INTRODUCTION

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Transparent: Season 3, Episode 8 (Corey & Arnold, 2016) takes us into the private world of 12-year-old Morty Pfefferman. After being benched by his grandfather Haim, who coaches the Little League team, and who, after Morty misses the ball, in his exasperation screams, "I can't believe that fegela's my grandson," Morty returns home in shame. Upset, he dons his mother's nightgown, white pumps, and pearl ring and dances around the basement of his grandparents' Boyle Heights home to such 1958 pop standards as "If I Were a Bell." Morty lives for those brief moments. Only then does he feel totally free, totally himself, totally alive.

Those moments are rare, however. He has to grab them when he can. Others in the family — his grandmother Yetta and his mother, Rose — have become aware of his ritual. Though Rose is supportive, that support is tempered, as she fears that Haim will find out and dire consequences will result. Yetta pleads for Rose to "talk some sense into [Morty] before it's too late." But Rose can only muster, halfheartedly, "Can't anyone be happy?"

One afternoon, after the neighborhood sirens go off, signaling an air-raid drill, Haim quickly gathers his family together. Where is Morty? As everyone descends the ladder into the basement — which doubles as a shelter — Morty's little sister Bryna is the first to see Morty and quizzically wonders why he's wearing their mother's nightgown. In a panic, Rose tries to get him undressed and redressed before Haim comes down. It's too late. Haim goes ballistic: "What the fuck is wrong with you, Mort?" he asks as Rose and Morty freeze in sheer terror. "Mom said it was okay," insists Morty. "What? You let your little fegela wear a dress?" Haim wonders in disbelief. For Haim, history is repeating itself. His son Gershon, Rose's brother, was sent by the Nazis to the gas chamber for being a homosexual. Haim berates Rose, "This, this is all your fault! You want him to end up like Gershon?" Powerless, Haim first tries to reason with Morty, but his anger quickly escalates: "Do you want to know what happened to your uncle Gershon? . . . He burned to death in the oven. Do you want to know why? Because your mother and your grandmother let him run around in a skirt!" Rose tearfully tries to defend Morty, insisting that it "makes him happy." Haim explodes: "You make him stop this or you get out of my house!"

Later that night, while in bed, Morty observes his mother fully dressed, carrying a bag, getting ready to leave. In a panic, he calls out for her. Rose looks back with a mixture of fear and guilt, opens the door, and quickly closes it behind her.

Will she return?

We live in a world of division — male/female, black/white, rich/poor, young/old, Democrat/Republican, gay/straight, cisgender/transgender — increasingly so under a president whose intrapsychic splits continually combust into a heightened sense of polarization on both the national and international stages. Culture and identity have now become battlefields on which we claim and sustain our place in this increasingly complex world. The political gains made by LGBTQ people over the last several years are starting to recede under the guise of the so-called religious freedom laws. Rescinding protections for transgender students to use the bathrooms of their choice and a proposed ban on future military service for transgender people are just two recent examples of this administration's blatant contempt for humanity. What easier way to regressively take us back to an idealized past, a time when, apparently, America was "great," than to scapegoat LGBTQ people. How catastrophic or how lasting the results will be remains to be seen. Sociopolitical divisions were obviously there already. Perhaps they just needed a match to ignite them. Now they burn uncontrollably.

In considering the ways we're different from one another, however, we must also consider the ways we're similar. While it's critical we recognize and honor our uniqueness, at the same time it's equally important to recognize and honor our commonalities.

In the articles and vignettes that follow, all our contributors highlight how critical it is that parents work toward achieving a level of acceptance of their child. But how can a parent offer that to a child who they may perceive as *too* different, almost unrecognizably different, a child who falls "far from the tree" (Solomon, 2012)? Certainly exposure can help. The more information that's available, the more times an issue makes headlines, the more the number of families who are directly affected, the more familiar an issue becomes. At this point, I can say with some certainty that most families, at least in this country, can identify a member — past or present — who is or was gay, lesbian, or bisexual. When I came out in the mid-1970s, I couldn't have said that. The closet was a crowded place. The message from my own parents at that time was: "You need help!" (Not exactly a history buff, my mother cited homosexuality as the reason the Roman Empire fell.) Their shame, which slowly diminished over the years, was never entirely extinguished.

Certainly we can point to other emotion-laden, poorly understood issues — suicide, trauma, drug abuse/alcoholism, eating disorders, domestic violence,

incest, child sex abuse, and, most recently, sexual harassment, as well as mental illness in general—that remain secrets, even within the context of the family in which they occur. It may now be a bit easier to talk about them than it was ten or twenty years ago, but we still have a long way to go.

