FOREWORD

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From Transgression to Transition

I was raised in a middle-class family in French-speaking Belgium. Throughout my childhood, my parents were loving and gave me a sense of being valued and cared for. They were proud of me and my accomplishments. Well—mostly. I was a feminine boy, who loved wearing my mother's scarves, heels, and makeup. None of our family albums contains pictures of those moments of creativity, freedom, and delight. Sadly, those have been hidden away. As a young teen, I distinctly remember my mother saying: *It's okay if you're gay, just don't turn into one of those queens*. She meant: Don't be feminine! And I could extrapolate: Don't be transgender! Yet she was far from conventional herself. Early on, she left my father to partner with a butch woman, who loved me dearly, living a colorful life, full of art and late nights at the neighborhood lesbian bar.

What I've gleaned from my own childhood and from my years of experience as a therapist working with families of transgender and gender expansive youth, is that even the most loving, open-minded parents are challenged when their children transgress cultural gender norms. This is often referred to as *cisnormativity*—the assumption that we are all cisgender unless proven otherwise. Why do parents fear their child's gender diversity and/or transition? Why does any gender outside the binary box seem so ominous? And why do some parents end up rejecting the children they love? Is rejection ever an attempt—even if misguided—to protect? More broadly, how do we understand the ways in which families deal with a gender diverse child, a process one parent described to me as "initially mandated but ultimately welcomed allyship?"

A gender paradigm shift is truly a systemic change. As my colleague Randi Kaufman often reminds us, "When children transition, everyone transitions along." *Families in Transition* looks at the cultural, social, familial, and individual adjustments of parents, siblings, extended family vis-à-vis their social, medical, and educational communities. More precisely, this book uniquely explores all aspects of gender complexity from the perspective of cisgender caregivers—heterosexual and queer—describing their reactions, roles, internal and external resources, and processes as they uncover the pervasiveness and fallacy of the cisgender binary and prepare to accompany a child down the transformative road of gender affirmation.

The text stands on the shoulders of foundational writings that preceded it. To conceptualize what a family in transition might look like, different frameworks have been used to assist those clinicians, educators, and researchers who work with them. For example, Lev (2004) and later on with her colleague Alie (2012) describe the process of emergence through a systemic and developmental lens, illustrating how families of transgender children pass through—in the best-case scenarios—a series of nonlinear stages: Discovery and Disclosure, Turmoil, Negotiation, Finding Balance, ultimately arriving at a sense of Integration. Caitlin Ryan and her teams (2009, 2010) empirically anchored the lifesaving role of families by demonstrating the positive effect acceptance has on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of LGBT youth. Specifically, she highlighted that accepting parental attitudes and behaviors exert a strongly protective effect, resulting in significantly lower rates of suicide attempts and emotional distress and higher rates of overall satisfaction. Other researchers document how the difficulties parents and families have in adjusting to children's gender identities contribute directly or indirectly to the significant presence of suicide, self-harm, and homelessness (Allan & Ungar, 2014; Bauer, Scheim, Pyne, Travers, & Hammond, 2015; Durwood, McLaughlin, & Olson, 2017; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Frank, 2011; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Díaz, Card, & Russell, 2010).

As a theoretician and clinician, I conceptualize these dilemmas as a conflict in parental functions (Malpas, 2011; Malpas, 2016; Malpas & Glaeser, 2017; Malpas, Glaeser, & Giammattei, 2018). When cisgender parents raise cisgender children, gender is mostly a place of socially affirmed bonding. Nurturance, acceptance, multigenerational transmission, and socialization all align, sharing compatible versions of masculinity, femininity, and gender identities. I also describe how multidimensional support helps families move from rejection to an understanding that *acceptance is protection* (Malpas, 2011; Malpas, Glaeser, & Giammattei, 2018).

In *Far from the Tree,* Andrew Solomon (2012) captures another important aspect of the multigenerational dilemma by differentiating *vertical identities*—those features of nature or nurture shared by parents and their children—from *horizontal identities,* those features essential to children, shared by a select group, but *not* commonly shared by their parents. All these models emphasize core experiences of grief and loss, but with the potential for growth inherent in all conflict.

