

HOW THE TRANSGENDER LABEL IS CAUSING CONFUSION AND PERPETUATING INTOLERANCE

By Dhillon Khosla

My Personal Story

I came into the world with the cognitive conviction that I was a boy who would someday grow into a man. So sure was I of this conviction that others saw it too: the boys on the playground treated me as one of their own, referring to me as “he,” while the girls on the playground viewed me as “the other,” nervously giggling behind cupped hands when I approached them.

The adults, however, did not see what these children saw and I saw, but instead identified me by the body into which I was born. One day, a teacher in gym class separated us into two groups. As the teacher took me away from my guy friends and led me across the gym floor towards the girls, the guys pointed and laughed, saying, ‘hey – they’re taking *him* with the girls!’

But I went home crying that day, because I knew something was terribly wrong. And this was just the first of many signs.

When I was eight years old, my family and I moved from Europe to America. The third grade class I was about to join was comprised of over twenty boys, but only seven girls. Upon being told that they were receiving another “girl,” the girls were thrilled. But despite their warm welcoming, I was lost as I now had no one to mirror back the truth of my conviction.

Nevertheless, I still continued my natural behavior of gravitating towards the guy side of the playground and when they played kickball, I ripped off my shirt to join them. Eventually one girl followed suit, but for her it was a daring move across the gender divide, while for me it was simply a natural impulse to move towards those with whom I identified – my “people.”

Later in the year we made valentines in the class and I received a couple from some boys. I remember being upset – not because I received an affectionate gesture from a guy – but because while we were making the Valentines, we had once again been separated into girls and boys and I had to watch the guys across the room joking around and laughing – without me. And slowly, as these separations continued and the girls invited me to slumber parties and read “Judy Blume” books, I began to forget what I had been so sure of in childhood.

My parents, to their great credit, did not try to change my behavior. And so when I tossed aside the doll they gave me at Christmas and demanded only “matchbox” cars, they bought cars from that moment on. And when I wanted a white pants suit for my piano recital because I had seen a male rocker with one, they complied and I wore the suit for my performance.

But they couldn’t understand the full depth of the identification, such as my insistence that I was in fact a boy or, my upset when people referred to me as female, and my relief when they took me for a boy.

Around the age of twelve I hit puberty and developed into a voluptuous female body. And now the forgetting became complete. To look into the mirror and see something so opposite to the image I had held in my mind’s eye as a child told me that

whoever I had once imagined myself growing into, must have been just a dream. For all objective evidence was now to the contrary.

I started to live my life from the outside looking in, trying to become that woman I saw in the mirror. But because she did not live inside me, I had to create her from images I saw around me – women I found to be beautiful. But the thing about love is that when it is based on the outside, it never really lands on the inside – like a cheap sugar high it quickly fades, leaving you more empty than ever.

During high school I spent much of my time drinking and partying, which allowed me to escape and hide my discomfort with my developing body. I even tried dating men, but while I was able to engage in some physical acts, others which involved more intimate parts of my body were harder and I drank to make it easier. And most of all, there was always still the sense that I was with a “buddy.” But, of course, they no longer saw it that way.

When I entered college, I turned my attention to women. That opposite chemistry I had felt with them on that playground as a child had developed into a romantic chemistry. And as some of them compared me to their first boyfriends and wondered why they felt that same spark with me, I felt a sense of home. It was vague sense that had no words or name; and it stayed buried in the intimate moments of darkness.

But by the light of day I was back in my shell, fiercely embracing the outer identity I had so carefully constructed throughout the years – one that kept me protected and far away from the truth – one that served me well as I began to take feminist classes and developed a trust with women that on some level compensated for all that I could not have. But the latter loss slowly, yet surely, became a source of resentment towards the

men with whom I had once shared a bond on that playground. But because I did not consciously know the source of that resentment I justified it as righteous feminism. But mine was more personally fueled by envy than anything else.

