

## **Gaining a Daughter: a Father's Transgendered Tale**

By LENNARD J. DAVIS

I look around and find myself, strangely enough, in the women's lingerie section of the Kmart in an upstate New York town. I am with my 19-year-old son, who is comparison shopping for a pair of black tights. Some farm ladies are regarding us with dubious glances. My son asks if I think medium is too large for him. He stands at about 5 feet 11 inches. I really have no idea what will fit him. Trying to be helpful, I suggest that he might want to wear the fishnet stockings, which seem to me a bit more goth, but he sticks with the regular ones. Then we move on to the cosmetics section for lipstick and hair dye. As I help him pick out a L'Oreal shade called Parisian Black, I wonder to myself how I got here.

How indeed? A few days earlier, my son had arrived back from his first year at college. The following morning, he sat me down at the kitchen table and announced that he had a big thing to tell his mother and father. My wife was on the telephone, and as we waited for her to finish talking, my son whispered, "I'm getting married." Then he added, "No, just kidding." He was jumpy with nervous intensity. When my wife sat down, he spoke: "I've been thinking about this for a long time, and I wanted to tell you -- I'm transgendered!" He looked pleased with himself and somewhat triumphant. My wife and I looked at each other, confused and horrified.

He must have sensed that we were nonplused. So, being of an academic bent, as we are, he began pulling out of his backpack books with titles like *My Gender Workbook* and *Gender Outlaw*, reading us long passages like the following, from Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors*:

"Both women's and trans liberation have presented me with two important tasks. One is to join the fight to strip away the discriminatory and oppressive values attached to masculinity and femininity. The other is to defend gender freedom -- the right of each individual to express their gender in any way they choose, whether feminine, androgynous, masculine, or any point on the spectrum between. And that includes the right to gender ambiguity and gender contradiction. It's equally important that each person have the right to define, determine, or change their sex in any way they choose whether female, male, or any point on the spectrum between. And that includes the right to physical ambiguity and contradiction."

As he talked, I tried to listen but could not escape the sensation that I was in someone else's movie. I thought about this young person and wondered if there was something I was missing. He had always seemed to be a very masculine guy -- interested in girls -- who never once could have been mistaken for a female. He wasn't effeminate in the least, and there seemed to be no apparent prehistory to this moment. Later, though, I recalled the many comic strips and zines he had written featuring female main characters. They seemed, in

retrospect, to have been his alter egos.

My wife and I both consider ourselves progressive academics. We have been willing to accept virtually any behavior from our children -- from their experimentation with marijuana to having their sexual partners sleep over at our house. We are a poster family for permissiveness and have cruised fairly comfortably from grunge through swing to goth. I've seen my kids' hair go from brown to blue to green, as mine has gone to gray. I followed my son as he crossed a police line and grabbed a bullhorn at City Hall to protest budget cuts in education; worried as he came back late from punk-rock clubs; trembled a bit as he explained that he might be arrested for defacing (or reconstructing, as he would say) corporate billboards. We are feminists against homophobia. And I teach courses with titles like "Women, Nation, Empire" and "The Different Body."

Could anyone be more of a political ally than I?

Had he announced, "I'm gay," my wife and I would have been relatively prepared to say, "Great! Who's the lucky guy?" But transgendered? I didn't have much of an idea then what the word meant. We asked some predictable questions. "Are you gay?" My son laughed, "No, I love women. I'm completely heterosexual." "So, do you want a sex-change operation?" "No, I like my body the way it is." "So, what does this mean?" "It means, I'm a girl. I want to wear dresses, makeup, and challenge the whole patriarchal, bourgeois idea of gender."

My mind raced. We were having Stanley Fish and Jane Tompkins over for dinner that night. I imagined my son swirling down the stairs, arriving at dinner like Loretta Young in flowing chiffon. How exactly would I explain such a phenomenon to my guests over hors d'oeuvres? As it turned out, our son dressed neutrally and got into an argument with Stanley over Bosnia, not biology.

