

A CHRIST-CENTERED GENDER IDENTITY

By all public appearances, I am a nauseatingly “typical” Mormon. I am a husband, a father, and a lifelong active member of the Church who was married in the temple. I was born in the covenant to fine parents who have always been strong in their faith, and I received my first spiritual witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon at about seven years old, when I prayed and asked with a child’s faith if it was true. Since that day, my testimony has never failed me. I received the Aaronic Priesthood at age twelve and the Melchizedek Priesthood at eighteen, and I entered the Missionary Training Center the very month I turned nineteen.

Later I married a sweet young lady who had written to me, as a friend, throughout my mission. I have a 72-hour kit on a shelf above the minivan, a wheat grinder in the cupboard, and unused cans of powdered milk in the pantry. I vote conservative, avoid consumer debt, and grumble about taxes. I’ve taught Gospel Doctrine, been a ward missionary, and served in Young Men, Sunday School, and elders quorum presidencies. I have the *right* number of children, the *right* education, the *right* job, the *right* type of home, the *right* type of car, and the *right* calling. I’ve even lived on the Wasatch Front and received some of my education at Brigham Young University.

But I am *different*, and not in the way you may be thinking: I’m not even remotely attracted to men. I’m different because my first memories are laden with a desperate, oppressive desire to be a girl— a desire that has persisted throughout my life. This condition is variously called gender identity disorder (GID), gender dysphoria, transgenderism, or gender confusion, and a person with this condition may be referred to as transgender or transsexual. Use of those terms can vary both clinically and popularly, particularly with respect to whether they refer to people who have had so-called sex-reassignment surgery (SRS). I have not had and will not have such a surgery, and I prefer to avoid labels. I will merely say that I feel and have felt a persistent and pressing desire to be female, and I choose a nonsurgical path for coping with that desire.

I want to share my experience for two reasons. First, I hope that other *typical* Mormons will discover that this is more than just fodder for trashy daytime television. This is a *real* issue that *real* people—maybe even one of your own—deal with. Second, I want to share with others who struggle with GID the hope I have gained. I too have felt the terrible dichotomy between faith identity and

gender identity. I testify that the two can be reconciled, not by diagnostic manuals or the learning of men but by learning where those feelings fit within God's plan and purposes.

Childhood

Before I grasped even the most basic physiological differences between girls and me, I wanted to be one of *them*. Little girls got to wear pretty dresses and cute little buckle shoes and bows in their hair. They got to play makeup and dress- up and mommy. I wanted all of that. When I was four or five years old, I would sneak into my mother's closet and dress up in her clothes and shoes. I fantasized about having a magic closet that could instantly make me a girl, and then I could wear those things all the time in front of everybody.

Of course, at five years old, I wasn't very sneaky, so my parents knew what I was doing. At first my mother didn't think much of it. Kids dress up all the time. But the fact that I was trying to hide it bothered her. It made her think that I thought I was doing something wrong. So eventually my father sat down to talk to me. I cannot credit either of my parents with a perfect understanding of my condition, but they are good, righteous people who love me and want the best for me. So my father's tone was not angry or accusatory. He simply explained, as simply as he could, that boys are not supposed to wear girls' clothes. I think he even said it was a sin. In my youthful trust I accepted that, so I pushed it all as far back in my mind as I could. For years I simply pretended it wasn't there.

Then I became a teenager. Puberty and adolescence are confusing even for a "normal" teenager, so you can imagine how they affected me. As my hormones started to change, I found that the feelings from my childhood returned, but stronger. Even as I found myself more *attracted* to girls, I found myself wanting more and more desperately to *be* one.

This was a dark and difficult time of my life that I do not dwell on. I maintained the proper image of the good kid everybody thought I was, but I felt filthy and full of self-loathing, guilt, and shame. I started dressing up in my mom's clothes again, but now I was more careful because now I knew it was wrong. I was never caught, though in hindsight I wish I had been. Carrying that burden alone was terrible, but I was too ashamed to share it with anybody. After a couple of years, I managed, through whatever quantum of will I possessed— and, I believe, much undeserved help from the Spirit— to stop. Again, I learned to suppress my feelings.

