

Chapter 16: My California Sojourn by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

Synchronicity has played a large factor in my life in recent years, as I've slowly learned to trust that events unfold in their own time, and cannot be forced. My mother's health had been slowly deteriorating as the years went by, and it was during the early summer of 1998 that she finally realized she just could not maintain the big old Victorian on her own any longer. She had come close to dying that spring, through neglecting her health and being stubbornly unwilling to call her nearby children for help. My sister Susan found her at death's door, and she spent several days in the hospital.

At this point, my mother gave up her independence, and Susan, our older sister Jan and her husband Jere spent weeks preparing the old house for sale. None of them were savvy about the San Francisco real estate market, which was at that time enjoying a price surge the likes of which had never been seen before. My mother's house sold for a ridiculous amount of money that summer, enabling me to move to the Bay Area and live for the first year of graduate school without having to work. My siblings and I had each legally owned an eighth of that house, and my mother owned half. I felt rich!

And I felt leisurely, for the first time in a long while. I was accountable to no groups, no non-profits had any claim on my time. The only people I knew in the Bay Area were my family, a mixed blessing at best. Here I'd left my family of choice behind and moved back to the bosom of my biological family, at a time in transition where I needed my family of choice more than ever. Nevertheless, my education was of primary importance to me and the program for me

was in the Bay Area.

My first few quarters at JFKU were a balm to my soul. My B.A. in Psychology was nearly meaningless; I might have done better to have gotten a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology, had I known it at the time. I found that I had indeed chosen the right school, as the paradigm of psychology I was now learning was the antithesis of the scientific medical model I'd been taught at PSU. How refreshing!

For the first time, I was learning a different, non-pathological view of various psychological conditions. Though we studied the DSM, we viewed it as a language with which to converse with colleagues, not as a Bible that held all the answers. My fellow students and I needed to know this language in order to pass our licensure exams and converse with each other about a client's behavior. We were very clear that this was the extent of its importance to us.

The smallest required course I took at PSU had about 60 people in it. At JFKU, the largest class I took had about 25 students. All my classes were held in a seminar format, and I never again saw a multiple choice test.

Group Process was the most difficult class for me, but I stuck it out through the required three quarters. Every time I felt tempted to chastise myself for the difficulty I felt talking about my feelings, I would step back from the situation and remind myself how absolutely *impossible* this kind of class would have been for me at earlier times in my life. I would remember the times in my late teens when I could not speak in group settings at all, my tongue padlocked, and I would nearly cry experiencing the deep peace and inner joy that has never left me since I began my psychological transition back in 1995.

I also took Effective Communication,

beginning to learn the tools of the therapy trade. During our second quarter together, the teacher had us each draw a defense mechanism from a hat. Synchronicity struck again, and I drew "denial." Our instructions were to do a class presentation about our defense mechanism, making it so personal and powerful that our classmates would remember it vividly five years later.

We were doing these presentations in pairs, and my classmate Felicia had also drawn "denial." When we got together to plan our presentation, Felicia said she was going to tell a story that she was sure people would remember. It turned out that Felicia is a recovering alcoholic. She is a highly intelligent woman, fairly skeptical and concrete in her observations. When she was an undergrad, before she faced her drinking problem, she took a psychology course in which the teacher had the class take the AA test "Are You an Alcoholic?" This simple questionnaire has been used for years as a time-tested method of helping a person determine whether or not they have a drinking problem. After scoring her test, Felicia went to the teacher and said, "I think this test is flawed. I answered yes to just about every question, but *I'm* not an alcoholic."

For my part of this presentation, I created a single page titled "Denial in Action." At the top of the page, I scanned in my high school graduation photo, which was extremely feminine looking and rather stunningly beautiful. Below this, I scanned in a very good professional photo of myself, taken during the time I was in love with Melanie. Though I was not on hormones at the time, this photo still resembled very closely how I appeared during that fall of 1998, just two years after the picture was taken.

I put my name beside each photo (Nancy

beside the high school photo, Reid beside the other), and in between the photos I wrote, "There's a whole lot of denial in between." I printed these out in color, and handed one to every person in the class. The Effective Communication teacher still uses my presentation as an example to her students of the kind of thing people might remember after five years.

Opportunities for this type of peer education cropped up in more than one of my graduate classes. For a Human Sexuality class, I asked a number of trans friends of mine and their partners to answer a questionnaire about their sexuality and relationships, pre-and post-transition. I sent a copy of the questionnaire to each of my classmates, about a month prior to my presentation, and asked them to consider how they thought a transsexual might answer the questions.

