BLOGS

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Transgender people burning at the stakes as modern-day heretics
Back in the day, like way back... say 400 years ago, if an individual questioned authority or long-held beliefs they could be tried for heresy. Heresy is defined as ‘an opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted.’ One famous case of heresy involved physician Michael Servetus. Servetus was one of the first to describe how blood flowed through our body but he also didn’t believe in the trinity. Not a great idea back in the day. So off ya go, kid. He was burned on top of a pile of his own books. How poetic.

See that’s the thing, in America they can’t *literally* burn us at the stake for stating new truths. But they sure as hell can figuratively by stripping away and denying us equal rights.

We live in a time when it is still considered heresy to state that gender does not naturally divide itself into two simple categories. Despite the evidence, through intersex births (http://itgl.lu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Blackless-How-Dimorphic-2000.pdf), that even nature itself does not produce two individual genders. It is still ‘profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted’ to believe you do not have to live within a gender binary. It has been shown that gender is a structure (https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9GexklwoSGrNLFhODhjbW1OeWs/view?usp=sharing), a structure built on this flawed assumption that nature has only two categories.

What happens to those of us who state a new truth based on new evidence? What happens to those of us that refuse to live within constraints just because that’s the way it’s been?

We are refused service (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/03/15/barber-refuses-to-cut-transgender-army-veterans-hair-citing-the-bible/). We are discriminated against (http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/2/22/report-2016-most-dangerous-year-transgender-americans). We are denied our rights. We are beaten. We are murdered.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_unlawfully_killed_transgender_people) And while society can no longer burn us at the stakes, we are certainly still burning.

So, I ask what’s everyone so afraid of? Something new, something different? A truth that may not align with your current belief system? ‘An opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted?’ If that’s the case, look to the future, my friends. You’ll see us heretics. Our images in history books. Our bodies, that bore the suffering, celebrated.

We may be bloodied but we are not broken. We will continue to speak the new truth about gender. The truth being uncovered by sociologists and scientists every day. Will you a part of the evolution or will you be lighting a match? #breakthebinary

You are who you say you are,
leo

*Photo from the NYPL archives*
3 reasons I won’t use the term ‘dead name’
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/5-reasons-i-wont-use-death-name/)

A term has popped up on my radar. The use of “dead name” instead of “birth name” when someone is referring to their name before transition. Initially, I was unsettled by the usage within the community. It felt like an erasure of the self, it felt unkind to who they were. I read some accounts about how using
the term symbolized the grieving felt during transition. I can relate to grieving a piece of the self that feels gone during transition. I’m not suggesting anyone stop using “dead name” because I believe in supporting my fellow gender fluid friends and I don’t believe in prescribing my way to anyone. We are all on this course in our unique fashion. However, I would like to address why I won’t be using it. And I can because hey, it’s my blog.

1. **The continuity of self is important to my identity.**
   There are moments when a breeze is blowing through the open windows and I’m laying in bed and a certain song comes on and I feel all the versions of me in that instance. I love those moments. I long for those moments when the self stretches into the future and past. And there are times when I feel a piece of myself has been lost in transition. In the beginning I viewed transition as losing and gaining – losing the hips and gaining the facial hair. But transitioning, no matter the kind, isn’t a matter of losing and gaining. It’s a matter of changing. Taking what is present and turning it into something new. For that reason, using the term “death name” implies that a piece of self is dead. That it didn’t transform with me, through me. I need the continuity of the yesterdays creating the todays.

2. **My dead name is Leo.**
   When I die, Leo Caldwell will die. Natasha never died, she became Leo. Leo was created out of Natasha. She will not appear in a Google search with my face. She will remain invisible but she will remain. And she will die when Leo’s body turns to ash.

3. **I honor my past and through it, heal my shame.**
   My past built my future. I’m kind to the person I was because it wasn’t often they experienced kindness. Natasha is not a name I’m ashamed of, because Natasha often felt ashamed. I’m reclaiming who she was with pride. Natasha needs me to remember her and love her. Maybe I’m able to do this because I’m nearly a decade into my transition. Maybe time has worn me kind.
I ask this from you, before you take up a term just because it’s a part of the trans vernacular, please think. Does this term truly apply to me? Do this with all things related to transitioning. Meditate. Find a place inside yourself that you can follow your own path. Be kind to yourself – past and present. This process of transformation is truly incredible. Not everyone gets to take this journey. Take a moment and breathe it in and get to know it for yourself.

We are here by fire. Let’s show them, let them see it still burning in our eyes.

You are who you say you are,
leo

Photo from unsplash.com
An ode to Amy
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/aiode-to-amy/)

Surrounded by red canyons. I wrapped my hand around the strings of the yellow balloon and jumped. My feet lifted off the ground and I sailed through the air over a large blue river, my friends floating down it on rafts. I landed by the river bank. Then I woke up.

Amy laid beside me. I rolled over and looked at her thick brown hair and soft face. I traced her cheekbones. She is my yellow balloon.

Amy is genuinely in love with life. I’ve come to realize that’s a rare gift as we age. She seems to grow more fond of it as she grows older. She still sees the magic. But not in that annoying kind of way. She’s balanced like that.

She sees it and shows it in a way that makes you realize it never left.

You know when you were 22 and you just knew you could and would do all the things, all the adventures, all the accomplishments. Then you hit 32 and made more practical plans so you could buy a house and have health insurance.

Amy still knows she will have all the adventures and achieve all the accomplishments and she knows you will too. And she has weaved that feeling into the fabric of those practical plans.

Amy is a healer – by trade and nature. A tenderness runs through her and it washes over the wounds of those she loves. She can find the hurt and work it out. She works wrapped in calm.
She finds us broken and restless and applies the oils and lays our heads down. And we trust her. We need her.

Amy lets you be whoever, whatever you are on this day or that. That flexibility in acceptance of a person’s identity takes a courage to let go of expectations. To let go of what is tomorrow and what was yesterday.

Amy’s beauty radiates on and on. Amy is gorgeous. She is the kind of beauty you can’t bottle up. She is the kind of lovely you can’t apply with a few brush strokes. She is a beauty built on kindness and magic.

She talks me through the darkest hours with this voice that drips with honey. Placing a hand on my shoulder with a proud look on her face. She tells me to keep going. She keeps me afloat. She is my yellow balloon.
3 Fuck You to anti-transgender bills
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/3-2/)

Generally, I write my blogs and columns as a way to bridge the gap between people outside the gender binary and those living deeply within it. I frame issues in a way to create dialogue and mutual understanding. This is important to manifest true change and foster open conversations around ‘controversial’ issues. This is the nature of who I am and the style I will continue to maintain (except today).

As a person living outside the social norms of gender I’m carving out space here to be outraged at the injustice. To be pissed at the 44 bills across the U.S. targeting transgender people. To feel a sting in my soul at The Advocate’s headline ‘REPORT: 2016 Is the Most Dangerous Year for Transgender Americans.’ (http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/2/22/report-2016-most-dangerous-year-transgender-americans) I’m angry and I should be. *I will be saying fuck a lot.

So, here it goes.

1. **F**uck you! **To the 26 bills trying to prevent transgender people from using public facilities that match their identity.**
Ok, most of these bills deal with public restroom usage. I’m mean for fuck’s sake, do you realize how enraged most Americans would be if their bathroom usage was trying to be regulated. I want to do some public shaming here. Let’s just start with Washington. Washington has 6 of these bills. 5 of them repeal laws and regulations that protect transgender people. Really? Didn’t your parents teach you that you don’t give something to someone and then take it away?


I’ve got to call Massachusetts out as well. Dude, you were the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. You now have a bill that wants to require people to use public facilities according to their anatomical sex. Fuck you. Also, how are you going to regulate this one? The Penis Police? The Vagina Vics. BT-dubs, lots of transgender people will 100% pass your anatomical sex requirement. SO FUCK YOU!

Indiana, I’m sorry but I have to pick on you. You’re near and dear to my heart. I love you so, but frankly, it’s getting harder and harder to defend your beauty and sweetness. You’re an abusive partner that I once adored but then you keep doing crazy shit. You have two bills that say, hey, let’s use your gender assigned at birth as a way to decide what bathroom you use. Guess what???? You’re stupid. First, do you realize how ridiculous it’s going to look to try to sort by this system? Take a look at the Instagram hashtag “transgender.” (https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/transgender/) Ok. How do you decide? Hmmmmmmm???? Who was assigned male at birth and female? Good fuckin’ luck!
2. **Fuck you! To the bills that are trying to allow people and businesses to discriminate against transgender people.**

Can we take a minute and realize these bills violate the simplest ideals the majority of us were taught as children? Be kind to others. Don’t hit. Try to understand some people are different from you. Yet, we have grown-ass adults wanting t


I don’t discriminate. I don’t give a fuck if you’re an extreme hillbilly in love with Trump. That’s you. You do you. I do me. It’s a simple rap philosophy.

3. **Fuck you! To the bills that are working to prevent transgender people the ability to change their legal documents to their gender identity.**

I’ve kept my legal documentation all female because for me it’s a tiny bit of activism in my daily interactions. Forcing people to rethink the legal definition of female. But trust me, it’s been awkward as fuck and sometimes even caused me to avoid social situations. But this has been my decision.

However, if some of these bills pass many transgender people will be forced to carry documentation that doesn’t recognize their gender identity. This will not only be awkward but dangerous. Imagine showing your ID to buy beer and you have a beard and a female marker. There are people who will literally kill you (http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/12/two-decades-after-brandon-teenas-murder-a-look-back-at-falls-city/282738/) because of this.
Let’s say you’re 5’8” and weigh 145. You get your driver’s license and they have you at 6’3” and 210. That’d make you uncomfortable, right? Well, take that feeling and multiple it times 100,000 and you get a hint of what it feels like for a transgender person. Fuck you, Tennessee and Virginia.

All jokes aside. Why is it so hard to accept that some people aren’t going to stay the gender they were assigned at birth? People’s decision to do this has no affect on you. Let it go.

Read all about this bullshit here (http://hrc-assets.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/HRC-Anti-Trans-Issue-Brief-FINAL-REV2.pdf) and here (http://www.transequality.org/action-center).

Also, please show up and vote. Show up and be pissed. Show up for me. Show up at the rallies, sign the petitions, write your governor, write your momma, write your senator.

You are who you say you are,
– leo
A request on the anniversary of my top surgery: Let’s be nicer
In 2003 I searched online for other trans guys. I found a LiveJournal Community called FTMVanity. In the same vein (or should I say vain) as Instagram it was a platform for trans guys to share photos. It was the only community I could find. I’d scroll through for hours. Back then, I longed to know other trans men that looked like me and felt like me. In those days, it was difficult to find a community online, let alone in person. We were hidden away either intentionally or unintentionally. In 2005, I went to a panel of transgender people at my college. I went because I had never met another trans person. It was incredible. To see these self-assured people talk about transitioning with such ease. I was in awe.

I met with one of the panelists, a transgender man. We chatted and met for coffee. I was happy and grateful for his presence in my life. He started a support group and everyone rallied around one another. We had finally found each other and we showered one another with support and love.

Fast forward to 2016 and I can google transgender and see so many people. I’m connected to hundreds upon hundreds of trans men. It’s incredibly powerful to be a part of such a huge evolution of visibility. On Instagram I can post about struggling with my testosterone and receive a flood of support. I write a blog or a column and get feedback about how my words resonated deeply with this person or that. However, I also get called afraid, confused and violent. The flood of support that I once felt from transgender and gender-nonconforming people has been replaced with the feeling of caution and, honestly, fear.

It’s hard to swallow when my feelings, my desires and my experiences are used to hurl insults my way. There is a big difference between constructive criticism and just being mean. I crave the criticism, the conversation from my community but the meanness cuts in a deep way. Seeing the infighting amongst the transgender and gender-nonconforming people is heartbreaking. We all face daily battles against a world that doesn’t
feel ready for us. We should lift one another up. We should honor those who are willing to share their experiences and face this cruel world. We should notice the spirit as well as the words. (Thanks, Colleen!)

February 6th is my top surgery anniversary. I’d like to ask you for a gift: Let’s be nice. Let’s respect that fact that we are all on our journey. Let’s respect each other’s version of the world. Let’s get less offended by one another. Let’s open honest and forgiving conversations. Let’s think before we comment. Let’s meet up and chat over beer. Let’s try empathy first.

That’d be an incredible gift. But if that’s a gift you can’t afford, I’ll take furs, pinky rings and a monocle.

*Photo from NYPL archives*
Gender Identity Dysphoria: Self at the mercy of the body

“For this reason illness disrupts the continuity of the biography, at times turning the self literally at the mercy of the body,” from Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body

Self at the mercy of the body. Aren’t we all at the mercy of the body each day? Not just those of us who are ill or trans? Constantly manifesting who we are in, through and with the body. Adjusting our eyeliner, our shirt collar, our hair. Covering up the layers of stomach, the unwanted breasts, the bulge in our pants. Looking to find the self in the mirror but seeing the body.

I was diagnosed with gender identity dysphoria back in 2009. That declaration by the therapist put my ‘self’ at the mercy of my body. I didn’t expect it. I knew I needed a letter from a therapist to have surgery and take hormones. I didn’t realize that would require a diagnosis with a ‘medical disorder.’ I didn’t feel ill/unwell/dysphoric. But now my medical records said otherwise.
For me, I’ve never felt female but, you know, I’ve never felt quite male either. But I did always feel like me. An unshakeable sense of self. My journey through styles, hormones and surgeries was a quest to ensure that sense of self was not at the mercy of my body. And that diagnosis was the only way to continue the progress but it disrupted the journey. It all felt so natural, so real, so me. Until I was labeled. Until I was diagnosed.

Based on other stories I’ve heard, many trans people have felt their self has been at the mercy of the body. Many trans narratives include a need to alter the body to be a true self. What about those who can’t afford surgery and hormones? What about those who aren’t old enough to access care? What about those, like myself, who didn’t feel dysphoric? Will our selves be forever at the mercy of our bodies?

The self relies on the body to communicate with the world but the self knows its truth beyond the body. It seems that the gender dysphoria diagnosis does more than stigmatizes a person within society. It declares to them that the self truly is at the mercy of the body. It stigmatizes their body to themselves. It confirms that you must physically alter your flesh to display your truth. But is that really the case? If you’ve felt your whole life that you weren’t a female, isn’t that the truth? Despite what clothes you wore or how your body developed, because wearing a dress and having breasts doesn’t make you female if you’ve never felt that way yourself.

Will we ever be able to take back the self from the body? Maybe not as a whole society but individually, yes. Through self-care, self-understanding, self-exploration. You are not at the mercy of your body. You are who you say you are.

– from leo

*Photo from unsplash.com*
Breaking down the gender binary

In past columns, I've mentioned the gender binary and talked about a middle space of gender. I've received feedback that gender and/or sex is an unchangeable fact rooted in our chromosomes. I'd like to take this column to
address gender and sex.

Gender is a social construct based on...

*Photo from unsplash.com*
A new legal definition of gender
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/gender)

Judith Butler discusses what it means to be ‘human’ in her book Undoing Gender, “The category of the “human” retains within itself the workings of the power differential of race as part of its own historicity. But the history of the category is not over, and the “human” is not captured once and for all.” In what ways is the human captured and categorized? One clear way is legally. We are born and giving a social security number that is attached to a description which includes the category of sex: male or female. In that category many transpeople and gender nonconforming are uncategorizable. What does that mean for us?

“The person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if such a being, uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world,” Butler explains. By being uncategorizable, we are murdered, threatened and discriminated against.

So, I was thinking – what system could we build that better represents the multi-dimensional elements of gender? One issue is that our society is not ready to move away from the masculine and the feminine. These are still deeply rooted in our culture and language. I felt for the system to be integrated it needed to work within these constraints.* But gender is much more than a marker we are given at birth and/or an identity we retain for ourselves. Gender is a social, cultural and self identity. It is put upon and taken up by us. Here is my proposal:
Pretty cool, huh?

The cube works this way. There is a self identity axis (x), a social identity axis (y) and a cultural identity axis (z). They are based on a spectrum ranging from masculine to feminine. The exact middle is gender neutral. This would be a self-reporting system. You determine how you view your gender, how socially you live your gender and how culturally your gender is viewed. You determine what culture means to you – church, America, the city, your friend circle, your
family. For me, it was America as a whole. Each box is numbered starting at the neutral point where the lines intersect. This is o,o,o. It has varying degrees of femininity and masculinity with the middle points on each axis acting as neutral. So, I identify as 3Xm, 2Yf, 3Zm. This means I see myself in the middle of the masculine side of the spectrum. I like to socialize/be seen close to the middle of feminine side of the spectrum (whether I am is a different story) and culturally, I think I’m viewed in the middle of the masculine side. This breaks down into how I see myself, how I want to be seen and how I am seen.

You would legally file your gender at 18. You would then have the ability to refile every ten years.

Gender is a much more complex social system than simply male or female. The increase visibility of the trans community is a catalyst for a fundamental change in the gender system. By becoming categorizable, we become possible.

“...To persist in one’s own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition. If we are not recognizable, if there is no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one’s own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility,” says Butler.

