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Cultural Plunge by Emily Clemons

When I took a trip to New York City this summer, I was more than ecstatic to see the Tony Award winner for Best New Musical, *Kinky Boots*, a show about a shoemaker and a drag queen who team up to save a local shoe factory. Although the musical poignantly illustrated *some* of the struggles that transgender-transsexual people encounter, including prejudice, harassment, and family conflicts, I knew that not all trans people were walking around the world in red, leather, high-heeled boots. That, among other reasons, is why I chose to do my cultural plunge with Tallahassee's transgender-transsexual community, first by going to a Gender Chat with Transgender Tallahassee at the Family Tree.

On Tuesday, November 11, I very quickly – and nervously - changed out of my marching band clothes and headed toward the Family Tree. The Gender Chat was set to last from 7:00 – 8:30 pm, and I knew that it would probably be the longest hour and a half of my life. You see, when Margeaux Mutz first came and spoke to our class some weeks before this day, she somehow made me extremely uncomfortable. Upon the realization that I was uncomfortable around her, I quickly became aware of several other things. First, I felt ashamed for feeling uncomfortable around a person just because she was different from me. Second, I was proud of myself for recognizing this discomfort and not ignoring it. And third, I knew that I absolutely *had* to spend my plunge with this community if I were ever going to grow as a person. So, off to the Gender Chat I went, already drowning in my discomfort and ready to sink some more.

I walked in halfway expecting a room full of Margeauxes, a room full of people with rainbow-colored hair, extravagant tattoos, and bright sundresses. Instead, what I found was a mostly “normal-looking” set of people. Many of the younger people in the room (who somehow were all female-to-male), appeared to me to dress like stereotypical lesbians, some of them more masculine looking and further in their transition than others. The older people (who somehow were all male-to-female or some variation on MTF) were all dressed very typically for women of their age, with moderate makeup, jeans, a nice blouse, and comfortable shoes. I was a little surprised to see MTF women dressed the same as my mother.

As the evening went on, I began to see how normal they actually are. They talked about their jobs, movies they wanted to see, a new purse someone just bought, someone's graduation from FAMU in December, and even a New Year's Eve barbecue. Of course, they did talk about some things that were out-of-the-box to me, like their surgeries, hormones, and their struggles with depression associated with the change. The trans people in the room were having these conversations as a means of supporting one another and finding community and solidarity with others. It was fascinating and eye opening for me to hear their stories and finally glean an understanding of what they go through. More than that, it was touching that they were so welcoming of me into their community. In fact, they were *excited* that I was there. They asked me to come back, to bring my friends, and to please keep in touch. It was awesome for me to see how willing they are to engage with cisgender people, as long as they are willing to learn and to love.

A couple of days later, on Thursday, November 13, I had a lunch date with Petra Doan, a woman who is not only involved with Transgender Tallahassee, but is also a professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning here at Florida State University. I went to her office in Bellamy at 12:30, and we set aside the next hour to eat lunch at the on-campus Chili's and talk. It was honestly the most valuable way I spent an hour that week. Petra and I really hit it off, and she was able to engage with me on a level that no one else had yet. I learned her story, her triumphs, and her struggles. I learned about how her transsexuality affected her family, her faith, and her work. I do not know that I have ever learned so much in one hour as I did with Petra. The most valuable thing that I learned from her, however, was not anything related to her story or trans issues. I confessed to Petra that there was still a missing piece, still a part of all of this that I did not understand. I did not then, and still cannot, understand what being transgender *feels* like. I can sympathize, and I can understand the culture and the issues, but I will never really “get it.” What Petra told me about this lack of understanding brought me so much peace, and settled my inner conflicts around having this privilege that I was not at all entitled to. She said, “You will never be able to understand on a gut level. You'll never feel that for yourself. But that's okay. What you are doing right now, learning and trying to understand and making yourself an ally, is the most you can do. You are giving yourself as much understanding as you possibly can, and that's enough.”

