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4. Boygasms and Girlgasms: A Frank Discussion About Hormones and Gender Differences

THOUGH I AM OFTEN RELUCTANT to indulge people's fascination with the details of my physical transition from male to female, I will often make an exception regarding the psychological changes I experienced due to hormones. The reason for this is quite simple: Sex hormones have become horribly politicized in our culture, evident in the way that people blatantly blame testosterone for nearly all instances of male aggression and violence, or the way that women who become legitimately angry or upset often have their opinions dismissed as mere symptoms of their body chemistry. Such hormonal folklore has strongly influenced medicine, as evidenced by the countless shoddy, pseudoscientific studies claiming to verify popular assumptions about testosterone and estrogen. Of course, such overt politicization has created a significant backlash of people who now play down the role of hormones in human behavior, who argue that most of their presumed effects (making men overly aggressive and women overly emotional) are better explained by socialization—after all, young boys are encouraged to be aggressive and discouraged from showing emotions, and vice versa for girls.

Having experienced both female and male hormones firsthand, I feel it's my duty to spoil this nature-versus-nurture debate by offering the following description and interpretation of my personal experiences “transitioning” from testosterone to estrogen and progesterone. But before I begin, there are two important points that must be made prior to any discussion regarding hormones. First, contrary to popular belief, hormones do not simply act like unilateral on/off switches controlling female/feminine or male/masculine development. All people have both androgens (which include testosterone) and estrogens in their systems, although the balance is tipped more toward the former in men and

the latter in women. Not only are there different types of androgens and estrogens, but these hormones require different steroid receptors to function, are metabolized by numerous enzymes that can shift the balance by converting one hormone to another, and function by regulating the levels of scores of “downstream genes,” which are more directly responsible for producing specific hormonal effects. Because of all these variables, there’s an extensive amount of natural variation built into the way individual people experience and process specific hormones.

The second issue to keep in mind is the difficulty in distinguishing “real” hormone effects from their perceived or presumed effects. For example, shortly after I began hormone therapy, I had a strong craving for eggs. I immediately attributed this to the hormones until other trans women told me that they never had similar cravings. So perhaps that was an effect of the hormones only I had. Or maybe I was going through an “egg phase” that just so happened to coincide with the start of my hormone therapy. Hence, the problem: Not only can hormones affect individuals differently, but we sometimes attribute coincidences to them and project our own expectations onto them.

For these reasons, I will limit my discussion here to those hormonal changes I have experienced that have been corroborated by other trans women I have spoken with. Also, rather than get into the more physical effects of hormones (i.e., muscle/fat distribution, hair growth, etc.) which are not in dispute, I will focus primarily on the “psychological” changes—in my emotions, senses, and sexuality—that I experienced early on when I began taking estrogen along with an anti-androgen, which suppresses endogenous testosterone levels, to shift my hormonal balance into the range that most adult women experience.

People often say that female hormones make women “more emotional” than men, but in my view such claims are an oversimplification. How would I describe the changes I went through, then? In retrospect, when testosterone was the predominant sex hormone in my body, it was as though a thick curtain were draped over my emotions. It deadened their intensity, made all of my feelings pale and vague as if they were ghosts that would haunt me. But on estrogen, I find that I have all of the same emotions that I did back then, only now they come in crystal clear. In other words, it is not the actual emotions, but rather their intensity that has changed—the highs are way higher and the lows are way lower. Another way of saying it is that I feel my emotions more now; they are in the foreground rather than the background of my mind.

The anecdote that perhaps best captures this change occurred about two months after I started hormone therapy. My wife, Dani, and I had an argument and at one point I started to cry—something that was not all that uncommon for me when I was hormonally male. What was different was that after about a minute or so, I began to laugh while simultaneously continuing to cry. When Dani asked me why I was laughing, I replied, “I can’t turn it off.” Back when I was hormonally male, I felt as though I was always capable of stopping the cry, of holding it all in, if I really wanted to. Now, I find it nearly impossible to hold back the tears once I start crying. I’ve learned instead to just go with it, to let myself experience the cry, and it feels a lot more cathartic as a result.

In general, even though my emotions are much more intense these days, I certainly do not feel as though they get in the way of my logic or reasoning, or that they single-handedly control my every thought or decision. I remain perfectly capable of acting on rational thought rather than following my feelings. However, what I can no longer do (at least to the extent that I used to) is completely ignore my emotions, repress them, or entirely shut them out of my mind.

The change in the intensity of my emotions is paralleled in my sense of touch as well. I cannot say for sure that my sense of touch has improved—that I am able to feel things that I couldn't before—but it surely plays a greater role in how I experience the world. Whenever I am interested in something, whether it's a book, a piece of artwork, an article of clothing, or an object or material of any kind, I feel compelled to touch it, to handle it, as though my understanding of it would be incomplete without the tactile knowledge of how it physically feels to me. In contrast, when hormonally male, I generally felt satisfied with simply seeing an object of interest.

