

# CHOOSING FAITH OVER FEAR IN UNDERSTANDING MY GENDER IDENTITY

The main character of the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean, was faced with an identity crisis. The 19 years he had spent in prison for stealing a loaf of bread had shaped his view that the world was a dark cruel place. "Take an eye for an eye, turn your heart into stone, this is all I have lived for, this is all I have known" he sings in the song "Who am I?" His identity crisis was incited by the kindness of the Bishop of Digne, who took Jean Valjean into his home, feeds him and showed him kindness. Jean Valjean upon seeing the value of the bishop's belongings, decided to steal from him. When caught by the police, Valjean says that the silver in his pocket was a gift from the bishop. When the police brought him back to the bishop, Valjean was certain the bishop would deny Valjean's story, sending him back to the racks of prison. To his amazement, the bishop affirms Valjean's story, and an extra gift of candlesticks was bestowed. This singular event of generosity was a life changing experience for him, leading him to change his life, become a better man, adopt an orphaned child, and care for the poor of his city.

His song "Who am I?" has been a question I have been attempting to answer for much of my life, and while I don't have a complete answer to that question, I am closer to understanding who I am than ever before. In my life, I have adopted a similar, albeit quite different, motto in regards to who I am. My motto from a very early age was "you are a disgusting individual, no one else is like you, no one will understand you, so don't tell anyone about who you really are." I had adopted a motto of secrecy which left me feeling all alone and isolated from other people. This motto prevented me from getting close to people. I thought that if people knew who I really was inside, that I would be rejected, made fun of, and mocked. Like Jean Valjean, I also have realized that my motto about life was not healthy and not how I really wanted to live my life. I have learned that as I share my story with others, it actually decreases the shame I have experienced throughout my life, leading to a more rewarding and fulfilling life. I have learned that as I act with faith instead of fear, the Lord blesses me with the opportunity to help others who are having a similar struggle as me. I have adopted a new motto for my life, which

comes from Doctrine and Covenants 115:5. "Arise and shine forth that thy light maybe a standard for the nations."

Before I go any further, I should probably introduce myself. To most people, I am totally 'normal,' the most Mormon of Mormon folk. I was raised in Utah County, served a mission, have held numerous callings for the church, including Elder's Quorum President and am currently a primary teacher. As if that weren't Mormon enough, I was born at LDS hospital in Salt Lake City. My great-grandfather emigrated from Sweden after joining the church and arrived in the Salt Lake Valley about 10 years following the first settler's arrival in the area.

I had a very "normal" upbringing as the third of four boys. I grew up in the most Mormon of Mormon neighborhoods, with primarily boys around me as friends. Our neighborhood had an unusual amount of boys. There were several families that looked like ours, with multiple boys and no girls. My father was a social worker and worked in that field for over 30 years. I have always been in or around the Church in some capacity. I gained my testimony of the gospel as I was preparing to serve a mission. I remember vividly the night I knelt down in prayer and asked our Heavenly Father if the Church was true. My heart felt full, the Spirit was strong and I knew that all I had been taught about the Church was true. I wept tears of gratitude as I had received the answer I had been looking for. I served a mission in Roseville, California. I have been married for 15 years to my beautiful wife Tina, and we have four beautiful children, ages 12, 9, 6, and 3. I graduated with a Masters in Social work from Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts and am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Despite the seeming normalcy of my life, I always felt different than others. This essay is aimed at telling my story, which is a story of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

### Early Life and Gender Identity Incongruence

I first sensed that I was different than other people at the age of five. Around that time I began to realize that I didn't feel totally comfortable in my own body. It started as I was watching TV shows such as *Wheel of Fortune* and *The Price is Right*. I would see Vanna White or the *Price is Right* models and I realized that I felt more like them than my brothers and other boys in my ward. I also noticed that I felt that I more closely identified with the women of the ward, in regards to how they dressed and their caring nurturing ways, as opposed to the rough and tumble type of life that is so often expected of boys while they are growing up. I began creating a fantasy world where I would become a woman and would generally fall asleep to these dreams. These types of dreams continued on a nightly basis.

I made friends with one of the girls across the street. We played Barbies together and I felt so comfortable doing that. I was jealous that I didn't have the skill to braid her hair and tried to learn. For my sixth birthday, I asked my parents for a Barbie of

my own. I don't remember their reaction; however, they did get me a Ken doll. While I don't remember if I was disappointed or not, I was grateful that I now had a doll that I could play with, and I didn't have to borrow my neighbor's doll to play Barbies with her. At one point, she had a 'girls only' birthday party and I remember being crushed that I wasn't invited. I also remember one family vacation where my parents took us boys to rent a video. My brothers wanted to get an action movie, while I insisted that we get the "Care Bears" movie. My parents placated us both and got both movies for us to watch. A few years later, Cabbage Patch Dolls were all the rage. I asked my parents for one, for my birthday. While they couldn't afford one, they did get me a miniature one, a football player. I took the doll into my 3rd grade show and tell with all the pride an eight year old could possess. I showed the doll to my classmates, and while I wasn't openly mocked during class, several of my classmates made fun of me for having a 'girl's' toy. I tried to defend myself by insisting that it was a football player, however the teasing continued. I tucked that doll away in my desk and hid it, so I wouldn't be made fun of. I believe it was at this moment that I realized that I couldn't share how I felt to anyone else. I remember vividly the next year specifically asking for GI Joes for my birthday. I desperately wanted to fit in. I found a group of other boys who played with GI Joes and I started hanging out with them. I began doing things that other 'typical' boys do. Despite the appearance of being a typical boy, deep down I knew I was different. I wanted to be a girl. I was jealous when I saw other girls in my class, the variety of clothes they wore, their long hair, etc. That was how I saw myself as opposed to the reflection I saw in the mirror.

I remember one particular primary lesson on prayer. My teacher taught that if we are good and say our prayers and ask with real intent, that our Heavenly Father would answer our prayers. I remember it hitting me right then. "If I pray to Heavenly Father to make me a girl, I will be a girl." I excitedly went to my room that night and prayed with all the intent and faith that a nine year old could muster. I asked Him to make me a girl. I waited for what seemed like an eternity, and when nothing happened, I thought "well, maybe I just need to go to sleep and when I wake up, my prayer will be answered." Obviously, that prayer was never answered in the way that I hoped it to be. My prayers went from asking to be made a girl to pleading with Father to make me a girl. In all my life, I don't believe I have prayed so hard for anything else. I was too young at that time to understand that sometimes Heavenly Father's answer can be no. That was never taught to me; at least I don't remember it being taught. I began telling myself that I must be bad, because I knew that Heavenly Father answered prayers, if we are 'good boys and girls.' Since my prayer was not answered it meant that I must be bad, or that I wasn't good enough, or righteous enough, or these feelings that I had were evil.

In this way I began a lifetime of self-doubt, and spent many years wondering if wanting to be a girl was an unrighteous desire. I began to loathe myself for feeling this way. I was sure I was the only person in the world who felt this way. This began

a cycle of isolation. I still had friends and we played around and had fun; however, I never really developed deep meaningful relationships, because I felt so shameful of how I felt inside. One day, while watching daytime TV, I saw a talk show that talked about being “trapped in the wrong body.” The show focused on people who felt they were girls trapped in a boy’s body and vice versa. Some of these people had sex reassignment surgery, while some hadn’t. This was the first time I had heard of other people who felt like me. I now knew that I wasn’t alone in these feelings; however, I was certain that I was the only member of the Church who felt this way.

### Developing unhealthy coping techniques to manage these emotions

I had no idea how to cope with my feelings. I felt so ashamed of them that I couldn’t bear the thought of telling my parents, my brothers, or any of my friends. One night I had an idea. If I could just put on some women’s clothing and sleep with them on, than perhaps that was the ‘missing ingredient’ to me being turned into a girl. I snuck into my mom’s room and took some of her clothes. For the first time, I was wearing women’s clothing. Wearing her clothes felt so unbelievably right; with them on I knew that I should have been a girl, but when I took them off and returned them I felt a deep sense of guilt and shame. This began a pattern of sneaking into my mom’s closet and taking her clothes. I vowed each time this happened that I would never do it again. This pattern continued until I went on my mission at the age of 19. Once, my Dad found the ‘stash’ of mom’s clothes I had taken. It was hidden in a common area, so I could deny that it was me if it was found. My parents asked each of us boys who took the clothes and we all denied it. I believe that we were grounded until someone came forward and told the truth. Eventually the guilt overwhelmed me and I told my parents that it was me who took them. My mom was shocked and asked me why. I wanted to drum up the courage to say “because I want to be a girl like you mom,” but I lacked the courage needed and just blurted out “I was just curious about what it felt like to wear women’s clothes.” She asked me to stop, and I promised that I would, which unfortunately was a promise I couldn’t keep. I continued to find ways to sneak her clothes and then return them without her knowing. Each time I did this, the guilt continued to grow and I would promise myself “this is the last time.” I felt a great deal of shame and felt unworthy of Heavenly Father’s love.

When I was around 15 years old, I was introduced to pornography. This was so exciting to me, because I didn’t know what a female body looked like under their clothes, so I had a more accurate image of what it was that I had wanted and felt like I was. I developed other unhealthy coping mechanisms as an adolescent, and the feeling that I was a girl never went away. Puberty is a difficult time for anyone; however, it was especially difficult for me. As my body was changing from that of a boy’s to a man’s, I knew that wasn’t what I wanted. The changes that were happening to me as a natural part of puberty were uncomfortable to me, making the disconnect between what I felt on the inside that much greater than what I saw

on the outside. As the disconnect continued to grow, I felt much more alone, and depressed.

Another difficult part of adolescence for me was that I was painfully shy. I didn't feel as though I could open up to others about who I really was. How I acted was such a façade that I didn't make many friends. I was always friendly with those in my ward and they accepted me, however my childhood friends began making other friends and I wasn't joining them. I began isolating myself even more, losing friends frequently by turning down opportunities to hang out. I realize now that I was isolating myself and pulling away from others.

### Jr. High through High School and trying to fit in

I started to play football in the 7th grade. I was never much of a "tough guy," but I have always loved football and I was always not only one of the tallest boys in class but also one of the biggest. At my first practice, I lined up against someone who was a bit smaller than me and I was thinking "I've got this." I was on the defensive line and after the quarterback said "hike," I was planted on my butt so hard. I was really embarrassed. I used that as motivation to never allow it to happen again. I wound up starting not only on the offensive line, but also saw a lot of playing time on the defensive line as well. I played football in the 7th, 8th and 9th grade, and played both ways most of the time, only coming out for a few plays for a breather. This was tough for me. I enjoyed playing the game, but I hated practice, and I hated trying to "fit in" with the macho image expected of football players. I never felt like I fit in on the team and tried to force myself.

At one particular practice, another teammate was talking about a girl at school and how he'd like to have sex with her as she was 'slutty.' Another teammate remarked how ugly she was and she should pay HIM to have sex with her. I joined in by making fun of her, and still feel guilty about this incident today. I was trying so hard to fit in and be like what other boys are like, but that feeling was so foreign to me. I know the girl didn't hear me (I don't even remember who she was), but it was so uncomfortable saying something like that and being a part of something like that. Yet, I yearned to belong to a group and have more friends. After my freshman year, my knees started bothering me and I went to see a doctor to see if continuing to play football would be OK. He cleared me for playing, however asked that I wear knee braces as part of playing. I wound up sitting out the year to do some physical therapy and I planned on joining the team my junior year.

It was during my sophomore year that my addiction to pornography began spiraling out of control. I isolated myself from friends and family. I spent many Friday and Saturday nights looking at magazines wishing, hoping, and praying I could be one of those women. I even bargained with Heavenly Father that if He would turn me into one of those women, that I would convert them to the Church! I

felt myself growing further away from family, friends, and loved ones. I felt so alone in my struggles. Not only did I feel as though I was the only one with gender dysphoria, but now I was also the only one with an addiction to pornography. I became really good at faking happiness. No one knew I was miserable. I didn't tell anyone. I got really good at fake smiling, despite the emptiness inside. During the latter-end of my sophomore year, the head football coach (whom I had never met) saw me in the hallway, and he asked me "Brandon, I hear you're a pretty good football player, how come you're not playing this year? I told him that it was due to my knees, and he asked if I had been doing my physical therapy exercises so that I could play again my junior year. I lied and said "yep." He then told me that he had heard good things about my ability and he wanted to see me playing. I told him I would be at Summer Camp. I went to maybe three or four practices and I knew that it was not for me. While I loved the game, the attitude of macho-ness combined with the fact that I didn't feel male was too much for me. I decided to quit and lied to my parents about why. I told them that the language used by the coaches and players made me feel uncomfortable, and while that was true, it wasn't the whole story. I just felt so out of place on the football field.

My pattern of self-destructive behavior, especially with regards to pornography continued until it was time for me to serve my mission. I needed to repent of these things and I worked with my bishop to achieve true forgiveness. I mentioned to my bishop that I had been sneaking around wearing my mother's clothes, and he acted surprised and then brushed it aside saying "well, don't do that anymore." He didn't ask me to repent. He didn't tell me if it was a sin or not. He didn't even tell me to seek forgiveness from my mother. That left me feeling even more confused. He wanted me to stop (and I knew that I couldn't be wearing dresses or skirts on my mission, so I had already stopped), but his lack of direction filled me with confusion about this particular coping technique.

I submitted my papers and was called to the California Roseville Mission. The two years serving there were a tremendous blessing in my life. While my gender dysphoria remained, it felt diminished. In one of my areas, for some reason, the gender dysphoria began again and I was doing my best to stuff it down. One day my companion and I were doing service at a recent convert's house and we discovered a pile of Playboy's in his nightstand. I couldn't believe it! I quickly grabbed the first one I could find, threw it in my backpack and went on with cleaning his house.

When I got home for lunch I ran into my bedroom to put the magazine in a safe place until I got home for the day and could look at it while everyone was asleep. My companion found this odd behavior for me and confronted me. I think deep down he knew I had taken a magazine, but didn't say anything. Needless to say, I looked at the magazine that night and I was flooded with memories and longing to be the woman I felt inside, however, I felt terribly guilty. I quickly ripped up the

magazine that night and put it in the dumpster. I never discussed this with my mission president, and oh, how I regret not talking to him about it. He is such a kind, gentle and caring man. I believe he could have really helped me through this, however the cycle of self-shame, self-loathing, and wanting to keep up appearances to him prevented me from seeing him about this. I did however repent of this with my bishop upon completion of my mission. As I completed my two years of service, I began to believe that these feelings were gone, and I wouldn't have to worry about them anymore.

I met Tina in the fall of 1999, and we were married in the spring of 2000. I never told her that I struggled with gender dysphoria, since I truly believed that it was behind me and I didn't have to worry about it. I did however muster up the courage to tell her about my pornography addiction, and she listened and tried to understand the best she could. She assured me that she still loved me, especially since the addiction was now behind me. The choice to keep my gender identity issues from her continues to haunt me and I continue to work through the guilt associated with all of this secrecy. Each time I bring up how guilty I feel, she is so patient and understanding. Although she at times will also express disappointment at my secrets, she typically responds with "this needed to come out at the right time, in the Lord's time." She has mentioned on more than one occasion that she believes that the Lord gave me the strength to last for fourteen years without telling her, because it wasn't the right time, there weren't the support systems in place when we got married. The belief that my gender dysphoria was gone lasted for about 18 months, and then the dysphoria came back with a vengeance. My wife and I are approximately the same size, so I started sneaking around and wearing her clothes while she was away. There were times that I would sneak out of bed while she was sleeping to put on one of her bras. The feelings of guilt continued to increase, and I associated the guilt I was feeling with my feelings of gender dysphoria.

