

## The Moral Search for Self<sup>1</sup>

February 9, 2010

“Wow! Congratulations!!!”

In the restaurant booth opposite me, my friend’s spontaneous response was wonderful, caring, and – to be sure – not at all what I had expected. Thankfully so; even though she is a dear friend I was still prepared for shock, disbelief, unease, perhaps even some well-intended joking. Instead, Victoria’s broad smile and sparkling eyes were precious. Her immediate and complete acceptance of my coming out was the sincere and unrehearsed gift of a friend, to be cherished forever.

I have not always met with such grace and love as those close to me learned that I was transgender. People have informed me, with the voice of absolute assuredness and authority, that I was delusional, wrong-headed, immoral, or simply being absurd. The angriest and most common negative reaction has been that I am being inexcusably selfish. There are often many additional adjectives added to “selfish”, but the sentiment is clear. How can I do “this” to my wife, my children, my extended family, or my friends? By doing “this,” I have seen my relationship with siblings and a few close friends disintegrate – some only gradually to be retrieved over a protracted period, some gone forever. “This” has led a client to explain that he was struggling to know how to react; his pastor had categorically advised him that I was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord and that he, my client, should therefore have nothing more to do with me.

The possibility that I am damned in the eyes of the Lord (whatever that means) was not a new idea to me. As I discovered when I devoured Jennifer Boylan’s wonderful autobiographical book, *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, I wasn’t alone with this ominous thought. Boylan’s insights and anecdotes are illuminating and provocative, but one passage in particular stood out for me. Jennifer – at that point Jim – is awake in the very early morning hours, agonizing over the overwhelming inner sense that he is the wrong person, living the wrong life, in the wrong body. Working through a litany of rational arguments against transitioning, the answer to each specific point is: “I know. Still.” Jim – later Jennifer – concludes this soliloquy thus:

You know, don’t you, that no amount of wishing that this were not the case can *make* it not the case. No amount of praying that you are not transgendered will make you something other than what you are. No amount of love from anyone will make you fit inside a body that does not match your spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was the basis of a talk given by the author at the Capital Trans Pride Event at the Madison Hotel, Washington, DC, in June 2008

To which I would respond: Well, I'll be goddamned if I'm going to break anybody's heart. I'll be goddamned if I'm going to let my family down. I'll be goddamned if I'm going to give up everything I've always wanted just so I can fit.

To which I would respond: I know. Still.

To which I would respond: Well, all right, then. You'll be goddamned.

Transgender people know that “still,” and we are poignantly aware of where it will lead us – the weighty possibility of a divine rebuke notwithstanding. It is the argument that won't be silenced, the certainty that we have reached the moral tradeoff that is too onerous to bear, no matter the consequences. We sense the harm it will bring to others, but within our societies we truly have no acceptable choices. It is a moral decision point, a boundary; it is a time to call an end to the slow and painful death of a false existence, instead to embrace a new and authentic life. As stated in the gospel of Saint Thomas: “If you call forth what is in you, it will save you. If you do not call forth what is in you, it will destroy you.” When I came face to face with the “still” in my own internal deliberations, I chose to trust in a God of love and acceptance, not in a God of retribution and anger against those who already suffer so deeply. I concluded also that it was long past time to reject being a disempowered victim of an unfortunate quirk of birth.

Calling forth my authenticity – being selfish – does have its destructive impact. On the other hand, Victoria and the many other dear friends who have reacted with as much delight (if not always with as much spontaneity) are celebrating my ownership of self. Taking the most prominent place among these initial celebrants are my wife, my two young children, and my oldest brother and his wife. My late father Ray, a retired Marine Corps colonel, may not quite have fitted within the “celebrant” camp when I came out to him when he was 91 years old, but the year that followed was an exceptionally close time for us both. He and all these dear members of my close family have offered me their unquestioned love and support, often at a great price to themselves: my wife has lost her husband, my children their father, my father a son, and my eldest brother and his wife have lost a brother. Their “transition” experience is imbued with poignant loss, but I will argue that the loss of the *roles* does not equate to the loss of the *person*. Still, there is no doubt that my “selfishness” has significant consequences for others as well as for me; coming out as transgender affects other persons, sometimes grievously. As such, coming out is fundamentally a moral phenomenon.

Morality may seem an odd map by which to chart the waters of the “selfish” transgender coming out experience, until we remember that the moral values that we encounter in ourselves and in others are diverse and so often conflict. We struggle to make sense of these clashing values, initially through a hasty reliance on the most immediate of our moral resources: our intuition and conscience. If we have the luxury of some time, then more carefully reasoned moral reflection may offer us a more comforting, reliable way to justify our selfishness and still conclude that we are, after all, moral and decent persons. As transgender persons we each feel our way forward as we come out in our own ways and with varying degrees of moral clarity, seeking the authenticity that we now, at long

last, are coming to express and to own. Along with that authenticity, we claim our dignity and worth – no longer a victim, the object of pity or of humiliation.

