

Voiding the Issue

The bathroom question

It's my anniversary. I have not used a men's room in 365 days. Men had begun to make it clear to me that was how it was going to be. Some women who had known me "when" became concerned that I might show up in "their" restrooms. But I anticipated that. I had asked about alternatives long ago, and was offered access to a unisex restroom. Very nice, very clean, very private, good mirror. All a girl could ask for. It's only a 1/8 mile round trip.

I suppose I *could* have made everyone happy by just puddling at my desk.

Having seen, as they say, "both sides now," I have a few comments I can offer.

Bathroom culture is very different in the men's room than in the women's room. The men come in, spaced as far apart as they can get; if there are three places to stand and there are two of them, they pick the ones on the ends. They don't speak to each other; and they avoid eye contact, focusing on the far "horizon." They make an effort not to get to the sinks at the same time, and they vanish into the world like ghosts.

The women come in talking together, talk across the stall walls, chat while washing up, stop to talk while one of them fixes up her eyes, and leave together. When the door opens they look to see who it is.

Considering that it's not illegal for, say, a gay man to go into the men's room, or for any man whatever to go into the women's room, what exactly is going on here?

The moment spent voiding, as any deer or antelope will tell you, is the moment of greatest vulnerability, equivalent to bending to reach the water at the watering hole. We're checking, moment by moment, to assure ourselves of our own safety, like the twitching ears of the doe. There are some large and unpredictable animals about.

Men in this culture want to be far from other men while voiding, and restroom facilities aren't very helpful with this. Keeping the eyes front, slightly out of focus, says: "Hey, buddy, go ahead with whatever you're doing there; I won't mug you."

Women want to be sure a man hasn't come in. They're listening for clues: "We're all *girls* here, right?" Right!

The intensity of the checking increases exponentially when there are small children present. The women most likely to raise a ruckus if they "read" us in the restroom are managing a toddler at the moment.

The usual explanation these people have, when they show up to oppose city code changes that would improve access to restrooms, is that they don't want predators near the women and children. Sometimes they don't use those words, exactly, but it's what is meant. Never mind that the statistics show that we transwomen aren't predators. The thought of us is just intolerable.

But there's an actual reason for all this worry. Restrooms being small, closed and universally accessible environments, they are easily entered by the presumably nefarious, and not easily defended. You can't run screaming out the back door with your infant in one hand, dialing 911 with the other — no back door.

If my presentation is the least bit shaky, I become an unknown quantity for two or three vital seconds, during which important decisions have to be made. And the only thing that had been protecting those seconds was tradition: the gender taboo.

Law, at least in this town, does not enforce the taboos, but the restroom "community" at any given moment does. If a woman looks at all like a man, she's forcing the other women to lose those precious two seconds, and they resent it — even if she was born looking like that. On our own famously multicultural campus, recently, a genetic woman was yanked out of a restroom by her backpack as she was going in — by another woman, enforcing the taboo against what she wrongly "knew" to be a guy.

The feeling is that without adequate gender markers, the risk of being raped or losing a kid to some impostor cranks up, ever so little. And so the non-standard woman presumably must suffer for the good of all. If this is happening to genetic girls, and if something similar, for slightly different reasons, is happening to genetic boys in the men's rooms, we have to realize what we're up against in working to make the city codes fair.

I'm a woman, albeit one born under the evil star of the "Y" chromosome. Having raised kids off and on for 37 years, having many friends (my God, why so *many*) that

have been raped, I get what the widening of the eyes is about when the lady at the next sink notices that I have a slight beer gut, large hands, big shoulders, and seem not inclined to make small talk. I work on my presentation accordingly. I take hormones, do electrolysis (roughly equivalent to walking into a nest of yellow jackets), diet, get my hair permed, wear pink nail polish, jewelry, good "feminine" clothing, and pay for voice coaching.

Like most male-to-female transsexuals, I'll be spending close to \$20,000 of my own money, mostly in an effort to find a safe place for *me* to go to the restroom; I'm not about to miss any opportunity, given the investment, to blend, even if it means coming across as an old maid with bad taste. It's working for me, but not everyone can do this. Lots of women just look like men; the stress they go through just to go to the restroom is very high; yet who would argue they should spend \$20,000 to make other people *comfortable*?

Fair isn't especially natural, or natural behavior, but it is civilized behavior. It's about making sure everyone gets a chance to participate in the *polis*.

Most of the time I could care less about whether the bathrooms are fair; I'm interested in using one, and the deal I'm often offered, that it would fine with all of y'all for me to just stand halfway between the doors with my knees pressed together, means I get to be too stressed to be as useful a citizen as I might.

"So what," says someone.

"What this is," says I, "is keeping people down who could be doing you some good."

We are airline pilots, doctors, lawyers, construction workers, waitresses, child care workers, professors, businessmen, businesswomen, soldiers (including Special Forces), secretaries, politicians, tree planters, ranchers, engineers, cooks, models, actresses, designers, roadbuilders, janitors and missionaries.

In spite of transpeople being the *only* population specifically named by Congress as not eligible for protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act for their medically recognized condition, the expressed aim of the framers of the ADA, which was to ensure the full opportunity for participation in society of all, still applies.

People have talents. People like to help other people. When anyone is prevented from full participation in society, the loss is not theirs alone, but occurs to the society as a whole. Only if everyone has access to full participation can there be a fully civil society. We will generally discover that, as with accommodation to the needs of wheelchair users, or to the visually or hearing impaired, everyone benefits.

Redesign of a few customs, accordingly, turns out to be a plus for all. Curb cuts were designed for wheelchairs. Bicyclists, users of walkers, people with large carts or wheelbarrows discover they appreciate the change.

My favorite restroom design is exemplified by the little cheap potty that sits in a row of such potties at large events, or in its own little corner on construction sites and the like. It has a handle that turns to latch the door, turning a little circular sign to the word "occupied" as it does so. It's strictly unisex. Nobody posts "Men" or "Women" on them because then some of them couldn't be used some of the time. Unisex is cost effective. I look for unisex restrooms wherever I go, because I feel safer in them, even though other women in my environment are accepting of me. We'll get to why in a little bit. For now, let's just point out that the availability of unisex restrooms increases the carrying capacity of a building, reduces overall stress, and adds to workplace productivity.

Some communities have this figured out.

In the U.S., five states, 10 counties, and 61 cities have passed and are enforcing transgender inclusive non-discrimination laws. In all of these, the statistics that have been collected *dispel* the myth that such laws make bathrooms more dangerous.

But myths exist for a reason. We can keep repeating the findings. But we shouldn't be dismissive of a woman's need to scan everyone who comes in. I'm one, and I understand that need. *It's why I carry pepper spray, fellas.*

If a predator does come in, which, as I said, happens rarely, we know. Almost immediately.

He's not dressed as a girl because he's not inclined to go that route. That trick exists mostly in the minds of those who've been exposed to too much propaganda about people like me. So it's a dangerous mistake to be focused on the cross-dresser, drag queen, or transwoman, who just wants to avoid going to the men's room, where she could get hurt.

Dears, your predator is almost always a heterosexual. Dressed as a guy and proud of it. He's high on something I gave up two years ago. It's called testosterone.

Risa Stephanie Bear lives in Pleasant Hill.





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