Over the next few days, my son continued to explain his metamorphosis to us: "Michel Foucault says that gender is socially constructed. So does Judith Butler." Foucault! Butler! Those were the names of scholars I teach, now being hurled like grenades at my feet. Those theoreticians believe, as I do, that such seemingly fixed and essential things as gender or disability are really pliable and plastic. It had seemed fine to accept that gender was a social construction, but now here was my child before me, attempting to carry out in principle what I had been teaching only theoretically in my courses. I suddenly felt rage toward those ivory-towered theoreticians who glibly spout gender theories. Now I was going to have to pay in humiliation and pain, in seeing my son in a dress. Thanks, Judy!

The next few days were pretty intense for my wife and me. As we sat up late discussing this alteration in our family life, we quickly passed through the phases associated with getting a fatal illness. First was denial, followed by the willing accomplices of rage and despair. Acceptance kept its reserved distance; the sticking point was the issue of wearing dresses. I thought I could logically argue my son out of that penchant. "If women are oppressed and femininity is a construct, why should you essentially reinforce or parody the feminine? Isn't that giving in to patriarchy? Reinforcing the gender binary?" As a litigious academic, I could

in a pinch come up with a cogent argument.

Knowing my rhetorical strategies only too well, my son replied that to break down the binary, we had to be able to dress as we wished. In our culture, women could wear men's clothing without any opprobrium, but men could only wear women's clothing at their own peril. If a woman wears a tuxedo she's an icon, as Marlene Dietrich knew, but if a man wears a dress he's comic. Just ask Tony Curtis or Jack Lemmon.

He was right, no doubt, but no matter how rational our discussion was, the dress became an eternal stumbling block. As some friends of ours said later, our son had picked the one thing that we, as progressives, couldn't accept. I continued trying to argue, "How would you feel if you saw me wearing a dress and makeup?" He replied, "I'd be so relieved." I countered, "What would your roommate think?" I was figuring that his Japanese friend, who was obsessed with technology, would be horrified. "Oh, he's saving up his money for a sex-change operation." My last round of armaments was quickly being depleted. One last salvo: "Well, you say you like women. What will they think of you wearing a dress?" He smiled like a cat with a canary in his maw and confided, "It's the greatest way to meet women," and winked knowingly. What could I say?

By now, I was beginning to understand a bit about this transgender issue, although I'm far from an expert. My son says that a transgendered person is anyone who breaks the rules of the gender binary. By his definition, people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual are not necessarily transgendered, since they define themselves by their sexual preference, rather than their gender crossing. They would be transgendered only if they attempted to break from the gender they were assigned at birth, by redefining their identity through an act of philosophical or political awakening, hormonal or surgical intervention, or choice of clothing.

My son says that it's all about a person's right to choose. He defines himself as a "transgirl." Some women may choose to define themselves as men. And other folks may head for the shifting middle ground of gender "variants," who like to keep things ambiguous. Inhabiting the transgender territory are drag queens and drag kings, "transgirls," "transboys," and those who vote for their identity with anything from estrogen to haircuts. A heterosexual male could be considered transgendered if he were a cross-dresser, although a cross-dresser is not necessarily transgendered if he only likes to wear women's clothing but doesn't consider himself female or a gender variant.

The possibilities are mind- (and body-) boggling. There are relatively simple variations along the transgender continuum, including male-to-female "post-op" transsexuals, such as Deirdre N. McCloskey, the noted economist, or female-to-male transsexuals such as Leslie Feinberg, the author of *Stone Butch Blues*. Then there are those who adopt hormonally and surgically the secondary sexual characteristics of the other gender while keeping the genitalia with which they were born. There also are bearded women, like the well-known circus performer and gender activist Jennifer Miller. Intersexuals -- formerly known as hermaphrodites -- whose parents "corrected" their gender, walk side-by-side in this movement with those who managed to retain the organs with which they were born. Then,

on the genetic level, there are women who, according to their chromosomes, should be male (they have female genitalia, but they can't reproduce).

The old gender binary begins to look pretty Procrustean when confronted with this welter of permutations.

My son is part of what might be called a "fourth wave" in gender activism. The first wave was clearly the feminist movement, followed by the next tsunami, as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals established their identities as individuals and communities. Then came a surge of queer activism, which challenged even gay notions of what was normal. But to my son and his peers -- who are mostly under 30 -- those three sea changes now seem merely to be part of a conservative undertow.

