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Quaker
Thought
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Life
Today



Marriage, Gender, and Relationships

Transitioning in the Light:

A Quaker Community's Journey across the Gender Divide

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by Chloe Schwenke

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I was feeling terribly alone on that cold February evening as I placed the call to Carole Hoage. Muscles knotted with nervousness, there was much more of resolution than desperation in reaching out to her. A weighty and perceptive Friend, I trusted her warmth. I was coming out, and the stakes were high.

My wife, Christine, and I were drained, exhausted, and confused. The demons we confronted were frightening; we both knew they threatened our marriage, our happy family, and our sense of who we each were. Not to confront the demons was no longer an option; for me, not to acknowledge them threatened my very survival. Despite years of denial and pain, my identity had shifted, finally and irretrievably. Daunting challenges would surely ensue for so many in my family, our meeting, and our world. This was the start of a new journey—no longer private—of a committed and loving couple, married under the care of Langley Hill Meeting, but now members of Adelphi Meeting (both in Baltimore Yearly Meeting). Christine and I took “care of the meeting” to heart and deeply trusted in the loving presence of our faith community; these thoughts were much in my mind as I heard Carole’s warm voice answering.

“Carole, I need your help—the Meeting’s help. After 16 years of therapy, countless hours of silent discernment, and a half-century of struggling to make the jigsaw pieces of my life fit, I now know with certainty why they never will. To make this puzzle come together, the pieces will need a different picture; I will need a different body. A different life perhaps, who knows? Carole, I’m transgender.”

There, the words were out, and the

silence that followed was poignant. When Carole finally responded, it was with tenderness but no sentimentality, followed by a quick admission that despite being a therapist for many years this phenomenon was well outside of her experience. Her very next question: “How are Christine and the children dealing with this?” It was a concern that framed the months ahead: this gender transition would be a journey into the unknown for every member of my family as well as for me, and ultimately for many members of our meeting. Yet everyone’s journey, while simultaneous, is different. A new person is emerging, yet she will retain much of the old; a beloved husband is leaving forever, but in baffling ways “he” will still be there. Stephen was becoming who she was always meant to be; I am Chloe.

Christine had been overwhelmed when I first shared with her about my transgender status—while finding the inner strength, grace, wisdom, and honesty to admit that somehow, oddly, it all made sense to her. She knew me that well. Many therapists had urged me to find comfort and meaning in being male, and it had taken a long time to find the therapist who finally saw Chloe within me. Even then, I had waited until the diagnosis was tested and found conclusive by a well-recognized expert, Martha Harris. I was born into the wrong body and had waged a costly and painful internal struggle until, at the age of 57, I could play the part of Stephen no longer. Chloe’s struggle to “be,” to have that long-denied integrity, came with a heavy price. Christine had married Stephen, not Chloe, and the children loved having a dad. What was I thinking; what was I doing? Was this be-

ing honest to the Light? Or was this phone call to Carole and the journey that ensued—as two of my brothers angrily accused me later—an egotistical exercise in selfishness?

Selfishness and courage; oddly those are the two most common moral judgments made when people first hear that I am transgender, now that I am finally myself living the life of Chloe. For most transgender persons, once fully aware of their situation, there is but one sensible choice, and that is to transition to your true gender and become a transsexual. As with other transsexuals I've met, this isn't remotely about selfishness or courage. Fortitude and persistence, yes; changing one's physical gender, with all the implications to loved ones, the interminable complexity of moving resistant bureaucracies to accommodate this change, the awkwardness and embarrassments and humiliations, the exacting physical pains involved in reshaping a body, the extraordinary expenses that no insurance will pay, and most of all, the struggle of learning to be convincing out in the world in one's actual gender without benefit of a lifetime of practice, example, and advice—well, only a perverse masochist could find this a “selfish” pursuit. Nothing has been more difficult in my life, yet I am quick to say that nothing has felt more appropriate and necessary.

Courage doesn't sit well on my shoulders either. It fits more appropriately on the gracious person of my wife and my brave, loving children. Compared to the ordeal of living the painful myth of Stephen year after year, it didn't take courage to come out as Chloe. Being Chloe was about survival, not courage. Yet to this day, the fortitude of my young children awes me. They loved me as a whole person; not just as “dad.” Bravely, they trusted that my love as a parent would not be diminished by this transition, even if now expressed differently.

I'm at a loss to recall exactly what pushed me that night to reach out to Adelphi Friends; perhaps connecting with the meeting seemed the obvious place to begin. Despite the fog and confusion around us, Christine and I clung to the conviction that we are a Quaker family who want to stay together in our love, in our faith, and in our faith com-



munity. We both felt the burden of our separate doubts whether these goals were achievable, yet giving in to despair and a silent shame never entered our minds. We also had experienced over many years the boundless spiritual gifts that exist within a spiritual community for those who sought them.

Adelphi had been our spiritual home since we moved to Maryland ten years earlier, and the meeting features largely in our lives as a family. Our children attended the local Friends Community School, started long ago by Adelphi, and my wife and I have both served on various meeting and school committees. We all attend meeting for worship regularly. Still, Adelphi is a busy metropolitan meeting; people frequently come and go, and neither of us enjoyed deep bonds with more than a few Adelphi Friends and attenders. Carole was one of them, and as she quickly gathered her composure on that telephone call, the reality of that bond was tangible and comforting. I explained to her that Christine and I thought that given the sensitivity of the issue, and the large size of our Pastoral Care Committee, the irregular step of moving ahead discreetly with a small ad-

hoc group of Friends would be best for now. In relatively short order we had agreed on the composition of our group, and that it would support both Christine and me in our separate but interconnected journeys. Carole would be joined by three others: Jamesen Goodman, a family therapist; Cheryl Morden, a woman with a career similar to mine in international development; and finally, Sandy Overbey, a pensive man, one of our oldest Quaker Friends, and a member of our original marriage committee from Langley Hill Meeting.

