



BOXES

THE STORIES

As part of my research into the lyrics for “Boxes,” I asked a few of my transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary friends to review them. These friends, together with my two daughters, became my informal consulting group. They gave me honest feedback and the lyrics evolved in profound ways. At one point, when we were talking about the lyrics, Rossi asked if I wanted to hear her story. Yes! I asked her if I could record it and include it as an addendum to the score. I believed her story was crucial to exploring the depth of the music, which led me to ask two more friends to share their stories.

I am grateful to Rossi, Theo, and Erika for telling their stories and to allowing them to be shared. *These are stories of bravery in the face of hatred, discrimination, and ignorance.* They are sharing them so that they can help others who either are going through something similar or whose loved ones are facing similar circumstances. The next time you are on the bus, or in the fitting room, or bathroom, and you see someone who is gender-queer, may you view them with more compassion. Like Erika said, we need to see each other “as normal, as people.”

Catherine



Becoming who I am today was a process, because for years I wore boys’ jeans and boys’ t-shirts, and I had short hair. In middle school I would get into my Mom’s makeup and put on a wig and all that fun stuff. But when I went to school, I was labeled as gay. The idea of trans was not even on the table. I was put in a box from elementary on. When I was on the playground, boys would call me a girl, which is kind of funny now that you think about it.

My safe space was theater, because I could be somebody else for that short period of time. Luckily, I grew up in a loving, caring, and accepting family where I was able to express myself however I wanted to. This helped dramatically because, [between] the ages of 14 and 18, I had multiple suicide attempts. I thought if I just accepted what society was telling me, which was that you are gay, maybe people would stop picking on me as much. So I did that for a little while and it still did not feel right because I absolutely hated my body. For years, I did self-mutilation.

There are people that are born into the box they are given at a young age, and it works for them. They can go to school and they actually can focus in class, instead of being miserable wanting the class to end, or uncomfortable with what people are saying about them.

Unfortunately because I did not fit into the box of a boy in Carmel, Indiana, I suffered two attacks at the hands of others. One was on a school bus. I went forward with trying to get these kids in trouble, but there was so much involved with it that I didn't want to bring more attention to the situation. I made the executive decision to convince my parents that I didn't want to do anything about it. I just stopped riding the school bus.

Throughout this time, I was trying to allow myself to express myself more by surrounding myself with the artsy kids. I did colors in my hair. I for sure did mascara and wore female tops. I did not have a name for it. This was in 2006. I was trying to suppress what I was going through as much as possible because I didn't have a name for it. I thought I was weird. I thought there was a screw loose in my head.

In high school, I got into this super competitive high school choir. Super competitive. I went to a school of 4,000. More than 300 people auditioned for this choir and only 22 got in. I felt like I had a purpose again. On my way to rehearsal one day, I was in the locker room bathroom and I was attacked by two boys. I got knocked out. My head hit the sink.

After another suicide attempt, I was watching the television and the movie *TransAmerica* was on and my heart dropped to my stomach. I ran over to the computer. I was like, oh my God, this is what is going on with me. After all these years of tucking my genitalia and doing all these things to try feel right in my skin. I was like, I can't do this. I promised to myself that I would never take any of my Dad's MS meds when I was trying to numb all this stuff. But this time I did. I was really out of it. I was hysterical. I was attempting to write something to my parents. That's when they came home. The garage door went up, I had attempted to try to get off of the bar stool in the kitchen and I fell. I woke up in the hospital from a coma two days later, and I said to my mom, "Mom, I know what is going on with me." She and I had had conversations and she had gotten me to the therapist. She just thought I was gay. But she always thought something was different as well. I said, "I'm a girl. I'm a girl. I'm a girl."

After that, my Mom took me once a week to Indiana University to meet with a gender specialist. There was someone who was doing hormones and blockers and so we met with them and we started that process. My mom took me shopping. I got a wig and I played with make up. The journey began. The toughest decision next was, could I do this at school? My only reasoning for wanting to do this at school was to be an Ambassador for the show choir. My Mom and I met with the director and unfortunately he said, Ross cannot be in show choir as a girl. My mom and I got up and walked out. It was the last time I ever walked into that high school, because I knew that if I didn't say "No" to that and become who I am, I was not going to be here past the next 12 months. I dropped out of high school.

After I got my GED, and about 9 months into my transition, I packed up my stuff and moved to Chicago. I felt this sense of ease because I didn't feel as much of a freak or different.

