

# NO MORE SECRETS

I've lived the majority of my life keeping a secret from those around me. To me, this secret felt like the most shameful, loathsome secret that anyone could have. I felt so much shame that for a long time, I convinced myself it wasn't true. Secrets like this can be destructive and prevent us from realizing happiness in our lives. My secret is that I feel that I am female.

Gender dysphoria (GD) is the distress some individuals experience because of incongruence they sense between their physical sex and their gender identity, or the gender they feel they are. Many who experience gender dysphoria or identify as transgender have a soul wrenching struggle. Questions enter the individual's mind such as: "what is wrong with me?" or "how do I make this go away?" For me the answers to these questions always reinforced the feeling that God must not love me.

Each individual's journey with gender dysphoria is very personal. What works to provide relief for one person may not begin to provide peace to another. My journey in accepting myself as a transgender woman is all my own. The best advice I could give someone who experiences gender dysphoria is to pray to our Heavenly Father to know what is right for you. Also please know that you are not alone and there are resources and support to help you find your path.

## My Story: Childhood through Adolescence

I was born into a strong LDS family in Salt Lake City, Utah. At the age of seven my family moved to Kaysville, where my mother's family was well known. My maternal grandparents were strict and expected a lot from their children and grandchildren. I was the first grandchild and my grandfather was very proud to have a grandson. My grandfather was strong, tough, and masculine and wanted to see those traits in his eldest grandson.

By this time I had a clear realization that I did not feel I was a boy, but I also knew that I didn't look like a girl either. It also became clear to me that it was not acceptable for boys to act like girls or to like girl stuff. I hid my feelings from my parents because I was ashamed. I knew what was expected of me as a boy and I wanted to please my parents and loved ones.

Puberty was extremely difficult for me. I didn't understand why but when I was twelve I began sneaking my sister's and mom's clothes. I would dress in their

clothes and pretend I was a girl. Every time I dressed, guilt, shame, and self-loathing would follow. Eventually my parents caught me dressed as a girl and they were very concerned and confused. I plainly remember my mom asking if this meant that I was gay. Although I had no understanding of the word 'gay,' I knew it wasn't good.

After my parents caught me dressed in my sister's clothes, they took me to a therapist. I was diagnosed with depression and prescribed medication. My dad encouraged me to talk to our bishop and reluctantly I agreed. Both my bishop and therapist took the approach that this was an addiction and my behavior must be stopped by means of prayer and self-control techniques.

I spent many hours on my knees praying for Heavenly Father to take this "secret" away from me. It was obvious to me that other boys did not have these feelings. To continue my treatment, my parents took me to see a hypnotherapist when I was 15. Under hypnosis, I revealed that a neighbor sexually abused me when I was 5 years old. I did not and still do not have any memory of this abuse. I have come to believe that it was easier for me to blame my gender dysphoria on something that happened to me, rather than wanting to admit that I was different.

Around this time the Jerry Springer Show was popular. Jerry Springer was a talk show that pushed the envelope. The premise of the show was to incite guests to fight and when the brawl inevitably started, the crowd would chant "Jerry... Jerry... Jerry..." I was curious and wanted to watch the show but knew my parents would not approve. One day I found the show was on and my parents weren't around. Surprisingly the first show I ever watched was of a transsexual telling her boyfriend that she had been born a boy. You can imagine how the boyfriend responded. There was yelling and fighting. And then the boyfriend called the transsexual woman 'IT.' I was horrified and thought there was no way I was similar to that woman. I would kill myself before I became an 'IT!'

I continued to see the hypnotherapist. He wanted to rid me of the desire to be a girl once and for all. Convinced that my gender confusion was due to a lack of normal sexual expression, he showed me a pornographic magazine. He encouraged me to masturbate like 'normal teenage boys.' I felt disgusted looking at those pictures, but there was also a part of me that was captivated. It was not due to the nudity, but because they were images of what I wanted to look like. It sounds silly but I felt jealous of those women.

