

MY TRANSSEXUAL FATHER; 4 CHAPTERS

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Part 1. 1995. The Australian Newspaper.

There is a burgeoning market of self help books of almost every description. But I have yet to see one that provides a guiding hand through the oceans of uncertainty generated by one's parent coming out as a transsexual. I guess there is not a huge demand for such a title.

So I have found myself charting unknown territory, with even my most articulate friends struck dumb by my casual admission of having a transsexual father: 'Yeah, he is a she now'.

One day when my dad - now Elaine - phoned up, a friend who was staying with me answered the phone. In a flush of excitement and uncertainty she said, 'Oh, you must be Steve's dad, uh, I mean mum, uh, I mean parent, uh, uh, oh dear, I'm so sorry'

There was a deathly silence on the other end and then Elaine gave a nervous little laugh, 'that's alright dear'.

There are a hundred and one comical aspects to the whole situation; in fact the entire thing is so hard to digest at times that humour is the only way I can make some sense of what has happened. It's a great setting for farce: a patriarchal 65 year old scientist and staunch fundamentalist Christian becomes a demure female childcare worker.

He broke the news to me in a 40 page letter, tracing the history of his yearning for another gender identity, starting when he was 5 years old. I thought, 'well I've been through many adventures in my life, this is just one more'.

As he started openly cross dressing - something he claimed to have done since his youth - it all seemed somewhat campy and a little like play-acting. When he started talking about 'the op', and seriously planning it, I felt a new dimension of intensity, and the reality starting sinking in. He started having umpteen minor operations - to raise the voice, reduce the nose, remove all unwanted facial hair. My well known and beloved father was rapidly disappearing, and in his place was a person I knew less and less.

Whilst accepting his decision, I nevertheless tried to dialogue: why not try therapy; what if you regret this; look at the other transsexuals - they are not a particularly happy bunch. But his mind was made up; this was his path to freedom and authenticity.

His friends dropped away one by one, until only a few remained. He moved from the conservative Tasmanian community which he had so loved for 25 years to the more cosmopolitan Melbourne. Each step involved incredible courage, and this I respected greatly. However I was losing a father, and gaining - I was not sure what.

He became more and more insistent at expunging the past - sending me back every memory he had. Packets of letters, photos and documents would periodically arrive in the mail. He didn't want reminders of who he had been, and this is probably part of the reason he, now she, started becoming hostile towards me. Perhaps my existence serves as a painful reminder of the years he spent in self denial, living a dual life.

I felt, and still feel, a great deal of mixed emotion. I am happy that my father finally followed his own tElaine; I admire the courage it took to do this. I feel compassion at the frequent rejection he experiences. I am very very sad at losing a father.

I am also confused because although there is no longer anything of the father I knew, there is still the person/spirit/body there. It seems that a new personality inhabits that frame, that dramatically altered frame. She carries a female passport, she has constructed for herself a female past. She spends hours each day on her makeup, and works with children; my father had zero interest in small children.

My father the intellectual giant, the knowledgeable scientist has gone. Elaine professes limited intellectual ability, tending to be scatterbrained and more inclined towards light gossip. She tries hard - oh so hard - to be female, talking about her idea of 'womanly things' such as clothes, makeup, and how terrible men are!

As you might imagine, this is all a bit hard for me to digest. I am a very flexible, broad minded person. But all my tolerance and intellectual acceptance does not help me come to terms with the profound disruption of a sense of family.

What has been most difficult to admit is my dislike. I don't like what my father has become. And what I am to Elaine is not much more than an irritating reminder of the years she was suppressed as a shadow of my father.

I could imagine my father dead and try to mourn; but being only a half tElaine, this doesn't work. There remains the Pandora's box of unanswered questions for me: how did this shape my growing up, how did it affect my male identity, to what degree did it contribute to the difficult dynamics between my parents (who remained together up until my mother's death 15 years ago). Elaine claims that my father was just the mask she was wearing, nothing but a cover-up persona which hid the real person. That leaves me in a difficult position. Was I raised by a mask? Did I love a mask?