I continued my education into law school as I continued to date women who, despite my female exterior, somehow caught glimpses of the man underneath. It was one of those women who eventually gave me an article that had appeared in the New Yorker in 1994 about female-to-male transsexuals. In it were interviews with men across the country who had transformed their female bodies into a male one. And as I read their stories, I saw myself in them. Not only that, I saw that there was a remedy for my condition. A way to actually become that man I had dreamed I would one day grow into.

Within three months of reading that New Yorker article, I underwent my first surgery and began hormone treatments. But it took another five years of surgeries – and many, many complications – to finally land in a body that felt complete.

During one of my surgeries, I came so close to death that they had to pull me out half-way through the operation. Each time I woke up and found out what had happened; I only had one question: “when can we go back and finish?” So strong was that impulse to make it all the way home.

I did go back for more surgery. And I had more complications. And more surgery. But finally, after fifteen operations; I emerged as the man I am today. Complete. At peace.

What was most striking about my journey, was just how familiar it was. Within weeks of each of my successful surgeries, I literally forgot what it felt like to have the former female body part I had replaced. It was as if my psyche had never really attached

to the female aspects of my body. It was like one giant déjà vu. Even the male culture was instantly familiar. I felt as if I was finally reunited with the guys I had been separated from in grade school during gym class. And my resentment melted away. For I now had what they had. And I could just be.

It wasn't until I began to study and read about the biology of sex and how we develop in the womb that I fully understood how I could arrive in this world so sure I was a boy and why my journey to reclaim my manhood was so effortlessly familiar.

The biology of sex and gender

All babies, regardless of whether they are xy (boy) or xx (girl) fetuses, start out by default as female. However, if all goes normally, around the six-eight week mark, the xy (boy) fetus will release a large amount of male hormones and start transforming that female body into a male one. This does not happen in one shot, but rather over several discrete stages all the way through the twelve week mark. If, during each of these stages, the boy fetus gets enough male hormones, the clitoris grows into a phallus and the gonadal lump becomes a set of testicles instead of ovaries. A separate process also disposes of the female reproductive organs.

If the male fetus does not receive enough male hormones at each critical stage, the genitalia may remain female or come out somewhere in between or appear unclear. One extreme example is AIS (Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome). With complete AIS, the boy fetus pumps out the right hormones, but because of a defect in the receptor sites, is unable to pick up the male hormones and use them to transform the body into a male one.

In complete AIS, that XY fetus comes out looking exactly like a female body. What's more, because the receptor sites also didn't take in the male hormones during the subsequent brain development stage, that baby also has a completely female brain and identifies as female. The law recognizes such a person as female, despite a clearly male DNA.

An abnormality within the fetus itself is just one way the hormonal process can go awry and cause disruption in the genital development of that fetus. The second way is through the mother's ingestion of hormones or substances that impact hormonal concentration. For example, in the 1960's some mothers took hormones to prevent miscarriages. Studies of children born to such mothers reveal that in cases where the mother took hormones opposite to the sex of the fetus, the fetus came out either with a genital disruption or the gender behavior of that child was dramatically different than their sibling of the same gender. Finally, toxins in our environment may play a role as well. A relatively recent article that made national headlines suggested a link between a chemical in female perfume and undescended testicles in male fetuses.

In any event, even assuming that all goes normally in the *body* development phase (phase one), once that is complete, the *brain* then begins the process of organizing itself along gender lines (phase two). And again, it is not a one shot deal, as was once thought, but rather a series of discrete stages that include aggression levels, verbal/spatial diffusion, body image. Once again, if all goes normally, the XY fetus will release a high amount of male hormones and change that female brain into a male one. If that baby does not get enough male hormones, that brain may stay closer to its original female template. Indeed, after observing various effects in human babies, researchers confirmed

this theory by taking every animal from rat to ape and injecting them with opposite sex hormones during that critical time of brain-sex development. In every case, when they hit the right timing, that animal came out believing it was the opposite sex and its behavior was completely in line with that belief. They then refined the process and by subtly changing timing, they could manipulate aggression only, but leave the other behaviors intact. This confirmed for them that there are multiple stages in our brain-sex development, just as there are multiple stages in our body-sex development.