Early transitioning is rough. It's a process. It is a process. I am very grateful that I have been able to have bottom surgery and top surgery. Do I always feel super feminine? No. Do I always feel like I look the way I want to look? No. Do I at times think "Well if I want to get

facial feminization done someday, then I will.” But from where I was, which I was not sure of, to where I am now is night and day. Unless I had taken that step to become who I was, one of those attempts would have been successful.

I had the inner strength to do this. It’s not easy. There are so many people that can’t do this. There are so many people out there who are suppressing who they really are because of the box that they are afraid to step outside of. Because, if they do, their family will disown them, their church will disown them, their school, their community. But they are struggling.



I would identify as a cis-gendered gay male. I never wanted to be a woman, but I have always felt most comfortable with some part of myself in a dress. From a little child on, as soon as I had permission to be in a dress, I was happy. I probably would have worn dresses outside to play in in the 1950s if that had been at all accepted. My parents did not stop me [from wearing dresses] and provided the material for me to play dress up in the house. They didn’t squelch that part of me.

I didn’t [hang out] with other guys in dresses until I found the Radical Faeries. And if you don’t know, the Faeries were a movement that started in the ’70s in a deliberate attempt to claim, what we called in those days, gender-f*** identity that was not trans. We all knew trans folk. It was still a little too early for much surgical change. If you were talking about trans then, you were talking about transvestites. But [the Faeries] wanted a space in between. Lots of street drag. I mean full beards with makeup and all of that sort of thing. I remember we did a Faery terrorist shopping spree in either ’90 or ’91 in which we were all in bits and pieces of regalia, marching through the IDS and Dayton’s getting make-overs and doing things.

After having gone through a kind of serious period in my life, the Faeries brought me back to understanding my inner-child and my playfulness and reclaiming dresses for me. I was still not [wearing dresses] in town because there’s not much of a venue for that, but [I would wear dresses] at Faery gatherings and at a camp we owned in Northern Minnesota.

Even though in all of my years as an ordained priest, working with congregations — all of my congregations knew I was gay, knew I was partnered, then married — I wore the me-in-a-dress part of my life very lightly. That was not something I talked about, because most people don’t understand that. My very first job, a congregation I was with for nine years, the weekend I had my interview, a book had just come out about our group, the Radical Faeries. It was reviewed by the Star Tribune. Mary decided that the one picture she had to use was of me. I said, ok. I signed away my rights on this picture. And so ok, if that’s what you have to do. That congregation still asked me to be their pastor, but three or four families left, because it was too big of a stretch. They could not comprehend that somebody who they were going to look at as their spiritual leader could have ever had, even in jest, put on a dress.

Even now, I can carry a dress with me to [choir] rehearsal and put it on when I get here. I don’t really feel completely comfortable, at 68, wearing it on the bus over here. Maybe if I

was with two or three other people, and we were wearing the same outrageous fun behavior, but on my own, I don't think I have the courage to do that.

It's all drag. Everything we put on is a costume that we tell the outer world something about our inner self. Or we create a costume/mask/barrier behind which we hide our inner self. Clothing is very fluid and what we want it to mean or how we use it. Sometimes it's a restraint and sometimes it's freedom.

When I put the collar on, I become a receptacle of everyone else's projections rather than being Theo quite to the degree that I want to be Theo. For me, it's been, what environment am I in and do I want to shake it up a little bit? I make no bones about the bangles I wear all the time. I've got a whole collection of bracelets.

[When I was a child, and] I put on a dress, I could do fantasy, I could be pretty, I could feel like Maria in Westside Story, "I feel pretty..." My brother and I would dance around the house. It was part of the freedom of expression. I'm just out here doing my thing. And the dress was part of that. Again, it wasn't, I'm a girl. It was, I'm a boy. But the dress frees me. Or adds something. When I was in my 20s, Dennis and I used to love going to the symphony. And we wore tuxes. It was part of the whole experience. It enhanced it. We did it for us, not for other people.



I was born in Brooklyn, New York. The joke is that I lived there long enough to get the attitude, but not the accent. I grew up in northern New Jersey. My mom used to dress me in frilly dresses, Mary Janes, earrings, and stuff like that. Probably about five, I was like, no, I'm not doing this anymore. And I started dressing in jeans, t-shirts, and sweatshirts. I had really long hair, probably down to the middle of my back. That would be a fight every night because I would be going out and playing. She would say, you need to take care of your hair. She would threaten to cut it off and I would be, OK. Around the age of 8 or 9 she took me to get a haircut and I joke that it has been getting shorter ever sense.