While authenticity is widely valued, selfishness is perhaps an odd attribute to celebrate. There are other less controversial compliments directed at transgender persons; we often are heralded as brave, courageous, honest, or determined. I've chosen to befriend the "selfish" label, however, probably because it so disarms those who select this way of demeaning me. To them "selfish" speaks of being callous, unconcerned and uncaring of the welfare of others. After all, selfish people place their self-interest arrogantly ahead of the legitimate, reasonable needs and feelings of other folk. The pejorative "selfish" label often overlaps or coincides with other similar labels: narcissism, self-absorption, misplaced idealism, sometimes even greed.

For transgender people, however, the decision to own one's authentic self is wholesomely selfish. For years we have lived lives of painful denial, trying to ignore, dilute, or reject the persistent internal messages and yearnings that finally, inexorably, lead us to where we are now. We've paid the most awful price for not being more selfish; the hollowness and dissonance of living one's life in the wrong body in adherence of other people's gender and role expectations subjects us to inner conflicts, bouts of deep depression, and troubled relationships with those whom we love. For me, whose teaching, work, and passion is the field of applied ethics, there were periods where I felt like a complete fraud: the person devoid of that internal integrity, teaching the world about integrity!

Until I confronted my transgender status, identifying as a fraud was not something I could come to peace with, or at times even bear. This isn't about philosophical angst; I felt undermined in my most deeply held convictions, affections, relationships, and passions. I was without a "self" that I could love or respect. That's an awful place to be; I am not alone among transgender persons in having adopted, of necessity, extreme coping methods to deal with that unlovable sense of self – methods that were ultimately very self-destructive. Some transgender persons simply cannot cope; suicide is tragically a too common outcome of this condition.

So I am selfish, but I am not callous. In claiming my authenticity, I am aware that in my character and my actions I have an impact on others around me. I continue to be amazed and often perplexed at how profound that impact can be for some people, spanning a continuum from delight to abhorrence. Why does being authentic, in this case through my gender expression as a woman, matter so much to those who are not in interdependent relationships with me? Why does Victoria smile, while other dear friends quietly turn away, never to return? Who is it that they have loved – the "me" or only one particular gender presentation of "me"?

Before even considering the confusing terrain of gender, "self" is a contentious concept; it has as much to do with psychology, culture, and history as with morality. Are we the product of our societies, shaped by forces over which we have no control? Are we instead the end result of our own creative spirits, a product of the choices we make? Or is there a hidden "true" self within that we must discover through an arduous introspective journey,

even into those darkest regions of the soul? Perhaps all of these alternative explanations offer some degree of truth, in proportions that vary for each of us. From a moral perspective, however, the question comes down to one important choice. In the face of immense societal pressures to conform to cultural stereotypes and roles that define who “we” are as members of any given community, society, family, relationship and gender, are we left with the morally permissible choice to be our own authentic selves? And if not, then what?

Transgender people, as they begin the process of coming out, quickly confront the moral precept to “do no harm.” This principle is fundamental to the civility, coherence and the vitality of our societies, and forms the metric upon which people’s actions – and the consequences that flow from those actions – are judged. We all ought to sacrifice elements of our self-interest so that our families and loved ones will thrive and a larger common good can be achieved, particularly when our sacrifice prevents actual harm to others. Given that coming out as transgender has potentially harmful consequences on others, we should sacrifice our desire to express our gender so that they might thrive – right? After all, in a very real sense, there are persons in everyone’s lives who have structured their choices and their life journeys on our gender defined role. Are we immoral to come out?

When husbands or wives become “partners” of the opposite gender, when mothers become fathers or vice versa, there is an impact. Innocent people suffer, often deeply, as a consequence of our “choice.” My trepidation in coming out to my young children was particularly vexing to me; perhaps the deepest anxiety that I have ever felt. Their childhood innocence and sweetness should never have to be threatened so profoundly, yet my “selfish fixation” was the threat. I was the threat. How could I come to a moral stance to justify exposing them to this upheaval? What could make this action morally permissible?

