

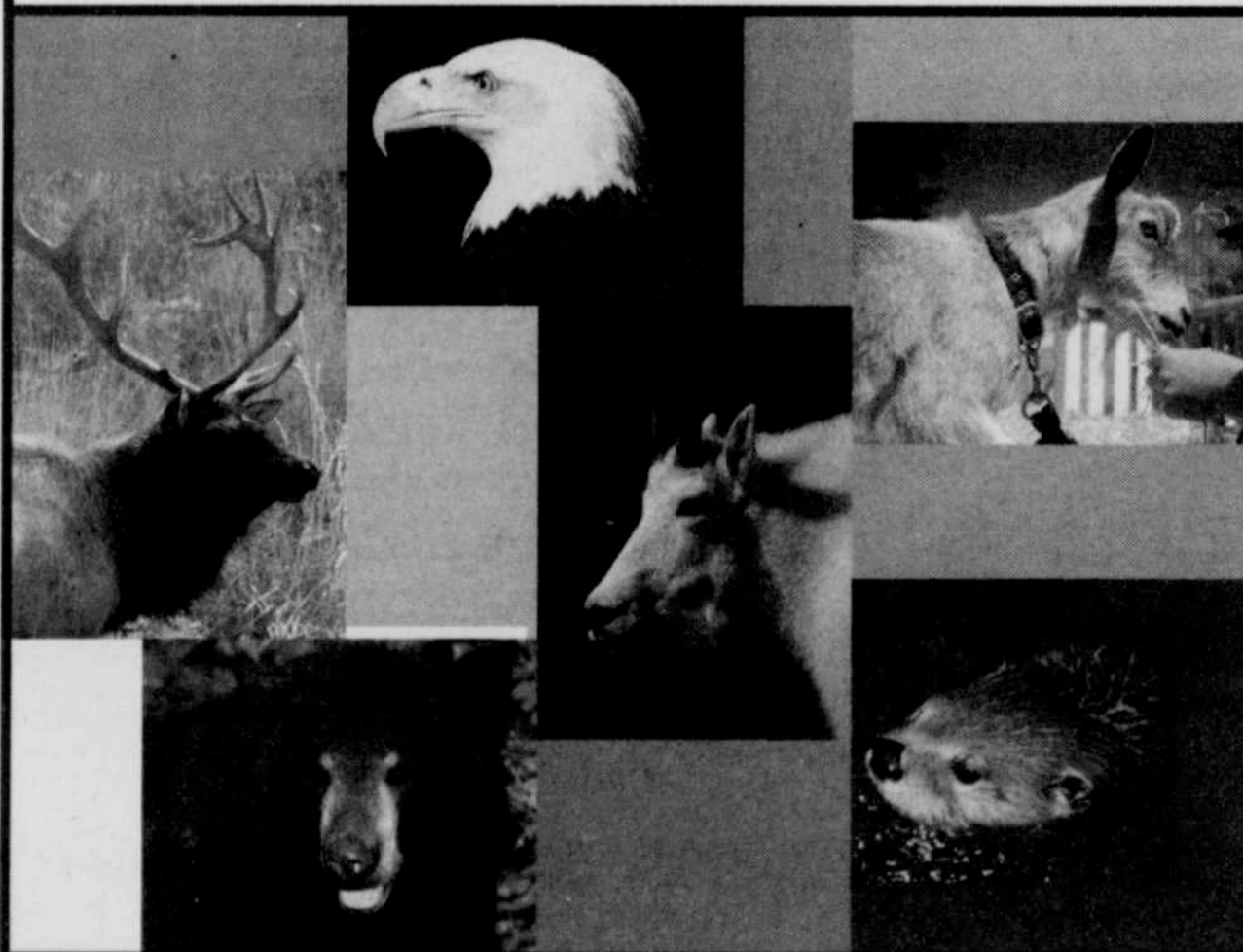
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From the mouths of babes

Living trans nuance in a cut-and-dried world

This essay is the last in a series by Christa-Margaret Nelson reprinted from trans awareness workshops sponsored by Basic Rights Oregon. "From the Mouths of Babes" was first presented last year to the staff and writers of Just Out.