Looking back on this time in my life and why I never told Tina, I see that I had developed a belief that to accept being transgender would mean that I couldn't be a part of the Church. My first memories of learning of someone who was transgender (though I didn't have a name for it at the time) was watching a daytime talk program where they showed people who had received a sex change. Somehow that had felt wrong to me, even though I so strongly identified with them in feeling like I was born in the wrong body. I dreamed of being able to save up the money needed and having a sex change of my own. I have since learned that the Church's only disciplinary position on transgenderism is in regards to an "elective sex reassignment surgery."

As humans can do, I saw the situation in black and white and thought I either had to suppress these feelings, or give in and find a way to transition and eventually have the surgery. I didn't think that there could be other ways of coping with these feelings. I have a testimony of the truthfulness of the Gospel and also knew how I

felt but I didn't know or even believe that the two could be reconciled. I also couldn't imagine how my wife would react. I knew that she loved me and that I loved her, but I was scared that she would leave me if I told her. Complicating matters, my cousin came out as transgender around 2010. I got a glimpse of how my family would react if I came out to them. While there was never anything said disrespectful towards my cousin, comments such as "I don't know how his wife can stay with him" were frequently said by members of my family as well as by Tina. This added to my fear of discussing how I really felt, because Tina meant the world to me. I simply could not imagine a world for me without her in it. I was determined at that point to never tell her or anyone else.

As an adult, although the pornography addiction had subsided, I had adopted other coping mechanisms which I realize were unhealthy. These included an addiction to video games, and a food addiction, which I continue to struggle with. Comfort eating has become a constant part of my coping mechanisms. I was gaining weight at an alarming rate, and I knew I had to do something about it. I was introduced to an app on my phone called the couch to 5k program, which gradually takes a person from a "couch potato" to being able to run a 5k. I ran my first 5k in June of 2013, and continued to find joy in running. I loved being able to listen to music and to compete only with myself. I found myself learning that I could push myself harder than I ever had. I repeatedly told myself, one more step, one more step. In August of 2013, I ran my first 10K and in June of 2014, I ran my first half marathon. I was so proud of myself at that point. I had accomplished a goal that I never thought I'd be able to. I thought that I could not be prouder of myself than at that moment. It was shortly after finishing my half marathon that I finally acknowledged that I was transgender, but acknowledging this and seeing the pain on Tina's face increased my own depression. I stopped running, I stopped eating right. Most of the weight came back; however, I am now back on track, back to running three times a week and working on improving my eating habits.

My other addiction became video games, generally sports related ones. At one point, I rented a golf game from a video store. In the game, you could create your own player. I created a male player for when Tina or my children were around and a female player for when they were in bed. As you played each round of golf, you would earn some money where you could go and purchase new and improved equipment or clothing etc. As much as I enjoyed the game, I think I enjoyed shopping the most! I would stay up until three or four in the morning, playing rounds of golf and then immediately going to the 'clubhouse' to purchase a new outfit for my character. It was as though I was living vicariously through this video game. That was the best part for me, the game became increasingly boring, because I needed to play it in order to have the money needed for the clothing I wanted for my character. This became an escape for me to hide from reality.



Tina became my security blanket in so many ways. She has always loved me unconditionally and yet we have realized that some of the ways I would treat her were part of my part of my pattern of unhealthy coping techniques. When she would spend too much time with her friends, I would get upset. She would travel to Massachusetts to visit her family, and I became overly clingy, waiting at the edge of my seat for a phone call from her. We would fight if she didn't call at just the right time. I reasoned that if she loved me, she'd call me and understand that I was lonely. I have since realized that my internal struggle increased while she was gone. When she was home, the dysphoria seemed lessened, and I could manage. She provided a check of sorts against these feelings I had, since I continued to believe that they were evil and wicked feelings. When she was gone, that security blanket was gone and I didn't have to worry about wearing her clothes and being caught, however that behavior always led to guilt and shame. I also have realized that the guilt I felt when dressing had more to do with the sneakiness as opposed to the actual behavior of dressing.

Finally after 14 years of marriage, I could no longer continue to lie to my wife or to myself. I had been living in denial for too long, fear had paralyzed me into doing nothing, and pretending everything was OK. I was becoming more and more depressed. I was struggling to even feel the Spirit in my life. I was simply going through the motions in regards to Church. I had stopped praying as my prayers hadn't been answered. I began to truly believe that I could not be LDS and transgender, that I was going to have to pick one or the other, yet both had consequences that I couldn't stand to bear. One day as I was driving home from work, I heard a teaser story on the radio about a transgender person who had found acceptance in their LDS ward. My jaw just about hit the ground when I heard that. I couldn't believe it. A transgender person who was active and welcome in their LDS ward? I had never heard of such a thing. That was the first sign of hope that it was possible to be transgender and remain in the Church. The interview was broadcast at a time when I wouldn't be around a computer or radio to listen, so I thought I could just stream the interview online the next day. I went to the station's website and I couldn't find it. I began doing Google searches to see if I could find it that way. To this day, I still haven't heard the interview, but it was during this process of trying to find the interview that I discovered North Star and their e-mail support group. Getting to know these members and their stories gave me the courage I needed to finally tell my wife.

