

Chapter 13: Back to School

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

One of the salvations of my life during this painful period was my classwork at Portland State University. My job did not challenge me any longer, as I'd been there long enough to know its systems and tasks. But school afforded me an intellectual challenge, of sorts, and gave me a structured outlet for my emotional energy.

I took three classes my first quarter. The first night of class (the night before James died) I'd noticed an attractive older woman, with bright red hair, sitting not far from me in our very full classroom. As was typical in my psychology classes at PSU, there were about 100 people in the class, many taking it to fulfill an upper division social science requirement. When my next class met for the first time, just a few days after James' death, I noticed the same woman. Wanting to make a friend during this lonely time, I struck up a conversation with her not long into the term. It had not escaped my notice that she looked quite a bit like Melanie, who had sent me a photo of herself. I tried not to make this comparison, but it did draw me to her.

I sat near Eileen from then on, and we studied together for exams. Eileen quickly decided she wanted to take as many classes with me as possible, as I always scored among the highest in the class, no matter what the topic of the course. I was majoring in psychology, of course, and was intent on taking only those classes I needed to get my degree. I'd taken so many courses in my previous college lives, I was bumping up against the limit for receiving undergraduate financial aid. I knew it would be a race to complete my B.A. without exceeding that limit. Eileen was majoring in psychology, also, so we would get together as soon as the

class schedule came out, planning what we would take the following quarter.

Near the end of that first quarter, I moved out of Lucy's house. I'd become increasingly unhappy living with a roommate, and had never felt at home. This was the first house Lucy had ever owned, and it always felt like "her house" to me, despite her statements when I first moved in that I was free to do as I liked. I spent all my time in my small room, and was feeling increasingly stunted.

Deeper than that, however, I was doing my "real-life test" at this point (though without hormones, still waiting on the Choir CD) and feeling more private than I'd ever felt in my life. Never had I needed to live on my own as much as I did then! I was wearing tweed jackets, ties, slacks and dress shirts to work and school. I never used the women's bathrooms at PSU, though I felt completely at home in the men's bathroom and used it regularly. I was working out a lot at that time, sneaking into a tanning booth at the gym to change my clothes, in order to avoid using a locker room. I was pre-hormones and pre-surgery and wanted no part of either locker room at that point. I felt much too dissonant with my female body to be able to walk into a women's locker room, and did not want to experience the scene I knew would result if I tried to use the men's locker room. I've never been an "in your face" kind of activist, and did not have the kind of brazen courage required to use the men's locker room, even though I knew it's where I would eventually feel most comfortable.

With all the challenge of presenting male and being seen as a lesbian every time I opened my mouth, what I needed most at the end of the day was to come home to a place of my own. Furthermore, because Lucy

already had a cat, I'd had to leave my beloved Bear Cub with Alan, still living in "our house." I wanted a place to call my own, to come home to Bear Cub each evening and shed the real life test until the next day.

I began looking at apartments. Our house was on the market by that time, and I knew we were going to make a significant profit on the sale. I told one prospective landlord I expected to come into some money within a few months, and he suggested I check out some apartments down the street that were being converted to condos. He thought some were going to be as cheap as \$79,000. I took his advice, and ended up purchasing a condo not for \$79,000 but for \$74,000. I purchased it as-is, and ended up putting a lot more work into it than I imagined at the time I bought it. But I made it beautiful, and Bear Cub and I were quite happy there.

For the first time, I was living in NW Portland, about six blocks from where I worked and a half-hour walk to Portland State University. I had moved from a completely residential area, with no stores within comfortable walking distance, to an area where absolutely anything I needed was a five minute walk! I moved toward the end of 1996, just in time for Christmas, to a neighborhood that looks like something out of Norman Rockwell at that time of year. It snowed that year, and the trees lining the major streets were all hung with little white lights. I was ecstatic!

At that time, an old girlfriend (Maria) called me, out of the blue, having heard about my transition from her sister, a fellow Choir member who had been a friend of mine for years. Maria and I had had an affair during my theatre company days. Her sister was in the theatre company with me, and we'd met when Maria came down from

Seattle to see her sister in a play. Ironically, Maria's sister and I played lovers in this particular production. Maria and I had taken one look at each other and were immediately attracted.