"S a guy" is a string of sounds that follows me.

These sounds I hear in passing, while standing in lines—most anywhere in public. These sounds are meant as a clarification that the being they are commenting on is presenting culturally as a woman, is trans. And this realization seems to trouble them.

The people who make these sounds are from all demographics, styles and types and, at times, are those you would expect the least. And one of the most consistent characteristics is the compulsive nature of it—they must confess this somehow.

They must stop their conversation and make the sounds before I get too far away for them to point me out. There are times, such as when I'm standing in line at a store, when one person is talking to the clerk, and the companion quite visibly, nervously and anxiously paces back and forth, awaiting the opportunity to let the other person in on the knowledge.

All of this revolves around outing me. They feel they must do this, as if I'm getting away with something. And this, I guess, they feel they just cannot allow.

I assume that since their world-views understand certain behaviors as being assigned to either female or male body types, and since I present myself with a set of codes they only expect from females, that I am trying to pass as female.

How do I explain to them while in line at the store (or walking down the street or riding a bus) that I don't identify according to this scheme and that how they interpret me just isn't the reality of the situation?

How do I tell them in that passing moment that I am something outside of their constructs?

Several weeks ago I arranged to meet a friend for coffee downtown. While waiting on a bench at the bus mall, I heard a voice from behind say, "Hey dude...."

So while sitting on the bench at the bus mall (after hearing the same old "Hey dude," emphasis on *dude*), I do what I normally do—ignore them. But then it came again, "Hey dude." Eventually, a young, African American male, perhaps 14 years old, walks to my side of the bench. "Hey dude."

I looked up at him curiously, as if to say, "Who me?" He stopped with an almost astonished look, as if it was not the face he expected to see. I smiled playfully, as you would with a child, and he asked, "Are you waiting for crack?"

This was so unexpected that I burst out laughing. "No," I replied. "I'm successful in my life." After a kind of awkward pause, he asked, "So why do you dress like a girl?"

Matter-of-fact questions deserve matter-of-fact answers. "Well, because I am a girl."



Christa-Margaret Nelson

He shook his head back and forth and told me, "No, you're a dude."

"Sure," I replied while nodding, "I used to be a boy just like you and do all the boy things you do, but now I'm a trans woman—y'know, like transsexual. I'm growing a new body with boobies and stuff."

His expression was starting to become less confident, so he blurted out, "Do you have a pussy?" I couldn't help but giggle with his honest candor, and said, "No sweetie, I have a weenie just like you, and I'll be keeping it for a while."

By this time the poor lad was quite confused and simply walked away.

How do I explain to him?

How do I explain to him my deconstructed universe without the foundational, guiding principles of concrete genders—this system, this exchange of meanings, reflected all around, from birth to death—that seems so self-evident, just as was looking at the horizon and deducing that the world is flat?

How do I explain to him the arbitrary nature of these meanings—that 15 years ago having earrings in both ears would have marked him a fairy? How do I explain to him that I do not understand myself as a "woman trapped in a man's body," but that I see my process as a move toward totality rather than a flip-flop?

How do I explain to him that, while my body may have male elements, after several years of hormone replacement therapy and all of the development of secondary female sex characteristics—from skin texture, to facial features, to musculature, to the distribution of body fat, to the smell of my armpits, to my quieted temperament, to my monthly cycling of emotions—I just no longer place neatly into the category of "guy"?

How do I explain the groundlessness of existential reality and how I've constructed my current persona from a lifelong vision of the type of character I would like to live, much the same way he chooses a character to play at the beginning of a Nintendo game? How do I explain that I have personally experienced the truly fluid and amorphous reality of gender, bodies and sexuality?

How do I express all of this to a 14-year-old kid while waiting for a friend on a downtown park bench? **J**

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PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS