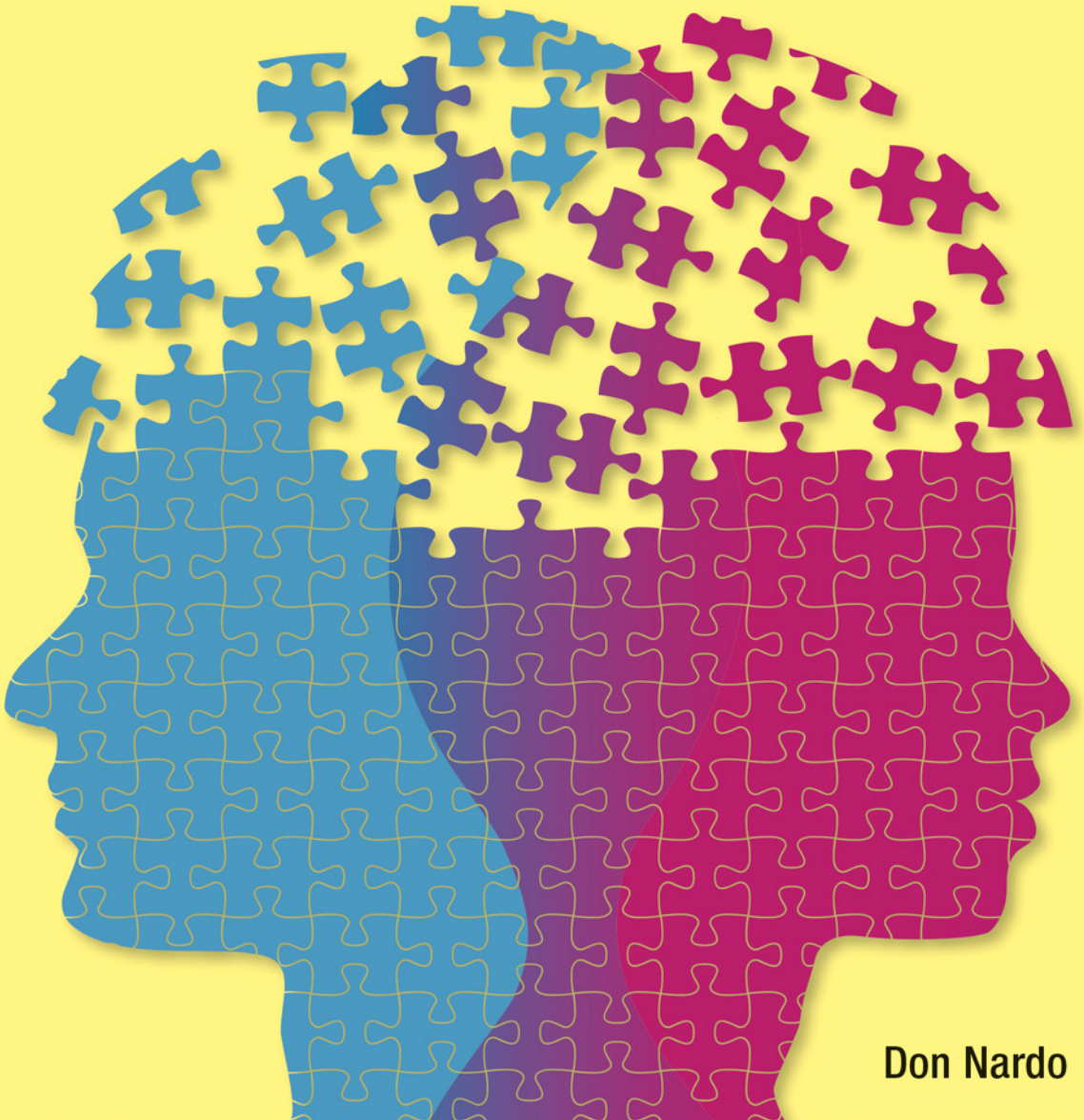




Teens and Gender Dysphoria



Don Nardo

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INTRODUCTION

"God Made a Mistake"

Brandon Simms was born in the year 2000 in a tiny Southern town. In his first few years of life, he said and did things that at first amused and later worried his parents. For example, his mother, Tina, remembers how she and her husband, Bill, laughed heartily when, in a local Italian restaurant, the two-year-old said his first full sentence. "I like your high heels," the boy informed a nearby woman wearing a red dress.¹

Also, Tina recalls, at age two and three Brandon often expressed a serious dislike for his boy's clothes. At times he would pull them off and insist that his mother let him wear underclothes and shoes from her closet. Thinking these requests to be cute and harmless, Tina sometimes let her son don these items. "He ruined all my heels in the sandbox," she says with a smile.²

