

NAAFA Essay

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The first day I willingly stepped on stage to perform my own material was Good Friday, March 28, 1997. It was a comedy open mic at a coffeehouse with an exceedingly straight crowd. But that was okay, since by all appearances I was a straight boy. I bombed miserably, which I've since learned is extremely common for first-timers in that room. All the same, I never returned, and I would not approach a mic again for five years.

What I remember more than anything else about that night is the view out the front door: Comet Hale-Bopp floating just over the horizon, fulfilling its historical duty as a portent of doom. In this case, it destroyed my stand-up career before it even began. No great loss, perhaps.

Our extrasolar visitor unwillingly spawned a far greater tragedy. However. On my mind that night was a story that was on *everybody's* mind. This is an excerpt from an article on cnn.com dated March 25, 1998, one year later:

The [Heaven's Gate] cult members committed suicide over a few days in late March 1997. They died in shifts, with some members helping others take a lethal cocktail of phenobarbital and vodka before downing their own doses of the fatal mixture. Police found an eerily placid and orderly scene on March 26.

Heaven's Gate members believed that Hale-Bopp, an unusually bright comet, was the sign that they were supposed to shed their earthly bodies (or "containers") and join a spacecraft traveling behind the comet that would take them to a higher plane of existence.

For a time, the story became a national obsession as the media revealed details about the group. Among the most shocking: several of the cult's members, including leader Marshall Applewhite, had undergone voluntary castrations in the months leading up to the mass suicide.

Let's do the arithmetic on this one, shall we? Cooperative mass suicide, poison cocktails, a quasi-religion prophesizing a spaceship would take them away, and what's among the most "shocking" of the details? What is that that most stirs the fears and turns the stomachs of the public, so much so that CNN feels the need to single it out a year later? Voluntary castration. Gosh, these people weren't just insane, they were FUCKING insane, huh?

In addition to the my first attempts at a life on the stage, the Heaven's Gate story hit right as I was working up the courage to come out of the closet as transsexual. It demonstrated a well-established fact: the general public considers the willful surrender of manhood to be a sign of insanity. Only a seriously sick freak would do that to themselves—if those Heaven's Gate people had JUST killed themselves, it wouldn't have been nearly as scandalous. The fuzzy video image of Applewhite's intense, mad stare was ubiquitous, reaching a level of media saturation not seen since the breaking of the OJ Simpson case a few years previous. Implicit in this image was the message, *this man cut his balls off. Anyone else who cuts his balls off is therefore like this man.*

And here *I* was, about to reveal to the world that even though I was obviously a boy, I actually wanted to be a girl. This meant that I not only was I going to start wearing women's clothes, but I was hoping to be castrated. Maybe I should should also drink a hemlock margarita and join the rest of the whackos on the interplanetary snowball express as it head back to the Oort Cloud.

I didn't start transitioning until 1998, by which point nobody much remembered Heaven's Gate beyond the occasional odd followup story on cnn.com. Not that they needed to.

In this era of what is pejoratively "political correctness," there are only two truly safe targets left for mean-spirited humor. I don't mean just humor in general; indeed, I believe everything is potential comic material. One of my favorite movies, *Dr. Strangelove*, is a dark comedy about nuclear annihilation. I mean the point-and-laugh-at-the-freak kinda thing. The freaks in question are fat people and men in dresses. A man who decides to get a quote-sex change-unquote is still a man in a dress, just one who compounds their crimes against nature with—you guessed it—voluntary castration.

(Posted to the LiveJournal belonging to "dreamprey" on February 20, 2004: Only in modern western society can we make the castration of a man go from being a eunuch to being "transgendered". As far as I know, adding the right hormones only makes one act more effeminate. It's not like they exchange one set of sexual organs for the other. They simply cut them off. A eunuch.)

After all, gender-bending is an eternally reliable source of humor. And if it's a fat man? Comic gold. Why do you think Roscoe Arbuckle was so often put in drag? (I refuse to call him Fatty, by the way. I recognize that the term is being reclaimed, and I support that. But it was thrust upon him against his will, making it no more empowering than had he been called "Faggy" Arbuckle.)

It's a tradition which carries on today in a more high-tech fashion with megastars like Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence raking in big money at the box office by donning both drag and fatsuits. One of the most profitable films of 2005, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, was originally marketed as a thoughtful drama about faith and spirituality with some comedic elements. One of those comedic elements

was the main character's grandmother, portrayed by the film's male screenwriter wearing a fatsuit and a succession of garish housedresses. When the popularity of the grandmother turned the movie into a big hit, it was re-marketed as a gut-busting comedy, and a sequel is in the works centering on that character.

I'm nowhere near sociologically savvy enough to speculate why this is primarily a trend among African-America comedians and not Caucasian, and it's thankfully beyond the scope of this essay. If anyone figures it out, lemme know.

