

The Second Transition

By Christine Burns

For many years there has been an increasingly diverse choice of literature dealing with the period surrounding the obvious physical transition made by trans people. Lots of people have written about their path to the doors of the operating theatre, and all the tears, drama and obstacles which have come to be regarded as the natural rites of passage on the gender-crossing road. Far less ever seems to have been written about what lies beyond the knife though – that time when the stitches have come out and the physical wounds have healed and when the newly liberated person is set loose on the world with a blank canvas on which to paint a life. I think it's time that omission was rectified.

I don't want to spend a lot of space speculating on why this part of trans people's development seems to have been relatively overlooked. Historically, many people have simply sought to assimilate and disappear after surgery. Or maybe stopping the narratives at this point reflects society's simplistic belief that gender transition is only about hacking at bits of flesh and nothing else – an end, rather than a beginning.

If this were true, you could assess the success or otherwise of a trans person's journey the moment they wake up from the anaesthetic, which seems ridiculous. Other people's biographies don't stop at the point when they pop out of the womb or celebrate their coming of age, it's usually where they begin! The assumption that things are in any way different for trans people can lead to a false set of expectations about how you should feel and behave afterwards. In the worst case, it can lead well-meaning individuals to shut off the support process at the very point when it is most needed, in the real growth phase of personal development.

“You won’t need me now. The operation’s over, the file’s closed. Go out and live happily ever after and don’t you dare say that you want or expect anything more after this much fuss. If you’re not instantly ecstatic, that can only mean the whole thing was a disastrous and irrevocable mistake”.

This story is therefore about the second and more profound transition in a trans person’s life. The longer, most exciting but least talked-about one. What happened next ! Hopefully this will encourage more people to think about the spiritual journey which the physical passage merely qualifies us to begin. That doesn’t mean I want people to think of this quick recap of my own “second transition” as some sort of model, something else to fail or succeed in replicating. Trans people’s lives are littered with far too many conformance models for me to dream of wanting to add another! Besides, as I’ll go on to explain, the second transition is far more of an evolutionary one. There is no set place for it to begin, no right or wrong speed or direction for it to proceed, and no reason to suggest that it should have to end. All I’d like people to think about is the notion that it *exists* and how to make the best of it. The rest is up to each individual. Enjoy.

Before I begin my story, I’d like to introduce you to a folktale that I heard many years ago and whose moral you might find as useful as I did.

One day a man thoughtlessly offends a gypsy selling heather at his door. She puts a curse on him and he finds, to his horror, that thereafter everything written – all the books, magazines and newspapers that he picks out to read appear to him as versions of the same narrative.

The storyteller loves reading and this is a curse that bites. He’s not become blind in a conventional sense, but worse perhaps: He’s blinded by the image placed between the print on the real page and his consciousness. In panic he looks for a cure, only to find that

nobody can help him. The problem lies inside. Other people look at a book and see the real words. They can't envisage his reality. He contemplates ending his life, for surely there is nothing to live for in this condition. In one last desperate act, however, he seeks out the gypsy to apologise for his actions and to beg with her to lift the curse.

The gypsy readily accepts the man's apologies but confesses that there is nothing she can now do to lift the spell. Instead, she advises him to find his peace with it. He needs to learn from and embrace his condition, she says. He must find the value in what has happened and rejoice in it.

At first the man is mystified by the advice he has received. How can you embrace and find peace with an obstacle like this? Then he resolves to try a new approach. He picks up a book and starts to transcribe the story that only his eyes can see. No longer fighting to see past the message that's there, he finds, to his surprise, that he is transcribing a masterpiece of great subtlety and depth. The substance of his curse turns out to be a thing of real beauty. At the same time he realises that the ideas were there all along, locked in his unconscious. They're his. What seemed a curse was actually a gift of insight into what lay waiting to be tapped in his own abilities.

The man's transcription turns out to be a bestseller, of course. And with the release of the ideas that stood between him and the world he finds that the spell offers something, rather than taking it away. Now when he opens a book he sees new perspectives waiting to be passed on and realises how this will continue until all the good ideas released by the gypsy's "curse" have been written down for others and published.

The story ends there, of course, and there's a moral in it for everyone: Take what you've got and use it. Take the "curse" of seeing things differently as a "gift" and that is what it will become.