Thus a person born intersexed is someone who had a disruption during that *phase-one-body development* stage while someone born with the transsexual condition (or, as we could call it, intersexed; type two) is someone born with a disruption during the *phase-two brain-sex* development phase.

And this is how I came into the world with this cognitive conviction that I was a boy. For the blueprint was there from the start.

The History of the term “Transgender”

In the 1970's the word “transgender” was coined by a transvestite named Virginia (Charles) Prince who authored the books, *The Transvestite and His Wife* and *How to Be a Woman though male*. Prince used the term “transgender” to define those who change their social gender through non-surgical means. In the 1990's the term was publicly claimed by authors such as Leslie Feinberg who also did not relate to the traditional categorization of male and female and in many cases appeared neither clearly male nor female nor referred themselves as “he” or “she.” (See, for example, “*Trans Liberation:*

Beyond Pink or Blue and Transgender Warriors). In a world that sees gender only in black and white, transgender people needed a new term in order to liberate themselves from a set of labels that did not reflect their identity. Thus, the books written by those who embraced the term “transgender” not only reflected a gender identity alternative to “male” or “female”, but also engaged in the deconstruction of sex and gender, viewing them as restrictive or false constructs.

In stark contrast to the term “transgender” existed the term “transsexual” which applied to those people who simply harbored that biological split between body and mind. By definition, a transsexual person is not seeking to break apart or change what it means to be “male” or “female” but instead is seeking medical treatment so they can be comfortably fit *within* one of these categories. Indeed, in many cases, once the transsexual person undergoes gender confirmation surgery, their resultant female or male identify is as mainstream in both appearance and behavior as the most masculine or feminine woman in general society. As such they are not personally motivated to deconstruct a gender system that does not impinge upon their own identity, although they may be more sympathetic to anyone who is outside of that system, having experienced their own form of discrimination or sense of isolation during their transition.

Nevertheless, at some point in the late 1990s, it was decided that anyone dealing with anything related to gender identity or expression -- transvestites, fetishists, transgender people and those born intersexed and transsexual who had completed corrective surgery – would now be put under a single, collective “umbrella” term that would connote those with an “alternative” gender identity. It was also decided that this

community would become an extension of the gay and lesbian community. The umbrella term chosen for all? “Transgender.”

The decision to apply a term that has for decades been claimed by those who do not relate to either the male or female identity to those of us who have fought to claim one of those *very* identities, is as logical as taking the term “bisexual,” proclaiming it to be an “all-inclusive” term, and applying it to both straight and gay people. However, when those of us who have undergone complete gender reassignment surgery question the “transgender” label, we are either ignored or simply told “many people are not quite sure of where they fall within these categories or on the gender continuum, and so the transgender label allows them to explore or question their gender.” The problem with this explanation is that it ignores the fact that some of us *do* know who we are. To therefore say that we should accept a label that does not fit for the benefit of those who are still unsure of their gender identity, would be no different than saying, “well—a lot of people are unclear about their sexuality, so let’s just call everyone bisexual.” Imagine the outrage from those who identify as gay or straight. Not only would they feel invisible under that label, but the moment they stood up to tell their story, their personal experience would defy the definition of the term ‘bisexual’ while the moment someone within the bisexual movement stood up to share their view, they would by definition invalidate those on the extreme ends of the sexuality spectrum. This is not unlike what happened to me as I set out to tell my personal story and kept bumping up against the term “transgender.”

My Book Tour

The first show on which I appeared, was a cable show on CNBC (The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch) to discuss my transition prior to the release of my memoir. My public relations firm had requested that the producers not use the term “transgender” under my name during my segment, but rather, simply “male born female.” However, because others were interviewed for the show – and because the term “transgender” has now been continually fed to the broader media by the GLBT community (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) – the entire show was entitled “Transgender people.”

The first guest to speak was someone who had been born in a female body and taken hormones and had chest surgery to appear male. When asked if he minded the term “transgender” he said “no.” However, he also proceeded to say that he had no interest in ever pursuing any genital surgery and that he didn’t feel that he belonged in either the male or female locker room. Indeed, he stated that he could not relate to the idea of being “trapped” in the wrong body. Finally, when asked whether he viewed himself as a straight man (because he dated women) or a lesbian (because he did not want to undergo genital surgery) he said “that’s an interesting question” and was not sure of the answer.

