

Chapter One – Work in Progress
by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

Even through the darkest daze
Be it thick or thin
Always someone marches brave
Here beneath my skin.
And constant craving has always been.

Maybe a great magnet pulls
All souls towards truth
Or maybe it is life itself
Feeds wisdom to its youth.
And constant craving has always been.
Constant craving.

– kd Laing, “Constant Craving”
from the recording *Ingenue*

There’s a hero if you look inside your heart
You don’t have to be afraid of what you are
There’s an answer if you reach into your soul
And the sorrow that you know will melt
away.

And then a hero comes along
With the strength to carry on
And you cast your fears aside
And you know you can survive
So when you feel like hope is gone
Look inside you and be strong
And you’ll finally see the truth – that a hero
lies in you.

It’s a long road when you face the world
alone
No one reaches out a hand for you to hold
You can find love if you search within
yourself
And the emptiness you felt will disappear.

Lord knows dreams are hard to follow
But don’t let anyone tear them away

Hold on, there will be tomorrow
In time, you’ll find the way.

– Mariah Carey, “Hero”
from the recording *Music Box*

I will not die an un-lived life.
I will not live in fear of falling or catching
fire.

I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid, more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch,
a promise.

I choose to risk my significance,
to live so that which came to me as seed
goes to the next as blossom
and that which came to me as blossom,
goes on as fruit.

– Dawna Markova

Have patience with everything unresolved
in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves.
Do not search for the answers,
which could not be given to you now
anyway,
as you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps then, someday far in the future,
you will gradually, without even knowing it,
live your way into the answer.

– Rainier Maria Rilke

Introduction

In a 1988 interview with Terry Gross on NPR's "Fresh Air," Ray Bradbury stated, "We ensure the future by doing it." I agree with this proactive statement, with the caveat that we also vigilantly remember that the future flows from the present flows from the past. History can be viewed at varying levels, from the cosmic to the deeply personal, but no matter how macro the lens, the present does not exist discontinuously from the past.

I write this book for people to read at some point in the future, to connect the future to the past, from a deeply personal point of view. I leave it to others to write histories of trans people at a more macro level. We need to tell our history from all these levels, to provide historical continuity that can help alleviate our sense of isolation from each other.

Trans people need to tell our stories to each other, to provide this continuity that has been sadly lacking in previous times. Isolation and feelings of being negatively unique are common among many trans people, in part because this historical continuity has been lacking¹.

All this said... Where do I begin, writing my history as a transman? As with any life story, there are layers to uncover. Does it begin with my first memories? Going to a deeper layer, my first memories that have to do with gender? My first realization of the nature of my true self? A good friend of mine, an MTF, smiled groggily as she was being wheeled out of her vaginal-creation surgery, and whispered to her partner and me, "Another fucking growth experience."

My life has been one long growth experience, and though I used to look on the growth experiences (so often the most painful parts of life!) with dread, now I look forward to them. Life is for learning, and I'm going for a Master's degree in Life.

It's an overwhelming proposition, writing this autobiography; all the layers co-exist from the beginning, and my story can be told from perspectives as superficial as my outward appearance, to the deepest subconscious thoughts and feelings buried in my mind from my earliest childhood and only recently uncovered. When one questions gender, one is questioning the bedrock of one's existence as a human being and the archaeology involved is formidable. Most people never delve this deeply into their identities, and I alternate between feeling blessed for the opportunity and cursed for the loss of unconscious acceptance of who I am.

My inclination is to begin chronologically, as befits an American, weaving the various layers of my life into a whole that bears some resemblance to my actual experience. We Americans do tend to tell stories from beginning to end, in linear fashion, with little regard to differentiating the layers involved. I hope to transcend this somewhat, as lives resemble an ongoing holistic web of social interconnection more than a straight line, but one must begin somewhere, at some point in the web. So I begin with what I remember first.

¹ Sadly, the paradigm of transition within the mental health community has also helped perpetuate these feelings of isolation and negative uniqueness, but that's a topic for a whole 'nother book. However, I will touch on this paradigm later in this book, as I have entered the therapy field precisely to help counter that methodology and conceptualization of what it means to transition.