During high school, I met a sweet girl. She had just moved to Kaysville from a small town in Central Utah. She was beautiful, fun, and was easy to talk to. I took her on several dates and we had a good time together. When I told her that I was beginning to have stronger feelings for her, she said that she just wanted to be friends. I was still dealing with my depression and when she turned me down, I

came to the conclusion that it must be because of my desire to be female. The rejection I felt was intense, but the belief that it was because of my gender identity sent me over the edge. For the first time I began to think of ways to kill myself.

Fortunately, I told my parents that I had been having suicidal thoughts. The next day they checked me into a mental hospital for suicidal teens. After a week stay in the hospital my psychologist was convinced that I was no longer a danger to myself. I never disclosed my feelings of gender dysphoria during my stay or in the months of out-patient care I received afterwards.

Throughout all of my teen years, I continued to meet with my bishop. We were still treating my dressing in female clothing as an addiction. I persistently prayed to Heavenly Father asking Him to take this away from me and to heal me. I had faith that if I was doing what was asked of me, one day the Lord would make me whole and the feelings of confusion with my gender would be gone.

### Serving the Lord

After high school, all of my friends left on their missions. It was expected that all young men would fulfill a mission, and I also desperately wanted to serve. Ever since I was in Primary, I had been taught that serving a mission was the right thing to do. But in all honesty I wanted to serve for a more selfish reason. I was convinced that going on a mission would eliminate my gender dysphoria.

I couldn't have been more wrong about a mission fixing my dysphoria. The feelings of gender incongruence did seem to be less intense during my three week stay at the MTC, but it was a different story when upon arriving in the mission field.

Having never been out of the states, London, England, was a completely unfamiliar world to me. One of the first things my new companion taught me was to avoid reading the newspapers and to never look at the magazine stands inside a convenience store. In England, regular newspapers and magazine stands contain large amounts of pornography. Even phone booths are plastered with ads featuring pornography and advertising escort services. I learned that I needed to be extra valiant wherever I went.

My first time in a convenience store I felt very proud of myself, while inside I never even looked in the direction of the magazine rack. Not long after arriving in London however, I felt the return of very familiar feelings, instead of going away my dysphoric feelings were coming back with a vengeance. In my personal prayers, I once again asked the Lord to take these feelings away and help me stay strong in resisting the only ways I knew how to cope.

Over the next year the dysphoria began to wear me down. I am ashamed to admit it, but I fell back into my old coping methods. I felt immense shame that even while on my mission, I was neither righteous nor strong enough to rid myself of these thoughts and addictions.

It was announced that the mission president would soon be doing interviews. The purpose of these interviews is to get to know the missionary better and address any concerns he or she might have. The time for my interview soon came. In our meeting I told him about my recent struggles with pornography and masturbation but neglected to say anything about my gender dysphoria. He didn't seem as concerned as I thought he should be, perhaps because he was nearing the end of his time as mission president. Maybe hundreds of missionaries had confessed these exact sins before, but I was sure no one had ever confessed that they wanted to wear girl's clothes. The shame and secrecy around these thoughts simply continued to escalate within me.

Each day of my mission I struggled with gender dysphoria and addictions. I became so tired. I would lie in bed and ask myself, "Why am I here?" Was it to make my parents and family proud of me? Or was it because I had a testimony of the gospel and wanted to do what was right? I felt like a hypocrite and a walking contradiction.

One night I finally reached the end of my ability to resist these thoughts. While my companion was asleep, I snuck out of our apartment and spent the evening out dressed as a woman. While out, I passed a large full length mirror. I stopped in front of this mirror and looked at myself. Self-hatred filled me as I looked at the person in the reflection of the mirror. I was overcome with intense disgust like nothing I had ever felt before. I knew I deserved God's wrath and that there was a special place in hell for me.

When I got back to our apartment, my companion was awake and waiting for me. The only words he said to me were that I needed to call the mission president. Even though it was 2:00am I called and told him I needed to talk to him right away. Early the next morning I was in his office explaining what I had done. I told him everything. I told him about my gender dysphoria. I told him about the many years of seeing therapists and talking to bishops. I told him about the sexual abuse I believed had happened to me as a child. He said he didn't know how to help me or what to do. He needed to call the missionary department in Salt Lake City and ask for guidance.