Unlike my emotions and sense of touch, which seem to have primarily increased in *intensity*, my sense of smell has definitely increased in *sensitivity*. That is to say, I now can smell things that I was previously unable to detect. Though it sounds like a cliché, during the first spring after my transition I was blown away by how flowers smelled to me. While I'd always found them very fragrant, I suddenly smelled all of these subtle notes and perfumes that I had never been aware of before. I also had similar experiences with the aroma of certain foods. Perhaps the most interesting facet of this change for me has been sensing new smells in people. I find that men now sometimes have a really strong, somewhat sweet smell to them that I had never been privy to before. But it is not simply that I have gained the ability to pick up on male odors or “pheromones,” because I also now detect new smells with women. During my transition, I noticed that when I would kiss Dani or nuzzle my nose into her neck, it felt as though fireworks were going off in my brain. I was barraged with amazingly sweet, soothing, and sensual smells that not only sexually stimulated me, but also made me feel closer to her, as if I were connected to her in a way that I hadn't been before. Indeed, the increase in my senses of smell and touch, and the way I feel more “in touch” with my emotions, has led me to feel more in tune with the world, and with other people.

Without a doubt, the most profound change that has come with my hormonal transition has been in my sexuality. In fact, the very first change that I noticed—which came during my first few weeks on estrogen/anti-androgens—was a sharp decrease in my sex drive. I noticed this for the first time at the end of a really busy week, after working many hours and being out late most nights. It suddenly occurred to me, only after the fact, that I had neither had sex nor masturbated during the entire week. While this may not seem impressive to some readers, for me, at the time, it was completely unheard-of. I could barely go a day, let alone two days, without some form of release (in fact, for much of my adult male life, masturbating was an activity that I typically indulged in one to three times a day). While my sex drive may have decreased, this surely

does not mean that I have lost interest in sex entirely. I still intensely enjoy masturbation and sex, it's just that I crave it about three to four times a week rather than one to three times a day.

While the quantity of my sexual experiences has decreased significantly, the quality of those experiences has increased exponentially. Indeed, I called this chapter "Boygasms and Girlgasms" because, for me, the differences in how my body responds to sexual stimuli—how I "get off," if you will—has been the most dramatic (and in many ways most enjoyable) hormonal change that I've experienced. I began to notice these changes within the first few weeks of starting hormone therapy. Even before I lost the ability to maintain erections, I found that what used to excite me—that back-and-forth stroking action that males typically prefer—really wasn't doing the trick anymore. I just felt like I needed something more. So I started experimenting with Dani's vibrators. When I had tried them in the past, they always felt like too much stimulation, but now they suddenly felt absolutely incredible. And back when I was hormonally male, sexual stimulation would cause me to climb rather rapidly toward the peak of orgasm; if I wanted the experience to last longer, I had to keep pulling back just before I hit that precipice. But now I found that I could go way beyond what used to be the point of orgasm, writhing for fifteen minutes in a sexual state that was far more intense than I had ever experienced before. Now, my orgasms are way more in the female rather than male range: They typically take longer to achieve (but are well worth the wait), each one has a different flavor and intensity, they are less centralized and more diffuse throughout my body, and they are often multiple.

Not surprisingly, changes in my senses have also greatly influenced my sexuality. Not only am I more sexually excited by the scent of my partner, but the increase in my tactile senses make my whole body feel alive—electric—during sex. Nowhere is this more obvious than in my nipples, which seem to have a direct connection to my groin. It also has become apparent to me that I am less visual with regard to my sexuality. I don't think that I recognized this at first, probably because it is harder to notice the gradual loss of a sensation than the appearance of a new one. I only realized it about a year later, when I began taking progesterone for ten days out of the month to simulate the endogenous expression of progesterone in most women. The first thing I noticed upon taking progesterone is that my sex drive, particularly in response to visual input, sharply increased. In fact, the visual effects of progesterone very much reminded me of how I responded to visual stimuli when I was hormonally male.

Upon hearing my experience, I am sure that some people—particularly those who favor social, rather than biological, explanations of gender difference—will be somewhat disappointed at the predictable nature of my transformation. Some may even assume that I am buying into female stereotypes when I describe myself becoming a more weepy, touchy-feely, flower-adoring, less sexually aggressive person. Not only are similar experiences regularly described by other trans women, but trans men typically give reciprocal accounts: They almost universally describe an increase in their sex drives (which become more responsive to visual inputs), male-type orgasms (more centralized, quicker to achieve),

a decrease in their sense of smell, and more difficulty crying and discerning their emotions.¹

On the other hand, those who are eager to have popular presumptions about hormones confirmed will probably be just as disappointed to hear what has not noticeably changed during my hormonal transition: my sexual orientation; the “types” of women I am attracted to; my tastes in music, movies, or hobbies; my politics; my sense of humor; my levels of aggression, competitiveness, nurturing, creativity, intelligence; and my ability to read maps or do math. While it would be irresponsible for me to say that these human traits are entirely hormone-independent (as it is possible that fetal hormones potentially play some role in predisposing us to such traits), they clearly are not controlled by adult hormone levels to the extent that many people argue or assume.