This call from Maria showed me how much I'd changed. I found it difficult to measure my own changes during transition, particularly during this pre-hormones phase. When you live it, the changes are so incremental, it's difficult to chart progress. But I have found that when someone re-enters my life after a prolonged absence, I can see my own changes. It's as if being with someone I used to know evokes the presence of who I used to be when that person was in my life. Despite the fact that Maria herself had changed tremendously, seeing her and experiencing my own very different reactions to her, showed me my own progress toward leaving Nancy behind and becoming Reid.

I found that I had become much less judgmental of other people's life choices, that I was less abrasive in manner, and more masculine in both my reactions to her and my mannerisms in general. Walking around NW Portland with Maria, I felt like a man walking with a woman. I'd never been aware of this with Eileen, because I never knew her when I was female. But walking with this ex-lover of mine, I was aware for the first time of my own maleness. It was a heady feeling!

Maria also had some interesting observations about me, dating from our 1983 affair. She had perceived the discomfort I felt about sex, but had interpreted it to mean I was not as attracted to her as she was to me, which was certainly not the case. As she lived in Seattle and was already in a primary (though non-monogamous) relationship, she didn't push it. We never actually broke up; Maria's primary partner left her for another

woman, and Maria was so broken-hearted, she lost all interest in me. Our re-connection that evening in the winter of 1996 was healing, for both of us, though we've never been in contact since. (I did run into Maria again, quite by accident, in the winter of 2000. I was fully transitioned by that time, and she did not recognize me at all. When I went up to her and jogged her memory, she simply said, "Oh my god!")

December was finals time, and Eileen and I were studying furiously. This was the first quarter back at school for both of us after many years away from academia, and we wanted to do well. I had found, to my pleased surprise, that just about every one of my textbooks contained a brief description of gender identity as separate from sexual orientation. At some point during our studying for finals, Eileen said to me, "You know, I just don't understand this gender identity thing. I'm comfortable being a woman. You're comfortable being a woman—" At which point I interrupted her and said, "Well... no, I'm not. I'm transitioning from female to male."

Eileen was very taken aback, and left my apartment shortly thereafter. I wondered whether she'd been thrown for too much of a loop. I'd nearly backed away from pursuing a friendship with this woman when I found out, very early in the term, that she is a conservative Republican and devout Christian. Nevertheless, her openness to new ideas and the innate integrity I sensed in her had pierced my defenses, and I maintained the friendship. At first, I was on eggshells, not quite trusting that a person who claimed those particular labels could befriend me once she knew who I really was. I had lived through the Oregon Citizen's Alliance's two anti-gay ballot measures in 1992 and 1994, and they had

distorted my view of Christians in general.

After our finals were over, it became clear to me that Eileen was intrigued by me, and wanted to know more. I told her what she wanted to know, being very careful not to reveal more than I felt she was ready to hear at any given time. We had wonderful conversations about life, our goals, school, and any other subject under the sun. We took classes together whenever we could, though it wasn't long before this was no longer possible. I had taken two quarters of statistics right off the bat, knowing this was required for most of the senior level psychology classes. Eileen was intimidated by statistics and eventually switched her major to avoid taking statistics at all. After my first year back at PSU, we never had another class together. I felt bereft, as did Eileen. We still met on campus to study whenever we could, but it wasn't the same, as we weren't studying the same thing.

I only came out in classes rarely, though I often came out in papers written for classes. I wanted to educate my professors, to give them a different perspective for the next time they would teach the same material. However, my classes were generally so large (the smallest I had was about 55) and full of people I didn't know, I didn't feel comfortable coming out.

I did discover it was much easier to come out in an organized, deliberate context than to raise my hand and come out as part of a class discussion. Along with 150 or so of my peers, I took a sociology course titled "Marriage and Family." At the first class meeting, the teacher (Pete Collier) announced that next class, we would hear from a panel of transgendered people and he wanted us to read in advance certain parts of our text and think up good questions for the panel. As he put it, "This is going to be new

to most of you, and I want you to put some thought into it before you hear from the panel.”

