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Attitude!

Sunday

DAYBREAK



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## Of Men, Women, and Those Living Somewhere In Between

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One night in 1970, when he was 19, Max Ganz put on a wig, a dress and women's shoes and walked across his small Arkansas town.

He was fairly sure he was a transvestite. He fit the descriptions he had read a couple of years earlier in Dick Tracy's Crimestopper Textbook and in a magazine article that described new electroshock therapies designed to burn away the horrid madness that drove men to dress like women.

He had dressed in his sister's and mother's clothing since he was a little boy. But never had he been so bold as to venture outdoors.

"I'm walking across town, navigating from shadow to shadow, hoping that no one would see me because they would probably recognize me," says Ganz, which is not his real name. He still lived with his parents. "It seemed my dad's business associates were appearing at every window. The Ku Klux Klan was just down the street. I thought if I was caught, the whole world would collapse. Mr. Electroshock was waiting for me. I was basically in a combat mode.



Michelle, a cross-dresser in downtown Salt Lake. (Rick Egan/ The Salt Lake Tribune)

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Electroshock was waiting for me. I was basically in a combat mode, facing the risk."

Now middle-aged, Ganz heads An Engendered Species, a Salt Lake City support group "for those who travel freely between Venus and Mars." The risk is still there, but now Ganz faces it with humor -- he took his female name, Deborah Dean, from a girl he dated in high school -- understanding and a desire to change social attitudes about those who cross gender lines.

While the group is open to anyone who likes to wear the clothes of the opposite sex, the 35 members are all male. They are professionals, blue-collar workers, semi-professional athletes and men in the military. Ganz doesn't know the men's sexual orientations -- "that's not really what we're about," he says -- but he notes that sex researchers claim 80 percent of all cross-dressers are heterosexual.

"Usually, before they call us, they think they are the only people on Earth who do this," says Ganz. "We're pretty much like square dancers or Shriners. We're just normal people, but we want to express the women within."

A group co-founder who goes by the name Aere adds: "For me, the genie is out of the bottle. Once you've experienced freedom, it's hard to go back to repression."

A few "transgendered" individuals are entertainers, but most are average, private people. They range from those who occasionally don clothing of the opposite sex to those who undergo extensive sex-changing surgery. Bean Robinson, a professor with the University of Minnesota Medical School's program in human sexuality, says one in 20 people cross-dress. One in 30,000 adult males and one in 100,000 adult females have had their sex changed surgically.

Knowing the difference between sex and gender is crucial to understanding transgendered. Put simply, sex is biology, gender is attitude.

Sex is determined by chromosomes, hormones and genitalia. Tradition says there are males, females and "intersexed," those born in between. But Brown University geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling says sex is more extensive:

"Biologically speaking, there are many gradations running from female to male; and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along that spectrum lie at least five sexes -- and perhaps even more," she says.

Gender variations are marked by manner and behavior, mix-and-match modes of expression. People show this through their clothes, cosmetics, hairstyles, body language and conversational style.

Western society allows females far more latitude in gender expression than males -- witness women's free adaptation of menswear, for example. At the same time, certain behaviors such as directness and overt independence are still labeled masculine in some communities and cultures.

Crossing sex and gender boundaries can be risky, says Nancy Nangeroni. She is a board member of the Boston-based International Foundation for Gender Education.

"Unfortunately, the transgender community suffers from severe

victimization," she says. "Transgendered folk are much more likely than others to commit suicide, to be murdered, to be fired from their jobs, to be beaten up and to be hurt in many more ways, some as blatant as open ridicule, some as insidious as nonhiring."

Diagnosed With a Disorder: Critics say the medical community has a hand in that victimization. They deny -- and resent -- the implication that something is wrong with them just because they can't be shoehorned into a binary gender system.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the fundamental text for psychotherapists, labels some brands of gender nonconformism as disorders. "Gender dysphoria," for example, is defined as a disturbance of gender identity, a sense of incongruity between anatomical and psychological sex.

Katherine K. Wilson of the Gender Identity Center of Colorado in Lakewood, Colo., says that assuming transgendered are disordered legitimizes intolerance in the community, workplace and courts.

That argument is giving shape to the transgendered community's political awakening of the 1990s. It is reminiscent of that in the gay community before 1973, when American psychiatrists and psychologists declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.

The roots of this assertiveness reach back nearly 30 years. In 1968, biochemical researcher Virginia Prince began publishing her magazine, *Transvestia*. It was the first of its kind: a non-erotic publication for cross-dressers and their spouses.

In 1980, Prince joined with an organization that came to be known as the Society for the Second Self, or Tri-Ess. It primarily serves transgendered people who do not want sex-reassignment surgery.