Three of my trans friends and/or their partners came through with flying colors, writing thoughtful and honest answers. I wrote a lengthy introduction to their answers and made copies of this 17 page document for each of my classmates. (It was this paper that I sent to my brother John early in 2000.) I then stood in front of them all and said, "You can read the answers on your own time. For now, I will tell you a bit about what it means to be transsexual, how that differs from sexual orientation, and will then be open to questions."

I then launched into a presentation of what I consider to be "Trans 101," beginning with the common distinction made between gender identity and sexual orientation. I went through this fairly quickly, as I was merely using this information to preface my talk on the interrelationship I saw between the two.

However, I had no way to gauge what

was basic information to me and what would be new information to my classmates. Several stopped me at times, wanting clarification about why it was important to differentiate between sexual orientation and gender identity. I then realized, once again, that though these were intelligent, empathic folks with good intentions, they were still products of American socialization and had never been presented with this information before. Further, many of these folks were my age or older and had never even heard the distinction made before that gender identity and sexual orientation are not synonymous.

The teacher, himself a brilliant psychotherapist, wrote on my paper that he thought I ought to publish it, which both gratified and floored me, making me realize for the first time that I was approaching a time in my life when I could reasonably expect to publish articles and make waves in the therapy community. (In the spring of 2001, a few months prior to receiving my M.A., I published my first article, in a magazine for queer therapists, *In the Family*. This article is *Living La Vida Media*.)

At this point, I began thinking and writing in concrete terms about how therapists can facilitate the self-insight and depth of self-knowledge necessary for a smooth transition. I started making notes about what had worked for me in therapy, and what had not. I began asking trans friends of mine the same question. I jotted things down as they occurred to me, in no particular order, formulating the beginnings of my master's thesis: A broad methodology for working with various types of trans clients, taking into account differing personality styles.

I know I have made a difference in many of my classmates' attitudes about gender identity and transsexuals. At the very least,

they know how much more there is to the experience than they had ever considered before. For some, they have been shown that this is a limitation of theirs and that they should refer trans clients elsewhere. For others, they have learned how deep the issues run, how profound the changes are, and how deeply trans people must look inward for the strength of character to fly in the face of the entire culture in undertaking a transition. Learning this will make these classmates of mine much more effective should a trans client approach them for therapy at some future time. They already have an advantage in that the holistic paradigm of our school lends itself to considering transition from many perspectives at the same time.

After about a year of living on the money from the sale of my mother's house, I knew I would have to find work. A friend who worked on campus informed me that university jobs come with the tremendous perk of partial tuition waiver, to the tune of six units per quarter. I looked at the job postings on the bulletin boards on campus and saw a flyer for the job of Outreach Coordinator for the Graduate School for Holistic Studies. In reading the job description, I realized there was no aspect of the job that was new to me. All those years of volunteer work were about to pay off, as I had learned most of the tasks required for this job in the context of the theater company or the Choir. I was hired and began work in late May of 1999.

The one requirement of the job that I did not have was a valid driver's license. For years, I had steadfastly refused to learn to drive. I always had good reasons, mostly to do with wanting to avoid inflicting damage on the environment. However, I was growing up with a vengeance, finally feeling

I was reaching the maturity of adulthood, and now I viewed getting a driver's license as a rite of passage into adulthood. I'd been stunted in early adolescence long enough!

I contacted a driving school that specializes in teaching adults, and took my driving test after six hours of lessons. All those years of riding a bicycle had given me a very good sense of how to behave in traffic. In July of 1999, I was awarded my first driver's license. I was finally beginning to feel like an adult, two years after starting hormones.

In September of that year, after a great deal of research on-line, I bought my first car, a brand-new Subaru Impreza Outback. (Shortly after I purchased this car, one of my lesbian friends informed me, with some amusement, that Subaru Outbacks had become the car of choice among Portland lesbians. Figures.) I drove it to Portland for Christmas in 1999, yet another rite of passage. I'd lived in Portland over 20 years, yet had never driven there. It felt subtly wrong for me to be behind the wheel of a car in that city, where I'd been a pedestrian, bus rider, and bicyclist for so long.

Though it meant giving up 28 hours a week to a job, I found working on-campus had its own benefits. I had no commute between work and classes, and I was doing a job I believed in, talking with prospective students about attending the Graduate School for Holistic Studies. For the first time in my life, I had medical benefits and paid vacation. And that tuition waiver benefit, which saved me nearly \$2,000 per quarter.

I found it odd at first, working my first steady job since leaving Equity Foundation. I was through transition and no longer gave passing a second thought. I had no idea which of my colleagues knew I was an FTM and which saw me as a bioman. I certainly

couldn't tell from their attitudes. About half my co-workers were fellow students, and some of them knew from class presentations. Others found out gradually as circumstances dictated coming out, or through the occasional indiscretion of a co-worker.