While transsexual accounts of hormones are largely in agreement with one another, I also find it illuminating to examine the more subtle differences between our individual experiences. For example, I have heard several trans men describe how they started to consume porn voraciously upon taking testosterone. While my sexuality was definitely more visual when I was hormonally male, and I certainly enjoyed looking at porn on occasion, I still always preferred erotic stories and fantasies to pictures of naked bodies. Similarly, I have heard some trans men say that they almost never cry since taking testosterone, whereas I used to cry somewhat often (although not nearly as often as I do now) when I was hormonally male. Some trans men have also described becoming more aggressive or competitive since taking testosterone (although many others describe themselves as becoming more calm).² However, when I was hormonally male, I typically found myself to be the least aggressive or competitive guy in any room that I entered. This is not to say that I was passive, as I have always been motivated and eager to succeed at any task I have taken on. Rather, I have never really felt any desire to have my success come at the expense of others.

Thus, it is clear that typical male levels of testosterone, in and of itself, are insufficient to produce many of these stereotypically male behaviors, most likely because of the variability that exists from person to person in the way this hormone is processed and experienced. While a part of me is tempted to attribute my apparent imperviousness to testosterone to the fact that I am trans—that on some level, I was never fully or completely male—I also realize that many cissexual people are exceptions in this regard as well. I know plenty of non-trans men who are not particularly into porn, who are not very aggressive, and/or who often cry. I have also met women who have high sex drives, who enjoy porn, and/or who are just as aggressive and competitive as the average

¹For trans male accounts of hormones, see Patrick Califia, *Speaking Sex to Power: The Politics of Queer Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), 393-401; Jamison Green, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 98-102, 151-152; Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 152-163; and Max Wolf Valerio, *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006).

²Summarized in Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 220-221; see also sources cited in the previous note.

alpha male. Thus, there seems to be more variation among women and among men than there is between the averages of these two groups.

Acknowledging this variation is absolutely crucial in order for us to finally move beyond overly simplistic (and binary) biology versus-socialization debates regarding gender. After all, there are very real *biological* differences between hormones: Testosterone will probably make any given person cry less frequently and have a higher sex drive than estrogen will. However, if one were to argue that this biological difference represents an *essential* gender difference—one that holds true for all women and all men—they would be incorrect. After all, there are some men who cry more than certain women, and some women who have higher sex drives than certain men. Perhaps what is most telling is that, as a society, we regulate these hormonally influenced behaviors in a way that seems to exaggerate their natural effects. We actively discourage boys from crying, even though testosterone itself should reduce the chance of this happening. And we encourage men to act on their sex drives (by praising them as “studs”) while discouraging women from doing the same (by dismissing them “sluts”), despite the fact that most women will end up having a lower sex drive than most men anyway.

While many gender theorists have focused their efforts on attempting to demonstrate that this sort of socialization *produces* gender differences, it seems to me more accurate to say that in many cases socialization acts to exaggerate biological gender differences that already exist. In other words, it coaxes those of us who are exceptional (e.g., men who cry often or women with high sex drives) to hide or curb those tendencies, rather than simply falling where we may on the spectrum of gender diversity. By attempting to play down or erase the existence of such exceptions, socialization distorts biological gender difference to create the impression that essential differences exist between women and men. Thus, the primary role of socialization is not to produce gender difference *de novo*, but to create the illusion that female and male are mutually exclusive, “opposite” sexes.

Recognizing the distinction between biological and essential gender differences has enormous ramifications for the future of gender activism. Since there is natural variation in our drives and the way we experience the world, attempts to minimize gender differences (i.e., insisting that people strive to be unisex or androgynous) are rather pointless; we should instead learn to embrace all forms of gender diversity, whether typical (feminine women and masculine men) or exceptional (masculine women and feminine men). Further, since some attributes that are considered feminine (e.g., being more in tune with one’s emotions) or masculine (e.g., being preoccupied with sex) are clearly affected by our hormones, attempts by some gender theorists to frame femininity and masculinity as being entirely artificial or performative seem misplaced. Rather than focus on how femininity and masculinity are produced (an issue that has unfortunately dominated the field of gender studies of late), we should instead turn our attention to the ways these gender traits are interpreted.