Let’s legally recognize the varieties of gender. Make us possible beings.

by Leo Caldwell

*If you have suggests outside of masculine and feminine I’d be very interested. Please send me other proposed models of gender! I’m very interested.
Why I removed my blog from the HuffPost: The fine line between creating change and creating walls
Why I removed my blog

I had this blog (http://www.leocaldwell.com/my-parents-call-me-she-and-thats-okay/) removed from the HuffPost but left it on my website. When I published it here I had some positive reaction from transpeople. When it reached a wider queer population via HuffPost a couple of things were brought to my attention. One I used the word ‘lifestyle’ which implies my trans status is merely a choice. The line was this ‘They just can’t align my lifestyle with their convictions and beliefs. Just like I can’t align their lifestyle with mine.’ I’ve since changed it to ‘identity’ here instead of ‘lifestyle.’ By saying lifestyle I made it out that it’s something I can change. The second point was that this piece could be used by someone to justify misgendering a transperson. I would never want my work to be used that way. I’ve kept the blog on my personal website because my intentions were to tell my story. It’s a delicate time for trans stories and I need to be careful how I frame/word my more public posts.

There are two standards I have when it comes to my writing: Not dragging unwilling participants into my pieces and not causing any more damage to the transpopulation. I took the blog down from such a public space because I feel like it violated my second standard. I want to tell a rich, truthful version of my experience but also frame it in a way that won’t be damaging to others. I’ve had negative feedback on my ‘5 things I learned from T’ blog as well but I didn’t think it could be used as a tool or excuse to misgender a transperson. I’m always willing to listen and learn from the trans and queer population. As my writing becomes public I’m learning a lot from the community. Keep it coming.

Ok, So, I’ve explained the reasons and what happened, now let me explain why being too careful can be problematic.
Radically unreachable

The reason I’ve become public with my story is to educate people about gender and gender variance. I try to write in a way that’s accessible to the general public. I write with a vulnerability that I hope reaches beyond my experience and speaks to others with the common language of emotion. My friend Colleen said this about the blog I took down, “I kind of hate that there’s so much looking at the letter and so little at the spirit in our public discourse, if you get me.” Me too. I’m writing about the spirit of my journey, the emotion behind the change.

I’ve found I’ve created the greatest change when I tell my story with raw exposure rather than caution. I’m not suggesting this is how all transpeople should tell their stories or that all transpeople should even have to tell their stories. What I am asking is that I’m allowed to reach my audience the way I know will create the greatest change. When we get so deeply rooted in our cause that we can’t see the other person’s side we lose our ability to change the world. If you can’t imagine how another person, even one that hates you, is feeling or thinking then you won’t reach them. I’d like to change my world. I want to make it a safer place for transpeople, gender-variant people. I want everyone to be able to express gender however they see fit.

In order for this happen my message has to reach many and those I reach have to feel comfortable asking questions. As transpeople we live in a world with hostility directed at us daily. Let’s not reflect hostility back. The way into someone’s heart is through kindness and openness.

And yes, I acknowledge there are some jerks who will never change and who are simply out to hurt us. Those people are radical and unreachable and what I fear is that some of us are becoming that way too.

My promise
I will be more aware about my HuffPost blogs in the future. I don’t want my work to be a tool for damaging another transperson. I will listen to feedback from the community and give it deep reflection. I welcome all criticism. It’s how I’ll grow.

I will blog freely and openly here because my heart is one of an artist. I need freedom to express myself. I don’t want to carry the weight of telling THE trans story but I do recognize I can’t control my story being used as a generic trans story for others. Words are powerful and yet they are just symbols we invented and smashed together. Ain’t it crazy?

*Photo from unsplash.com*
Nomad on the gender spectrum
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/nomad-on-the-gender-spectrum/)

It seems your message can get lost in the language of the world. Your own personal truth. The message that you wrote to yourself years ago. It gets smudged under a coffee cup. The ink fades.

When I began transitioning I did so under the faulty assumption that there were just two genders up for grabs. The expectations of femininity didn’t suit me so I assumed that I had to pick the other option. I didn’t realize it didn’t have to be an either/or situation. I set out because I knew I had a truth that I was trying to reach. A something about me that I had to find. So, I got the counseling. I started the doctor visits and I evolved.

Through the windows of my eyes, I observed my body shift. My hairline recede, my arms grow larger, my face turn into someone else’s. I watched an old version of me fade into a new one. I’d study my hands each morning. The new hairs sprouting, the texture changing. It was a rapid progression to somewhere. An uncertain somewhere. Three years into this physical transformation, I started catching glimpses of that person I had been trying to reach. There. There in that mirror, there he was. And ‘he’ was. I treasured this time. I felt deeply rooted in my flesh. I felt like a beast. Strong, but not too strong. Still soft. Something about my face still held some femininity. My hair still full. My eyes sparkling with life. I felt unstoppable. I felt sexy. These feelings surrounded me for a year. I lived in a palace of excess.
Then gradually it began to change. My hair moved further back on my head. My face started to look worn. My hands odd. My eyes dull. I was losing something. Something was leaving me. Something I loved. Someone I knew slipping through my fingers. I saw shallowness and anger. I saw something I wasn’t. I had to do something. Stop this progression. I moved my testosterone levels down. After a month, I started to feel that vibration of me.

And now, I’m at a stage where I realize, just like full fledged femininity didn’t suit me, neither does being immersed in masculinity. I crave that middle space. I’ll say it again – that sacred space. When I was in my late 20s I tried to expand my masculinity and now in my early 30s I’m grasping at my femininity.

My message is coming in clear. I’ve cleared away the mess and I see that note to myself – coffee stains and all. I’m a nomad on the gender spectrum.

Photo from unsplash.com

Older posts
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/page/2/)

About Me
Enduring after top surgery (http://www.leocaldwell.com/mymy-top-surgery/)

In January of 2012, I increased the limit on a credit card to afford top surgery. I had the consent letter I received from the therapist years ago. I scheduled my top surgery for February 6th, 2012 in Cleveland. I sent the surgeon updated photos of my chest and received a check-up at the Mazzoni Center, an LGBTQ health center in Philadelphia.
On the Sunday before surgery, my girlfriend drove me to Cleveland. We spent the night in a hotel. I laid on her and wept. I was mourning losing a piece of myself. I was mourning transforming my body into something other than female; a body that would exist in the in gray between masculine and feminine. I thought of all the situations that my transbody may be used against me. What if I was in an accident and unconscious? What if first responders paused in their treatment when they saw my uncategorizable body? What if I were thrown into jail? What about when I needed medical care? Will my girlfriend love my new body? Will I ever find someone who can understand such a complicated, scarred body? I was scared of surgery.

My girlfriend was tender and kind but also nervous about the duties ahead of her. We fell asleep. My breasts would never be touched again. In a few hours that part of me would be gone forever.

**Read More:** Braver than the binary? (http://www.leocaldwell.com/braver-than-the-binary/)

The day of surgery I was in a nervous fog. I tend to shut down when a moment is so immense. I go through the motions to get to the other side. They took me back to a large room. I changed into my gown and cap and sat in a chair. They started an IV. I asked if my girlfriend could come back. I needed a kind touch. My hand was really cold from the IV. She held it and made me laugh. They wheeled me back to the operating room. There were a lot of people in the room. I’ve never seen that many people in an operating room. It wasn’t a comforting thought as I drifted into darkness.

I woke up in the hospital bed. I have a system after surgery. I ask what time it is and then I figure out how long I was under. If it seems like longer than it was supposed to be then I know something may have gone wrong. What can I say, I’m an introvert and pessimist. The surgery was under a reasonable amount of time. I thought, “I must be okay.” They moved me to another room and brought my girlfriend back to teach her how to empty my drains. As my girlfriend turned the corner, we made eye contact. She looked petrified. Tubes
had been inserted under my skin with plastic bulbs attached to the end. All of my excess fluid, blood, and bodily gunk drained into these bulbs. The nurse quickly explained the process of stripping the drain line and emptying the bulb at the end. My girlfriend would have to do this for the next seven days. I was feeling weak. They brought me a wheelchair and I was released. The day was a blur. I threw up that night back at the hotel. The next day we drove west toward my hometown in Indiana.

My recovery would take place at a spiritual community where I spent many pivotal moments of life. We unloaded the car and made a nest in the back bedroom. I stayed in a painkiller induced warmth for the first week of recovery. I wore a compression vest. I couldn’t really move much. I would sit in the tub in shallow water while my girlfriend gave me bird baths. She’d wake up at 5 a.m. when I couldn’t sleep because I felt dirty. She would help me into the bathtub and tenderly wash me. She was good at this. I felt cared for and loved. I didn’t have many emotions or thoughts about what might be under my bandages and vest. I was just existing and waiting for my body to heal.

**Read More:** Trans bodies elude the binary
(http://www.pnj.com/story/opinion/2015/10/01/trans-bodies-elude-gender-binary/73156670/)

After about seven days it was time to get the drains out and bandages off. We drove back over to Cleveland. The holes where the drains entered my body were red and very irritated. We walked into an outdated medical office with a large waiting room. I felt just as nervous as I felt the day of surgery. I was about to see my new chest. I had watched all the YouTube videos of the other transguys’ reveal days. They all looked so happy. I didn’t know what I would feel.