Awkwardness; how else could any of us describe that first gathering at Carole's home in early March of 2008? No one there had any prior experience with the transgender phenomenon, and every one of us felt more than a little at sea. I had been voraciously consuming all that I could read on the web and in books on transgender, but no one else present other than Christine had any facts or experiences to draw upon. No one personally knew another transgender person—we remain relatively rare—so the group started by sharing photocopies of a short web-downloadable brochure from the American Psychological Association: *Answers to Your Questions about Transgender Individuals*

and Gender Identity. We also set some ground rules. For every subsequent gathering of the group, I would come dressed *en femme*. We would respect the confidentiality of this process (even this article has been cleared by the entire group before submission). The group's focus would not just be on me, but on the two of us as separate individuals, as a couple, and as parents. In time, it would embrace our son Ian (14) and our daughter Audrey (9), even if indirectly. We all acknowledged from the outset how different Christine's journey was from mine, and that our separate spiritual support needs did not coincide. She was overcome with grief at losing a husband, while feelings of fear and anger often distanced her from that nourishing inner peace. I, too, was on a voyage into a new reality; yet, as I journeyed, I drew deep spiritual energy that effervesced into my life. For me, a jarring blend of joy, discovery, exhilaration, grief, fear, and—despite all of this cacophony—a welling up of the most powerful peace I had ever known.

Amidst the tears and unquestioned warmth in that first gathering, one thing was certain: we were among Friends, and the spirit was at work. I was lovingly yet firmly called upon to be accountable, then and throughout the group's existence; to share as clear an understanding of the truth of my situation as I could discern. Call it tough love, but seeing the tears in my wife's eyes and the loving concern in the faces of these gathered Friends, I held nothing back. The discussion (punctuated when needed by pauses for silence) went well past dark. Before we left, we asked each member of our support group if they were prepared for this deep commitment of time, love, and spiritual endeavor. To our eternal gratitude, each agreed without hesitation.

This small support group was in many important ways our spiritual and emotional anchor in the months ahead, as we gathered every four to six weeks. There was much to do. First, there was my personal challenge of being Chloe among them. My first "appearance" wasn't easy for any of us, but at least for me it felt surprisingly natural. The closest analogy—and it is an odd one—is that feeling you get when you finally find your-

self in the Quaker meeting that "fits," that you just know, somehow, is the spiritual home you've looked for. But we all had much to learn about the meaning of gender identity, the nature of the transgender phenomenon, and about coming to some peace with our separate, diverse feelings. We discerned as a group the important difference between "tolerance" and "acceptance." Under the loving care of these Friends, Christine and I reached within and to God for some answers (even if tentative answers) for such questions as to whether our marriage could survive, and what we could possibly say as we came out to our two children and our larger family. We thought long and hard about how best to unfold this transition to the larger meeting, whose support we all knew was critical to making this transition a success. We did not even know with certainty what "success" in a gender transition meant, except to sense how important it would be that the meeting community offer a safe and loving place for our family.

As the year unfolded, our support group steadfastly helped us find a gentle, sensitive way to introduce our "situation" to the larger meeting community. It started with discreet discussions and then visits by Christine, at least one member of our small group, and me among the various meeting committees to raise awareness about our situation and the nature of being transgender. The process reached its culmination with a tenderly choreographed *coming out* to the whole meeting. First, there was a midweek email letter in September from our clerk, Ann Marie Moriarty, announcing our transition. Accompanying her warm, supportive letter was one of our own, crafted prayerfully by Christine and me, and seasoned by our support group's holding us in the Light. I chose not to be present at the next meeting, allowing Cheryl Morden from the support group to spend a few minutes after rise of meeting speaking to those with concerns or questions, or to people who had not received the email. Having me not there, but Christine and the children present, gave the meeting community a little space to see for themselves that my wife and children were well, without having to adjust to my new appearance. By the time I arrived next First Day as Chloe, there

were many welcoming, warm smiles to greet me.

In October, the meeting arranged a Second Hour—a period after meeting for worship—for Christine and me each to speak from a centered, worshipful place to all who sought to learn more of our respective journeys. The meeting-house was full, including nearly every young Friend; all present sat in rapt attention as we spoke of pain, sorrow, joy, and discovery, but also of the power of a meeting to transcend rejection, to move even beyond tolerance, and embrace acceptance.

After a year, this much is clear: Christine and I both continue to feel the power and love of God expressed through these four Friends. Through their love we have been led to find a deeper spiritual home within Adelphi. Our transition journeys have been the occasion for spiritual growth for others in the meeting, too. We may be "special" as a couple and a family, but within the meeting we are one with our faith community, where all are held to be special. We are loved; through our transition we are even a part of the Adelphi community's Quakerly journey of spiritual growth.

For Christine and me, there remains much to resolve even as our relationship has moved to a deeper level of friendship. Not all transgender people change their sexual orientation even if the labels shift under them; the world has reclassified me from "heterosexual male" to "lesbian." Christine remains herself, as she always has: a loving and caring heterosexual woman who now finds herself legally married to a woman. She finds the grace somehow to accommodate that dynamic tension, tempered perhaps by the qualities of warmth and friendship between us that eclipse anything we've ever experienced before.

The transition continues in its quiet way, and my presence no longer elicits undue attention. Thankfully we are no longer "news," just another Quaker family enjoying the warmth of a very remarkable faith community where the Light shines brightly. Christine and I know that the future still holds deep challenges for us as a "trans-couple," but we need never face those challenges alone. □