

Couples in Transition: When One is Trans and Other is Not

In the Family, 8, #4, pp. 18-23. 2003.

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It was my last session of a long day and I had just finished scheduling the couple for their next appointment. I was mentally beginning to disengage from my work life, and was thinking about getting home to my kids who were waiting in bed for their nightly reading, when Jonas, coat on and half-way out the door, said, "I have one more question. Are there other couples like us?"

His lover, Becka, bundled up to face the frigid cold of upstate New York winters, seemed worried that Jonas was over-extending their stay. But I knew the question was important, and so I invited Jonas and Becka, a male-to-female transsexual, to sit back down.

"Define, 'like us'?" I asked.

Did Jonas mean another couple where one member was trans, and the other was not? Did Jonas mean another couple where one was leaving a long-time heterosexual marriage to live with a transsexual woman in the early stages of transition? Did Jonas mean a couple where both genetic men had engaged in significant-but secretive-homosexual desires, fantasies and flings for many decades, and were presenting themselves as an "out" gay couple to the world for the first time, although one was actually in transition to become a woman? Did Jonas mean a couple dealing with the newness of living together in a small, rural community, as an inter-racial couple? Or was Jonas referring to the topic of our session this evening: the vagaries of being the lover of a committed, and near-obsessive, artist? Every couple is completely unique, of course, but whichever way Jonas meant "like us," I could unequivocally assure him that there are other couples out there who are dealing with those same issues, although not necessarily all at the same time.

As a family therapist, I work with many transitioning and transgender clients and their partners and families. When I first started this work, about 15 years ago, I was shocked at how little information and research was available. The marriage and family literature was mostly silent on "transitioning" within families when one member transitions from one gender to another. Extensive library searches of social work and psychological journals uncovered only a small handful of articles written by gender specialists that were specifically about working with families. Families are often defined as "the wives of crossdressers," and little has been written about the partners of transmen, successful transitions within families or the impact of transition on children, parents and extended family members. More recently, the word "transgender" has appeared in the index of family therapy textbooks; however, the context in which the word is used is the acronym "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT]," with little specific content about transgender, or even a definition of the term.

Family systems therapy with trans people and their families is still a nascent topic, despite the fact that The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association [HBIIGDA] lists "educating family members" as one of the tasks in its Standards of Care. Historically, it was assumed that trans people would leave their families, and cut themselves off from previous relationships, in order to live successfully in their "new" identity. It is not uncommon for therapists these days to continue to view "transgender" as an individual matter, either not viewing the trans person as a vital member of an intimate partnership, family and community, or continuing to assume that a cut-off from these past associations will be necessary, if not beneficial. Betty Steiner, a therapist and gender specialist, warns clinicians who work with clients with gender disorders that they "will occasionally have to deal with the partners of patients...", as if working with the spouse is extraneous to the treatment process. Some gender clinics go so far as to insist on the dissolution of the trans person's marriage before sexual reassignment surgery is approved. The professional literature is rife with gloomy forecasts of doomed marriages. If therapists have so little faith in relationships surviving and thriving past transition, how can couples have any hope? Spouses (read: wives) are commonly pathologized as being "hostile" and as suffering from their own mental health problems. Spouses of transmen are often defined as "surprisingly healthy," although this has been explained as part of the couple's shared "delusion" that the transsexual partner is actually a man.

Sexual reassignment and gender exploration is not antithetical to stable, healthy family relationships, but therapists need to be doing a lot more to help families cope with the changes that will ensue. Many family members report that their therapists offer no guidance or hope about how to move through the myriad emotions. Counseled to "accept the inevitable," they are typically offered little compassion or space to voice their confusion, fury and painful disappointment. But acceptance isn't easy or automatic. It requires coaching and conversation. I believe the family members of trans people are crucial to the trans person's successful transition, and vice versa. Therapy with trans people should start from the assumption that families can transition together; with love and respect, families can move through this normative crisis, a stage in family development.

