

COMING UP QUEER

Johannah (Ephilei) Baker-Johnson

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I cannot tell my story chronologically. It's a story that rather defies linearity. I liken it to waking up in the morning and you have the delicate strings of a dream barely clinging to your consciousness. In my dreams and in my gender, feelings are stronger and more memorable than any events or people or ideas or images.

Dare I say that it was Providence that Jordan bustled into my bedroom, introducing the clamor that would wake me from dream and inspire me to clutch at the fading feelings of my gender that never stayed in one place very long. We had entered Greenville College together and my earliest impression was of someone with an odd jaw and a funny gender but already being a strong egalitarian I didn't think twice about it. "Friend" would be a strong word, but we knew each other as half the campus knew each other and the next year roomed with my best friend. I took a year sabbatical from school and returned needing to catch up with a lot of people. Jordan filled me in on coming out to the campus as being attracted to women and the all the ramifications. Greenville was a conservative Christian college with some liberal leanings, me being one, and now Jordan another which gave me a sense of camaraderie I hadn't attached before. I've always been different. The real word is "queer," but I didn't realize it yet. It felt comforting. I hadn't felt the half of it!

As much as I have always prided myself for having no hesitancy for controversy or introspection, I was not open to knowing the expanse of my gender nor anyone else's. In one embarrassing conversation with Jordan we came to the realization that even though Jordan had come out to me as a transgender man Easter of our freshman year. While I still have a detailed memory of the silly conversation, "Will everyone fly in Heaven?" during the same car ride, Jordan's transgenderism was completely new to me. What else was I blocking?

I have always been different from other boys. I call my difference feminine and that offends others who would rather call it gentleness or just not macho. We need better vocabulary. Regardless, I could never take boys in high doses. I liked boys one at a time but in the morph from individual to group their masculinity gets amplified and I got bored. I have never hated masculinity, whatever you think the word means; I've just had greater interests. Likewise groups of girls were unbearable while individuals were fun. In kindergarten I was the only boy invited to Christina's birthday party out of dozens because I was the only boy she knew who wasn't mean. I wasn't someone who only liked playing girls or girl things. I liked balance. All things being equal, all things were equal. As I got older that characterization has remained constant.

As a teenager I turned from a fem boy to a feminist guy. ("Egalitarian" is the politically correct word in Christian circles.) I was sparked by the apparent sexism in the New Testament, made more urgent by having a pastor for a mom and felt responsible knowing Scripture's true roles for women and men. Others often asked me why a male would be so interested in women's roles; I didn't want a wife subject to me any more than women want to be subject to others. Subconsciously I must have yearned for something even deeper.

In high school I sometimes wore girl clothing – once in a while, on and off. On because, well, I didn't know. In college I would later do it as a public statement about genders, but it began purely private. It felt good in that unspeakable way when you realize you had an entire capacity that was lying dormant and suddenly filled with imaginative opportunity. I have never felt the need to exaggerate my masculinity but I was realizing I had femininity left unexpressed. I would relate it to someone who finds they have a Native American ancestor and finally feels they have a solid connection and outlet for their love of Nature. I realized that my natural expression of non-masculine characteristics wasn't enough to truly represent me, this "me" that I couldn't articulate. But I knew it was good. I could never call it "cross dressing." "Crossing" implies going somewhere difference or somewhere outside yourself. But the clothing brought me closer to my self than usual.

Not as close as honest prayer or intimate conversation with loved ones, but closer. But it was on and off because I felt unfulfilled. Expressing yourself privately isn't real expression.

Together with the clothes and egalitarianism, Jordan was a taste of some true form I couldn't swallow yet. The best of times were getting him to talk about transgender topics or borrowing books while as yet trying not to appear *too* interested. Senior year Jordan had an art show all about finding his gender. It filled several rooms in a building off campus open 24 hours. Going the first time presented me with an awesome, "Yes, and" feeling that stirred up a compulsion in my soul. Needing to know more and feel more I returned that Friday night and didn't leave until dawn. I couldn't resolve the curiosity it prompted, but my heart was finally motivated to find the truth about my identity. "I guess it's no secret I'm transgender," I journalled that night. How quaint!