Fortunately I have 20 years of meditation and 10 years of therapy work behind me, so my sense of self is clear, strong and resilient. I also have been a parent for a while and doing okay, so I know that I am not entirely screwed in the head. If this revelation had come before I had had kids, I think I would have gone through a lot more turmoil about my abilities to parent. If it had happened before I started therapy work I can only imagine the difficulty of processing the emotional impact. If I had found out in my teen years I might well have gone through some fears about my own sexuality.

As it is, I live with many suspended questions, figuring that over time I will be able to slowly work my way through them. Or not. Maybe I will never figure it all out. At times I look at it this way: I am grateful that my father brought me into the world, and acknowledge he did his duty, provided for me, and raised me as best he could. Now he has moved on to another life of which I am not a part. The whys of the whole thing are a mystery, belonging perhaps to Ripley's Believe it or Not archives.

I would love to ask Elaine a lot about the past. To know a lot of detail, to try to grasp what this strange thing is about. But such conversation is strained and often cut short by her. She certainly retains one characteristic of my father: a lack of attention to personal details; she prefers instead to speak in large brushstrokes.

The whole business is strange not only because of the lack of personal context, but also the lack of social context. Transsexuals are generally the object of lurid fascination, repulsion, ridicule, or overt hostility. Even psychiatry has placed the subject in the too-hard basket. They have of course a label for it, but absolutely no idea of what causes it or what the remedy might be - apart that is from the final solution: *the op*.

Its not a subject that is generally discussed, and whenever I mention my situation there is usually a mixture of intense interest, sympathy, and incredulousness. Almost as if I was fathered by a Martian. A part of me covers in fear at the way others might react; however the ongoing reality is that I receive support and sensitivity. I must admit that a slightly devilish part of me delights in watching the effect on people: '*your father is a what?!*'; there is no familiar niche to place this piece of information, no set response, nothing in the *good manners guide*.

Thus it is with some trepidation that I go beyond face to face revelation and write about my experience. I can't see your response. I don't know whether you react with judgment or compassion. But I feel it is important to 'break the silence' and stimulate discussion.

I have found my own ongoing therapy work useful in helping to unravel a few of the threads. I have become clearer about how to move towards some sort of resolution for myself in the present at least. I am discovering how to not let myself be daunted by the enormity of the experience, standing instead by what is real for me just as Elaine in her own way stands by what is real for her.

My kids have taken it all in their stride. Grandpa is now Auntie Elaine. She comes up occasionally, and although they think her a bit strange they don't mind her too much. Young children are inherently curious, and always appreciate more adult attention.

My ex-wife has been very tolerant and compassionate towards Elaine, who prefers to talk to her, 'woman to woman'. Unfortunately when the topic comes around to me, Elaine tends to express a lot of bitterness. This produces a tense situation for my ex-wife; when I get to hear about it, I can feel my own bitterness. Round it goes, just like a normal dysfunctional family.

Elaine claims she is for the most part happy in her life, though she often sounds depressed about the world in general. Rejection is a recurring theme in her life now. Whether it is due to intolerance, her rather adolescent way of interacting with the world, or her passive aggressive undercurrent of anger, it is hard to say. She of course attributes all rejection to the prejudice, and it must indeed be difficult to fit into the ladies auxiliaries she attends with her 6 feet plus height, large hands, and strange manner. Nevertheless, she has found great joy in her childcare work, and it is undoubtedly due to the ability of kids to be unconditionally accepting.

I have yet to meet someone in the same boat. There are some books by transsexuals, a few radio programs, and one or two movies. But I have seen nothing by or about the children of transsexuals. I now make a point of talking about the whole thing with friends as I figure that it is nothing to be ashamed of. People often don't know how to respond to the whole thing. Neither do I.

Part 2. 2005. An update.