The issue of interpretation becomes obvious when considering transsexuals. For example, one cannot help but notice how much more empowering trans

male descriptions of hormonal transition tend to sound compared to those of trans women. Trans men experience an increase in their sex drive, become less emotional, and their bodies become harder and stronger—all of these changes having positive connotations in our society. In contrast, I have experienced a decrease in my sex drive and become more emotional, softer, and weaker—all traits that are viewed negatively. The reason for these differing connotations is obvious: In our culture, femininity and femaleness are not appreciated nor valued to the extent that masculinity and maleness are. And while embracing my own femaleness and femininity during my transition was personally empowering and rewarding, I nevertheless felt overwhelmed by all of the negative connotations and inferior meanings that other people began to project onto me. These meanings were not only projected onto my female body, but onto the hormones themselves: from the warning label on my progesterone prescription that read, “May cause drowsiness or dizziness” and “Avoid operating heavy machinery,” to the men who have hinted that my female hormones were responsible for the fact that I disagreed with their opinion, and the women who sneered, “Why would you ever want to do that?” upon finding out that I have chosen to cycle my hormones.

Once we start thinking about gender as being socially exaggerated (rather than socially constructed), we can finally tackle the issue of sexism in our society without having to dismiss or undermine biological sex in the process. While biological gender differences are very real, most of the connotations, values, and assumptions we associate with female and male biology are not.

5. Blind Spots: On Subconscious Sex and Gender Entitlement

ONE OF THE MOST FRUSTRATING ASPECTS about being a transsexual is that I'm frequently asked to explain to other people why I decided to transition. Why did I feel it was necessary to physically change my body? How could I possibly know that I'd be happier as a woman when I had only ever experienced being male? If I don't believe that women and men are "opposite" sexes, then why change my sex at all? Unfortunately, while these are among the most common questions people ask, they are also the ones to which people are the least open to hearing my answer. After having fielded these sorts of questions from my friends and family, at high school and college classes where I've been invited to speak, and from fellow queers and feminists with whom I've shared discussions about gender, I have come to the conclusion that most cissexuals have a particular blind spot at the source of their seemingly endless curiosity (and often doubt) about how someone who is born into a certain physical sex can come to know themselves as a member of the other sex. This blind spot has to do with what has been commonly called *gender identity*.

Personally, I have always found the term "gender identity" to be rather misleading. After all, identifying as something, whether it be as a woman, a Democrat, a Christian, a feminist, a cat person, or a metalhead, seems to be a conscious, deliberate choice on our part, one that we make in order to better describe how we think we fit into the world. Thus, with regard to transsexuals, the phrase "gender identity" is problematic because it seems to describe two potentially different things: the gender we consciously choose to identify as, and the gender we subconsciously feel ourselves to be. To make things clearer, I will refer to the latter as *subconscious sex*.

The main reason I make this distinction between gender identity and subconscious sex is that it best explains my own personal experiences. I did not have the quintessential trans experience of always feeling that I should have been female. For me, this recognition came about more gradually. The first memories I have of being trans took place early in my elementary school years, when I was around five or six. By this time, I was already consciously aware

of the fact that I was physically male and that other people thought of me as a boy. During this time, I experienced numerous manifestations of my female subconscious sex: I had dreams in which adults would tell me I was a girl; I would draw pictures of little boys with needles going into their penises, imagining that the medicine in the syringe would make that organ disappear; I had an unexplainable feeling that I was doing something wrong every time I walked into the boys' restroom at school; and whenever our class split into groups of boys and girls, I always had a sneaking suspicion that at any moment someone might tap me on the shoulder and say, "Hey, what are you doing here? You're not a boy."

I wasn't sure what to make of these feelings at the time. After all, I was obviously a boy—everybody thought so. And unlike other MTF spectrum children, I never really wanted to take part in girlish activities, such as playing house. Being that, like most elementary school children, my understanding of "girl" and "boy" was largely based on gender preferences in toys, activities, and interests, it wasn't clear to me how to reconcile my vague, subconscious feelings with my passion for dinosaurs and my desire to be a major league baseball player when I grew up.

It wasn't until the age of eleven that I consciously recognized these subconscious feelings as an urge or desire to be female. The first incident that led to this discovery happened late one night, after engaging in a losing battle with insomnia. I found myself inexplicably compelled to remove a set of white, lacy curtains from the window and wrap them around my body like a dress. I walked toward the mirror. Since I was a prepubescent boy with one of those longish boy haircuts that were popular in the late '70s, the curtains alone were sufficient to complete my transformation: I looked like a girl. I stared at my reflection for over an hour, stunned. It felt like an epiphany because, for some unexplainable reason, seeing myself as a girl made absolutely perfect sense to me.

The second discovery happened shortly thereafter. Every day after school, I used to play by myself in my bedroom, making up little adventure stories that I would act out. For a while (most likely inspired by my mirror epiphany), the adventures I created had a plot twist where my imaginary nemesis would turn me into a girl and I would spend the rest of the story trying to find him so that he could turn me back into a boy. After a while, I got bored with that last part of the story, so I would simply continue throughout the rest of the adventure as a girl. I did this for a couple weeks before I realized that the "being a girl" part of the story was much more than just play. It became obvious to me that I actually wanted to be a girl and that, on some level, it felt right.

