Marathon transgender questions

Background

Growing up transgender is really painful and bewildering when you don’t know what it is. Once when I was about 4 or 5 years old I told my mom I wished I was a girl. I could already glimpse the shit-storm with no name brewing ahead of me. She got quiet and looked at me funny, and asked in a certain voice and manner “why would you say that”… Thankfully I thought up a reason really quickly and told her it was because “girls never get in trouble”. She then said “oh” in an obviously relieved and smiling manner and proceeded to tell me how girls do indeed get in trouble. I never forgot that, My child brain automatically connected that feeling of wanting to please my parents and maintain love to not saying what I really felt. Much of it I did not have words for anyway. Kids who are transgender are totally unprepared and blindsided into coping mechanisms that are automatic and unhealthy from the beginning. I remember two things from my childhood as my first memories, desperately wishing I was a girl and saying so out loud, and later, the black-and-white image of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon so far from Earth. That was the beginning of my new life trying to act and be who I wasn’t.

In school, everything was split up between male and female, and I was now supposed to act like the male side of things juxtaposed with the female groups, behaviors, clothes, and friendships forming all around me like sunshine through iron bars. I hated school so bad I refused to go at all a few times when I was only 6 or 7 years old. Later, I liked to think it was because I was really smart, since that offered a ready explanation. I knew I was “weird”, but later the IQ thing really allowed me to divert my attention from much more difficult issues. Through all this I developed a hatred of what made me not fit in – my real emotional self. I became extremely thoughtful about psychology. I had to take every emotion and shunt it into something acceptable and that was really hard intellectual work to get it done quickly enough that people would not catch on. I did it automatically and unconsciously – like you act when your boss is around at work sometimes. It’s exhausting. It took the pleasure out of things. I did not like to socialize because of this, but I loved people...! I could not get along with or fit in with the guys because eventually they would figure out I didn’t have a guy brain. At the time I just thought that once they “caught on” that I was different, and had no clue as to the proper response, I had to stop hanging out near them. I could not respond properly to their testing or hazing behaviors -- so I was bullied a lot. Once in class in 6th grade I actually stood up and freaked out and asked why everyone had to fight all the time?!?! What’s wrong with you people! Mostly meaning the guys… That stood out because I definitely let my real emotions out right then. In this same grade, I hid down a stairwell next to the school near the playground to avoid guy behaviors. Once, I ran away from school and hid until my mom came to pick us up because a girl knocked me down and started to beat me up in the classroom as we were coming inside before the teacher got in. (today that girl is gay --and I think maybe slightly transgender her, or himself? Not sure…) If I had any testosterone during all of this, my brain somehow didn’t get the message. I actually think I have an androgen insensitivity to some degree.

I wanted to have female friends throughout all this, but things were made weird and untenable because I was outwardly a guy. My best friend in 1st grade was a girl. My mom took me to her house once to play and I was amazed! I loved being there and I did not want to leave her room. I had 2 brothers and shared a room with them. No girly stuff anywhere enforced every day. I had to live there, so even there I had to be careful. My friend had joined the PALS vitamin club and had this cute wall-chart for height from that. Right after we looked at that and measured ourselves, she wanted to go out to play outside (which I could do anywhere). So it got weird and we stopped hanging out. In grade school, girls were supposed to have cooties. All I remember was what I now know was my only source of jealousy – watching what the girls got to do together, what they got to wear. Everything about that. I vividly remember watching the girl in front of me who was everything I wanted to be writing in her notebook. She made these cute circles above the letter “i”, and I wanted to do that so bad. Now sometimes I put a tiny heart above the letter I and it feels really, really good.