The first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* I perused still listed homosexuality as a mental disorder. More recently, the change from *Gender Identity Disorder* (GID) in the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) to *Gender Dysphoria* in the *DSM-V* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) represents a welcome cultural and conceptual shift. Though psychiatry and psychoanalysis have historically been proponents of the status quo, we have to acknowledge positive changes when they occur. So I have little doubt that, by the next generation, if history is any guide, the issue of gender nonconforming and transgender people will be less intimidating, less frightening, more familiar, and, perhaps, better understood. Progress, whether systemic or individual, is rarely, if ever, linear.

Given that cultivating a greater sense of openness takes work, how could parents of gender nonconforming and transgender people achieve and sustain a more accepting stance over time? Perhaps highlighting my own qualitative research (2000) on the ways in which fathers adapted to the reality of having a gay son might be relevant to the focus of our present volume. In her essay in this text, "But Doc, Is It Safe?" Irene Sills points out that looking at related medical research could generalize to and have application for other areas of inquiry. The same holds true for the psychological literature. That said, in my research, I uncovered three main adaptive strategies the fathers used, which I'll call the three *I*s: (1) *I*dentification, (2) *I*nternalization, and (3) *I*dealization (pp. 161–167).

Identification/Internalization: For the most part, Freud (1921/1971) discusses the concept of *identification* as a mechanism through which the child connects to the parent, for example, by way of the formation and resolution of the Oedipus complex: the son can't *be* the father so resigns instead to be *like* him. Identification, as defined in this context, represents both "an emotional tie" (p. 46) and a "common quality shared" with another (p. 49). Identification can also be built on common attitudes, feelings, values, and traits. In earlier writings, Freud (1914/1959) highlights the parent's identification with the child, who embodies both the parent's idealized past self as well as the hope for the future self—their self-to-be.

Among those fathers whom I interviewed, a central point of identification with their gay sons was their common experience of struggle. These older men came face to face with major obstacles over their many years, some enduring

circumstances so treacherous in their early lives that their very survival was at stake. A few were first-generation immigrants, which necessitated the accommodation of a vastly different set of values; several struggled to find jobs or careers that were engaging, then had to work long hours to support their families; most were witnesses to the Crash of 1929 and its catastrophic financial and emotional effects; others were challenged by the reality of retirement; and the majority of them struggled with their guilt for not being present enough for their children early on, which resulted in a sense of their inadequacy as parents, dramatically illustrated by the distance they experienced mostly with their gay sons, with whom they had had difficulties connecting earlier in life.

Likewise, the fathers perceived their sons as struggling individuals as well—struggling with the option of going to and/or finishing college; struggling with finding a job or career that proved creatively satisfying; struggling with the desire to be financially independent; struggling with finding love; and struggling with ways to afford themselves a sense of safety as gay men in a homophobic society. A strong need to protect their sons was evident in the ways the fathers themselves were not protected by their *own* abusive, negligent, sometimes abandoning caretakers. That common link contributed to helping the fathers begin to forge a stronger connection with their sons—really for the first time. How might parents of gender nonconforming and transgender children and adolescents find common ground?

In discussing middle age, Jung (1933) highlights the notion that, like the sun at high noon, we start to reverse course. Some of our physical and psychological characteristics, so prided earlier in life, begin to shift into their opposite. The harder, sharper, shiny surfaces of the male torso begin to soften. Focus on career may diminish and be replaced with a greater interest in relationships with family and friends. In contrast, women may start to grow facial hair and their voices sometimes deepen into a richer, darker timbre. Earlier focus on the home and child rearing may be replaced with interest in the competitive, wider world. Cultural differences aside, men in late middle age start to take on (traditional) female characteristics; women in late middle age start to take on (traditional) male characteristics.

In my study, the fathers associated their gay sons with femininity on the basis of their sons' childhood histories of cross-dressing and doll play, their greater comfort with female peers, their resemblance to the mother both physically and temperamentally, and their closer relationship with the mother. I surmised that through the fathers' evolving acceptance, there was an *internalization* of that (female) part of their sons, making it the fathers' own, a part of

them that, in the past, might have gone undeveloped and unrecognized, but a part that the fathers "needed" *developmentally* in order to feel whole, further concretizing an identification with their sons.

Thinking about my own life, listening to the experiences of my patients, and cataloguing the stories of biological families (2000, 2003, 2005, and, with Bigner, 2006) as well as what I term *families of choice* (2008), our lives seem to be characterized by a never- ending ebb and flow—periods of *transition* followed by periods of *consolidation.* Research confirms this as well (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). It is during those periods of transition in which vulnerability is heightened that the possibility of real change can occur.