Trying to translate these subconscious experiences into conscious thought is a messy business. All of the words available in the English language completely fail to accurately capture or convey my personal understanding of these events. For example, if I were to say that I "saw" myself as female, or "knew" myself to be a girl, I would be denying the fact that I was consciously aware of my physical maleness at all times. And saying that I "wished" or "wanted" to be a girl erases how much being female made sense to me, how it felt right on the deepest, most profound level of my being. I could say that I "felt" like a girl,

but that would give the false impression that I knew how other girls (and other boys) felt. And if I were to say that I was "supposed to be" a girl, or that I "should have been born" female, it would imply that I had some sort of cosmic insight into the grand scheme of the universe, which I most certainly did not.

Perhaps the best way to describe how my subconscious sex feels to me is to say that it seems as if, on some level, my brain expects my body to be female. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that our brains have an intrinsic understanding of what sex our bodies should be.³ For example, there have been numerous instances in which male infants have been surgically reassigned as female shortly after birth due to botched circumcisions or cloacal exstrophy (a non-intersex medical condition). Despite being raised female and appearing to have female genitals, the majority of such children eventually come to identify as male, demonstrating that brain sex may override both socialization and genital sex.⁴ There have also been studies that have examined a small, sexually dimorphic region of the brain known as the BSTc. Researchers found that the structure of the BSTc region in trans women more closely resembles that of most women, while in trans men it resembles that of most men.⁵ Like all brain research, such studies have certain limitations and caveats, but they do suggest that our brains may be hardwired to expect our bodies to be female or male, independent of our socialization or the appearance of our bodies.

Personally, I am drawn to the brain-hardwiring hypothesis, not because I believe that it has been proven scientifically beyond a doubt, but because it best explains why the thoughts I have had of being female always felt vague and ever-present, like they were an unconscious knowing that always seemed to defy conscious reality. It would also account for how I knew there was something wrong with me being a boy before I ever could consciously put it into words; why I had dreams about being or becoming a girl well before I experienced any conscious desire to be female or feminine; why my first experiences masturbating as a teen (which happened before I had ever seen or heard anything about what happens when people have sex) involved me spreading my legs, placing my hand on my crotch, and rocking my hand back and forth the way many girls instinctively do it.

The brain-hardwiring hypothesis can also account for why thinking of myself

³Carina Dennis, "The Most Important Sexual Organ," *Nature* 427, no. 6973 (2004), 390-392; Arthur P. Arnold, "Sex Chromosomes and Brain Gender," *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 5 (2004), 1-8; Anne Vitale, "Notes on Gender Role Transition: Rethinking the Gender Identity Disorder Terminology in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*," from a paper presented at the 2005 HBGDA Conference, April 7, 2005 (a fully referenced version of the paper can be found at www.avitale.com/hbigdataalkplus2005.htm).

⁴John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); William G. Reiner and John P. Gearhart, "Discordant Sexual Identity in Some Genetic Males with Cloacal Exstrophy Assigned to Female Sex at Birth," *New England Journal of Medicine* 350, no. 4 (2004), 333-341.

⁵Jiang-Ning Zhou, Michel A. Hofman, Louis J. G. Gooren, and Dick F. Swaab, "A Sex Difference in the Human Brain and Its Relation to Transsexuality," *Nature* 378 (1995), 68-70; Frank P. M. Kruijver, Jiang-Ning Zhou, Chris W. Pool, Michel A. Hofman, Louis J. G. Gooren, and Dick F. Swaab, "Male-to-Female Transsexuals Have Female Neuron Numbers in a Limbic Nucleus," *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* 85, no. 5 (2005), 2034-2041.

as female has always been beyond my conscious reach, why I was unable to repress it or rationalize it away no matter how hard I tried. A lot of people assume that trans people have an addict-like obsession with being the other sex: The more we think about it, the more we want it or convince ourselves into believing it to be true. I have found that being trans is quite the opposite: The more I tried to ignore the thoughts of being female, the more persistently they pushed their way back into the forefront of my mind. In that way, they felt more like other subconscious feelings, such as hunger or thirst, where neglecting the urge only makes the feeling more intense with time.

I am sure that some people will object to me referring to this aspect of my person as a subconscious “sex” rather than “gender.” I prefer “sex” because I have experienced it as being rather exclusively about my physical sex, and because for me this subconscious desire to be female has existed independently of the social phenomena commonly associated with the word “gender.” As mentioned previously, my initial experience with my female subconscious sex was not accompanied by any corresponding desire to explore female gender roles or to express femininity. Nor was it the result of me trying to “fit in” to societal gender norms because, by all accounts, I was considered to be a fairly normal-acting young boy at the time. And my female subconscious sex was most certainly not the result of socialization or social gender constructs, as it defied everything I had been taught was true about gender, as well as the constant encouragement I received to think of myself as a boy and to act masculine.

