

Transcending Boundaries

Category: Trans

written by Jess Skyleson | July 20, 2024

My diagnosis launched me into a world where everything felt foreign, even my own reflection in the mirror. But little did I know that that reflection would ultimately help me discover myself.

At first, self-discovery was the last thing on my mind. At age 39, I was facing Stage 4 endometrial and ovarian cancer, and, with it, my own mortality. As I focused on making it through each day of chemo, while struggling to heal from the surgery that had plunged me into instant menopause, I was more concerned about making it to the bathroom than about who I saw in the mirror once I got there.

Lying in bed, I began slowly making my way through the pile of resources my doctors had sent home with me. One, a pamphlet about dealing with postsurgical complications, spoke about “grieving the loss of one’s femininity.” As I read, I suddenly realized that, actually, I did not feel a sense of loss. I felt relieved. Not just because the surgery had removed much of the cancer, but because it had made me feel more like . . . well, me.

This thought took me by surprise, but the longer I pondered, the more I recognized how often I had avoided labeling myself, sidestepping any real consideration of my gender. I remembered my disappointment as a child, when I first understood the societal divide between men and women. And the way, as a teenager, I threw myself into a “performance” of womanhood. Then how freeing it felt to drop much of that charade once I came out as a lesbian. Yet even as a gay woman, some things had never quite fit.

It was only now, gazing at my newly bald head in the mirror, at my ambiguous features, that I began to understand why. I was gay, yes, but I was not a woman. Nor was I a man. I didn’t fit into either of these boxes: I am both—or, better yet, neither. I suddenly knew, with deep certainty, that I am nonbinary. I am me.

Just like in the movies, my mirror spoke the truth that day. It showed me who I really am, and a way to live that truth—something I am still learning to do every day. Existing in a world defined by boundaries is not always easy, especially as a patient, but it brings me one step closer to truly being me.

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