Now I'd like to tell you a little bit about my own life...

Acceptance

Looking back, the first part of my own life story seems like a bit of a stop-start affair– for years a game of hide and seek with reality.

It's quite safe to admit nowadays (cliché or not) that I knew how different I was from very early on as a child. There were “incidents” from before I even started school. The other kids instinctively spotted a difference of some kind too. The boys bullied and shunned me, the girls welcomed me as one of their own. Even before my teens I ached to be one of them, with an inexplicable force which became more terrifying the older I grew. There could be no question of doing anything about how I felt inside until I had at least left home though. And, at university, it wasn't long before I was covertly reading about others like me (this was the 1970s when the story of British trans woman April Ashley appeared in the newspapers because the court refused to recognise her as female, and the travel writer Jan Morris published her autobiography *Conundrum*). Before my finals I'd even overcome my self-
abhorrence sufficiently to seek professional advice. And, aged 21, the advice I got from an amazingly well informed psychologist of the time was that the decision was mine. I filled all the diagnostic criteria as “a transsexual”. Being young, slight, long-haired and pretty I could start my transition tomorrow if I wished. All I had to do was ask. I still remember her words, “We can do so much to help you”.

You'd think in hindsight, and in view of the problems encountered by so many others over the years that I'd be overjoyed at this news. In fact, it was quite the opposite. I was terrified and “hid”. It wasn't the prospect of the change which terrified me, but the consequences. I feared the loss of everything else that was important about my life at the

time. I was convinced I'd lose my family and friends, all the people I cared for. The very things which underpinned my personality were at stake – needing to be valued, respected and cared about by others. Strong as the desire to liberate my self-expression might be, this fear was stronger. What would there be in this other life if others withdrew their love and the opportunities to love in return? So it was that I embarked on a cat and mouse game of denial for years, becoming ever more frightened of the immense force of what needed to be expressed in me, and more and more guilty at my inability to ignore it. Like the character in the short story, the curse was wherever I looked. And, more than once, it took me back all the way to the brink of decision before another psychologist came to the same conclusion.

You know the outcome, of course. Third time lucky I stepped, and found my fears to be largely unfounded. True, there were long-term friends, people I loved who didn't manage the transition with me. Other people took their place remarkably quickly though in what turned out to be a breakneck transition. Notice how little there is to say about it too when there's no trauma put there by others.

In most transition stories that is the end of course. The heroine skips off into the sunset (preferably with a new love in tow), and we the audience are left to conclude that she lived happily ever after.

Only that's not quite the case. For me, the completion of all the surgical paraphernalia of transition reminded me of the day I passed my driving test. From that point I was licensed to get in the car alone and choose where I wanted to go. I knew the rudiments of how to steer, how to start, accelerate and stop. I could begin having an independent experience in a car. But I wasn't a driver, merely a trained operator of a motor vehicle. Passing your test simply allows you to start learning to drive, and I soon came to realise that the same applies to becoming a complete integrated person too.

As a newly licensed woman, however, I was a bit of a mess, and I'm telling this tale because it may come as a surprise to those who only know the modern day Christine Burns, a successful IT consultant, one of the key public faces of trans political activism in the UK through the most exciting period in our history, a woman whose face and words cover the hundreds of pages of that campaign's website and literature. But back then I was having difficulty accepting myself, let alone expecting others to do so.

On the face of it, all those years ago, nobody could quite see my problem. It was best summed up by the wife of a man whom I met at an early stage in my transition. She had met a few *transvestite* men before, and I'd been warned that she was likely to be challenging towards this more threatening person labelled "transsexual". The instant we first met, however, her jaw dropped, she paused for a second and then flung her arms around me in a warm sisterly greeting. "My God dear, you *are* a woman!" The consensus among others was: "We've sensed it for years, what took you so long?"

My family saw it, much to my amazement. True, my parents had some questions to ask before they understood in their own terms, but strangely they never doubted or challenged the idea that my transition was right. Instead, they embraced their new daughter and bade farewell to their son. Business clients seemed to see it too. As a self-employed consultant I was entirely dependent upon acceptance by them to survive in transition and fund private treatment for myself. Paradoxically, however, my income and workload actually increased on starting the transition, and continued to grow healthily afterwards. I was awash in acceptance, yet couldn't fully accept myself. Something didn't *feel* right still.