However, given that most of my co-workers were either alumni or current students in holistic programs, their world views were sufficiently expanded that not one ever had any problem with my identity, slipped on pronouns, or saw me as female.

I have never been a very politically active person, and have always had a difficult time coming out to people. I am an introvert and a private person, and talking about myself for the sake of coming out is not easy for me. I have an easier time if I am a guest speaker, or talking on a panel, where the coming out is done for me in advance, as part of the context of my presence. I believe strongly in every individual's right to privacy about their various identities.

On the other hand, I also hold the somewhat incompatible belief that if all trans people remain closeted in the name of privacy, it remains impossible to educate the general population that "trans" does not equal "drag queen." At the moment, the only members of the trans community that are visible are drag queens and those MTFs who don't pass well, and therefore they are seen by the general population as defining what it means to be trans.

Until Hilary Swank won the Oscar for best actress (how ironic!) for her portrayal of Brandon Teena in the movie "Boys Don't Cry," most people didn't even know FTMs exist, we blend in so well. This is a double edged sword. We pass safely and are invisible – unless we are "discovered," as Brandon was. At that point, we can be in grave danger, for some people will feel

betrayed and others deceived to the point of reacting violently.

At the Boston FTM conference in 1997, I attended a workshop in which a biofemale tearfully proclaimed that she thought every FTM had a moral obligation to come out in every situation in which a woman was being harassed by a man. She put on us the burden of changing the masculine paradigm of U.S. culture.

I agreed with her belief that FTMs usually do have a more balanced view of women than many biomen do. (This is not always the case, however. Back in 1996, I corresponded briefly with a highly conservative FTM whom I met on-line. I forwarded to my e-dress list a joke post I received, an excerpt from a 1950's Home Economics textbook outlining for young women how they should behave to make their husbands happy. Full of absurd tips that clearly placed the husband at the center of the wife's universe and far above her in importance, I thought this excerpt was hilarious. This particular FTM, however, sent me a terse reply saying he saw nothing funny about the post at all, that this was the way he and his wife lived their lives, thank you very much. Being trans is no guarantee at all of being liberal politically, or even of being non-sexist.) However, I felt overwhelmed by the burden she was placing on us. My own transition took quite enough of my energy, much less being held responsible for changing the behavior of all the biomen around me who don't act appropriately toward women!

I also resented her challenge, and realized after the workshop that there was fundamental illogic in her argument. On the one hand, she wanted biomen to treat her as an equal. On the other hand, she was expecting FTMs to be her "knights in shining

armor," her protectors, against biomen.

As several men pointed out in the workshop, it's a balancing act, deciding when to come out and to whom. Is it safe? Is it necessary in this situation? Will it help me, or other trans people? If I see a woman being verbally harassed by half a dozen biomen, is the situation such that they are likely to beat me to death or shoot me if I challenge them? Would it really help the woman in question, if I become a martyred poster child for the FTM community, as Brandon Teena has become?

Biomen do not tolerate arguments coming their way from other men to the same degree as they tolerate the same arguments from a woman. Biomen are taught not to hit women, period. (The exception to this, illogically, is women they are married to) As a transman, I cannot argue with a bioman to the same degree I could when I was perceived as a lesbian, unless I'm prepared for a physical fight.

I would like to think I would speak out in situations in which someone is making inaccurate or inappropriate comments about women or transpeople (or anyone else, for that matter). But I have to be careful. The world is not a safe place to be openly trans, even in the Bay Area.

Also, at 45, I don't have as much energy physically as I did in my early twenties. I've never quite regained the conditioning and strength I had in 1996-7, when I was working out with a vengeance to produce those wonderful anti-depressant endorphins. Now that I'm no longer depressed, my motivation for working out has diminished considerably.

My physical energy level is simply not what it was earlier in my life. I guard my energy jealously. I pick my battles, and my battleground is the therapy profession. We

can't be all things to all people, or fight battles in all arenas. I leave overt political activism to others with more charisma and a higher degree of extravertism. My contribution will be as a therapist, a writer, and occasionally as a speaker.

I've begun seeing clients now, and know with absolute certainty that I've chosen the right profession. I am passionate about my work, I love my clients in all their diversity, and can't wait for each new day.

It's hard to know when to end an autobiography. If anyone had told me five years ago where I would be today, I would have thought them crazy. God knows where (or who) I will be five years from now. Well, that will just have to be Volume II of this work in progress, this growth process that is my life. God, I love it! I wouldn't trade places with anyone.

*Copyright © 2000
Reid Vanderburgh, MA
All rights reserved*