

T R A N S G E N D E R

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TRANSSEXUAL INMATE ISSUES

INTERSEX, TRANSGENDER,  
AND ENGLISH LAW REFORM

TRANSGENDERISM AS  
GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

WORKPLACE CONFERENCE  
EMBRACES TRANSGENDER ISSUES

SOUTHERN  
COMFORT 2001



we find that place, then we can handle and rejoice and find peace in all the surgeries we want.

I've been in the transgender community for a relatively short time, just five years. In that time I've seen transnie after transnie go into surgery or strive for the passing look, or transition, or whatever, with the fairytale notion that on the other side things would be better, problems would cease, life would be wonderful, and their hose would not run. Well, folks, it doesn't work like that!

We're a part of a grand and wonderful evolutionary jump our culture is taking away from the old failed patriarchal society and toward a future of sharing and rejoicing and embracing variance and difference rather than fearing it. To be a part of this wonderful adventure, we need to think differently. We must realize we're a part of something larger than ourselves and our community, and embrace our specialness—not try to hide it.

To pass or not to pass? I've made my decision.

## STEALTH AND PASSING

by Susan Blewitt

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I cannot understand the choice of so many transsexuals to live in stealth. Who wants to live in untruth? I certainly don't, and I fail to understand how anyone in his or her right mind could, assuming that he or she was mature and of good character.

It's true I don't pass well. However, my attitude toward stealth is not a rationalization. Thanks to Dr. Ousterhout's work on my face, coupled with the fact that at 5'8" and 135 pounds I have a body favorable for female presentation, I get feedback from mainstream people to the effect that I make an attractive lady. I think it possible that within a couple of years I'll be able to pass fairly well, for the cause of my inability to pass is not pronounced male physical qualities, but voice and behavior, which can be learned. I'm quite new at female presentation, having done it for the first time on an airline flight last January,

when I flew from Chicago to San Francisco for a surgery date with Dr. Ousterhout. Thus, while I'm lousy at passing, I'm not resigned to the fact that this will always be the case.

If I become passable—which is not terribly unlikely—I will want everyone who knows me, even casual acquaintances, to know I'm a transsexual woman. I'll want this primarily because in a general way I prefer living in truth, and secondarily, though still importantly, because I feel I owe this particular truth to others. I feel it would be disrespectful to others to allow their false belief that I was nontranssexual to go uncorrected. I feel it would be a betrayal of their trust.

I know that having people think I was nontranssexual and being treated as such would be pleasing to my ego. I've passed often enough to be acquainted with this pleasure. But the pleasure stealth would provide wouldn't be worth the lessening of my character it would entail. I would lose self-esteem. I wouldn't love myself as much. In my relationships with others, I want to be regarded as a person who has a sense of honor, a person who can be counted upon. Thus, the pleasure I stand to gain is weighed against what I would lose. The intelligent choice is clear.

Thirty years ago, when "impersonating a woman" was a crime in every state, when being clocked would likely mean a trip to the county jail, the choice of living in stealth was rational. But public attitudes have changed enormously since then. Thirty years ago it was excusable for a transsexual to keep his or her friends in the dark about the past. If friends were to learn the truth, they would not feel betrayed, for they would understand the powerful social forces that made the betrayal necessary. Today those social forces are not so strong as to render stealth behavior excusable. Today most mainstream people would feel their trust had been betrayed, and their esteem of the transsexual's character would drop.

I think in large measure the thinking of the transgender community regarding passing, and especially towards stealth, was formed in earlier times, when there was powerful stigma to contend with. This thinking hasn't

caught up with the better social conditions of the present today. Apart from that consideration, I can't understand the choice of so many transsexuals to live in stealth. I assure you, I personally have no such desire.

## PASSING TRANSSEXUAL

by Dallas Denny

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I am a passing transsexual. That means that wherever I go, in whatever situation, whether I'm getting my car repaired or giving a presentation at work or sharing a hotel room with a co-worker, whether I'm all dressed up or hot and sweaty in a t-shirt with no makeup, people don't read me as transsexual, but believe me to be and accept me as nontranssexual. Neither my appearance nor my voice nor my mannerisms tell them I'm transsexual.