Ten years later. Another turn of the clock. I am remarried. My kids are teenagers, I am an author and run a therapy training institute. I have ten years of talking, searching, therapy, and hopefully some maturing. My article is on the internet, and I have received dozens of responses each year from transsexuals, and children or ex-spouses of transsexuals.

These contain stories of hope, care, fear, rejection, pain, perseverance, family breakdown; through it all there are people trying to do their best in almost impossible circumstances. Many of those who write me report very similar circumstances. For instance many instances of staunchly conservative Christian fathers who come out in their mid life, to the complete surprise of everyone. Many of the children who write me speak of painful disconnection, their fathers' losing interest in anything outside of their new world. They also write me about their own difficulty coming to terms with the transition, and the lack of support for them doing so.

My own circumstances have increasingly resembled the kind of challenges faced in a 'normal' father-son relationship; my remnant longings for recognition and acknowledgement from my father and my consequent disappointment; my difficulty in accepting my father for who he/she is and isn't; the lack of ability to communicate across some kind of divide.

My friends often struggle with similar difficulties with their parents. So what is unique? Firstly, you might note that I use the word 'father'. Through some helpful therapeutic input, I have come to see that I can both hold onto the fact that no matter what happens, Elaine is still my father. Regardless of the way my father chooses to live his life, my own life came through him. It has been liberating to be continue to acknowledge this. There is still some solid ground which his move into transsexuality cannot shake.

And at the same time I can acknowledge his fate. An increasing acceptance on my part that this is the way the cards have fallen. Some people win lotto, my father came out at 65. My continuing recognition of him as my father somehow helps me come to terms with where he has gone.

So I give myself the freedom to use a variety of terms when talking about Elaine: Dad / He / She / Elaine. I enjoy this flexibility, and the recognition of multiple realities which goes with it.

Because of the mutual tension, I have given myself the freedom to take a great deal of space over the last 10 years. I have carefully unknotted all the 'shoulds', and simply made contact when and how I feel like it. I have phoned or written when I felt the urge, which has been anywhere from every few months, to once a year. When I talk with Elaine I do so for as long as I want, and not a moment more.

This has suited both of us, and reduced the strain in our contact. Its also given me the space to do the hardest thing – accept my father for who she now is. This has been a long slow process, and taking my time has been important.

Despite my efforts, Elaine has grown distant from my children. They consider her a kind of oddity; but then my father always was somewhat of a social misfit – listening to Alan Watts, growing a beard and riding a bike to work long before these things were fashionable. I liked those things about my father, and the fact is he never did want to fit in. However, in relationship Elaine tends on the Aspergers side of things, and certainly has no idea how to make contact with teenagers... though I confess I am frequently at a loss myself. She can play with young children, but can't make sense of the world of young adults in 2005. To be fair, there are probably not a lot of 79 year olds who can.

An incident. My sister's husband died. Elaine attended the funeral. I was talking with my niece and nephew, 7 and 9 years old at the time. I discovered that my sister had been lying to them, under Elaine's direction. They thought Elaine was their grandmother. I explained that their grandmother had died a long time ago, and that Elaine was in fact their grandfather, but now a woman. This was unsettling to them, but they wanted to know more, to figure out just who was who in the family structure. I am a therapist - I know the negative effects of lying to children. Personally, I grew up with a father who lived with a lie for 6 decades. I was not willing to continue any kind of pretence. But it created trouble. Elaine was furious - she didn't want them to know until she herself had died. My sister felt caught in the middle. My wife was displeased because she thought I should have gone about it in a different way. My niece and nephew were unhappy they had been lied to. Everyone was upset. These are some of the real life challenges of dealing with transsexuality in families, especially when the person who has transitioned wants to hide their previous life from everyone, in order to 'pass'.

And, life goes on. Elaine has continued to make her way through the difficulties of getting older, and the ongoing challenges of living as a transsexual. She has migrated through a series of churches, each of which inevitably ends in rejection – sometimes spectacularly, sometimes quietly - when someone outs her. I think she has finally found a congregation with some measure of acceptance; pockets of compassion seem to have survived despite all attempts to stamp it out.