“Natasha?” the nurse called from the doorway. We stood up and walked through the door. I wasn’t meeting with the surgeon, which made me even more nervous. I laid down on the table and the nurse took off my compression vest. Wow. That felt nice. I was finally able to take a full breath. The bandages
were bloody and she removed them as well. The drains were left dangling from my body. I couldn’t look down. The nurse said, “I’m going to take the drains out. Take a deep breath in and let it out slowly.” I felt a quick, sharp burning spread through my chest. I looked down. I looked dead. My chest looked like a cadaver’s chest. The ones you see on *Law and Order* after an autopsy. The nurse smiled and asked if I wanted a mirror. I felt sick. I said, “No.” I wanted to cover my chest quickly and run out of there. She brushed over the aftercare, “Keep your nipples covered. Use vaseline.” It was a blur and it all ran together. I hoped my girlfriend was paying attention. We left and drove the four and half hours back to my recovery house.

I was certain I had made the wrong decision. It felt like cutting off a piece of my body had left me in an inescapable unsteady mental state. I felt alone. I had made this decision. I was having regrets. How could anyone understand? I didn’t hear this experience from other transguys online. My plan was to document my entire recovery, but I couldn’t imagine taking a picture of myself. The good news was I could finally take a bath. Baths are my happy place. I filled the tub halfway up and slid down into the hot water. I looked down at my flat, white, bloody chest. The incisions were screaming at me. My nipples looked black and dead. Don’t cry. This was your decision. I reached for the soap. My arm knocked a bowl to the floor and it shattered. I cried. I bawled. I leaned forward and held onto my legs. What had I done? Who was I? My girlfriend walked in and cleaned up the bowl. I couldn’t bear to touch my incisions. She grabbed the soap and gently rubbed them while I turned my head away.

I extended my sick leave from work another week. I was too emotional and too weak. I spent that week pacing the house. I rarely left. I’d go on walks. I wasn’t mentally stable. Then one day after a shower my girlfriend caressed my chest. I felt a tingle. I grabbed her hand and laid it on my breast bone. I felt so connected to her. It felt like the core of who I was rose to meet her at my chest. I was no longer hidden under breasts. I was bare and raw. That was a turning point for me. The surgery and recovery turned out to be more gory and emotionally taxing than I had expected. I finally understood bravery.
Bravery is to keep going even when it's agonizing. Bravery means to fight through until you have that moment of peace and revelation. It took me three weeks to get a fraction of peace. But I kept going until I felt it.

Eventually, I embraced my scarred chest. Hugs felt warmer. I could pull someone in closer. I started taking pictures of my chest and going into the ocean shirtless. The scars are still tender today. They remind me that my flesh can be bent and broken but my spirit cannot.
5 things I learned taking testosterone
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/5-things-i-learned-taking-testosterone/)

Disclaimer: This my experience alone. I don’t speak for any other transpeople or anyone else taking testosterone.

A one and half inch long needle penetrates deep into my muscle and pushes the culturally-prescribed masculinity into my system. The first few months of my testosterone injections I had no idea what I was opening in my soul, my mind and my body. I thought I was simply going to grow some hair. Hopefully only on my face and not my butt (spoiler: it grew on my butt). Maybe gain some muscle growth. It didn’t occur to me that I’d gain a deeper understanding of the masculine mystique.


We all have different amounts of testosterone and estrogen drip, dropping in our bodies despite our assigned gender/sex. I made the deliberate decision to tinker with this tango. Here are a few things that have come from this experiment in hormonal chemistry:

1. The soul resides in the pituitary gland. Ok. Maybe not. But it sure felt like the influx of new hormones changed me in places I thought were untouchable. I was under the impression it was like remodeling the outside of the house. Yes, I’d get new and exciting changes, maybe a paint job, but I thought the interior
would mostly remain the same. I was wrong. I was gutted. I felt different after my second shot. It was a carnal time in my life. From my second shot until about three years into my testosterone treatment I craved fleshly activities: eating, fucking and making money. I wanted everything to be high-risk and visually stimulating. Give it to me. Give it to me. That’s how it felt. My emotional range went from having complex feelings about a bee struggling to escape my soda can to barely feeling a thing when my girlfriend was curled up and bawling. I questioned if we even have souls during this period. Dark. I know.

2. **Sex IS amazing.** I had complicated feelings around sex before I took T. My first girlfriend wasn’t a lesbian and didn’t embrace the whole thing very well. Plus, I was raised in a religion that equated my sexuality with burning in the deepest level of hell. So, you know. Guilt and shame. Not fun. Those feelings lingered through all of my relationships until T took hold. Finally. It freed me. Shame was smothered by desire and guilt extinguished in the warmth of a body pressed against mine. I felt my skin tingle and come alive. Now I knew why everyone was obsessed!

**Read More:** Enduring after top surgery  
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/mourning-my-top-surgery/)

3. **Masculinity is beautiful.** Masculine bodies always had me borderline repulsed until my body began to masculinize. I associated them with brute, hair and stink. They seemed hard and clumsy. Then I watched the veins grow in my arms, my skin became coarse, fat dissolved and hair grew. I looked in the mirror and I still saw tenderness, grace and softness. I began to look at other masculinized bodies and realized they too held a feminine beauty that I had failed to see before T.

4. **Emotional violence.** Before T I wasn’t one to lash out. I seldom got angry even in times when I should. I experienced verbal and physical abuse in a relationship before T and I did nothing. I was extremely submissive. After taking T I was able to use my voice and stick up for myself. Unfortunately, I
also found the ability to be cruel. In moments of rage, I used words that
couldn’t be undone. I felt completely out of control. It took a pretty terrible
breakup and multiple screaming phone calls for me to realize I had to tame
this beast. I no longer find myself reaching those points of anger but I still find
myself getting unnecessarily annoyed and frustrated at the tiny things.

5. My body separates me. When I was a lesbian I’d go out to bars and
immediately fit in with a group of girls. They’d draw me in and we’d be friends
for the rest of the night. I was safely one of them. Guys rarely talked to me. I
felt like the luckiest person in the room – surrounded by the ladies. Then I
took T and my facial features masculinized and I had top surgery. I’d walk into
bars and girls would tighten their circles and turn their backs. As I stood in
line to order a drink, dudes would make disturbingly sexist comments about
women in the bar. I was lonely. If I tried to nudge my way into an all lady
conversation I was treated like the dude trying to get in someone’s pants. So,
going out really lost its appeal. However, I was part of a new network of guys
who treated me much better than when I was lesbian. I’d checkout at the
grocery and the cashier would say, “Have a nice day, man.” Or the gas station
attendant would tell me, “It’s going to be $28, boss.” I’d practice these niceties
at home. “Thanks, man!” “Yeah, buddy.”

Read More: Marriage that breaks gender norms
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/published-work/)

My dose of T has changed over the years. I started on a lower dose and have
continued to drop my dose. My hormones usually read in the space between
what doctors consider a ‘man’s’ levels and a ‘woman’s’ levels.** A space
explored by many, yet left hidden in our language and in our society. I have no
regrets in tinkering with my hormones. It’s giving me the ability to see
beyond the black and white and through the gray to realize we’re a rainbow of
hormones. This isn’t a man’s world and it ain’t a woman’s. It’s our
world. Bodies with differing amounts of hormones racing toward the sun.
**I put quotes because these are amounts established by a medical society that sees gender as a binary.**

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From a binary to a spectrum: Ending the violence against transgender people
Gender is a social structure that shapes interactional expectations, institutions, and social groups (Risman 2004). Structuration theory argues that people act on social structures as social structures act on people. These actions can change the social structure (Giddens 1984). The growing visibility of the transgender population acts on and challenges the social-structural constraints of the gender binary. Transgender individuals challenge the principle of the gender binary by transitioning from one gender to another and/or not identifying with either gender (Lorber 2005). As the transgender individual brings their new self to social interactions they create new cultural expectations about gender. These interactions and actions change the gender social structure.

Read More: Acceptance disguised as kindness
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/acceptance-disguised-as-kindness/)

In a culture that subscribes to a gender binary, trans bodies and trans expressions exist outside the boundaries created by the binary. Limiting acceptable gender expression to a binary (i.e. masculinity equals man, femininity equals woman) creates rigid and limited identity codes. Identity codes are rules of performance and symbolic constituents that signify membership within a certain group (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). Expressing gender outside the binary identity code discredits transgender individuals’ experience of self.
Transgender individuals either adapt to or reject the identity codes of the gender binary, because there currently is no identity code appropriate for their lived experience. By living outside the binary, transgender individuals can become marginalized and may experience oppressive othering.