My segment appeared later on in the show. During my interview, I was not asked about the term “transgender” but I told my story of transition and how I underwent multiple surgeries to become complete as a man. When I subsequently watched the show, the term “transgender people” was run across the screen not only at the outset, but repeatedly during each interview, including mine. What this meant is that the first man had a label with which he felt comfortable, while I did not – despite my public relations firm’s best efforts to make sure I did get that recognition during my segment. I do not fault the producers, for there were several of them working on the segment and the show

went to tape within minutes of the interviews. Rather, it was simply the consequence of the fact that the ‘transgender’ term has been so successfully disseminated by the GLBT community that it is difficult for someone like myself to be recognized under the label that fits my experience.

As I continued on my book tour, I focused more on individual segments. After I appeared on ABC’s “THE VIEW” I received an email from a woman who runs a large Transgender Conference. She said she was impressed with my appearance and added that it was great to see someone open and honest about their past, as so many people she knew were living in secret – or as she referred to it, “the stealth life.” She said she had told some of these people that they really were not doing anyone any favors. She wanted to invite me to speak at their conference and said she was sure, based on my “View” appearance, that I would be “well-received.”

I responded by saying that I would love to come, but that I did not personally use the term “transgender,” and perhaps by having someone like myself speak, it might encourage others like me -- who also do not relate to that term -- to come forward and share their stories. I never heard from her again. It was not the last time I would have this experience.

And herein lies the catch twenty-two that people like myself are in: if we keep quiet about our past so we can be seen as the men and women that we are – the men and women we have risked everything to be -- the transgender community accuses us of being closeted or living the “stealth” life; if we *do* come forward to tell our story in the way that feels truthful and right to us we are rejected, judged, or

excluded by them. Not all, but enough to make us question our decision to tell our story at all.

Months after my appearance on “The View” I was at an awards banquet put on by GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) when I picked up the recent newsletter and saw that they had coached that first speaker on the “Donny Deutsch Show.” It struck me as interesting that the only guest coached on the show by the lesbian leaders within GLAAD was someone who did not undergo phallus reconstruction surgery and potentially saw himself as a “lesbian.” Indeed since my transition, I have read vitriolic articles written by lesbians denouncing those of us who undergo phallus reconstruction and referring to penises as “vicious and abusive” symbols of the patriarchy. I have also seen lesbians refusing to acknowledge those of us who transition as “men” or renouncing the transition as a simple quest for “male privilege.” Indeed, two of my male friends who went through this transition experienced the most vile and cruel treatment from lesbian co-workers or acquaintances, while mainstream men stood up for them. These experiences not only show that those who demand tolerance are capable of intolerance, but they highlight the underlying problem of lumping two groups together who are fundamentally different in their gender identity and expression.

Every time I stand up and tell stories of how female friends and ex-girlfriends pegged me as male even before I transitioned because of the way I take up space, my different sense of boundaries, or simply the crappy gifts I gave them, mainstream women laugh with recognition. But for those within the gay, lesbian, or transgender movement, these stories are often seen as perpetuating gender stereotypes while they are working hard to break down those very stereotypes. Indeed many of these people have heard the

same “Men are from mars, women are from Venus” stories so often from the mainstream, that they do not want to hear it again under a banner that claims to be for them, about them, and within their agenda. I understand this. And yet I am simply sharing the truth of my experience.

