

DignityUSA works for respect and justice for all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy and support.

TRANSGENDER ISSUE

Introduction to Transgender Lives

By Leo Egashira, Publications Committee Chair

In this thematic issue of the *QV*, we are pleased to share with you the difficult road to self-understanding and acceptance—both internal and external—faced by four transgender individuals and a transgender couple. While DignityUSA identifies itself as a GLBT Catholic organization as a matter of course, most of us know very little about the “T” component, much to the detriment of the wholeness of our faith communities. Even in the public policy arena, transgender issues often take a back seat and are often sacrificed for political expediency, as evidenced by the recent federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act spat between those who insisted on covering transgender people versus those who felt that leaving it out (for now) would guarantee passage.

The variety and diversity of people covered under the transgender umbrella is astounding, as will become apparent in reading these stories. But, even here, we’re only scratching the surface—literally. One of the articles includes an extensive discussion on the added, complex dimension of race with respect to faith. Indeed, we are fortunate and grateful to have two black transgender folks contributing their stories.

If the Church’s ignorance of gay and lesbian people is appalling, it is even more so when it comes to transgender people. That the people portrayed here have chosen to be identified as Catholic despite all the Church’s negative pronouncements against transgender people is truly inspirational. The transformational power of lived experience that is shared among family, community and the broader society cannot be underestimated. Thank you, Fredrikka, Ethan, Shari & Crystal, Sandi and the Garber Family for being who you are and sharing intimate details of your lives with the larger Dignity family. We are blessed by your presence and inspirational life stories.

Finally, the tremendous challenges and unique issues faced by transgender people behoove us—as individuals and as community—to ensure that the “T” component of GLBT remains high in our consciousness and accorded its rightful place in our mission. ▼

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Our Story

By Shari K. Miller, a long-time Dignity/Denver member

We believe the following story is just a bit unusual, and one that needs to be told. Crystal Ann Gray and I are two transwomen who met at the BeAll (annual transgender) Conference in Chicago in late May 2008. We exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and then went our separate ways. Crystal stayed in Chicago where she had her final gender realignment surgery, and I returned to Denver to resume my activities here in this area. In late June when she returned to her home in North Carolina, we began communicating at length via telephone. She was able to receive free incoming calls, and I switched to an unlimited plan so we could talk to one another via phone without concern for phone bills. Soon we were talking for hours, and finding out more about each other.

Over the Labor Day weekend of 2008, we celebrated together in North Carolina where we did some touristy exploring of the area where Crystal lived. We learned we enjoyed the same things, and we found that we felt very comfortable just sitting and talking to each other.

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Crystal then went to tractor-trailer driving classes and learned to drive the big rigs. Shortly after her graduation, she went to work for a major U.S. shipper, and she settled into her new occupation of driving tractor trailer trucks. Unfortunately, this endeavor was cut short by the excruciating pain she was still experiencing from the surgery. She had gotten off the truck, and was home only a day when she was rushed to a hospital in a comatose state. I was notified of this, and immediately flew to North Carolina to be with Crystal.

During the month we were together in North Carolina, and during the trip to Chicago where we saw one of Crystal's doctors, the relationship grew.



(L to R) Crystal Ann Gray and Shari K. Miller

In late November 2008, we decided that Crystal would move from North Carolina to Colorado where we could be together. In December, we decided to make the commitment a permanent one, and we plan to be married at Dignity/Denver in September 2009.

Crystal had been married before, and her spouse passed away in 2006. My marriage ended in divorce in the early 1970s. Marriage is not—nor will it ever be—a cure for gender dysphoria. Crystal's wife understood it and accepted it, but my wife didn't understand it and the marriage was doomed to failure from the start.

Both of us believe in the philosophy that we are who we are, and we love who we love. No one would ever choose to be gender dysphoric because it is a very difficult life, and it presents nearly overwhelming challenges. Many, unfortunately, do not survive them. In God's infinite wisdom and understanding, some of us are chosen to be gender dysphoric .

Who can really understand the complexities of why we love who we love? When we find ourselves truly and deeply committed to the well-being of another person, who has the right to declare that love is wrong or evil? We don't believe anyone does. ▼

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Begun in 1969 in San Diego, CA under the leadership of Fr. Patrick Nidorf, OSA, first as a counseling group and then a support group in Los Angeles, DignityUSA has been a national organization since 1973 uniting GLBT Catholics, their families and friends.

DignityUSA is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose national office is located in the Greater Boston area, with chapters located throughout the United States.

Members gather at local chapters, periodic regional meetings and biennial national conventions.

The **QV** encourages the exchange of opinions, book reviews, reflections, background information, resource materials and essays and articles by established speakers and professionals touching on spirituality, human sexuality and its expression, and the mission of DignityUSA. Of special interest are personal experiences and what has worked well in areas of pastoral ministry, human and social justice issues, leadership, chapter and faith community building.