Speaking of surviving: she has been through a house fire which burnt everything she owned. There's no doubt: she is resilient. I haven't had to deal with that particular kind of devastation, but then my father's transformation into a woman felt something like a bushfire through our relationship.

As the Zen monk quipped after his house burnt down, 'Now I can see the moon'. It's a bit like that. What's left are the bare bones. It's taken me a while to stop staring at the ashes and recognise what is of value.

I have started phoning Elaine more regularly. As I get older, I am more able to appreciate the worth of what I got from my father, and focus less on what I didn't get. With this appreciation comes a kind of warmth. I don't know if I will ever really like Elaine, or if I will ever be able to say to her 'I love you', as I could to my father. Perhaps one day.

But for now, it's enough to be able to make simple contact, to have brief conversations about mundane things, and to steer away from trying to 'fix' anything in our relationship.

That's the personal level. When I look at the bigger picture, piecing together my own experience and the many letters I receive, it is very clear to me the insufficiency of the medical model in dealing with this complex topic. To treat transsexuality as if it is just happening to one individual who has a 'problem' that needs to be (medically) fixed is out of kilter with reality. In fact transsexuality is a family phenomena. The secrecy, the coming out, the change in all relationships both in the family and the person's life – this constitutes a complex web of people who are affected.

All this is substantially ignored both in the pre-counseling and in the process of the operation itself. Forget about any post-counseling. No wonder the person's family life usually unravels into a shambles of anger, misunderstanding and rejection. The price is incredibly high, for everyone.

I don't believe it has to be like that. If such a dramatic transition were managed in a way which included all the important family members – parents, spouse, kids, then at least channels for dialogue could be established. There is no magic wand to make the pain go away, but an increased amount of support is essential for everyone facing such a major disruption to that most fundamental of assumptions: gender.

Looking back, I now understand my interest in the mens' movement in the '80s, a decade before my father's coming out. Somewhere I knew I needed to understand more deeply what it means to be a man in all ways: as a son, a father, a husband, a mate.

Part 3. 2015. The end.

Another 10 years have flown by.

Transgender issues - the contemporary, politically correct term - are now more openly discussed, everywhere. There are internationally famous models, there are some excellent films, many more books and articles. The media seems to take a less sensational approach, and is more interested in people's actual stories. There is a movement to supporting children who identify as transgendered to be able to make a choice at adolescence about their sexual identity. There are many support materials for the parents of children who transition. Things have changed.

And the letters continue to flow into my mailbox from children of transsexuals. They continue to report the same stressors - the incredible lack of support for the children (or spouses) in the transition process. The expectations of instant acceptance. The disruption in the father - child bond. The medical model, with its focus only on the individual in transition, and the lack of therapeutic support for anyone else. I reply to all the letters. They sadden me. The positive stories are extremely rare.

I am now a grandfather myself, my kids all moved into adulthood themselves. My own life has turned. I gave away my institute, I travel and teach internationally. I have even moved back to Los Angeles for a period, the city my father desperately wanted to get away from. Life's twists and turns.

My father, Elaine, died late last year. But lets backtrack.

4 years ago she thought she was dying. I went to Melbourne to visit her. The doctors didn't think she was dying. It was a brief, gentle visit. She said sorry for her failures. She spoke in an open hearted manner. There was some sense of healing perhaps on both our parts. She didn't die.

She recovered, and picked up with her life. She started publishing a little blog, a venue for her social commentary. My father had always had opinions about society, where it was going, what needed to change. Her first great grandson was born, ironically, on her birthday. She showed little interest. When she became a transsexual, it seemed her interest in family diminished to a tiny trickle. I felt sad that this was yet another milestone in my life that she didn't want to celebrate. And, that's how it was.

2 years ago, I visited her again. She was still living in her own apartment, but that time was rapidly nearing an end of life as she had known it. Her memory was starting to fail. We had a friendly little visit. 2 weeks later, her memory substantially went. She transitioned to a hostel, with a staff that seemed kindly.

