

Honoring our Past, Envisioning our Future

Keynote address by Aaron H Devor, PhD
Mazzone Center Trans-Health Conference
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Intro

Thank you to Charlene for that kind introduction and thank you to all of you for coming out tonight. This is truly a wonderful event and I'd like to express my appreciations to the organizing committee for making all of this happen for our communities.

The theme of this year's TransHealth conference is **"Honoring our Past, Envisioning our Future."** When I first considered this theme I started to prepare a talk about some of our trans forebears. In particular I wanted to talk to you about three trans people who I see as pioneers who provided much important foundational work for the trans communities that we know today: Christine Jorgensen, America's first famous transsexual;



Virginia Prince, the grande damme of male crossdressers and the person who gave us the word transgendered, Virginia is now 95 years old and living in Southern California;

and Reed Erickson, the little-known transman multi-millionaire whose vision created the first transsexual national support, education, and referral services and who financed international research which led to the first US gender clinic, many of the early scientific publications and the founding of the Harry Benjamin Association (now WPATH).



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If you do not know about these fine people and the work that they have done, I urge you to learn more about them. However, in the end I have chosen to take a much more personal approach to the theme of Honoring Our Past and Envisioning Our Future.

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What I'm going to do with my time with you tonight is to talk to you a bit about how it is that I have, in my own journey been faced with the challenge of how to honour my own past, while living in my present reality, and working toward the future society that I envision.

I will ask your indulgence while I tell you a few stories using my own experiences and perspectives as a way into some of the larger questions facing most, if not all, transpeople as we attempt to find ways to move with grace and integrity through the complex phases that comprise our bifurcated lives. I hope to provide you with some insights into some of the ongoing challenges of living a life whose parts do not easily fit together. How do we honour our own pasts while living in our present realities and envisioning a future where it will all be that much easier.

Who Am I?

This is a conference focused on transpeople. It is common at events like this for people to want to know, and to explain to others, how it is that they fit in to the trans world. Are they trans themselves? Perhaps you have a trans loved one? Are you a service provider? A political ally? An academic observer? A journalist? Someone looking for a date? These, it seems to me, are fair questions. Communication is often easier when you have some idea of the interests and knowledgeableness of the people with whom you are talking.

So, let me tell you something about myself. As is to be expected, my explanation of whom I am includes a few intersections of different identities and roles which serve me differently in varying circumstances. I'll start with the most public portion of who I am.

On first glance you will see before you a middle-aged, middle-class, white man, born in America and immigrated to Canada in 1969. A brief introductory conversation will quickly uncover that I am straight, married, a step-father of one, and a grandfather of two. You will learn that I am a Dean responsible for all graduate programs, graduate students, and associated

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staff and faculty at a mid-sized Canadian university with about 20,000 students. This is my first, most public layer. It is the information that I feel most comfortable making available in the widest range of contexts because in most public places in which I find myself this is a powerful position which affords me many privileges. However, it leaves a tremendous amount about me unsaid and it leaves me, in many other ways, feeling lonely, vulnerable, and only partially seen.

In some contexts I might also feel safe to tell you that I am a past-president of my local synagogue and that I am active in a Jewish religious community. This information I am more careful about disclosing. There are many anti-Semites in the world today. There are many people who think poorly of the rationality of *anyone* who is religious. There are many people who take such information as an invitation to initiate accusatory diatribes on the politics of the Middle East. Fortunately there are also those who find this information salutary and afford me greater respect on account of it. Disclosing this information allows me to connect with other Jews, with people of religion more generally, and to some extent with those who understand and value the sense of community which can come of such affiliations. When I disclose this information in a congenial environment I can feel seen and acknowledged in some important ways that bring me some significant comfort and the kind of safety borne of finding a harbour in rough seas.

Were you to only know this much about me, you might wonder what I am doing here today. Some of you might wonder what authority I have to speak, what knowledge I might be drawing upon? Some of you might doubt that I could have sufficient authentic knowledge to be authoritative. Some might consider that my class, race, religiosity, gender, and sexuality would disqualify me from a place on this particular podium.