A Phase That Never Passed

Tina was a bit concerned, however, one day when she was giving Brandon, still three, a bath. At one point he climbed out of the tub, tucked his penis between his legs, and started dancing in front of the mirror. "Look, Mom," he crowed happily. "I'm a girl!"³

These sorts of incidents continued to occur regularly for the next two years. Eventually, more than a little worried, Tina had a serious talk with her son. Calmly but firmly, she said, "Brandon, God made you a boy for a special reason." Before she could continue with her carefully prepared speech, Brandon blurted out, "God made a mistake!"⁴

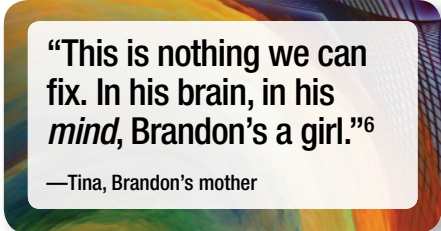
Tina took Brandon to several therapists. The first one said the boy was just going through a phase, but Tina subsequently

observed that the so-called phase never passed. Then, out of the blue, Tina's mother, in whom she had confided about Brandon's seemingly strange antics, arrived at the family home. The boy's grandmother eagerly showed Tina a Barbara Walters 20/20 special she had recorded. The program showed a six-year-old boy named "Jazz." Since he was a toddler, he had enjoyed dressing like a girl. In fact, everything young Jazz had done to reject his maleness and embrace a feminine identity was completely familiar to Tina. Walters mentioned the name of the condition the two boys clearly exhibited—"gender identity disorder." Medical experts, Walters went on, call those who have that condition "transgender."⁵

A Stunning Realization

Like millions of Americans at the time, Tina and Bill had never heard the term *transgender*. They had long assumed that Brandon's displays of apparent gender confusion were unique to him alone. Once she had viewed the Barbara Walters program, however, Tina hurried to the nearest computer and Googled the words *transgender children*. That quickly educated her about the condition; it also led her to a subculture of parents of transgender children living all across the country. These mothers and fathers shared their own similar experiences with both little boys and little girls who consistently rejected the gender indicated by their own bodies.

Eventually, just as those parents, along with medical experts, had already concluded, Tina came to what was for her a stunning realization. "This is nothing we can fix," she says of Brandon's case. "In his brain, in his *mind*, Brandon's a girl." Echoing medical articles she had been reading, she continues, "It's just a medical condition, like diabetes or something." It is nothing to be ashamed of, she realized. It is "just a variation on human behavior."⁶




"This is nothing we can fix. In his brain, in his *mind*, Brandon's a girl."⁶

—Tina, Brandon's mother

pedophiles, or child molesters, will disguise themselves as women and sexually assault women and children in those facilities.

But many organizations and individuals disagree, among them the American Civil Liberties Union and the Human Rights Campaign. No evidence has been found, they say, of such attacks or other threats posed by transgender people using public bathrooms. The bathroom laws in question are therefore illogical and unreasonable.

Furthermore, some trans individuals have reported that the new anti-transgender bathroom laws promote conflict—and worse. They say that when they merely tried to adhere to these statutes, they encountered mean-spirited confrontation and even violence. One such complaint came from female-to-male transgender teen Payton McGarry. The law in his state dictated that he should use women’s public bathrooms because he was born female. So he dutifully did just that, but that led only to trouble. “In high school,” McGarry recalls, “as my body started masculinizing,



“I would walk into a female bathroom and I would be screamed at. I would be pushed and shoved and even slapped.”⁵⁷

—Transgender teen Payton McGarry

I would walk into a female bathroom and I would be screamed at. I would be pushed and shoved and even slapped. I do not look female. I do not belong in that bathroom.”⁵⁷

Similar complaints have been made concerning the use of women’s bathrooms by male-to-female trans people. Protesting the North Carolina anti-trans bathroom bill, in 2016 noted photographer Meg Bitton snapped a picture of the young, strikingly feminine and beautiful transgender teen Corey Maison. Bitton posted the photo on Facebook and other popular social media websites. Accompanying the image was a bit of text that read, “If this was *your* daughter, would you be comfortable sending her into a men’s bathroom? Neither would I. Be fair. Be kind. Be empathetic. Treat others how you would like to be treated.”⁵⁸ The photo and the message of the text reportedly changed the minds of a number of the bathroom law’s former supporters.

Trying to Be Normal

Belinda was born as a biological, or anatomical, male but identifies herself as a female. One way she has been able to cope with her gender dysphoria, with which she has suffered since childhood, is through frequent cross-dressing in women's clothes. She explains:

I am a forty-two-year-old who has been cross-dressing at different times since I was a young teenager. I remember wearing my mother's clothes while [going to] school. Both Mom and Dad worked and I was an only child. Every afternoon I would come home from school and try on my mother's clothes.

