I'm a woman, but I'm glad I used to be a man

Rachel Mann [1] 9 June 2014

I was the kind of trans* person who, upon coming out, sought to destroy all references to my male social and legal identity in the most ruthless manner. Part of Transformation's liberation series [2].

It is out of woundedness and brokenness themselves that new life, ‘shalom’, and creation come. Credit: Demotix/Sallie Pisch.

“I am a woman, but for the first time I can begin to say that I am glad that I was a man.”

When I transitioned from male to female twenty plus years ago I could not have imagined that one day I’d be able to write that line.

One of the dynamics in many trans* people’s narratives – diverse as they are – is a powerful and understandable desire to forget, move on from and, in some cases, to annihilate references to a painful pre-transition life.

In an age where tabloid journalism is still too often obsessed with pre-transition names and gender identification, the desire for privacy is not only understandable, but often a matter of safety and respect.

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For me that was necessary and liberating.

Yet having now lived over half my life as a woman, negotiating the complex social and theological realities of being trans*, a Christian, disabled and an Anglican priest, I have begun to discover another liberation: liberation as reconciliation.

When I went through the challenging and often exhausting process of transitioning from (for want of a better term) ‘male to female’, I experienced one kind of liberation.

As a boy and man I felt forever trapped in an empty, if skillful, performance of masculinity.

In becoming a woman I was liberated into myself, a self that was hard-won and fought for; a self that learnt to play with gender roles, practices and began to discover moments of peace. Willingness to be reconciled with the fractures and lack of simplicity in myself was crucial to that process.

Reflecting upon ‘self’ and ‘identity’, the notion of ‘The Other’ becomes striking, potent and undeniable. Even if one is suspicious of psychological concepts, ‘The Other’ resonates powerfully in human experience.

The most familiar examples lie in ‘external targets’. History is littered with examples of racism, sexism, misogyny, class fear and homo- and transphobia in which various groups – on the basis of skin colour, race, gender and sexuality – have been readily turned into ‘The Other’ by the dominant and normative power group.

As someone fascinated by our desire for liberation and reconciliation, I am intrigued about how the notion of ‘The Other’ plays out within our own selves.

As an internal concept ‘The Other’ refers to those aspects and dimensions of our selves are afraid of or wish to bury, or destroy.

In my teen years, my desire to be a girl was precisely the kind of dimension of myself I wanted to wipe away, bury and destroy; yet no matter what strategy I adopted it seemed to come back stronger and more cunning.

It was a part of me that sickened me because it seemed abnormal, ‘Other’. It made me different. It was ‘wrong’. It needed be excised so that I could fit in.

The journey into womanhood was a journey into reconciliation. Yet what if reconciliation goes deeper than me merely accepting myself as a woman, as a lesbian and so on? What if it means re-embracing and loving that within me that once was male?

Sometimes, when I spend a considerable amount of time in the company of cis women I become conscious of certain ways I have of talking and ways I behave – ways that strike me not simply as ‘mannish’ or ‘tom-boyish’ but actually ‘blokey’. These things are very hard to pin down and feel almost indefinable, but still they are there.

Given how successful I’ve become at passing as a cis-woman, I don’t want them to ‘out’ me. If I want to tell someone I’m trans I want to do it on my terms and in my time. But sometimes I fear there is blokish-ness within me threatening to out me unexpectedly.

To open myself up to those things about me that I consider ‘male’ or ‘mannish’ has been akin to walking among the dead. It has been a journey into so many things I’d rather forget. It has been a walk into darkness. It has been like the work of a cold case pathologist – someone who searches for long dead bodies carefully hidden in unexpected places and then disinters them, dismantles them, trying to unlock their secrets.

This process of reverse reconciliation has been a long time coming. After the experiments of my twenties, when I tried to be as conventionally girly and as womanly as I could, I have found my way back to myself.
Like most grown women, I have reached a point where I know what I like but also know what works for me clothes wise. And that means avoiding, as much as other women, certain styles of dress. I have come to terms with the fact that my music and cinema taste is – if one were to stereotype – a little more male than most women of my age.

But I have only really just begun to be unafraid of the fact that not only was I raised as a boy, but that that past was genuinely good.

At the same time, I am a divided self. It has taken me many years of honest and authentic self-reflection and living with God to become at peace with the simple unavoidable fact that some aspects of my past life are dissonant with where and who I am now.

For me, the immense and joyous good news is that such dissonance and inconsistency is creative, thrilling and risky in the best sense of the word. The ‘shalom’ in myself is not of a comforting and easily resolved kind. It is the creative dissonance of (to borrow a phrase of Gillian Rose) ‘The Broken Middle’.

And broken? Yes, but it would be lazy to assume that I take this word in a negative way. I, like all human beings, am broken. Perhaps I am more broken than most; I do not know. But I know also that my brokenness, which includes some aspects of my gender dysphoria, but is most certainly not defined by it, is also a place of creativity, hope and healing.

This creativity is, I sense, an emergent property of forging wholeness out of pain and confusion, but crucially is a reflection of an essential and defining truth of the Christian faith: that it is out of woundedness and brokenness themselves that new life, ‘shalom’, and creation come. But this no shalom in stasis but the shalom in journey and transformation.

One of the great fantasies of our religious selves is that there is such a thing as ‘home’ – that there is a ‘place’ in our selves or in ‘heaven’ or on ‘earth’ where human life could feel complete or healed. I’m inclined to say that one of the lessons of postmodern thought, in the hands of Lacan or Foucault or whoever, is that there is no place of complete resolution. We are born into exile.

Yet, in the provisional situations we all inhabit, we can find ‘shalom’ – not as a static identity but in our understanding of the temporary, but still real liberations on offer. For me, one of those places lies in my very self.

To become a woman was a step away from power and status and, yet, I am glad beyond words that I am a woman. But, though it is still very difficult to acknowledge, I am surprised to discover that I’m also glad that I was a man.

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