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My Own Transition

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In 2008 my 20-year-old son, who at the time I believed to be my daughter, told me that he was transgender, planned to begin taking testosterone, and wanted to have top surgery as soon as possible. I was shocked, but not really surprised. As he spoke these words, my ears were filled with a wooshing sound, as if I were being engulfed by a huge windstorm. I think my expression remained neutral, but inside I felt as though I had fallen into an abyss. I was flooded with half-formulated thoughts and memories.

R. had been unconventionally gendered since the time he had any control over expressing himself. When he was three, he would change his clothes several times a day, as though he couldn't quite get it right. By the time he was four and in preschool, he was adamant about wearing only clothing that was dark blue and dark green: boys' underwear, boys' bathing suits, and boys' T-shirts. He had come to see something about the gendering of T-shirts I had never noticed before—that girls' T-shirts have slightly lower necklines and slightly shorter sleeves. He wanted to have a blue pickup truck when he was older, and he was interested in what the *DSM-IV* diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) referred to as "rough-and-tumble play." We had to stop playing the board game *Life* because of his agitation about having to choose to represent himself with either a blue peg or a pink peg in the car that players "drive" through the game.

I recalled an image of R. in a dress at age five that I convinced him to wear to a family wedding in which he was hiding under the table because he felt so uncomfortable. Soon after that, he said to me, "Mama, why do you want me to wear girls' clothes when I feel like killing myself when I wear them?" This was my dilemma: as a feminist mother, I wanted both my children to have expansive ideas about gender; as a lesbian mother, I worried that people might think I was "making" him dress like a boy. In the late 1980s, it was still a relatively new phenomenon to be an intentional lesbian family, and I felt an internal pressure to be a model.

I had a visceral memory of the times in R.'s early childhood when I thought he might grow up to be transgender, which would fill me with anguish, and I quickly made myself think about something else. I was relieved when he went through

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