Opinions expressed in reflections, reviews, letters, etc., are those of their authors and not necessarily those of DignityUSA.

Graced by the Entire Transgender Person That I Am

By "Sandi B.," a new DignityUSA member who lives in the Midwest

My name is Sandi, and I refer to myself simply as a male-to-female transgender (TG). Sometimes people like me are asked whether they are "pre-op" or "post-op" (pre- and post-gender reassignment surgery). This question may or may not indicate a belief that transgender means precisely the same thing as transsexual (or TS—those who not only feel, but are absolutely convinced, that they are of the opposite sex to which they were physically born). I know that many people see the two terms as identical, and I am not here to argue the point. I do

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realize that in fact many who might have called themselves TS in the past have replaced the term with TG, because people in general may take “transsexual” to imply that someone transitioning to living as the “opposite sex” is doing so for reasons that are purely sexual. But many others who see themselves as TG, look upon this as an umbrella term including all people who cross gender lines, in any way, as a significant part of their lives. Thus TG is seen to include:

- “crossdressers” (most CDs are heterosexual males with a feminine side, who have the desire to wear women’s clothes—frequency varies, but “dressing” is necessary for good mental health);
- “androgynes” (people who reject the label “male” or “female” because they see themselves as:
 - (a) having characteristics of both genders,
 - (b) being a “third gender,” or
 - (c) being outside the limitations of gender);
- “drag queens;”
- “female impersonators;”
- other unnamed designations;
- and, in addition to “pre- op” and “post-op,” there is “non-op!”

Perhaps I should give a brief description of myself as a TG who is difficult to label (and certainly the TG population, like the entire population, is very diverse.)

Having been forced at an early age (at least by 6 or 7) to repress almost completely all feelings and expressions of “girlness,” I spent 20 years (ages 20-40) struggling with recurrent serious depression. But at the age of 40—after about three years of weekly professional counseling—I had an insight like a lightning bolt, that “Part of me is a woman!” Given my limited vocabulary in such matters, the first word that came to my mind was “transvestite” (TV—later CD), with all the ugly connotations it carried in our society. But then I looked up the word at the library and did some reading on it. I decided that this was my “label,” and saw that in itself, the term was essentially neutral and merely descriptive (Trans in Latin means “across,” and vestis means “clothing.”).[See Prince, Virginia Charles: *The Transvestite and His Wife*. Los Angeles: Argyle Press, 1967]. With this personal insight, depression was no longer a major problem, but a minor one.

After another 20 years, my sense of gender identity has moved to a place about midway between CD and TS. Many will say that I will eventually see myself as the latter, but as of now I feel as though I have reached the balance point at which I am my real self. As I recently said to a professional gender counselor, “I feel as if I am both male and female. Sometimes one is stronger, and sometimes the other, but neither ever goes away; so I go with the flow.”

As far as my personal life is concerned, I live alone (and am unemployed) and wear women’s clothes (comfortable and

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casual) most of the time at home—though often without wig, makeup or jewelry. Nevertheless, I do a more complete female presentation when I feel the need and have more energy.

Because of the energy factor—due to chronic illness—I go out as female only about ten percent of the time. But those times are always significant to my personal growth, whether I am out with a female friend to grab a bite, or attending an event sponsored by a TG organization. I have gradually grown into being more comfortable with who I am, and with the ebb and flow of my life.

Since I am a person of faith, I need to say that I thank God for bringing me through those 20 years of struggle with depression. There were times when I could feel the presence of God, and times when I definitely could not. At those times, when I tried to keep moving forward, the effort seemed from my point of view to be sheer stubbornness. At those times I sometimes said, “OK, God, no matter what you do to me, I refuse to stop believing in you!” But when I experienced the powerful insight about being transgender, it was as if that very same God had just given me a direct revelation! It’s one of those things you just know, even if you can’t explain it to anyone else. I’ve had my ups and downs since then, but when I am on the down side, I usually find that I have been ignoring the female “part” of me that is so integral to my identity as a person. The times that I feel most whole, and closest to God at the same time, are the times when I am open and accepting toward all of myself.

There is an old theological principle that “grace builds on nature.” It certainly makes sense to me. Until I came to see my whole self as the TG person that I am, it seemed that grace could go only so far. But now that I am open to all of me, God’s grace can affect my whole being! ▼

Reflections on Being Black, Trans and Catholic

By **Fredrikka Joy Maxwell**, a DignityUSA member from Nashville, Tennessee

If someone were to ask me if one can be black, trans, and God help us, Catholic, I would have to answer with President Barack Obama’s famous line: “Yes we can.” But I know from experience that it isn’t easy.