The transgender person is seen as morally inferior to those who subscribe to the gender binary identity codes. They live outside the hegemonic boundaries of gender. Violence is used to ensure the maintenance of these boundaries (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). Transgender people experience higher rates of murder than the general population (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling 2011). By inflicting violence or death on transgender individuals, non-transgender individuals incite fear toward not conforming to the binary.

Transgender people experience higher rates of poverty, discrimination, and harassment. The National Center for Transgender Equality’s survey of transgender individuals revealed ninety percent of their respondents experienced harassment or discrimination on the job. They were twice as likely to be unemployed. Fifty three percent of respondents reported being verbally harassed in public spaces (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling 2011). To stop this violence, to stop this discrimination, to stop the unnecessary limitations of our current identity codes, and to generate more acceptance of gender diversity, the cultural expectations of the gender social structure need to change from a gender binary to a gender spectrum. The need for boundary control will change because the gender boundaries will expand (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000).

**Read More:** 5 things I learned taking testosterone (http://www.leocaldwell.com/5-things-i-learned-taking-testosterone/)

A gender spectrum is inclusive of the transgender experience. The transgender individual is no longer bound by the constraints established by the binary. This may help stop the violence against transgender people. If there is a change to the identity codes of the gender binary then there may be
a shift in the cultural expectations of gender. When there is a new social expectations for gender performance the whole gender social structure is forced to shift with these new expectations.

*This is the introduction to my master’s thesis prospectus.


Risman, B. J. (2009). From Doing to Undoing: Gender As We Know It. Gender and Society 23(1), 81–84.


*Photo from unsplash.com*

posted on December 30, 2015 (http://www.leocaldwell.com/acceptance-disguised-as-kindness/) posted in blog (http://www.leocaldwell.com/category/blog/)

.leave a comment (http://www.leocaldwell.com/acceptance-disguised-as-kindness/#respond)

❤ 0 likes
Acceptance disguised as kindness
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/ac-disguised-as-kindness/)

accept: [ak-sept] 1. to take or receive (something offered); receive with approval or favor: 2. to agree or consent to; accede to: 3. to respond or answer affirmatively to:

kind: [kahynd] adjective 1. of a good or benevolent nature or disposition, as a person; 2. having, showing, or proceeding from benevolence: 4. indulgent, considerate, or helpful; humane:

Acceptance and kindness are not the same. As a transperson, I’m expected to be delighted because someone has decided to accept me (despite being trans). I’ve even felt relief and happiness when someone has accepted me. Like there was something so desperately wrong with me that just merely being received was a kind gesture. That’s changing for me.

By seeing acceptance as kindness I’ve fed into the narrative that I deserve less than cisgender people. That transpeople as a whole are to be tolerated and, at best, accepted. Transpeople are literally trying to survive. Because of the constant violence and discrimination, we expect to be rejected so we gobble up any form of acceptance. We forget that we deserve so much more. We feel lucky to be alive. To have someone by our side. But we deserve kindness.
Often I speak up when I’m being mistreated and I’ll hear, ‘I’ve always worked to accept you.’ Bravo! Guess what, it doesn’t mean you’ve shown me kindness. It’s nice to be accepted and it’d be great if as a culture we accepted transpeople. However, the act of accepting is not a kindness.

My life is beautiful because I surround myself with people that support me, celebrate me and show me kindness. And now, I’m going to stop being surprised and grateful when someone accepts me. I deserve that much. I’ll be grateful when you are kind to me.

And so many of you have been so kind. Thank you.

‘Your friend is your needs answered.  
He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.  
And he is your board and your fireside.  
For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.  
The Prophet’

*Ways to be kind to a (trans) person:*

1. Try to understand their perspective

2. Celebrate their big moments, hold them in their low moments

3. Be there
How Leelah broke my silence
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/how-leelah-broke-my-silence/)

This day last year I was wrapping up my holiday by visiting my girlfriend.

This day last year Leelah Alcorn was wrapping up her short 17 years on this earth by stepping into traffic.

When I read Leelah’s suicide note, I realized I couldn’t just move on and not speak up. We all have that moment when the injustices of the world make us
so sick we can’t slide by anymore. Leelah was calling out to us from the beyond with this message:

‘The only way I will rest in peace is if one day transgender people aren’t treated the way I was, they’re treated like humans, with valid feelings and human rights. Gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier the better. My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say ‘that’s fucked up’ and fix it. Fix society. Please.’

Her last plea, “Fix society. Please,” I took very personal. I felt like I had something to say, something that might change those that I could reach with my words. Change my piece of society. With the hope that transpeople especially transyouth would find a society that was willing and wanting to embrace them. So, I started writing. I wrote my first column about Leelah, as so many others were as well. We all took her up in our arms and spread her story. I think we all recognized that desperate cry, that desperate want for a society we could survive. With 41% of us attempting suicide, it’s clear she was not alone. Got that? Not thinking about suicide but actually attempting it.

After the outpouring for Leelah, we watched in horror as the number of murdered transwomen of color grew. The demand for justice grew louder and my mission begin to shift.

I started researching structuration theory and boundary control. I began to see how vital it was to my transsisters of color that our society change. In a radical way. The violence and discrimination transpeople face is based on boundaries created by a gender social structure that is limited to a binary. If we can shift the way we view gender from a binary to a spectrum, I believe we can help end some of this violence.

My mission for 2016 is to continue to breakdown the gender binary myth... because I’d like to one day live in a society where “transgender people are treated like humans.”
For Papi, Lamia, Ty, Michelle, Taja, Penny, Bri, Kristina, Keyshia, London, Mercedes, Jasmine, Ashton, India, K.C., Shade, Amber, Kandis, Elisha, Tamara, Keisha, Zella and Leelah.

“Gender likewise figures as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity.” – Judith Butler
My parents call me ‘she’ and that’s okay (http://www.leocaldwell.com/parents-call-me-she-and-thats-okay/)

The waitress looks around at the mismatched bunch at the table. A man with an overgrown goatee and striking blue eyes. The woman with her long hair in a bun and soft skin. And me.

She starts to take drink orders and turns to look at me. I focus in on her. I repeat in my head, “Please, don’t use ‘sir.’ Please, don’t use ‘sir.’” “Sir, what would you like to drink?” “Water.” The woman with her long hair in a bun, my mother, looks into the distance uncomfortably.

I quickly fill in the silence with chatter.

The waitress comes back. My mom says loudly, “Tash, what are you going to have?” She points, “She is going to get the pasta.” See, that’s the thing. My mom wants to reclaim some piece of me she feels she lost when I began testosterone. Just as I try to reclaim some piece of her when I see the lines deepen in her face and the passage of time reminds me she won’t remain here forever. My mom wants me to remain “she” because that’s the person she knows. But more substantial, without the “she” I’m a lost soul. A sinner in her world.
Can I fault her? Argue with her? Accuse her of not respecting me? No. I can’t do any of these things because, you see, my mom taught me about convictions and truths. And these are her convictions and truths. Without my truth and my ability to live it I would’ve remained in a life not my own. Without these tools, I would’ve withered away. She taught me to believe in myself and to fight for those beliefs. She taught by example. She has held firm to her beliefs about God, the world and certain standards we should hold as humans. I find that admirable and bold.

The subject of my parents is a hard one to tackle in my writing because they are tender and loving to me. They just can’t align my identity with their convictions and beliefs. Just like I can’t align their identity with mine. While this makes holidays complicated, it does not damage our love or respect for one another.

Over Thanksgiving someone asked me, “How was it with your family?” I said, “Awkward and awesome.” They replied, “Yeah, while your parents have issues with your lifestyle, they know how to love.” They do.

So, they still call me “she” and it doesn’t feel damaging. It doesn’t sting. It reminds me of who I was. It reminds me to hold steady in my beliefs. It reminds of the lessons they taught me. It reminds me – I am loved – past and present.

*Photo from unsplash.com*
Braver than the binary?
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/b
than-the-binary/)

‘It takes real courage to do what you’re doing.’

‘I’m so proud of you.’
‘You’re being true to yourself and that’s so brave.’

I’ve been told I’m brave quite a few times the last couple of years. Yes, this transition required me to quiet my trembling body and lay down on an operating table. It required me to look into my parents’ eyes and reveal I’m not who they wanted me to be. It still asks that I shake up the notions of gender
for those in my life. But those actions don’t make me brave. Those choices bring me closer to an unexpected understanding. An enlightenment. An evolution of my soul.

I never felt female. So I did what I was told I changed my physical appearance and name to something less feminine. I did this because it was an easier option than exploring a space in the middle between female and male. I did this because even despite the risks of violence and discrimination, it was easier to survive in this world as a transman than someone without a pronoun.

But as I watch the walls of masculinity grow around me, I realize I’m not comfortable. This isn’t my home. I don’t belong among men.

