

Notes on Gender Role Transition

By Anne Vitale Ph.D.

[Home](#)

[Return to T-Note Index](#)

T NOTE #4

Unlived Lives

August 28, 1996

When I say "unlived lives," I am speaking of the frustrations inherent in "waiting": waiting for life to begin. Yes, one is doing what everyone else is doing, but the "doing" has a hollow feel to it. Life has more of a spectator quality rather than real time, actual involvement. Life takes on the quality of being in an intolerably long line at the bank. Everyone gets to the teller window but you.

For most gender identity conflicted individuals the waiting starts very early. Little boys wait to be allowed to enter play with the girls as a girl. They wait for a pretty dress to wear or a doll to mother for their birthday. Little girls get by with tomboyish behavior but they also know they're in a serious struggle for real gender expression. Unknowingly, these children start the long wait for the problem to resolve itself. It is common for all children to turn to magical thinking and to expect miracles. For example, one of the more common appeals gender conflicted children make to end the waiting is to pray for God to intervene. Others wish upon a star or make a birthday wish when blowing out the candles. Most children use every chance they have to petition for divine intervention. It's heart breaking to think of all those innocent children out there at this very moment, praying and wishing for a miracle that will never happen.

And then there are the adolescent years of waiting. A time that starts full of false hope but ends in further disappointment and confusion. This is a time in life when the boys watch in wonder and heart breaking envy as the girls start to develop into young women. On the other hand, gender conflicted girls begin a feminization process they wanted desperately to avoid. As boys endure what they feel is grotesque masculinization, girls endure what they feel is the indignity of feminization. At this point a certain resignation sets in. They now are aware that the problem is a significant part of their life and may never go away.

When the gender conflicted individual enters his or her early twenties, the efforts to relieve the waiting takes a more practical turn. If a young man can't be a woman, perhaps if he makes some changes, he can become a man. Perhaps if he joins the armed forces. Perhaps if he gets married. Perhaps if he has children. Perhaps if he starts lifting weights. Perhaps... perhaps... perhaps. If a young woman can't evolve naturally into a man, perhaps she can simply continue acting like one.

Of course, it isn't the same but it is better than the alternative. However, there are other complications for these dysphoric people. Foremost among these is the need for intimacy.

For some men, being with the right woman eases the tensions of non-participation. It adds a touch of social respectability and makes the family happy. The problem, of course, is that he almost invariably falls in love with the woman he wants to be. And as often as not, he starts living his life through her. This pseudo-life is characterized almost invariably by secretly crossdressing in her clothes, even going so far as going shopping with her and encouraging her to buy clothes that he wants to wear. It usually doesn't take very long for the wife to rebel and the individual to realize that far from providing resolution, marriage has complicated the matter. Now he finds himself waiting to become a wife as well as a woman. Can waiting to become a mother be far behind?

In the meantime gender dysphoric females take full advantage of a world denied their male counterparts. Unlike gender dysphoric males, who avoid gay life with a passion, these women often move into the lesbian community. There they have a history of easily finding someone who enjoys their unique blend of maleness and femaleness. They also take full advantage of the social acceptance of short hair on women and the wearing of gender neutral clothing. Add a few male effects and the image, if not the fact, of maleness is almost complete.

By now the picture is clear. As the decades pass, anxiety and depression place an ever growing burden on life. Typically, life stagnates and becomes something to endure. Some people turn to drugs and alcohol to mollify the pain. When that too becomes intolerable, thoughts of suicide creep in and it all too often becomes the solution of choice.

Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar pattern. The only way to end the dysphoria, like any other problem one faces in life, is to come to terms with it. Acceptance is the key here. Acceptance of gender diversity and acceptance of an answer based on the reality of what is possible. The good news is that what is possible usually far exceeds initial expectations. Thanks to the influence of modern therapeutic understanding of gender issues, there are now thousands of people who have worked through their fears and are leading authentic lives. For all of you who have yet to face your gender issues, it's time to let the waiting end.

Copyright 1996 by Anne Vitale, Ph.D. Dr. Vitale is a psychotherapist specializing in gender related issues. Dr. Vitale's office is located at 610 D Street, San Rafael CA 94901, (415) 456-4452, Internet: [Contact Dr. Vitale](#). This column may be reprinted in any non-profit organization's newsletter if Dr. Vitale's name and address appear with it. Other publications must obtain written permission from Dr. Vitale. A copy of any reprints must be sent to Dr. Vitale.