This generation believes that earlier activists, while challenging various kinds of gender abuses, still clung to the notion of the criticality of gender per se. First-wave feminists, for example, never doubted that being a woman was essential to their mission. Likewise, although gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals challenged the notion of mandated or "normal" sexual preference, they saw their identity as defined by a ratio of one's gender to one's sexual choice. That is, a lesbian could only be defined as a woman who chose another woman as a sexual partner. Even some conservative post-operative transsexuals cling to the gender binary, saying "I was born the wrong gender, and now I've become the right one."

Members of the fourth wave, who like to call themselves "trannies" (perhaps in solidarity with 60's "hippies") see challenging the fixity of gender as their most important goal. My son reported to me that gender is so complex that there are 100 genders, and that we can morph through 20 of them in a single morning. He indicts the quotidian norms that force people to subscribe to one gender, to be legally identified as having one, and to be forbidden to use certain social spaces by that specific aspect of identity. Indeed, the International Bill of Gender Rights, drafted and adopted in 1993, lists as fundamental the prerogative to define one's gender identity, control and change one's own body, and have access to "gendered space."

When my wife and I asked my son why he thinks he is transgendered, his snappy retort was, "I don't know which bathroom to use." When he is wearing a dress, should he use the men's room or the women's room?

The transgendered concept allows for some interesting family groupings. A father in a couple might undergo sexual reassignment surgery and thereby become a lesbian, if he remains with his wife. Or a cross-gendered bisexual can pair off with an intersexual lesbian. A cross-dressing male can live with a post-op male-to-female and appear to fit nicely into the prototype of the typical American family. The possibilities are limitless. They make Ozzie and Harriet look like something from the late Devonian period, and Ellen DeGeneres's coming out seem as staid as that of a debutante.

I understood all this intellectually, but I was taking a fair amount of time to process it emotionally. My wife initially insisted on an N.I.M.H. -- Not In My House -- policy in

regard to cross-dressing. That stance resulted partly from embarrassment and shame about how friends and family might perceive our son if they knew the truth.

Somewhat conveniently, the grandparents had already transmogrified to that genderless beyond, so at least we wouldn't have to explain the situation to them. Our 16-year-old daughter thought the whole thing was kind of cool and couldn't understand why we were so upset. "Some boys in my school come to class in skirts or wearing lipstick, and we think they're sexy." My brother, a financial analyst living in the suburbs, was blase. His college-age son was open-minded, having lived his four university years in a frat house, where he had no doubt seen worse.

We were uncertain about what to say to our friends. The artistic types were intrigued, and even offered some fetching outfits, if needed. One male friend was judgmental, and said our son was manipulating us. But that same friend sheepishly admitted that, when his wife bought new high-heeled shoes, he had to be the first to wear them at home. Another friend, who is part of a gay couple, confessed that his dream was to be married in a wedding gown, something his more conventional partner just would not hear of. In fact, a lot of folks stepped up to our confessional with Oprah-like stories of their own journeys into the backrooms of sexuality, gender, and fashion.

In the midst of all this turmoil, or because of it, my son decided to go to an indie-rock concert in Washington State. He would take a Greyhound bus and camp out. He asked me to help him get organized, which is how I ended up in the Kmart as his shopping consultant. He packed a few dresses into his backpack, along with his other clothing, and left. All of us felt relieved.

We began to get phone calls from bus stations scattered across the country. At first our son was friendly, but one late-night call from Fargo turned angry quickly. "I've been thinking, and I'm really upset that you won't accept me for who I am." My groggy response was that I was doing the best I could. "That's not good enough. I can't believe that you, of all people, who teach about the rights of people with disabilities, people of color, working-class people, can't accept this. These are my people! They are being discriminated against, cast out, and you can't accept it?"

For the first time, I felt that he was completely right. I had no counterargument. Whether I liked it or not, a disenfranchised and despised group was in need of support; what made it difficult to accept was the fact that my son was in that group. I had to confront my own prejudices and realize that I was a bigot. I, like many of my peers, thought that a man in a dress was either humorous or pathetic, as so many episodes of *Monty Python* or *Benny Hill* have suggested. It was true that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry about my son.

