

## The Road to Acceptance

It has taken me most of my life to come to terms with being transgendered. At long last I have been able to fully accept myself and understand who I really am. I do not have all the answers, but at least I am content and at peace.



With that in mind, it would be unrealistic of me to expect those I know to accept my transgender side without any difficulty. In fact, I know that I cannot and should not expect or demand anything from them to that end. However, I do want to encourage my friends and family to consider these things further; then maybe they will be able to go some way along what I have called the Road to Acceptance.

I have heard a wide variety of opinions on transgender issues. I've listened to these viewpoints, as well as reading comments in books, magazines and newspapers. As a result I now identify four levels of transgender acceptance, though they are really part of a continuum. The purpose of defining different steps is simply to highlight the process a person might go through on their road to acceptance.

### Level One: Intolerance

At this level transgender people may be regarded as sick, warped or perverted and are looked on with a high degree of suspicion. They are best avoided and may be considered a risk to children. The media can be intolerant too, sometimes 'outing' people in a negative light, with ridicule and misrepresentation. I speak from experience, having been the target of this sort of exposure, in 'The Sun' no less, and it was quite a distressing and traumatic time for me and my family. Fortunately, over this period we had wonderful support from friends, work colleagues and people we hardly knew, so we were able to weather the storm.

In some Christian circles any expression of the gender variance is seen as sinful and in need of repentance, healing or both. Church leaders may ban a TG person from all forms of leadership and ministry and even exclude them from church membership completely. I have met several people who have been turned out of their congregations: it is a dreadful experience to have to go through. Some have never got over it and remain bitter and alienated from the Church and sometimes from God too. This is a situation of great sadness.

My own situation was one of exclusion from any form of ministry, which made me feel excluded by the fellowship. Who would want to remain in a fellowship that considers you are deliberately living a sinful life?

## **Level Two: Tolerance**

The common response of many British people on considering transgender people (or any person who is different from the norm) is a kind of uncomfortable acknowledgement of their difference. Whilst they have a gut feeling that it 'isn't normal', they are not going to make a big deal about it. It's not talked about any more than necessary and then only in hushed tones or in a rather embarrassed way, often mingled with some joking. Think how many pub jokes or remarks in sitcoms refer to men in bras, stockings etc?

In my own experience, this tolerant approach, whilst not completely antagonistic, often avoids facing the main issues. Life goes on much as before and my relationships with friends seem to be unaffected by the knowledge that I am TG. However, I am reluctant to raise the subject for fear of upsetting those friends or causing embarrassment. I sense that my gender identity issue is seen as my private business and something they do not wish to see or discuss further. Many churchgoers adopt this type of approach to TGs in their fellowship. They haven't really thought the subject through, but are quite prepared to tolerate it as long as that's as far as it goes

## **Level Three: Acceptance**

The next level is a person who has accepted the fact that someone is TG and goes further by trying to understand the subject more. This may involve reading, talking with TGs and asking them questions with an open mind. It takes time to work through their deep-seated negative feelings that society, family and church have instilled into them. The person becomes more concerned for the well-being of the individual TG than before and will go to some length to try to support him or her in any difficulties and stresses they are going through. The initial embarrassment has now gone and they are comfortable to discuss the subject with their TG friend.

Many of my friends are in this position, and they are a great support and help to me. I still have a little reluctance to raise the subject with them, in case they wonder if my TG side is becoming too important for my own good. This can then lead to some awkwardness and transgender once again becomes a taboo topic, never to be mentioned.

## **Level Four: Inclusion**

There is I believe a level beyond Acceptance where the TG side of a person is seen as something to be embraced and even appreciated by those around him or her. This is fuller acceptance, which I prefer to call Inclusion. The TG person is valued and welcomed, irrespective of whether they

present in their adopted gender role, or their birth gender. Any confusion that this causes for the friend or family member is something that they are prepared to work through themselves, which usually needs some effort and heart-searching. Transgender is no longer seen as an enemy or something that needs to be discouraged (like trying to persuade a smoker to cut down or give up).

I do have some people around me who fit this description and I am very grateful for them. I can talk unapologetically with them about my Elaine side at any time or place, without feelings of judgment or disapproval. I know that they are happy to be with me in my male or my female presentation and some even prefer my company when I'm Elaine!

## Questions

### **How can someone move along the road towards Acceptance?**

First, people who have never considered TG before may, when presented with the subject, start out at any point along the road - not always at the beginning. It depends on their background and upbringing and the way they view the world in general. For some the issue of gender will be no big deal, whilst for others it is a big problem. Their individual starting point will make a huge difference to how their journey will progress and where they end up. Some people may never move at all. It is very difficult to know how to help them. The hard thing for TGs is to accept that people are entitled to their own views. It is sad to think that our trans side is so unacceptable to them, but it is not for us to try and force something on them.

### **Can the TG do anything to help a person along that road?**

For those who *are* prepared to explore the issues and challenge their own initial reactions, I would first encourage reading around the subject (and that means wider than sensationalist articles in the gutter press). It would also be helpful to chat with anyone with specialist knowledge on the subject. Beyond that I would suggest talking with transgender people themselves, as this will bring a more personal perspective, seeing ordinary people who happen to have an extra dimension to them. This is about people and the sooner we look at it that way the better.

It is even more instructive if people are prepared to meet the TG in his or her transgender mode. This will help to diffuse any misconceptions a person may have about what it is to be TG and may put their mind at rest.

I have friends who have taken time to do some or all of these things and it has usually helped them greatly in their understanding and acceptance. Sadly, very few of my former church were

prepared to talk with me and ask questions, let alone meet me dressed. There is little I can do about this other than accept that they are entitled to their views.

### **Can someone go backwards down the Road to Acceptance?**

Some people I know have been reassuring when they first learned about my transgender side. They may have seen my dressing as a weekend pastime that wouldn't impinge on life in general, or they thought it was something I would eventually give up. As they realised that it was much more deep-seated than that, they started to back off and wish it would all go away. Their dis-ease increased as my discomfort decreased. They feared that I was going on the road to full-time transition, and were unsure how they would ever cope with that. Their level of acceptance seemed to be going backwards, a difficult thing for me to cope with.

So, yes, it does happen and I am not sure I can do anything about it.

### **What is your hope for the future?**

My hope and prayer is that more transgender people will dare to stand up and be counted and that this will encourage those around them to explore the subject and consider how they can learn to be more accepting of those who are transgender.

### **Surely this is going to take a very long time?**

It probably is, but for myself tomorrow wouldn't be a day to soon, so I want to do my bit right now. I have seen too many transgender friends living secret lives in misery and loneliness. How can I put it off any longer? Writing this booklet is one small attempt towards that end.

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