I was reminded of all that when I read the February 2009 issue of Catholic Digest, in which Marc Adams wrote “The Parish That Made Me Whole.” Adams, a contributing editor of BustedHalo.com (an online magazine for spiritual seekers) and broadcasting associate for the BBC, lives in Washington, D.C. and attends St. Augustine Church. It is one of the oldest Catholic Churches in the diocese, having been founded in 1858 by freed slaves. I think Adams was trying to explain what it feels like to be black and Catholic in a church that oftentimes does not feel like home. I can empathize.

Adams began his article with a flashback to his childhood brought on by St. Augustine’s world-famous Gospel Choir. According to the article, his mom, who is white, was Catholic and raised him and his brother in the Church, while his dad, who was black, was a Southern Baptist. When he was a child, he grew up to the notion that if you wanted to be a black person of faith you had to be Protestant—particularly Southern Baptist. He said that there were those who thought he should not be Catholic, since the Church was considered a white entity.

Sr. Jamie Phelps, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, is quoted in the article several times. One time she is quoted as saying, “We’re between two worlds being black and Catholic. Catholics don’t think you’re Catholic enough and Protestants don’t think you’re black enough.”

In another place, she says our greatest gift to the Church and the world is our deep faith, hope, and commitment to God in the middle of the struggle. God has enabled us to keep on trucking despite being rejected, marginalized and devalued. Phelps said she saw no reason to leave the Church despite the racism, sexism or classism of some of its members or institutions. All human institutions are flawed and God can and sometimes does, use the flawed instruments.

Like Adams, I too grew up Catholic. Unlike Adams, both my parents were black and grew up Baptists in the segregated south. But, dad was exposed to Catholicism early in his military career and thought the liturgy—as then practiced—was “beautiful,” mom would later tell me. By the late 1950s, our little military family was baptized Catholic. We moved around every so often and I never really got a sense of any place as home. Even Savannah, GA, where I was born, wasn’t quite home to me; home was wherever dad took off his jump boots.



Fredrikka Joy Maxwell

So I never had a sense of being a part of the Catholic community even though I was Catholic since I was knee-high when Mass was still said in Latin. The “Ecumenical Council” as the TV newsmen styled Vatican II, went over my head. I had no idea who John XXIII was nor the significance of his passing. All of that would come later, after I’d figured out why it was suddenly OK to eat a Whopper on a Friday night when previously it was a fast ride to hell.

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It wasn't until I'd graduated from college that I started to question whether the Church was a racist, sexist institution. I was ready to leave the Church after having sampled different groups from "Jesus freaks," to Baptist and Episcopal and some other churches. Something was missing, but I didn't know what to call it. But it was important enough to make me decide to leave the Church that year, 1981.

So, as luck would have it, on what was supposed to be my last Sunday Mass, I missed the bus. On that chilly February morning in Nashville, I walked from my apartment many blocks, recalling having seen a Catholic church in the area and decided it would have to do for my last Sunday as a Catholic.

I arrived too late at St. Edward Church for the entrance hymn and I don't remember what the gospel was about. But I do remember that the young priest, Fr. Kevin, was going to baptize a baby. What he said stood out for me. He pointed out that we were about to baptize this kid into a Christian community that sometimes didn't act very Christian. Amen! We were going to baptize this kid into a community of love that sometimes didn't always act very loving. Amen! But we were going to baptize this kid into a community that was trying to make the effort. And as I listened to him I suddenly realized that this young priest was telling it like it was and making a very telling point about church: You can't ask any more of a community than that they try, every day, every way, to live the law of love. Some days, they simply aren't going to succeed. But at St. Edward's, people were trying. I wanted to stand up on the seat and applaud the man.

At St. Edward's I would meet people who became my friends, and stayed friends after I came out as trans. And the funny thing was, most of them were women. I suddenly understood what I had been missing in my earlier Catholic life: community—the sense that I could be part of what was going on despite being black.

Yes, sometimes I did wonder if I should find another parish. And sometimes, when I worried out loud, some well-meaning parishioner would suggest I go elsewhere, perhaps to a predominately black parish. But I never did. I had already promised myself and promised God that I would not let any people with bad attitudes or even bad racist attitudes drive me from what was now my home parish. And I joyously took part in the "Parish Celebrations" that happened on some Wednesday nights. I was even the featured speaker once, sharing Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. And I joined the parish branch of the Legion of Mary where I grew in my Catholic faith and learned to handle myself in hospital ministry and even held several offices both at the parish level and at the statewide level.

I spent almost two decades happily worshiping and being a part of St. Edward Parish before I finally found the missing piece of the gender puzzle. I learned what gender dysphoria meant; I was horrified. I figured out that this was the name of the monster that made me wonder about myself in my mid-teens; made me try and fail to become close friends with girls

who, unfortunately, saw me as one of the guys, and hence the enemy; made me dream of living life as a woman; made me dream of having a husband, being somebody's bride and somebody's mother; made me secretly lock myself in the bathroom to try on panties and girdles from the laundry; that possessed me to wear stolen panties to work; and even made me one very depressed day in high school think what I had always thought was the unthinkable—suicide. I was very much afraid to let the trans genie out of the bottle. I was very much afraid of what could happen. And when you're in a military family, I was always told there are some things you don't do and some things you don't say.