My son asked that I read some of the books he had brought home, and I agreed. I also ordered some books through Amazon.com. (Then, when I logged on, I got helpful messages like, "If you liked *Transvestism: A Handbook*, you'll like *Bound and Gagged*.") I not only read through the material, but, since I would be teaching a course in the fall called "The Different Body," I decided then to put some of the books in my syllabus. (It is interesting to

me that my reaction, as an academic, was to teach about what was mystifying and edifying me.)

I've just about gotten used to seeing my child in women's clothing. At first I experience a confusing, cognitively dissonant moment, but then I remember that he is the child I've known for years, with the same brio for life he's always had, the same excitement over his ideas, commitment to fairness and justice, and love for us. The only difference is that he's in a skirt. I remember my mother's agony over my long hair in the 1960's -- how she asked me not to come to her place of business because she was embarrassed, and how much that hurt me. I knew as a parent, and as an activist, that I could not legitimately reproduce that rejection.

Our life has gone on. My son announced that he wanted to bring his girlfriend, a "bidyke" as he described her, home for the holiday season. I learned that the term "dyke" has now been freed up from its dependence on sexual preference, and is an operative word to describe a strong woman. When she arrived, she seemed a bit androgynous, but not remotely butch. And she wore a prom dress out one night. We all liked her, and it was a memorable Christmas.

Meanwhile, my graduate course on "The Different Body" went very well. The body in question was a little more different than it had been in the previous year's version. But the students were barely fazed by the transgendered component of the course. They were blase, even when I told them about my son or showed them pictures that I thought were pretty shocking -- like a photograph of Tala Candra Brandeis by Loren Cameron titled "Biology Is Not Our Destiny," depicting a nude person with long, flowing hair, breasts, tattoos, and a penis. It seemed to be all in a day's work for this generation of cultural-studies adepts, brought up as they had been with RuPaul and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. I shared with the class my son's zine entitled *Boy Is Girl* and gave them his e-mail address so they could converse with him about these subjects. My son was pleased with the correspondence, and the students were, too.

The story is not over. In the months since his announcement, my son's attitudes toward some issues have shifted. He has come into conflict with more-conservative elements in the tranny community who do not agree with his radical politics. He has had to deal with the fact that some people within that community do not regard him as truly transgendered, because he hasn't taken hormones or had an operation. He is evolving a position that I have come to respect and from which I have learned a great deal. In many ways, he occupies a similar position to the one I do in disability studies. I am not a person with disabilities, and I have to negotiate that liminal status on a regular basis. In addition, both he and I are against the narrowness of certain kinds of identity politics and see our goal as opening up the question of identity through a notion of the mutability of the body. So, we talk a lot about the ways in which our interests intersect. I've helped him with his zines, and he's helped me with my course.

As an academic, my job is to learn from the world. And if that world comes into my house in women's clothing, spouting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, then I have to learn from that. As a



father, my pleasure is to love and accept my children. When those two roles come together, in a kind of serendipitous confluence, one must be quick to recognize the opportunity that presents itself. My child and I have grown closer through what might have been a terrible conflict, one that in some families might have been the end of the line. What made a better scenario possible was that same intellectual desire to learn, to know, and to encourage that has been behind all my teaching and scholarship.

The other day, my son announced that he wanted my wife and me to refer to him as our "daughter." He asked that we not use masculine pronouns or nouns to describe him. I told him that I probably could not find it in myself to call him my "daughter," that my sense of the English language was that it was not sufficiently flexible, nor was I, to accomplish that gender purification of my linguistic practice. This was finally a moment, I felt, when the old binary dog couldn't learn new transgendered tricks. We got into an argument, and he hurled Judith Butler at me again. She was getting to be my nemesis.

My son knew that I was writing this article, and he approved. But when I told him that it would be impossible for me to write this piece without using masculine pronouns, he was upset. He suggested that I use "s/he" or "ze," and I responded that I was sure the *Chronicle* style sheet was pretty limited in that regard. After some discussion, he said, "OK, but just do it at the end of the essay." So I told her I would. After all, I figured, I wasn't losing a son, I was gaining a daughter.

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