

THE LORD HAS PREPARED A WAY

In 1988, my wife, Kieko, and I had our first child. We had been married for five years and were beginning to worry that we might not be able to have children. When we found out that Kieko was pregnant, we were happy beyond description. When our son, Eddie, was born, I cried. He was so perfect. I know you will think me biased, but I'm convinced that he was cuter and smarter than any other babies in our ward. I didn't say anything to the other parents, of course, because I'm sure they were all aware of it, and I didn't want to make them feel worse than they already did.

Growing Up

Eddie and I were always very close, and he was always very good about communicating his feelings. When he was four years old, he came to me crying and told me that he wanted to be a girl. I was a little surprised and perplexed, but I had already noticed how he liked to dress up and play mom when playing house. I didn't know what to say to him. I took him on my lap and told him a story about a puppy who wanted to be a kitten. I explained that wanting something we can't have just makes us unhappy and how the puppy eventually learned all of the good things about being a puppy and finally realized how happy he was to be a puppy. Eddie stopped crying and went off thinking about my story. I didn't feel like I had solved the problem, but I couldn't think of anything else to say or do. In my heart I just prayed that this wasn't something serious, but rather a phase that he was going through.

Eddie continued to want girl things. He loved to dress up like a girl, which I discouraged, and he always wanted to play with what were typically girl toys. As the years went by, he came to me from time to time to tell me that something was wrong with him. When he was about eleven, he came to me kind of embarrassed and told me that he thought he might have a crush on a boy he knew. I could see the fear in his eyes as he worried about how I would react. I told him that it was perfectly okay to admire other boys that he wanted to be like, and that he shouldn't feel bad about it. I continued on to tell him that feelings were feelings and we couldn't necessarily control whether we liked spinach or chocolate, but that we could control our actions and that was what determined if we were doing the right thing. He seemed relieved. Again, I was a little concerned, but I waited and watched, hoping that he would outgrow what it was he was feeling.

A couple of years later, when he was about thirteen, he told me that he had a crush on an older boy in his Boy Scout troop. As we talked, I tried again to make sure I was saying the right things. I reiterated to him that liking someone was not a sin, that we aren't going to be judged badly because we had a crush on this or that person. We generally don't just "decide" that we won't like ice cream, or that we will like celery. I explained that the important thing was how we respond to those feelings. As long as we tried to keep all of Heavenly Father's commandments, He would be pleased with us. Again, he seemed relieved and went away looking happy, while I pressed on in my hope that these were feelings he would eventually grow out of.

When he got to be about fifteen, I heard from his sister that there was a girl at school that he liked. At sixteen, he started dating and was extremely popular with the girls. He had a girlfriend and I thought he had finally outgrown his previous feelings. He was working towards becoming an Eagle Scout and was an assistant to our bishop in the Priests Quorum. Everything seemed great. I was sure everything was going to be fine.

My World Crashing

Then, when he was seventeen-and-a-half, something changed. I became concerned as he started missing church, something he'd never done before. One Sunday, when he didn't show up at services, I went home to talk with him and to see if I could get him up and ready for Priesthood meeting. He broke into tears and said, "Let's face it, Dad. I'm gay." Inwardly, I felt the world come crashing down. Outwardly, I held him and told him that I loved him. I prayed with him, gave him a blessing, and talked with him about it, trying to understand. I could tell he was hurting as he told me he thought he was a disappointment to me. I assured him he was not.

Over the next few months, my wife and I prayed and fasted and studied and went through the same stages of grief and loss that I suspect every parent goes through in this type of situation. At first, I was in denial. I simply didn't want to believe that this was happening, so I kept trying to figure out how Eddie was wrong, that he didn't really understand his feelings. I quickly realized that this wasn't very helpful. Following that, I accepted that the feelings he had were real to him, but was determined to "fix" him. After a while, when I realized I couldn't just fix him, I began to try to accept that this wasn't the end of the world. I had to force myself to imagine a future where we were dealing with this situation and could still be happy and peaceful. Throughout these stages, my wife and I were both extremely depressed. I felt like I was caught up in a nightmare and prayed desperately for the Lord to deliver me. It took about three months before I stopped feeling like my world was coming to an end, and a few more months before I started feeling "normal."

