



Adult Learning Within Reach

## Member Lecture – 8 October 2020

Gender in Mind

Bea Groves-McDaniel

Questions and answers not taken during lecture and answered post-lecture.

### **Q1 Do you feel that if the gender binary was not so wide and we were more free to be gender-fluid, then there would be less need to trans to the opposite sex?**

Possibly. As I was trying to explain, the business of transition (as I see it) is one of mental adaptability to existing social 'templates' (of behaviour, physicality, dress, etc.). If there are more ubiquitous examples of otherness in the communities we create, and these are more 'normalised' and spoken of with little or no embarrassment, then I think the polarities of gender identity may evaporate. However, the tendency to categorise and pattern-match is very strong in human beings.

### **Q2 Do you think 'passing' is controversial as some do and some don't? Do you get any abuse as I have friends who do?**

I've often thought of 'passing' as both a curse and a blessing. It's a curse because it's about playing the same old gender-related games of inconspicuousness and being accepted by playing a role that conceals one's past. It's a blessing because it makes life easier...and who would not want that? But, on balance, I'm personally unhappy with it. I've spent forty odd years pretending to be someone and concealing the differences that make me unique. I really have a reluctance to continue to do the same thing in my future.

### **Q3 It has often occurred to me that it must be very hard for anyone who looks radically different from the norm to deal with the fact that every new encounter could be met with, at best, discomfort. How would you advise me to 'react'? The very act of trying not to can be uncomfortable and impact on initial meetings (to my shame).**

Paulo Freire once is (said) to have said: 'everyone teaches, everyone learns', and I think those of us who have unconcealable differences are inevitably doomed (?) to be one of life's natural educators. We end up with coping skills about dealing with the curious or the malicious. For example, when a (usually drunken) person approaches me with the provocation: 'Are you a man or a woman?' I've learned to give the philosopher's logical answer: 'Yes!'. Wit often helps, as does honesty and a sense of transparency. If you (or I) as a person are utterly transparent to the

world, then in effect there is no leverage that the hostile can use to dent one's authenticity. Does that help at all?

**Q4 Where did you find the strength to be who you wanted to be? What was the hardest and also the easiest part of changing for you?**

Strength, I find, comes from necessity. You deal with what happens to you as best you can, and either survive or go under. I also met people who were essential to my mental survival: the faith of my late partner, my Mum, my WEA colleagues, my counselor, and the mentors I had during my teaching career. Being a teacher has helped too. I became my own best resource. The worst bits have been losing friends and family who shunned me. I felt (and still do feel) dreadfully betrayed, much though I try to rationalise why people do what they do. Understanding human psychology helps, but it does not adequately console. The easiest bit was the physical change. I reacted well to hormone treatment, had the luck of having a good figure, and feet small enough for nice shoes!

**Q5 Do you consider gender a societal construct? Has this construct changed in this millennium?**

Gender is socially constructed and related to basic bodily categories (very wide ones, as it happens) that create the roots of social communicative signally and recognition. To be a woman **does** entail bodily function, but it is the socio-cultural attitudes to those functions that create the various images of 'Woman' that have so engaged the popular mind down through the millennia. We need our categories; they give us safety and a way of creating personal stability in a chaotic universe. Nevertheless, rigid adherence to those categories (essentialism) is as much a curse of progress as would be the abandonment of them altogether. It seems to me that we need a meta-analysis of our own fears in order to open up the possibility of gender variance as a clearer route to social equity. Has the construct changed? Yes, and it is changing, much to the annoyance of some who fear change. (Sorry for the academic lecture! I am an old-time philosopher and love my verbiage!)

**Q6 How did your family react when you came out?**

My mother was a bit surprised, but not too much. She was an old lady by then, and had 'seen it all' I think, and was more than a little relieved that she had a name for what had been 'wrong' with me all those years. She eventually got used to calling me 'Bea', after a bit of a verbal struggle. My Swiss relatives were fab. Very accepting from the get-go. Stereo typically, I have a feeling the Swiss have a naturally stern approach to social variance as they are a nation which has learned to live with national differences. But my sister just couldn't deal with my change, and refused to discuss it; she hasn't spoken to me since 2009. I write to her with news every so often, and keep the door open. But, it looks like I'm going to stay persona non grata.