Of course, I was intrigued, so I read the parts of the text that he’d mentioned. It was the same basic explanation I’d seen in several other of my textbooks. I also realized, however, that this explanation was anything but basic for most of my classmates! The following week, a panel of four spoke to our class about their experiences. The panel consisted of two post-operative MTFs and two MTF cross-dressers, both heterosexual and married. The class asked intelligent, respectful questions and received intelligent, respectful answers.

I was impressed the teacher had put this together, but... I went up to Pete afterward and said I thought something was missing from his panel. I asked why there had been no FTM representation, and Pete said that a friend of his wife’s was a member of a group called the Northwest Gender Alliance. As Pete had not been in Portland long, he had not had an opportunity to meet anyone who might be able to direct him to any FTMs. Knowing that NWGA is a group primarily comprised of heterosexual male cross-dressers, I understood Pete’s position.

I told him I was an FTM, and that if he planned on doing this panel in the future, I would be glad to participate. He thanked me profusely, and said he would keep this in mind. A year later I spoke before nearly 200 students in Pete’s “Marriage and Family” class, as a member of his gender identity panel. (What a difference that year made – by that time, I’d been on hormones six months and had had top surgery less than a month before. A new man, indeed!)

I continued to rehearse with the Choir that fall of 1996 and spring of 1997, though it felt more surrealistic with every passing

week. As long as I didn’t speak, I was beginning to be seen as a man more and more often, which felt very right and natural to me. Yet here I was rehearsing Portland Lesbian Choir music in preparation for the tenth anniversary concert and CD recording! The disparity was beginning to chafe, and though I was sad about leaving the Choir behind, I was also increasingly irritated at delaying my process.

A strong part of me realized, however, that I was being given a priceless gift, living this year and a half between genders. Though at times uncomfortable, it also gave me the experience of transcending gender labels, as much as one can. I could be either or neither or both at any given time, and realized for the first time what a joke it is to define marriage as being between a man and a woman. First, you have to define “man” and “woman”!

Upon being told of his transition, one of our mutual lesbian friends said to Alan, “What a gift to be able to live as both sexes in one lifetime!” Alan told me this during my breakdown period, and that reframe shifted my own perspective significantly. I was given a further gift of being able to live as both sexes alternately during the same *year*.

Doing this by choice, having deliberately postponed my own process, gave me a sense of personal power that has been with me ever since. I had complete control over my own gender, an identity so fundamental that this sense of power spilled over to every other aspect of my life as well. I felt there was nothing I did not control, and it is this feeling that has stuck with me in the years since. I am my own man, and I know it much more fully than I ever felt I was my own woman.

In the spring of 1997, a few months prior to beginning hormones, I had a

disconcerting experience in one of my classes. I asked a minor favor of the woman sitting next to me, and she was agreeable. Yet there was something in this woman's attitude toward me that was disconcerting and a little uncomfortable for me. The feeling was familiar, as if I'd seen it before, yet I knew it was not an attitude I'd experienced directed at me. It was rather like being mothered by a peer, and I didn't like it.

At our next class meeting, she referred to me as "he" and I realized that for the first time, I'd experienced a woman interacting with me as a man. Her attitude had been that unconscious deference some women show toward men. I'd seen it before, second-hand, but had never been in that role myself.

On the one hand, I was exhilarated that I was passing as a man to this woman, that she had never revised her opinion of me from "male" to "lesbian," though we had had a fairly lengthy conversation about the course material. On the other hand... this deference did make me uncomfortable, socialized as I'd been in the lesbian community to be outraged at women showing deference to men simply because of their gender.

At this point in my transition, I assumed that everyone who heard my speaking voice would no longer see me as male, so I was not particularly *trying* to pass. I was going about my life, just being myself. This made it especially gratifying to be seen as a man when I was not putting forth any effort to that end.

In this particular class, I had my first experience of being a "gender bender." Most of the people in the class saw me as a lesbian and referred to me using female pronouns. A few used male pronouns for me and looked puzzled when others referred to me as "she." This was a sociology class titled simply

"Minorities." The teacher (an obvious lesbian) thoroughly enjoyed being on a soapbox, espousing her socialist views of our society and its despicable history where non-white, non-male, non-Protestant, non-heterosexual people are concerned. Though I agreed with many of her assertions, I found her smugly self-righteous manner a little hard to take at times.