Mission and Marriage

For years I resisted the promptings of the Spirit to share my burden. It wasn't until I was in the Missionary Training Center, where the Spirit is overwhelming, that I could

no longer resist its promptings. I finally opened up to my branch president—a good, loving man. More than anything, he was sorry that I had unnecessarily carried this burden alone for so long. He assured me that many teenagers feel confusion as they sort out their identities. So that was it, I told myself—just youthful teenage confusion that many people feel. I was sure that every thing had been resolved.

I faithfully served the Lord for those two years and returned home feeling honorable and clean. I felt that I was finally the person I wanted to be. I even felt comfortable enough to talk to my parents about what I had put myself through as a teenager. But by this time we were talking about a problem I *used* to have. There was, I was sure, nothing more to worry about.

I started back at school, and in time I was blessed to marry the perfect bride in the temple. I cannot say enough good about my wife. She is kind, faithful, patient, and loving. She is an anchor to my soul and a constant source of good in my life. Ours had been a storybook romance better than any I had ever read, and I knew that all was now well. I felt no need to tell her about my erstwhile feelings. That was all in a distant past.

I remember with vivid horror the moment they all came back, suddenly and aggressively, about six months after our marriage. It was late, and my wife had already gone to bed. I had stayed up to study but was wasting time playing a computer game when I was suddenly seized with an awful, dark panic. All of the former, desperate feelings returned, but they were magnified, darker, and more disturbing. But again, I didn't tell anybody. I spent several more years suffering in silence, hiding in shame as I had done as a youth. Because I was not *acting* on my feelings, I reasoned that there was no need to tell anybody. It was just a private struggle. I would improve, repent, and move on like "normal" people did.

For years, even as I put on a public show that all was well, I was rotting away from the inside. I felt dark and empty. I was miserable being a man, and though I wanted very much to make myself a woman, I was terrified of the repercussions. I hated myself but I loved my wife, and I couldn't bear to lose her. I was scared and lonely, sometimes suicidal. And still I kept it to myself. But over a very long time, the Spirit again worked to soften my proud heart. Eventually, I realized that I absolutely *could not* do this alone. I needed to get this out, not because it was a sin I had to confess but because I simply needed help. Things were getting worse, not better. I was headed for a catastrophic collision, and this was going to come out somehow. I could choose the terms, or it would choose its own terms.

Enlisting Support

Even after I had decided to open up to my wife, I could never find the right time. There was always some excuse for delay. But finally, shortly after our fifth wedding

anniversary, I resolved to just do it. I sat with my wife on our bed and slowly, with tears and averted eyes, told her what I was. She listened to my story in stunned silence and hardly spoke a word for two days. More than anything, I was scared that she was going to just take the children, get on an airplane, and leave forever.

Finally, she wanted to know just one thing. Was I going to someday decide that it was too much, that I could no longer fight it, and run off and have surgery? Was I going to abandon her and the children for a new life as a woman? Even in the depths of my confusion, some things were clear to me. As much as I disliked the fact, I knew, by abundant temporal and spiritual evidence, that I was male. I knew that God had work for me to do as a man. I knew that if I were to *transition*, I would displease God. And I knew that I loved my wife, that I could not envision any life here or in eternity without her. So I promised her, in all sincerity, that I *never would*. However deep my darkness or depression, whatever the toll in pain or misery, on my honor, I never would. Angel that she is, she has stayed by my side ever since.

After speaking to my wife, I felt a huge weight lifted off of my shoulders. I was then able to call and talk to my parents and let them know what was going on. They were supportive, as always— especially my dear mother, with whom I have always been close. Sharing my burden with people I could trust lightened it. I was finally on the long, slow road to redemption, a road that I still walk. To be sure, there was still “an effectual struggle to be made” (Mosiah 7:18), but at least I was going in the right direction.

I do not say lightly that my trials were not over. I still struggled. Things came to a head about six months later when work obligations separated me from my wife for a time. She is my anchor and quieting influence. I don't do well without her. So when we had to be separated, I started losing my grip. Feeling desperate, I looked on the Internet to see if I could find others who were like me. What I found was a great many ex-Mormons who declared how happy they were when they left the Church and decided to transition. I found sites with advice on every thing from purchasing and padding bras to sizing clothes to doing makeup to rating surgeons. I wallowed in these message boards for a few days. It was exhilarating to find others like me, a sisterhood with a common struggle that would surely understand. I wanted so much to be a part of their world, but I could see where this was heading and how unhealthy it was for me.

