

Defining a 'man' sometimes isn't so simple

As is always the case, the question came sooner than we expected.

"Daddy, are you a man?"

Marcelle hesitated. "Yesss ..."

"So am I!" Kai crowed.

"What do you think a man is?"

"No hitting and no pushing," our 2-year-old pronounced.

"That's right," Marcelle sighed with relief. "Men don't hit or push."

Loree Cook-Daniels

"Are you a man, Daddy?" is not a question most parents would have trouble with. But for female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs), the answer isn't necessarily automatic. For FTMs, the answer to what makes a man — a Y chromosome, a penis, a beard, a legal document, a boyhood, a behavior, a look, an attitude? — and what it takes to compensate when you're missing one or more of those markers takes some thinking.

Of course, genetic men also wrestle with masculinity. Many theorists believe that much male violence and macho posturing (masculopathy, psychiatrist Frank Pittman calls it) is perpetrated by men who were never told by a loving, present, securely male father figure that they were "man enough." Not knowing when and where they can stop, these "unanointed" men follow exaggerated cartoon and movie models of masculinity.

Most FTMs know enough not to try to be John Wayne or Rambo, but that doesn't mean they take their masculinity, identity, and community for granted. Although some FTMs quietly heed the siren call to disappear into the mainstream, others struggle to find their place within the Gay community. This isn't easy. Gay male FTMs have had their credentials questioned, and some report feeling out of place in FTM groups

where most have female partners. FTMs who lived as Lesbians before their transition may find themselves unwelcome in the Lesbian community because of their gender and unwelcome in the Gay male community because of their partner's.

Negotiating identity and community is also a challenge for those partners, the majority of whom seem to be Lesbian-identified. What feels good to half of such couples often directly threatens the other half: Every step the FTM takes towards claiming his true identity (male) may seem to pull the partner away from hers (Lesbian). Partners often have to struggle hard to tease apart and then reintegrate political theories and commitments, community ties, self-identities, fears, and stereotypes developed in past encounters with men, and love for and commitment to this particular individual.

Not every SOFFA (significant other, friend, family member and/or ally) has to struggle with the Lesbian-who-loves-a-man dilemma, but then that's not the only challenge SOFFAs face. Contrary to the image the term suggests, SOFFAs do not passively watch their loved ones' gender struggles from the sideboards. One of my friends, Lahl SarDyke, wonderfully writes about her SOFFA journey:

i still don't know where i am often, but the process of loving someone who changes their gender opens me up, somehow, to a vastness of possibility and acceptance that i never knew i had the capacity for. it is scary because i loose some of my rigidity, some of my own rules, some of my reluctance to see the tender contradictions/juxtapositions/oppositions in life. this is so good for me, even when i am afraid.

Questions of identity and community

Those of us struggling to survive within this 'non-existent' space have many questions. Where does our allegiance lie?

also face another segment of our community: those who are neither transsexual nor comfortable within their birth-assigned role of "female." Tomboy, butch, transgendered, drag king, intersexed, third sex ... the legion of labels hints at the creativity that's required to carve out a space where our society says none exists, a bubble within that thick, supposedly impermeable wall that separates the half of the population that's female from the half that's male. Those of us struggling to survive within this "non-existent" space have many questions. Where does our allegiance lie? Who is our community? Are we (as is sometimes said of bisexuals) simply "in denial" or "in transition"? Or are we advance guards to a future that is at once more spiritual and more fluid?

Identity. Community. Masculinity. Femininity. Rigidity. Rules. Contradictions, juxtapositions, oppositions. Struggling with our assumptions about gen-

der, about stereotypes, about mutability, about biology and upbringing and oppression and hypothalami — and figuring out how to use the fruits of these struggles in our political, spiritual, and public education work — is what will be happening Feb. 22-23 in Laurel, Md.

That's where the True Spirit Conference will bring together female-to-male transsexuals, butches, intersexuals, tomboys, drag kings, shape shifters, transgendered persons, partners/lovers/spouses, family members, friends, and allies to compare and contrast our journeys and our learnings. There will be workshops on masculinity, medical and legal issues, public education, outreach, spirituality, politics, relationships, sexuality, and coming out. There will a dialogue between male-to-female transsexuals and female-to-male transsexuals, a meeting specifically for SOFFAs, caucuses, receptions, a dance, a pool party, live musicians, vendors' tables, and book-signings. Leslie Feinberg will keynote.

It doesn't take much to attend this event: \$25 and a good-faith willingness to examine what it means, individually and collectively, to transgress gender boundaries.

For information on the conference, e-mail LoreeCD@aol.com or transman@netgsi.com, or write True Spirit Conference c/o The American Boyz at PO Box 1118, Elkton, MD 21922-1118. To register, send a check and the usual information to: True Spirit Registrations, 26-A Ridge Road, Greenbelt, MD 20770-1759.

Conflict resolution specialist Loree Cook-Daniels lives in the San Francisco Area. "Common Ground" explores productive ways of resolving differences among members of the Gay community.

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