With hindsight (and to save you skipping to the end of this tale for the answer) the "something" that didn't feel right was the way in which I had learned to "know" myself, through a medical label. I'd come to think of myself as a product of a condition, not an expression of a person. I had learned the art of denial first as a way of trying to evade

something inside that frightened me. But now it was out, for all the world to see, I'd continued the learned habit and was still trying to deny the full extent of the reality to myself. Being a trans person was still "wrong" in some way, a personal failure for which I ought to feel some guilt, especially for succumbing. Worse, of course: The conventional wisdom, in which the trans person is supposed to conceal their past, which just compounded the problem. And I knew there *was* a problem, because every day I was greeted by people with a warm, affectionate and unquestioning acceptance which somehow eluded me. The fact that those people clearly couldn't even comprehend the difficulties I was having only contributed to the sense of being in some way "apart" still. In one sense I'd not changed the basic condition I'd known as a child, the sense of being different and separated from normality. At the same time I wasn't expected to have these feelings. I'd obtained the outward trappings of the thing I'd sought. The physical barrier to personal expression was removed, so why wasn't I yet free?

The 'Wrong' Model

Like the wretched soul in the short story, I was trying to see around the very thing that was there before my eyes, rather than taking it out and examining it. The "model" I was using to explain myself just wasn't right. It couldn't explain my reality in ways that concurred with everything else I knew about myself. In the model I'd been taught, the unstoppable pursuit of the essential had to be interpreted as sick or bizarre or deliberately and dangerously radical. I knew myself to be none of these things. Everything else about me was reasoned and planned. I tended to be conservative, if anything, rather than radical. Relationship centred, yes, attention seeking or extrovert, no. Having allowed my big secret out into the open, all the force which had brought it out was dissipated too. There had never been any other

“compulsion” or imperative like it. In that sense “need” and “solution” seemed to have been completely matched, like drinking when you’re thirsty.

I was cured of the original “disease”. Now I was suffering from the residual stigma of it being dubbed a “disease” in the first place. It’s not just drugs that have side effects. Psychiatric classification is just as damaging. The “wrongness” didn’t stop there either. There seemed to be a schism in society too, between how people would describe me, and how they would describe the label for people like me. If what I’d learned to date was supposed to be a scientific hypothesis to explain people of my kind then it wasn’t very good at predicting things in the way that a decent theory ought to be able to do! Things just didn’t add up. No wonder I couldn’t get comfortable. I was a bit slow realising that scientists replace their hypotheses when they don’t match the data.

A Conservative Lady

At first I sought peace in the pursuit of acceptance and assimilation. I became a Samaritan, learned the art of “active listening” and helped others to find some answers from within themselves by asking remarkably little myself. I learned that dissonance comes in many wrappers, and that nobody was seemingly immune from anguish at some point or other in their life. It didn’t solve my own dilemma, but at least I was rebuilding a new set of foundations for an ego that depends on being needed. There was something rather curious too in the sense of exploring, for the very first time, the sense of being “the one who’s got it all together”. I could see it in my fellow Samaritan volunteers too. Scratch the surface and everyone, every single one of them, seemed to be looking for some sort of answer. Perhaps learning to be professional and switch off our own feelings to listen to others was a means of temporary escape from questions which we couldn’t answer for ourselves.

With a place and recognition among “nice people”, the next stop on my journey was to seek out more mainstream forms of approval too. It was the time of the 1992 General Election in the UK. My boyfriend at that time never missed a chance to pull fun at my “Conservative-voting” upbringing so, in a rebellion of sorts, I volunteered to help my local party’s campaign. A week after the election, however, the local branch secretary died suddenly from a heart attack and, before I knew it, I was suddenly stepping into his shoes. There it was again, that schism. These were people who later went on to prove that they had absorbed the same tabloid-trained ideas about transsexual people as I’d been taught from childhood. Yet, without question they were pushing, *yes pushing* me to take up one of the most vital organising roles at the centre of their grassroots political activity. It was inexplicable. Flattering too, so I went along for the ride. After all, if these people instinctively liked me at first sight then maybe I could find a way, through that, to like myself in the same way.

Other social acceptance roles followed, all thrust my way, never sought. A year later I had my arm twisted into becoming the chair of the “Young Women’s Supper Club”. Three years of being branch secretary led to taking on the role of treasurer, then vice chair. I cooked for fundraising events and canvassed on doorsteps as Conservative ladies do. Now and then people would ask if I’d like to stand for local government elections.