I finally decided to speak with my bishop. He gave me some good counsel, and then anointing me with oil, he promised me by the Spirit that I would someday be healed. He also advised me that LDS Family Services might be able to help and gave me the name of a counselor. Unfortunately, circumstances delayed the appointment, and we soon completed an out-of-state move.

Once I was back with my wife, I felt better, so I just kept going for a while. But eventually I started feeling overwhelmed again. With my wife's support, I spoke with our new bishop. I explained that I wasn't coming to confess any grave sin but that I was struggling with these feelings. Our bishop was a man of mighty faith, and, though he didn't understand the problem (at first he just thought I was telling him I was gay), he comforted and strengthened me and gave me a blessing. He also referred me to LDS Family Services

I wish I could say that the good brother I met with at Family Services had all the answers, but he didn't. He didn't even really know what GID was. I found myself having to explain that, no, I'm not attracted to men, and no, I'm not looking at pornography on the Internet. But even with limited clinical insight, he did have some good advice that got me going in the right direction.

One of his suggestions was to get a notebook and start writing. The notebook was not for sharing with anybody, not even with him. It was just for me to write down what I was feeling, to get those feelings out. The things I wrote at first were confused, dark, and depressing. But writing was like poison extracted from a wound. Eventually, I started writing more positive things. Writing my feelings helped me process them and let them out so that I didn't feel like a pressure cooker about to explode.

I followed up my writing with other positive behaviors. Countless priesthood blessings from my father and others have been a source of strength and insight. And in late 2007, still feeling very alone, I again looked to see if I could find an online group—but one that sustained the Church. I couldn't find one, and I felt impressed to start my own blog, which allowed me to set the tone. Soon thereafter I started to find others who were looking for the same thing. Eventually, a few of us started a discussion group under the umbrella of North Star. Our numbers are still few, but the feeling of community is sweet sustenance indeed because we have felt so alone for so long.

An Anchor to the Soul

An important aspect of my journey has been defining my gender role. The foundation for this task is my testimony of Jesus Christ. I testify that we are led by living prophets, who speak for Him. I also testify of the principle of personal revelation. When possible I like to model my behavior after my righteous predecessors. But Elder Richard G. Scott has taught that "today . . . such a course of action is often not available to us. . . . [This] creates a condition where we, of necessity, are more dependent upon the Spirit to guide us through the vicissitudes of life."

Having little scriptural or doctrinal direction dealing specifically with my condition, I have had to build on a foundation of revealed truth and rely on personal revelation to teach me how those foundational truths apply to my situation. One difficulty is that while the Church unequivocally discourages SRS, the spiritual consequences are not always clear. My plea is that when we meet those who have had SRS, our invitations for them to join us in the fellowship of the Saints will be no less fervent. I hope we can see them as children of God and let the Lord and inspired priesthood leaders see to the states of their souls.

I affirm as a foundational truth what the prophets have taught: each person "is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents" and that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose." My gender is not something I can alter at will. But it is also not defined by ever-changing societal norms and expectations that would have me watch too much football and behave boorishly to my wife. I relish Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's invitation that if you need guidance regarding your gender identity, "whatever other steps you may need to take to resolve these concerns, come first to the gospel of Jesus Christ." The revealed word of God is the touchstone by which I judge my actions and my personal revelations.

"Peace I Leave With You"

As I've seen postoperative transsexuals fervently testify that they have found peace only by accepting and embracing their new gender role, at times I've felt envious. How could I find peace when the only visible path of peace was closed? Over time I learned that I was seeking the wrong kind of peace. In the latter part of his Gospel, John shares some deeply personal final instructions that Jesus gave to His Apostles. There, with majestic certainty, Christ promised: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). The Apostles were shortly to be persecuted, beaten, betrayed, falsely accused, and slain. James was beheaded; John was exiled and lived to see the Church fall into apostasy; Thomas was purportedly martyred in a foreign land while preaching the gospel; and according to tradition, Peter, the chief Apostle, was crucified upside down at his own insistence, considering himself unworthy to suffer the same death as the Lord. Was this the Lord's promised peace? It was, in fact.