I waited in the other room while he privately made the call. They told him they would need to meet together to discuss my situation. The missionary department is always overseen by at least one member of the quorum of the twelve. The apostle serving at this time knew of a senior missionary couple serving in a neighboring

area. This senior elder specialized in helping individuals with issues similar to mine. It was suggested that my mission president contact him and do what was recommended.

Still to this day I am astonished that this faithful elderly man told my mission president to refrain from disciplining me. He recommended that I go home and receive professional help. My mission president had asked for permission to call my parents and tell them what happened. He said if he had a son that was going through what I was that he would want to know so he could help. I gave him permission to tell my dad, but made it clear that I didn't want my mom to know. I knew both my parents would want to help me, but my mom would not understand or respond well.

Based on his guidance I was released from my service for medical reasons and returned home. My family was all waiting for me as I got off the plane. I didn't understand how they could all still love me. They were the parents of a son who had done something horrible and shameful.

### The End of My Rope

Immediately upon my return, my parents and I made an appointment with LDS Family Services. Our meeting with the counselor did not go well, as the meeting only focused on how to cease acting upon my addictions. It was the same thing I had heard my whole life. My dad brought up the alleged sexual abuse as a young child but the counselor didn't feel that was important. We made an appointment with a different therapist and I found that I was just hearing the same stuff I had heard so many times before.

Recognizing I was at the end of my rope, my dad sat me down to for a heart to heart talk. With tears in his eyes, he bore his testimony that he knew God would heal me and take this away from me if I asked with a contrite spirit and complete faith. The Lord had performed many miracles back when he walked on the earth and even today, then why not for me?

Even though I had previously prayed many times to be healed and have this affliction taken from me, this time was different. For me, this time I approached it with a 'do or die' attitude. I was going to put all of my faith, everything I had into this. I knew God answers prayers and this time I knew He would answer mine.

That night I knelt by my bed and pleaded with my Heavenly Father. I told Him that I knew my desires were righteous and I only wanted to do what was expected of me. I poured out my heart out to Him. I knew He could do all things and that my only desire was to be made whole. I spent so much energy and emotion praying that I eventually collapsed with exhaustion.

Immediately I realized that I had not been healed and I was devastated. Nothing had changed. I still felt the feelings of gender dysphoria and the desire to wear women's clothing. Words cannot describe the hurt I felt. I was angry and I felt abandoned. All of my negative feelings were directed towards God. I still had a testimony of the gospel but I no longer believed God cared about me. If He did care about me, He would have healed me and made me whole.

Everything changed after that. My church attendance became sporadic; my heart was no longer in it. I stopped trying to resist my addictions. I just didn't care anymore.

## Dating

At a friend's wedding I met a nice young woman named Alaina. She was LDS and had just begun college. We began dating and I made frequent trips to Snow College to visit her. I told her about coming home early from my mission and the sexual abuse I experienced as a child. Alaina was very sympathetic and understanding. However, I neglected to tell her about my gender dysphoria, addictions, or what I had done on my mission.

We started getting serious and even talked about marriage. I knew I needed to tell Alaina more about my past and my current struggles, but I was afraid. I was afraid of being rejected again. Eventually I found enough courage to tell her about my addictions but chickened out about discussing anything further.

One evening Alaina's dad called me and asked me to come over to talk. He asked for more details surrounding my mission and said he didn't have a good feeling about me. I told him I struggled with masturbation and depression. He could sense there were things I was not telling him and pressed me further. I reaffirmed that that was everything because I could not bear the thought of telling him I secretly wore women's clothing.

The next time I saw Alaina she was upset and told me her parents wanted us to stop dating. She asked me to find a way to soothe her parents' concerns. I was confused, how could I help her parents feel better about me when I didn't like who I was either? I asked my dad for advice and he suggested that I request to serve out the remainder of my mission. He believed if I did that then Alaina's dad wouldn't have anything left to stand on. But returning to my mission wasn't an option for me. I was barely attending church physically; and emotionally I had completely checked out.