Seeking Understanding

Eddie stayed living at home, but completely quit going to church. He did read scriptures and pray with our family, but something was missing. He became vocally critical of our bishop and other church members. He then began hanging out with openly gay friends and stopped living the standards that had always seemed so important to him before. I was completely unprepared for all of the changes. He had always been strongly committed to living the gospel.

My wife, Kieko, and I tried to learn everything we could about same-gender attraction. We attended conferences put on by Evergreen International, got involved with North Star, and attended monthly firesides put on by Fred and Marilyn Matis for individuals and families dealing with homosexuality. We met and made friends with other young men who experienced same-gender attraction but were faithfully living the standards of the Church and seemed happy. This was very encouraging to us.

We continued to talk a lot with Eddie. He explained that during the period of his life when he was fifteen and sixteen years old, that he was praying and fasting constantly, believing that if he had enough faith in the Lord, He would change him. He tried going out with girls and making himself like them. He told me he even consciously practiced walking and acting in a more manly way, trying to "fix" himself. During that period, I had been completely unaware of the pain he was going through. Instead, I thought he was outgrowing the feelings he'd struggled with when he was younger and simply imagined his mission and temple marriage, and lots of grandkids. I undoubtedly made comments to him that let him know of those thoughts and hopes. I'm sure that must have created feelings of terrible guilt for him.

In addition, as Eddie was growing up, I told him how much Kieko and I wanted a boy and how excited we were when he was born. He later told me he so wanted to please me and that when I said this to him, it just destroyed him. He felt trapped. He believed he could never be that boy he thought I wanted, and my telling him how I felt when he was born made him feel like he was going to be the biggest disappointment. He said it made him wish he had never been born. I wish I would have told him I would have loved him the same, whether he was a boy or a girl, and that we were just happy to have him as a part of our family.

One of the biggest fears I've felt as a parent has been that I might overreact to something, do too much, and push a child who is merely going through a stage into something more serious and long-lasting. As parents, we walk a fine line, trying to keep our balance, praying that it's only a stage and that they'll grow out of it, but afraid that we'll make it worse by over- or under-reacting, or by giving too much or too little information. It feels like enough to drive a parent over the edge. I've felt so

inadequate and unprepared through these experiences. Kieko and I have spent hours and hours on our knees, praying for guidance, only to still sometimes say just those things we probably shouldn't have said.

More Changes

When Eddie was nineteen, he decided to go to Japan to stay with family there (my wife is Japanese). I prayed about it and felt it was a good idea. During the six months he spent in Japan, he spent a lot of time with the missionaries and started going to church again. He attended discussions with them and even bore his testimony. We were very excited about this. When he came home, we met him at the airport in San Francisco. I was surprised to see that he had grown his hair long and had begun wearing girl's blouses and slacks. I decided as long as he attended church and seemed to be making a conscious effort to grow spiritually, I wasn't going to make a big deal out of what he wore. He did attend church with us a few times after he came back, though he usually didn't stay long and never went to Priesthood meetings.

A few months after returning from Japan, Eddie came to me and said, "Dad, I've realized that I'm not gay. I'm simply a straight woman trapped in a man's body." He actually seemed happy and relieved about this. As he spoke, I tried to understand. He explained that he experienced what has been called "gender identity disorder" (GID)—that he had always felt like he should be a girl and believed that he had some type of birth defect where he was born the wrong sex. The way he explained it to me was that he was broken and he wanted someone to fix him. He wanted to get a sex-change operation. We talked about it late into the night. I tried to simply hear and understand his feelings and not say anything that he might interpret as judgment or rejection.

At this news, I felt the world closing in on me again. My wife and I prayed and fasted. We went through the same grief cycle all over again. A week later, late at night, Eddie came in to the living room where I was reading and had a strange expression on his face. He looked rather pale. He quietly sat down on the couch and said, "Dad, I need to see some kind of therapist as soon as possible." He told me that he had gone into the bathroom with a knife, antiseptic, and bandages, planning to remove the part of him that he found so depressing and offensive. He felt desperate to have the "birth defect" removed and decided to try to do it himself. He had been planning this all day and had bought some of the materials earlier. We live near a hospital, so he said he figured I could get him to the ER before he bled to death. Fortunately, something stopped him before any damage was done, but it scared him pretty badly. I could tell that he was really frightened by what he had almost done—and I was shocked and torn.