To counter such objections I might tell you that I am a scholar of gender & sexuality. I am a Fellow of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and an elected member of the International Academy of Sex research, known around the world for my work of the last 25 years on transgender issues, feminist and LGBTQ concerns. I could tell you that I have written two books (both of which have been already cited as "classics") and many scholarly articles on transgender topics. I could *try* to reassure you by telling you that I have been a member of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association for 16 years and that I was one of the authors of the last version of their *Standards of Care*. I could tell you about all the lecturing I've done and about all the transgendered people that I've known in countries around the world.

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And although I might simply explain my interests with a claim to dispassionate curiosity-driven scientific research, for those of you who are critically concerned about issues of identity, this might not provide you with much reassurance. How could someone so "*not one of us*" ever hope to get it right? Even many people who are not particularly concerned with such identity issues and who know only this much about me might find themselves wondering why a straight middle-class white guy would want to study such topics. Am I a secret cross-dresser? A closeted homosexual? Am I some kind of voyeuristic pervert, titillated by other people's unusual lives and exploiting my access to provide a thrill to myself and to my readers?

On the one hand, the research work that I do would seem more legitimate to most people in trans and queer communities were it to be based more in self-interest. However, that same self-interest can also lay me open to accusations of being biased, of having a political agenda, of lacking objectivity, and to being discredited for being a member of a stigmatized group. Credibility to research, speak, and write with authority to audiences made up of members of the groups being studied often requires some level of in-group affiliation. Credibility to research, speak, and write with authority to audiences made up of non-members of the groups being studied usually requires sufficient distance and perspective to provide an appearance of "objectivity."

So, at this point in the conversation I am faced with a fork in the road. I can stay the course and run the risk of being thought an exploitative pervert by some people and a highly accomplished, if somewhat quirky, researcher by others. Down the other fork in the road is more self-disclosure. Self-disclosure which most often rapidly becomes very one-sided, that feels highly personal (even though the information is available all over the internet), and which often prompts voyeuristic and intrusive questions about my body and the intimate details of my life.

Some days I take one fork, others days I take the other. Sometimes, I just steer the conversation away from my research altogether so that I am not faced with having to make sense of what I do--by making myself the object of intense curiosity (that's on the good days). At other times I take the more revealing route of bidding for LGBTQ legitimacy at the cost of my more normative legitimacy, while possibly opening myself up to personal endangerment. Here, today, it is my hope that I can walk you through how it is that I can speak with some authority and some legitimacy about trans issues and at the same time retain my credibility as a researcher and my

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integrity as a man. In the process I hope to illustrate how I face the challenge of attempting to at once honour my past, and my present reality, and help to bring about the future that I envision.

The Other Fork and the Road to Here

I'm a transman. I was born female. I grew up as a girl and as a very masculine tomboy. When I was little, the girls rejected me and the boys accepted me as one of their own. As a young teenager, strangers called out to me on the street, chastising me for my long hair because they thought I was one of those weirdo long-haired boys.



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In the mid-1960s I realized that I loved women and went looking for lesbians. That was before Stonewall and it was before gays and lesbians were talking much about pride. For me, like most gay people, the 1960's were times overshadowed by shame, ostracism, and all manner of socially-sanctioned abuse. I was young. I was living in the suburbs with my parents. I was underage. I was scared. I knew others who had been put in mental hospitals and given shock treatments for lesser offences. I was closeted. I was ashamed. We pretty much all were, but we found each other anyway.

In the spring of 1969, I was at a gay bar in New York with my older female lover and a femme gay man friend of hers. I was underage for being gay (which means that I was jailbait for my girlfriend) and I was underage for drinking. I left my ID in the car thinking that if there was trouble I'd be better off not being identified than having my parents get a call from the police telling them where I was and what I was up to.

My girlfriend was dancing with our gay friend when all of a sudden all the lights glared on and a harsh male voice shouted "Nobody move! This is a raid!"

It was the summer of Stonewall in New York and we were caught earlier on in the same sweep that ignited the Stonewall rebellion. Only this time we all just froze as we were told to do and the cops started roughing people up and dragging them away to the waiting paddy wagon. I was terrified as I waited my turn and the police photographer kept snapping my picture.



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Finally, they came to us. We were the last ones left in the place. I lied about my name and age. I told them I lived in Canada and gave a phoney address there. They knew I was lying and underage but they took pity on me and eventually let me go noting that at least I was with the only man and woman in the club who had actually been dancing together when the lights went on! I got out without being busted but I was terrified. I was certain that if my parents found out they'd put me away in a mental hospital and I'd be so rebellious that I'd never get out. I lived with that fear and shame for the rest of what seemed like a very long summer. Not long after I fled to Canada. I was 17 years old.

