

My Son, My Daughter

Jane McDowell

The first time I saw my forty-one-year-old daughter, Geraldine, she was being wheeled into a hospital room after major surgery. She was hooked up to intravenous tubes and was barely conscious. When her doctor assured me that she was going to be fine, I was very relieved. But in spite of this good news, it was a day of mixed emotions for me. You see, when my daughter, Geraldine, went into the operating room a few hours earlier, she had been Gerald, my son.

Geraldine is a transsexual, a person who believes he or she is the victim of a biological mistake and is trapped in a body that is incompatible with his or her real sexual identity. Because they are so unhappy, some transsexuals choose to undergo a sex-reassignment operation, as my daughter did. I know this is hard to understand. However, I now accept what Geraldine did and why she did it. When I look at her today I see a content, self-assured woman. And when I compare her with the very troubled man she used to be, I believe she made the right decision.

As a male, Gerry had always been very unhappy. He was a difficult and even disruptive child, whose behavior often went to extremes. He was either so active that he couldn't sit still or so involved in what he was doing that he was oblivious to everything else. He also seemed confused about his life.

"Who am I?" he would ask me, clearly troubled.

"You're my son, Gerry," I'd reply.

"But what else am I?" he'd continue to probe. "Who am I really?"

"Gerald, you are a very smart boy, and I'm proud of you," I'd tell him.

"Will I always be your son?"

"Of course you will," I'd say firmly.

No matter how much I tried to reassure Gerry how special he was and how much I loved him, I somehow knew that I wasn't getting through to him. But I was at a loss for what to say or do. And I was more or less on my own, since Gerry's father and I had separated when Gerry was four years old.

As Gerry grew older he began to experience frequent periods of severe depression. By this time I had remarried, and my husband spent a lot of time trying to help him sort out his feelings. But Gerry still couldn't put into words exactly what was bothering him.

Things started to look up for Gerry when, at age twenty, he was introduced by a mutual friend to Linda, who was nineteen. They hit it off right away, and a year later they got married.

However, they gradually grew apart, and after ten years, Gerry and Linda were divorced. They had no children, which made the divorce less complicated. On his own again, Gerry finally began to face his feelings. He had grown increasingly unhappy and had experimented with drugs. He told me that he'd even contemplated suicide, and I was very worried about him.

Then, in May 1983, when I was visiting Gerry in New York, where he worked as a free-lance photographer, he said that he had something very important to talk to me about. Nothing could have prepared me for his next words.

"Mom, I'm going to have a sex-change operation," Gerry said.

I was stunned. I wondered if my son had finally gone insane. All these years I knew he had been desperately unhappy, and I had feared more than once that he might have a breakdown. This is it, I thought.

I didn't know what to say. Fortunately Gerry continued talking. He told me that even as a child he had secretly wished to be female, but he had been ashamed of those "bad" thoughts. When he had asked me all those years ago who he was, he had actually been questioning his gender. Now Gerry finally knew that there were other people who felt the same as he did and that it was indeed possible for him to change his sex.

Then Gerry reassured me that sex reassignment was not something he was entering into impulsively. He said he was in therapy and promised to continue to see his therapist. As we talked for hours, both of us were in tears. It was the closest I'd felt to my son in a long time. He was my child, and I loved him no matter what.

After I went back home, I couldn't stop thinking about Gerry. Every time I came up with a new argument against the operation, I would phone him. But he always explained patiently that he knew he was doing the right thing. He felt that his being born male was a birth defect, and that he had truly lived a nightmare for forty years.

This was the hardest thing I'd ever faced. Of course, I had heard of other transsexuals, Renée

Richards, for instance, but I simply couldn't accept my son's becoming my daughter. I began having nightmares every night, after which I couldn't go back to sleep. Instead, I spent those long nights worrying about Gerry and wondering where I had gone wrong as a mother. I thought that what Gerry was going through now surely had to be my fault in some way, and I felt terribly guilty.