I had this confounding challenge that I could not relate to anything I heard. I didn't have the body issues that transexuals complain of but I did have enough. At the Christian camp I worked at during summers, communal nudity was a virtue among the males and I felt no shame among them; naked Bible studies are still an emotional highlight of my life. My penis feelings have ranged from "good" to "annoyance" but predominantly uninterested. Yet I have always hated acknowledging my body hair. At that camp I met Yohanna who could not grown any hair and I found her body perhaps the most beautiful I had ever seen. I also always had bizarre experiences with mirrors because the face that looks back at me is not my face. For a long time I could not picture my face in my mind's eye and no photo or mirror looked quite right. In the summer after the art show I gave serious thought to being transexual, going for a week experimenting with just the feelings. I asked a random person online if I should "become" a woman and she gave the good advice, "only if you're absolutely certain." If I was absolute in anything, it was my uncertainty. There are bigender people (aka, a cross dresser) who alternate between complete manhood and complete womanhood. Having lived semi-bigender already and feeling no draw to ever be completely woman, I ruled that out as well.

Eventually I bumbled around enough to find my gender. While most of my discovery was a slow and steady process, one single moment remains as a breakthrough. Transgender books are hard to come by but a rare find contained a single sentence that blew me away, simply that some trans people think of themselves as both male and female and can be asexual. The A word broke the dam as I simultaneously realized that I am both asexual and think of myself as both male and female. It was as if the part of my brain storing that fuzzy dream suddenly woke up and a dozen parts of the story sprang into awareness simultaneously.

Was it possible to feel both male and female at the same time? It must be because I realized I did feel that way. In all my gender exploration, I had never considered feeling both. But now that I had the vocabulary I knew it to be true.

People ask me what these words mean and how else I can articulate my body identity. It is something you can only comprehend if you have felt it. Imagine you woke this morning with a body with the sex opposite what you had the night before. Everyone acts as if you have always been that way and your whole life is suddenly *transgendered*. You could see and feel your sex, you could listen to what others tell you, and you could go over in your head that bodies don't magically change over night. Yet you would always *feel* your original sex. If you close your eyes right now, you will feel yourself male or female. Body identity is an instinct. What your mind tells you and what your eyes tell you are different senses and therefore not identical. Typically they match. Transexuals completely mismatch. I partly match. That's the simple answer.

Simultaneous with that was the realization of my sexual orientation. In high school I suddenly recalled the serious thought I had given that I might be asexual, someone who does not have a sexual attraction to others. I didn't have my first crush until the ripe old age of 16 but when I did, I felt relieved to be heterosexual. Nevertheless I clearly did not have the experiences of others. In ten years since I've had 4 more crushes which I'm told is quite few, dated once which I hated and have no desire to start again. As some friends lost their virginity, I could not wrap my head around it. I knew intercourse abstractly, but actually happened? With another person? I certainly could not comprehend their physical drive for sex. Whenever I saw a female body I liked, I interpreted it as my sexual orientation. But at this moment, I realized my attraction was not to *have* the body. My attraction was to *be* that body. It is not a distinctly transgender feeling. Others feel it when they

look at the body of the same sex, someone they think is more attractive or more healthy, and feel a yearning or admiration. More than a couple female women have wanted the slenderness of my body.

All this happened in an instant. Within two seconds I had a vastly different view of my identity. So many motivations, history, desires, and indescribable feelings went from chaotic mystery to beautiful comprehension. The sudden clarity came for two reasons. One was realizing the existence of the categories of genderqueer and asexual. I had not thought of asexuality since early high school or genderqueer except briefly in some long list of genders I skimmed through.

Second was having them in the same sentence. Gender and orientation are certainly different categories, but our orientation is a part of our gender, a sub-category. Because asexuality is the most rare and subtle, I couldn't understand it without understanding my entire gender and vice versa (a catch-22).

It took me a several more months to finish clarifying my gender. It was not until a year later that I was able to say confidently that I knew how I felt though I reserve the right to re-interpret when I have new light. I have since thought the term "intergender" describes me best - a meeting of different genders within me. What makes me transgender is three things: Male *and* female, feminine *and* masculine; *neither* man *nor* woman.

I am feminine and masculine. "Masculine" refers to the qualities, characteristics, and behaviors associated with or thought to be appropriate to men and boys," says the Oxford English Dictionary and vice versa for "feminine." Most or all people cross that line of gender appropriateness our culture has created. I happen to cross more than most. Take any list of feminine and masculine characteristics and I'll fit a lot of qualities on each list. Roughly half and half, but depending on the list. Of course everyone everyone has some pieces of both.