**Q7 Do you prefer to be referred to as a transgender person or simply as a woman? What personal pronoun do you prefer to use?**

I adapt to the local conditions. Much like the way in which one can be Geordie, English, or British (or European?) by turns. I refer to myself as a woman in the majority of contexts. But I am a transwoman when it proves easier for others to understand. I always use the she/her pronouns, mainly out of convenience and because I feel that my struggle for identity means I have somehow 'earned' them. Wittgenstein once said that 'in the vast majority of instances, the meaning of a word is its use'... and I strongly feel that the dialectical struggle of identity in present day society lies in the verbal battlefields of usage. (that may seem a little strong: I'm extemporizing here, so forgive the Hegelian references).

**Q8 I am mis-gendered sometimes and I fluctuate between thinking it's their mistake to assume and safer/easier to let it go, and wanting to not be silenced and that people need to learn. How important is it to speak out?**

Very! I have a 'three strike rule'. They get to mis-gender me once and I say nothing. If they do it twice they get a verbal warning. Do it a third time, and then I know it's a deliberate verbal attack and they get my usual lecture about the Equality Act 2010 on the issue of harassment, with all the nasty legal consequences for offenders. It usually works. I don't believe in fighting every single verbal war, as it gets too tiring after a while, but I don't put up with persistent nuisances. The reason: not just to defend my integrity, but to pass the message on that trans' people have a sense of pride in who they are, and we have a collective sense of common defence. Much as one finds in the black, Jewish, Muslim, etc. communities. What's more, rights being indivisible, the defence of one's rights also defends EVERYONE's rights, everywhere. Hope that helps.

**Q9 What do you think about the general aggression that seems to be aimed at people such as JK Rowling and Germaine Greer who question the authenticity of trans people? Also the notion of trans women hijacking women's rights?**

The irony is that no transgender woman started the conflict. No one that I know ever had a great deal of an opinion on women's rights other than they were a very good thing because they defend people like me too (rights being indivisible). The question arises as to why the conflict arose right **now** and not years ago, as trans' women have always been present in the wider community. I also checked by re-reading Germaine's work: she was a supporter of the de Beauvoir 'constructivist' concept of gender when she wrote *The Female Eunuch* (I can quote chapter and verse if you like), but seems to have become particularly (viciously) hostile since... and predicated her politics on a radical essentialism which is at odds with her previous views. She also is at odds with Eva Figes, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and other notable feminists...the list is a substantial one.

So what went wrong? Well, it was the self-identification issue in law. This stimulated the moral panic that, somehow, a host of trans' women were suddenly going to invade women's social spaces, threatening them with abuse, rape, intimidation, etc. The deep irony being, we were there

already and quite peaceably getting on with our lives. There is no substantive evidence to show otherwise.

As to Joanne Rowling, I feel a very deep sense of betrayal: that an author who, at heart, seemed to profoundly address 'difference' in her stories. She suddenly seems to have renounced that interpretation. So who is Harry Potter? Just another kid with teenage hang-ups? Or the young man at odds with himself, that seemed to important to me and many a young person seeking to find a place for themselves in society?

(I rest my case... for the moment)

### **Q10 Do you think it is actually too easy for young people to transition now?**

It's never easy. Every person who transitions will lose something: friends, relatives, perhaps a job...and hence it's important to flag this up when the issue comes to the fore. If there was a Red Pill that enabled transgender folk to never have been born with the issues that face them, then the vast majority would take it. That is, I think, very sad. It indicates how fearful recognising the challenges of transition really is. That's why I think in depth counseling support is so important as an individual 'comes out'.

On a more practical note, the administrative business of changing gender identity (at least in British society) has always been relatively straight forward. I changed my name, passport, bank accounts, driving licence, etc. all without any difficulty. What I couldn't change was the gender marker on my birth certificate, and the bureaucracy means I have to go through a very convoluted process (a bit like submitting an NVQ portfolio) to get government sanction to do so? Silly? Yes...it's an unnecessary and needless hurdle, considering that there are no restrictions elsewhere.

### **Q11 Do you know what proportion of male to female transgender people are sexually attracted to women and don't consider themselves to be lesbian?**

I wish I could quote a figure, but I don't have one. What's more, I don't think anyone has ever done the research? An opening for you there?

The issue, I think, is a semantic one due to the conflicting overlaps between meanings as people transition. I have always said that 'the language betrays us'.