When Katherine called to make an appointment, she was extremely upset. Her husband had just revealed that he had been secretly cross-dressing during their 20-year marriage. During their first session, she was visibly angry and spoke of feeling betrayed; her husband, Walter, was ashamed and frightened. He would not give any direct eye contact, and looked like a scared and cornered rabbit. Katherine, age 47, simply couldn't believe that Walter, a 50-year-old man, had an entire hidden life, including boxes of cross-dressing magazines, trunks full of female clothing and long-term friendships through email and personal ads. She was in a state of traumatic shock, repeating over and again, "I just can't believe it."

Walter had little to say. He answered direct questions, but otherwise looked miserable. Finally he said, "I knew this is what would happen. I knew if I told her, our lives would

never be the same. I knew she could never accept this." I asked Walter why he had disclosed his secret to Katherine after all these years, and he said he felt like he was going to explode. "I love my wife and my marriage. I don't want to lose her, but," his voice got low, "this"-he motioned to his body-"is not all I am. There is more to me, and the person closest to me doesn't even know my whole self!"

When transgender people "come out" or bring their secrets to light, they are revealing a vulnerable and precious part of themselves. To their spouses, the revelation is an admission of a perversion-a psychiatric disease, a grotesque deformity-and they fear that their proximity to their spouse implicates them and they will be viewed as accomplices in this depravity simply because of their intimate association. What most people know about transgender people is what they've seen on television talk shows. Katherine sat in my office that first day and kept repeating, "How did I wind up on The Jerry Springer Show?" Walter was witnessing his worst fantasies come true. He was terrified that Katherine would leave him. He'd been preparing to come out to her by talking to his online friends about it, and most of them had warned him, "Wives never understand. You need to get out while you can, get a good lawyer. The only way to be your authentic self is to leave."

Walter explains to me and Katherine that he had known since he was very young, at least age 10, that he wanted to be a girl. But he could never tell anyone, not even Katherine. "This was such a hidden part of me for so long, it never occurred to me to tell anyone. It's hard to explain without sounding crazy, but although I've been cross-dressing my whole life, I just kept it separate from the rest of my life. I mean, not just in the outside world, but in my own head. In some ways, I told Katherine as soon as I realized I had something to tell her." I told Walter how brave I thought he was, and that I recognized how important this was to him to share if he was willing to risk his marriage.

I turned to Katherine, who was looking uncomfortable. She did not see her husband as brave, but as an embarrassing fool who was destroying their lives. She was thinking about their two children, now in college, and what she would tell them. She was worrying about what everyone in their families, their church and their neighborhood would think. As these thoughts ran through her head, I could see her starting to distrust me. "Katherine," I said, "You have a right to be furious." She was startled by this statement. "It must be shocking to realize your husband has been carrying on a secret life behind your back, and for his whole life. I can imagine it makes you feel that your whole life has been some kind of farce. I mean, what other secrets is he sitting on, for God's sake?" I spoke intensely, even dramatically, mirroring her own shock and disbelief, and she smiled and shook her head with a mixture of relief and recognition.

I then shared with them what I believe about transgender disclosure in long-term heterosexual marriages, which is that although this disclosure was the end of a long-held secret, it was the beginning of a true conversation. Like couples dealing with infidelity, Walter may have unburdened himself with this disclosure, but he had unloaded it right onto Katherine. I told Walter that if he really wanted his marriage to succeed, he need to accept that Katherine was going to be angry, even furious, for a long time to come. I was

clear that abuse and name-calling was not acceptable, but that she would probably be emotional and drift in and out of wanting information, being accepting, being shut down and rejecting. That was simply the price Walter had to pay for keeping a secret. I used the analogy of what if Katherine had been married before their marriage and had never told him-how would he feel finding that out now? It reinforced for Walter what the reality of the betrayal was like for his wife.