I hung out with a group of girls for a while in high school. But it would eventually get awkward because they could not act like girls around me and talk about girl stuff or invite me to sleep over or any of that. They would try to fix me up with their friends… Eventually I hid out in the library after I had no one to sit by in the lunch room anymore. For my entire high school career I didn’t go to lunch or much worse, shower in the locker room. I was really skinny and not muscular in high school. I was always concerned about my weight, and I would try to skip meals at home. Never eating lunch at school helped. I tried to make myself throw up, but I couldn’t do it. I looked into male makeup, but eventually I bought a tabletop face-tanner to even out my skin-tone because makeup at school was definitely a non-starter. I stole womens clothes from stores sometimes (I couldn’t just buy them! No one could know.) My favorite jeans of all-time were a pair of high-waisted tight Jordache jeans which my brother blurted out once “totally make your butt look like a girls butt” in exasperation – like it was a bad thing or funny that I just didn’t know. I had thought that too! I will never forget the cool-lightning feeling of joy that involuntarily hit me. I loved those jeans! Throughout my life, if I had been presented with a magic button that would instantly make me a girl, I would have pressed it without hesitation. In fact I would have pressed it so fast that you would not have been able to see my hand move. Most of my life I though that many or most men were really like me, but they were BETTER at smashing down the feelings, better at controlling their emotions and desires to be women – which I just took for granted they had done. I wove these erroneous ideas all through my world view. When I heard about the “womens liberation” movement in high school, I was like WHAT!?!? SERIOUSLY!?!? Yeah, I was messed up. Now I know, it was just me – I thought of everything female as what the word *“liberation”* meant. Now this kind of thing has made me realize just how different people can be.

Once I entered college, I ran track for one semester, and my girlfriend who ran track was 3 years older than me and could bench-press more than me, so I started working out (due in part to her response to the bench press situation). I had been rejected and cheated on several times in relationships, once the women got the impression I was a friend more than a boyfriend. I wanted to do what girls wanted me to do to avoid this. Ironically, there was a full-size poster of Bruce Jenner in a triumphant pose in the weight room where I worked out. He had attended college there and trained for the Olympics in the same weight room. Now today, I call it “doing a Bruce Jenner” when people in my support groups mention trying to get rid of that part of themselves with hyper-masculine behaviors. A couple of years later, I met Bruce Jenner cutting through where they had a skating rink in the student center – I shook his hand and chatted with him briefly. I really liked him, I really liked his *hair* too for some reason…

After a set of long relationships mostly ending in the other female looking for and finding a guy to have relations with while we were still going out, I met my future wife in college. By then I had been working out a lot for a long time. She really liked that. Plus she thought I was smart and funny. After college, I went to graduate school in behavioral neuroscience. I had to move about 800 miles away to Atlanta Georgia. While I was there, I met my best female friend of all time who got me through some rough times, and taught me so much. Meanwhile, my future wife went all-out dieting and flying or driving down to visit to maintain our relationship. I loved that she loved me that much, I fell in love. After a couple of years, she moved down there and we eventually were married. My best friend was the maid of honor. after 4.5 years in graduate school, we had our first child. I took leave from graduate school, because I had thought about and dreamed of having children from when I was a kid. One of the main reasons I originally chose psychology as an undergraduate major was because I took a child development course. My wife really did not want children, but knew I did, so we had them. We both cried when our second child was a boy. I always wanted to have a daughter so I could vicariously experience growing up female, and the freedom and joy that would have afforded me. I had no idea how to be a good father to boys. Still, I loved having children and worked part time at night so I could be with them during the day. I loved them so much and was so protective that I said no once when the people at church wanted to hold my baby. I thought there was a risk they would drop him… Yikes. I was a little tense back then. My wife mentioned that for years.