I went back to Transgender Tallahassee for my last event on Sunday, November 11, for a movie

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Ask Margeaux



Margeaux Mutz

Founder of Transgender Tallahassee, she facilitates its gender chat group and administers both the Facebook page and website (transgendertallahassee.com) which bear the Transgender Tallahassee name. She is a former board member of the Tallahassee LGBT organization The Family Tree for whom she has written the monthly articles "Transgenderscope" and "Ask Margeaux" published in The Family Tree newspaper Branching Out and its website at familytreecenter.org. She has a B.A. in Political Science, is a parent and the owner of Hairvoyance, A Salon de Beaute through which she has the opportunity to work with the aged at Tallahassee Memory Care, a local Alzheimer's facility. Margeaux is a transgender transsexual female who through public acknowledgement of her transness hopes to de-mystify the transgender experience and promote the non-discrimination of all.

WHAT IS A TRANSGENDER PERSON'S GREATEST OBSTACLE?

FEAR!!! What power it carries within us!

Fear is defined in Wikipedia as "an [emotion](#) induced by a perceived [threat](#) which causes [entities](#) to quickly pull away from it and usually hide. It is a basic survival mechanism occurring in response to a specific [stimulus](#), such as [pain](#) or the threat of [danger](#). In short, fear is the ability to recognize danger leading to an urge to confront it or flee from it (also known as the [fight-or-flight response](#)) but in extreme cases of fear ([horror and terror](#)) a freeze or paralysis response is possible. Fear should be distinguished from the emotion [anxiety](#), which typically occurs without any certain or immediate external threat".

A. Ohman states in the article "*Fear and anxiety: Evolutionary, cognitive and clinical perspectives(2000)*" that fear is frequently related to the specific behaviors of escape and avoidance, whereas anxiety is the result of threats which are perceived to be uncontrollable or unavoidable. A. Olsson notes in an article "Social Learning of Fear (2007)" that fear almost always relates to future events, such as worsening of a situation, or continuation of a situation that is unacceptable. Fear can also be an instant reaction to something presently happening. All people have an instinctual response to potential danger, which is in fact important to the survival of all species. The reactions elicited from fear are seen through advantages in [evolution](#). Not surprisingly L.D. Burton writes in the Journal of Research on Christian Education (2011) that fear can be a manipulating and controlling factor in an individual's life.

How instrumental has fear been in my life?

How can I count the ways?

Let me start by admitting that this litany of words was induced by the admission of Emily Clemons, a student in the Florida State University Social Justice Program whom I had recently met after addressing her class, that she immersed herself in our Transgender Tallahassee community as part of her program requirements--- because she felt uncomfortable with me as I talked to her class. In her exact words she states that "she(me) somehow made me extremely uncomfortable".

Ironically, I read this pronouncement shortly after flying from Tallahassee, Fl. to San Diego to visit my daughter, who had just recently moved there, for Thanksgiving. It was the first time I had flown in over 40 years! A fearful fact of avoidance that became more difficult as I dealt with my fear of acceptance as a transperson. How would airline employees deal with my transness? Would they and all the passengers on the plane fear or be made anxious by me, unleashing a fear or anxiety within me as I sensed their discomfort? Would my life end before I got a chance to impact more people in a positive way for our transgender community?

As I was propelled seemingly weightless thru the air I was struck by the fact that I had tackled one of my few remaining fears. I had done it.....another reason to feel good about myself. I felt a sense of peace, a joy, a wonder as I watched humanity lit countryside....my flight left at 5:40AM an ungodly time for anything.... turn with the effervescence of the morning sunlight, into green, brown and snow covered mountainous regions. I dozed and I read, and I dozed while I read, an all too familiar exercise of late. What I read surprised me, just as my new friends declaration did. In John Irving's book "In One Person" the main character Billy states "I know only a few post-op transsexuals. The ones I know are very courageous. It's daunting to be around them; they know themselves so well. Imagine knowing yourself that well! Imagine being that sure about who you are."

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Remembering the T in LGBT by Kane Barr



Following October's National Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender month of awareness and events, November is the month for [transgender awareness](#).

[Transgender](#) refers to people whose gender identity and expression do not correlate to the sex they were assigned at birth. The assumption is that if you were born as a boy or girl, your gender falls somewhere within the acceptable boy/girl categories and you will be attracted to persons of the opposite sex/gender. This is not always the case.

The nation as a whole has become more accepting of people with same-sex attractions and their legal rights to marry. However, there is still the T in LGBT that lacks a wide range of awareness, support and education.

For one, it is not easy to identify someone who is transgender without that person saying so. It is based on how that person identifies with his or her gender or sex internally, not physical characteristics.