CHILDHOOD

First there is the outward layer, that which everyone else sees. The assumptions people make about others, especially about children, are based almost entirely on observations drawn from this layer. From that first slap on the butt and the doctor's declaration, "It's a boy," or "It's a girl," a child's life is shaped toward a particular adult role. Gender permeates our culture, as invisible and necessary to our social lives as the air we breathe is to our physical existence.

Some believe it is possible to transcend gender, that we can create a new culture that is gender-neutral. In such a society, gender would be as important as a birthmark in determining roles and duties. Roles and duties would be assumed based on inclination and talent, not foisted on people by virtue of the assumption of one gender or another. In such a culture, innate differences in the brains of girls and boys would be mere observations of tendencies, shortcuts in helping determine a child's aptitude, rather than automatically conferring or denying status to an entire group of people based on perceived gender.

The only way such a culture could evolve is in a society where child rearing is divorced from the concept of personal family, a society where babies are routinely raised in communal settings similar to today's daycare centers. In our current system, gender roles are passed on automatically from generation to generation, effectively preventing the development of any societal transcendence of rigid gender roles. Fears expressed about test tube babies are based on dim glimpses of this family-less setting of childraising. On a deeper level, I believe these fears are also based on the perceived loss of control over gender roles. Loss of rigid roles is unsettling

to people, for then they have to look inward and ask, "Who am I?" Gender roles are the most rigid we've got, and questioning their validity as methods of determination is a scary proposition to many people.

Beyond considerations of how children are raised, such a gender-neutral culture can never exist as long as we are bound by the limitations of the English language. Our gendered pronouns would have to be superseded by a gender-neutral replacement word, such as "hir" or "per." As long as our language continues in its dichotomous presentation of gender as an "either-or" proposition, we don't stand a chance of being able to relate to people in a gender neutral fashion.

I have my doubts about the viability of gender neutrality in human interaction. I think it's more likely we are hard-wired as humans to need to differentiate gender, dating back to animal mating instincts. We may very well be able to procreate without sex, but the evolution of instincts will be a long time catching up with technology.

Furthermore, I don't quite agree with the philosophical basis of gender neutrality. I adhere to a belief in our place among the other animals of this world, that we are part of nature and not apart from nature. While some animals are dimorphous sexually, we are not among them. It may well be that there are more than two genders throughout nature, and that trans people reflect a natural state of being, but I don't believe gender neutrality to be natural, in the literal sense of the word. We just need a more fluid language with which to describe gender, allowing for the mutability of gender roles.

In any event, my own upbringing was far from communal or gender neutral, though daycare was a fact of my life from my earliest memories. The outward layer everyone saw

was a little girl named Nancy, much younger than her three siblings. I was born near Sacramento, but had the good sense to move to San Francisco when I was a few months old.

My alcoholic father died when I was four, or thereabouts. He was only 45 (the age I am now as I write this). I am told I cried bitterly at being denied a place at his funeral. I don't remember this, but I think my tears had more to do with feeling left out than with grief for a death I could not understand; loneliness and feeling I didn't fit in were constant companions during my childhood.

I only have one lucid memory of my father. He was lying in bed, I believe at home, sick. I went into his room and he offered me a peppermint lifesaver. This was always a purely innocent memory on my part, until one of my sisters made a remark that illuminates the difference between my small memory of our father and her more vivid, nightmarish memories. I told her of this incident, and she unknowingly tainted my sole memory by saying, with some bitterness, "He probably had the lifesavers to disguise the smell of alcohol on his breath."

We had radically different childhoods, my siblings and I. There is a theory of individual development that all siblings experience different families, based on birth order, age, gender differences, and the like. My sibs and I had more differences between our family experiences than most, such that I grew up feeling like an only child with too many parents, rather than a much-younger sibling. I have one sister 13 years older than I, and a brother and sister (twins) who are 11 years older. While I never had a sense of being unwanted, I did have the sense of being in the way and of being problematic. I was a late-arriving complicating factor in the already complicated existence of my mother

and siblings. I don't know what my father thought of me.