Would that I had been able to say with knowledge of the language and the concepts that Just Evelyn titled her book: *"Mom I Need to be a Girl."*

Only I kept it all inside for years. But trans people say you can only suppress stuff for so long. One day in 1997, a co-worker asked me what I was going to do for Halloween. Our new lady supervisor had let it be known that she didn't care if we wanted to wear a costume. Her only stipulation was that the work got done. So the coworker asked and I just shrugged and gave her a flippant answer, "I dunno, maybe nothing, or maybe I'll just wear a dress."

"I dare you!" she said with a wicked grin. It was then that I realized she was serious and knew that my flippant response was the wrong one, and the rest, as they say, is history. I still have the purple dress in my closet. Everyone said I had chosen well for office wear. And, had they been judging costumes, I'd have won hands down. That was how good I was and how good I looked.

Strange thing was, unlike a lot of the transsexuals and cross-dressers, whose posts I read online and whose stories I've read in books, I never felt a sense of shame or guilt. Nervous? You bet. I was always looking over my shoulder. I used to think you could hear my nervous heart beating all the way from Nashville to Chattanooga at the other end of the state! And, as I grew in confidence and competence in my feminine presentation, I started to feel for the first time that this is what I was born to be. For the first time in my life, something felt really right.

That didn't mean everyone else agreed. In fact many parishioners—including one who chaired the parish council and the nun who was the Director of Religious Education—were very unaccepting. Indeed, the nun may have been responsible for denying me a slot as a Eucharistic minister for almost four years despite my determined showing up for all the classes and meetings mandated for that ministry. So the community feeling about the place was not quite as strong as it used to be. And I'm looking for a niche to call my own.

But overall, I've been lucky: I did finally make the list of the parish Eucharistic ministers. And I'm on the planning team of the Adult Faith Dialog group that plans the Sunday morning programs after the 8 a.m. Mass. And there are still precious friends at St. Edward Parish that I thank God for every day.

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So yes, Sr. Jamie Phelps at Xavior Univeristy is correct: Perhaps one of the gifts that Black Catholics bring to the church and the world is a consistent faith in God despite rejection, marginalization and just plain devaluation. And when she says the church is flawed, she is right again.

Back in 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter to the bishops of the world. The letter instructed bishops not to change the gender marker on baptism records, not to welcome trans people into seminaries or convents, and not to allow us to be married in the Church. And if we have Gender Realignment Surgery (GRS), the Church says that doesn't change anything: Whatever you are at birth, you are forever, which to me is a clear sign that the Church doesn't understand the trans phenomenon. By the time a trans person is ready for GRS, that person already knows who he or she is and isn't actually trying to change per se. The persona actually is trying to adjust the body to the gender identity of the person.

When I finally began transitioning on the job in 2001, I lost a number of friends and many coworkers were unkind if not outright nasty. But there is always a saving remnant. And when I finally retired in 2005 after transitioning on the job, a good sixteen of them held a special place in my heart. Most of them were black, but among them were a few white women. Such was the family at work.

It would take years before my family of birth came to terms with my femininity. For years mom insisted that I not wear female garb in her house and it was a very difficult time in my life to realize that my true self was not welcome in the bosom of my family. But time heals and change does come. Not only does mom now use my legal name but most of the time she even gets the pronouns right. And she doesn't even blink an eye when I duck into the ladies room. Heck she may just move right along in there. My sister and I have gotten closer—especially after an incident at a Dress Barn, where a sales clerk approached us and asked, "How can I help you ladies?" Bless her heart. There is a world out there where some folks actually view me as female.

My brothers still talk to me but two of them disagree with me on religious grounds but claim they still love me; we've basically agreed to disagree. The other brother is a "live and let live" type.

Sometimes, I still wonder if it's time to leave the church. But I still remember that line from the Paul Masson wine commercial: "We will sell no wine before its time." And thank you Marc and Sister Jaime, for making me think about such issues. I will not leave this church before its time. And it's not time yet. ▼

The Most Influential Transition That Has Made Me Who I Am Today

By C.J. Garber, September 21, 2007

From the time I was a little kid I had always felt hatred toward who I was. I felt like a stranger in my own body. My physical body was that of a girl, but I knew inside my heart and soul that I was a boy. My female anatomy was an obstacle I would have to reconstruct before I could feel complete and "at home" within my body. I have begun my journey to reconstruct my life and physical body to match my inner gender.



Feb 1990. From front clockwise. C.J. At 18 months
Marcia, Sarah and Ken.