A person can feel as if he is female within, even though he was physically a male at birth, and that person's sexual orientation is identified as lesbian. Someone may internally express his or her gender as not male or female, just somewhere in between or neither. The point is, one's own gender, sex and sexual orientation falls on an independent spectrum, resulting in the diverse human experience as we know it today.

I came out as transgender August 2012 and started the slow process of transitioning from female to male. I asked to be referred to by male pronouns and a male name within everyday social situations. Some people jumped on board, and others – not so much at first.

For some trans people, it is necessary to go through a medical process to change his or her gender and/or sex. Unfortunately, accessible transgender health services is limited in Tallahassee and even more so for those with low incomes.

Many of us suffer through bouts of depression, anxiety and distress. We are ridiculed, harassed, bullied and physically and/or emotionally abused daily when we express our gender identity in ways we feel are right for us.

Suicide attempts for transgender individuals are the highest among any other social minority group. I was taken to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital March 14 at 2:30 a.m. to get 10 stitches on my left arm. At the time, I was completely overwhelmed with the need to take hormones and no longer wished to live a life where I was referred to as a female.

Today, I may be a survivor, but hundreds of us are not. Nov. 20 is [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), and it is a day to commemorate those who have been victims of violent crimes during the year. This year the death toll is 238, according to [tgeu.org](#).

I could have been one of them. There will be a memorial service hosted by Transgender Tallahassee and [The Family Tree](#) from 6-9 p.m., and it is open for everyone.

By sharing a piece of myself, I hope to inspire an inclusive and accepting atmosphere for transgender individuals at FAMU.

Kane Barr attends Florida A&M University and is an e-board member of the FAMU LGBT Student Pride Union and the FAMUB Anime Club. Kane also can be found participating in meetings and events with the Inclusive LGBT Task Force. Kane has accepted that he is trans and is starting his journey in becoming the person who he sees on the other side of the mirror.*

Are the Transgendered the Mine Shaft Canaries of Urban Areas? Part 2

By Petra Doan



*Dr. Petra L. Doan is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning in the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy at the Florida State University. After earning a B.A. in Philosophy at Haverford College, Dr. Doan completed a Master of Regional Planning and a Ph.D. from the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University in the field of International Planning. In 1998 she began her transition from male to female, and completed that process in 2001. She has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on international planning as well as planning for marginalized communities, with a special focus on lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgendered individuals. In 2011 her edited book, *Queering Planning: Challenging Heteronormative Assumptions and Reframing Planning Practice*, was published by Ashgate. She has served as the faculty advisor for the Pride Student Union and the steering committee member of the Safe Zone Program. She is a past Board Member for the Family Tree, Tallahassee's LGBT Community Center, and in 2010 was awarded the LGBT Educator of the Year award by the Family Tree. In 2012 she was selected as the John Bousfield Distinguished Planning Visitor for the Fall semester at the University of Toronto, where she taught a course, *Beyond Queer Space Planning for Non-Normative Populations*, and gave the Bousfield public lecture entitled "The Tyranny of Gendered Planning".*

Perhaps the most critical argument for giving trans issues greater visibility is the issue of personal safety. There is an established stream of planning research that looks at safety issues for vulnerable populations within urban areas. Such populations are usually identified on the basis of gender, race, ethnic status, or disability. Rising violence against these groups has encouraged state legislatures to pass special legislation designed to discourage acts of violence motivated by hatred. However, transgender is systematically left out of most of this legislation. Minnesota is the only state that includes transgendered people in anti-discrimination clauses, though a number of municipalities have also done so. Like driving while black (DWB), walking while gender variant (WWGV) is like waving a red flag in a bull ring with often fatal consequences for the trans person.

