

# Letters For My Brothers

Transitional Wisdom in Retrospect



Edited by Megan M. Rohrer and Zander Keig

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Edited by Megan Rohrer and Zander Keig

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In memory of Lou Sullivan.

Megan would like to thank Tamara for her love, Joey and Rebekah at the GLBT Historical Society for all their support and friendship, the many transmen who have generously shared their stories and Zander whom I consider a friend, a mentor and family.

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## Learned Along the Way// Aaron H Devor

I'm a thorough, methodical kind of guy. I like adventure but I don't like surprises. I'll take risks but I like to know that the odds are well in my favour before I leap. I'm also an intellectual and a scholar by trade. So, before I made up my mind to transition I had to investigate and work through all of my other options. I had to be sure that there wasn't a less risky course of action that would allow me to go on with my life without the immense disruptions that transition naturally entails. I read everything there was to read about regular gender and about transgender. I talked to everyone I could. Then, because scholarship and teaching is my business, I taught and wrote about gender and sexuality. I wrote two books<sup>1</sup> (and numerous articles) about what I had found out about pushing the limits on womanhood and about how some people transitioned into men. I learned an awful lot. I became an expert on the subject. So much so that when I transitioned I knew pretty much exactly what I was getting into. I knew this on an intellectual level. Until you go there (wherever there may be) you can never really know what it feels like. Until you have your own experiences, you can get the idea, you can know in your mind, but you can never know in your whole being how something actually *is*.

For those of you just thinking about transitioning or in the early stages, I'd like to offer a few words of advice. I do so knowing full well that while words can provide helpful guidance, in the end, the most they can do is allow you to recognize experiences as they come. You still have to actually have your own experiences. For those of you who have traveled further, I hope that my words can offer you the satisfaction of knowing that someone else may have shared some experiences similar to your own and has tangled with some similarly thorny questions.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Devor, (1997) F<sup>T</sup>M: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society and (1989) Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

### Questioning

Long before I started to seriously consider transitioning as an option I spent most of my pre-transition life with big questions about gender. For most of that time I felt uncomfortable in my assigned gender but transitioning wasn't even on my radar. I chafed at all the restrictions I kept bumping up against as a woman. I fought to make the social space for women bigger. I tried out every way of being a woman that I could imagine for myself.

Transition is huge. Your life changes enormously. I think that it is tremendously important that it not be entered into only as an escape from what you don't like. You need to want the life on the other side more than the one you were born into. However, you can't ever really know what that will be like until you get there. That's why I think that you really need to believe with some certainty that what you started out with is untenable for you before you make any final decisions.

### Deciding

In order to have some good idea of what life on the other side might be like I studied men in every way that I could and I talked to as many transmen as I could. There was not yet a big transman presence on the Internet then. Now there is. If you're trying to make up your mind now I'd recommend reading and looking at pictures on the Web and in print, joining social networking and other discussion groups online, attending conferences, making friends with transmen and their SOFFAs (significant others, friends, family, and allies). It might also be a good idea to find out why some people thought about making a transition and then decided not to do so. I also found it very useful to talk with a knowledgeable and qualified therapist to help me to sort out my thoughts and feelings. Everyone else has a self-interest in a particular outcome. A good therapist should only care to help you get clear. If you're willing to be honest there, you can work through your beliefs and feelings until the way forward is undeniable.

It's also crucial to remember that everything that you do affects other people around you—some of them very important people to you. For me, the most important person to talk things through with was my wife. We talked for a long time. She was important enough to me that I was unwilling to go ahead without



her support. I knew that her support at the beginning was no guarantee that she would still be there years later (she is) but I wasn't willing to knowingly trade my relationship for a new gender. You might feel differently about that. Still, I strongly suggest that you talk things through with the most important people in your life *before you decide*. I'm not saying that you need to let their opinions decide for you, only that if they are truly core people in your life, you want to know and think hard about their level of support. In the end, my wife said that she'd come with me and I said that what I needed from her was a commitment to ongoing emotional work on her attitudes towards men as a class. There have been rough patches but our relationship, now at twenty years, is incredibly strong and deep for it.

#### Once you have decided

Once I had decided to actually make a transition I went back to take a new look at all the materials that I had gone over before. You look at and understand things differently when you have to make specific and precise decisions that will shape the rest of your life. Now the pictures and conversations were not just for general information about what was possible. Now I had to try to put myself into them. Everybody is different and unique. How was I going to end up looking and feeling? How did I want to do hormones? Which surgical techniques would work best for me? Which surgeons did I think did the best work? How was I going to pay for it? On how many documents did I have to do paperwork to get my name and sex changed? What were my legal rights and obligations? There's really a lot to figure out. **Get organized.**

If you're like me and you want the best for yourself, I suggest taking the time up front to do your homework. A lot of people, once they decide to make a transition, are incredibly eager to get it done. That's entirely understandable. Just remember that the more you know upfront, the more you have thought things through and gotten everything organized the way you want it to be, the better the rest of your life is going to turn out. Some things you can go back and redo if you don't get it right the first time. There's not much in transition that falls into that category. I think it best if you take the time to get it right from the beginning.