The Ingredients for Change

As our practices continue to expand, so do our frameworks. Eight years ago, I founded the Gender & Family Project (GFP) at the Ackerman Institute for the Family. Since then, the GFP has supported hundreds of families of transgender children. From this work we identified three changes families can potentially make as they begin to shift from cisnormativity to gender diversity: (1) a change of awareness; (2) a change of connection; and (3) a change of community—each of which involves psychological, relational, social, and cultural processes (Malpas, 2017). Together they constitute a nonlinear developmental line that will help expand family acceptance. Failure to change at any level manifests itself in particular forms of family rejection.

Change of Awareness

What is the usual question asked when someone is pregnant: *Is it a boy or is it a girl?* Why is knowing a child's gender so important? After he or she has been gender assigned, family and friends start imagining who the child could be: "Will he be handsome and athletic like his father? Will she be beautiful and creative like her mother?" Gender helps parents move from an abstract idea to the hopes and dreams about this person they are welcoming. In most Western traditions, gender seems to *humanize* life, taking the *it* and constructing a *he* or a *she*.

Parents of gender expansive and transgender youth face the challenge of relating to them through a lens other than the traditional gender binary, an antiquated construction as old as time itself. For example, the book of Genesis describes God as organizing energy and chaos through the creation of dichotomies: heaven and earth, light and darkness, man and woman. Dualistic thinking is endemic in many religious Eastern and Western traditions. When an individual challenges this construct, they challenge the ways in which we organize fathomable representations and, ultimately, how we recognize and relate to one another. When families struggle to change the normative expectations of their transgender child, a sense of dehumanization for that child can result. Experiencing children as fundamentally *other* can desensitize parents to their child's struggles, which can sometimes escalate to rejection, even violence. Parents can make this shift by *decentering* their cisnormative experience and humanizing life through the lens of gender diversity (Erhensaft, 2016). At a conscious level, it requires a

change in their belief system and an openness to existential complexity; at an unconscious level, it requires dealing with discomfort, chaos, the unfamiliar, and the unknown, elements we all struggle with.

Change of Connection

As Solomon (2012) points out, while there are those who assume their children will share their core identities, "parenthood abruptly catapults us into a permanent relationship with a stranger" (p. 1). If parents experience their transgender child as "too different"—which varies from family to family—their empathy and desire to protect may be compromised. Damaged connections can result in emotional detachment, rejection, abusive enforcement of family rules, and neglect and culminate in total abandonment. Though most cisgender parents do not have a lived experience similar to that of growing up transgender, their ability to empathize with a transgender child is greatly enhanced by meaningful identification. By way of their own story of marginalization, difference, identity formation, empowerment, or pride, parents need to find an authentic point of connection with their child.

Change of Community

In addition to these internal and interpersonal changes, parents have to face where their own communities stand on gender diversity. It is to their benefit to facilitate tolerance inside those communities of belonging by trying to influence group norms or, if necessary, by leaving their original groups to join more welcoming communities. In many situations, family members, even though inexperienced themselves, can be powerful agents of change. But sometimes gender diversity and community norms are like oil and water. They don't mix. If a family lacks the privilege, resources, or ability to change its environment, its members might resolve the task by compartmentalizing their lives. For example, the trans youth may choose not to be "out" to the entire community, or parents in conflict might divorce. Each situation is unique, but acceptance should inherently be looked at as intersectional. Race, class, educational level, religion, and language—each carries great weight in the process of integrating a transgender child (Malpas, Davis, Colon-Otero, & Raad, 2016).

Acceptance Is Protection

Parental functions can be articulated as a combination of nurturance and protection, acceptance and socialization, "soft love" and "tough love" (Malpas, 2011). Although things are rapidly changing, cisgender parents often associate being transgender with a lifetime of hardship, increased exposure to violence, and discrimination. Indeed, in 2016 at least 23 trans men and women were murdered in the United States. In 2017 at least 28 transgender individuals lost their lives to horrific acts of violence in this country (Human Rights Campaign, 2018a, 2018b).