I walk the world wrapped up in white, male privilege. It’s a safe space to be in and maybe that’s why I’m here because I haven’t felt safe most of my life. But I can’t deny that I feel the roar of femininity inside of me. I feel Natasha desperately clinging to everything she was and could be. I struggle with the realization that my gender no more transcends the binary than a non-transperson. I didn’t move beyond the binary. I just picked the other box.

But now, as I research and dissect the gender social structure I can feel myself let go of that comfort and safety of my masculinity. I’m ready to truly to be brave. I’m ready to give up the safety net of societal acceptance and embrace who I might really be beyond the binary.

*My experience is mine alone. Every transperson experiences their journey and transition differently. I speak only for myself and my convictions.

**Also, you can totally still tell me you’re proud of me and I’m brave... oh and beautiful.

***The working title for this piece, ‘Let’s deconstruct this bitch’

Photo from unsplash.com
Raising a son as a transman
(http://www.leocaldwell.com/raising-a-son-as-a-transman/)

We walk into the bathroom. His tiny hand firmly in mine.

“Is this the boys? Is this boys bathroom? Are we in the boys?”

“It’s a bathroom.”

“Can I use those? There is a little one.”
“Yeah, you can. That’s a urinal.”
His tiny hands reach out to touch the urinal cake. “What’s this?!”
“NO!!!! Don’t ever, ever, ever touch anything in the urinal. Or the bathroom at all for that matter.”
He pulls his pants up.
“Ok, now I have to go. Let’s go to the stall.”
“Why? They have a big one for you!”
“I can’t use that. I don’t have a penis.”
“Oh...”
His eyes are often filled with wonder. They look like tiny deer eyes especially during our early morning chats. His dreams and fantasies dance with all the questions. He looks to me for answers. “Why? Why? Why? Why are some boys girls and some girls boys?” I’ve never lied to him about my identity. I tell him a plain and simple toddler version of my life. I was born a girl and now I’m a boy.
Just like my stepson, I have a lot of questions about gender. In a way I’m still a child in the world of masculinity. As I raise him, I wonder how my life and my views will ripple through his. I want him to know there are no limitations to his expression. He can be, wear, feel any way he wishes. Lately, he has decided he wants to be a cat when he grows up.
I guess it might be working.
He also has been telling me about how some toys are girl toys and some toys are boy toys. I feel pain in my non-binary heart when I hear him gender objects. I try to explain that toys are toys. But he is three and always right.
I want him to be gentle. I want him to be kind. I want him to be brave.
I want him to recognize and appreciate the femininity within his masculinity. I want him to understand that the world is so much more gray than black and white.
Sometimes, he puts on his tutu and dances around the house with his hand flipped up and I burst with pride. Then I worry. Am I allowing him to be him? Or am I influencing him too heavily? But I guess that’s the thing about raising a child – they are, we are a culmination of influences, hormones, electric impulses and personalities.
I’m just another voice in that big, beautiful wondering head of his.
COLUMNS

PUBLISHED IN THE PENSACOLA NEWS JOURNAL AND THE COURIER-POST

FROM JUNE 2015 TO JANUARY 2016
In past columns, I’ve mentioned the gender binary and talked about a middle space of gender. I’ve received feedback that gender and/or sex is an unchangeable fact rooted in our chromosomes. I’d like to take this column to address gender and sex.

Gender is a social construct based on the sex marker we were given at birth. A baby is born and it’s declared a boy or a girl based on how the genitals appear. The moment of birth is the only time in our lives, outside of sexual relations, that our genitals are used to distinguish our gender. The rest of our life is spent acting out our gender through our mannerisms, our styles and so forth.

But how do we know what is an appropriate way for a man to wear his hair? Or what outfit a woman should have on to be ‘read’ as a woman? We know this because of what we have determined as a society is appropriate for a man versus a woman. These standards change with time. Look at the ‘80s. Gender-fluid expression among men was much more acceptable, and women wore shoulder pads to give the impression of power normally assumed by men.

You might argue that more visible features such as facial hair or breasts are clear physical signs of gender. But I’ve seen quite a few women with facial hair. Most of my friends boast they could outbeat me despite my testosterone use. I’ve also encountered men with breasts much larger than the ones I had pre-surgery. Gender is a performance and we fall into the role everyday based on societal standards.

Let’s talk about sex. The biological kind. This is where it gets fun. The argument goes that your sex is determined by nature so your gender needs to follow suit. Right? You are born with a vagina or a penis so you are a woman or a man. Yes, some of us are born with a clearly defined vagina or penis and some of us aren’t. There is a trait called intersexuality that affects 1 to 4 percent of the population. The intersex individual’s sex can be ambiguous for a variety reasons, from physical differences to chromosomal differences.

But chromosomes are the definitive marker of sex, right? Sure. As an article in Nature Education states, “Normally, cells from females contain two X chromosomes, and cells from males contain an X and a Y chromosome.” Chromosomes determine sex. Have you had your chromosomes tested? I sure haven’t.

So, if you’re reading this and you are a man because you have a penis, then you are assuming you have XY, right? Well, you might not. The article includes the example of “sex-reversed XX men, rare individuals who look like men but have two X chromosomes instead of one X chromosome and one Y chromosome.” Until you have your chromosomes tested, you can’t determine that you are, by scientific standards, a man.

The Intersex Society of America includes this statement on its website: “So nature doesn’t decide where the category of “male” ends and the category of “intersex” begins, or where the category of “intersex” ends and the category of “female” begins. Humans decide [http://www.isna.org/faq/gender_assignment]. Humans (today, typically doctors) decide how small a penis has to be, or how unusual a combination of parts has to be, before it counts as intersex. Humans decide whether a person with XXY chromosomes or XY chromosomes and androgen insensitivity will count as intersex.”

The landscape of sex and gender includes way more gray than black and white. This isn’t an either/or situation. As a society, we’ve decided to maintain these gender boundaries for centuries. We’ve policed ourselves and others to maintain them and it’s been lethal. Last year was the deadliest on record for transpeople. What a different world we would live in if we could see gender on a continuum. Not just for transpeople, but for all of us.

_Leo Caldwell is a transman, husband and writer._

Read or Share this story: [http://on.cpsj.com/1RGsIlr](http://on.cpsj.com/1RGsIlr)
On Sept. 6, I exchanged vows with my lovely bride, Amy, and entered into the world of marriage. Being a transman and still legally female, I wasn’t sure I’d ever see the day I’d be able to marry. But here I am, a husband. Navigating this new role, I’m careful to foster equality and not fall into traditional marital gender roles. However, I often find myself up against a world that doesn’t quite understand our marital philosophy.

When we began planning our wedding I had an opinion about every detail. When I started explaining the exact placement of the tulle, our wedding planner looked up from her book and said, “Are you an artist?!” It seems most grooms weren’t as involved in the design and decor. As we stood in the foyer of our apartment talking to the landlord about the HVAC system, he turned to me and started talking about the different components. These small talk social expectations don’t seem like much on the surface. Men know about cars. Women want to talk about flowers. But they send a clear message. “Stay in the box, this is what you should know. Study up on your roles as a man and wife.”

These expectations become quite damaging when it comes to more substantial household decisions. We walked into a car dealership and immediately the salesperson made eye contact with me. I looked at Amy. She is the one with the facts and figures. We decided she would be the negotiator and I’d help when needed. But the salespeople continued to look to me after each question and quote. Suddenly I felt the pressure of making a decision on a car purchase and making sure my wife received respect in the process. I asked Amy how it felt for her. She said, “It felt demeaning and frustrating that the salespeople seemed surprised when they realized I was the main negotiator.”

In these situations I try to redirect my privilege as a white man to her. I want my body language and my gaze to say, “She is just as much in control and knowledgeable as I am.” As a husband and an equal partner, it’s my obligation to make sure she is never looked over because she is not a man. It’s my responsibility to step back as she steps forward. I’m not here to protect her. She is capable and can do that for herself. However, I will not let my white, male privilege stand in her way.

Within our household, there is no division of labor based on gender. We nurture and care for our son equally. We both cook and clean. We both work. We live as equal a partnership as possible. I don’t feel the burden to be the breadwinner and she doesn’t feel the sole obligation of housekeeper. We carry the responsibilities of this life together.

Because of my unique perspective on gender, I’m able to distinguish the subtle societal cues that reinforce inequality in marriage. If you’re married or in a relationship, take a look at it with fresh genderless eyes. Observe how your partner is treated, how are you treated and how you treat each other. Discuss with your partner how gender has affected your roles in your marriage or relationship. Shake it up bit. Let go of those gender roles. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Leo Caldwell is a transman from Indiana and living in New Jersey. You can reach him at leo@leocaldwell.com (mailto:leo@leocaldwell.com) and @leo_caldwell. For more information, go to leocaldwell.com.