I tried to keep my distance from Alaina and respect her father's wishes, but I missed her. One night I decided to surprise her at college and before I knew it I was on her doorstep. When she opened the door I could tell she had been crying. She told me

that someone had informed the bishop of her home ward all about me and exactly what I had done on my mission. The bishop went to Alaina's father with this information and together they convinced her to breakup with me. This left me feeling worthless, shameful, and unlovable. To this day I don't know who talked to Alaina's bishop about me.

## She's the One

It was a few months before I started dating again, and soon I met Brigit. She was a strong willed woman, and we clicked right away. I was comforted in knowing that we could talk about so many things that I had never discussed in previous relationships.

Brigit had struggles of her own. She did not have a stereotypical childhood which might explain why I felt so comfortable around her. She was LDS and active in her ward, but she never came across as preachy which made me feel safe. Even though I was scared, I began to divulge the details of my past. We discussed my addictions with masturbation and hinted about my interest in wearing women's clothing. I did not tell her anything about my gender dysphoria.

Our relationship progressed quickly, and we started talking about marriage. Late one night while walking around Temple Square I gathered up the courage to ask her to be my wife. We were married in the Bountiful Temple on September 18, 1999.

Many have been surprised to find out we were married in the temple, especially considering my feelings towards God at the time. Although I no longer had a personal relationship with my Savior, I still felt the need to do what was expected of me. Temple marriage was what was expected of me. I was no longer emotionally invested in the Church, but I could go through the actions and present the image that everyone expected. How I felt inside was very different, but it would be a long time before I admitted that to anyone.

## Our Married Life

Learning how to live up to what was expected of a husband was very difficult. Brigit was a head strong, independent woman who was used to doing things her way. I was very passive and most of the time I was content to let her call the shots. I didn't want to be a mere passenger in my marriage, but I was emotionally exhausted due to the personal struggles I had.

In time Brigit realized there was a large part of me that I kept hidden from everyone, even her. In a moment of vulnerability Brigit would catch glimpses of this part of me. We both knew I was hiding secrets but were unsure if we were ready to open up the can of worms.

We continually repeated a toxic cycle when she would find my stash of women's clothing. Then a fight would ensue and I would feel guilty. Each time I recommitted to try harder to not act on those desires. Typically I was able to resist retreating to my world of lies for a while, sometimes even a few months, but eventually I would yield to my thoughts and feelings.

After a few years of marriage, Brigit experienced a serious health problem. She was hospitalized for over two months recovering and was on home health care for an additional six months. We learned that this health condition would impact her ability to get pregnant. The thought of infertility was devastating for her and made her question her role as a daughter of God and the expectations of her duty as a woman.

Infertility did not affect me the same way that it did Brigit. Even though I liked kids, the thought of raising a child scared me. How would my struggles affect my children? What makes me think I can raise a healthy child and not damage them in some way when I am so broken?

We spent years trying to conceive through medical intervention. I still feel guilty that I felt relief each time a fertility treatment failed.

### **A Bundle of Joy**

In 2004 by chance we met a woman who changed our lives forever. Mary was a pregnant woman who wanted to find a home for her baby. We spent many evenings with Mary before she told us she had known the first day we met that we were the parents she had been looking for. I was nervous and scared about becoming a parent and discussed these feelings with Brigit. She reassured me that I would make a great dad, and slowly I began to feel that this was right.

Mary wasn't due for three more months, and we thought we had time to get ready. Only two weeks later, our daughter was born. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I instantly loved her more than I imagined possible. I immediately realized that I would do anything for her. I recommitted that I would no longer entertain thoughts or feelings of being the opposite gender. I also was going to finally kick my addictions because I now had more reason to stop than I ever had before.

I was so incredibly naïve! If a mission or marriage didn't make these problems go away, why on earth did I think becoming a parent would do the trick? Plus now I had brought someone who was completely innocent into the picture.

### **The Cycle of Shame**



After Alyssa was born, the cycle continued. Brigit would find my stash of clothes, we would fight, and I would feel terrible and recommit to her that I would not do this anymore. Eventually, I couldn't resist and once again I would give into my addictions. Around and around we went. I believed I was getting better at hiding stuff from Brigit and pretending that everything was fine. After a short period I would get careless and get caught; maybe deep down I *wanted* to get caught. Was this really how I wanted to live the rest of my life?