People seemed to see a very different person than the one I knew in the mirror, and the difference troubled me. Clearly they weren’t wrong in what they saw and accepted, so what was wrong with me? What fuelled my fear of completely letting go and accepting myself? Maybe I’d still be troubling myself over these questions were it not for the fact that other activities began to take off at the same time...

Less Conservative ideas

My very first piece of transgender activism dated back to mid 1990, a time when another trans woman, Caroline Cossey, came to general attention as the second of our kind to seek

resolution for trans people's ambiguous legal position in the courts. Caroline's career as the model "Tula" had come unstuck in the way that was all too familiar – tabloid exposure. Her attempt to settle down as a married woman was undermined too by her legal status in the UK as a "male". Her position was the epitome of all trans people in the UK at that time: unable to marry, no job security if "found out", vulnerable to blackmail and violence, no recourse when it happened, guaranteed a rough ride in the press from the moment someone sold your "secret". And if all this could happen to such a beautiful woman as Caroline, these things clearly had nothing to do with looks or any other aspect of individual social acceptability. If it could happen to her then everything I had was presumably on limited lease from society too. I could never really feel safe in society until society was made safe for me.

In 1990 I wrote a brief but poignant letter of support for Caroline to the *Guardian* newspaper. As I say, it was my first campaigning act, but a timid and limited one. I asked for my name to be withheld, otherwise I feared the same experience as the woman I wanted to defend. It felt shameful to have to hide this way. Still, what was the evidence in favour of doing otherwise? This was the Catch-22. As trans people we suffered from a whole set of misconceptions about us. If one beautiful Caroline couldn't change perceptions, what hope did the rest of us have? By coming out, we undermined what little basis we had for security and credibility. Whether as a Conservative association secretary or an IT consultant, people listened to my ideas. Once known as "a transsexual" I was seemingly doomed to lose those things, and then nobody would be able to hear what I had to say.

But by not coming out we simply colluded in our own oppression. How could trans people be capable of holding serious places in society if you never saw any of them doing so? And how credible is it to argue that you are deserving of equality of opportunity if you're afraid to have that argument attached to your name? People in democracies like to see who and what they are letting in. Change would not occur on its own – some sort of activism was

necessary to bring about that advance. Activists need some sort of consensual power base from which to draw their authority, and organised movements need visible leaders. But what happens if those leaders then immediately lose their job, their financial security and tenuous place in society? Was there a flaw in that feared argument? If not, it seemed a hopelessly circular one, and timid anonymous letters of support to mainstream newspapers (themselves, one of the instruments of continued oppression) were going to achieve absolutely nothing.

So, at the same time as I was busy getting myself assimilated into mainstream society in pursuit of a slice of my own acceptance, the reasoning through of these issues was also telling me that the thing I was building had no foundations. An acceptance based on avoiding the fundamental weakness of my legal position was no security at all.

Knowledge is Power

I started getting interested in learning more about my legal position and attended the special medical and legal Colloquy organised by the Council of Europe in Amsterdam in 1993. There I learned two things.

First I discovered that there was knowledge and research about my situation which was notably absent from the narratives I'd seen before. I'd learned how to view myself principally from the muddled half-truths and blatant misinformation peddled by a mainstream press with a social agenda of its own to pursue. If better and more accurate knowledge changed my thinking, therefore, what could it do for others? This later became one of my guiding aims when I began setting the ambitious goals for the web site of the UK campaign group Press for Change.

The second revelation was that there were other trans people around the world asking similar questions, revisiting our history, relating our position and struggle to the examples of other excluded groups, applying basic theories of philosophy and human rights, and projecting our experiences and insights into the further evolution of dialogues in feminism and gender theory. I discovered a literature I'd never known about, and a basic consensus of thinking which was all the more remarkable because it had emerged along parallel lines around the world without all that much collaboration. It was all there for the taking. This was knowledge with the power to transform not only a trans person's view of themselves, but also other people's perceptions of trans people. If the conventional medical model was like a drug with damaging side effects, this was the "alternative" herbal equivalent. What's more there were *non* trans people in numbers who evidently understood some of this too. These were people who cared simply because they could see that something was wrong about the status quo. There were intellectuals worked up by the same basic wrong that I perceived too. The only difference was that I'd been scared of it. They saw it as a challenge.