Read or Share this story: http://on.pnj.com/1QD7ROK
Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Self-trust is the essence of heroism.” To begin the process of transitioning beyond the gender you were assigned at birth takes a great deal of courage. To act on a decision that could result in ostracism requires a trust fall into your own arms. Many transgender people go through extensive soul searching before they embark on the physical journey of transition. Self-trust is empowering and enabling but incredibly isolating. The decision to follow our own truth may cut us off from family and friends. The decision to begin my transition isolated me emotionally, physically and spiritually.

The emotional isolation of transition begins the moment you are scolded for feelings that don’t fit societal norms. My moment was when I realized the crush I had on my female babysitter was considered wrong. My emotions remained the same but they were wrapped in shame and guilt. I knew what thoughts to keep private and what could be expressed. I couldn’t imagine speaking the truth that I didn’t feel female. So, I didn’t. I didn’t express a full range of emotions. I kept my deepest desires and passions hidden. I was protecting myself. I was protecting my dreams from ridicule. I’ve received a pretty clear message from our society — there isn’t room for you here.

I felt physical isolation when I began hormones. I avoided people in my life that I felt might reject me. I couldn’t handle the emotional heavy lifting of transitioning and being rejected at the same time. My voice deepened, so I stopped calling my friend who was in her seventies. I didn’t want to confuse her. Eventually, my breasts were gone. I loosened my embrace when I hugged family members. I relocated and I was terrified to find a new massage therapist. I avoided any situation that involved a locker room. I was afraid of situations where I had to use my birth name. I was beginning to love my body but was afraid it would cause someone to harm me.

My spiritual isolation began in my teen years. I grew up extremely religious. I adored going to church and felt a strong connection to God. However, the message I heard over and over about homosexuality made me feel like it was impossible to remain active in church. I couldn’t come to love myself and still love the church. I had to distance myself in order to survive. I’ve often said that having to leave the church was my first heartbreak.

“I have been living as a man for years now but as I am getting older I have found that I feel so isolated from every community. People feel the need to label you somehow and this is why I feel isolated from the cisgender (a person who identifies with their sex assigned at birth) world,” said Andrew, a transman in his 30s. The labels are everywhere from clothing sections to bathrooms. When these labels aren’t congruent with your reality, it becomes difficult to be a part of the community as a whole.

Even today, I am most comfortable alone. Navigating a world that is highly gendered is emotionally taxing on someone who identifies in the gray space of gender. The sirs and ma’ams. It’s a daily negotiation of how much to reveal and how much to conceal. You have to be ever vigilant of your surroundings. I’ve left many restaurants, bars and stores because I did not feel safe. In most cases, I’ve isolated myself for protection.

Despite the isolation, I trust myself. Despite the sacrifices, I continue to speak my truth. Because only I know the deepest parts of myself. Even in a world that acts violently towards my decisions, I move forward because it is simply who I am. As I walk fully myself into the world, these words from Emerson surface in my mind, “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

Leo Caldwell is a transman from Indiana and living in New Jersey. You can reach him at leo@leocaldwell.com and @leo_caldwell. Find him on YouTube, search Leo Caldwell.

Read or Share this story: http://on.pnj.com/1101J8D
Trans bodies elude the gender binary

What constitutes a male body or a female body? We use genitals to label someone, but what about intersexuality when perhaps the genitals don’t fit societal standards? And beyond body parts, what makes a man or a woman? That question is being asked by many as the trans population becomes more visible.

Bodies are interestingly contradictory. We are encapsulated by flesh that is intended to represent us. Who we are. But mostly, our flesh tends to dictate how we are seen in society rather than being seen for “who we are.” We are female, male, large, small, short and tall. All these characteristics form a sense of “person” in the world. Our daily interactions are shaped by these bodies. We quickly scan one another, decide how to interact based on previous established expectations of gender, race, size, etc. What does that mean for a body in transition?

At some point in transition most people experience a radical and enlightening space. A sacred space between a female body and a male body. It’s a place of terror and beauty. Some people decide to stay there and celebrate this body. Some continue to change and grow into a traditional American feminine or masculine appearance.

The latter group tends to be more digestible for the American public. They ooh and ah at the beauty of these trans bodies. They gawk at the before and after photos. They are amazed at how these new bodies “pass” in their new gender. Yes, these bodies are beautiful. These bodies are powerful and have endured endless pains to be alive. What about those bodies in the in between, in the gray space? Those with visible scars and an undetectable gender.

I want to celebrate the transbodies that still stand in the gray space. I want to celebrate my body. I tend to be read as a feminine man. My body reads as someone of both genders and my face reads as male. I’m intentionally on a low dose of testosterone because I feel most comfortable in the gray space.

In this space, I’ve gained an insight on life that is difficult to see unless you’ve lived it. You know when you’re standing on a plain and looking at a mountain and it’s gigantic and majestic against the blue sky. As you approach, it blooms and grows and suddenly you’re surrounded by the mountain. It’s lush, green and rocky all around you. You are enveloped. I live in a body and space where I experience both views in the same moment. The immense allure and the swaddled serenity. This body, with its scars and its gender indifference, feels like home. I’m comfortable in this body and I wonder why so many people are uncomfortable with it.

I wonder why trans people have to be presented as either feminine or masculine for an American public to take notice. Because, frankly, we are all transormative. We are all dazzling! We are all gorgeous and interesting. And now all I can hear in my head is Salt-N-Pepa’s “I’m the body beautiful.” I always like to end with a little call-to-action for the reader to get better acquainted with the trans experience. So, go Google “I’m the body beautiful”, turn up your volume and flip through photos of trans people by Amos Mac or Jess T. Dugan. We are the body beautiful.

Leo Caldwell is a transman and writer. If you have questions about the trans experience, he can be reached at leo@leocaldwell.com (mailto:leo@leocaldwell.com) or @leo_caldwell.

Photo caption: My scars are a visible mark of my transgender status. Credit: Leo Caldwell

Read or Share this story: http://on.pnj.com/1KQyiNi
Viewpoint: Each of us should strive to be a true ally to transpeople


These women will no longer experience the beauty of the lingering light left as the sun sets. They will no longer taste the delicious kindness of a home-cooked meal. They won’t laugh or cry again. They won’t apply another layer of lipstick. They will no longer embrace their loved ones. These women. They are transgender and they are dead.

They were violently murdered this year. Most are transwomen of color. Transwomen of color live at the intersection of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Not a kind place to live. All these phobias steam from a fear of difference. This fear is a societal disease. A disease that feeds on angry stares, cutting whispers and violence. The above women were murdered in states scattered throughout the U.S. The fear of difference is consuming our entire country.

I said in my last column that I felt safer this year because of all the trans visibility. That’s easy for me to say because I pass as a straight, white, male. The truth is the violence toward transpeople is at an historic high. I’m blessed to have this public forum to speak about my personal issues and experiences. However, I realize my voice is not adequate. I asked my friend Monika Veliz to write about her experience as a biracial transwoman. A big part of me quietly hoped violence had some how missed her. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

Monika told me about an incident that “defined her awareness.” She said that her family was supportive and she went into the world and assumed life would be normal. She lived her life unafraid. Until she was attacked:

“In the summer of ’98 I was clubbing on the westside of Cleveland. Performing actually. I went outside to grab a smoke and chat with people who commonly stood outside. I thought I was really cute in those days. It wasn’t a second thought to holler back at men who drove by and gave catcalls. I didn’t care. They thought I was pretty and I liked the attention. One guy stopped his car, asked for my number. I followed him to his car where he said he had a pen. It was on a side street by the club.

“He attacked me.”

Monika escaped her attacker but she said, “Fear was born that day. That caution became real. It took me years to get myself back to a point where I trust people I’m around, or trust places that I’m in.”

Monika lost her trust in society. I never trusted society. This is the reality for most transpeople. To live in fear of the world. And with historically high murder rates, why shouldn’t we be afraid? How can we stop the violence? How can we stop fearing difference?

Stop the transgender jokes. I’ve overheard many rude comments about Caitlyn Jenner and Chaz Bono because people don’t realize they are in the company of a transperson. You never know who is trans, and when you make these jokes you validate the hatred and violence as you also invalidate the person. Be a true ally. Kate Bornstein, a transwomen and gender pioneer, described an ally as someone who asks, “What do you need?” If you know someone who is trans ask specifically how you can help them. Stop the whispers and questions about gender. When you question someone’s gender you open that person up to violence.

If we can break down the boxes that divide the genders, we make room in our society for all expressions of gender.

Leo Caldwell, 32, is a transman and writer in Merchantville, N.J. Got questions about the trans experience? Ask Leo on Twitter, @leo_caldwell or email leo@leo-caldwell.com

Read or Share this story: http://on.pnj.com/1Es5Wdc
Viewpoint: I’m able to come out – again

I began identifying as trans in 2007.