In 1987, the first International Foundation for Gender Education conference convened. The organization, based near Boston, covers the spectrum of the transgendered population: transsexuals, cross-dressers, those who live as the opposite sex without surgery, ungendered, and their spouses and partners.

Today, there are about 20 national transgendered-education groups and many more local organizations providing social and political support to this little-understood segment of society.

The movement is a long time coming, says Dallas Denny, who founded the Atlanta-based American Educational Gender Information Service, or AEGIS, in 1990.

"When you get political, you get a great sense of pride in yourself," says Denny, herself a transsexual. "People struggle with this, often for decades. It can't be cured. It is not a disease. It is just a way to be human. People are just trying to live their lives with dignity and respect for themselves."

That isn't easy, given the truculence of the defenders of gender polarity. To them, gender lines are clearly drawn: There are women, and there are men. Ambiguity is unacceptable -- a soul-killing dilemma for the many who don't fit easily into either mold.

Aere, of *An Engendered Species*, notes that it may be easier to come out gay than as a cross-dresser. And while transgendered and gay drag queens have been a staple of entertainment forever, their

acceptance -- even with gays and lesbians -- often stops at the stage.

"It's totally acceptable in the gay community to be a drag queen. It's almost mainstream," says Renee Rinaldi, former executive director of the Utah Stonewall Center in Salt Lake City. "But the moment men dress like women in their own lives, the community is uncomfortable."

Somewhere In Between: The spectrum of gender includes:

- Those who have always considered themselves female, or male.
- Females who have thought of themselves as men or boys.
- Males who have considered themselves female.
- "Othergendered," neither man nor woman but some other gender.

- "Ungendered," neither man nor woman nor any gender at all.

- "Bigendered," or gender-blended, male and female at once.

The term transsexual first gained wide acceptance in 1953, when endocrinologist Harry Benjamin presented a paper at a major medical conference on gender.

Sex researcher Alfred Kinsey had coined the term five years earlier, but it was Benjamin's paper and the subsequent media popularization of the term that spurred medical and public recognition of transsexuals as a category distinct from transvestites.

Another significant event in transgender history occurred in 1953: Ex-serviceman George Jorgensen went to Denmark for sex-change surgery and returned as Christine Jorgensen, America's first publicly recognized transsexual. Since then, those who believe they were born in the "wrong" body have increasingly sought surgery to align their sexual and gender identities.

With other sex researchers, Benjamin developed protocols for those seeking sex-change surgery. In 1979, the attendees of the Sixth International Gender Dysphoria Symposium in San Diego adopted guidelines under the lengthy name "The Harry Benjamin Standards of Care for the Hormonal and Surgical Sex Reassignment of Gender Dysphoric Persons."

The standards require an individual to be evaluated psychologically, medically and socially for at least one year and perhaps many more before he or she is deemed ready for the surgery.

At the core of the standards is whether the patient has had a persistent feeling of being in the wrong body. A gender-disorder diagnosis is necessary.

That doesn't sit well with some therapists, such as Sheila Dickson, a Phoenix psychologist who says transgendered people make up about a third of her clients. In fact, she says, the standards -- already revised three times -- are now undergoing further "sweeping" revisions.

Dickson believes gender dysphoria is a medical condition; at the same time, she counsels her patients to accept all their gender aspects.

"I usually have to help them understand it is not an either/or situation," she says. "There is an amazing spectrum of gender identities out there and how you want to express it and live it."

Adds Dallas Denny: "The process of sex reassignment, which has moved people inevitably toward surgery, is right for some people but not for others. A lot of people want to live as transsexuals without

surgery for a variety of reasons."

**Ambiguous, With Attitude:** A politically emergent group questioning the value of sex surgery is intersexuals, those born sexually ambiguous. This obscure population gained visibility this year after the publication of an account in *The Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* that challenged long-held assumptions about the relationship between culture and gender.

In 1973, sexologist John Money of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore published a report about an infant boy whose penis accidentally was cut off. Surgeons created "female" genitalia for the child and she was reared as a girl, "Joan," ignorant of her sexual beginnings. In his account, Money exhibited the case as proof that infants are sexually neutral at birth and that sexual identification is acquired, like language, in early childhood.

It turned out, though, that at age 14 "Joan" denied her female identity, became "John" and eventually underwent surgery to try to restore the lost genitals. In April this year, Milton Diamond, a physician with the University of Hawaii-Manoa in Honolulu, and Keith Sigmundson, a doctor with the Ministry of Health in Victoria, British Columbia, published their follow-up on "John/Joan" that refuted Money's earlier assertions.

The two physicians suggested that rather than resorting to immediate sex-assignment surgery, intersex children should be allowed a say in what, if any, surgery to have.