Morally permissible? When values conflict, as they often do, we attempt to resolve them within a framework that has boundaries: what is permitted, and what is not. The framework is seldom articulated explicitly, but we have multiple and diverse messages from our society, religion, culture, and community to guide us to where the boundaries are. We learn to sense what tradeoffs are “allowed” as we juxtapose one irreconcilable value against another, discerning which value is best placed to guide our actions. Are we called to extend the obligation to constrain our “selfish” tradeoffs to the sacrifice of our fundamental identity as a human being, so that others’ lives will not be disrupted, harmed, or inconvenienced? Identity is rooted in our gender expression and society demands certainty and consistency in that regard, sometimes (and often grudgingly) with occasional room at the margins to explore our feminine/masculine inclinations. That was the reaction of several people in my own Quaker faith community, who were deeply perplexed that I would pursue so radical a path as gender transition. “Can’t he find less extreme ways to express his feminine side?” With more than a hint of exasperation, I tried to explain that being female was more than a “side”, more indeed than expression or presentation, yet this answer seemed insufficient to them. After all, their gender was so deeply hardwired into their being that it wasn’t very easy for them to disassociate that

part of their identity to see what was left. Transgender persons know very well what is left, and we know that while there is much to our identities that isn't directly gender-linked, gender remains central. So the lingering question remains: are we morally permitted to be selfish when our identity itself is on the line?

Moral permissibility applies not only to the actions and their consequences that flow from our choices, but also to who we are – our character. Are we at risk of sacrificing our identity in order to pursue it? Is our character, in a moral sense, altered when we cross the gender barrier – do we become new persons? Do others have a morally reasonable expectation that we should adhere to the character norms assigned to us at birth, and incorporate these norms into our identity? What do I lose when I cross the gender boundary, besides some great biceps and all those cultural advantages that society assigns to males? Perhaps more importantly, why don't I feel any sense of loss? When people ask me now how I feel, and whether I have any regrets, my answer is easy and direct. I've never felt better, and my only regrets are for the suffering I have caused to others.

Perhaps identity truly does come from a deeper place. If so, it is a place that defies our best efforts to describe it. Morality is often measured in the consequences of our choices, but not in terms of where those choices come from. We clearly visualize what our choice to transition will mean to those whom we love the most, but we also know that we will stumble and probably never find the right words to explain that this really isn't a choice at all.

Yet it has to be a choice! After all, haven't many of us chosen to persist for as long as we have in the body that was wrong for us. For me, it was in that decades-long persistence that I demonstrated courage, determination, and bravery – not in coming out. As a trans friend succinctly put it: “what's courageous about running out of a burning building?” When we reach the point of “still,” the arguments against transition fall away. We know that a future in the wrong body is *too great a sacrifice* to place upon any person when there are options available to resolve this medical condition. We take our “selfish” choice; ahead of us lies the immense spiritual and moral challenge of redefining, and hopefully retaining, valued relationships. Our “selfish” choice will cost us dearly in uncompensated medical expenses, time consuming and expensive therapies, extensive surgeries, and many other unsettling adjustments. For male-to-female transgender people like me, there is the mild pain of laser treatments, followed by the more excruciating pain and expense of two years or more of electrolysis. There are many transgender persons whose “selfish” choice will always be apparent; given the vagaries of physical stature and the influence of years of the wrong hormones, not everyone will be able easily to “pass” as their true gender in public. Still, they transition. Transgender persons confront persecution, humiliation, and even violence. Still, they persist expressing their authentic gender.

We transition, but do we ever reach that moral nirvana of *authenticity*? My dear friend and sister transsexual, Joy Ladin, perhaps answers this best:

Then a young transwoman – I think she'd been on hormones for a year – weighed in. "It's going to hurt more than you can imagine," she wrote, "but you will have *real* feelings. You'll walk outside and feel the sun and the rain on your face. You may go through hell, but it will be worth it." Though I had never thought about transition so concretely – to me it still seemed like the magical fantasies of transformation I had lived on for years – her words had shockingly familiar quality. This was the voice that had called to me all my life. No more distance, no more numbness, the voice would whisper. You too can be human. Now I knew that the voice had been right. I did have real feelings. I felt pain, loneliness, terror, hope, exhilaration, triumph. I might not be a woman, but I had become human.

Morality, ultimately, is about flourishing as human beings. While we are reasonably expected to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of everyone's flourishing, we should never be asked to sacrifice our authentic identity, which is the root of our humanity. Let's draw that moral line clearly as we weigh our morally permissible tradeoffs, but let us also commit ourselves to creating a world in which the consequences of our "selfishness" are caringly understood and compassionately mitigated to the extent that they can be. Such a world will welcome us in a manner akin to Victoria's blessing, and such a world will be sensitive to and supportive of the "transition" of those whom each transgender person loves and is loved by.

Such a world will perceive our mutual humanity while celebrating our diversity. To reach that moral state, the obstacles before us seem absurdly daunting.

Still...