I remember having crushes on my girlfriends pretty early on. I was really shy about it too. I still really kind of am. I remember one Halloween, a friend and I went out. She was dressed up as Scarlet O'Hara and I had a jacket. It was really cold, so I gave her my jacket. Little things like that. Same friend around Hanukkah/Christmas. My mom had made latkes. And I remember C*** had put her plate of latkes and sour cream down. We were laughing at something and she rolled over and sat in the sour cream. She was like, help me. And I was like, I don't want to touch your butt. I was really embarrassed about it because I had a crush on her. I was like I don't know that that's appropriate.

I think growing up in the mid-70s in New Jersey — it was western New Jersey, so not even close to New York. It's not to say there weren't gay people, but it just wasn't something that was talked about. I think the first time I even heard the word "gay" was probably middle school. Even then it didn't really register.

I got into a couple of scrapes in high school. But most people looked at me and thought, I'll pick on somebody else. In college, kind of the same thing. I had friends. I kind of stayed to myself. I didn't come out until halfway through my senior year in college. I was out with a guy friend of mine. Great guy. Really funny. We had known each other for a year or so. He looked at me and said, "Would you want to go out sometime?" and I looked at him and I said, "I think I'm gay." He didn't talk to me for two weeks after that. He was angry and hurt. He wasn't homophobic. But he had put himself out there and I don't think that was the response he was looking for. The conversations with my parents were a little harder. A little scarier.

My dad was cool with it. My mother was harder. In high school, after seeing a therapist, my mom sat me down and said, "Well are you or aren't you?" And I said, "Am I what?" And she said, "Are you gay?" And I said, "I don't know." She said, "Because if you are you are, you are out of my house." I was 14. I said, "Then I guess I'm not." So when I came out, I said to my mom, "Do you remember that conversation we had when I was 14, the one where you threatened to throw me out of the house if I was gay? Is it still true?" And she said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I think I am." She asked me how the weather was.

Since I stopped wearing the Mary Janes and the filly dresses, I've always presented as a boy. The first time I was mis-gendered was when I was 12. I was at a restaurant with my dad and my sister and the waitress called me "sir." I used to be more combative about it.

I used to get stopped a lot going into the women's room. And I'm like, I can read. I know my own gender. I know exactly where I'm supposed to go. The one that hurt the most was when I came out of a bathroom stall and this mom saw me and grabbed her kid and I was like, seriously?

Nowadays it doesn't bother me as much. It's come down to, as I've gotten older: A, is it really worth it? And B, is it gonna get me anywhere other than me feeling good telling somebody off. Is it going to change anybody's mind, perspective? And what was the intent? It also doesn't bother me as much because, I realize as I've gotten older that I'm just me. And I don't have to fit into anyone else's idea of who I should be except mine.

Growing up, it helped that I was preppy — jeans and button down shirts, that kind of thing. So for the most part I wore girl's clothes. I don't remember when I made that change to the majority of men's clothing. Probably in college when I started buying my own clothes. It wasn't that hard because it was still jeans, t-shirts, and button downs. I still had some dresses. I remember the last time I wore a dress or a skirt was for a job interview in 1997. I had brought a change of clothes to change into as soon as I was done. I thought, I'm done. There are pantsuits if I need to wear women's clothing.

For the longest time I would shop in the men's section and then go to the women's section if it was on the same floor. And then I just started using the men's changing rooms and just keeping an eye on things. I've been hassled a couple of times and my argument has always been, it says fitting room. It doesn't say men's. It doesn't say women's. It says fitting room. Well it's the men's department. Well yeah, but I'm trying on men's clothing. You can't go in there. Fine. So I put the clothes back and I don't shop there anymore.

I've gotten looks from customers when I walk into fitting rooms. It was scarier when I was younger because I was worried that someone was going to come in and drag me out. But,

nope, I belong here and I just go in. It doesn't mean that those feelings go away. Even in Minneapolis, where it's pretty welcoming, I go into the women's bathroom and I'm like is somebody gonna be like, you can't go in there. I think some of that has to do with our experiences. I think it might be different for younger people today who have grown up with members of the LGBTQ community seen as, for lack of a better word, normal, seen as people - especially in more urban areas. But I think, the older you are, your actions get formed by the experiences you have. No matter how welcoming a space is, I don't ever want to become complacent. I don't know when that next shove, or word, or look is going to come from. There is always a piece that is going to be guarded.

The last picture of me in a dress was my graduation from college. There is also a prom picture of me in a strapless white dress which nobody gets to see. I look at that and I think, damn I was young. But I also see me. I see that the clothing didn't fit what I knew was underneath. But it was still me. I probably realized that at the time. I still was feeling like I needed my parent's acceptance. I think a lot of us still need that throughout our lives. It doesn't go away. Regardless of your orientation, your age, your gender, your success level. It just doesn't go away.

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