Anyway, Heaven's Gate was far from the first evidence I'd received that threatening one's manhood and/or the crossing of gender lines is a bad thing. Like everyone else, I grew up seeing images in the media of transvestites and transsexuals as freaks. Most of them stung, especially as I grew older and grokked the subtext. They drove home the point that I must *never* tell anyone that I was interested in such things, that I wanted to wear dresses and be a girl. I could barely admit it to myself, so it was unlikely to come up in casual conversation.

One day when I was a teenager, my mother was reading a "human interest" story in the local newspaper about a cross-dresser. Probably not even entirely conscious that I was in the room at the time, she shuddered visibly and said, "A man cross-dressed as a woman. Ugh." Naturally, I kept quiet. What was I going to do? Say to her, "Mom, you know how I spend so much time at the Fresno State University Library? What I'm doing is reading everything they have on cross-dressing, transsexuality, anything I can find about changing gender. If you went looking in room you'd find photocopies of them. Somewhere within all that is the truth about me, and it's closer to that person in the newspaper than you might think." Um, no. Besides, her comment hadn't been directed towards me. She didn't wave the article in my face and say "You'd better not want to do this!" Indeed, the casual, genuine nature of reaction made it all the more chilling.

Another example: *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* came out when I was twelve, and my mother didn't like it at all. I heard her telling a friend all the things that disturbed her about the movie. I'm sure there were a lot, but the only one that leapt out at me—and stuck--was "...and their son didn't know if he wanted to be a boy or a girl, and..." Again, of course, I said nothing. Now, I don't want to give you the wrong impression about my mother. Though she did understandably freak out a bit when I came out to her, she's accepted the change, and introduces me as to people as her daughter. I can't ask for more than that. And I don't hold it against her that she used to have such thoroughly middle-class values.

As I grew older and more independent, I studied images of cross-dressing and gender blurring. If I heard that a book or movie had a tranny character, I sought it out. I watched many, many very bad movies as a result. Well, I fast-forwarded through them, anyway. I also recorded many hours of talk shows, back when they were *comparatively* civilized, before the audiences were encouraged to shout and throw things. Even when the tone was grim, I found something in it, something that spoke to me. I was supposed to be shocked or at least ironically amused, but as usual, the effect on me was quite different.

Sometimes the smallest, most offhand images fascinated me, like the cross-dresser in the pink dress and the big floppy hat in the group shot on the cover of *The Basement Tapes* by Bob Dylan and the Band. There was also a genetic woman in harem garb on the back cover who was more aesthetically appealing, much more empirically pretty and sexy, but I knew the cross-dresser more represented my reality. This was at least presented fairly neutrally, which was rare for both its time and now.

There's a scene in the movie *Crocodile Dundee* in which the titular protagonist almost picks up on a tranny in a bar. Though I found the rest of the movie noxious, I watched that scene over and over, pausing it, studying it from every

angle. I couldn't help but notice that she didn't have visible facial hair before the hero had been informed that she's quote "a guy dressed as a woman—a fag" unquote. After that—during which time she was seen reapplying her powder—she suddenly has a 3AM shadow. I felt sorry for her, being humiliated, being chased out of what was probably her regular hangout by laughter of the crowd, though I was glad it didn't get violent. I imagined what her life was like otherwise, how her day had gone up until that point, what she did *after* leaving the bar. I created another movie entirely in my imagination, one where she was the hero and this Australian prick was just a bit player, my own version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

I was a twenty-year old boy working at a video store in Fresno in 1993 when *The Crying Game* came out on VHS. By then, everyone knew the big "secret" of the movie. We had to play previews on weekend nights, and whenever the clip from *The Crying Game* came on--it was actually a clip of the tranny singing the title song--I would try to make myself scarce. The negative energy was just too much for me. I just *knew* what everyone in the store was thinking, the repulsion and distaste they were feeling. No, I can't read minds, but again, this was Fresno in 1993.

The turning point in my life, when I went from observer to participant, came in 1997 just a few months after Hale-Bopp began its return trip back to the Oort Cloud. I asked a transsexual of my acquaintance about herbal hormones, which I'd started to seriously research--as seriously as was possible given the product, which is of course no more effective than herbal viagra. She said that she only knew about the legitimate stuff, and asked me a key question: could I imagine being a man for the rest of my life? I couldn't. That was when I realized I had to get serious about it.

To this day, the word "man" bothers me. I was *never* a man. I was a boy, yes, I was a boy until my mid-20s, but I was never a man. Even now, I tend to think of myself as a girl rather than a woman.

