

On Being Transsexual: An Unexpected Spiritual Journey by Libby

I grew up in a tough, lower middle class, blue collar neighborhood. I went to an all boys' public elementary school (and CCD classes) until 6th grade and then transferred to Catholic schools for the 7th through 12th grades. I had very good parents, even from a spiritual standpoint. My childhood was fairly uneventful and pleasant although I always felt something wasn't right. I can remember having these "feelings" or thoughts as early as age four or five or sooner. It's all very vague and unclear now (I'm 67 at this writing). I did not have the vocabulary then to really understand what was happening. Gender related information was scarce. Internet didn't exist and I was very young and dare I say...innocent. The feelings seemed to be concerned mostly with a desire to experience things from a girl's perspective...to "feel like a girl" and later wishing I could be physically female and live as a girl and woman. I worried that I might be gay. I instinctively resisted these thoughts and feelings, given my background. I tried to compensate, suppress and hide these feelings.

My feminine feelings became more and more pronounced, with more clarity, well before puberty--possibly as early as age seven or eight. In my teen years—or even earlier—I became more and more detached and distant; less sociable and more isolated. I entered puberty struggling with these conflicting feelings--great anxiety, fear and a draining experience of depression. A great sadness enveloped me, moving well beyond personal hardship or life difficulties. The sadness reflected what seemed to be my hopeless situation, with no satisfactory resolution on the horizon. I felt trapped, as if I were in prison with no prospect for release. Intuitively I knew what was causing my distress, but I could not find the words to verbalize these feelings and dared not try to talk to anyone. Who could I really trust with my secret, where could I dare to go for help back in the 50s and 60s? At that point, transgender people that were often viewed as a danger to society, and commonly ostracized and even institutionalized.

I heard the term "transsexual" for the first time before puberty began for me. At that early point I became very afraid, resisting the whole idea that I might be a transsexual. Even if my worst fears were true and I was indeed a transsexual, I had neither the support nor the financial resources to take any action. I saw no possibility other than making the best of what I was physically; a male. I tried to counter my feelings by being as masculine as possible. I thought perhaps this experience was just a phase, a fad I was going through. If I just ignored the feelings, hid them, denied them, perhaps this experience would just go away. This was my secret, and as with most secrets, these thoughts festered and hurt me in many ways.

My gender conflicts were not only making me very sick and unhappy but also slowly causing me to drift away from the Catholic Church and God. There was no grievance or malice, I just couldn't participate any more. I suspected that members of these communities would condemn me if I shared such personal information about myself. The conflict and turmoil boiling inside me revealed how far I was drifting from the Church, but more importantly from God.

Finally I felt I had nothing to lose: the time had arrived for me to resolve my gender identity issues. I started taking female hormones shortly before my 59th birthday. Eventually I got in contact with a Catholic sister, Sister Luisa Derouen. We corresponded first by email and later by weekly phone calls and finally met in person at a transgender event in a hotel. Her message was that God loved us...loved *me*! She insisted that we could have a relationship with God without adhering to a clerical rule book. She looked at me and said, "Libby, don't you know that God loves you?" I couldn't answer, probably because I didn't feel loved by anyone. But in that moment I felt something I never before experienced. I sensed love from her. I could see it in her eyes! I began to cry uncontrollably, right in the middle of the afternoon crowd in the hotel lobby.

I identify as Catholic, even though I am not presently a practicing Catholic. I had always hoped that someday, somehow I could reconcile with the Church. But I had seen my transition as a further impediment. Also, I've been attending a Unitarian Universalist Church where I have been accepted and have made many friends. How do I give this up to return to a Church whose hierarchy includes many who do not accept me? I worried especially about the rules of the Church that I was not following. I had spoken to a Catholic priest about this and his response was "God is not that petty!"

Sister Luisa reminded me of the Catholic Church's understanding of the primacy of conscience. I had lost connection with this conviction. The Church should emphasize this important principle. Catholics would then be encouraged to take more personal responsibility for their spiritual lives. I think the crux of my conflict in reconciling with the Catholic Church is that I fear submitting to the Church's authority because I fear they won't respect me and I will slip back into mechanically following the "rules," which would likely then be followed by guilt.

I no longer feel I'm spiritually dead. I believe in and love God more than ever. I'm grateful to God for the many gifts given me, including my gender identity. I have an active prayer life and spend time with God every day. I try to do good works as the opportunities arise. My faith has remained strong and constant now for many years. I do not know if I will ever reconcile with the Church, but I am open to this.

I view the existence of transgender people as evidence of God's creativity and love. I believe we are part of God's creative genius and exist to complete God's plan. I believe God not only epitomizes love, but wants to include us, all of us, in God's love. I probably did not consciously believe this when Sister Luisa spoke to me in that hotel lobby many years ago. But that is no longer true, thanks to her and many other friends. My belief and faith in God and my inner spirituality is stronger and I believe healthier than at any time in my life. I never suspected my transition would be so focused on my relationship with God. It has indeed been an unexpected spiritual journey!