Within a year of my arrival in Canada I sought out and became active in the fledgling feminist, gay, and lesbian-feminist movements of Toronto. For the next five years I was involved in many of the earliest activities of these movements in Canada. I marched, shouted, and sang. I worked to organize meetings, actions, and conferences. I helped to build new organizations and services. I gave public speeches in university classrooms, and talks in church basements. I mentored others. I spoke to the media. The communal house I lived in was an unofficial drop-in centre for lesbian-feminists. It was a heady time. Everything seemed possible. Some of you may remember those times. We felt that we could change the world.

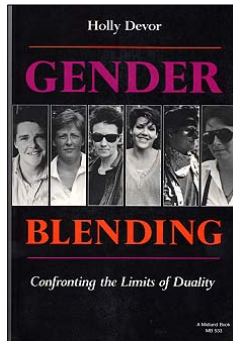


But there were some bumps in the road. In gay and lesbian politics, gay men were still acting like sexist men, so gender became a dividing line there. In feminist politics, straight women were embarrassed to be associated with lesbians, so sexuality became a dividing line there. Class became an issue. Race became an issue. Age became an issue. We splintered. For a while I became a separatist lesbian-feminist who didn't trust either men or straight women. (I'm sure you can see the irony there!)

I moved west, got a bit older, and mellowed some. In the 1980s, I became a graduate student researcher and taught Women's Studies. My first solo teaching job was in a men's federal penitentiary teaching Introductory Women's Studies to murderers, drug dealers, and thieves. From there I went on to teach WS100 to women on campus and also to men in prison convicted of rape and child abuse. The men were thrilled to find themselves in a situation where they felt safe to ask and talk about all the things that they didn't understand about women and heterosexuality. They spoke plainly and asked direct questions. So did I. I learned a lot about men, gender relations, and heterosexuality and I hope that those men did too.

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In 1989 my first book, ***Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality***, came out. That book was an exploration of issues of central concern to my own life at the time. I had become increasingly masculine over the years to the point where I was often seen to be a man when out in public. I thought that I was just doing the feminist thing of rejecting sexist expectations about what women should look like.

Others just thought that I looked like a man. I needed to know what was going on. It was something that had plagued me for most of my life in varying degrees. I was ashamed and embarrassed by it and had never spoken with anyone about it. I just endured the embarrassment, enjoyed the glimpses it gave me into the world of men, and tried to avoid getting the stuffing kicked out of me for it.

Before I started talking about it myself, I had never heard anyone ever speak of such a thing. Once I started talking about it in the context of my research, I found that it happened to lots of other people too (of both sexes). Pretty much all of them also told me that they had never spoken of it to anyone before. When I started to write about our experiences I hadn't yet heard the word transgender and it was not yet used by other than a very small group of gender variant people associated with Virginia Prince. So I coined a new term and called us gender blenders because we inseparably blended the two genders together in one person. Now I think that most people like that would call themselves transgender. Then, mostly we thought of ourselves as women who didn't want to be feminine and couldn't understand why others couldn't understand.

I was just starting out as a scholar. I idealistically thought that the world of scholarship was different from the world I had known in lesbian and feminist identity politics. In some ways it was. In some ways it was not. Trying to appear as an objective scholar and also trying not to ruin my fledgling career by branding myself as a "freak" by identifying myself as a gender blender, I didn't talk about myself at all in the book. I tried to secure a better future for myself by hiding both my past and my present. As a result, people made their own assumptions about who I was and where I was coming from.

I'll never forget one particularly scathing review of the book in a prominent feminist periodical. The reviewer assumed that I was a straight woman who could not possibly understand gender-blending females and so she figured that I had no right to say anything critical about them. She went on to interpret everything I said through her own assumptions and found me to be

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a vile enemy of lesbian feminists. After her public pillorying of me and my work, few dared to say anything positive about my book in feminist print for a long time. People still read it. Sales continued. (It's still in print 19 years later). I still got fan mail from around the world. And I learned a few lessons about honouring where you come from.