She knew she was losing her memory, and it distressed her. My father had always depended on his intelligence, and it was profoundly difficult for her to encounter the confusion and sense of loss.

I would phone every few weeks. There was her depression about her memory loss, and being subject to the limited company of other elderly people, many of whom could not maintain much of a conversation. And at the same time, remarkably, her mood seemed lighter. For the first time in my adult life, she seemed glad to hear from me. She brightened up. To my utter surprise she would ask me 'and how are the kids?' - a question that I had never heard before. I would give her a short reply. Saying goodbye on the phone there was also a shift - she would thank me very kindly for phoning her. I felt touched.

Then there was another incident. One day, when I called, she asked me what I was doing. I told her I would be doing some seasonal work - a small business I had run for 30 years. She asked me why I was still doing that work - I replied I needed the money. What then ensued was an exchange which stays with me. She challenged me, much as an experienced life coach might - or perhaps, an engaged father might. She pointed out that I was stuck in a rut, and that unless I did something significantly different, nothing would change. She was sharp as a tack, and everything she said struck home. More than that, I felt the care, advice, sternness, and support of my father. Transsexuality was completely in the background. Our difficult history, her previous indifference to my world - all faded away. In that conversation there was a moving experience of connection, clarity, a gift from my father to me.

After that, the calls reverted to her memory fog. She would ask 'where are you living?' 'Los Angeles' I would reply. 'Remarkable' she would say, surprised anew, each time. The last call I made was in November 2014. It went along these lines. She was warm, pleased to hear from me. I felt my bemused pleasure. Two weeks later, she died peacefully in her sleep.

Part 4. The eulogy.

My father was a complex person. There's much there to acknowledge and appreciate, and it's also hard at times to hold the complexity in a way which honours both the parts, and the whole person, and the whole life.

My own relationship with him was also complex - at times difficult, challenging, frustrating, and sometimes painful. I received many things from him as a child, and perhaps less as an adult. The things I did receive, I feel deeply grateful for.

My father must be spoken about with two names, two pronouns, yet both his male and female identity were the same person. I will use mostly the pronoun 'he', as I speak of my father, then the man who brought me into this world and raised me. I do so, and at the same time acknowledge his transition to living as a woman. The complexity of two selves, two genders, was too much for many of his friends to handle, yet those who did found a person worth knowing. He struggled with this himself, both as a man, and as a woman.

The weight of this struggle bore down on him for a two thirds of his life. In the last third, he took the courageous decision to be authentic with himself first, then the world, and bear the consequences which may follow. Those consequences were very painful - the loss of most of his friends and his community. Yet, he bore this with dignity, and created a new life, a new identity, a new profession, in a new city, with new friends.

My father's dignity lay in finding a way through this struggle, through these internal and external challenges, and in never flagging.

This was true in the larger picture as well. He was always a maverick..preferring to ride a bicycle when everyone else drove cars, to grow a beard when everyone else was clean shaven, to start work at 10.30 instead of the obligatory 9am, to turn his back on the glitter of Los Angeles, for the remote quietness of Hobart. He swallowed nothing - religion, science, politics. He thought deeply, argued passionately, and made his own mind up. In that sense, he was indeed his own person, and this remained true as Elaine.

His journey through religion was truly that. His atheist- Jewish upbringing left him with little inherited spirituality. For his adult life though he was a seeker. In the '50s he and mum sought out voices such as Alan Watts, and the alternative perspectives offered by early American public radio, for instance KPFK. This led to an interest in Zen, and our bookshelves at home had books on a variety of religious perspectives. In our childhood, he would take our family to a succession of different churches, appreciating each one, and being critical of each one. He later settled on the pentecostals, and then as Elaine, going through a succession of churches till finding one that was truly accepting. This was a long process, full of hope, caution, critical thinking, faith, disappointment, perseverance, and a deep orientation towards the 'something more' of life.