Later that same year I flew over to America to see whether I could learn some more. I visited people I'd met in Amsterdam and stood in awe of the incredible achievements of some of them. I'd never met high achieving trans people before. That wasn't in the script I'd been taught. At a conference held by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, which represents professionals working in the area of gender dysphoria, in New York that October, I saw how the intellectual equals of the psychiatrists were not prepared to simply sit and be patronised as delusional weirdos. I saw how another hugely feared and powerful edifice in the lives of trans people could be challenged if you simply stood up and said the philosophical equivalent of "boo" to it. This was starting to take shape.

Accepting the ghetto role we were given by society was the only thing which allowed the system to perpetuate. Our treatment was fundamentally wrong, simply on the basis of the

facts, let alone any philosophical considerations. Challenging the oppression required people prepared to stand up and do so, yet people wouldn't do this until the fear of doing it was destroyed by others doing it first.

Press for Change

On returning to the UK I was invited to join Press for Change, an organisation which at that point was so young and tiny that the first planning meeting I attended took place in someone's front room, over a shop in London's Golders Green.

I had the feeling that even those other campaigners looked on me a bit quizically at first. What? A Conservative? The idea that I could be a trans person and actually work with and for the people at the centre of our oppression was, admittedly, an odd contradiction. Still, if transsexuality doesn't define your sexuality, why should it define your politics? A few years later I did leave the Conservative party – another transition, another wrench involving the severing of personal relationships. But I moved on because both that party and I had evolved in different directions, on a whole range of economic and social issues.

At first I didn't have a specific brief in Press for Change, except perhaps to try and use my contacts in the Conservative party to lobby ministers. In this I was fortunate that my own MP was a Privy Councillor and about to become the Chief Whip in the Government. This meant that top ranking ministers very often came to our fundraising events and I could catch them face-to-face over the smoked salmon sandwiches. It also meant that any issues raised through my MP would automatically get answered by the actual Minister of State, rather than one of his juniors. That's the protocol. The first obstacle I had to come to terms with was “coming out” to my own MP though. In the event this turned out to be far less traumatic than I

expected, and Alastair and his wife Cecilia turned out to be extremely sympathetic (one might almost say “energetic”) supporters.

So it was that I gradually began to break down my own fear of being “out”, the fear which held the Catch-22 cycle of oppression together for me. But coming out to a handful of well-educated politicians sworn to discretion is not the same as “being out” in the broadest sense. Getting to that stage took almost another 18 months of confidence-building.

The event which finally marked that stage came in the late summer of 1995 when Press for Change set out to organise so-called “fringe” meetings alongside the Labour and Conservative party annual conference events. By this point I accepted the notion that representatives of political lobbies have to be “out” in their dealings with the world, even if I felt scared stiff of the possible consequences. The idea of a “fringe” meeting is to get attention for the subject. You want the press. You want an audience. You want debate about the topics raised. To obtain those things you also have to advertise in advance too. You have to issue press releases explaining the importance of the issues. You also have to explain who is going to be representing those points. In short, there is no ducking the connection between yourself and the subject matter!

Coming Out

It seems remarkable looking back now that, just seven years ago, such a prospect was still really terrifying. The night before the press release which would initiate that massive change in my life I remember being physically sick. I’d already briefed key people in the local Conservative party about myself and the event. There was shock and surprise, but also something I hadn’t expected too: admiration and respect. It was stupid of me to think otherwise in hindsight, of course. Real politicians all need to face moments when their

convictions are put on the line. I was simply another politician of sorts. The admiration was professional.

As the news spread and tabloids came looking for reaction I was quite unprepared for what followed. There was fear and concern among local party workers, of course. I was debated, in my absence, and people were clearly grappling to resolve the difference between the nice woman they knew, and their stereotypes. They closed ranks in my defence though. Even now I'm crying at the recollection of that experience. The newspapers had no story. And mysteriously, when it came to the actual fringe meetings themselves, those reporters who turned up expecting a laugh went away to write very little. It may have been years too early to write positively about the concept of trans people getting politically organised – even now most UK editors still prefer us as victims – but the next best thing is to write nothing at all. Just because you're not on the front page it doesn't mean the important people haven't noticed you are there.