Ever since I was able to talk and socialize, I have always been more accepted by the boys in my neighborhood. I would always participate in the neighborhood baseball, basketball, and football games, which I was very good at. I would do anything and everything the boys did without any consideration for fear or danger. These were the happiest times of my life. I would wake up with a smile on my face every morning and be prepared for the day's activities. During this time I was also dressing like one of the boys. No one suspected anything besides the fact that I was a tomboy. However, I knew there was something more. I was always convinced I was a boy and that I just so happened to be born without the male organs. I tried everything to fit in with the boys; I even tried going to the bathroom like a boy until I eventually gave up trying at age twelve!

Unfortunately, I had to grow up and continue my education in middle school. During this time, classmates began to call me a lesbian. I became convinced that I was a lesbian and that was the end of it. I was made fun of constantly by classmates and people who were supposed to be my friends. The hatred that I felt about being in my body was growing more and more unbearable by the day. I would not want to wake up in the

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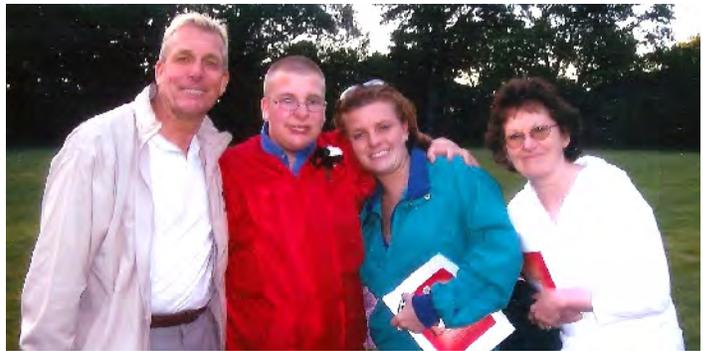
morning. It had gotten so bad that I did not want to wake up at all. I wanted to kill myself so badly. I wished and prayed that someone would just take my life and release my heart from under what felt like a two ton brick. I cried myself to sleep on many occasions. Night was the only time I could let out what I was feeling. I wanted to cry all day long, but I wouldn't show my emotions to anyone, not even my parents.

The longer I held in my feelings, the more my head would throb. I could feel the blood rushing to my head quickly. My head pounded from all the thoughts going through it. I can honestly say that if I wasn't too scared to die, I would have killed myself and I would be freed from all the hatred and disgust that I felt toward who I was. It was at this time that my parents began sending me to therapy.

As soon as the therapist and I began talking, I was introduced to a new word: "transgendered." For me it meant a female who has a brain of a male and believes should have been male. I knew as soon as I heard this, that I was not a lesbian, but rather, transgendered. From that time forward, I spent my life explaining that I was not a lesbian and that it was perfectly normal to like girls because I think, act, and have the brain of a male.

As I expected, people were too rigid and could not open their mind to accept me for who I really was. My parents, however, were very accepting. They agreed with the therapist right away that this was the perfect explanation for who I was. My father was able to let go of his youngest daughter very quickly. On the other hand, my mother took just a little longer to get used to having a son instead of another daughter. My mother did always wish for a boy and now tells me that I am the boy she always wanted. My parents began going to meetings for parents and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. They are now a very active part of the GLBT community and I could not be more proud of them.

I struggled through high school trying to find a place where I fit in and a place of acceptance. Some people tried to understand who I was, but to others I was still a lesbian. I was constantly explaining to my classmates that it's not like that and that I would become a boy soon. In fact during the summer of my junior year, I received the okay from the endocrinologist to start taking testosterone and to research surgeons for breast removal. I met with Dr. Johnson, and I was so excited to have this surgery but was disappointed to hear that she would be on maternity leave until September. It was then I believed God had not wanted me to be a happy male. I began to hang my head down low again. A couple days later the surgeon's office called. They don't usually do this, but when they saw my disappointment, they had moved me to the top of the waiting list and scheduled me to see Dr. Stueber who was the "in charge" doctor and did not usually see people like this. My happiness immediately reappeared. Over the summer I underwent breast removal surgery. I went back to senior year as Christopher John Garber who was on testosterone and was now without breasts!



May 2008. C.J.'s high school graduation picture after breast removal surgery and about 1-½ months before total hysterectomy. (L-R) Ken, C.J., Sarah and Marcia

