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## Healing

The secret ingredients for powerful counseling

This essay is the first in a series of four by Christa-Margaret Nelson reprinted in Just Out from trans awareness workshops sponsored by Basic Rights Oregon. "Healing" was presented in June for the employees of William Temple House, which provides resources to low-income adults.



Christa-Margaret Nelson presents personal essays at trans workshops in the Portland metro area

One of the most personally empowering statements I heard while coming out as trans some five years ago while living in the Austin area of Texas was from Dr. Jane Wray.

Dr. Wray was a large woman, perhaps in her mid-50s, and not only was a practicing children's endocrinologist, she was also sympathetic to trans people and provided hormone replacement therapy. Dr. Wray had lived most of her life as a straight woman with a husband and child, but in midlife both she and her husband came out as gay and divorced.

She was a strong, wise woman—a medical doctor and a Ph.D. in philosophy (as well as in the process of acquiring her black belt in Kenpo). Toward the end of my second appointment, we discussed how hard it can be living as a trans person in this culture.

She looked at me squarely and, with much conviction, told me an affirmation that I carry with me to this day: Trans people have a much greater knowledge of themselves and the gender system than most people in the world. In this, she said, "You're right, and they're wrong."

For the most part, the world is not an affirming place for trans people. All we see is traditional gender—clearly delineated ideas of men and women. And, while there are strong progressive aspects such as the capacity for women's empowerment or some space for sensitive men, most are bound by fairly rigid roles, behaviors and expectations.

Really, when it comes down to it, the boys are boys, and the girls are girls.

Gender expectations are culturally enforced with severe consequences for transgression. One of the ways these expectations are enforced is through the concept of normalcy, and, in this, any transgression of traditional gender is seen as "abnormal," with more extreme cases seen as a pathology.

Historically, trans people have been diagnosed as suffering from gender dysphoria. This term refers to negative symptoms such as excessive anguish, agitation, restlessness and malaise that gender-variants often experience and seek counseling for. Since variance from cultural gender norms is most often interpreted in the negative, gender dysphoria has been treated as a sickness in itself.

Now, there are progressive and enlightened approaches that do not treat trans as a "sickness" but, rather, as an identity that is quite legitimate, with symptoms traditionally ascribed to gender dysphoria arising out of either an inability to manifest and live one's own sense of personal gender or from the cultural response in doing so.

In August of 2001 I moved to Portland by myself, never having been here, not knowing a soul and supplied only with two duffel

bags, a thousand bucks and my wits. I had been doing well for myself in Texas until I came out as trans. Then things became difficult, and I lost a great deal.

While being a somewhat more affirming environment, it was still difficult being a quite visibly out trans woman alone in Portland. So I sought counseling at William Temple House.

I was blessed by being assigned a very progressive and thoughtful counselor, and, while this person may not have had much experience in trans issues, she made up for it in clarity, wisdom and compassion. I was taken "as is"—I never felt like I was seen as sick or ill and being diagnosed for treatment, but rather as someone who had experienced a trauma and who had suffered loss.

We did not spend most of our time investigating the reasons for my gender variance; instead, we worked toward making the most out of my life with the choices I had already made. On top of this, my counselor was an excellent role model for me in my new gender.

If trans people appear to be showing symptoms of being sick or confused, it is not because of a gender variant identity, it is from how we are treated in our world. What needs to be accomplished through counseling and therapy is an affirmation and techniques for self-empowerment within that world.

At this point in history, being trans can be a very difficult journey, yet having access to counseling that is affirmative, rather than guilt- and shame-ridden, will result in a person working toward individuation rather than living with forced repression. This not only benefits the clients in the quest for self-realization, but it also begins to slowly place the culture as a whole down that same path. **JM**

CHRISTA-MARGARET NELSON is a free-lance writer, musician, member of the Trans Advocacy Group at Basic Rights Oregon and facilitator of the Trans Youth Group at the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center.