It felt so wonderful but I was always worried about getting caught by my parents. I remember one Saturday night when they went out and I stayed home. As usual I changed into Mom's clothes and a little bit of make-up. Naturally, I did not have a wig at that stage. They came back about an hour later to collect something Mom needed.

That was the excuse but I now think they suspected something. Anyway, I would not let them in until I changed which took about fifteen minutes. The dressing was hard to explain.

I don't really know why I started cross-dressing but I cannot stop as it gives me so much pleasure. I am a loner who has not had many girlfriends although I have been married once. I think that was just to try to "be normal," however that did not work as I also started wearing my wife's clothes.

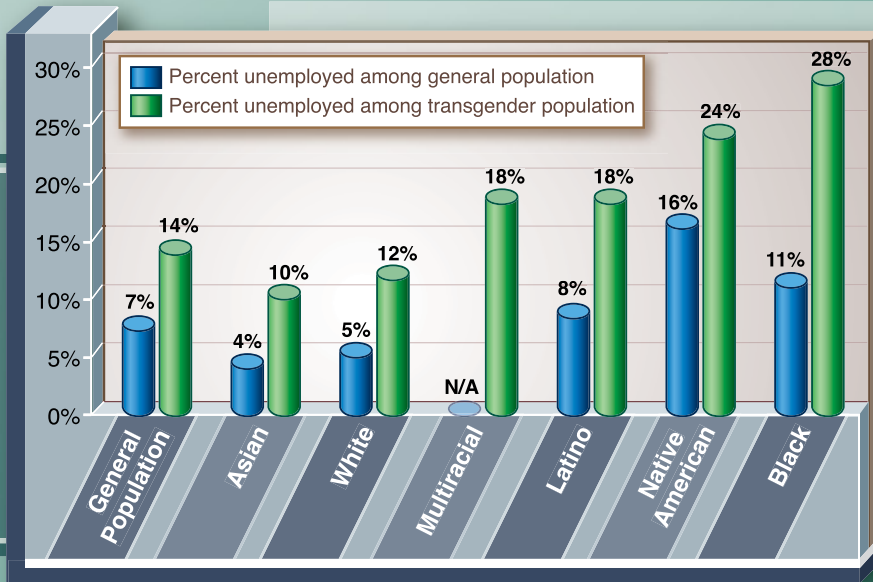
Belinda, "Expressing My Feminine Side: Belinda's Personal Story," Gender Centre, October 2013. www.gendercentre.org.au.

Is Being Transgender a Choice?

The issues of playing school sports and using the bathrooms that fit their gender identities are ongoing challenges that trans people face in their everyday lives. In all fairness, they say, they should not have to deal with such challenges. They feel that these are restraints forced on them by cisgender people who do not understand what transgenderism and gender dysphoria are all about.

Unemployment Is High in Transgender Population

Studies show that unemployment rates among transgender individuals are much higher than for other members of the general public. And when unemployment rates are broken out by race and ethnicity, statistics show that transgender people of all backgrounds experience higher unemployment rates than their non-transgender counterparts.



Source: *San Diego Free Press*, "LGBT Economic Empowerment in the Era of Climate Crisis," May 8, 2015.
www.sandiegofreepress.org.

Trans people generally see these challenges as attempts to discriminate against them. A directly related issue is the common charge made by cisgender individuals and groups that those who claim to be trans are simply ordinary people looking for special treatment. They have chosen to look and act like members of the opposite gender, according to this view. Supposedly trans people do this because they like to be the center of attention or have some other selfish reason for “pretending” to have a condition called gender dysphoria.

Scientist and medical doctor Danielle Kaufman, who is a male-to-female trans person, strongly refutes that being trans-

gender is a choice. “Gender dysphoria is unspeakably painful,” she says, “and changing gender expression is extremely hard. It really would have been a lot easier to have just been born a woman in the first place than to switch.” In fact, she continues,

no one would ever do this unless they were forced to by their own psychology. I did choose to follow a number of specific steps to change my gender expression [i.e., to look like a woman]. It’s just that I was so compelled by inner need that I would say it’s not really a *choice*. This is so hard that no one would do this if they had any other option. My only other option was to die. And yes, I was prepared to die. I had carefully detailed plans and all the necessary supplies. All I needed were 10 minutes before I went to bed and I wouldn’t wake up the next day. I saw it less as suicide and more like euthanasia [mercy killing]. I had a medical condition [gender dysphoria] that bordered on unbearable at times.⁵⁹

What Is It Like to Have Gender Dysphoria?