I learned that if you don't tell people who you are, they'll make up their own minds about you. I learned that some people won't trust you unless they think that you're part of their identity group. And I learned that if they don't trust you, they may interpret everything you say as coming from a hostile place no matter how well-intentioned you may have thought you were being. I learned that if they can't see who you are, not only will they not listen to you, they'll do what they can to make sure that no one else will listen to you either. I learned that you can't build yourself a better future by denying who you are now and where you came from. And I learned that it hurts to be maligned and rejected by your own people.

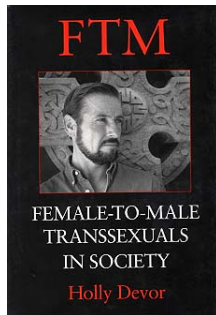
Identity politics, while necessary and rewarding in many ways, can also stifle important and valuable voices when the correct credentials are not available for scrutiny. Fortunately, I was still able to reach people who were not bound by these rules and my work spoke to their truth. Not everyone has the resources that I had that enabled me to get through these barricades. We have lost, and continue to lose, much wisdom and leadership when we spend more time looking at the packaging than at what people have to say. We need to learn to listen to every kind of voice and hear them clearly. We'll know the truth when we hear it. The trick is to not be afraid, and to listen with an open heart and an open mind.

Throughout the 1990s I taught the sociology of gender and sexuality and continued my research. By this time I was specifically studying transgenderism. I knew that I was drawn to the subject but I did not yet know what it was to mean for me personally. I still thought of myself as a lesbian and a feminist (although most of the trans people I knew were just waiting for me to figure it out and follow in their footsteps). I read everything I could get my hands on. I went to trans conventions and scholarly conferences. I served on the board of the International Foundation for Gender Identity. I made friends, socialized, hung out, laughed and cried with trans people.

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Near the end of the 1990s I published my second book, ***FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society***. The response to this book was also full of



lessons for me. When I had started the research, transmen were largely a hidden population. There were only a handful of very small isolated FTM organizations; communication among trans people was very sparse and largely took place via snail mail and expensive long distance phone calls (the internet and cheap long distance phone plans hadn't really hit yet); no FTM conferences had happened yet and transman had not yet been invited to participate in the conventions and conferences organized by MTF folks; only one (despised)

scholarly book and a few book-length autobiographies about transman existed; there was almost nothing in the popular press or in the popular media about transmen; scholarly literature was generally thin and unkind. My interest in telling the stories of transman was warmly welcomed. Finally someone wanted to know!

It was a big book (720 pages). It took close to ten years to bring out. By the time it came out things had changed considerably. Transmen had found their own voices. They were organized and networked. They were on the net, on TV, writing their own books, holding conferences, being professionals educating their peers. Many of those who were at the forefront of this work were veterans of feminism, LGB organizing, and lesbian-separatism. They brought with them some of the habits of identity politics that they had learned there. By the time my book came out, some transmen vociferously took the stance that anyone who was not one of them could not, and should not, attempt to speak about their lives. They saw this as appropriation of their voices. Ironically, this time, having learned from the last time that I should make my identification known, in the introduction I had proclaimed myself to be a masculine lesbian and a feminist.

To my critics it didn't matter that most of the book was based directly on interviews with 45 transmen, or that a sizeable portion of the text was made up of direct quotes from those interviews. What mattered to them was that I was not (then) a transman. Once again I got loudly and publicly denounced as unqualified and offensive for writing such a book, sometimes by people who readily acknowledged that they hadn't even read the book. My offense was in having the wrong credentials for the job. Once again the book sold well among those more concerned with seeing their truth in print than with political correctness. My history seemed to be repeating itself. What I was to learn from this took some time to sink in.

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Imagine my surprise, imagine my dilemma, when a few years later I realized that the research and writing of that book was also a journey into myself. Early in the 2000s I transitioned from female to male just a few months after I had been elected as an out and very masculine lesbian to be the dean of the graduate school at my mid-sized Canadian university.

One of my many motivations for wanting to transition was that I wanted to be able to move through the world comfortably. I had come to understand that the more true to my nature I was in my gender presentation, the more I became a man in the eyes of others. The task of trying to convince others that I was actually a woman became impossibly fraught. My emotional resources were becoming rapidly depleted by the effort and by the experience of people's responses to my efforts. The more I became true to myself, the more of a oddity and a misfit I became in the eyes of others. I concluded that I'd be much happier were I to abandon the futile effort and reshape my body to match my personality.



