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Creating Womanhood

Submitted by Chelsea Rives



What does it mean to be a woman? Why are some people born into the right body, while others aren't? What is the cause for this? Do we create ourselves? Endless questions run through my mind as I reread She's Not There. For every question answered, another is formed. Jennifer Boylan's transition from male to female has, without a doubt, forever changed my perspective on womanhood.

I. Out of the Closet and Into the Spotlight

Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of She's Not There, is one of the most inspirational women I have ever come across. I can honestly say that while researching her for this paper, I fell in love with her. Jennifer's raw honesty and bravery is a goal all women should strive to reach. Jenny was fortunate enough to have the resources, namely the love and support of her family and friends, as well as the money necessary to undergo the transition from male to female. She was also blessed to be born in the era that she was. The end of the century was a wonderful time for the trans-community. As Riki Wilchins reminds us, the 1990s saw gender advocacy reaching new heights (Wilchins 21). We can thank Virginia Prince for this. In 1960 Virginia held the first convention for cross-dressers in a discreet hotel room. This convention was an anonymous way for people to express themselves in a shame-free environment (Wilchins 22). Since then a vast social network has been forming, making it possible for cross-dressers, transgendered and transsexual people alike to enter the realm

of visibility. By 1996 trans issues started to be covered by the gay media (Wilchins 26). Recognition is spreading as each year passes, with the help of people like Jennifer Boylan willing to step into the spotlight. Jenny volunteers her private life to the public in order to further understanding and acceptance. As she tells Christopher Muther, "I think most people are surprised that we don't sit around talking about sex changes all day. We talk about homework and practicing trumpet, radical and revolutionary things like that. We're changing the world by living a quiet, normal life" (Muther). Just today, while flipping through the channels, I saw an ad for a new television series on WE entitled "Sex Change Hospital." It's these seemingly small steps that will change the world.

II. Let's Talk About Sex(ual Reassignment Surgery)

In 2000 Jennifer began her transition. Although it would have been possible to transition prior to the new millennium, it would have been significantly more difficult. According to Alison Oram, the first documented sex change was performed in Germany of 1930. The patient was Lili Elbe. The most publicized sexual reassignment surgery is the former US soldier Christine Jorgenson in 1952 (Oram 278). As hospitals began shying away from sex change procedures, private doctors took over, this shift made sex-reassignment surgeries much easier to access, as well as more affordable (Wilchins 23).

While reading of Jennifer's transition my curiosity was peaked. What exactly happens during a sex change procedure? Reluctantly I put down *She's Not There* and ventured over to my computer. After about ten minutes I found a website that looked legitimate. Dr. Chettawut Tulayaphanich is a doctor in Thailand who performs sexual reassignment surgeries. The standard procedure costs nine thousand American dollars. Dr. Tulayaphanich requires his patients to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria by a psychiatrist, or someone equally qualified. The patient must have lived exclusively in the opposite sex role, as well as take hormones, for the six months prior to surgery (Dr. Tulayaphanich). According to Richard Wassersug, hormone treatment has two main physiological aims. The first being to eliminate the secondary sex characteristics as much as possible. The other, to induce the secondary sex characteristics of the desired sex. This is done through various combinations of estrogen and anti-androgen (Wassersug 102). The results include fat redistribution, the diminishing and softening of body hair, breast development, nipple sensitivity, softening (and typically the drying) of skin, and occasionally the loss of energy and vitality (Wassersug 103).

Dr. Tulayaphanich replicates the vagina in its entirety, from the clitoris to the vestibule of the vulva. The scrotal skin is the most favorable material for the vaginal wall, although tissue from the anus can also be used. If this is used the procedure is typically more expensive. After surgery the most important thing for a patient to do is vaginal dilation. This is done under the supervision of a nurse until the patient is deemed ready to proceed on her own. Using vaginal stents of varying sizes, the goal is to gain and maintain maximum depth, which is approximately six inches. This will be done for the rest of the patient's life under a set

schedule. Two months after surgery the patient can have intercourse; the majority of Dr. Tulayaphanich's patients are able to reach orgasm within a year (Dr. Tulayaphanich).

III. Biting Your Own Teeth

"And part of it is – ready for this? – still learning what it means to be a woman, and feeling content, even excited by what I learn and feel" (Boylan, home page). Now fifty, Jennifer is still learning about what it means to be a woman. I'd like to argue that this is not because she used to be a man, because she never was a man. "I always had to choose to be James. Being Jenny, though, isn't like that. I just am" (Boylan, *She's Not There* 162). Yes, she once had the body of a man, but it is important to remember that a body is nothing more than a vessel. Jennifer, like so many others, is still finding herself. After all, human beings are nothing more than ever changing, ever evolving works of art. We are born blank canvases that are continuously painted and repainted until the day we die. (And who knows, maybe long after.) As a young child Jenny would play "girl planet." Walking through the woods pretending she was stranded on a planet whose atmosphere transformed her into a girl, Jennifer always knew she was truly female. "Remember when you woke up this morning – I'd say to my female friends – and you knew you were female? *That's* how it feels. *That's* how I knew" (Boylan, *She's Not There* 22).

The Merriam-Webster dictionary has numerous definitions for woman. The first being "an adult female person" and another being "of a distinctively feminine nature" (Merriam-Webster). Following the first definition, to be a woman she would have to possess the female reproductive organs. But following the second, she would simply need to act and feel like a woman. So what is it that makes us who we are? Why was I

born into the “right” body, while Jenny was not? It’s clearly not biological, so then is it psychological? Some have argued that gender is a social construct. Up to this very moment, as I type these very words, I have whole-heartedly agreed. But under that argument, how would you explain transsexuals? They are quote obviously not socially geared towards being females. If this was the case, then there would be no such thing as transsexuals, or only a handful. We have ruled out biology and psychology/society. So, my dear reader, what is left? What makes us, all of us, who we are? Why are some people female and some male, and still others are another sex that language, and far too many people, have ignored? Is there some force out there decided what game we will play? I believe gender is too complex for one answer. Maybe it is part social construction, part biological; maybe it’s another factor that we haven’t even dreamt of yet. We are young, and we know little, no matter what many would like to believe. Maybe we’ll never have an answer to this mind-boggling question, but it’s certainly worth the thought. As Alan Watt’s has declared “trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth” (Moncur).