After a few years of pretending things were going well, Brigit again found my stash. She had hit her limit and was done living like this. She said we needed to again talk to a therapist but this time find one who specializes in these behaviors. I had plenty of experience with therapists and believed they were of no help. I reluctantly agreed to see a therapist again in an attempt to save our marriage.

Brigit found a doctor who specialized in working with individuals with gender issues. During our first appointment, Dr. Malan asked that if he had a magic wand, what I would want him to do with it. Of course I told him to make these feelings and addictive behaviors go away. I told him that I had lost all hope and no longer believed it was possible for me to not be this way. If I wasn't able to get rid of these feelings or behaviors with the help of therapists, bishops, my parents, my wife, and even the Lord, they were never going away. With Dr. Malan's help I began to realize that the only thing I could ask him to take away was my guilt and shame. Dr. Malan couldn't remove gender dysphoria, but he could help me accept who I was. As a first step, I started to accept that I was a cross-dresser, a man who enjoyed wearing women's clothing. Brigit and I could work through this, and it meant that I could stay with my family. Dr. Malan introduced us to a few transgender individuals who identified as the opposite sex from what they were assigned at birth. Each person we met had been divorced or had never married. So I was convinced that yes, being a cross-dresser was acceptable and much better than the possibility of being transgender. My cross-dressing would remain between Brigit and myself and a few *close* family members and friends.

Through therapy I gave myself permission to stop attending Church. Why was I going anyway? For my family? Was that reason enough to go? I certainly wasn't going for myself or for God. Why would I want to go for Him? I didn't believe He even cared about me. I still believed the Church was true, and I was convinced that my family should still attend. At this time I also stopped wearing my temple garments since they no longer held any meaning for me. Brigit was incredibly hurt by this and scared that she was losing her eternal family, but she knew it was out of her control.

Brigit reluctantly agreed to the occasional cross-dressing. We found a group of heterosexual cross-dressers that met once a month in Salt Lake City. To our surprise some of these men were even happily married and had no desires to be a

woman; they just enjoyed dressing like women. I asked people to begin to use what I feel is my proper gender name, Ann. I choose it because it was a part of the name Ryan and I wanted it to respect all of who I am including the journey that brought me here.

Even though I got permission for this occasional outlet, I still could not shake the addictions of pornography and masturbation. It was not enough, something was still wrong. The only thing that changed was that it got easier for me to hide my stash since Brigit knew I had women's clothing.

### Digging for the Truth

Eventually we changed therapists to find someone to help us mend the cracks in our marriage. Brigit felt more comfortable with this new therapist because he was LDS. She felt that he could help me mend my negative feelings towards God and the Church. He had worked with many individuals who were gay but with none who were gender variant. I made sure our therapist knew I was not going to try to suppress my cross-dressing but I did want to figure out why I still felt like something wasn't quite right.

We explored my childhood and I came to believe that the alleged sexual abuse may never have occurred. We talked about feelings and characteristics of both Ryan and Ann. Brigit told our therapist that over the last several years she had noticed an increase in the anger that I held inside. When she said those words I knew she was right. I too had felt the anger growing inside me and realized that it was so intense the possibilities terrified me. This felt strange, as I had always been an easy-going person. I was frightened at how quickly my anger got out of control with little or no warning.

At first I had told our therapist that that Ann was the gentle, kind side of me and Ryan was the destructive and angry part. I had it backwards but wanted to believe it was so. In all honesty, I realized that Ryan was gentle and Ann was the destructive, angry side of me. My whole life it was Ann that I had tried to get rid of. My parents had tried, church leaders tried, and even my wife tried. Ann was so suppressed that she felt hate towards all of them. There seemed to be a battle going on inside me. How was I going to reconcile the two parts of my true identity?

I worried that as Ryan I would be battling Ann for the rest of my life. As Ann I was angry, hurt, and scared. I had stopped caring for anyone and it didn't matter who I hurt. I was ready to leave my family just to be able to exist. I didn't realize that what I really wanted was just to be loved for who I was and that I was already surrounded by people who wanted that for me as well.

