ATLANTA GENDER CHRONICLE

The Journal of A.G.E.
Atlanta Gender Explorations

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Editor: Tammy Harkness
(404) 962-3118

upcoming events

TRI-ESS' HOLIDAY EN FEMME
Atlanta GA
November 11-15

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Linda Peacock
P O Box 7241
Tallahassee FL 32314

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H.O.P.E.

Honoring Other Peoples Expressions

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Help line for spouses, partners, relatives, or friends of transsexuals, crossdressers, or transgenderists who need to talk about gender issues.

Ask for Tammy

A.G.E.

Contact Information

You can write to:
A.G.E.
P O Box 1542
Roswell GA 30077

Or you can call:
(404) 642-9652
Kimberly Karsten
OR
(404) 962-3118
Tricia Harkness
Tammy Harkness
OR
April Eckhart
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The Ins of "OUT"

Part One of Two: Three Options

by: Dallas Denny

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For more on the author see end of article.

At some point in their lives, transsexual persons-- at least those who are dealing with their gender issues-- come out of the closet. This process is to some extent analogous to the coming out of gay men and lesbians, but there is a difference-- at the end of the long process of transition, there lies another closet. It is the closet of anonymity. There is no rule which says that transsexual people must embrace this closet, but many do.

In regard to being "out," post-transition transsexual persons have three options: 1) they can be out with everybody; 2) they can compartmentalize their lives, keeping persons in some settings ignorant of their past, and letting those in other settings know; or 3) they can lock themselves into the closet at the end of the rainbow and throw away the key.

Actually, the word "option" is probably a poor choice. "Status" may be a better word. Those who have extreme problems in passing or who are well-known in the settings in which they must operate are denied the third status and may find that even the second status is not available to them. The first status is there for any of us who care to use it.

Status 1: Being Out With Everybody

To the transsexual person with extreme problems in passing, those who transition in place, and for "celebrity transsexuals," there is no alternative to being out. Those with whom they interact for any period of time will figure out or learn from others about their transsexual status (could you imagine being friends with Tula or Roberta Muldoon and not "knowing"?) Those who are more fortunate have a choice of being out or of keeping their transsexual status a secret, but some have no choice. People are going to know regardless.

Some transsexual people are out because they want to be. Anne Ogborn wears a t-shirt which reads "Sex Change." She is proud to be a transsexual woman, and not only doesn't care who knows it-- she wants everyone to know it. Others, like Nancy Burkholder, make a moral choice to be out. Nancy was thrown out of the 16th Annual Womyn's Music Festival because she was suspected of being transsexual, and rather than let the issue die, she went public. It cost her her anonymity, but she felt it was important to make a stand.

Coming out can be very disruptive to one's life, for people can react unpredictably, and even violently. Once everyone knows, however, things settle down. Caroline ("Tula") Cossey told us, when we interviewed her for Chrysalis Quarterly, our magazine, "There's not one newspaper that can write anything about me that is going to bother me now. I just figure, if people don't like my gate, they don't have to swing on it. I get invites to premieres, parties. I know half the time I'm treated like a party piece, because they find me intriguing, but at least I'm not paranoid that Oh my God, they're going to find out."

Option 2: Compartmentalizing

All transsexual people compartmentalize to some extent. After all, we don't wear scarlet "T"s on our foreheads. We don't gleefully announce our status when we run into the 7-11 store for a Slurpee. Most people, on meeting even the roughest-appearing of us, take us for nontranssexual. But it often goes deeper than that, with us being out in some circles and not in others. I, for instance, am not out at work, but am in other aspects of my life. Others may be not out at church, in their social clubs, with their neighbors, and even with their long-term sexual partners.

Compartmentalizing has risks, but then, so do a lot of things. In my field, mental retardation, we speak of the dignity of risk. Sometimes we must let persons with mental retardation take risks, even though they may fail. Sometimes we must, as transsexual people, take a chance in order to have a satisfactory quality of life. In this instance, there is danger of spill-over from a "know" compartment to a "don't know" compartment. I am speaking here, of course, of compartmentalizing on the back end of the process, after transition. It is certainly possible to compartmentalize on the front end, as the real-life test approaches, but that is fodder for another article.

Status 2: Being Out With No One

Some transsexual people deny their origins, and spend considerable and even monumental amounts of physical and mental energy to purge transsexualism from their lives-- throwing away photographs, scratching names out of books, excommunicating friends, "forgetting" old skills, burying old interests, making up and embellishing pasts that never were. Some don't tell their partners, even when they get married. They expunge their transsexualism, and will hotly deny it if accused. They are the famous "disappearing transsexuals" of yesteryear. They are in stealth mode.

This is the closet at the other end of the transsexual tunnel, and it is in some respects even worse than the one at the front end. Could you imagine the fear, the anxiety, you would feel at all times, knowing that one little slip of the voice, of the tongue, one piece of mail in the old name, one person from the past could totally wipe out your cover? Could you imagine a marriage in which you couldn't share the first thirty or so years of your life? Could you imagine the need to talk to other transsexual persons, to share special things, and not being able to do it, year-in and yet-out? I can't, and yet some people remain successfully in the post-transition closet.

The Ins of "OUT" (cont'd)
by: Dallas Denny

Unfortunately, it isn't always possible to deny the past. Transsexualism is juicy gossip, and the world is a smaller place than it might seem. Sooner or later, it can catch up with you. I've known several such people who totally blew out when they were revealed. Their entire lives crumbled; there was nothing left. One acquaintance, Diana, lost her fiancee, her job at an adoption agency, her credit, and her apartment when someone from her earlier days made a point of telling the world about her. Her entire universe dissolved; there was nothing left. She spent some time in a mental hospital, and even now, four years later, she is emotionally scarred by the experience.

All of Diana's eggs were in one basket. The result of that: instant omelette.

SEE NEXT ISSUE FOR PART TWO.

Dallas is Executive Director of the American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc. (AEGIS), a national clearinghouse for information about gender dysphoria.
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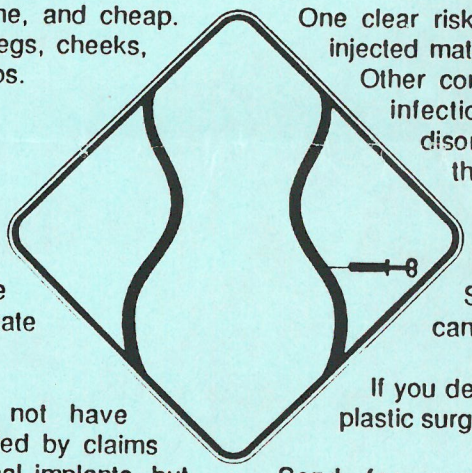

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