

En Femme, How Homme?

What does genderqueer mean? I don't have an exact definition, but I've been returning to the idea again and again. What if the thought of being either a "man" or a "woman" is incomplete for me? What if our binary gender system is just a construct, a concept that everyone adheres to but that isn't inclusive enough for all of our expressions? To me, it's catchy.

When I started this transition, I assumed I wanted to become female. I had so much feminine energy in me that had been held down so long, when it released it was like a geyser. Nothing was girly enough. As time's gone on, though, I've realized there's something innately masculine to myself, and it's not going away, which is fine. The problem is, I hate those gender words.

Male and female. Masculine and feminine. Those terms have always divided me, and as with any division, rivalries and conflicts have arisen. When I wear a dress, a part of me says, "What are you doing? You're a man." When I wear khakis and a dress shirt, another part sighs, "This is so boring. Where's the woman?"

Are they really different parts, though? I don't want to believe it. I'd like to think time and my spirit can help to integrate me. That's why the genderqueer idea is attractive.

I went to a trans support group a few weeks ago, and a participant said, "If I put a label on



from half a life to whole

BY LEELA GINELLE

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myself, I'm giving society the power to validate or invalidate me. If I say I'm a woman, and someone else doesn't recognize me that way, then that person has the power over my identity."

At the time I was still super femme-y, and not relating very personally to what was said. A chord was struck inside me, though, and I haven't forgotten zis words. A few days later I prayed to be freed of the desire to control my gender and its expression.

That was a frightening prayer. I associate my gender with sexuality, and I associate sexuality with danger. The thought of letting my true self out scares me. I can see rational reasons for my fear: My choice of clothes could limit my employment possibilities and per-

haps alienate people in my life. The real fear seems deeper, though.

What is it about? I'm tempted to say the incest, but I don't believe that's it. It seems more personal than that. I think it's about seeing myself. I've been divided my whole life. From fear and perceived necessity, I compartmentalized myself. Certain realms were "male" and others were "female."

In that way, it was natural when I was coming out to assume I'd change one name, one wardrobe and one life for another. As I did this, though, I saw a growing self-hatred emerge. My hands, my beard, my voice—all of them seemed wrong. Likewise, when I uncorked my femininity, I dropped everything that had been of interest to me before, as though my entire life to that point had been a falsehood.

After the prayer, those thoughts receded and a new picture emerged, one both masculine and feminine. It feels more balanced and authentic, but it's still rooted in those words. What is it that bothers me about them?

When I read writings by transgender women, I notice what I perceive as a fetishizing of their female personas. When they talk about

appearing in public "*en femme*" there's an illicit thrill to their descriptions, as if they're recounting having done something nasty or forbidden. I've known that feeling all my life, and I'd like to drop it.

The place to start seems to be within me. When I identify my actions as female, it's like I'm taunting what I see as the male side of myself, telling it, "I know you don't like this and I don't care, I'm having fun." When the tables turn and I return to my male persona, it's as though I'm exacting revenge. "Now you're locked away," I seem to tell the female. "You're no threat to me anymore."

What if the two coexisted? Better still, what if there were no "two," but just me? The idea frightens me, but it may be just a lingering fear, part of the "If people knew my secret..." tape that used to run in my head. Could unity exist in me?

That's what's attractive about the genderqueer idea. It seems to say, "Be yourself." If you'd like to wear something, wear it. If you want to change your body, go ahead. If you want to write in "None of the Above" on the gender box, that's your prerogative.

With that type of freedom, I feel a permission to see myself for the first time and, although it's a little shocking, I like what's looking back. JO

LEELA GINELLE authored the plays *En Femme: A Transgender Journey* and *Suede: A Transition Story*. Visit her blog at leelaginelle.com.

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