I arranged for him to see a therapist the next day. A week later, he told me that he no longer wanted to hurt himself but that he could not live any longer as a man and that he either wanted to get a sex-change operation, or he wanted to die. He said he wanted to move ahead with the operation as quickly as possible. He made his own appointment with a psychologist who specialized in transgender therapy and invited me to go along, so I sat with him during his first session.

Eddie wasn't ever overly dramatic. While some kids might be dramatic for effect, I genuinely sensed that Eddie was desperate and serious. While I was concerned about what was happening, I told him that I loved him regardless of what he did. Eddie continued to meet with a psychiatrist and eventually started living as a woman. He began dressing more feminine and wearing makeup—not a lot, but eyeliner and foundation. One week, he told me he was late for church because he kept crying while he was trying to put on his eyeliner. He said he cried because he knew that no matter how hard he tried he would never be pretty like his little sister—that he would just be a freak. He sobbed as he told me. It broke my heart.

Seeking Guidance from Priesthood Leaders

Because I was serving in our ward bishopric at the time, I had access to the Church Handbook of Instructions. I studied what was there regarding sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), which was quite vague, and everything else I could find. I talked with my local church leaders about our situation and met with my stake president several times. I wanted to know what Eddie's situation would be if he were to get a sex-change operation and then got married.

My stake president contacted Church headquarters in Salt Lake City to get more information. I expected a black and white answer. What I was told was that the Lord understood Eddie's feelings of pain and confusion on a level that we can't comprehend, that there are consequences to our decisions that are unavoidable, and that He can feel the very pain that Eddie feels when making critical choices—and that regardless of what choices Eddie makes in this life, when he is judged he will be judged by a Judge who will take those feelings into account, in addition to his desire to do what is right. I felt a lot of comfort in this. I continued to stay in contact with my stake president, who was incredibly understanding and supportive.

We also noted the official Church instruction that ward and stake leaders are to counsel against elective transsexual operations, and that anyone contemplating such an operation should be advised that such operations may be cause for formal Church discipline. There is no universal requirement for any specific disciplinary action such as excommunication or disfellowshipment given, but because of the potentially devastating and irreversible consequences of sexual reassignment surgery, Church leaders understandably counsel strongly against it and would seek the guidance of the Spirit in determining appropriate disciplinary action. Our

leaders were also counseled that those who participate in elective SRS may not have a temple recommend or use the priesthood.

Because Eddie was suicidal over his condition, our stake president and bishop took no steps to try to change his decision. From my discussion with them, and in reading the Church Handbook, my understanding is that after Eddie has transitioned, he/she will likely have a disciplinary council. The outcome of that council will depend upon his/her heart and otherwise faithfulness. While Church instruction is clear that she won't be able to receive the temple endowment at this time, our understanding is that she can attend worship services, take the sacrament, and hold callings, etc., as long as she seeks to be otherwise worthy. It is my hope that she will choose to remain a member in good standing who is allowed to take the sacrament and even hold a calling. Quite frankly, while it still all seems confusing at times, I can accept her becoming a woman more easily than I can accept her straying from a gospel path that would eventually lead back to God's presence.

As my wife and I have asked questions over time about how we should respond, there have been many questions that are incredibly difficult and seemingly unanswerable. At the same time, there have been the specific covenants we made in the temple regarding how we are to live that are clear. We have held tightly to those covenants so that the promised blessings regarding our family might be realized. Even with the difficult and seemingly unanswerable questions, I have a sure knowledge and trust in our Church leaders that God has chosen them as His prophets and apostles. As the Lord reveals through them greater clarity around these issues, I will fully embrace it. Where there is currently ambiguity, I prayerfully seek and follow the guidance of the Spirit with regard to my son/daughter the best I know how, staying in close communication with my local priesthood leaders in the process. I trust in our loving Heavenly Father that He will guide us through this life and prepare a way for us to return to Him, in spite of any mistakes which He knew we would make long before we made them.

Where We Are Today

Eddie is living as a woman and has legally changed his/her name to "Eri." She's had her Social Security record changed to indicate that she is female. When Eri initially decided to go through with the surgery, I hoped she would change her mind before she actually transitioned completely. When I realized that she was determined to walk this path and that there was no way I could stop her, I decided it would be better for me to walk it with her than have her walk it alone. I believe this is what Heavenly Father wants me to do. I love her and want her to be happy, so I pray for her and continually seek the Lord's guidance.