In looking for points of identification with their gender nonconforming and transgender children, parents may not have to look that far. As the adult body transforms, and drives and interests change, in some sense parents themselves become gender nonconforming, successfully bringing together male *and* female, female *and* male, finally achieving a sense of wholeness. Transition, though used with specificity in this text, is a universal experience, all of us going through it in our own way, at our own time, thus a second point of identification.

Idealization: Another strategy or defense the fathers in my study employed was *idealization,* that is, they appeared to *overvalue* certain achievements, talents, physical and character traits of their sons, thus neutralizing their sexual orientation. When fathers perceived their sons as brilliant, creative, gifted, and handsome, their gayness became less central. And if the effect of the sexual orientation resulted in a narcissistic injury to the fathers, that wound then "healed" by way of the perception that, if their sons were special, then, by association, they *themselves* were special. What are the implications for parents of gender nonconforming and transgender people?

When a child comes out as LGBTQ, that part of them can become the central focus of "who they are" by the parent *as well as* the child—at least initially. Consolidation and integration evolve over time in the best-case scenarios. The parent is charged with the task of seeing their child both in a new(er) way as well as in ways already known, a challenge even for the most open parent. What is *already* known is the unique strengths their child possesses and how those can enrich themselves, their family, and their world. That knowledge may not exactly be sustainable during a crisis, but it can become clearer over time. The capacity to see their child in all their complexity—not just as gender nonconforming or transgender—is a challenge for most. It *can* happen. It *does* happen. The parents who told their stories in this book *made* it happen.

Most of the fathers in my study acknowledged that, over time, they were able to achieve a level of intimacy with their sons that they had never before known; this intimacy offered them a *second chance* to be the father they could *not* have been years earlier. The capacity to see more clearly who your child is—in those myriad ways—opens the door for a parent to see who they themselves are, creating the opportunity for a more expansive, real relationship, one that is deeper, richer, and more authentic.

Healthy aging entails challenging the earlier assumptions of youth and accommodating to a different reality, one in which the locus of evaluation gradually shifts from the external world to the internal one, the result being a greater sense of autonomy, which ideally culminates in a more expansive capacity to claim and proclaim oneself (Gould, 1978).

Despite the risks and the dangers inherent in being gender nonconforming and transgender in this society, those children, adolescents, and adults are heroically declaring who they genuinely are. At the same time, parents are on a similar path, exploring and defining who *they* are, moving toward what Erikson (1963) terms *ego integrity,* characterized by an adaptation to life's "triumphs and disappointments adherent to being . . . the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (p. 168). Sheehy's (1998) term *coalescence* (p. 218) captures a similar sentiment—a shedding of all pretense and a final unapologetic declaration: "I am who I am." And so therein lies yet another point of identification: both parent and child, in their own ways, separately and together, are on the road to finding an authentic self, or as Winnicott (1960/1965) simply terms it, a *true self,* a self from which springs all that is creative, all that is spontaneous, all that is real.

A central task of parenthood is the capacity to relinquish oneself in favor of one's child. However cherished the goals, however well-meaning the expectations, however coveted the dreams, all must be held in abeyance: "Parental narcissism matures in the forging experience of expanding and deepening tolerance of differences and the ability to reconcile these where reconciliation and resolution are crucial" (Elson, 1984, pp. 301–302). Perhaps Kahlil Gibran (1923/2015) says it best:

> *Your children are not your children.*
> *They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.*
> *They come through you but not from you,*
> *And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.* (p. 18)

If we understand a crisis as characterized by a disruption in homeostasis, one in which the usual adaptive strategies may not work, one that sometimes calls for creative problem solving, one that reawakens conflicts of old, then parenthood presents a crisis on an operatic scale. Rossi (1968) points out the tension between the pressure to be a parent and the fundamental paucity in *preparing* for the role, an abruptness in *transitioning* to the role, and a lack of guidelines in *executing* the role. Further, as a child's needs change, the parents' attitudes and (re)actions should also change. But some parents cannot or will not accommodate those changes. And so the crisis continues—unabated.

The Chinese word for *crisis* is composed of two symbols—one signifying *danger,* the other signifying *opportunity.* It is my hope that parents seize on their child's difference as an opportunity not only to know their child better, but to know themselves better, and then to create a deeper, more meaningful relationship together.

In discussing his response to his son's sexual orientation, Walter, one of the fathers in my study, eloquently says it this way:

> I feel as if I've stepped though a door, and it's a brighter room than before. I could have gone through my whole life and not even been aware of the difficulties and the rewards and the joys of the lives of all those people [who] are now accessible to me. Whereas before, they were in that other room and I didn't go in. My son's in that other room. I want to be in the room with the light with him. I hope that he feels with my acceptance that I'm with him. He hasn't left me behind. (2000, p. 132)

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