Although I believe that my female subconscious sex originated within me (i.e., that it is an intrinsic part of my person), things were inevitably complicated once my conscious mind began processing these feelings, coming up against the reality of not only my physical maleness, but the fact that I had to function in a world where everybody else related to me as male. This intersection of subconscious and conscious sex is what I prefer to think of as gender identity. When one’s subconscious and conscious sexes match, as they do for cissexuals, an appropriate gender identity may emerge rather seamlessly. For me, the tension I felt between these two disparate understandings of myself was wholly jarring. Even as a youngster, I realized that there were really only three ways to potentially resolve the problem: I could suppress my subconscious sex (which I tried to do, but was never fully successful), accept my subconscious sex as my conscious sex (which would entail not only denying my physical maleness, but announcing to my family and friends that I was a girl—an action that I knew would be both dangerous and devastating for everyone involved), or learn to manage the difference between my conscious and subconscious sexes, finding novel ways of relating to my gender that would allow me to straddle both maleness and femaleness to certain extents.

While I have found my subconscious sex to be impervious to conscious thought or social influence, my gender identity (i.e., the way I consciously relate to my gender) has been very much shaped by cultural norms and my own personal beliefs and experiences. For example, even though my initial realization of wanting to be female occurred prior to me experiencing sexual attraction and independent of any desire to take part in stereotypically girlish activities and

interests, that realization led me to question (and eventually experiment with) my sexuality and gender expression. After all, like most children, I was raised to believe that men were supposed to be masculine and attracted to women, and that women were supposed to be feminine and attracted to men. The fact that I wanted to be female necessarily threw these other gender-related facets into flux. In fact, the first thought that crossed my mind when I discovered that I wanted to be female was that I must be gay, an idea no doubt inspired by flamboyantly feminine gay male stereotypes that regularly appeared on TV in the '70s. However, once I hit puberty and my sexual desire kicked in, I found myself attracted to women and not men, which only served to confuse me more, since at the time I hadn't even heard the word "lesbian."

As time went on, I latched onto all sorts of other gender identities and theories that seemed to hold potential explanations for my subconscious feelings. For quite a while, I thought of myself as a crossdresser and viewed my female subconscious sex as a "feminine side" that was trying to get out. But after years of crossdressing, I eventually lost interest in it, realizing that my desire to be female had nothing to do with clothing or femininity per se. There was also a period of time when I embraced the word "pervert" and viewed my desire to be female as some sort of sexual kink. But after exploring that path, it became obvious that explanation could not account for the vast majority of instances when I thought about being female in a nonsexual context. And after reading Kate Bornstein's and Leslie Feinberg's writings for the first time, I embraced the words "transgender" and "queer." I began to think of myself as bigendered, viewing my female subconscious sex as being just as legitimate as my physical maleness. In the years just prior to my transition, I started to express my femaleness as much as possible within the context of having a male body; I became a very androgynous queer boy in the eyes of the world. While it felt relieving to simply be myself, not to care about what other people thought of me, I still found myself grappling with a constant, compelling subconscious knowledge that I should be female rather than male. After twenty years of exploration and experimentation, I eventually reached the conclusion that my female subconscious sex had nothing to do with gender roles, femininity, or sexual expression—it was about the personal relationship I had with my own body.

For me, the hardest part about being trans has not been the discrimination or ridicule that I have faced for defying societal gender norms, but rather the internal pain I experienced when my subconscious and conscious sexes were at odds with one another. I think this is best captured by the psychological term "cognitive dissonance," which describes the mental tension and stress that occur in a person's mind when they find themselves holding two contradictory thoughts or views simultaneously—in this case, subconsciously seeing myself as female while consciously dealing with the fact that I was male. This gender dissonance can manifest itself in a number of ways. Sometimes it felt like stress or anxiousness, which led to marathon battles with insomnia. Other times, it surfaced as jealousy or anger at other people who seemed to enjoy taking their gender for granted. But most of all, it felt like sadness to me—a sort of gender

sadness—a chronic and persistent grief over the fact that I felt so wrong in my body.

Sometimes people discount the fact that trans people feel any actual pain related to their gender. Of course, it is easy for them to dismiss gender dissonance: It's invisible and (perhaps more relevantly) they themselves are unable to relate to it. These same people, however, do understand that being stuck in a bad relationship or in an unfulfilling job can make a person miserable and lead to a depression so intense that it spills over into all other areas of that person's life. These types of pain can be tolerated temporarily, but in the long run, if things do not change, that stress and sadness can ruin a person. Well, if that much despair can be generated by a forty-hour-a-week job, then just imagine how despondent and distressed one might become if one was forced to live in a gender that felt wrong for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Unlike most forms of sadness that I've experienced, which inevitably ease with time, my gender dissonance only got worse with each passing day. And by the time I made the decision to transition, my gender dissonance had gotten so bad that it completely consumed me; it hurt more than any pain, physical or emotional, that I had ever experienced. I know that most people believe that transsexuals transition because we want to be the other sex, but that is an oversimplification. After all, I wanted to be female almost my whole life, but I was far too terrified of the label "transsexual," or of having potential regrets, to seriously consider transitioning. What changed during that twenty-some-year period was not my desire to be female, but rather my ability to cope with being male, to cope with my own gender dissonance. When I made the decision to transition, I honestly had no idea what it would be like for me to live as female. The only thing I knew for sure was that pretending to be male was slowly killing me.