I don't know how things will work out during the remainder of this life or in the eternities, but son or daughter, she will always be my child, and I will always love her the same. It took me a while to get used to using female pronouns and introduce her to others as my daughter, after twenty-one years of calling her "him." But I found out it hurt her every time I slipped up, so I'm trying hard to honor her agency and her preference. While I love my new daughter with all my heart, for a long time I also missed my son. I tried not to let her know how much I missed my son, but she knew. Sometimes, when I looked at pictures or other things that reminded me of my little boy, my heart hurt, and I had to pray for strength. However, I eventually got over that. I now love to look at pictures of my lovely daughter when she used to be a cute little boy. I know that sounds strange, but it feels perfectly right with me. She was my cute little boy, that grew into a lovely woman.

The other day a well-intentioned friend made a comment about her being resurrected as a man and I thought about how lonely I might feel if she was. The daughter that I love would be no more, and in her place would be a young man who would now be a stranger to me. However, I have complete trust in the Lord and I know that when she is resurrected, whether as a man or woman, that everything will be wonderful.

I don't understand why things are the way they are, but I believe that gender dysphoria is only a challenge in this mortal life. I trust in Heavenly Father, that He has a plan for Eri, and that somehow things will work out in the end. I pray that my daughter will choose to stay close to the Lord, give service to others, and live worthily to eventually receive her temple blessings, even if in the next life, since she obviously won't be able to go through the temple in this life if she elects to go through with the surgery, given the integral nature of gender in the endowment ceremony.

Eri currently doesn't attend church services with us, but she said she is still trying to work up the courage to start attending again. She says she still has a testimony and thinks it will be easier for her begin attending church again after she has transitioned and moved to a place where no one knows her. I can see by watching her how difficult it is. All I can do is pray and be supportive. She still reads scripture and prays with our family. Her prayers feel sincere. She has also met with our bishop and he has considered callings that would be meaningful to her. She's reacted very positively to the suggestion. She pays a full tithe and tries to keep all of the commandments except for going to church. I don't know that I can ask for more than that right now. I know she has a testimony and a desire to please the Lord.

This experience has caused me to grow in ways that I can't imagine growing in any other way. While I know I have to seek the Spirit's discernment concerning right and

wrong, I likewise know I simply cannot judge other people because of the choices they make. I don't feel the pain they may be feeling when they make those choices, so I know I am completely unqualified to judge. I am also very protective of Eri, that no one judges her. I know, however, that there will always be those who will speak and act in a way that is hurtful. It's a sad but unavoidable fact.

As Eri makes the choice to transition, do I think she will face some painful consequences because of this choice? Yes. Do I think those consequences will be worse than if she hadn't chosen SRS? I don't know. Do I believe that if she continues to try to stay close to the Lord and follow the guidance of the Spirit in her life that she will eventually make the choices that will enable her to return to her Heavenly Father's presence? Absolutely. And, to me, that is what really counts. Because as much as I love my daughter and would do anything to help her be happy, I know my love for her is only a faint shadow compared to the love that our Heavenly Father has for her. I have prayed to Him and been assured that He has prepared a way for her to return to Him—that He knew before she was born the painful challenges she would face and the decisions she would make. And He began long before she made those decisions to prepare a way for her to return to Him (see 1 Nephi 22:20; D&C 95:1).

There are those who choose not to transition and seek other solutions to their issues, and I sincerely pray that they are strengthened and comforted in that resolve—that they will be blessed a hundred-fold in this life and the next life for their faithfulness. Because Eri has chosen to transition and I feel it important to walk this journey with her, I likewise pray continually for God's grace and mercy and guidance along the way—that He will not condemn her but will eventually prepare a way for her redemption, salvation, and exaltation. I have a strong testimony that God will bring us home if we let him. We don't have to be perfect, we just have to earnestly seek Him. The atoning grace of Christ covers the rest. In the meantime, I pray always to exercise full trust in the Lord and to be ready to accept whatever answer He gives. My prayer is that I can be increasingly understanding and supportive of those who are struggling with gender dysphoria, same-gender attraction, or other hard-to-understand challenges.