I came out in a class paper early on, and the teacher indicated support of me in her written comments. I asked a question at one point late in the quarter, and the teacher said into her microphone, "Did you all hear what she asked?" I wanted to sink into the floor, and one of my classmates who'd seen me as male turned to me and said, "She???" I looked at her and shrugged my shoulders, as if I didn't have a clue why the teacher had said that.

I went up to the teacher afterward and told her I preferred male pronouns. She looked very puzzled and said she didn't remember using pronouns for me at all in that situation! She had been so very righteously indignant about the treatment of minorities in this culture, it was a bit satisfying for me to give her an object lesson: No one is immune from making mistakes in dealing with others – we have all been socialized and can react automatically from the influence of that socialization, no matter how evolved we believe ourselves to be.

I did not come out to my classmates in that class. Being seen as a guy was such a new and exciting experience for me, I wanted the opportunity to revel in it. The Choir CD was recorded at about this time, and it is an indication of the "double life" I was leading that the woman who sang next to me for years said at one point during the recording process, "Do you *have* to become a man?" I laughed and said, "Yes, Jeanne, I've

come too far to want to turn back now." And then she said, "Can't you stay anyway? I mean, *we'd* all know, but we wouldn't have to tell anyone."

Jeanne was deliberately missing the boat. Singing in a group creates such powerful bonds, and she didn't want to lose me in that capacity. It was a wrench for me to leave, but it was also a wrench to many Choir members to witness my leaving, and under such circumstances that it was clearly a final parting.

On the date of the Choir's tenth anniversary concert, I held a parting ritual at my apartment. I sent a flyer to just about every Choir member, and invited them to come over sometime in the afternoon, prior to the concert, bringing with them some memento that reminded them of me. Quite a few showed up, and brought me interesting gifts and cards full of loving support.

Later, I put the cards in a photo album and created an altar with the gifts. A mustache cup. A geode, split open to reveal shiny mica inside plain rock – as fantastic a metaphor for living trans as I've ever seen, this gift came to me from my muskateer allies Erin and Liza. A new copy of the score for Handel's *Messiah*, as my old one had the alto part highlighted. That afternoon stands out as a highlight of my transition.

My oldest nephew was there, hanging around in the background. He saw his first Portland Lesbian Choir concert that night, and had traveled from the Bay Area specifically to support me for that last performance. I saw him as representing my biological family, which had largely been silent on the subject of my transition. As is the case in many alcoholic families, mine is terrible at showing genuine emotion or expressing honest feelings. Only four family members had taken the time to respond to

the coming out letter I'd sent all of them in the fall of 1995. My oldest nephew had come to visit me several times, and though we never talked much about my transition itself, his very presence spoke volumes.

When I first came out as a lesbian, I followed the family pattern of not telling anyone formally (except my sister Susan, as usual via a letter, shortly after I'd moved 700 miles away to Oregon). I let the rest of my family come to a gradual realization that I was having relationships with women. No one ever said anything about it to my face, though I'm sure they talked amongst themselves.

In this case, I was very honest with them all, and knew it was going to be very interesting at family gatherings. When they realized I was a lesbian, they did not have to say or do anything to acknowledge the fact. Now, however, they would actually have to *do* something to acknowledge my transition – use a new name and a new pronoun for me.

A few family members had come up to Portland for my 40th birthday party, late in the summer of 1995. All my siblings were there (with the exception of my brother John), and my mother. I had never had so much family visit at one time since I'd moved to Oregon nearly 20 years before. At times I would look at Judy's family with extreme envy for their closeness. When Judy graduated from the University of Oregon, every member of her immediate family made the trek from various parts of the country to participate. Every Christmas and Thanksgiving, the entire immediate family gathers in one part of the country or another, taking turns hosting the family gathering. This means quite a few small children are traveling to be with the St. John clan gathering, but that's the way their family

operates.