If being transgender is not a choice, then trans people are markedly different, emotionally and otherwise, from the cisgender individuals who occupy the so-called societal norm. Based on that supposition, it is only natural for cisgender individuals to ask their transgender counterparts how it feels to be themselves. That is, what is it like to live with the gender dysphoria that often develops from being transgender? Put another way, what does it feel like to be part of a small group of individuals whose gender identity and roles do not match up with expected social norms?

One outspoken trans person answers that question with an apt and moving analogy that imagines a person being in a production of one of history’s most famous plays. “You are meant to play Romeo,” she says. Moreover, the person has gone through all the rehearsals as Romeo right up till the day of the first public performance.

The wide range of treatments these and other medical authorities recommend include both mental and physical approaches. In addition to psychotherapy, much is currently being done in the area of pharmacologic treatments—those involving various drugs designed to change the way the body develops. In addition to both psychological and drug therapies, some patients turn to a more extreme and permanent approach—surgery, in this case known as sexual reassignment surgery (SRS).

Liberating Years of Pent-Up Emotions

Usually the first step in treating gender dysphoria is some form of psychotherapy. One of these involves the patient seeing a therapist in a series of one-on-one sessions. For teens and even younger patients there is also family therapy, in which the parents talk to the therapist, either with or without the patient present. Group meetings, in which the patient meets with other gender dysphoria sufferers, are also helpful.

Psychotherapy usually involves simply talking, with the therapist both asking and answering questions. Sometimes, however, these discussions are supplemented by alternative sessions. In them, the patients, including transgender children or adolescents,

express themselves through drawing, painting, playing music, or performing dances or dramatic skits.

Whichever approach is employed, the counselor attempts to get the patient to express and discuss his or her inner feelings. In one-on-one sessions especially, this process can be very emotional. Indeed, many patients, particularly younger ones, have never told anyone about feeling that they are either a male or

“Teenagers are generally impatient with their parents’ ignorance, doubts, and lack of instantaneous support for gender transition.”⁶¹

—Irwin Krieger, specialist in transgender counseling

female trapped in the wrong body. So merely releasing years of pent-up worry, confusion, or even fear and rage can be very liberating.

Cases of teens and children suffering from gender dysphoria also benefit from meetings between the therapist and parents.



Although transgenderism is not considered to be a mental disorder, gender dysphoria is. Experts recommend that treatment, including psychotherapy or other counseling, begin early and continue into adulthood.

Irwin Krieger, who specializes in transgender counseling in New Haven, Connecticut, strongly advocates including parents in the treatment process. “Teenagers are generally impatient with their parents’ ignorance, doubts, and lack of instantaneous support for gender transition,” he states. He adds that he encourages teens to take some time to fully understand themselves, and

above all to be patient with their parents and willing to collaborate with them. Teenagers and most young adults realize that the process of transitioning will go better for them in the long run if they have their parents’ support. I often point out that simply by being willing to enter into discussion and participate in therapy their parents are offering much more than many teens are able to get from their families.⁶¹

SOURCE NOTES

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RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF TROUBLE

According to the US National Library of Medicine, the symptoms of gender dysphoria are not the same for everyone. Age and social environment may influence symptoms.

Children may:

- Be disgusted by their own genitals
- Be rejected by their peers; feel alone
- Believe that they will grow up to become the opposite sex
- Say that they want to be the opposite sex

Adults may:

- Dress like the opposite sex
- Feel alone
- Want to live as a person of the opposite sex
- Wish to be rid of their own genitals

Adults and children may:

- Cross-dress; show habits typical of the opposite sex
- Have depression or anxiety
- Withdraw from social interaction

US National Library of Medicine, "Gender Dysphoria," MedlinePlus. <https://medlineplus.gov>.

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

The following organizations offer information and support for teens and others who are transgender, and help for those who are suffering from gender dysphoria.

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20036
website: www.hrc.org

HRC provides a national voice on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. The group lobbies Congress and promotes community education projects relating to transgender people.

International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE)

PO Box 540229
Waltham, MA 02454
website: www.ifge.org

IFGE provides information about psychotherapy, counseling, and support groups that help transgender people, in the form of books, magazines, and videos.

National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE)

1325 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
website: <http://transequality.org>

NCTE is an organization dedicated to helping transgender people achieve social justice and equality, in part by educating members of Congress about transgender issues and needs.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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Kenna Dixon, *I'm Not the Man I Used to Be*. Los Gatos, CA: Smashwords, 2014.

Jazz Jennings, *Being Jazz: My Life as a Transgender Teen*. New York: Crown, 2016.

Susan Kuklin, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. London: Walker, 2016.

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