The same holds true for many male-to-female transsexuals. I have met women originally born in a male body who -- following surgery to align body and mind – end up as PTA moms who are conservative in their values and traditional in their gender roles - *not because they are trying to be, but simply because this is who they are.* Their surgeries were about becoming complete as women, they were not about embracing an alternative gender identity, political ideology, social or sexual identity. Indeed as one woman said to me who underwent her surgeries in the 1960’s and has been married for thirty years, “even if I never had sex again in my life, I would have gone through these surgeries. They just allowed me to be the woman that I am.” Yet for decades the public has viewed these women as drag queens or sexual fetishists, a view perpetuated by the fact that talk shows are filled with the latter while women like her are almost never in the public eye. Indeed this very woman who went through her transition in the 60’s was told by Prince (the transvestite who coined the term “transgender”) that she was “delusional” for wanting to undergo surgery. And while this woman may have no inherent judgment towards cross-dressers or fetishists, the process of putting her under the same category will inevitably create resentment as it will only serve to perpetuate the long-held view that she is a man who did some cosmetic changes to her appearance, rather than a woman who has corrected a birth abnormality. And so her chance of having her truth heard or understood will be greatly diminished by the actions of the very movement that claims to

represent her. And her supposed liberator will instead contribute to her oppression by continually merging her with the very identity from which she is seeking to differentiate herself. Indeed, one need to look no further than the casting for the film “Southern Comfort” to see just how pervasive this confusion is among our entire population, even among the supposedly enlightened.

The Casting of Southern Comfort

The film “Southern Comfort” is based on a documentary by the same name in which a man named Robert Eads was filmed and recorded as he was in the final days of his struggle with cancer. Robert Eads, like myself, was born in a female body, but identified as a man - - nothing more and nothing less. The documentary records his difficulty of obtaining medical treatment and surgery in the Deep South, but clearly reflects that he is a man – both in appearance and in self-conception. Indeed his appearance and behavior was so unquestionably male that the Klu Klux Klan tried to recruit him as a member.

Nevertheless, after he passed away and the rights to the story were purchased in order to bring his story to the larger screen, the actor chosen to portray Robert was Sissy Spacek -- who commented that if she didn't do the role successfully, she would have to throw out her “male” clothing. The roles portraying Robert's two male friends who underwent their transition into manhood were also given to women. This despite the fact that the wife of one of those men – a woman who had been married to several men previously -- said this of her husband, “He's never been anything other than a male to me. I look at him and that's what I see.”

The message in this casting decision is clear: Robert Eads and his friends, were simply women in drag. And yet in the documentary, Robert himself said that the only time he was “cross-dressing” was the time when his parents put a dress on him as a child. He also said that he never saw himself as a lesbian, but simply as a heterosexual male. And so his dying message to us, his message of truth, was ignored. And it begs the question: how is the public supposed to grasp the distinction between men like Robert and a cross-dresser when the GLBT community has not only placed both under the same label, but that label by its very definition signifies someone who is neither male nor female – someone who is an “alternative” gender. Why is a plain old, self-described “hillbilly” like Robert an alternative gender? Simply because of the medical state of his body? If a mainstream, masculine man is castrated is he transgendered? And would you portray the plight of such a man by casting a woman dressed in male clothing and a mustache to represent him? And how would this make him feel?

Perhaps the most qualified person to answer that question would be David Reimer – the boy who following a circumcision accident in which he lost his penis -- was raised as a girl only to have to eventually go through the surgeries I did to reclaim his male identity. When asked about the doctor’s decision to put him in the role of a girl, David had this to say, “When I switched back, I had two problems on my hands, not just one, because of them trying to brainwash me into accepting myself as a girl.” So too, does the casting of Robert Eads end up re-victimizing him, for now not only did his body betray him, but those entrusted with his life story did too.

Unlike Robert, I was able to complete all of my surgeries; I had both the time and the resources. But one of the very reasons I sprinted through them, risking life and limb

despite grueling complications, was because the thought of passing away and having the wrong pronoun placed on my grave was too painful to imagine. I came into this world with my identity broken, I did not want to leave it that way. And now that I have finally arrived, I cannot and will not betray my own efforts by taking on a label that does not honor the end-place at which I have arrived. Indeed using the word “transgender” in reference to me is no different than using the term “female” – both are places I had to travel through as a product of my birth condition, but neither represent my home or my truth. And the unwillingness of so many leaders within the GLBT community to honor and accept this begs the very question: what is true tolerance?