### Coming out and finding a new normal for my family.

I had told Tina at one point that I simply liked to cross-dress, but not to worry, I wasn't transgender. We dealt with that for a few months before I decided that I should stop cross dressing since I began to believe it was contributing to her depression and anxiety. After finding the North Star e-mail support group, I realized that I had to tell her the whole truth. I remember the day so well. It was a Sunday

and we were walking with the kids around the block. She could tell I was nervous and scared and she asked if I was OK. I told her no I wasn't, but that the time wasn't right to talk about it. After the kids went to bed, we sat down at the kitchen table and I told her. "Tina, I'm not 'just' a cross dresser.... I am transgender."

The look of shock, disappointment, and betrayal on her face continues to haunt me to this day. She was confused and angry. She didn't understand how this can work within a gospel context. What does this mean for the eternities? What about our eternal marriage? If I feel like I'm a woman inside, will that somehow nullify our eternal marriage in the resurrection? I told her that I didn't have any of those answers for her, however I did tell her about North Star and that there was a spouses group that she could join. Despite her pain, I felt a sense of relief, in that I wasn't holding onto this secret anymore. I had someone who would share my burden. Since coming out to her, I have found that she truly does love me unconditionally. One of our songs that we danced to at our wedding reception was "I'll Stand by You" by *The Pretenders*. One of the lyrics of that song says "Nothing you confess, could make me love you less." That song has always held a deep meaning to me, but never more so than in the past year that I came out to her.

Despite the relief I experienced by telling Tina, the pain and guilt from the years of lies continued to haunt me. I went to the Lord in prayer to know what steps would be acceptable to him in how to manage my gender identity concerns. The Spirit whispered to me to make all decisions with my wife, and as long as my behaviors were within the parameters that the Lord has set, along with boundaries set by Tina and myself, then all would be well. I began wearing women's clothing again, in private and in my room, this time with my wife's permission and an interesting thing happened. I was happier. I no longer felt guilty. The Spirit came back into my life. I realized that the guilt that I was feeling was due to the sneaking around, and not the result of being transgender, or cross dressing. I began feeling increasingly worthy of my Heavenly Father's love. I began feeling closer to the Spirit.

My brother once asked me "what is it about wearing women's' clothing that is so helpful to you in managing these feelings?" I have wondered that myself, and discussed it with my therapist. He asked me questions such as, "is it sexual in nature?" I answered, "No, it was not." He asked if it was because they felt more comfortable. I answered that may be part of the reason; however, that didn't really feel right either. After further questioning, and a little research, I realized that wearing women's clothing feels right for me, because it helps to eliminate the incongruence I feel between my mind and my body. Dressing for me has become a helpful way to reduce the amount of dysphoria I feel on a daily basis. The boundaries that Tina and I had set limited my dressing only in our bedroom behind locked doors, after the children were in bed. I couldn't be happier, however Tina continued to struggle.

Without therapy I wouldn't be where I am at today. To anyone going through a gender identity crisis therapy is crucial, and finding the right therapist is equally crucial. For me, finding a therapist who was LDS and could help me through my gender identity concerns was paramount. I looked in my insurers list of preferred providers for individual therapy and was presented with several names. As part of my licensure process for becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, I was expected to meet weekly with a supervisor, to review cases, review how I was doing, and to hone my clinical skills. Every one of them was female and when I was struggling, I was able to open up to them. At times, it felt like I was in therapy myself. Using this as a backdrop, I decided I wanted a female therapist. I called the closest female therapists to my work, and none had any openings within the first few weeks of my calling.

There was one male named Rich who was on the list and he was close by. He had an opening in the next week, so I decided I'd go see him, and if things didn't work out, I could go and see the other therapist. As the time drew closer to meeting with Rich, my nerves began to get the best of me. I told myself, "what's another couple of weeks?" I tried many different ways to talk myself out of going to meet with him. I remember a concept that is taught in therapy called "opposite emotional reaction," which states that in order to feel better, you sometimes have to do that which you do not want to do. With that in mind, I decided I'd give Rich a try and if it didn't work out, I still had the appointment with the other female therapist.

I remember walking into his office, right across the hallway from one of my former teacher's quorum advisers, who is a pediatrician. I remember thinking "Oh great, he's going to see me, and he's going to know I'm transgender." I know I was catastrophizing; however, it shows how nervous I was to attend therapy. I remember sitting in the waiting room, anxiously waiting for Rich to come out, certain that he would be the only one to ever know what I was about to tell him. My "official" reason for seeing him was for depression, however I told him quickly what was really going on. He looked me in the eyes and stated "I'm so glad you're here, I don't know much about those issues, and can't empathize totally with what is going on, however I am in supervision to become a certified sex therapist and I consult through Skype with several other counselors in the Rocky Mountain area. I am sure I can help you." It also helped that he is LDS and is also in the bishopric of his ward. Working with Rich has been a tremendous blessing. He keeps me in check when needed, reminds me of my priorities etc.

One day, Tina and I were discussing boundaries and what she was comfortable with. Anything she was not comfortable with, she told me so. She could see the hurt on my face and told me "I hate having to be the bad guy", to which I replied "well, you kind of have to be." Not my greatest response as a husband... In processing this with Rich, he reminded me of two things. First, the answer to my prayers was to do all things with Tina's blessing and within her boundaries. He also helped me to

reframe the thought that she was the “bad guy” into her being my “voice of reason.” That really resonated with me and helped me through that particular time. We all need our own little Jiminy Cricket, and that is what Tina has provided for me. Meeting Rich also provided another blessing. Tina had been in therapy, and her therapist lovingly told her “I really don’t know how to help you. I can listen, I can empathize; however, I have no experience with this.” I discussed this with Rich, and he told me of one of his colleagues who was also in supervision with him, who had an office close by. Tina began seeing her and she has been a tremendous blessing in her life.