Unlike some transsexuals, I don't really care who knows about my past. I just live my life, surrounded by those who don't know, those to whom I've disclosed, and those who have learned of my transsexualism from others or from my various activities and writings in the transgender community. Whatever happens, happens, and is just fine with me. No one can hurt me by outing me, yet because I can pass I'm able to participate fully in life's rich banquet without fear of finding myself in a dangerous or uncomfortable situation because I've been read as transsexual. Unlike many of my friends, I don't have to survey the environment to see if I'm in a "transsexual danger zone." With equal ease, I can hike the Appalachian Trail, go to the corner grocery store, wander into a seedy country bar, apply for a job, or dine in a fine restaurant, never having to wonder if anyone "knows" or if those people at the corner table are laughing about me. Indeed, as I go about my business, even when I'm passionately advocating about gender issues, I rarely think about my own transsexualism, for I'm not reminded of it by the actions or words of others or by my own body. My life is, from

moment to moment, very little different than that of a nontranssexual woman of a like age. I find I prefer it that way, for as out as I am, I've no real desire to do gender education and outreach every time I go to the supermarket. I don't have the energy, time, or patience to primp and survey my appearance before stepping out—nor do I need the drama of being clocked; I just want to grab the milk and eggs and bread and go home and make french toast.

Now, I'm not claiming to pass at all times and under all conditions. Because my name has been widely linked to gender issues in print and on the Internet and because I've frequently left copies of trans-related material on the copier at work, I often have no idea who knows and who doesn't, or if anyone knows at all. If anyone wonders or has figured it out they aren't talking about it, which is just fine by me, for I don't want it to be all about my own transsexualism, but about gender issues in general. The result is the same, whether my transsexualism is not known or just not talked about. I'm in control. I decide when and to whom to disclose. And that's the way, uh huh, uh huh, I like it.

## I'M JUST LUCKY THAT WAY

Although I'm glad I pass, I don't ascribe it to any particular virtue on my part. My passing has nothing to do with my inner goodness. I pass because my most predominant masculine characteristics were amenable to change, and I changed them. I had facial hair, for which an effective removal technology existed, and a body which produced testosterone, for which an effective opposing technology existed. I was lucky, for I had no physical features which would have made it especially difficult to pass. I wasn't overly tall, I had no adam's apple, my voice wasn't particularly deep, I hadn't lost my hair, I had little body hair, I didn't have a thin upper lip or heavy brows or a square jaw, I wasn't overly tall, my hands and feet were on the small side for my height. Those are features which were determined by chance, in a game of genetic roulette, when sperm met

ovum. I was fortunate; although I had my share of male characteristics, the game of life happened to give me a body which could be whipped into shape without too much expense or effort.

At one time, I was proud of my ability to pass, but I eventually disabused myself of that notion. Now I'm merely grateful, for it makes my life easy and safe. I know I pass only because of chance, and I recognize my ability to pass doesn't make me superior in any way. I'm not "more" transsexual than others because I happen to lack secondary sex characteristics for which medical science hasn't devised effective treatments—but I am, as I've said, grateful that by a combination of luck and technology I've an appearance which causes others to respond to me in ways which generally help rather than hinder me as I go through life. It's convenient and comfortable to have the option of telling others rather than having them inevitably figure it out for themselves, for when people know, interactions change subtly; everything they say and so and everything I say and do is influenced by the transsexual issue.

I feel for those who, despite their best efforts, don't pass, but however much I sympathize with their predicament, I'm not ashamed because I happen to pass. I'm not at fault because I can pass any more than they are at fault because they can't. I've no obligation to render myself nonpassable for their sake. On the other hand, I wouldn't be much of a human being if I turned my back on them—not because they're unlucky and I'm lucky—that's merely a matter of perspective; I might in fact be the unlucky one because my life is more of a deception—but because the thing that drives us is the same. We come from a common place, and our issues and enemies are the same. People who give those who don't pass a hard time would give me a hard time too, if only they knew I was transsexual; they don't like me any better, they merely assume I have a history which in fact I did not have. Those who deny employment to those who don't pass would deny

me a job, too, and those who would be happy to kill them would be as happy or even more happy to murder me. I would be a fool if I ignored this, if I permitted myself to believe the evil people out there love me because I pass. They don't. It's for that reason I've spent the past 15 years as an activist. It's for this reason I don't choose my friends for their ability to pass, why I don't mind being seen in public with those less passable than myself.

Non-passable transsexuals face tremendous rejection and have great difficulty in finding or keeping employment. Obviously, a post-transition life characterized by discrimination and hostility from others is far different from a life in which one gets a job and is treated with consideration. It's difficult not to be impacted when one's life contains a large measure of unpleasantness. A few of my non-passable acquaintances have become cynical, pessimistic, aggressive, beaten-down, and just generally nasty because of the way they have been treated. This exacerbates their problems. A pleasant personality can defuse difficult situations and can result in acceptance whether one passes or not; on the other hand, no one wants to be around someone who is unpleasant, whether they pass or not. The world being as it is, those who don't pass and walk around with a chip on their shoulder because of it tend to find life doubly difficult. But of course, the world being as it is, the most personable and pleasant nonpassable transsexual may wind up jobless.

