



Beyond Diversity Resource Center

7102 Normandy Dr
Mount Laurel NJ 08054
856 235-2664 (voice)
856 235-0827 (fax)
info@beyonddiversity.org
www.beyonddiversity.org

Inside Out and Upside Down

By Lee Ann P. Etscovitz, Ed.D., MFT

Someone asked me recently to state in a sentence or two what my life is like as a transsexual person who transitioned from male to female. My immediate response to my questioner was that he had to be kidding, for such a life is so complex that I don't even know where to begin, let alone summarize it all in one or two sentences. Of course, as a transsexual I am in the midst of such a life and tend to see the trees more than the forest. But after a moment's reflection I thought of a phrase that captures the essence of my total transgender experience: "inside out and upside down."

My questioner appreciated the succinctness of my response, but at the same time, its cryptic quality made him realize that more clarification was needed. My purpose here, therefore, is to talk a bit about being inside out and upside down, for I believe that this phrase captures the essence of my experience.

Where do I really begin? I can begin by trying to describe what it was like to turn myself inside out; that is, to let that which was inside and invisible become that which is at last outside and visible. I say "at last," because my transgender identity was buried for more than half of my life, a fact I regret but one I had to live with. In other words, to survive outwardly and to keep my life "right side up" in accordance with familial and societal expectations of me as a male, I hid my gender feelings. To tell the truth, I hid them from myself as much as from anyone else, and no therapist, at least for quite some time, was able to help me uncover them.

But even my outer survival, at least until recently, has not been much better than my painful inner struggle. I guess I may have looked fairly good growing up because I was a typical-looking male, but I certainly did not feel good inside. I was unhappy and struggling simply to stay alive. Difficulty concentrating in school, a zigzag work life, and a divorce all became the

outer symptoms of my inner torment, even when I was not sure what was tormenting me. There was no way to zigzag my way out of my inner unrest, which turned out to be a confusion about my gender. There was no way to divorce myself from it. Wherever I went, my gender confusion, like my shadow, went with me.

Eventually, with the help of a transgender support group and a gender therapist, both of which I turned to in desperation, I began to face my gender confusion head on. The first steps of recognizing and then accepting myself were extremely painful, but once I was past the shock of realizing that I was a woman living in a man's body, I gradually became more relaxed, happier, and more at peace with myself.

There has been a tragic irony in letting my inner life emerge. So long as I was what other people wanted and expected me to be, I was acceptable. But all the time that I appeared to "fit in," I was lying to myself and others. As soon as I allowed myself to be more authentic, to be my true self, to be a female instead of a male, I was considered self-centered and selfish. And yet at last I was more real, more at peace with myself, and more capable of greater love for others than when I felt so empty, depleted, worthless, and confused.

Of course, gender is such a fundamental element in a person's identity that I can understand the difficulty my family, friends, and coworkers have had with my gender change. It is as if I am being told by everyone, "We want you to be yourself, but don't go too far."

Not everyone, of course, is intolerant or uneducated about gender change, but enough intolerance and miseducation exists to make turning oneself inside out a risky and sometimes dangerous, undertaking.

Part of the danger is that one's life begins to feel upside down because others see it as upside down. I have been rejected and angrily shoved by a family member and ignored by so-called friends. When I used to work in a state-run social service agency, I was not given any difficulty because no one except my manager and a personnel officer knew of my gender change. They were accepting of me without any apparent problem, so long as I produced, which was true for any employee. However, I was advised by both of them not to disclose to anyone with whom I worked anything about my transgender experience because fellow employees might be phobic.

Sometimes coworkers asked me if I were ever married or if I had children. These questions created in me a feeling of awkwardness and regret. The awkwardness stemmed from my having to lie, especially if I wanted to keep matters somewhat simple for my own general comfort on the job. The regret stemmed from the fact that, since I was not telling the whole truth about myself, I could not, therefore, share with others some of the meaningful, albeit difficult, aspects of my life. In a nutshell, I was always being careful, careful of what I said and careful of what I did.

This carefulness in terms of what I said and did was brought about by the daily demands of my resocialization efforts as a female. My behavior and general deportment now identify me as a female, but I must admit I still have some behavioral characteristics that I, and maybe others, consider to be more masculine than feminine, such as my outspoken, earthy type of humor. But being outspoken and earthy are not always traits for men alone, so maybe I can just as well be my own kind of woman, so long as I can still be identified as a woman.

Another problem I continually face, and which tends to turn my world upside down, is the fact that I am married to a wonderful woman who has chosen to stay with me after my transition. In many social situations we refer to ourselves as cousins to minimize that social stigma that can occur when we go shopping or dining, or when we attend party where we are not well-known.

My wider family situation has been even more difficult. At one time my own children would have little, if anything, to do with me, and my wife's family expressed the same attitude. The situation on both sides has slowly improved, but for quite a while, I was not invited to many family gatherings. I was not even invited to the weddings of my three children because I refused to crossdress back to my former male self, which would have been extremely difficult, both physically and emotionally. So I did not attend any of the weddings, yet I wanted very much to go.

My daughter and I now get along very well. I visit her weekly to be with my two granddaughters. My older son and I also get along well, but my younger son has dropped my last name and has refused to talk to me for about ten years. I have neither met his two children nor have I met his wife.

In one sense, my world will be upside down forever because, at least in my own eyes, I am a reborn adult who appears different from the way I did before my rebirth. In another sense, however, the world I now live in is not really upside down because at last I am relating to life in terms of the person I have always felt I was meant to be. But being genuine to myself makes me appear to be turning everything upside down by risking my marriage, my friendships, my job, and perhaps even my life. Nevertheless, I have finally chosen to live my very own truth.

At last I am living in a world that is right side up, not upside down, a world in which I am at last standing, not on my head, but on my own two feet. It feels good to have my head back where it belongs, where I can see more clearly and can get on with life with a clearer vision of who I am and where I am going. I am trying as best I can to live on my own terms with others who are different from me and who do not always understand my transgender experience.

As a result of all this, I find myself asking, “Is my life really upside down?” Perhaps the issue is not that of being right side up or upside down but of simply understanding that the nature of human diversity includes something as unusual yet as real as gender change.

About the Author

Dr. Lee Ann Etscovitz is a psychotherapist and organizational consultant serving southern New Jersey and the Philadelphia area. As a therapist she works with individuals, couples, and families experiencing various emotional and relational problems. She also serves the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Intersex (GLBTI) community and specializes in transgender issues. As a consultant she offers workshops and consultation for staff and organizational development involving problems of diversity in the workplace, with special attention paid to GLBTI issues in general and transgender issues in particular. She can be contacted at (215) 272-1049; LPE@comcast.net. Her website is [www. innerjourney.biz](http://www.innerjourney.biz)