Differently gendered people are some of the most vulnerable within an urban area because of their visibility. Gender variance is sometimes assumed by the straight world as a marker for homosexuality, and nearly always is considered a flagrant transgression of the fundamental dichotomy of gender which is the underpinning of social and moral order. This violation of what has been called the apartheid of sex incites a virulent and usually violent response. Not all gender variant people are transgendered; butch lesbians and effeminate gay men are also highly visible and likely to be "bashed." However, transgendered people, especially during their transitional stage, are often more obviously gender variant. Male to female individuals are likely to be taller, have deeper voices, larger hands, and prominent adam's apples compared to most women. Female to male individuals are likely to be shorter, have smaller hands, and at least initially have higher voices than most men. These and other markers raise transgender visibility and make them one of the most vulnerable and least protected communities in social space. There is another element that nearly all transgendered people share with lesbians and bisexual women. They have direct experience with what it means to be a woman in an urban space. Female to Male individuals (FtM, or trans men) taking male hormones are quickly "passable" as men. However their early socialization as girls makes them acutely aware of the swift retribution which would be their lot if they are discovered as a trans. Male to Female individuals (MtF, or trans women), although originally socialized as boys, quickly learn about their vulnerability within the city. Trans women who live full time as women have the same potential to be treated as targets for harassment, abuse, and street crime. Trans people who do not live full time as one or another gender are often less likely to "pass" and are thus even more visible as transgendered and may evoke an even harsher reaction.

Urban safety issues have often been catalysts for the women's movement and have stimulated a variety of activist responses including Take Back the Night marches, lobbying for more police protection, better lighting, and more humane treatment for female victims of rape and abuse. Although the transgendered are equally vulnerable to these forms of violence, protecting this uniquely vulnerable population is rarely on anyone's political agenda.

Musings

By Diane Fisher

Diane Fisher is a Canadian lesbian mother, who is an elder with MCC (the first Canadian Elder) and the pastor of Gentle Shepherd MCC in Tallahassee. She has a daughter Karli whose dad's are two gay men. Diane has served in many capacities within MCC; pastor of a church in Belleville, Ontario, District Co-ordinator of both the Eastern Canadian District and the Northeast District, an elder serving in many parts of the world and now again, as senior pastor of a local congregation. In her role as an international denominational spiritual leader, Diane worked with Canada, the Northern and Midwest areas of the United States, Europe, Russia, North Western Asia, Middle East, Africa and served as the ecclesial elder for New Zealand and Australia. Diane sits on the Moderator's Ecumenical Interreligious team. Diane has been an avid Human Rights activist and was involved in the creation of the denomination's Human Rights Policy. Her work in Eastern Europe has been instrumental in strengthening the LGBT response to religious based homophobia. Diane's passion is making a difference in the world.

New Beginnings

Throughout our lives we come to places where we make pivotal decisions. We reach a crossroads and the next step we take changes it all. Sometimes it is about a career choice, or the choices to have a child, or adopt a pet or to give love another try. There are some milestones that are not choices at all, but rather the acceptance of something we know about ourselves and can finally embrace.

These times in our lives, these new beginnings often happen with little fanfare, no big announcements or parties, they just seem to unfold. Yet, we all know that there have been struggles, sometimes wrestling with our own demons to finally come to the realization that we must go forward and not look back. I believe that we should celebrate these milestones, these big changes and decisions, these new beginnings.

Coming out, leaving abusive relationships, transitioning towards your true identity/gender, having a child; these decisions are life changers and I think that we should celebrate them. When a person comes out, we should have a celebration with as much flare as a cotillion; when a person transitions we should have a service welcoming the new person and the new name. We should celebrate courage in all its many forms. (we could call it "The Outrageous Courage Awards")

Making hard decisions is so under played; choosing to come out or transition or leave or arrive or marry; these are critical turning points in our lives and we should acknowledge them. We celebrate biological birthdays, which we had little to do with, so why not celebrate our new birth days.

We are quickly approaching "The Trans Day of Remembrance" and some of the most courageous people I know are those who have transitioned. Most have given up more than we will ever know to find their way to themselves; the selves they have always known they were. I for one want to celebrate the courage, the tenacity, the strength it has taken for so many to find their way home to themselves. I want for this to be a time of celebration and not pain, of welcoming not rejecting and of wholeness not brokenness. If we can celebrate the journey of New Beginnings, maybe, just maybe we will stop hearing of beatings and suicides, and homelessness and poverty.

UPCOMING EVENTS

GENDER CHAT

2nd Tuesday of Every Month
7:00 PM – 8:30 PM
The Family Tree, Above AMC

Gender Group Therapy

Times vary, email Liz
Kamphausen
Location

YOGA with Jen Kennedy

Every Tues. 5:45-6:45 PM
The Family Tree, Above AMC

Gendernation X IV

Friday, Feb. 28th
Doors @ 8, Show @ 9
Krewe De Gras

Tallahassee Pridefest 2014

Transgender Tallahassee Booth
Saturday, April 12th

St. Pete Pride

Transgender Tallahassee Booth
Sunday, June 29th

TDOR

Thursday, Nov. 20th
The Family Tree, Above AMC

THOUGHTS ON THE TRANSGENDER DAY OF REMEMBRANCE, 2013

By Will Ryan

I first came to the Family Tree for the Trans Day of Remembrance last year. I was scared and reluctant and was at the very beginning of my foray into publicly engaging with my trans-ness. So, I am particularly honored to be able to mark this milestone in my own life and my own transition here. And I very much appreciate that I found this place and these people. It has been so, so important in my life.