Immediately after graduating from high school, I decided it was about time to get my female organs removed. I made an appointment as soon as summer began. Next thing I knew I was preparing for a complete hysterectomy. I feared that the procedure would hurt, but in reality there was very little pain and the recovery period was only three weeks. I was excited to start a new life in college as a legal male, but there was still one step left to complete. My mother and I went to the birth certificate office in Boston City Hall only to find out that the endocrinologist's letter stating that I have been living completely as a male and that I underwent breast removal surgery and had received a complete hysterectomy and currently was taking testosterone, and that I fit all the requirements to legally be male, was not on his standard letterhead. My mother and I were so irritated that we went to the doctor's office right away to get another letter. We then decided to try the birth certificate office at the Bay Side Expo Center only to find out that they would not accept the letter because it did not include the phrase, "Sex reassignment surgery has been completed." Now we were really mad because the doctor literally wrote everything the phrase said just in a different way. My mother and I were almost in tears; I could feel my heart throbbing again. I ran outside; I felt the need to be alone. My mother refused to leave without talking to the attorney's boss. He took us into a private room where he apologized profusely and agreed that the letter the surgeon had written for us was fine. The anxiety I was feeling had to be let out and I burst into tears. My sadness rubbed off on my mother because she began to let out a couple of tears also. The man promised that he was planning on taking it to his lawyer the very next day to get her approval. He replied to us the next day as promised to tell us the letter had been accepted. Two letters from the endocrinologist and four employees later I had finally received the big "male" on my birth certificate. This was the first time I had actually felt closure and happiness for who I have become.

It was finally time to get into college mode. I was excited for once in my life. I was faced with another chance to live my life, but this time would be in the body of the boy I had always felt I was. It was a new beginning as a legal male. No one would know my past and I might actually be able to make some

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friends. In addition, I would hopefully never have to hear the same, “I am sorry, you are a girl, and I am straight” excuse that I had been getting from girls ever again. I would finally enter the dating world as a straight male and hopefully be given the reciprocated love that I had always wanted for once in my life.

The next hardship I would have to endure was whether I should tell my classmates or not. This is a huge internal struggle for me. On one hand, I feared that if I told people they would not want to have anything to do with me. On the other hand, I might make a lot of friends who I could educate about who I really am. When it comes down to it my heart, soul, and brain are torn between whether I should disclose my secret or bury it inside myself. I really do want to be liked and have a lot of friends. My heart thrives on finally being accepted and liked. At the same time I want people to know what I have gone through in my life to become a male. I am really scared to make this decision and if it doesn’t turn out the way I want it to and people do not accept me, I am fearful for my life. I cannot take anymore disappointment in my life and I am terrified for what may happen if I have to experience this amount of pain again.



Jun 2008. Family vacation at Riviera Maya, Mexico.
 Front (L to R) Sarah & Marcia
 Rear (L to R) C.J. & Ken

Becoming male has given me a whole new perspective on life. I no longer have suicidal thoughts, and I could not be happier. I enjoy waking up each morning knowing that I will not be tortured by my classmates because of my sexuality or my gender. I am now being accepted for the man I have always felt I was! This has been a difficult journey for me, but with the support of my parents and wonderful sister I am getting through it successfully.

Epilogue by parents Ken & Marcia Garber, members of Dignity/Boston:

The preceding piece was written by our son as a college application essay. His words speak to our hearts and hopefully touch others —“friends who I could educate about who I really am.” But they don’t even begin to tell the totality of who he really was and the story of his life.

C.J. died January 26, 2009, due to a deadly combination of isolation and drugs. If we can touch even one life with this story, his death is not in vain. A celebration of his short life was planned and conducted by our family, along with members of Dignity/Boston. It is where our family has found an even larger family of welcome and support. C.J. is also survived by his sister, Sarah. May C.J. find the peace in Heaven that he couldn’t find here on Earth. ▼

Why I Left the Church and Why I Am Coming Back

By Ethan Thomas Young, a new DignityUSA member living in Toledo, Ohio

My name is Ethan Thomas Young. I am black and disabled. I was born female in 1958, and socialized as such. Born and raised in Upstate New York, I lived all over the state for 48 years through 2006.

My mother was a devout Catholic and all of us were raised in the Church. I was born with Cerebral Palsy and questioned from an early age why God would make me this way. I did most of my questioning in private, because you just didn’t question God in my house. My mother had breast cancer when I was born, and died, after a long and painful battle, when I was six years old. Again, I began to question how a benevolent God could take this wonderful woman from me just when I needed her most.

Fast forward to 1969 and the Stonewall Rebellion. I saw the news reports on television about how gays were no longer willing to be beaten by the police just for being themselves, and I knew that was where I needed to be. I had realized a few years before that I was different from the people I knew at school, and even in my own family, but I didn’t have the words to express what I was feeling. I knew that the Church said that God would not love me if I was gay and I would not go to heaven unless I gave up my homosexual ways. I knew that I could not do that so I started to move away from the Church. By the time I was 18, I had completely given up on practicing my religion. I lived as a lesbian for many years and tried to make that work for me, all the while feeling as though there was something fundamental missing in my life. During those years, I also had feelings that my body was not right for me. I felt as though I had a male brain and a female body. I never really talked about this with anyone until I was in my thirties, and, by then, I knew that the Church

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would never accept me and who I was. It was very hard for me to deal with that because I was at a point in my life where I really needed the Church.