Having been around the trans community for many years, and having studied and researched other people's transition stories in some detail, I was better equipped than most to undertake my own transition. Over the course of the next several months I had personal conversations with upwards of 100 people to tell them of my plans to cross over the gender divide. Few were surprised. Most realized that for me it would only take one very small step from where I was to get over that most significant of dividing lines.

My transition could not have gone better. It was a remarkably life-affirming experience. When I told my rabbi, his first words were, "We'll need to have a ceremony!" At the time, I wasn't ready. Later, two weeks before my official transition date, I changed my mind. My wife and one of her best friends devised a ceremony that at the time we all thought was just for our benefit. It took place on an old stone bridge over a duck pond in an idyllic public park. People came from all parts of my life: family, friends, my workplace, the synagogue, queer people, transgendered people, people in every stage of life from babes in arms to octogenarians. The women stood at one end of the bridge and said blessings for my journey as the men waited for me at the other end. My wife accompanied me part way up to the apex of the bridge and then returned to the tears and arms of her



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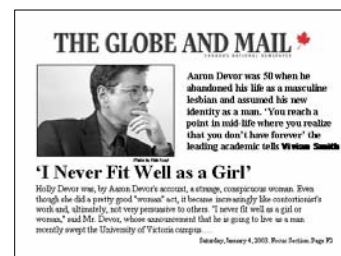
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women friends as I continued to the top of the bridge where the rabbi awaited me. We stood there together as he blew the ritual ram's horn shofar and read out a proclamation in Hebrew and English renaming me and welcoming me among the men. We walked down to the other side together where the men surrounded me and we danced, our arms on one another shoulders, to the traditional Hebrew song *Henei Ma Tov* "How good it is for brothers to be together."

In the weeks and months that followed I learned many things about the value of that ritual honouring the traditions of my people and our revisioning of those rituals for our new future. I learned that invoking ritual proved to be hugely helpful in easing the transformation for all of us. An entire community of people needed to make that transition along with me. Each of them needed to learn to think and act differently with me and about me. And each of them needed to examine their own beliefs and values about the meaning of gender in their own lives as well. Enacting a communal ritual gave everyone a way to connect and to participate in marking their/my transition. It gave their own experience of transition to all who were there or who knew about it. It allowed them to process it among themselves. It also gave a surprising number of people the courage to share and heal some of their own private wounded places.

When I spoke with the president and vice-president of my university, the first thing that each of them said was "what can we do to help?" and they carried through on that promise in multiple ways. For instance, when it came time to announce my transition to the entire university they insisted that we co-sign a letter and send it out hard copy on the president's fine letterhead paper so that no one could misunderstand their support and respect for what I was doing. I learned from my experiences at work that if you ask for and receive the support of the people at the top, and if you are able to conduct yourself with quiet dignity, others will follow suit. Of course, it doesn't hurt to also be in a position of power yourself!

Having made myself known to so many people over a period of several months I was more than ready to get on with the business of my everyday life. However, it is not every day that a dean of a major university undergoes a gender change on the job. A reporter from Canada's top daily newspaper (comparable to your NY Times) tracked me down at a deans' conference in our nation's capital and insisted she was going to make me national news whether I cooperated or not.



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Over the next year or so that half page story was followed by a spread in Canada's national newsmagazine (comparable to your Time magazine), a piece on me in a highly acclaimed investigative journalism show on CBC national TV, and a full page colour photo and a piece on me in my local newspaper. And of course, all of this, and more, was all over the internet in no time at all.

I learned from all of this that you may think that your life's story is yours and yours alone, but it is not. Everything that we do touches other people. It touches the people that we know and see everyday and it also touches people who we may never meet face-to-face. As word of my transition spread, both through the media and by word-of-mouth, I received hundreds of cards, letters, and emails from people all around the world. From friends of the day and from friends I'd not heard from in decades, from professional colleagues, from casual acquaintances, and from complete strangers. Over and over again they wished me well and many spoke with admiration of being inspired by my courage and hopeful for themselves. Among them all there was only one woman from Toronto who chastised me in any way. What was her complaint? She had read an interview with me in the national news magazine and she wanted to correct my grammar. She felt that as a dean I should know better!