IV. “This is nothing we can fix.”

Now let us look at the initial journey – maybe you can find the answers that evade me. As I mentioned earlier, Jenny knew from a very young age that she was not a he. “Although my understanding of exactly how much trouble I was in grew more specific over time, as a child I surely understood enough about my condition to know it was something I’d better keep private.” Early on, she was faced with this incalculable burden, a frightened child knowing that there was something seriously amiss, knowing that it *must* be kept a secret. “By intuition I was certain that the thing I knew to be true

was something others would find both impossible and hilarious” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 21). Imagine, if you will, a toddler clutching a safety blanket. Look into that child’s eyes. Do you see fear? Do you see sadness? Most would assume these emotions are caused by something trivial, such as a thunderstorm or a strange face. Would you even think of the possibility that this child was thinking, in a toddler’s limited language, that she was not in the right body? Imagine the confusion Jenny must have felt. Imagine the turmoil. How could a parent know? And if that child expressed her thoughts, how would the news be taken? Would it be shrugged off as a child’s game?

It isn’t uncommon for a transwoman to now at a young age. Take Hanna Rosin’s article about Brandon for example.

“Brandon, God made you a boy for a special reason,” his mother Tina told him one night. “God made a mistake,” he replied. From toddlerhood he gravitated towards “girly” activities, such as playing with Barbies and dressing up in his mother’s heels. In fact, his first full sentence was “I like your heels.” Never having heard the word transgender until Brandon was eight, Tina was lost. She believed Brandon was the only boy who dealt with these issues. But eventually she connected with an internet community of parents of transgendered children. Shortly after this she brought Brandon, his stepfather Bill, and her two other children to the Trans-Health Conference in Philadelphia. Here Tina found the support she needed, and became convinced that Brandon’s issues were real. “This is nothing we can fix. In his brain, in his *mind*, Brandon’s a girl.” This realization was emphasized by the conversation Brandon, who was then introducing himself as Bridget, unbeknownst to his parents, had with a fellow child. “Are you transgender?” asked his friend. “What’s that?” replied Brandon. “A boy who wants to be a girl.” “Yeah. Can I see your

balloon?” The stark simplicity of this dialogue says it all. To Bridget, there is no question. She is a girl. Rosin explains that “before they have much time to be shaped by experience, before they know their sexual orientation, even in defiance of their bodies, children can know their gender” (Rosin 1).

It is vital that these communities and conventions exist. Without them, countless numbers would be floundering, drowning in their own troubles. Thousands would feel even more isolated than they already do. And this doesn’t only go for the transsexuals themselves, but their friends and families as well. These outlets help people accept the truth that transsexualism is not a choice that can be reversed, and that steps can be taken to help those who suffer. Now, if only there were more awareness campaigns centered on this issue. In good time? Maybe, but I’d rather not wait.

V. Maddy Wasn’t Cured

Years pass, the toddler matures into a preteen. Jennifer, then James, is now ten. “The first time I remember trying to come up with some sort of solution to the *being alive problem* was about 1968” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 22). James goes for a long, solitary walk, and contemplates his life. How many ten year olds delve into such heavy, philosophical questions such as this? “And then I thought, *Maybe you could be cured by love*” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 23). Fast forward, James is in graduate school, and is living his private life as a female, feeling afraid and secluded. “I was sitting on top of a mountain of secrets so high that it was impossible to see the earth anymore” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 70). Her struggles would have been greatly lessened if she had the support of a trans-community, if acceptance was something she could have fathomed. Later, while liv-

ing in Baltimore, James, like so many others, gathers all the girls clothing he has, including makeup and accessories, and throws them away (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 83). He has been seeing Grace, and is falling in love with her. But he is not cured by love. Nor is he cured by marriage and a family.

“I often woke up and lay there in the dark...I’m the wrong person, I thought, I’m living the wrong life, in the wrong body” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 102). At age forty two she realizes that the time for self acceptance has come. The time to speak to Grace has come. “The burden that had been mine alone for all these years was now Grace’s, and in the weeks that followed she walked through her days broken and crushed” (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 127). Jennifer is an extraordinarily lucky woman. Grace, after a long journey of her own, never leaves Jenny. She sticks with Jenny, and is with her to this very day (Harkavy). The parents tell their two young boys, and Jennifer is dubbed “Maddy,” a combination of mom and daddy (Boylan, *She’s Not There* 159). Jennifer tells her friends, some in person, some through a letter, and begins her transition. She is shown an amazing amount of love and support from all. Of course there are questions and confusion, all of which she handles very well, and with much humor.

Has Jennifer’s journey been made any easier because she is a writer and professor of literature? Was it any easier for her to imagine her life in a different body? Maybe it was easier to imagine herself in the correct body, but I don’t think there is any way to ease such a journey. I don’t believe Jenny ever had a choice. Yes, getting the surgery was a choice, but being a woman wasn’t. Some factor other than her own desire made that a non-choice. What was that factor? I haven’t the slightest idea. I have no idea what makes us who we are. Society plays a major role, of course, but how big of a role

when it comes to what sex you are?
Dear reader, I regret that I cannot
give you a set answer. What I have
presented is a pallet, quite like She's
Not There, a base work to identify ques-
tions for you to answer.

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