Being a scientist, I am inclined to try to dissect problems, thoughts and feelings down into manageable and explainable bits. I wanted to talk tonight because I have been thinking a lot about how labels and categories work in our lives and why there is so much tension and conflict around them in the GLBT community. But I thought it would be cowardly and dishonorable of me to come to this event, to this group of people who have been so open to me with their lives and give a dry, academic speech without the discomfort of making myself known.

I am a trans-man. I am from California. I have lived in cities where the government hangs city ordained rainbow flags from municipal light posts and the whole city lights up for pride week. I have been lucky enough to be raised without an explicitly anti-gay or anti-trans dogma to overcome. When I told my estranged father I was transitioning, he took my hands in his rough paws and told me that he just wanted me to be happy, with tears in his eyes, even if he didn't understand exactly what that all meant or know exactly what to do to help me. In many ways, I have been privileged to have the life that from here in Tallahassee looks an awful lot like the end goal of the work we are doing here.

Yet, I have also spent a great deal of my life wondering if the difficulty and pain of my experience would someday overwhelm me. Despite having the markings of an open, accepting society all around me I have felt so isolated and so trapped by the experience of being outside the realm of things people know how deal with, lost with no path to a "normal" life open to me, that I have been to the point where suicide seems like a quite rational response to what seems like an inescapable isolation.

So, with those conflicting experiences in mind, it seems to me like it is not enough just to teach other people that we exist. To teach people the names we use to call ourselves and refer to each other and to initiate our allies into the complex lexicon of the queer community. This is a worthy and difficult task and gets us to a place where maybe we stem the violence against us and maybe carve out a place in the cultural landscape that other people recognize...which is huge. But many of us have been sent seeking out the structure of this community because of a deep experience of alienation from our own families and cultures of origin. It is incredibly important that this community exists, and its existence has helped a lot of us be ok in the world. But how do we change the world enough so that queer youth in the future can come to this community to learn about themselves and feel surrounded by their people without having to go through the baptism of depression and rejection first? How do we make sure that we don't lose any more of us to the void of violence and suicide who couldn't find their way through to us?

The place that I've had to start with this is to think about how we end up feeling like there is a thing that we should be that we just can't become? Where does that idea come from? And how do we get away from reinforcing that idea to ourselves and other people that there is any particular thing that you should grow up to be? And often in queer groups this conversation comes down to labels and categories and how they are complicit in the creation of these "rules" but really hard to live without. What I've basically realized is that the conflict and paradox that people experience when they try to get away from using labels and categories is that categorization and labeling are an incredibly important way that humans make sense of the world. So, if you denounce categories and labels, you end up with a soup that is hard to describe in a meaningful way. But the thing about labels is that we use them in two very different ways, often without specifying the difference...Labels can be prescriptive or descriptive. Prescriptive labels are of the "you are this, therefore you should be like this" form ("women wear makeup, if you want to be considered a woman, you should wear makeup"). Whereas descriptive labels are used to describe general patterns observed in variations ("I have noticed that many people who call themselves women also wear makeup"). The difference here is subtle and often lost, but HUGE. It is the difference between labels being applied to people to make them feel inadequate or in order to control their behavior (which happens constantly and is immensely damaging) and being able to make useful associations between the way people identify themselves and traits and behaviors that can help you navigate social interactions with

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Cultural Plunge continued from page 1:

night. We all rearranged the chairs, I was assigned the job of popping the popcorn, and we all settled in to watch *Normal*, an HBO film starring Tom Wilkinson and Jessica Lange in which a small, religious farm town is rocked by one man's revelation that he is actually a female and wants to have surgery. I sat on the couch between Margeaux and another woman named Jay, and we laughed, cried, and cursed at the movie together. I absolutely loved it. I loved the movie, I loved the friendships, and I loved the experience. Margeaux was whispering to me the whole movie, trying to relate what was happening in the film to real experiences that she had had or pointing out things that were not realistic. She said, as uplifting as it was to watch, that most marriages in that situation do not last. "Mine didn't," she said in a matter-of-fact sort of tone. Jessica Lange's character said in the final line of the film, "Oh, the things we do for love" and I felt the whole room inflate and deflate at the same time. It was so uplifting to see a couple that loved each other and overcame that hurdle, but I felt like it was a reminder to them of the loves that they lost and the reality of their lives. Only a rare, select few are as lucky as the MTF woman in that film.