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It's been some years since then. My wife and I have been together for almost 20 years now. We've had some tough stuff to work out as my change of identity required my wife to change hers too. It hasn't been easy, although it has been rewarding. We're stronger together now than ever.

My life is considerably less newsworthy now. Now I speak to you as a person with a bifurcated life and an interesting past. I am that white middle-aged middle-class man with an excellent job and some measure of power over other people's lives. At the same time I am also a person who viscerally knows what it feels like to be a member of the female half of humanity and all that entails, and who knows what it feels like to be stigmatized for my ethnicity, for my sexuality, and for my gender identity. I live with the knowledge that others like me have been murdered simply for being who they are.

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Most of the time, I live an extremely straight life. I work as a senior manager and academic leader. I spend as much time as I can with my grandchildren. I am religiously observant. Interspersed with this is my work as a researcher and a teacher. I also make myself available as role model and advisor to transgendered people and their loved ones in my home community and in cyberspace. Mostly my straight life and my transgendered life exist comfortably side-by-side with very little apparent cross-over. But this comes at a cost.

The challenge for me is in how to live the life I have envisioned for myself while honouring both my own past and that of those who have gone before me. How do I live my current privileged life as a powerful straight white man without denying all the other parts of who I am and have been?

Oftentimes I take the simpler route and I just keep my mouth shut and enjoy all the privileges I have acquired. I let people who don't know otherwise make their own assumptions about me. I don't remind those in the know that I am trans, that I have lived most of my life as a female. Even people who know can forget for periods of time and I enjoy being able to relax into being just a regular guy for a while.

But to do so means that I must obliterate most of my own past. It means that I must suppress much of what makes me who I am today. It means relinquishing claim to much of what I know to be true and it means failing to make use of much hard won knowledge. It means being unable to share with others much of what I have to give.

However, to bring my past into the present is to risk undermining my claim to manhood. To do so puts me in danger of a diminished authority, stature, and legitimacy. To do so makes me and my body once again an object of curiosity. Either way I am uncomfortable. I struggle constantly with when to tell those who do not yet know and how often to say things that will remind those who already do know. But when I hide, I feel alienated from myself and from others, disconnected, lonely in a crowded room, emotionally barren.

This is too high a price to pay for straight respectability. Each of us needs to have roots. Each of us needs to honour our past. It is what has made us who we are today. When I decide to bring my transness out into the open my heart beats hard in my chest in anticipation and fear. I wonder how it will change our relationship, as I know it must. Yet my past has taught me that there really is no other way to reach the future that I envision.

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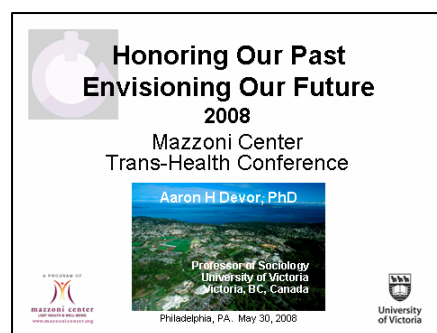
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I want to live in a world where every combination of gender expression and bodily configuration is celebrated. I want each of us to be able to explore freely all the combinations that we can imagine. I want there to be room for us to create new ways of being and to have those ways of being bring us only more joy and pleasure. I want our laws and social customs to recognize that there are far more than two genders, that bodies can and do come in an infinite variety of permutations, and that multiple genders can be combined with interesting bodies in all manner of exciting and enriching ways. And as we move into a world of greater gender freedom I also want there to be lots of room left for those of us who might just want to be regular old-fashioned men and women too. I want us to work together to build a world where the entire gender spectrum shimmers for the delight and wonderment of all.

And so what I have learned is that if I want to live in the world that I envision, then I must live my own truth today, in this world. I must choose to be a whole person with a past, a present, and hopes for the future. If I want to make room for others to create the lives that they envision for themselves, as others have made room for me, then I must allow others to see the fullness of my own complex and somewhat unusual life. If I want to make the world a safer and more accepting place for other transpeople, then it is my job to be whole. I have no more to offer than myself. I can offer no less. This is what I have offered you tonight. And I hope for you the freedom and the safety to do the same for those who need no less from you.

Thank you for your attention.

Pause



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