Too often, transgender disclosure is seen as an impossible obstacle for marriages to survive. I try to frame it as one more normative lifecycle event, albeit a challenging one. I often ask clients how they would imagine coping with the birth of a severely disabled child, the death of one of their children, the onslaught of a chronic or terminal health problem, as a way to put this in perspective. One spouse laughed when I said this: "I guess if I have to pick, I'd rather have my husband running around in a really tacky dress than have anything happen to our kids." Transgender disclosure often feels like, as Katherine said, "the worst, most unimaginable thing that could ever happen," but of course, it isn't. I find it helpful to give couples that reality check while they are in the throes of the disclosure stage.

Disclosing the secret is phase one, I told Walter. Now the hardest part for him was that even though the cat was out of the bag, the cat did not have full freedom to roam. Telling Katherine would not make his pent-up desires abate. Typically, when men like Walter disclose their secret, something has changed in their internal experience. Indeed, Walter was feeling more pressure to cross-dress as well as a strong desire to go out in the world dressed as a woman. For more than a year, his crossdressing was no longer serving a masturbatory function or lowering his stress. Instead, his female self was demanding a real-life existence. Walter had learned about transgenderism on the Internet and about the burgeoning trans-liberation movement, and felt a personal connection to this information. He realized he dreamed about being a woman, and was beginning to suspect that he was not a disgusting person for this desire, but was a person who was worthy of dignity and respect. These new ideas were intoxicating, and frightening.

The hardest part for couples in this situation is for the trans-emerging person to give his or her spouse time to catch up. Katherine had a lot to learn about transgenderism. She was now as isolated as Walter had been his entire life before the Internet; she needed to gain information about trans issues, as well as break down her isolation as the spouse of an emerging trans person. This would require time and commitment, and I told Walter that his gift to her would be to exhibit patience. But it was so hard for him! After years of being closeted, Walter was dying to hit the streets. He wanted to spend more money than the couple could afford on clothes and makeup; He wanted to travel to trans conferences. He was eager to have Katherine see him dressed as a woman. Katherine, however, was sinking into a depression and all she wanted to do was hole up in her room with a large bag of chips for the next 6 months, and watch soap operas. I reminded them both that they had been together for 20 years, had weathered many storms together--economic crises, a terrible car accident, the stormy adolescences of their children--and they would weather this one too, with patience, love and the willingness to grow.

There are a number of issues that Walter and Katherine will have to address in time, including whether or not Walter is actually transsexual. When Katherine finally asked him, in one session, "So, what do you want to do, become a woman?" he denied it fervently, but later in the hour admitted that he still couldn't say how far he really wanted to go. I advised him to go slow and give it time. I have discovered over the years that when someone is just coming out, the relief of being out is so strong that it overwhelms everything else. Trans people often do foolish and dangerous things at this stage of their own emergence such as cross-dressing and walking to a daughter's high school, or showing up at church in full drag. The middle part of Walter and Katherine's therapy involved containment for Walter, moving slowly enough so as not to sabotage his life. For Katherine, it was about education and helping her heal from the betrayal and connect with a sense of compassion for her spouse. Katherine did come to see that Walter's secret wasn't personal-there was nothing she did or didn't do, nothing she was or was not, that made him have this urge to cross dress. She acknowledged the truth in what he said, that their marriage was meaningful and important and always had been, even though he had kept this secret from her.

The next phase of therapy involved negotiation. Both Walter and Katherine wanted to "know" whether Walter's emerging, authentic self was "really" transsexual, or whether he was reacting to the many years of living in shame and despair and would be satisfied with more freedom to crossdress. This question boils beneath the surface of all trans couples: where is this headed, and how far on this path are they going? For Katherine, a typical heterosexual spouse, this was a very queer journey, and one she at times continued to resent and resist. Some weeks, she wondered whether she would be able to stay with Walter. Other weeks, she couldn't imagine being without her beloved husband. She grieved for the man she thought she had married. She felt awkward and out of place in the part of his life he seemed most excited about. She felt burdened with keeping it all a secret from their children and family and friends.