Second, I feel my body is both male and female, and more or less equal. This has nothing to do with feeling feminine or masculine but is purely an instinct about my body. (Indeed, when I am around people I feel more like a feminine male and when alone I feel more like a masculine female, if you can understand that.)

Third, I am not a woman or man. The phrase "all women/men are . . ." rarely fits me. "Woman" and "man" seem like categories human put themselves into to understand themselves and each other better. Like I said, that doesn't work out for me. Since I don't fit a category, this makes

From there I had to decide how my gender would influence my life. This is pretty simple for transexuals and bigender people; they all go the same direction for the same distance. But I learned intergender/genderqueer people are all over the map. Everything about our gender is up for grabs. I knew I did not want to pass as a woman; it's a lot of work and I had little motivation. Similarly, I felt apathetic about any surgery which also costs thousands of dollars. I thought of changing my mannerisms to act more feminine, but when I've tried they felt alien and not myself so it's rare. I may try changing my voice, but I may feel the same way. My interests are not more feminine, but I express them more openly now. My appearance is as a feminine male with my long hair, earrings, women's clothes, facial hair and male body. Yes, I do get a lot of stares.

I already had many names given to me by others: three first names (Jonathan, Jon, and JBJ) two last names (Baker-Johnson) which I have always loved. I already had a couple other gender neutral names already that I gave myself. I chose "Johannah" as yet another name, to balance the masculine and neuter names with something feminine. Besides the obvious correlation, I had several reasons. On two different occasions I felt a "gender experience" with people with the same name, one girl and one woman. At the same time my Aunt Joanna (an alternate spelling) passed away; she was at that point the closest that death had come to me and perpetuating her memory felt right. "Johannah" does not replace my other names but compliments them, reflecting I am feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral.

The most difficult aspect of my journey is coming out to friends and family, beginning with Jordan. While nearly all my friends have been very supportive, it was difficult to tell close friends there was a side of me I hid from them for years. My family, though loving, is not supportive which is excruciating to me. The other difficulty is that I had to do it over and over. Because our culture doesn't have a communal understanding of intergender or genderqueer, it means I constantly explain it to new people which is partly fun and partly exhausting.

My story noticeably lacks two plot elements that some other trans people include. Both are issues I simply did not even think to consider. One is the source of my transgender feelings. There were no events that made me think, "This is making me trans!" either in the moment or in retrospect. None of the silly stereotypes apply – I didn't have a traumatic childhood, a distant father, or a sexual abuse. My gender identity is no different from any other aspect of my personality – seeking out the true nature of things, organizing information, lacking focus, not believing anything because others tell me to, and so on – no one cares to find the origin of most of our attributes. Gender is no different. Besides, I don't fit into categories of any people. I'm too Protestant to be Orthodox and too Orthodox to be Protestant. I'm the only vegan I've ever heard of who doesn't like to cook. The only cyclist who hates bike shops. I get extremely uncomfortable around large groups of white people. Being a gender misfit is simply in character.

When people say, "How do you reconcile your faith with your gender?" I cannot relate to the question at all. They have always been harmonious to me. I might as well try reconciling my faith with my quietness, my gentleness, or my persistence. Only as I anticipated the reactions of others and they expressed condemnation did I see any need to think about ethics. I am quite a slave to my conscience, so I have had to reconcile my faith with my food, my money, my science, and more. But gender? There's nothing questionable about it. What my parents and the Church taught me well is that Christianity is not a religion of Do's and Don't's but of loving God and neighbor. I do both better by expressing by gender than repressing it and only that matters. Alternatively, Christian ethics can be summed up by what the Orthodox dub *theosis*, becoming like Christ. Because Christ transcends gender (Jesus could not be fully God otherwise), Christians are called to transcend gender. I did that before identifying as intergender and I continue now, merely with a different vocabulary and toolset.

God was definitely present throughout my awakening into my gender. God worked to bring the right circumstances – people, books, environments, ideas – at the right times lead safely into great knowledge of myself. My knowledge of God is far greater now too as I have come to realize that the Source of All similarly transcends male and female and the Incarnation embraced male and female. Were it not for the uniquely Christian theology of dying to self and taking on the fullness of God's will, I would not have made it this far. What is fantastic about both being Christian and intergender, is the many opportunities for growth and maturation that await me now.