That also is the position held by the San Francisco-based Intersex Society of North America, a support group founded four years ago for intersex people, many of whom had genital surgery without informed consent.

According to ISNA, one in every 2,000 babies is born with ambiguous genitalia, and more than 2,000 surgeries are performed each year in the United States to assign a sex to intersex patients.

Geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling says intersexuals fall into three categories: true hermaphrodites, who have both testicular and ovarian tissue, often due to abnormal chromosomes; female pseudohermaphrodites, genetic females whose external sex organs appear masculine after prenatal exposure to testosterone; and male pseudohermaphrodites, genetic males who don't become fully masculine, either because they didn't produce the necessary hormones or because their tissues didn't respond properly to hormones while still in the womb.

When these babies are born, the surgeons move in. The general policy has been to proceed with sex-assignment surgery as soon as possible so the child does not have to experience ambiguity. According to ISNA, about 90 percent of the time, the child is made female because surgeons find it easier and more acceptable to make a small penis into a clitoris than a large clitoris into a small penis.

This attitude angers ISNA. Executive director Cheryl Chase says, "Genital surgery damages sexual function, compounding the difficulty of being different in the first place."

Calling themselves "Hermaphrodites With Attitude," ISNA

members have posted their stories on the Internet. The first large group of intersexuals who received early childhood surgery are now reaching their 40s. Their activism has prompted pediatric urologists to rethink their views on early sex-assignment surgery. They also are asking the fundamental question: Just how do we define "male" and "female"?

Dictionaries say females bear young, males beget them. The definitions also say males and females are those who have male and female qualities.

But, of course, there are females who don't have children and males who don't beget them. And all people are made up of "male" and "female" qualities. So it is fair to say that all people are transgendered.

And while those who undergo sex-change surgery to live as the opposite gender are regarded as sexual radicals, they also are deeply conservative. No one goes to greater lengths than they to square sex with gender.

To Change or Not: A segment of the transgendered community is taking issue with the idea that a person can be "born into the wrong body." That attitude, the critics say, reinforces the assumption that sex and gender can only be binary. To them, no body is "wrong," nor should people have to hew to a gender identity, a gender role or a sexual orientation based on their genitals.

Scott Gerdes, a 43-year-old female-to-male transsexual, counters that such political arguments are pointless and divisive. "I don't appreciate it when I hear people put down surgery and those of us who want it. If I want to, let me. It's personal," says Gerdes, a spokesman for the International Foundation for Gender Education. "We just want to blend in and live."

For Gerdes' colleague Nancy Cain, blending in has gotten easier since she began taking hormone shots and living full time as a woman. But the 43-year-old has yet to decide how far to go with her transformation.

Born a boy, "I knew I was transsexual at 19," Cain says. "I just stayed drunk for years and didn't deal with it."

As with many transgendereds, middle age forced a change. "I lost my job, I had to get glasses and I thought, 'Screw it. I might as well live as a woman,'" she says.

Cain still has male genitalia. She identifies as a bisexual, but lived as a gay man for about 10 years. She now lives with a woman who once was her wife -- but that was when Cain was living as a man and cross-dressing.

"I often ask myself, 'What am I doing?'" says Cain. "If I'm going out with a woman, does that make me a lesbian or a heterosexual? I don't know."

Cain has been on hormones long enough that she definitely looks like a woman. She says she is terrified of sex-reassignment surgery, but hasn't totally ruled it out. For her, being able to "pass" without being "read" -- that is, without onlookers realizing she is a man in a dress -- may be enough.

Not so for Gerdes. Born a girl, he was suicidal as a teen-ager because he couldn't reconcile his brain with his body. "I was afraid to

tell anybody," he says. "I thought they would toss me in the loony bin."

At 26, he came out to his family. "I said, 'I know this is going to be strange to hear. But I have felt male as long as I can remember. And I have recently found out there is something I can do that will help me, physically and mentally. And that is what I'm going to do.'

"I made sure they all knew it wasn't their fault, that it was a good thing that would help me. I remember my dad looking at me, looking at the ground, looking at me, then saying, 'Well, if that's what you have to do to be happy, go ahead.' My mom said, 'But you're such a pretty girl.'"

Gerdes has legally been a man for 11 years. He had his first surgery three years ago, and will definitely go all the way.

"That's right for me, but not for everybody," he says. "If I needed a third ear to be male, that's what I would have. It happens to be a penis. It doesn't have a personality. It's not a choice. It's not a like or dislike. I would just feel more complete.

"People are afraid to look at that," says Gerdes. "I'm not sure of what they are afraid of. Living without being true to yourself is hell."



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