During the months of therapeutic conversation, I had always referred to Walter and Katherine with pronouns and names reflective of their relationship history. However, before the end of one session, I asked, "Walter, will you tell me what your female name is?" I have never asked this question and been met with a blank look. Crossdressers like Walter not only have a female name, but a female identity. Disclosing this aspect of him/herself is a big step. He looked nervous, but took a deep breath and whispered, "Suzette." He stole a peek at Katherine, who was holding her breath. His body posture changed slightly, perhaps not enough for Katherine to notice, but I noticed him shifting in a way that allowed Suzette to be present in the room. Katherine only shook her head and said, with a deep sigh, "This is going to take some getting used to."

Walter/Suzette and Katherine share a lot in common with Jonah and Becka in terms of coming out of the closet from lives that had always appeared to be "hetero-normative," although that is not be a term that would be familiar to them. It's a see-saw of emotions and reactions, and it is shocking to find themselves part of a sub-culture, an underclass of

people facing bigotry. At the same time, fitting in somewhere is a new sensation and a relief, allowing them to understand how constricting the pressure of "normality" has been.

When Marla and Pat arrived for their first session, Marla was visibly pregnant with their second child. They were partnered for 7 years and when they talked about their relationship, their love and passion for each other was evident in their eyes and gestures. Marla and Pat were both strongly lesbian-identified, and were both active in local queer politics. In recent months, Pat, always strongly butch-identified, had begun to examine her gender identity. She had dressed up for a drag king event and joined a trans support group. At first, Marla was ambivalent. She wanted to see it as a harmless exploration, but as Pat became more serious about her trans identity, Marla became increasingly agitated. "I'm really not interested in being with a guy," she said. "I am a lesbian, and although I'm very comfortable and like Pat's butchness, I'm not really interested in her changing her body in any way. I like her body the way it is!"

Marla felt that Pat's desire to transition was an insult to their lives as lesbians. She felt that Pat's wanting to be a man was something that emerged from her internalized misogyny. Pat listened respectfully to Marla, but when she spoke her words were raw with pain, "This is not about politics, Marla. It's about who I am, and who I've always been. I need this, and I need you to come the distance with me on this."

There was no question for Marla or Pat that Pat is the "same person on the inside" whether she lives as a man or as a woman. The question for Marla was all about the outsides. She considered herself a lesbian and her sense of identity and community was embedded in having her intimate partner be a woman. Although she loved Pat, being with a man was not something appealing to her in any way. Her dilemma may be confusing to many straight people (and therapists) who might assume heterosexual privilege is something desirable. But for many lesbian-identified women, to be viewed as straight threatens everything they care about. It is just as difficult from them as it is for a straight person like Katherine, who blanched at the idea of being viewed as lesbian when her partner presented as a woman.

Like Katherine, Marla felt angry and betrayed, but unlike Katherine, Marla was not shocked by Pat's disclosure. The politics of gender for lesbian couples is profoundly different than it is for heterosexual couples. Gender expression is more fluid in the queer community, and Pat's masculinity was always part of their relationship. It even had a name, "butchness," which did not have negative associations as "femme" or "feminine" might have had if it was applied to Walter in a heterosexual context. But even though Pat had a place and a definition in the lesbian community as a butch, the burgeoning trans liberation movement opened up the question of gender identity and expression in a more serious way for her. After years of living a life somewhat betwixt and between, Pat wanted a stable, masculinity identity. Marla understood; she knew other trans people in their community and felt accepting of them. But accepting others is different from accepting your own partner, and she didn't want to live what felt like a pseudo-

heterosexual life with Pat. She wanted to be with a woman in a lesbian relationship. That's where they were stuck when they came to see me.

The issue of sexual orientation has two components: one is the direction of a person's desire, but the other is how outsiders view the couples' relationship. Technically, Jonah and Becka appear to be living in a homosexual relationship, because they are both biologically male, but because Becka's true identity is female, they identify as heterosexual. Katherine and Walter appear to be a heterosexual couple, but what is the relationship between Katherine and Suzette? Can Walter and Katherine remain lovers while Suzette and Katherine become friends? One crossdressing man, married for 35 years and just coming out, recently said to me, hesitantly, "I am very attracted to my wife. I'm not attracted to men at all." I smiled at him and said, "So you're a lesbian!" His face moved from tension, to relaxation, to a broad smile. He laughed, "Yes, I suppose my female self is a lesbian, but I'm not sure how to tell my wife."