There were many political milestones that year, 1995. The groundbreaking case of *P vs S and Cornwall County Council* was heard in the European Court of Justice. The Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesman Alex (now Lord) Carlisle used his place in a private members' ballot to announce his plan to debate a possible bill in Parliament to change our legal status. The first exploratory meetings of a new Parliamentary Forum on Transsexuality were held. Things were changing. In fact a barely-reported meeting on the far edge of the annual political conferences may seem the least significant of these events. Nevertheless on a personal level a line was crossed, from which there could be no turning back.

In case of misunderstandings I need to say that this was not the first "coming out" of its kind. It wasn't even the first voluntary one. The subjects of high profile court cases, people like Mark Rees and Caroline Cossey had never had a choice. People like Press for Change founder Stephen Whittle had voluntarily appeared in television programmes as a legal expert

and trans man for some time. So had other trailblazers like the immensely brave Julia Grant, more than ten years previously. Long before her there was Jan Morris too. Although it was still a very rare thing to do, these pioneering people left me no excuse had I thought of backsliding.

Having “come out” and found that the world did not fall in on me, the only way forward was onwards and upwards. The weak link in the Catch-22 of trans activism was broken. It was no longer socially suicidal to thoroughly own my own condition and rejoice in a pride about it. People sometimes ask how I can talk of being trans and proud in the same breath. And, of course, there’s no pride to be had simply in being who or what you are. I can’t be proud that I’ve got blue eyes! The pride is in what you do with the cards you’ve been dealt. The achievement is in finding your way through the maze and turning the gypsy’s curse into a gift.

Making Legal History

The rest, as they say, is history. It’s a history you can read and research for yourself, because everything about the trans rights campaign in the UK has been proudly and publicly documented from that point forward on the website I started to create in 1996. The vision was simple. I wanted to short-circuit the process of learning for others. Campaign-based websites of any kind were a rarity in those days. In practice they contained little of any practical use. Once you’d read the contents they ceased to be of value because they were rarely seen as a living, tangible embodiment of a movement. Trans related websites were worse still. Those which existed in 1995 were mostly personal and essentially apologetic: “Here, look at me... I’m done up as best I can. Please say I’m acceptable and like me”. There was nothing much on offer to reflect the things I’d seen on my travels. There was nothing to communicate the

insights which were out there and were already firing up my own imagination to think about our position in a different way. If that information had so transformed my own thinking what would happen if someone organised it for hundreds and thousands of trans people to read?

There was by now plenty coming out of the growing legally-based campaign to provide news copy, analysis and reference material. In 1996 “P” won her case in the European Court of Justice and brought employment protection to every trans person in Europe, via a new interpretation of the Equal Treatment Directive. Before long, other high profile court cases in Europe (and later in the UK itself) were to be reported, each one requiring someone to be “out” to some extent to press a case for reform, and each one requiring journalists, law makers and everyday people to think that bit harder about what we had to say.

In 1997 the election of a landslide Labour Government opened new doors and led to the start of the first efforts at consultation between the UK Government and its trans population. Where just two years previously we were a curiosity on the “fringe” of the Labour party conference, now we were suddenly invited to be an exhibitor within the heart of it. When high profile cabinet ministers (even the Prime Minister’s wife) stop by and pose with you for photos, something definitely has to alter in your perception of yourself and the world.

Things were hotting-up all round. In 1998 two more trans women followed Caroline Cossey (and Mark Rees) to the European Court of Human Rights and came closer than ever before to an acknowledgement that their case to be legally recognised as their new gender was valid. If just *one* judge had voted the other way...

In 1999 new law was enacted in Britain to formally incorporate the European judgement on employment protection into UK law. A new inter-departmental working group was set up by the then Home Secretary to start looking at the rest of trans people’s complaints more seriously, and in early 2000 a handful of us sat and gave a presentation to officials from no

fewer than twelve government departments in a meeting which, fittingly, seemed to mark the start of a new era. Six months later those same officials published virtually every word we had said and written as the results of their research. This wasn't a snigger topic any more. This was serious review on a serious matter, the most significant advance for trans people in thirty years and all because people were jumping up in increasing numbers from every direction and demanding that their position be looked at in terms of basic legal and social principles.