I cannot begin to imagine that kind of closeness in my own family, and when I first met Judy, I envied this family closeness while at the same time feeling stifled when I was at St. John family dinners. It was this experience that showed me no family actually is a Norman Rockwell family. Alan's mother is very controlling, and has a rather large blind spot about her ability to truly accept diversity within her own family, though her politics are quite liberal. Over time, I've come to realize (a) that it does no damn good to envy other people's families because I can't change mine anyway, and (b) no one else's family is perfect, either, we just all have different histories and patterns.

My own family has reconciled itself (for the most part) to my transition and does quite well with my new name and reasonably well with pronouns. My siblings are all so much older than I am, it's hard for them to change their view of me. After all, they babysat me when I was in diapers. And as for my mother... she still slips on pronouns occasionally, especially when I'm not there. She is very much the type to live in the past and has never allowed me to grow up in her own mind. She does not often slip on my name, or on pronouns when I'm present. I forgive her a lot, because she does mean well.

I have completely lost contact with my brother John, which I find ironic since it was with him that I enjoyed the only happy times of my childhood. He is the black sheep of the family at the moment, and lives in Guam. He had an affair with a much-younger woman and his wife divorced him. I imagine this affair was the last straw in a long string of similar transgressions. In addition, he has apparently inherited our father's alcoholism and is in denial about his

problem. Shortly after his separation from his wife, he accepted a job in Guam, and has lived there since 1994.

I had sent him a coming out letter, also, and never heard a word from him. John rarely visited the Bay Area after his move to Guam, and never when I was also there. When I moved back to the Bay Area in 1998 to attend graduate school, my mother told me he was going to be visiting soon. The date of his visit kept getting postponed, but as my mother had been keeping me posted for years about family doings, I assumed she would let me know when he was finally going to be there. In November of 1999, she let slip that he'd been in town for ten days in October, stayed with one of his daughters (who lived about five miles from my Oakland apartment), and was gone again. I was very hurt by his silence. He'd visited all his siblings – except me. I never even knew he was in town.

I expressed my hurt feelings and anger to my mother, who did not know what to do with them. She has never been one to express her own feelings, particularly if they are feelings of pain or vulnerability. She then told me that when I sent the coming out letter four years before, John had shown it to a doctor friend of his, who was "very impressed by it," as my mother put it.

It would be the family way for me to nurse a grudge against my brother for not contacting me, and use this to maintain a posture of righteous anger, to be dissected and rehearsed with my mother and sister Susan for years to come, to never speak to my brother of it at all and treat him icily when I do finally see him again.

More foreign to me is what I actually did about the situation. I wrote to him in early 2000, said I was very hurt by his actions (or, non-action) toward me and that I'd like to

see him the next time he visits. I included a number of pieces I'd written since 1996, primarily layperson explanations of various aspects of "trans-ness," and one paper I wrote in graduate school for a Human Sexuality class.

About a week after mailing this packet to him, I came home from work to hear a very surprising message on my voice mail, from John. He was calling from a bar, drunk, but his message of support was one of the most genuine statements I've ever heard from *anyone* in my family. Among other things, he told me he'd wished very much for a little brother and reluctantly reconciled himself to having a baby sister when I was born. I don't know that he would have said all he did if he weren't drunk, but people do tend to say exactly what they feel when under the influence, without the usual social inhibitions in place, so I was most gratified by this message. I haven't heard from him since, but intend to get together with him next time he visits. (John called me in the spring of 2001, an RSVP accepting my invitation to attend my graduation from John F. Kennedy University with my M.A. This is the first time all four of us siblings will be together since my nephew David's 1993 memorial service.)

Not only do I want to see him because he's my brother and I have not seen him in years, but also because I want to see the look on his face when he sees me post-transition. In late 1999, I mentioned to my sister Susan that when I attended the 1999 FTM conference in Burbank, folks I'd met at the Seattle conference three years earlier did not recognize me. She looked disbelieving at that, and said I had not changed to the point of unrecognizability. I countered that she'd seen me incrementally during my transition, and that she was so familiar with me, I

would have to change much more than I have for my own sister to not recognize me. It will be very interesting to see how much trouble John has recognizing me, as he has not seen me since our nephew David's memorial service in 1993. (As it turned out, John did not seem to have any trouble recognizing or accepting me. What was most entertaining to me was to find that we sound *exactly* alike, both in terms of the timbre of our voices and the inflection with which we speak.)

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