The world's peace is freedom from strife, the kind that comes, for example, from spending mortality in a comfortable gender role. But freedom from strife was emphatically not the Apostles' peace. The peace that the Lord promised them is a more profound peace. It is the peace that comes in the midst of strife, not in its absence. It comes from the assurance of the Spirit, granted to those who make and keep sacred covenants, that their lives are pleasing to God. It flows from the Holy

Spirit of Promise, which is the promise of eternal life that “the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true” (D&C 76:53).

A profound lesson about this peace came at a time when I felt that my faith and my feelings were at interminable odds. I knew vaguely that I could not feel like this forever, that in some post- resurrection life I would surely feel okay with being male, but even that knowledge felt oppressive. It seemed a sort of Orwellian promise that, although I would be eternally imprisoned, I would be happy in my prison. I felt so trapped between my faith and my gender that my thoughts at times turned suicidal. I couldn't continue to live like this.

Then, on what seemed the blackest night of my life, my wife and I quarreled over something unimportant. Feeling sorry for myself, I retreated to the couch to pout alone. There it seemed that demons were raging around me, shouting that I was foolish to keep trying. She didn't care. She hated me as much as I hated myself. What did my promises to her matter if she hated me? Take up a knife, they demanded, and destroy yourself. Or if not, at least take up a knife and destroy those parts that cause you so much pain. I cried to the Lord for relief and finally fell into an uneasy sleep. Shortly after this I resigned myself to the proposition that it was simply my lot to be miserable in this life. But perhaps, I thought, I could with my mortal misery purchase an eternal complacency.

Immediately, I heard a strong rebuke in my mind: “Men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). Living the gospel was not to be a source of mortal pain. President David O. McKay stated, “The principal reason the Church was organized [is] to make life sweet today, to give contentment to the heart today, to bring salvation today. . . . Today is part of eternity.”¹⁰ As I have continued to search, I have learned that my peace, both mortal and eternal, will come neither from the feelings being removed, nor from transitioning. Instead, my peace will come from learning that these seemingly incongruous feelings have a divinely appointed purpose in God's plan for me.

Personal Revelation

One evening about three years ago, the Spirit taught me clearly that I needed the constant nourishment of at least thirty minutes of daily scripture study, and I was promised specific blessings if I would get it. But it must be complete and consistent— I couldn't miss a single day, ever, and it had to be no less than a full thirty minutes. I have done it every day since, and this consistent, measured spiritual nourishment has been essential to my progress. As I have studied, I have gained precious knowledge “line upon line” (D&C 98:12) and learned things “I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10).

Trivial as it may seem to those who haven't wrestled with this issue, one profound personal revelation has been that I am male. Despite all my feelings to the contrary, I know that I am a son of God. I believe that anybody who sincerely questions his or her own true gender identity can come to a similar knowledge one way or the other, though the earnest seeker must be careful not to confuse emotionally invested personal preference with personal revelation.

That knowledge has been foundational because I could not progress if I were constantly casting about in a gender-ambiguous darkness. Firmly anchored in that knowledge, I have, over time, gained other insights. The Spirit has incrementally unfolded to my view a beautiful model of truth in which my internal feelings interlock perfectly with revealed truth. And I know that what the Lord has done for me, He can do for others. If He can show me how all of my righteous desires can be fulfilled, how every pure yearning of my heart has a place in His plan, and how He can lift me out of confusion by teaching me things "I never had supposed," He can do the same for you.

I hope that others are wiser than I was— that they will find the peace without the years of darkness and depression. I can testify of the sweet fruits of truth and revelation, and I know that God is ever willing to share them with any who earnestly seek. I am no longer envious of SRS. I would not now trade the knowledge I have been given for living as a poor approximation of a woman. And I no longer even want those feelings to go away. They have helped shape my eternal identity and purpose. And though I still have stressful phases of yearning and anxiety, I feel that God has truly turned my weakness into a strength (see Ether 12:27). Some of the most deeply spiritual moments of my life have arisen from my pondering on this subject. What was once the greatest source of despair in my life has now become a fountain of knowledge, blessings, and peace.