Personal Transformation

I can't say that the rest of the personal transformation came overnight. Complete and fully integrated people take a lifetime to make and I, like many, had some site clearance to undertake before building on new rock-solid foundations. Each public advance has added something private too, and a lot of what I've learned and grown from stems from seeking out the shadows I fear and turning on the lights. As I've campaigned at higher and higher levels for change in the legal circumstances of the UK's trans people, as I've taught others new ways of seeing their position and as I've recognised the regard that strangers have for our combined achievement, I grow and find myself wanting to own my part of that.

In case you think otherwise, this isn't a treatise about the need for every trans person to come out to the world though. Press for Change has always believed in the right of people to have their privacy and to choose if, when and in what manner to "come out" to others. Court cases like that of the famous "P" have fought to retain anonymity for people when they wish for it, if only to create the means for others to use the law without losing their privacy in the process. Coming out to the world is far from obligatory. The only mandatory part is to come out to yourself.

There are parts of my own life where it would be superfluous to “come out” too. Few people in my career as an IT consultant know anything these days about my past. Those who’ve learned about it tend to forget quite quickly too. The information isn’t appropriate for the circumstances, and in that setting I continue to grow by seeking out other kinds of challenges, the things that scare me. I tackled new and difficult consultancy assignments, got promoted, ran for election to represent over 8000 of my colleagues at board level in the company, criticised the chief executive’s policies to his face, made enemies as well as friends, let go of the childish need to be approved of by everyone all the time. It seems that personal growth always involves some element of risk and overcoming one’s fears.

When people at work have seen me on the television, or heard me on the radio (or simply found my face and name all over the internet’s search engines) I learned to meet them with a smile. I gave them some reading if they were at all interested and I explained that I didn’t take the campaign life to work, and vice-versa. And that’s the end of it. If they’ve gone on to say anything to others then so what? Fear of that kind of exposure belongs with the outmoded belief that there was something “bad” about being who we are. The important thing is that I know I’ve done enough with my life to expect what people say to be a compliment.

Two Transitions

This is why, looking back, I’ve come to realise therefore that there are those two transitions for people like ourselves to navigate on the road to completeness and peace. The first is not actually hard for us. All the difficulties in the physical transition (if you encounter them) tend to come from others. Nevertheless, the most that first transition could make of me on its own was a little girl in a big girl’s body.

The second more spiritual transition into maturity as a new woman or man is the harder one and is the least documented, because so many biographies seem to stop shortly after the subject's surgical transformation, as though there was no life from this point worth writing about. For that spiritual journey towards completeness you first need to overcome your own fears and preconceptions. It's like a long-delayed process of maturing from a form of childhood into being a complete adult at last. Becoming a trans politician was my own way of making that journey. The milestones in my personal voyage are inextricably tied with the milestones we've achieved collectively. Every new advance in public and official understanding still provides me with a new aspect on my own self. And I'm genuinely amazed at times by the things I've found I could do.

So in the end I came to realise that the secret to seeing myself as others see me lies in altering a bit of both. I've set out to teach people what I see. I've grown from seeing them change and in turn I've evolved that bit more as well. Like the character in the short story, I had to learn to see the curse as a gift, and use the insights being offered. Maybe in this way the world and I will one day truly find ourselves seeing the same thing – me because that's what I see, and *them* because you and I transcribed it for them to read and understand.

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A Footnote

Even as this book was being edited the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg issued a unanimous verdict by no fewer than seventeen national judges that the treatment of trans citizens by the United Kingdom contravened two key articles of the European Convention on Human Rights: Article 8 – The right to privacy, and Article 12 – The right to marry. It was

such a landmark decision that the ramifications will be felt around the world for years to come, and affect far more groups than trans people alone.

A few days afterwards a campaign colleague remarked how different she felt walking down the road in her village. She said that she felt more confident, more of an accepted part of her community, and more able to see the friendly support of other people as something she deserved to receive. For me too, I already sense another shift in my language and self-awareness. The second transition continues.

One day perhaps we'll be able to celebrate the removal of transsexualism as a diagnosis term in the psychological literature and see yet further advances in the happiness and confidence of people who are simply coping with being themselves. If the space needs filling, then maybe there should instead be a category for the treatment of unhappiness resulting from social rejection and medical stigmatisation. But then the cure wouldn't need Psychologists.