And of course, I was scared for my son. He was planning to undergo an irreversible operation. What if he wasn't happy with the results?

But since Gerry was determined to change his sex, I decided that it was important for me to learn everything I could about transsexuals. I read *Second Serve*, by Renée Richards, and all of the articles Gerry sent me. I found out that his condition was medically recognized and known as gender-identity disorder. I discussed my worries about the operation with my husband and my other son, Tim, Gerry's younger half-brother. Finally, I realized that Gerry desperately wanted my support and understanding, and little by little I began to reconcile myself to the operation. Certainly, Gerry wasn't happy the way he was. And having seen Gerry's distress for all these years, I didn't want his suffering to continue.

I was relieved to learn that to be eligible for the operation Gerry had to undergo extensive counseling and physical and psychiatric evaluation. All the professionals Gerry saw concurred

that he was indeed a good candidate for surgery.

Gerry was also required to receive estrogen therapy and live for at least one year as a woman. He was undergoing electrolysis treatments and taking voice lessons to bring his voice up to a higher pitch. I accepted this as he explained it to me over the phone, but I knew it would be a totally different thing to see my son in the role of a woman.

A few months later, Gerry invited my husband and me to attend an open meeting of transsexuals at his psychiatrist's house. This was the moment of truth. When we arrived, Gerry was wearing a black dress with a white linen jacket and black pumps. His hair was shoulder-length, and he wore gold earrings. An objective observer would have seen him as an attractive woman. But this was my son. Intellectually, I had begun to accept that my son was becoming my daughter. But in my heart, I still had grave reservations.

Having got past that initial visual shock, I began talking with other transsexuals at the meeting (all of them women who had once been men). Doing so made me feel a lot more confident about what Gerry was proposing to do. Their stories were similar to Gerry's: They had been unhappy growing up and had felt early in life that something was wrong with them. But all of these women were happy with their new lives. Watching my son, I realized that he, too, seemed happy as a woman.

After that, I truly began to accept Gerry's sex reassignment,

and so did my husband and Tim. We even started to call Gerry Geraldine, the new name she had chosen. I also decided to go with Geraldine to Colorado, where the surgery would be performed, since I couldn't bear for her to be all alone.

When the operation began I prayed that it would be a success. Afterward, Geraldine was pale and exhausted, but she started to regain her strength quickly. That night she was able to sit up in bed and eat dinner. Although Geraldine felt some pain, it was kept under control with medication. Eight days after the operation, she had recovered so well that her surgeon released her. I took her to my house to recuperate.

I could see an immediate change in Gerry. She was happy, almost bouncy. She said that she

finally felt "right." I was very glad that the operation had been a success. My son was gone, but now I had a happy and apparently well-adjusted daughter with a whole new life ahead of her.

Geraldine healed quickly from the operation. I was amazed at how perfect her body was and how natural she looked. In fact, when I took her with me to run errands, no one ever gave her a second glance. The doctor had even told Gerry that she could have a normal relationship with a man if she so desired.

After nine days at home Geraldine went back to New York to resume her photography career. I began nervously to tell family members and friends about the operation. I had worried about how they would react, but I was pleas-

antly surprised. Almost everyone I told felt that if Gerry had had to change her sex in order to find happiness, then she had done the right thing.

A few months later Geraldine came back home for Thanksgiving. From the moment she walked into the house it was as if she had always been a woman. She looked wonderful, she walked gracefully, and she seemed totally at ease in her new body.

Since the operation, my relationship with Geraldine is much stronger. We're very close, and we talk and write often. She's become a gentle, sensitive, thoughtful woman, and she's truly pleased with her life. I no longer worry about Gerry as I used to. Instead, as I think any mother can understand, I'm thankful that she's finally happy.

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P.O. Box 33724
Decatur, GA 30033-0724
(770) 939-0244 Help Line
(770) 939-2128 Business
(770) 939-1770 FAX

aegis@gender.org
anonymous FTP mindspring.com/users/aegis
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