I left the plunge with an overwhelming sense of peace and joy. After all of the anxiety that I had going into this assignment, it is strange and incredible that I left with a community I did not know I was looking for. At the end of the movie, I could see in several people's eyes that they were worried I would never come back to Transgender Tallahassee, that I would just do my project and never return. That is far from the truth. Transgender Tallahassee and the Family Tree have given me relationships and a sense of community that I did not know I was missing. Wednesday, November 20 is Transgender Day of Remembrance, and I plan on attending the vigil that night. I found something with these people that is impossible to walk away from.

I have learned about myself that I carry a lot of guilt surrounding my privilege. We have said from the very first day of class that guilt is a useless, wasted emotion, but I cannot seem to let it go. I feel guilty that I am white. I feel guilty that I am middle class. I feel guilty that I am cisgender. All of this guilt has been weighing on me like the weight of a hundred worlds. But, this experience has also taught me to let it go. I know in my brain that none of these things are my fault, but now my heart is learning that as well. Now maybe, just maybe, my brain and my heart will be in the same place and I can start making some real change in the world.

This experience changed everything about how I see this community and how I see myself as an ally. In the beginning, I was overwhelmed by my sense of discomfort. I hated walking into the Gender Chat and being hyperaware that I was the "other" in the room. I was the only cisgender person there, and although this is far from the truth, I felt like every eye in the room was on me. I later realized that I had the ability to remove myself from the situation and that my privilege was the ability to be "normal" almost all of the time. That discomfort is what they live with *every single day*. My whole view changed from that point on. In its "Putting It All Together" chapter, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* says, "Understanding social justice means that we must be able to recognize that relations of unequal social power are constantly being negotiated... We must understand our own positions... We must be able to think critically about knowledge. And most importantly, we must be able to *act* from this understanding, in service of a more just society (145)." Because of my experience in this cultural plunge, I feel as if I can *finally* accomplish this. I understand how the balance of power falls between cisgender people and trans people. I understand my position and my privilege as a cisgender person and how to use my privilege appropriately. I can think critically about the knowledge I have gained from this experience. And, most importantly, I now know how to act as a force of change and create a more just society, side by side with the trans community.

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Ask Margeaux, continued from page 2

Damn! The fact that we are daunting in our ability to know ourselves is vexing since baring of self is in part a need to be loved and accepted, not a desire to be held aloft and made even more unapproachable. I was stunned---- brought back down to earth if you will! Carissa Klevens of California State University at Northridge wrote an article entitled "Fear and Anxiety" in which she states that "self-certain people know their own strengths and weaknesses. Self-certain people tend to make plans to deal with their weaknesses". Truth be told, the entire reason I left Tallahassee on that plane was in search of more meaningful relationships with family, my daughter and sister specifically, and the sense of being part of a larger world; the opening of the ability to impact a much larger population than those who know me. It was triggered by my struggle with the feeling that I am unlovable in the body that I inhabit, an issue exacerbated by the recent breakup of my 2 year marriage; a breakup which, though I cannot say with absolute clarity because I am not privy to all her thoughts, was precipitated by fear and anxiety, in her case a fear that she could not access her true self in our relationship. A breakup that I did not see coming, a breakup where we have had basically no contact since that fateful August day. Was my self- certainty an encumbrance to our relationship?

Prior to our breakup both my ex-wife and my daughter said that I can be "intimidating." "That I can fill up a room". My own uncle who I have met as an adult only a handful of times, all pre-transition, told me at my grandmother's funeral that "I seemed to know where I was going." Is my seeming ability to know where I am going, a roadblock to getting THERE? A THERE that wishes for loving acceptance and kindness.

At our most recent Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) event that has been held on Nov. 20 since 1998, we at Transgender Tallahassee shared with upward of 80 transgender people and allies the documentary TAKING OFF THE BLINDERS, a 45 minute depiction of the life of Dr. Petra Doan, an out transwoman and great personal friend. I was and always am moved by the video and how thoughtful her parents are, but what kept ringing in my ears at its conclusion was the word FEAR, which seemed to jump from the lips of all whom were interviewed.

Will I now fear my own self-certainty as an out transgender-transsexual? Will I now fear that my strength is a weakness? Should I fear that I am unlovable or unapproachable because I am strong?

As I ruminate I hear the word in my brain and feel it in my soul. How often it pops up around transgender folk. I saw it in Emily's words. I heard it in Petra's doc. But transgender people do not own it. The fear of those around us in the cisgender(non-trans) world is just as palpable, if not more so. We cannot fear getting to know our true selves. Leave that to those who fear looking within. Unfortunately those who fear looking within may always fear us and are perhaps unreachable. But what of people like Emily? If I now fear my own self-certainty as an out transgender-transsexual; if I now fear that my strength is a weakness; if I fear that I am unlovable or unapproachable because I am strong, where does that leave the Emily's of the world; people who are capable of looking within and dealing with their discomfort over that which is unknown. How is she or anyone else going to learn the depth of our community and our commitment to authenticity?

Emily saw me as a rainbow haired, extravagantly tattooed woman in a sundress. As I told her entire class, I am one personification of transgender. Emily took it to heart and explored further, finding the true meaning of what I was trying to say! As she continued her plunge into the transgender community she writes that she found "a community that I did not know I was looking for". Her final words as she reveals her experiences ring with what we all hope to accomplish as trans activists. "I now know how to act as a force of change and create a more just society, side by side with the Trans community".

Will I now fear my own self-certainty as an out transgender-transsexual? Will I now fear that my strength is a weakness? Should I fear that I am unlovable or unapproachable because I am strong?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said "we have nothing to fear but fear itself". We all have it within us! Can I say that I will never feel it? No, but I can say that I, as I have my whole life, am certainly making plans to deal with it, not just for me but for the Emily's of the world and all that they will affect!



VISIT US ON [FACEBOOK!](#)
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WWW.TRANSGENDERTALLAHASSEE.COM

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strangers and sort out your world. The prescriptive kind encourages you to see difference between people and to make assumptions about who people are, how they should act and gives you an excuse to be intellectually lazy about getting to know people. The descriptive kind of labels encourages you to be thoughtful about yourself and others and to be constantly gathering data and refining your ideas about connections between identities, behaviors and traits.

We need to remember that labels are a shorthand, which implies that every label is standing in for a more nuanced, long hand version. When we see labels as shorthand that makes communication easier, rather than as a full descriptor in and of themselves, we are less likely to use them in a damaging way. We can apply them to ourselves and see how they fit with the other things we relate to and put them down if they don't work. We can use identities as a way of exploring ourselves and others, particularly as we grow and change.

This is important because it takes us out of the narrative of changing categories as a catastrophic and traumatic process. It makes reorienting your identity reflect the matter of degree that it usually is, rather than allowing people to see it as jumping a chasm between two unrelated things. The story of before and after. This life then that life, as though you are two different people. The current narrative of chaining prescriptive categories is the one that makes you so afraid of being wrong and hurting others that you hide your true self. It is the same narrative that makes your lover see your transition as a loss and a betrayal rather than as a way to connect with another facet of this person that they love so deeply. It is the narrative that made my very supportive ex-girlfriend still say she wanted to hear my voice one last time before I destroyed it. What made my friend say, I love and support you but I'm going to cry the first time i see you with a beard.

To me, these responses are signs that we are telling the wrong story. It has been suggested that I want to burn down the system and to start over from scratch. To rebuild the whole system of how we interact and view each other. And that is mostly right. This system has failed us. This binary system. This hierarchical system. This prescriptive system.

I want to burn down the system that tells young women that they are not enough, that they are never enough, that they are at the peak of their power when they are "barely legal" - when they are young, beautiful and clueless and that every fact that they learn about the world, every year that they live and learn, every experience that makes them wise up makes them more ugly, more undesirable, uses them up and makes them "bitchy" and cold.