Even though I did not know what transgender was fully (I thought you had to be gay, did not understand how a brain could be really and fully transgender…?), I still tested my boys to be sure they were not “weird” like me. I bought a wind-up swimming barbie in an Olympic swimsuit for them once (I collected dolls at the time anyway, also spent time sewing on my sewing machine at the time while I was home during the day). I figured they would not think I was weird for doing so because it would actually do something, and it was the *Olympics* – which everyone thinks is cool. They had no interest in it whatsoever. Later I was shocked that they had no interest in clothes, shoes, or their figures. After the barbie thing, and many other things, I set about raising them like males. Probably too male. I did not want my “weirdness” to mess them up. Later, seeing how they actually liked being male, with no interest in female things, it kind of opened my eyes. But for the time being I was working in earnest to rid myself of the “weakness” that other males had apparently conquered, and that had messed up all my relationships in the past – and made me not fit in anywhere. I had a lot of bad times, and once I told my wife that I had been depressed for 15 years, and she agreed. I didn’t care much about anything and nothing was truly satisfying or enjoyable. I suffered a lot and so did everyone around me. I was in a constant downward spiral and I did not know why. I could not make plans or follow through with anything. I did not have any real friends for over 15 years. I did and said dangerous things and I did not care. I was going to be a supermale if it killed me, or die trying. I did a “Bruce Jenner”. I didn’t know what dysphoria was – or how it plays out. Gender dysphoria is not a joke. That’s the reason the suicide rate is so astronomically high among transgender people. It’s much higher than veterans with PTSD even – to put it in perspective. I get that.

Fast forward 15 years or so – when Bruce Jenner came out as transgender. I was drawn to interesting stories of “transsexual” people, like Renee Richards in high school, but understanding and information about this kind of thing was minimal back then. I had thought about suicide many times. There was no real magic button which could change me. I am a writer, and recently I was writing a book with a producer (he produced The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe movie, among other things). It was over 2 years ago now -- before I came out as transgender. He was urging me to “dig deep” and develop the romance in the book… but I was having so much trouble with that and so in the process of discovering why, I realized that was also because I was transgender. So much in my life is holding me back because I cannot be myself. Being accepted as female is the one thing that can change all that – for me and other people unfortunate enough to be transgender. I finally realized the main underlying issue to many unhappy things in my life as a result f that “digging deep” coming out on the pages of my book. Running helped, but that too wore thin and just delayed what really needed to happen. When Caitlyn Jenner hit the scene, I started reading about the issues, and what that meant. I was shocked beyond belief. The things they described were ME. I read books on people who were transgender, started to watch and follow them on Youtube – it was the first time I felt a deep feeling of hope, that there might be hope I could belong somewhere, to be accepted as female without stigma. I might be able to be ME and get out of a life sentence I did not choose or deserve. It was a light at the end of a long tunnel. Something I seriously never dared hope for because it was an impossible thing screwing up my life.

I was really excited because all those weird things that kept me ostracized all my life, hating myself, being borderline suicidal, messing me up, suddenly made sense. Even more – they made perfect sense. I felt exactly like Darwin putting together the evidence from the Galapagos islands, and pieces of evidence throughout my life history, into the one great framework which gave all those things meaning and explained it all. After I found out, I told my wife. It all made sense. She had told me I had issues about sex, and she was right, but at least I knew why now, and it allowed me to see much more. I have a female brain hooked up to male sex response! (That explained the stuff I thought about during sex… and that my wife and I had the same basic sex fantasy). I was constantly surprised at the emotions I felt that were now coming out. I began to buy the makeup I always wanted, the clothes I always wanted. At first I was so nervous, really I was phobic, about being myself! Deathly phobic. I hated myself for making me not fit in all these years. It took a lot of courage to finally come out, and be who I wanted to be all my life. Now I was beginning to see there was a place for me in the world opening up, but at the same time, my wife was not OK with it, my kids were not either. I started to be depressed again when I thought about not fitting in or not “passing” as a woman, the opposition I would face, and not being accepted as “normal” even if I came out. I thought about losing my 14-year job and destroying my 20+-year marriage and my close relationships with my kids. Now everything was in chaos again. I was sinking back into depression that all these things I had worked on and nurtured for so long were coming apart.