I have only fragmentary memories of childhood. Just about every event I remember with clarity has something to do with gender, and is negative. I do not have any purely positive, happy memories of my childhood or adolescence, except those related to some times I spent alone with my brother. He used to take me with him when he went to a local driving range to hit golf balls. He would give me a dime to buy a Coke if I could hit a ball 100 yards. I was so young, there was typically only one golf club small enough to fit me. We also went to the Boardwalk, an amusement park in Santa Cruz, several times and rode the Big Dipper roller coaster, at a time when it cost only a quarter.

My brother treated me more like a younger brother than a younger sister, teaching me baseball and using me as a catcher while he practiced his curve ball. We would play catch in the backyard, bare-chested, until I was forced by some unseen pressure to put on my shirt when I was about 11. Even then, we never stopped doing things together. He was married by this time, but still never treated me as an older brother typically treats a younger sister. I remember standing in front of a mirror in my bedroom, combing my hair as he combed his, and trying hard to deepen my voice to sound male. I have one excruciating memory of him overhearing these attempts on my part and teasing me about it.

Other, less happy bits and pieces of memory surface ... my ninth (I think) birthday party, the only one I remember, which my mother decided should be an all-girl party. I was very bitter about this, as my best friends were two boys, Jimmy and

Danny Brooks, from over the back fence and I was not allowed to invite them.

I remember this party as excruciatingly embarrassing. Girls from school at my house, myself in a frilly dress, so shy and self-conscious I could say nothing. It was one thing to wear a dress to school – this was the rule in the early 1960s, so it was none of my doing and I could subconsciously look on the dress as a kind of uniform – but to wear one at home, where one has a choice of clothing, was a matter of complete embarrassment. I never invited girls to play with me at home; I wanted to play with Jimmy and Danny in their sandlot of a backyard. We would build roads in the sand, with our hands, and run trucks and cars along them.

Since I was born in early September, this all-girl party took place shortly before the end of summer vacation. When I began fourth grade that fall, I was at a new school, nearer my house. I sat next to a girl named Gina Neilsen, the first tomboy I'd ever met. She and I became best friends, and I never had another close friend who was a boy.

Later, I was to attribute this to being a budding lesbian, though I was not attracted to Gina. Now, I think it more likely that I'd finally given up and tried to *be* a girl. That birthday party was the last straw; I never wanted to feel that level of embarrassment or self-consciousness again. Driving my true identity completely underground took care of that. Prior to this time, I had had behavior problems at school, acting out a lot. From fourth grade on, my behavior seemed to improve tremendously, as did my grades. The "acting out" I'd exhibited prior to fourth grade was, in fact, my behaving exactly as other boys on the playground behaved. But in a *girl*, in the early 1960s, this was seen as "acting out."

Unfortunately, this "improvement" in my behavior was at the expense of my self-esteem and sense of identity. Instead of acting out, I became very self-conscious and repressed, not wanting to draw attention to myself. To those around me, it appeared that I was maturing. In hindsight, I was stunting myself in an effort to fit into the pigeonhole "girl."

I am not one of those transsexuals who knew consciously from a very early age that I should have been born a boy rather than a girl. My earlier behavior had been unconscious, my acting in a way that felt natural to me. I gradually came to realize that this was for some reason unacceptable, and I eventually caved in to the pressure to conform. I knew somehow that this meant not being *me*, and believed that there must be something innately wrong with being *me*. Not knowing the exact nature of the problem made it worse, as I assumed that the "something wrong" was unfixable. I was aware even during childhood that the "wrongness" I felt was something innate in me, and that it would do no good to tell anyone as there was nothing anyone could do about it.

In this, I was quite right. In the early 1960s, even in San Francisco, it would have done me no good whatsoever (and possibly, it would have been harmful to me) to admit my self-consciousness to anyone. Particularly since I was unaware of the true reason for it, I have no doubt my mother would have been embarrassed by my vague fears and anxiety, and would have done her best to discourage me from expressing such feelings. Unfortunately, like most of society, she had no knowledge that a child's outward gender appearance does not always match their internal identification. That said, it was a no-win situation for me, as it also did me

no good (and was harmful to my development) to *hide* these feelings.