For the last few years, I have been working on joining the two parts of me and becoming a whole person. At first I had no clue how to do this or what it even looked like. I felt like I was being asked to climb Mount Everest with a toothpick and it seemed impossible. I didn't know how to dismiss the expectations others had of me, but I knew I had to work at it.

The thought that I could be transgender freaked me out. Based on what I had seen, I believed at that point that it meant I would have to leave my family, fully transition and never think about God again.

### Agency and the Road Back

We reached a wall in my therapy sessions where my course of action with my transgender feelings had to be up to me. We stopped discussing Ann and began to focus back on my feelings towards God. Every time the subject was brought up I was terrified physically and emotionally. I was not ready and didn't know if I would ever be.

One evening, Brigit and I had a fight. As in so many past fights it began small, with a discussion of how often I was dressing as Ann. For me however, it was deeper than that. It was another reminder that as Ann I didn't feel welcome or loved. No one wanted that part of me around and I was feeling suffocated.

Like a rite of passage for young girls, I had always dreamed of getting my ears pierced. However Brigit did not approve of this and had often told me it was a deal breaker for her. I sent her a message that I planned to get them pierced. She responded that if I pierced my ears, she would see that as a sign I was finished with our marriage. There was no stopping me, so later that day I pierced my ears and sent a message back that I would be home to pack my things.

After arriving home to pack my belongings our emotions were high but Brigit patiently asked me to help her understand what I was feeling. She asked me to ensure that my actions were honest and not made on emotional impulses.

The following week, a good friend asked us what the worst case scenario would be for us to stay together. Each of us was surprised by our answers. Maybe this could work. At least it was worth a try, what have we got to lose?

Over the next month we met with my parents and siblings to inform them of what we were going through. They knew that I had struggled for a long time and hearing me admit that I was a transgender woman was not a big shock to any of them. They did have concerns and questions. We openly discussed things for several hours, and it was evident that they loved me tremendously. I spoke of my feelings of anger towards the Lord but admitted that perhaps eventually I might be open to

going back to church, but only dressed as Ann, my true self. I was shocked when my sister-in-law volunteered to go with me.

With the support of Brigit and based on our worst case scenarios, I made an appointment with a doctor to begin hormone replacement therapy. Around this same time I noticed a major change in my life. I hadn't experienced the desire to look at pornography or masturbate for several months. I have a theory why this happened. I believe that once I felt loved and accepted as Ann not only by those around me but by myself, I no longer needed those destructive coping methods.

Last fall Brigit gently suggested I take my sister-in-law up on her offer to attend church together. I sent her a message to ask if she was still willing to attend with me and she accepted. Attending church dressed as my true self was an amazing experience. I was able to listen to the talks and concentrate on the spirit during sacrament meeting. I no longer felt uneasy and anxious during church. I finally felt at home.

Later that day I knelt down and prayed to my Heavenly Father. I told Him about my feelings and experiences. I let out all of my hurt and my anger that I had held on to for so many years. And for the first time in my whole life I felt peace and felt that God loved me.

Currently we are trying to navigate what it means for me to be transgender and for us to remain together. We make joint decisions only after a lot of discussion and prayer. We strive to be completely honest with each other.

I have been surprised at the progress I have made in becoming whole. I have begun to identify as a transgender woman but know that as a whole person I will always have Ryan inside me too. The realization that I don't have to act or dress a certain way based on other's perceptions of my gender has been healing.

The process of writing my story has been very painful. I found myself reliving so many moments of heartache and suffering. I continued to write with the hope that my story might bring someone some comfort. Whether you are someone who shares the grief of gender dysphoria or you are someone who is trying to understand transgender individuals, I urge you to reach out with an open mind and a softened heart. No one chooses to have these feelings. Each individual's path of dealing with gender dysphoria is different and this story is mine alone. We can all be united in our desire to love others. I have learned that what really matters most of all is that we are all children of a loving Father in Heaven, and he knows each of us for who we truly are.