Tina had been in therapy for several years dealing with depression and anxiety and my announcement that I was transgender became a big topic of their therapy sessions. I was determined to not let anyone else know other than Tina, reasoning that she could process things within the spouses e-mail group and with her therapist. I had posted to the support group how I was feeling about keeping this a secret and not telling anyone when one of the members lovingly plead with me to allow Tina to talk to someone about this. She made me realize that keeping it a secret from everyone just seemed to increase the shame and embarrassment of it all. Tina had been asking to talk to someone about this, however didn’t name anyone. One day as I pulled into home, I thought to myself, “who of Tina’s friends would I be comfortable with her telling?” The first name that popped into my head was Cassie, our neighbor. When I asked Tina who she was thinking about telling, she looked at me and said “Cassie.” This was confirmation enough for me. I gave Tina permission to share this with her. Cassie’s response was nothing but compassion, empathy, and concern. She stated that it didn’t affect how she viewed me or Tina and offered her continued support. I was relieved that finally Tina had someone else to share this burden with, and with how well it was received. Cassie and her family have become a huge support system for us and she even coined the phrase “Team Jenson,” a team I am learning is growing larger than I ever imagined possible.

Despite these added supports, Tina continued to experience deep depression. We have a high deductible insurance plan and coming out in June, meant that our deductible would be restarted in July. I knew that we both needed therapy; however, we could not afford to pay out of pocket for our therapy appointments. We decided to go in and discuss this with my bishop, and I also decided to get counsel with my bishop to receive his input since I have never really trusted my ability to receive personal revelation. My bishop is a kind man and he listened and asked questions. He was a new bishop and he was surprised when I told him and he said, “I haven’t heard this one before.” He looked at the Handbook and agreed that nothing about cross dressing was specifically mentioned; however, he felt as though I needed to stop, he didn’t know why, and told me “this isn’t a sin and it won’t have any effect on your worthiness in the Church; however, this is the feeling I am getting.” He continued to counsel with my stake president. I am grateful for my

Bishop in supporting and assisting us in our therapy that is very important for the both of us to understand.

When my temple recommend expired, I went to my bishop for a recommend interview. I was told that if I was cross dressing (and I was at the time), that my stake president wouldn't allow me to hold a temple recommend. This sent me reeling. I couldn't understand why the Lord had answered my prayer so clearly, and yet my leaders were giving different direction. Tina also was upset, since she had received the same answer that I had, contrary to her hopes. In her words, "that wasn't what I wanted to hear, I wanted the Lord to tell me *no*, this is *not okay* for him to dress or to explore this part of him." Finally, we decided to speak to the stake president for further clarification.

I had prepared a folder which contained some of the medical research into the causes of gender dysphoria, pointed out the lack of clear guidance from the Church regarding cross dressing, and discussed how I felt the Spirit, not only when I prayed about dressing, but while I was dressed. I discussed how, due to my prior actions, I knew the difference between feelings of guilt and the Spirit and I was certain I was following in the Lord's plan for me. He was stern and said some very upsetting things to us, things that brought back the feelings of shame I had been working on eliminating from my life. He made it clear that he felt that we were being deceived. We asked him how we could be deceived if the feelings we had when praying about cross dressing as a form of coping for gender dysphoria were the same as when we prayed to know about the truthfulness of the Church, the Book of Mormon, our marriage etc. It didn't make sense to us. In all the emotional turmoil, it didn't take long until the Spirit was gone and Tina and I needed to leave the interview.

The following days were not good. I was not only depressed and upset about how I had been treated, but I was confused. Everything I had ever believed started to crash down around me. I began to question the truthfulness of the Church, the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, everything! I mean, if the answer to my prayers about dressing were received "just because it's the answer I wanted," how could I trust that what I received as the basis of my testimony wasn't just "what I wanted?" This led to even more depression and bouts of suicidal thinking. As mentioned earlier, I am a Clinical Social Worker and am well-trained at recognizing when a person is suicidal or when it's just thoughts of harming themselves. I had had thoughts of suicide in the past, thinking to myself "I'll just drive into that tree, or maybe I can crash into that wall of cement." This time was different. I was alone, in my room, crying while Tina was with the kids. I looked over to my medication basket and I told myself "I'm going to do it, I'm going to take the Valium that I am prescribed and overdose on it." I've had this thought before and I had always been able to check myself out of this line of thinking. My check this time was "there are only like 10 pills in there, I doubt that'd be enough to do anything." Usually, such thoughts ended my

line of suicidal thinking, however when the thought of “well, you also just got a three month supply of blood pressure medication you could also take, that might do it.” That was the scariest moment of my life. I began sobbing even louder. I wanted to call out to Tina, but couldn’t. She heard me sobbing and came in to check on me. I told her what I had been thinking about. Once again, I was forced to look into those beautiful blue puppy dog eyes filled with tears and she told me, “don’t you dare, don’t you dare leave me.” I assured her I wouldn’t, but I was scared. I didn’t know how I could move forward. Nothing made sense anymore.