### **Q12 What kind of discrimination do you now get, overt or hidden?**

A constant underlying feeling of being tacitly excluded because of convenience is the main one. Because of my identity, my openness about it, and my history, I feel that people sometimes find it so stressful that they'd rather not have to have me around. So I get put to one side as a 'problem'. I also have issues with mis-gendering from bureaucracy, which is resistant to change. For example, I've had a two year conflict with a famous bank because of a constant mis-

gendering from one of their employees, which is currently before the ombudsman. Now and again, I also have issues with occasional service industries who seem to find me 'amusing'.

For the most part though, things are pretty much OK. I'm either missing some of the signs or blissfully ignorant.

**Q13 What do you think of the claims by transgender 'men' who wish to transfer to female prisons?**

Do you mean female-to-male trans' people? If so, I think it's an issue that needs to be judged on a case by case basis. I've worked peripherally with offenders in the past (both via Barnardo's and in my role as a teaching practice observer) and I know that in a very large number of cases, the problems of prison life are exacerbated by serious mental health and literacy issues. This means that where and how a person joins the prison population is not just a matter of their expressed gender, but also their behavioural risk factors and needs.

If you mean the idea that 'essentially' transgender women are 'men', but just either in disguise or fooling themselves, then I challenge you to justify that essentialist position. The question dissolves if you can't.

**Q14 In your experience, have women who have transitioned to men had very similar feelings about alienation, joining in 'girlie' things to suppress wishing they were boys? Given the different ways men and women are still often regarded in society, I wonder if there might be differences?**

There are. This is a qualitative issue as well as a quantitative one. I've had many friends whose birth gender was female (one of the most famous is Prof Stephen Whittle, who is an amazing guy!), and I recognise that the potential for integration into gendered society is a little easier because of the revolutionary impact that hormone treatment has on the female body. This is not the case with estrogen on the male biology, sadly. Therefore the psychological reconstruction of identity is more complex for trans women, with bodily dysphoria being more difficult to ameliorate.

Nevertheless, trans' men relate similar stories to mine. Lack of expressive contexts to 'know' who they are; bodily issues that are initially translated into lesbian identity; an evolving realisation of their difference as they grow older...and a final struggle for fulfillment. It's an oft told tale, and though I don't know for sure 'how it feels', I do have a strong empathy with it.

There are also the conflicted issues of seeming to 'join the patriarchy', with all that means to past identity. And the business of hypermasculinity as a reaction to past suppression. Both are unique to the female-to-male transition.

**Q15 Individuals accept change differently. Can children who are born before a transition occurs accept a parent has changed gender or does it cause issues?**

It can cause issues, but families seem to be very resilient. I think (and I have only anecdotal evidence to support this) that the previous family structural and emotional relationships play a huge part in how children respond. If the family has been one where gender category behaviours have been very traditional (Pa does certain things, dresses a certain way; Ma does certain things... and never the twain shall meet) then any alteration in this template can cause feelings of emotional betrayal and the consequent 'death in the family' reaction I was describing in my talk. Those families who are more flexible in their gendered behaviour seem far more accepting of change. Education, as ever, plays a huge part in this.

For example, I have a friend whose family accept her as their father and that she is female. Sounds weird, eh? But it works really well, and her four children (of varying ages) seem pretty much at ease with the whole thing. I have another friend who hasn't spoken to her two sons in decades because of alienation.

I guess there's something to be learned here: how children react to their parent's changes depend on where you started with them to begin with.

So to speak.

**Q16 When in love with a woman, was the need to be transgender a reason for it ending (if this is not too personal)?**

She just couldn't take the idea that I was 'essentially' female (and I use the word ironically). I don't blame her. Imagine that your partner told you tomorrow that he/she was going to live a different gender from now on. You would, quite naturally, be shocked to your boots. I expected things would go badly. They did. For a year. We lived apart (I hated it). But we stayed in touch, and eventually agreed to start meeting again.

The rest is history. What is love? Love is an attachment beyond the means of rationality to comprehend. And it worked out for us, though not in the way it had done during the previous 20 years.

As I've written elsewhere, the possibility of a relationship surviving the transition of one of the partners is based upon the quality and context of their previous history. How both partners envision the relationship has an influence on how much compromising they are both willing to do to keep the relationship going.

I was lucky. I'm not sure if my late partner would say the same. But it was better than eternal yearning, regret and loneliness for both of us.