Faced with the dilemma of accepting their child's identity, which could endanger the child, or rejecting their child's identity as an attempt to protect them, parents sometimes choose the latter. This resolution often translates into situations in which parents may not necessarily resort to physical aggression or oust the child from the home, but instead prevent access to affirmative treatment, such as hormone blockers, or delay (or deny) a request to socially transition. Many of us will recognize those who hope "this is just a phase," or who say: "*At 18 years old, he will be able to do whatever he wants!*" Symptoms can appear as obstruction, ambivalence, delaying or postponing care, or enforcement of gender stereotypes.

The shift to a protective strategy is contingent on a parent's understanding of what is actually most dangerous versus most helpful for their child, garnering enough support for themselves to venture down a new path. Once we as clinicians comprehend the parents' intentions as positive, conveying the effect of acceptance and protection helps them understand the need for affirmative language and behaviors and being part of a supportive community. A fundamental aspect of this shift is a deep understanding that rejection does not work, but, rather, that acceptance *is* protection. Though that paradigm shift is necessary, it is not sufficient. Affirming family members will need every bit of emotional, behavioral, and social tools to take on the world as an ally. To borrow Gottlieb's (2000) concepts, families will, it is hoped, make the shift from *resigned acceptance* to *unconditional acceptance.*

Families in Transition takes the reader, professional and community member, further into the dynamics of this transformation. It presents affirmative material to support young people, taking into account the layers of complexity families inevitably face as they embark together on this journey, and what parents, clinicians, and educators should understand about it. Most sections are organized as a dialogue among professionals, many of whom are recognized leaders in the field, and parents (cisgender, both queer *and* straight), reflecting on their individual and collective experiences.

Combining developmental psychology, psychoeducation, and systemic therapy, the text highlights the importance of our own social locations and identities as clinicians. It puts the responsibility on us to challenge our own cisnormativity and blind spots, and evaluate the ways we can become "gender creative" (Erhensaft, 2016). Therapists working primarily with young children and adolescents and their families describe the range of emotional reactions of parents as well as outline psychoeducational tools and clinical strategies to support them in their quest toward acceptance.

While highlighting the need for a slow, insight-oriented process of reflection on the effect of gender diversity on the parent and the parent-child relationship, the transformative and potentiating aspects of having a gender diverse child are emphasized. Similarly, parents' own complex sexual and gender identities, expressions, and social locations are intertwined with the process of parenting. As Shelley Rio-Glick states in "Gender in Four Voices": "If anyone thinks that being gay makes it easier to navigate changes of gender identity within the family, they have never known the power of culture, parental fantasy, expectations, self-esteem, denial, and terror."

The book offers a contextual approach to the psychological and relational processes of families in transition. It takes into account the complexity, specific skills, and resources for advocacy required to deal with those medical, legal, and educational systems designed to administrate and discriminate against transgender children and their families, offering insight into cutting-edge best practices—medical, educational, and psychological. Ultimately, it confirms my own experience: if parents and caregivers are supported in coming to terms with survivalist fears, they can be among the fiercest protectors and most efficient agents of cultural change.

Though gender diversity has always existed, it has usually been repressed, subjugated, and silenced, at least in this culture. But today we have reached a tipping point. While still being murdered, criminalized, and pathologized, gender expansive voices, bodies, and communities are increasingly being heard and seen. No one can explain precisely why this shift has been possible or why it is happening now. It is likely that there is a conjunction of factors: the relentless fight for survival and equality of transgender communities around the world powered by the global connections and organizing capacities provided by the advent of the Internet. I believe the last bastion of cisnormativity was significantly breached when transgender children forced us to question everything the cisgender world assumed: *We do not know the gender of any child until they tell us who they are.* In the end, I hope this book is a step toward our accountability as allies and our empowerment as complexly gendered beings.

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