Now I could see freedom, and understand why I had dysphoria all these years, but I might never actually get there, and I would end up destitute, old, pathetic, and truly alone. At least when I was the male version, people would treat me in a predictable manner, and I could be around people. The problem there is that you are forever in a parallel universe – all your relationships are hollow and unsatisfying because the person they accept and are relating to is NOT YOU. Yet the closeness is so enticing that it makes you try all the harder to be what people want instead of the real you. Super painful stuff. There is no magic button, no easy solution. I started to have real suicidal thoughts again. So I started going to a psychologist out of desperation --along with a support group I had found online and already been attending. I hoped my wife and kids would come to the psychologist too – but it never happened. I couldn’t get all of them to even talk about it, let alone come to the meeting. The support group was pretty awesome. It was the first time I ever felt truly 100% comfortable in a social setting. My wife did not even want to see or look at me when I dressed up for the monthly meetings, but I felt for the first time in my life true acceptance, true understanding there. It made my wife cry to see me and that hurt bad. I always went to group meetings with my best outfits and makeup on, and in contrast, I wanted my wife to be proud of me. I was constantly surprised at the emotions I felt that were now coming out unfettered, unfiltered. It felt amazing beyond belief, and I cried tears of joy from it. I wanted to live full time as female. However, As soon as I started to (it was not really a choice, it was life or death to me) – my wife said she needed to talk that Friday (because I would not have to go to work afterwards, she said). I knew what was coming. I freaked out, but contacted some of my running friends and went for a run and talked with them. They said it would not be fair for me to expect my wife to live in unhappiness as I had for all those years, and then it clicked – they were right. I could not expect her to do that for me. She would never be happy doing that. It would not be fair or right. I resolved right then to say nothing and I said nothing when she asked for the divorce. The most painful thing was that we still said we loved each other. Still do. The tears are flowing as I write this. I wish we hated each other, I wish we fought. It would make it easier.

Now that is my background for the controversy in the sport of running that I have encountered as transgender. Probably most important is acceptance – acceptance of the atrophied, scared, underdeveloped real you that you have kept chained up underground for all these years that has made you suicidal. I don’t expect “normal” people to understand it, but that is the reality transgender people experience. If everyone was accepting of people who were different, and cared for others for who they truly are, I think we can all agree this world would be a better place. That takes effort. It takes intelligence, effort, and love. Most people do not understand how difficult this is, because we automatically dislike people who are different rather than trying to understand them. Similar interests bring people together. Differences drive them apart.

We tend to look at the world only through our own eyes, only as we see things, and we can be seriously deluded as to the accuracy of that view. It feels right – and then we set about weaving that view into everything – into our reactions about everything – when it might be entirely wrong. This is an evil in the world that we can address – that we can banish from our world if we want to make the effort. It might be a function of evolution itself – making a world, a playing field that we delude ourselves into thinking is level when it is anything but. It is a psychological siege-engine we build to make the world a place where the majority is the only group standing on level ground and that is not fair. It also selects against anyone who is different – depending on their degree of difference. It is part of what I call our “invisible phenotype” – and it can be quite predatory. Even when we have no idea how or why, it just feels “right”. Kathey Switzer wanted to run a marathon once. She wanted to be accepted for who she really was and what she really wanted. I get that now. I get “womens liberation”.

It makes me upset that people don’t want to accommodate those who are different, but there is hope – we have handicapped parking and we build handicapped rest rooms and ramps so that people who are different can be more accepted and integrated into life. We make special classes for people who are less intelligent so they are not left out from learning. One of my running groups got together and raised several thousand dollars to buy a running wheel-chair for one of their members who fell ill so that she could participate in races and be included in runs. Well there is another group. One we may like less, one we may have a visceral reaction to as somehow “faking it” or “perverted” or something. It’s a group with a physical and emotional handicap. We ALL have an emotional reaction based on the closed world- view we wove around us and for many, maybe the majority, it just doesn’t fit == it feels wrong. We have a pattern that comes up when we think of our daughters and when we think of boys, and we do not want that pattern in the same bathroom or locker room, and so we make up rational-sounding explanations for the emotional discomfort this causes. Welcome to my world. I have been there, lived there, because my entire life was that (but in reverse). And I ended up HATING – that’s the real road to hate. Lack of understanding, lack of objectivity, lack of love. I hated myself and this spilled out into my world view. I officially apologize for that, but I have recovered. Most people never do. It is not easy, but it must be done. If there is any reason for the suffering I have experienced in my life, this is it. I say to myself “I don’t care anymore about discomfort and fear, I will change the world toward love and acceptance”.