Those who pass can easily put it all behind them, choosing to deny their history and experience and avoid those they consider less passable than themselves. Many do, and a few go to great lengths to reconstruct their lives in such a way that they completely disavow their transsexualism. This is of course intellectually dishonest, but more than that, it's dangerous, for they enter what I've called "the closet at the end of the rainbow," building relationships and careers which can come to an abrupt end if and when (and it's usually when) they're outed or discovered. They base their lives on the lie

that they're nontranssexual, and forevermore must spend their time and energy patrolling the ramparts. They live in a state of hypervigilance, filtering everything that happens to determine if they're in danger of being revealed. Who among us hasn't run into one of these deep-in-the-wood-work transsexuals in public and watched them freeze in their tracks, shrinking within themselves as they

pray we don't notice them, and that if we do, we won't speak.

I've little patience with those who consider themselves superior because they can pass. I've even less with those who consider themselves superior because they don't. Both viewpoints are merely constructions of subjective realities which conform to the genetic hand dealt in the poker game of life. We are each working from an *n* of one. Our

experiences speak about our individual lives, and have no meaning when applied to others who, after all, have their own experiences.

We're real transsexuals, and our lives are equally valid, regardless of whether we pass.

### HOW YOUR EDITOR FEELS ABOUT THE POLITICS OF PASSING

Whether we're happy with the idea or not, we live in a society with a binary gender system. As gender activists, we're expected to challenge, undermine, and tear it down because of its restrictiveness. This is healthy because among other things, it calls into question our community's unhealthy obsession with passing—but it is at best an interesting philosophical exercise that doesn't translate well to reality. Most transgender activists take pains to pass in public as members of one sex or the other; it's a matter of safety.

Here's a confession: I like the binary system. Life would be pretty darned dull without it. I can't even begin to imagine the film "Casablanca" with a 3rd-gender Bogart and a two-spirit Ingrid Bergman. What I do find offensive is the system's unwillingness to let people choose their place within it. As far as I'm concerned, the system needs an overhaul so it will value Alan Alda as much as John Wayne and k.d. lang as much as Marilyn Monroe, but it doesn't need to be scrapped altogether—a goal of some transgender activists, but certainly not this one.

Like other transsexuals, my gender identity isn't somewhere in the middle of the continuum, but at or close to the end opposite the one I was assigned at birth. Kudos to those who like it somewhere in the middle. I'm happy for you—but if you're one of those who are trying to get everybody else to join you, please stop claiming we transsexuals are singlehandedly responsible for the perpetuation of the binary system. We're tired of your insistence that if we could only share your special enlightenment we would, like you, seek the middle ground. With all due respect, you have no idea what it's like to be transsexual. Please stop patronizing us. We're not impaired. We know exactly where we want to be, and it's not stuck in the middle with you.

**DISCLOSURE IS A COMPLEX ISSUE.** Should one inform others of one's transgender status? If so, then when, how much, to whom, and under what conditions? Should one tell all even if it can wreck a friendship? Effect employment? Make it unsafe to live in the neighborhood?

It's a difficult onion to peel. What about crossdressers? Is a post-transition transsexual under a special obligation? What of stealth crossdressers? Are they exempted-- and if so, why? Which is the *real* lie-- to not mention the fact of a past that was itself a lie, or to hide the fact of one's secret cross-dressing from family, friends, neighbors, and employers?

The disclosure issue runs deeper than gender. Should one disclose a 2-year stretch in the slammer? When, and to whom? When you first meet someone? ("Hi there. I'm Dallas. Once upon a time I did a dime stretch in Sing-Sing. I didn't mean to hit him that hard. Hey, come back!") When it becomes important in a relationship? ("Please marry me. But before you do, there's something I want to tell you. My real name is Ted Bundy.") Should you tell your boss you had a conflict with your last two supervisors? What about you-- yes, you-- the person who stole a car and knocked over a mini-mart and were lucky enough to get away with it? Are you living any less a lie than a stealth transsexual?

Peel the onion. When and under what circumstances should I reveal my left-handedness? Certainly until I do others will assume I'm right-handed. I'll be living in a state of imperfection, of deceit. All right, *Tapestry* readers, I'm coming clean! I'm tellin' you now, I'm left-handed, see. I'm a left-hander who has been living in these pages as a presumably right-handed editor. I apologize for not telling you. I guess I'm just a moral weakling. Please find it in your hearts to forgive me. Please keep reading the magazine.

Disclosure, as I said, is a complex issue, and one best left up to each individual.