I wonder if Jonas would view Marla and Pat as a couple who was "like them." I believe they have a lot in common in terms of their fear of social acceptance-with issues of pronouns, of disclosing to the extended family. And both have fears of living as social outcasts-Jonas and Becka in the straight community; Marla and Pat in the lesbian community.

For Marla, remaining in a relationship with Pat meant confronting the potential loss of her identity as a lesbian. She could open herself up to the idea of being bisexual. She could remain lesbian-identified. She could see herself as queer-identified, or she could identify as heterosexual. I have seen lesbian partners of transmen take each of these paths. The importance of the construct of lesbian identity varies from woman to woman, as does each one's comfort with bisexual and queer constructs. Transmen sometimes have strong opinions about how their partners identify and those who seek to blend into society often feel outed by their partner's lesbian identity. Like heterosexual spouses, many lesbian partners are reluctant companions on their spouse's gender journey. Often, the overriding decision to stay together rests on their commitment to that person and the family they have created together. For Marla, their seven-year history and their co-parenting commitments eventually were the deciding factors in staying. She connected with other lesbians in the same position through conferences and over the Internet, and it brought her some relief from her isolation and fears. And she was surprised to find herself sexually aroused when Pat's body began to masculinize from the testosterone.

One of my clients, Sheila, had a husband of 30 years, Ed, who recently came out to her as a crossdresser, soon after they had learned that their son is gay. She was shellshocked, and told me, "I can't believe I spent my whole life thinking we were a normal family!" I reminded her that they are an incredibly "normal" family: they work hard to pay for their suburban home, they vacation at the beach, they argue and make up, they enjoy going to the movies and out to dinner, they worry about paying for college, and sometimes they dress up and go to queer events in Provincetown.

The reality is that trans families, like all families, are incredibly diverse. In families where the male partner is a crossdresser, the couple may have to compromise on where and when crossdressing can take place, how much money is spent on crossdressing, and who is told. In families where a partner is transsexual, the issues can be far more complex. Some spouses are simply not able to remain in a marriage with a fully transitioned partner, and the therapeutic aim is to help partners let each other go with gentleness and support. For many families, there are children involved, and the need to remain in close contact and be respectful of each other is paramount to the children's adjustment to the divorce, as well as to the transitioning partner's emergence. It is often true that a non-trans ex-spouse can be angry and bitter, and in those cases their divorce battles can get ugly, with the trans parent having less power and less voice in the process, in our prejudicial legal system.

It is often true that spouses are able to reconcile their differences and have amicable separations; it is undeniable that children fare better when their parents are respectful of each other. Some couples remain close friends after a divorce, with the ex accepting the gender transition as a friend, although unwilling to remain a marriage partner. Other couples are able to remain in committed marriages through the transition process. To my knowledge, there are no statistics on the frequency of successful marriages after transitions, but it is something I see in my office far more often than dissolving marriages.

The therapeutic stance can have a great deal of influence on whether marriages and families survive transition. I start with the assumption that they can survive, and transmit that to clients through my own comfort and openness in talking about gender. But I also impart a somewhat neutral stance about the potential outcome of opening up this Pandora's box of gender issues. I rely on humor, on education and most importantly on seeing gender issues and transition as a normative part of some family's lifecycle processes. By normalizing a spouses' anger, betrayal and disappointment; by recognizing the trans person's desperation, impatience and sometimes adolescent gender explorations; by acknowledging the surreal quality of what sometime feels like the Twilight Zone to both partners; by seeing gender transition as a process that moves through time, and is just one event in the life cycle of a family, I honor the existence and stability of the family as larger than "small" things, like changing gender. Over and over again in my office, people say, "He (or she) is the same person inside."

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