I started testosterone in 2009.

I had a double mastectomy, also known as top surgery, in 2012.

Yet, I didn’t completely come out as a transman until 2014. It wasn’t a part of my public identity. I was terrified. Completely and absolutely. Terrified of the world. I didn’t want my face associated with being trans. I was afraid of getting assaulted or verbally attacked in public.

What’s different now? What shifted for me? You did – I hope. Our society has – for sure. We are still in forward motion. We are in a spot that I feel safe to write this column. However, we are still a society that brutally murders transwomen. We are moving, we are marching but we still have a very long way to go before all transpeople feel safe. As I see Caitlyn Jenner in the news, Laverne Cox grace the cover of many mainstream magazines and marriage equality reach every inch of our country, I’m able to live in less fear and shame. I’m able to come out – again.

There has been discussion around whether Caitlyn Jenner should be called an American Hero. I’m not here to settle the debate, but I will say her decision to finally come out publicly made this society a little safer for me. It certainly helped that transgirl living in rural, small town America feeling alone in this journey. It helped her hold her head a little higher.

It helped me see who was behind Caitlyn Jenner and who was against her. Who I could trust and who I should avoid. Transpeople live in a world that isn’t kind to them especially minority transpeople. Seeing others come out publicly helps us open up and speak up — for us these actions are heroic.

As I watched Caitlyn’s interview with Diane Sawyer I felt empowered to take control of my own narrative. Isn’t that what coming out is all about? Telling your story from your lips. Caitlyn’s public coming out process gave more transpeople the courage to come out when previously, they were still in the shadows. It enabled some to tell their story.

But as we come out, I want society to remember we aren’t all going to look and sound like Laverne Cox or Caitlyn Jenner — just like you all don’t look like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. For most of us it is like a second puberty. Remember puberty? Yeah, it can be painfully awkward.

We are a diverse set of people with a variety of styles and bodies. We come in a wide range of gender variance. We won’t be able to afford to transform in such a dramatic fashion. For the majority of us the transformation is a long, painful, physical and emotional path that takes years. It’s a path we go down because we have to. It’s the only way we will survive this life.

As we come out, remember we are coming out to increase visibility. We need to be seen. We exist and hey, we are awesome. As Laverne Cox said, “When people have points of reference that are humanizing, that demystifies difference.” That’s why I write this column. I’m a #reallife transadult and I want you to communicate with me. Ask me questions. Let’s talk about your fears, your excitement, your confusion, your happiness about the trans experience. I want to be your point of reference.

Leo Caldwell is a 32-year-old transman and writer living in Merchantville, N.J. Got questions about the trans experience? Ask Leo on Twitter, @leo_caldwell.

Read or Share this story: http://on.nj.com/1MQfldf
Viewpoint: Experiencing both sides of gender inequality in the workplace

Leo Caldwell  10:05 a.m. CDT June 6, 2015

Imagine one day leaving your job as a woman and starting another as a man. We all know the quantitative data on inequality in the workplace – men tend to get paid more and hold higher positions than women. What would it be like to experience this inequality as an individual? What if you could experience the workplace as a woman and then a man.

I was able to do so a few years ago.

I worked in a small newsroom in a Midwestern town from 2007 to 2011. I was perceived as a butch lesbian. Perception is a powerful force in the workplace. We all have our own conscious and unconscious categorization to help us navigate the world. One of the most basic and instant categories is gender. But when someone can't be easily gendered, what happens? Usually silence. I found myself mostly ignored the first year or two of my employment with the newspaper. My yearly review even said I was too quiet. If you know me personally you'd laugh at that assessment.

What I was dealing with was being silenced or ignored because my colleagues didn't know how to interact with someone they couldn't easily gender. This left me mostly disengaged in the workplace banter. It was even more detrimental to not have a voice during decision-making moments.

After a couple of years everyone eased into who I was – someone on the gender spectrum. Communication flowed a bit more easily. I was finally seen as a woman in the workplace! (Awesome. Now I could rightfully own that 78 cents to every dollar that a man makes.) I noticed my voice still didn't get heard as loudly or clearly as my male colleagues. I felt like I had to fight for my point. It's a subtle gender inequality – not the kind that you show with statistics and data. I didn't realize how prevalent this inequality was until I was perceived as a man in the workplace. I was offered another newspaper job in 2011. I decided this was my chance to assume my male name and pronouns professionally. I left one job as Natasha and started the other as Leo.

As I sat in my newsroom’s meetings wrapped in white, male privilege I was stunned – at the respect, the authority and the eye contact I commanded simply by wearing a tie. When I spoke up at a meeting everyone tuned in to listen, some even taking notes. I no longer had to fight for my point – my point simply was good (most of the time).

I wasn't hidden away at some desk tucked out of view. I was paraded around and introduced to all the new faces. The handshakes I received were harder and longer. I was respected. I was a man.

I am sure some of my former colleagues would argue that they thought of me no differently and maybe that's true. However, gender inequality starts when we put the genders into two separate boxes. It starts when we decide that women behave one way and men another, when we assign characteristics to gender rather than to people. And gender inequality ends when we realize we all live on a gender spectrum. It ends when we realize that characteristics are just that "a feature or quality belonging typically to a person." See that, to a person, not a whole gender.

Pull apart your perceptions about gender. Stop separating everyone into your neat, tiny boxes. Stop assuming men are from Mars and women are from ... you know. Try for one day to see your workplace as genderless.

Leo Caldwell is a 32-year-old transman and writer living in Merchantville, N.J. Got questions about the trans experience? Ask Leo on Twitter, @leo_caldwell.

Read or Share this story: http://on.pnj.com/1IseKQA
Leo Caldwell: Let’s fix society #RealLiveTransAdult

On Sunday, Dec. 28, 2014 yet another transperson committed suicide. Leelah Alcorn was struck and killed by a tractor-trailer. But she did not go gently into the night. She made her suicide a public event with a clear and simple message, “Fix society. Please.” In response to her death, the hashtag #RealLiveTransAdult began to cultivate the stories of us — of me, of transpeople. I am a 32-year-old transman and I want to ask you — you, a member of this society that needs fixing, please help me fix this society. I am hoping this column might help both of us in that journey.

Educate yourself so we can go beyond definitions and tell stories. Let’s focus our trans-related content on the human aspects, the #RealLiveTransAdults. We continually feel the need to explain what it means to be trans to a public that has seen Laverne Cox on the cover of Time. If you’re still not sure what transgender means, Google it. Heck, let’s not get caught up on definitions. Remember gender identity is fluid and so the definition is fluid. Being trans isn’t an all encompassing identity and we miss the rest of someone’s story when we focus on this piece of their identity. I am a soon-to-be parent and husband, I am a multimedia developer and I am trans. Let us be represented by who we are, what we love, our passions and our achievements — not our gender identity.

Support us even if it’s hard. Usually a transperson has gone through hell to become their authentic self. The path involves surgeries, financial and emotional costs, loss of family and friends. Please do the work to understand and respect a transperson’s journey. I read a story published in Woman’s Day about a Christian mother who had a trans son and she stopped asking God to change her child and instead asked God to change her heart. Instead of asking someone who has worked so hard to exist to change, ask your heart to change. We need to stop putting the burden of being understood on the transpopulation. The onus is on you to understand.

To my transbrothers and sisters, I can say the usual things — it gets better, keep going and you’re not alone. But I know some days those things hold no truth for you. They didn’t for Leelah. They haven’t for me on a bad day. But those were bad days and to be honest as cheesy as it is — different is the new normal. Yes, our society still needs to be fixed and shaken out of their gender binary boxes but we aren’t there yet. This doesn’t make you a freak — it makes you evolved. You’ve evolved beyond the definitions and standards. You, my friend, are enlightened.

Society, let’s do this together. Let’s fix ourselves. Let’s educate ourselves. Let’s support one another. Transpeople exist. Please go to Twitter, search for the hashtag #RealLiveTransAdult and read our stories. Our lives are important. Let trans lives have more meaning in living than in dying.

Leo Caldwell is a 32-year-old transman living in Indiana and New Jersey. He is a multimedia developer and former newspaper editor at Gannett. He can be reached at leo.andmedia@gmail.com

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VIDEOS

PUBLISHED ON YOUTUBE.COM

FROM OCTOBER 2015 TO MARCH 2016
The Teensy Mustache: Introduction

Hello! I'm starting a weekly series about gender and living beyond/between the gender binary. I'm Leo. I'm a 33-year-old married transman. I want you to ask me questions. This series about creating a safe place to ask all the questions about gender and transgender experiences.

The Teensy Mustache: The sacred space in the middle

Published on Nov 1, 2015
In this one, I wear a bowtie and talk about how all ranges of gender expression need to be seen to break down the binary. It's our mission as transpeople to create visibility around the diversity of genders in our community.