I tried to attend services several times over the next ten years but I couldn't cope with hearing the priest talk about how harmful homosexuality was. He would talk about homosexuals as pedophiles, murderers, and such. I knew this was not the case, but I felt helpless to fight it. Then the sexual abuse allegations against priests and the hierarchy's effort to hide them began to come to light, and I was overjoyed, because I wanted the Church to be hurt as much as it had hurt me. I had a really difficult time reconciling my feelings of resentment toward the Church with the knowledge that I really wanted to be a part of the Church. Then in 1991, a friend invited me to a diocesan-supported, gay and lesbian Catholic group in Syracuse, New York. It was a very loose-knit group, but people were very connected in their love of God and the Church. I was apprehensive at first, but when I saw all these lesbians and gay men celebrating who they were as gay people and as Catholics, I knew that there was a chance that I could come back to the Church at some point.



Ethan Thomas Young with his Giant Schnauzer, Muggle.

I still hadn't really dealt with my gender issues at that point, and I had an uneasy feeling about coming out to people in this group as transgender. I didn't want to be seen as a 'freak' by these wonderful people who had been so welcoming and caring. What I didn't realize until later was that there were already some transgender folks in the congregation. Some of the people in the group knew that I was struggling with gender, and they encouraged me to talk about it at one of the Masses. Even though I knew I had the support of several people, I could not bring myself to come out. Because I knew the official Church position, I didn't feel like it was safe for me. I could not be sure that the people in the group would still be accepting.

I continued to attend the group sporadically. When I did go, I felt wonderful and I loved the fellowship and sense of belonging that I felt, but then I would go home and feel like a total hypocrite. When I didn't go I felt a tremendous sense of loss. During the time that I was not involved with the Church, I always felt as though something was missing in my life and I tried to find it through drugs, alcohol, sex, mysticism and paganism. None of those things could fill the void that I felt in my soul.

Finally, in 1999, I came out to the group and was accepted with open arms. Everyone hugged me and most of them said that they already knew, but they wanted to give me the time and space that I needed to come out on my own. It was then that I realized that not everyone in the Catholic Church agrees with Rome's stance on homosexuality and transgenderism/transsexuality. I have come to believe that God made me who I am and this is the journey that has been set forth for me.

With this understanding, I embarked on the next step of my journey: the multi-phase gender realignment surgery. I had a bilateral mastectomy in 2003 and a hysterectomy in 2005. For now, however, I have no plans for lower "reconstructive" surgery because I really can't afford it and the results are not that great. Eventually, I would like to have some sort of lower surgery, if I ever have the money for it.

In December 2006, I moved from New York State to Toledo, Ohio, and am now searching for a similar group here. I don't know if I will find such a group, but I know that the Church is where I am supposed to be. I don't have to, and probably shouldn't, agree with all of the doctrines set down by the Vatican. I know that God loves me for who, and what, I am and I love God as well. The Church was an important part of my life when I was a child, but I questioned everything I had been brought up to believe. I developed a feminist sensibility during my teens and twenties, and I had a hard time reconciling my knowledge with the Church's position with regard to women.

I have slowly been getting back to my own personal relationship with God, and that has helped me to realize that I need the fellowship of a church congregation and the ritual of celebrating Mass. I hope that by becoming a part of DignityUSA, I can get back all of the things that I feel have been missing from my life for so long. It has been a very long journey, and it has been rocky a lot of the time, but I am happy that a void has begun to be filled. ▼



Ethan Thomas Young ready for a job interview.

A partial list of Transgender resources on the Internet

“Gender Identity 101: A Transgender Primer”

http://sagatucson.org/saga/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=94

Advocacy sites:

<http://www.transfm.org/>

<http://www.gendertalk.com/info/resource/glb-activism.shtml>

Information for the gender variant person:

<http://www.tsroadmap.com/>

Trans-oriented job bank:

<http://www.tjobbank.com/>

Religious sites:

<http://www.transfaithonline.org/>

<http://www.gendertree.com/>

National Center for Transgender Equality

<http://www.nctequality.org/>

Social and support group for heterosexual crossdressers:

<http://www.tri-ess.org/>

Gender forums, library, wiki, and links:

<http://www.susans.org/>

Blogs:

<http://donnarose.com/MyBlog/>

<http://www.bilerico.com>

Conferences:

<http://www.be-all.org/>

<http://www.sccatl.org/>

Legal assistance:

<http://www.transgenderlegal.com/>

Medical:

<http://www.wpath.org/>

Resource for parents and guardians of gender variant children:

<http://imatyfa.org/>

Transgender Day of Remembrance

<http://transgenderdor.wordpress.com/>



**DignityUSA Convention 2009, July 2-5
will present two Trans-oriented workshops:**

“Trends in Trans Theology,” by Justin Tanis
“Trans-inclusive Communities,” by Justin Tanis
& Jim Mitulski

**Sign up for the Convention at
<http://www.dignityusa.org>.**



BOOK REVIEW

Sex as God Intended: A Reflection on Human Sexuality as Play

by John J. McNeill, (Letha Press; ISBN: 978-1-59021-042-0; \$20.00)