Transsexuals will often say that they can never know for sure whether they should physically transition until they begin taking hormones—if they find that they like the changes in their body and the way they feel, then it was the right decision; if not, then it was the wrong one. While not a particularly helpful bit of advice, it is consistent with my own personal experience. I honestly was not 100 percent sure that transitioning would ease my gender dissonance until after my first few weeks of being on female hormones. The way they made me feel, and the subsequent changes they brought about in my body, just felt ... right. There is really no other word to describe it.

It is typical for cissexuals to assume that trans people transition in order to obtain gender-related privileges of some sort. Such assumptions are undermined by the fact that post-transition transsexuals may end up being either female or male; being bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual; or appearing gender-normative or gender-nonconforming. In my case, I went from being a straight man to a lesbian woman in the eyes of the world. And while I have lost the significant benefits of male and heterosexual privilege, I still consider my transition to be well worth it. Because for the first time in my life, I now regularly experience what I consider to be the most important gender privilege of all: feeling at home in my own sexed body. Rather than living with gender

dissonance, I now experience gender concordance.

Many cissexual people seem to have a hard time accepting the idea that they too have a subconscious sex—a deep-rooted understanding of what sex their bodies should be. I suppose that when a person feels right in the sex they were born into, they are never forced to locate or question their subconscious sex, to differentiate it from their physical sex. In other words, their subconscious sex exists, but it is hidden from their view. They have a blind spot.

I do believe that it is possible for cissexuals to catch a glimpse of their subconscious sex. When I do presentations on trans issues, I try to accomplish this by asking the audience a question: “If I offered you ten million dollars under the condition that you live as the other sex for the rest of your life, would you take me up on the offer?” While there is often some wiseass in the audience who will say “Yes,” the vast majority of people shake their heads to indicate “No.” Their responses clearly have nothing to do with gender privileges, because both women and men, queers and straights insist that they wouldn’t be willing to make that change. When I ask individuals why they answered no, they usually get a bit flustered at first, as if they are at a loss for words. Eventually, they end up saying something like, “Because I just am a woman (or man),” or, “It just wouldn’t be right.”

Let’s face it: If cissexuals didn’t have a subconscious sex, then sex reassignment would be far more common than it is. Women who wanted to succeed in the male-dominated business world would simply transition to male. Lesbians and gay men who were ashamed of their queerness would simply transition to the other sex. Gender studies grad students would transition for a few years to gather data for their theses. Actors playing transsexuals would go on hormones for a few months in order to make their portrayals more authentic. Criminals and spies would physically transition as a way of going undercover. And contestants on reality shows would be willing to change their sex in the hope of achieving fifteen minutes of fame.

Of course, such scenarios seem absolutely ridiculous to us. They are unfathomable because, on a profound, subconscious level, we all understand that our physical sex is far more than a superficial shell we inhabit. For me, this is the most frustrating part about cissexuals who express confusion or disbelief as to why transsexuals choose to transition. They are unable to see that their disbelief stems directly from their own experience of feeling at home in the sex they were born into, their own gender concordance. In other words, it is their own subconscious sex—and their inability to recognize it—that makes it difficult for them to understand why anyone would want to change their sex.

All of this reminds me of when I was growing up in the ’70s and early ’80s, when most straight people had a similar blind spot regarding sexual orientation. People often expressed an inability to fathom how someone could be attracted to the same sex. They said ridiculous things like, “It’s just not natural,” “It must be a phase,” and “I just don’t understand it.” They actually had the nerve (or naiveté) to ask queer people, “But how do you know that you’re really gay?” without ever thinking to ask themselves the reciprocal question: “How do I know that I’m really straight?”

Perhaps the most important conceptual change that has facilitated the gradual acceptance of LGB folks over the last twenty-five years is that straight people are no longer able to take their attraction to the other sex completely for granted, to assume that it is the one “natural” form of sexuality. They now recognize that, like queer people, they have a sexual orientation too—they are heterosexual. Similarly, I do not believe that trans people will be fully accepted in this society until cissexual people recognize that they also have a subconscious sex and that, if they are not battling a constant barrage of subconscious thoughts about being the other sex, then their subconscious sex most likely matches their physical one.