I want to burn down the system that tells young men that their emotions are a weakness to be armored over with violence. That tells them that they deserve the attention of every desirable woman, but should interact with those women in a way that precludes connection, honesty, equality, trust - precludes emotional satisfaction. A system where emotional satisfaction is coded as the whimpering battle cry of emasculation.

I want to burn down the system that says that the worst insult you can lob at a man is that he might be a woman. That every trial by fire of masculinity in the course of a man's life, and there are many, is test of your belongingness to the club of the superior gender. That your identity might be stripped away if you don't conform to the expectations of your peers and worse, you become rebranded as "woman". That is dehumanizing to everyone involved.

I want to burn down the system that demands that we see each other as categories and deviations from those categories, rather than as whole people. Complete. Complex. Consistent. The system that tells us we need to lie to ourselves and everyone else in order to survive. That they will never love us if they only knew us. That when we are loved, it is the idea of what we are, what we represent, that is loved and not us, whole and complex.

I want to burn down the system that has caused everyone in this room to suffer under the tyranny of expectations that they were never equipped to meet.

I want to burn down the system that compels us to see these private experiences as isolated and personal. That brands the pain you experience when you bump up against the system as a personal failing or, in a more empathetic system, a disorder outside your control. Depression, Dysphoria, Hysteria...there are a million words to tell us about the thing that we have. The thing that we have that causes us to have an individual isolated experience that makes us

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different, that makes us separate from all of "those" people who don't have this thing. But sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia - these are not discrete entities. They do not spring from separate wells. They all flow from the same source - the idea that there is a right way to be human and a wrong way to be human. And that your human-ness is conditional. That it is revocable. That it depends on the assessment of others.

When we are hurt by other people in this way, we are often feeling the power of the knee jerk reaction to a life time of conditioning. It is growing up in a constant terror of being stripped of their male identity, for failing the test of manliness, that makes fathers fear for and hate their queer sons for not getting in line...after all they know what happens to kids that don't get in line. It is women who were raised claiming what little power they could squeeze out of the system by contorting themselves into plucked, blushed, starved superwomen that are mystified and terrified by their butch daughters. After all she has only seen one path to stay alive in the jungle and her daughter seems unwilling or unable to stay on it. This is terror out of Pain! Of Fear!

But, ultimately we are all in this together, all of us! We have to find a way to change it together. There is power in community. There is compassion in connection. There is safety in numbers. Our story is not a story in isolation. When we talk about our trans experience, we are not talking about a people standing outside the system. We are bodies caught on the gears of a system that blatantly does not work for us. And, for other people to see our bodies there and think "oh those poor people" is not the point. We are just the most obvious casualties of a system where all bodies are being shaped and shattered. That is where the power comes from. To turn to the people in the room who are trying to understand what it must be like to be us and gently point out that the best thing that they can do to help us is to think deeply and critically about what it is like to be themselves. As though they are shaped and shattered by the same forces that have so shaped and shattered us. Because they are. There is no homophobia if there is no sexism. There is no trans-panic if we don't see "women" and "men" as immutable and absolute categories - full of prescriptions for who is in and who is out. There are only people. There is only us, the things we can make between us, the things we can learn from each other and the journey of discovering each other.

We are all in a process of becoming who we are. We are all in the process of discovering who we are, what we are made of, what we are capable of, what we mean. Maybe trans people have a bit of a head start on the self-awareness side of this process - because it requires enough self-knowledge and confidence to be able to advocate for yourself in sometimes unwelcoming territory and defend yourself against the constant thrum of people's doubtful murmurs....but it's not like people who fit squarely into the system get to be an adult and then remain confidently static for a few decades while trans people are on these epic journeys of self-discovery....we are all new to every moment. We will all take a lifetime to learn who we are and what we are doing here.

So we need to realize that WE create the system, every time we interact with each other. We create it with every lazy assumption that we make about people we don't know. Or about people we do know. But we also have the power to recreate the system, to change the way that we treat each other. To give each other the space and the support to explore ourselves. We recreate the system by making an effort to asking people who they are, and giving them the space to tell their stories about themselves and most importantly believing them when they tell us what they know to be true. And we need to offer people the safety to explore and change and grow without fear of losing our love while not using their words or their identities as a weapon against them. We owe each other the effort to help each other become ourselves. That is how we change the system - by seeing each other as whole, complete complex people who can be describe in all kinds of ways and with all kinds of words but cannot be dismissed with the simple laziness of a prescriptive identity.

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