This was the time period in which John Money was the predominant figure in American sex research, and he was quite vocal in his pronouncement that gender roles were entirely a matter of socialization, that neither genetics or any other biological factor influenced gender identity at all. The time period I'm writing about was approximately the same time Money was advising the Reimer's that they could raise their son as a girl after his botched circumcision. (The David Reimer story is recounted in John Colapinto's excellent book, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*.) While I never heard anything about John Money's theories, of course, this attitude was the societal context in which I was raised.

As I write this autobiography in 2000, many people (including my mother) accept as natural the idea that it's not a question of nature OR nurture, but nature AND nurture, in combination, that shape a person's identity and personality. However, in the 1960s, biology was not given any credence in shaping identity, and parents thus felt a tremendous pressure to raise their children "right." At this point in time, most parents would say, "Where did I go wrong?" if their children turned out to be gay, lesbian, or transgendered, as if it was entirely their fault. (Some parents still say this, but most people have come to accept that there is a biological component to a person's identity.)

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I was quite a tomboy, a fine athlete, in my pre-adolescent years. I was allowed to play at the schoolyard after school, having first raced home to change into jeans. I was never discouraged from this athleticism, to my mother's credit. Her attempts to feminize me were a dismal failure. Fortunately for me, my mother herself was never feminine. She was merely trying to do what she saw as her maternal duty in signing me up for ballet lessons, trying to instill some kind of femininity in me. When this was a patent failure, she quietly stopped trying; she could hardly hold herself up as a feminine role model, and had no feelings of personal rejection as she had not adopted a feminine role herself.

My mother has always been a very fair person, and hypocrisy is not her way, though she has never been one to understand others or be able to empathize with others' feelings. She must have seen my obvious unhappiness over that all-female 9th birthday party, as she never tried to force me to do any such thing again. It may be that she had been advised by others to try to "feminize" me, and when my behavior seemed less "boylike" after that terrible party, she stopped the efforts, thinking she'd been successful enough.

On the other hand, it may be that had she continued to try to force me into a feminine role, my gender dissonance might have come to the surface of my mind much

earlier than it did. As it was, I had no reason to rebel against a forced gender role on a daily basis. Hence the strength of my repugnance for things feminine was not apparent to me. Unfortunately, my alcoholic family structure was such that I had no self-esteem and never felt safe enough to talk to anyone about my true feelings, about anything. At some point, it stopped occurring to me to try.

Given the situation, it's probably just as well I didn't know what was really going on. It would have scared me silly, and I would still have felt I could not talk to anyone about it. Denial was firmly in place – and with good reason! Defense mechanisms are formed subconsciously to protect the conscious mind from information it can't handle or incorporate. We hide in these fortresses, protected sufficiently to function in our daily lives, until such time as we are in a position to be able to deal with that which is being denied or repressed. Then, and only then, will the information surface.

My father was a raging alcoholic, and drank himself to an early grave. My siblings were in their mid-teens when he died. My mother never remarried. I was raised by these three almost-adult children of an alcoholic, and the woman who married him not once, but twice. (Hence the age gap between my siblings and I) One by one, my siblings married and left home when I was a child, each time a personal abandonment of me from my point of view. By the time I was eight, my mother and I were rattling around by ourselves in a three-story Victorian house near Golden Gate Park and UC Hospital in San Francisco.

My siblings did not leave the Bay Area after marrying, and as they began having children of their own, I gradually became reconciled to being an only child in the midst

of a growing extended family. I often felt I had no father, and was struck fancifully by the cabbage patch story told to young children about where babies came from. It almost felt true to me, as if I'd never had a father at all. No one ever talked about him, except in amusing family anecdotes. He was never three-dimensional to me. I don't even know where he's buried. I was between generations, three of my nieces and nephews being closer in age to me than my siblings are, and had a difficult time defining a clear role for myself in the family structure. This was not aided by my subconscious realization that I had no clear *gender* role to begin with.

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