I began exercising and running seven years ago after not running for over 20 years after that first semester in college when I met my first serious girl friend. I wanted to change my life, I always loved running because of how it made me feel, and it was like a miracle in what it did for my mood and self-esteem. I got totally addicted to it (as my brother likes to say-there are worse things). It got me through a lot in the past few years. In high school, I never finished a cross-country race because so much raw emotion and need for acceptance would pour out that I went way too fast and inevitably ended up winded and walking out of the woods. It still felt good. When I heard about a group that ran in a park near my house where I used to run cross country in high school, I was elated. That’s when I heard about ultrarunning. I started to run with them and I learned so much about distance running. It is truly hard for me to go slow (I know many people will not believe this). But I naturally start speeding up and they helped me understand that this was detrimental to my ability to finish longer races. I ran the 800 meter in college, BTW… that was fine – it’s basically the longest sprint. My best event now is the 1500 meter. Anyway, I got really excited because it felt like I was getting a second chance to do something I could not complete in high school. Not only that, but they were having a 50k race – 10 times the distance I could not complete in high school! I was IN! That ended up being my first ultramarathon. I trained hard and went the distance. I felt like a new human being.

I started running 5k’s a lot – that old distance that I couldn’t do before – and slowly moved up. In my hometown race over those years, I went from 35th to 13th, to 6th, to 3rd!! I won a couple of 5k’s overall, then I came in 2nd or 3rd overall in some really hilly and difficult 10k’s. I set all-time PR’s in every single distance in one year – from the mile to the 50-mile – and was voted MVP of my running club, and gifted an MVP embroidered jacket! That is my favorite award of my entire life to this day. After that I became the USATF regional champion in the 1500 meter, and then went on to win the right to represent Illinois in the national senior games. I placed 7th overall in the 1500 meter competing with representatives from nearly every state in the union. I am not really competitive in spirit, I was just looking for happiness, trying to get it out of my system, doing a “Bruce Jenner”. People who are not transgender will automatically see things differently. In the final event at nationals, a runner apparently elbowed me back at the start line as we were taking off, and later my coach asked me why I didn’t respond or do anything – I stammered something but truly I did not even notice. My competitiveness is not with other people. Try to expand your view if you think differently. The rewards are worth it. What an awesome feeling to do all these things which I did not do before… but still through all this, females were always my inspiration (and I didn’t fully know why at the time). A hometown girl set state records in the distances I ran and I would watch interviews and look up her videos and results online and it would bring tears. I saw her running around town and I was in awe. I will never forget the first time I saw her run. I wanted to be that. It was otherworldly. Once she was in a 5k I ran, and won it, and I got her autograph on one of my bibs. She was a superhero to me – everything I wanted to be, dreamed of being. I wanted acceptance as me, but that was truly a dream! I wanted to run as a female so badly. Watching Shalane Flanagan on TV was my other big inspiration. Today, the only picture I have on my wall of a runner is Shalane Flanagan in the air leading a world-class field at the Boston Marathon. I am so excited to see her there it is unreal! I want to go to Boston to see her more than anything else – to run with her in the same race! Other than that picture of Shalane, I have a medal-rack with a quote from Steve Pre: “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift”! And that is how I feel about life now, and I cannot give my best in life if I am not being me.