I’m so grateful that I didn’t go through with any of it; however, that was a very scary place to be. We decided that I would have faith that even if I was following uncertain counsel from my leaders, that I would be blessed in my efforts. I put all my prayers into following his counsel and asking if that was the Lord’s will. I fasted and prayed for many weeks, and I never received an answer. In fact, my prayers felt hollow and I felt more distant from my Heavenly Father than ever before. My depression continued, and I found it more and more difficult to attend Church. I stopped attending the second and third hours, because it was just too difficult for me. I had reached out to my transgender cousin who has socially transitioned, living full time as a female. She told me that she had left the Church because “there just isn’t any place in the Church for transgender individuals.” At first I really disagreed with this statement, but as time went by, I began to see where she was coming from, especially in regards to our interactions with my stake president. I started pondering what I really knew, if I really had a testimony, and if there was a place for me in the Church. During my darkest moments during those early days of my coming out, Tina often would hold me and ask me what I knew to be true, these statements became my anchor. I would respond with I know that the Church is true, I knew that that Christ had risen from the grave and conquered death, and I knew that Tina loved me and that we were meant to be together. She often commented that her depression and anxiety had been difficult for me to bear, and while this was difficult for her to bear as well, she continued to love me. Following our meetings with our stake president, those things I knew to be true didn’t ring true to me, with the exception of my love for Tina and we were meant to be together. My whole foundation into everything I had believed was cracked and crumbling. I continued to ponder the words of my cousin and if I had a place in the church.

After five weeks of feeling like this, Tina called to me as I was heading out the door to go to work. She said, “I’m tired of pretending that we didn’t receive an answer to our prayers.” I didn’t know what to say, other than “Okay. We’ll talk tonight.” During that day, a thought came to me: isn’t the Church built upon a foundation of personal revelation? Christ told Peter that it was upon this rock (of revelation) that he would build his Church. I asked myself, what would have happened if Joseph Smith had listened to his church leaders who scolded him and told him that visions don’t happen anymore.

Now, I'm not suggesting that it is okay to disregard priesthood counsel, however I do feel as though it is most important to follow the counsel you are given from the Lord. I discussed my confusion with a friend of mine. She pointed out that I had been too focused on being right and my priesthood leaders being wrong, when what I needed to focus on is the possibility that we are both following what the Lord has told us, and there is some other plan there that we can't see. This was a comforting thought and has helped me in so many ways; however, I continued to hold onto resentment towards how I had been treated. I asked my bishop how I can know truly what the Lord's will was for me, when I couldn't trust my own feelings. He referred me to a talk from Elder Richard G. Scott from the April 2007 conference entitled "Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer." The following quote struck me while listening and again while I was reading it.

"Some misunderstandings about prayer can be clarified by realizing that the scriptures define principles for effective prayer, but they do not assure when a response will be given. Actually, He will reply in one of three ways. First, you can feel the peace, comfort, and assurance that confirm that your decision is right. Or second, you can sense that unsettled feeling, the stupor of thought, indicating that your choice is wrong. Or third—and this is the difficult one—you can feel no response.

What do you do when you have prepared carefully, have prayed fervently, waited a reasonable time for a response, and still do not feel an answer? You may want to express thanks when that occurs, for it is an evidence of His trust. When you are living worthily and your choice is consistent with the Savior's teachings and you need to act, proceed with trust. As you are sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit, one of two things will certainly occur at the appropriate time: either the stupor of thought will come, indicating an improper choice, or the peace or the burning in the bosom will be felt, confirming that your choice was correct. When you are living righteously and are acting with trust, God will not let you proceed too far without a warning impression if you have made the wrong decision."

I prayed and prayed and fasted and prayed and fasted to know if the counsel from my stake president was correct for me. I was living the gospel as best I could. I was attending the temple, reading my scriptures etc., but I never received an answer. However, in applying the lesson from this quote, my spirituality was lessened, I was struggling feeling the Spirit, Church was difficult and not faith promoting for me at the time, I pondered leaving the Church altogether. I don't feel that any of these feelings are of the Lord. However, after deciding to act on the promptings that we received from the Lord, my testimony has increased, my relationship with my Heavenly Father has increased, my relationship with my wife and family is closer. I have an increased desire to serve others. In short, I know what the Lord would have me do. I hope to be able to enter the temple once more. However, even with these increased understandings, I continued to hold onto resentment towards my bishop and stake president.

## Beginning to recognize and utilize the Atonement as part of my healing process

One day, as I entered Rich's office, I was angry. I had felt that Heavenly Father didn't care about me, didn't care about others who were like me, and I felt I was forgotten about. I mean, there is official church doctrine in regards to same sex attraction, and many other things, why not gender dysphoria? I felt as though God didn't care about my people. Rich looked me in the eyes and asked me if I believed in the Atonement. "Of course," was my reply. He looked at me and said, "Then do you realize that the Savior knows exactly what you are going through? He knows what it is like to experience gender dysphoria; he knows what it is like to experience same sex attraction." For some reason, I hadn't thought of it like this before. I thought that Christ knew what it was like to experience depression, grief sorrow and pain, but not my pain. Surely he didn't understand my pain. That experience in Rich's office began a turnaround for me in truly applying the Atonement in my life.

