

Chapter 10: Baby Steps Forward

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

I had fired my therapist Margaret in late summer, and was in search of a new therapist. Alan had found the only trans support group in town, and thus this was not an option for me. He got there first. I tried not to resent this, but I needed support also and was feeling very isolated, so I could not help but resent that he had a support group and I did not. It only seemed fair that I found the best individual therapist in Portland for dealing with gender identity issues (at least, at that time). What made this time period bearable for me was the four hours that I spent with B.J. Seymour in September, 1995, just before the Choir reconvened for its ninth season. (Credit where credit is due... I have not changed B.J.'s name in this book, nor the names of any of the other service providers from whom I finally received decent care. I *have* changed the names of the two therapists I had during this time period who did not understand correctly what was going on, or who I was.)

I told B.J. I thought I was transgendered and didn't know whether or not transition was the route I would go, but that I was trying to avoid it if possible because of the Choir. I told her that I had no idea who I was anymore and was completely confused. She gave me an exercise I use periodically to this day, to get to know all my sub-personalities and how they each felt about gender and transition.

I went off and did the homework she'd assigned, came back and told her what I'd found. The tools she'd given me in the four hours I spent with her were enough to keep me on my path for the next year and a half, on the path toward transition. It was not

long after my last appointment with her that I finally admitted to myself that I was going to end up transitioning, that I could no longer live female. I did not see B.J. again for nearly two years, but she had given me the tools I needed to get through the next part of my life unaided by therapy for gender issues.

I did see another therapist (Lois), for relationship issues, for the next year or so, but I did not get much out of our work together. Because gender was so prominent in my life at this time, Lois kept trying to focus on that in our sessions, but she did not have a good enough handle on what it means to transition to be effective in this realm. I had all the tools I needed from B.J. to handle my own transition, at this point.

By late September, Choir was back in session. I felt like a new member, and felt very unsure of myself. I had a new name (though it was not legal yet), a new address, no relationship, no business or job – *everything* in my life was different from what it had been when the Choir had started its summer break.

Yet despite the magnitude of the visible changes in my life, the deepest change of all was invisible to my fellow Choir members. I had changed to such an extent that they looked like strangers to me, as if I was meeting them for the first time. And in fact, I was – I was Reid interacting with them, no longer Nancy. This created the surrealistic scenario of my being a founding member of nine years' standing who felt like a new member meeting the group for the first time. And feeling very bizarre about the whole thing because not a soul in the room could see this about me.

By this time, I had written a coming out letter and was beginning to tell people what my process had been and that I was heading

toward transition. In my letter, I included a list of frequently-asked questions. One of my reasons for doing this is that I wanted to disseminate the information, and some of it was personal enough that I felt more comfortable writing than saying it. Another reason is because I knew these were the questions most likely to come up and that if I didn't do this, I'd get very tired of repeating the same information over and over again. I also said that if anyone had any questions not listed, I'd be happy to answer them.

The first people I sent this letter to were the leaders of the Choir, both administrative and musical. I had been on the Music Committee for several years and knew the Choir was planning on producing its first CD to coincide with its 10th anniversary season, and that the recording was still more than a year and a half away. I was determined to hold off my physical transition until that recording was finished. As I put it in my coming out letter, I knew that in five years, the pain of living between genders would have faded while the CD would be on my shelf forever, a source of pride in an organization I'd helped create. (I was wrong about this, by the way – though the pride remains, the pain faded much more quickly than five years)

But I knew that if I did not have the support of the movers and shakers in that organization, I couldn't stay during that year and a half. For I also knew that my transition was going to be the biggest gossip ever to hit that organization, and that there might be some serious opposition to my staying in the group since I was planning on transitioning. I knew even then that Rita's reaction was not an uncommon one among lesbians and that her negative views might well be shared by some Choir members. However, I received nothing but unqualified support from Choir

leaders about remaining to sing on the CD, and this comforted me.

The Choir's first concert of that season was particularly difficult for me to rehearse and perform. Titled "Simply Love," it had to do with love relationships of all kinds. Singing the love songs was difficult for me, but nowhere near as difficult as singing "Suite in Four Movements," written by a woman whose long-term relationship had ended painfully. I had often made rehearsal tapes for my section, and made several for this concert, but the Choir director didn't even consider asking me to make the rehearsal tape for this particular piece. She did that herself. Rehearsal tapes are made during the summer prior to Choir reconvening, and there was no way I could have sung the following lyrics during that summer of 1995:

I'm wand'ring around you
Nowhere to rest my head
Nowhere to lie down and wait for
morning
Nowhere to find an answer
Nowhere to find a reason
No one home in my heart.
I took your name off the checkbook
I took your name off my heart
I am a tourist in my own life.
But I still see your face.
I wait for the healing they say time will
bring,
but time only passes and it can't do a
thing
To ease all the hurting that you left
behind
To comfort my heart or settle my mind.
Your face in the morning, your arms in
the night
My darling, my dear one, my sweetness
and light

My grief is a hollow that nothing can fill.

– from *“Suite in Four Movements,”*

Diane Benjamin

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In 1993, I had performed a concert of children’s songs with the Choir a month after one of my nephews committed suicide, and had thought that was the most difficult concert I would ever sing with the Choir. Yet singing a concert of love and relationships during this life crisis, knowing I was also leaving the Choir and losing that relationship as well, was far more difficult than the children’s concert had been. All that fall of 1995, we rehearsed these songs of love, longing and grief. The performance was January 20, 1996 and I was already in a countdown mode, thinking, “Two more concerts are all I have left with this group that has meant everything to me.”

During this time, I did not share much of my internal process with friends. I’d never been very good at asking for help from people, or allowing myself to be vulnerable with people I cared about. This legacy of an alcoholic family kept my lips sealed at a time when I badly needed connection. Listening to the tape of that concert evokes the feelings of extreme isolation and despair I felt at that time as nothing else can. Music has always had that effect on me, which is the very reason the Choir had such a hold on my soul. It was not just the group itself, but the power of sharing music, that created the deep bonds that are with me to this day, the bonds between me and my family of choice.

In October of 1995, I read that a local gay/lesbian foundation was looking for a half-time administrative assistant. I thought, “That’s a job I can do.” I needed some stability in my life, and a half-time job seemed ideal. For the first time, my oldest nephew came up to visit me from the Bay

Area, having received my coming out letter and wanting to show his support. He, Alan and I went clothes shopping for my job interview, and I bought my first men’s dress shirt and wool suit jacket. Wearing these splendid new clothes, my first overt and deliberate step toward wearing men’s clothes, I went for a job interview. I was hired and on October 16, 1995, I began a new phase of work life.

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