His working identity was as a scientist. But he always felt more aligned with his teaching role than that of a research scientist. He loved teaching, and that's something I have inherited from him. He preferred the practical science of the Technical College, to the more rarified pretentiousness he found at the university. His scientific mind was a core part of his identity, with the combination of open mindedness and scepticism that is necessary for that discipline. This created a capacity for sharp thinking, and that is something I appreciated about my father. I thought I would follow in his footsteps as a scientist, but ended up carrying on his teaching tradition, albeit in a different discipline.

His hobby and passion was electronics, initially ham radio. That gave him access to the world...to people in other countries, a half century before the internet has made us all global citizens. It contributed to his broad view of life, his interest in other cultures and ways of thinking, and to connections which included friends he made from Russia, Japan, England, and Australia. This embracing of the world is something I am also very appreciative of, and have benefited from myself. I have been able to pass the same sense onto my children.

One form of this was the Electronic Experimenters Bulletin, known as the EEB, a little electronics mail order magazine that he published with Rodney Reynolds, with the unique stamp of his folksy commentary which made it very personal. Perhaps this is part of what has resulted in my own love of writing and publishing.

His politics were always radical. He declined to continue to participate in US government research which was military based. The FBI visited him in the 50's because he made comments to friends about radiation fallout from the atomic tests. He gave me my middle name - Karl, after Karl Marx, surely a defiant gesture in the throws of the McCarthy era. He wrote letters to the French government, protesting their atomic tests, long before this was a popular cause. Politics mattered to him, it was something he thought deeply about, and argued passionately. He was interested in history, in the ways it was repeated, and in what he saw must be learnt from it. I enjoyed growing up in a climate of these values, and they are ones I have taken up in my own way, and continue to matter deeply to me.

My father was a restless person, always searching for something, always intensely engaging with people, or ideas. There was nothing about him that was lazy. He worked hard. He liked solving problems, and discovering new ideas. He loved sharing ideas and perspectives, and his excitement about many things that he encountered. Perhaps at times, his excitement was too much for the world, and was not always received. Yet it contributed to his aliveness, and its something I appreciated at core about him.

There was much that he gave me as a child which I value to this day - a capacity to think deeply, to bring common sense to everyday problems, to not give up, to operate out of a value base, to be your own person, to walk in nature, to live with passion; these were things that were true of him, and which he could therefore pass on to me.

In my adult life, as Elaine, I knew her less well. I had my own family to raise, and she created a life for herself, perhaps separate by necessity. The complexity of having two genders was too much for her as well, and she needed to be one at a time. As Elaine, she was still my father, but more remotely.

As she aged, she never let herself flag. She worked as long as she could, enjoying an opportunity to contribute to society in her new profession - childcare. After that she kept herself active and engaged, always interested in learning, and often glued to the ABC, which she loved. That love too I have inherited.

Finally, I will mention my father's love of music. Jazz, opera, and a whole range of classic music. With his support and encouragement I learned some classical instruments, and I certainly inherited his enjoyment of this sphere. There is no doubt, my father was a deep man, one who appreciated that which was meaningful. The external world seemed to matter less to him. He was not materialistic. What he valued was in the inner life, and it is this I appreciate very much about him as Leo, and her as Elaine.

As a child, going to sleep at night, my father would often read me stories. Not simple stories. Complex stories, great stories. That was something special, on so many levels. Then he would bless me, drawing a cross on my forehead. A loving, intimate, and expansive thing to do. That blessing is something of deep value. On this occasion of his death, of her death, I offer that blessing back.

Part 1 was originally published in The Australian Newspaper in 1995.

Since then, it has been available on the Australian Humanities Review website:

<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-August-1997/gunther.html>
since 1997.

The name used in those articles for my father was 'Ruth', which was a pseudonym. She has died, so I now use the name she chose for herself: Elaine.

The magazine my father published for 8 years, *The Australian EEB* (Electronic Experimenter's Bulletin) is available for download at:

<http://www.rochester-engineering.com/EEB/>

My father's blogs are at:

<http://deprofundis-emf-contents.blogspot.com>

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