I saw a therapist and started on hormones in September of 1998, came out to my family and friends in 1999, mostly cruised through 2000, and legally changed my name in 2001. I have to admit, I had an easier time than most at it. I remained on good terms with my family, and I didn't lose any friends. My eight-and-a-half year relationship did come to an end, but her and I had been growing apart for a long time anyway, and we remained friends. I lost my cushy, highly overpaid job due to the dot-com crash in September 2001, a week before, I was officially going to come out to the office. (Side note: they'd originally planned on giving me my pink slip on September 11, 2001. They decided to wait a week for obvious reasons.) That was a relief in its own way, since it meant I didn't have to deal with people getting my new name wrong, screwing up the pronouns, getting weird about me using the women's restroom, et cetera.

Granted, it probably wouldn't have been *that* much of a shock to most people, since I'd habitually worn makeup to work. I was a goth webmonkey, so nobody really gave it a second thought, and those who did just figured I was gay or something. That was fine by me. If I was going to be considered a boy, then I might as well be a queer boy. In any event, I would start every new job from then on as a girl, and as far as I was concerned, that I used to be a boy was of no importance.

Not that I denied being transsexual. Indeed, I made a conscious decision before I started transitioning to never go into what's known as "stealth," to pretend that I was always a girl. Here's the thing: I was not born a girl. Period dot end of line thank you drive through. Nothing can change that, and it felt dishonest to suggest otherwise. For me, transitioning was all about finally being honest with

myself and the world, and denying being trans would have been exchanging one lie for another. But it's not relevant in a work environment, either.

In spite of the fact that I was in the city with the largest queer population in the world, I didn't really have much to do with the tranny community at large throughout my transition. I'd gone to a few support groups when I first starting out, but otherwise, I didn't feel the need to seek out the support or validation of others like me. I was always confident that I was doing the right thing, and found the strength to do so from within.

Now, for as long as I could remember, I'd wanted to be a writer. Actually, my first career goal when I was in the mid-to-late single digits was to draw comics, but I discovered that I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler, both hands and a flashlight. I don't know, maybe the flashlight was throwing off my chi. Whatever the reason, the ambition soon evolved into writing. I wrote a lot growing up. Most of it was autobiographical, including a sprawling yet never-completed epic about my first crush at summer camp. I also did a fair amount of fiction in high school.

Then, when I hit my twenties, I kinda stopped. I don't know if I simply ran out of steam, or I started watching too much teevee or what. I pretty much abandoned not only the concept of being a writer, but of writing at all. Sure, I wrote a lot of emails to friends, multi-page tales of angst and woe, but the notion of doing it in any other capacity—of being a writer with a capital W, or at least a capital T--was a dream which I considered as dead as the one about me wearing skirts and using the women's restroom. It was never going to happen, and that was that.

Shortly after I began transitioning, a recipient of one of those aforementioned lengthy emails suggested I start an online diary. These days most people call it a blog, but the difference between a blog and online diary is another essay onto itself, and a different convention entirely. The bottom line is, I got into the habit of

writing on a regular basis for an audience. Not always a lot, and not always very good, but something. I felt it important to keep some sort of record of my transitioning, not only the mechanics but the emotions. I also fancied that by writing honestly and openly about it, I might demystify the process somehow, and maybe help someone else find the courage to take the plunge themselves.

In July 2002, I read at what I now consider to be my first real open mic, one geared towards on poetry and spoken word and which proudly calls itself the longest-running queer open mic in San Francisco. I was nervous as hell and not all that good, but I enjoyed it, and I did it again. And again. And again.

Three years and several dozen open mics and feature readings later, I'm starting to make a name for myself as a writer and a performer. I'm also much more involved with the tranny community, since trannies are prominent in the City's literary scene.

Not everything I write is about being trans. Some of it, sure. When I'm asked to write a piece for a large-scale event such as this one it's usually because I have something relevant to say about the tranny experience, or at least my own experience as a tranny. (I don't presume to speak for anyone else.) I even wrote and performed a solo piece about being a tranny in the UC Berkeley production of *The Vagina Monologues* earlier this year. But I'm also frequently asked to read at smaller shows just because they like my words, and what was between my legs when I was born, or now, has nothing to do with it. That makes me feel like a writer with a capital W.

I know some trannies who write almost exclusively about being a transgendered. Sometimes it's about the very real pain of being born into a body which doesn't match your mind, sometimes it's in the form of fiery manifestos, calls to arms in the battle against the outmoded binary gender paradigm. It's their goal, their mission. I love their work, but it's not something I can do myself. I find that

nothing bores me quicker than trying to write in those veins. By the same token, my other creative outlets, such as programs on Pirate Cat Radio and Public Access TV in San Francisco, are not about being trans. I don't believe this is me being stealth, or assimilationist.

The world needs to be changed, it needs activism, it need people to go out there and fuck shit up. For better or for worse, though, I can't wave a flag or carry a banner. It feels false to me, personally. By virtue of being six feet tall and aesthetically striking, I'm noticed whether I actively want to be or not, so I try to use that for good. I change the world by putting myself and my words out there, by being open and honest about my life.



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