The next experience came as I attended a North Star conference in April, which was truly a life changing experience for me. One of the keynote speakers, who is a quadriplegic was telling his story of how following his accident, his father looked at him and said "Son, the good news is that you're alive, but the bad news is...." and he left the question up in the air. I shouted, with others in the audience, "you're paralyzed." He looked right over in my direction and stated that he didn't like that term. I felt horrible. I wondered if I had said something that was not politically correct. He then said that there were people in that room who were paralyzed spiritually just as he was paralyzed physically.

I realized that the resentment concerning how I had been treated by my priesthood leaders was spiritually paralyzing me and I needed to seek their forgiveness for holding onto those feelings. I was able to sit down and ask my bishop for forgiveness, which was quickly granted. He then asked forgiveness of his own, should he have done something offensive. I spoke to him that while I don't feel that I am at a point where I can no longer dress, since it provides a great deal of comfort and strength to me; and I knew that although choosing to dress left me without a temple recommend, that didn't mean that I couldn't provide temple service in a different manner. I have begun working on family history and getting names ready to send to the temple so that their ordinance work can be done. I hope that someday, either I will be given the strength I need to not dress so that I can return to the temple, or that other direction will be given from the Lord. While praying about this, through bouts of tears, the Lord gently whispered, "this is only temporary." I know that someday I will be able to return to the temple.

Following my meeting with my bishop, it was time to meet with my stake president. This was truly my biggest obstacle. I know that he is a good man, and is trying to do the best with limited information and little guidance, but the words he chose to say to me felt very hurtful to me. I felt shamed by his response to my vulnerability, and



seeing him created a trauma response which took me back to those dark days as I contemplated suicide. I do realize that he was trying to help me, but my relationship with him had become a scary thing for me. It got to the point that even seeing him in Church created a great deal of anxiety, and I would leave Church if he was in attendance; so the thought of sitting down with him in his office was a very frightening proposition. Initially, I had decided to wait until I truly felt ready. Shortly after meeting with my bishop, I was listening to a conference talk given by Elder Jose A. Teixeira entitled "Seeking the Lord" from April 2015 conference. This quote stood out to me:

"Let us not leave for tomorrow what we can do today. It is now that we must come unto Christ because if we believe Him, we will labor while it is called today."

I realized that *now* was the time to speak to my stake president and to ask his forgiveness for the harsh feelings I was holding onto against him. I called the stake executive secretary and set up the appointment. The day of the appointment I was filled with anxiety. As the stake president called me into his office my heart was racing. We opened with a prayer and I talked to him about my experience at the North Star conference. I asked for his forgiveness. He quickly said "don't worry about it, and then he said "I forgive you." It was at that moment that I truly felt the love of my Savior and truly felt what it was like to be coupled with the Savior and to yoke myself to him and allow him to take on my burdens. I wept. I wept as I have never wept before. I was so grateful that I didn't need to hold onto these negative feelings any longer. The meeting was truly a powerful one, and while we may disagree on certain aspects, we can focus on things we do agree upon, and that is our testimonies of the Savior and the gospel.

While my leaders have not been as supportive as I would have liked, my testimony of the gospel has never been stronger. I have a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel, and of the importance of personal revelation. At this time, there is not much direction from the Church in regards to being transgender, so I have had to rely more on the Spirit than I ever have. My relationship with my wife is better and we are closer than ever. We have had to have very difficult conversations and rely more on the Spirit in our everyday lives. Each of these conversations brings us closer together as husband and wife. While not every day is perfect or full of roses, things are better. As I have come out to friends, family members, and even our children, the shame that I had experienced lessens.

### Gaining personal acceptance

Accepting who I am has been a powerful tool in being able to love myself and to feel love from others. During the North Star conference, I was able to attend a panel discussion that had loved ones of people who are transgender and what they can

do to support their loved ones. Tina was on that panel. From the get go, an overwhelming feeling of love came over me. I wept. I cried pretty much throughout the hour long panel discussion. During the panel I realized that I had been fighting against myself for most of my life, which made it difficult for me to feel like I'm worthy of love. When we got home and got a chance to talk, Tina asked why I was crying so much throughout that discussion. I told her, "I think I actually felt love for the first time today." She has the most beautiful blue eyes, and when she gets sad or sees that I am hurt, they are the windows to her soul, and I could see how hurt she was by that comment. She stated, "You have always been loved." I responded by saying, "I know that I have been loved, by you, my family, by Heavenly Father, but today was the first time I remember actually *feeling* that love." Today, I can honestly say for the first time in my life that I am proud of who I am. I am proud of being transgender, and yet being transgender does not define me. It is part of who I am, but not all of who I am. I am a husband, father, son, therapist, sports fanatic, music and movie lover. I feel more complete today than I ever have. I also have learned that as I share my story more, the shame of who I had been lessens. It has been a wonderful experience to be able to share my story with others.

I began my essay with the question of "Who am I?" For so long, I have been trying to understand if I am a female spirit in a male body, a male spirit in a male body with a female brain, or why I have this challenge. While many of my other transgender LDS friends have sought these answers from the Lord and will testify of what they have learned, I have taken great comfort in my knowledge that I am a beloved child of a loving Heavenly Father and that is enough for now. I know that I am a child of God. I know that as a result of the resurrection, I will have happiness in my body in the eternities and will no longer feel the disconnect I currently feel. I look forward to that day.