The Commandment of True Tolerance: Treat Others as you would wish to be treated

Imagine if every time Ellen Degeneres was asked to speak at a conference or on a television show, they put the word “bisexual” under her name. Imagine if every time she was introduced at those conferences, she was identified as a “bisexual” person who would be discussing “bisexual issues.” And then imagine, if she said, “hey – can you please refer to me as “gay,” she was either rejected, dismissed, or treated as if she was asking for a huge favor. Imagine if she was told, “this is a broad, inclusive term. Plus - you were once with guys, right? So what’s the big deal?” Regardless of how “logical” the explanation might appear, the act of invalidating the very way she sees herself would be nothing short of blasphemy to her spirit.

You see, true tolerance does not mean putting someone into a box you have built for them and conditioning your support and acceptance upon them climbing into that box; true tolerance means accepting someone as they define themselves and standing up for their identity *even if you do not personally relate to that identity*. And one of the best examples of true tolerance is reflected in the actions of Reed Erickson.

Erickson was born in a female body, but underwent the transition to visible man in the 1960s. A wealthy man who had amassed a sizeable fortune during his life, Erickson formed the Reed Erickson Foundation and funded a diverse group of causes from dolphin research, to homeopathy, to the development of ethical guidelines for gender reassignment.

His foundation also gave two million dollars to the first gay rights organization (One, founded in 1952) and then helped them achieve non-profit status in their own right. In so doing, Erickson epitomized the definition of true tolerance: he did not try to claim, rename, or define their agenda; he simply gave them the means and tools to do it for themselves, on their own terms.

Conclusion

It is a fundamental need of the human soul to be seen for who we truly are. And when something as core and basic as gender or sexual orientation has been damaged or invisible for a long time, we need to have that part of ourselves witnessed in order to heal and become an integrated part of this world. This is why gay and bisexual people stand up and “come out” by expressing their true identity despite the potential for rejection. For the simple act of stating their truth and having it witnessed, liberates a part of their soul.

The same holds true for those of us who have suffered invisibility regarding our true gender. Every time I stand up and say, “I am a man” – nothing more, nothing less -- my truth is spoken and I make something that was wrong for so much of my life, finally right. But when someone refers to me as “transgender” the spirit I worked so hard to liberate is once again imprisoned and I am forced to participate in a lie. And so, by virtue of the transgender label, I am unable to fully complete my process of “coming out” and being witnessed. And yet when people like me point this out to the GLBT community, we are so often dismissed or worse, accused of being divisive or “rejecting” that community. But true tolerance – or true love, for that matter -- does not mean making others into reflections of yourself. True tolerance is the willingness to step back and allow another to come forward and be witnessed in a way that truly makes them feel seen. Anyone who gives this gift, is honoring the commandment to love another as they themselves would wish to be loved. Anyone who denies it, is perpetuating intolerance.¹

¹ Recently, after years of dissension, several transgender groups agreed to remove “intersex” from their definition of transgender. The same reasons that make it inappropriate to put those born “intersexed” under the transgender label apply to those born as true transsexuals: once intersexed and transsexual people have surgery to correct their birth condition, they may very well identify as mainstream men and women. All they may have left are some faint scars or, in some cases, DNA that does not match their physical body. But since it is estimated that 1 out of 200 people have DNA that does not clearly conform to their physical sex and DNA is not visible to others, does it really make sense to label people who have undergone corrective gender surgery as having a politically/socially alternative “gender” identity for the rest of their life?

Another reason used to justify choosing the term “transgender” is that “transsexual” has a connotation of “sexuality” in it and thus creates confusion between gender and sexuality. That’s true, but the better solution would be to select a term that is more appropriate sounding than transsexual and reflects the actual truth of the condition, such a “intersex -- phase two, stage two, or type two” (since this split between body and mind typically occurs at a later fetal stage than the intersex condition). The solution is not to choose a term that speaks to an entirely different identity and then attach it to a movement based on sexual orientation; the latter simply reinforces the notion that gender and sexual orientation are interchangeable.

This article is dedicated to David Reimer and Robert Eads and all of those men and women who have risked so much to be who they are – who they have always been.

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