Recognizing our own blind spots—our inability to fully comprehend gender and sexual inclinations that we have not experienced firsthand—is an important first step toward eliminating all of the gender entitlement that exists in the world. Unlike gender dissonance, which is only experienced by trans people, gender entitlement can affect anyone. It is best described as the arrogant conviction that one’s own beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions regarding gender and sexuality are more valid than those of other people. Gender entitlement often leads to *gender anxiety*, the act of becoming irrationally upset by or being made uncomfortable by the existence of those people who challenge or bring into question one’s gender entitlement.

There are many different (but often overlapping) forms of gender entitlement and gender anxiety. For example, one of the most frequently discussed forms of gender entitlement is heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is the only “natural,” legitimate, or morally acceptable form of sexual desire. Heterosexist gender entitlement can lead to homophobia, which is an expression of gender anxiety directed against those people who engage in same-sex relationships. Similarly, the gender-entitled belief that all women are (or should be) feminine and men masculine—which some have called *cisgenderism*—gives rise to transphobia, a gender anxiety that is directed against people who fall outside of those norms. While homophobia and transphobia have both received mainstream attention, thinking in terms of gender entitlement and gender anxiety also allows us to consider less well-known (but just as disparaging) forms of gender and sexual discrimination. For example, many gays and lesbians who believe that all people are “naturally” either homosexual or heterosexual often express biphobia, a gender anxiety directed toward bisexual people because they challenge the presumption that people can only be attracted to one sex or the other. I have also met some people in the transgender community who feel that identifying outside of the male/female binary is superior to, or more enlightened than, identifying within it. Such people often express gender anxiety (binary-phobia?) at people who identify strongly as either female or male.

What should be obvious by now is that all forms of gender entitlement and gender anxiety are, at their core, expressions of insecurity. After all, people who are truly comfortable with their own desires and expressions of gender and sexuality do not have any need to be bothered or concerned by dissimilar expressions and desires in others. However, when we indulge in our own insecurities and resort to gender entitlement, we not only deny the variation that exists in human

gender and sexuality, but we arrogantly presume that other people should curb or conform *their* inclinations and desires in order to meet *our* expectations.

The most productive way that we as individuals can overcome our gender entitlement is by coming to terms with our own blind spots, acknowledging that there are certain gender and sexual expressions and desires that we cannot know, that we will never experience firsthand. Thus, the path toward overcoming homophobia or biphobia is to become more in touch with our own sexual orientations, to recognize that other people's sexual orientations have no bearing on our own. The transgender movement has taken a similar approach to confronting transphobia, by encouraging cisgender people to become comfortable with their own expressions of femininity and/or masculinity in order to be respectful of those expressions in others. This approach has most certainly benefited many transsexuals, as it has helped convince some of the public that we should be allowed to express our genders without being discriminated against. Unfortunately, confronting transphobia has done very little to ease cissexism, i.e., the belief that transsexual genders are less "real" or legitimate than cissexual genders. For me, this is most evident when I interact with people who accept my feminine behavior and female identity but adamantly draw the line when it comes to accepting my transsexual body.

Because most people have not come to terms with their own subconscious sex and its relation to their physical sex, they tend to experience unwarranted distress regarding sex/gender-variant bodies. Many people who say they favor transgender rights tend to balk when it means that they have to share a locker room or public shower with a transsexual. And plenty of people are supportive of their transgender friends and colleagues, but, hypocritically, would be disturbed if the person they were dating, sleeping with, or partnered to were to come out to them as transsexual. It is high time for gender-anxious cissexuals to look deep within themselves and ask why they choose to view transsexual bodies as unsettling or disturbing. How can they consider a physical body to be attractive or innocuous when it is assumed to be cissexual, then suddenly find it to be horrific or threatening upon the discovery that it is transsexual? And if such dramatically different responses can be elicited by the same human being under different circumstances, doesn't that indicate that the real difference resides in the cissexual mind and not in the transsexual body?

Once again, I am reminded of the 1980s, when it was popular for people in the earliest stages of accepting homosexuality to say, "I don't care what other people do in the privacy their own bedrooms, just as long as they don't flaunt it in front of me." Today, it is obvious to most of us that such remarks are merely prejudice disguising itself as tolerance. Similarly, it is time for gender-anxious cissexuals to start coming to terms with their own thinly veiled cissexism, to ask themselves why they feel entitled to "flaunt" their cissexual bodies (e.g., to shamelessly talk about their femaleness or maleness, their body parts and their functions) or to take certain gendered rights for granted (e.g., using public restrooms, freely sharing their bodies with lovers without having to confess, come out, or explain anything) while simultaneously insisting that transsexual bodies remain hidden from their view or be held to different standards. Gender-anxious cissexuals

must begin to admit that the issues they have with our transsexual bodies stem directly from their own insecurities, from their fear of having their own genders and sexualities be brought into question. So long as most cissexuals refuse to come to terms with their own blind spots—specifically their own subconscious sex—the countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they objectify trans people and treat us as secondclass citizens will remain forever out of their view.