Reviewed by Jeff Stone, Dignity/New York

To many of us in DignityUSA, John McNeill is a familiar and beloved figure. Yet because he is so well-known to us, it is possible to lose sight of the vast scope of the achievements and gifts of this prophet in our own land. In 1970, John published the first theological articles defending homosexuality from a Catholic perspective, which became the basis for Dignity’s original Statement of Position and Purpose. In 1972, he co-founded Dignity/New York. In 1976, he published the groundbreaking book *The Church and the Homosexual*, which brought his subject into the international spotlight for the first time. Over the next two decades, John followed with *Taking a Chance on God*; *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* and his autobiography, *Both Feet Firmly Planted in Midair*.

As a Jesuit priest and psychotherapist, John counseled hundreds of LGBT Catholics and others. As a workshop and retreat leader, he reached thousands more around the world. In addition to many other honors, he received DignityUSA’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997.

A featured speaker at every Dignity national convention except one (when he was briefly silenced by the Vatican), John will be with us in San Francisco to introduce his new book, *Sex as God Intended: A Reflection on Human Sexuality as Play*. In it, John offers fresh, joyous, and challenging insights into a subject of intense interest to each of us, while expanding on the major theological and psychological themes he has developed over a lifetime. In addition, twelve of John’s distinguished fellow theologians, writers, and activists — including Sr. Jeannine Gramick, Daniel Helminiak, Mary Hunt, and Mark Jordan — present their own insightful and provocative reflections on his work and life in a festschrift of essays.

John poses a central question at the beginning of *Sex as God Intended*: “Christian revelation, as it came from Jesus, was one of the most sex-positive and body-positive religions in the history of the world. How, then, in just a few centuries did it become such a body- and sex-negative religion and remain so to this day?”

Turning to both Scripture and personal experience, John seeks out the revelations of God’s intention for human sex as play, from the Old Testament’s frankly erotic “Song of Songs” to four profound affirmations of the body in the New Testament. In John’s view, God’s plan for sex as a source of joy, pleasure, and love fully embraces same-gender partners. He finds biblical support for this conviction in the stories of Jonathan and David, and Ruth and Naomi, as well as accounts of Jesus’s beloved disciple, the gay centurion and his beloved boy, and Jesus’s membership in a highly unconventional family of choice.

John’s vision of playful same-gender sexuality includes the complete spectrum of the LGBT community’s experience. He writes: “Intimacy, both physical and spiritual, is precisely the goal of playful sex. But...in order to have the freedom to play and to overcome self-consciousness, we must have the felt security of being loved. The primary purpose of a relationship of love is to enable the partners to affirm each other continuously through shared activities in an atmosphere of security and trust. Love gives us that freedom.” At the same time, John contends that everyone — not just those in committed relationships — has a right to playful and responsible expression of their sexuality and their search for intimacy. “I agree with Norman Pittenger,” he writes, “that there are only three kinds of sexual activity between consenting adults: good, better, and best sex.”

Arguing forcefully for the right to same-sex marriage, John declares that there is nothing in either Scripture or human experience to support the denial of official recognition of committed same-sex relationships by church and state. He explores the “providential role of gay marriage,” including the potential for same-sex marriage to correct the power imbalances and rigid gender stereotypes of traditional heterosexual marriage. In addition, he celebrates the special gifts of creativity, compassionate service, and spiritual leadership offered by the LGBT community.

Moreover, John maintains that one of the main roots of homophobia is feminophobia, or a fear of and contempt for all things feminine. The only cure for this form of homophobia, he states, is the liberation of women to a full and equal status with men. Furthermore, John argues, “It is my belief that Christianity in its present form is dying, along with all the major forms of patriarchy representing the domination and suppression of the feminine by the masculine. The only way it can be resurrected is to recover and affirm the feminine, which will allow the Church once again to proclaim the body- and sex-positive message revealed by God.”

The voices of the festschrift writers, as well as foreword author Ken Page, speak eloquently not only of John’s deep influence on them personally, but on LGBT Catholics, the broader Catholic and Christian communities, and the entire LGBT spiritual movement. As Mary Hunt writes, “His impact goes well beyond his roots to persons of diverse faith perspectives who seek to hold together their sexuality with their faith. If a Roman Catholic priest can do it and be open and proud about it, why not a devout Muslim, a Southern Presbyterian, or an Orthodox Jew? As our collective movement matures, his example becomes more obvious.”

Sex as God Intended is the crowning work of one of our true sages, vital and inspired in his ninth decade. A fount of new and stimulating ideas as well as a compact overview of John McNeill’s cumulative wisdom, it is essential reading for all of us who call ourselves lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and Christian.

All of John’s books are expected to be available for purchase at the convention. He will be on hand to sign all copies, new or old. John’s books are also available at online retailers. ▼