One of the aspects to which I paid a lot of attention at this stage was building my **support networks**. In the months leading up

to the day that I publicly announced my transition I spoke to about 100 people face-to-face to tell them of my plans. I felt that it was important that they heard from me, in person. I talked with family, with friends, with people with whom I worked at my regular employment and in my volunteer work.

There were a few principles that I kept in mind with these conversations. I had been thinking about transition for a long time. Most of the people with whom I spoke had never thought about it at all. Anything they knew about transsexualism came from the popular media or from casual conversations with me about my research. A few whom I knew from my research had known others who had transitioned, but mostly as “clients” of some sort, not as friends or colleagues. For the rest, I was the first trans person whom they knew up close.

I think that it is very important to put people at their ease if you want their support. If you can go with confidence and without defensiveness to the people who you want to support you, if you can approach them with the attitude that you are confident that they will do their best to support you, I think that most people will rise to the occasion. I think that most people will support you if, with good will, you give them the time and the space to figure out their own stuff about it.

Wanting their understanding and support, I told them in a way that I thought would be easiest for them to absorb. I didn't say that I'm changing sex or gender because I don't think that most people know how to understand that until they've actually seen for themselves how fully it is possible to actually change one's gender. What I told them was that I was going to start living as a man. Knowing me as I was then, I did not think that this would be a huge step to ask of them.

Then they needed to ask questions. Why? Why now? How? What should they do? Who knows? When would I start? I encouraged questions then, and later, as they thought of them. I knew that they needed time to absorb the information. I knew that my changes would require changes of them too. Of course, they'd need to learn how to relate to me differently. That alone was a huge thing to ask of them. I was also asking them to adjust their thinking about the nature of sex and gender, about what kinds of changes were possible, and to move from thinking of transsexuals as some kind of weird aberration to thinking of someone who had

transsexed as an important and valued person in their own lives. Probably you'll find yourself asking similar things of the people around you. Remember, this is not easy for them and remember too that they have other priorities in their lives in addition to what you need of them.

The people with whom I spoke included my bosses at work. I think that it is really important to never surprise your bosses and especially never to embarrass them in any way. Due to the nature of my job at the time (Dean of all post-graduate programs at a large publicly-funded university) there were a couple of thousand people who needed to be informed of my impending change. My bosses, the President and the Vice-President of my university, were both incredibly supportive. Together we prepared a letter to send out jointly to all concerned. We kept it simple. But one point that I wanted to be sure to include was an acknowledgment that it would take time for everyone to get used to my new name and to using new pronouns. I wanted them to know that it was OK to make mistakes. All I wanted was for them to keep trying and to improve with time. I privately vowed to myself to be tolerant and encouraging and to not express annoyance at anyone who made mistakes until two full years had passed. In retrospect, I'm pleased with that decision. By then there were less than a handful of people who needed to be encouraged into better behavior.

Not everyone has the kind of workplace that I've had. Some will be harder to negotiate. Some will be easier. What I think is most important is to get as many people on side as early in the process as you can. In my case, I think that having the people at the top express their approval and support of what I was doing helped everyone else to be more cooperative. Many even took the time to tell me personally of their respect for my "bravery."

### Transition

It seems that there are almost as many markers for the start and end of transition as there are people who transition. I have several starting points in my own mind. Sometimes I think of it as when I started on hormones, sometimes I think of it as when I made my own decision, sometimes I think of it as when I started going around to tell people. I also had a public ceremony with my

religious community.<sup>2</sup> Mostly I think of it starting when I sent out my announcement at work on my natal birthday.

The end of transition is also hard to pinpoint for most transmen because most of us keep in the back of our minds that we might one day have a bit more surgery to make things that much more like natal men. Regardless of medical status, I think that most transmen reach a point when they feel they are fully living as men. Not everyone needs to do everything medically possible to get to this point. For that matter, not every transmen wants to be a man all the time. Some folks want to be some variety of gender queer. Find your own space. All you need to be is true to yourself. You don't need to satisfy anyone else's vision. You don't need to do everything. You don't need to do everything at once. Go at your own pace and discover how you feel at each step. You may want to rest for a while, or stay forever. It's all OK if you can make it work for you.

As you are going through your transition so is **everyone else around you**. They all need to adjust how they act, and think, and feel around you. They also need to redefine who you are to them as you may go from being sister to brother, or daughter to son, or partner to husband. Who is in your family is changing. You are asking your parents and elder relatives to come to completely new understanding of your birth and all that has come since. This is Herculean. Remember that they are also going to have to come out about your transition over and over again to the people that they know. They too have to risk rejection and disdain every time they do. If you have a good relationship with them they will do this for you and you need to respect that they will choose the right time for them and their relationships with the people they need to tell. Their hesitation doesn't mean that you need to go into hiding, nor does it mean that they don't love you. Your family is irreplaceable. I treat mine that way and I hope that you can do the same with yours.

Your partner's sexual orientation changes as you do. This, too, is huge. My wife had identified as a lesbian for decades. She had fought hard for respect and recognition and had paid some

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<sup>2</sup> A. H. Devor, (forthcoming) *Narrow Bridge*, in Noach Dzmura (ed.) [Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community](#), Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books.

significant emotional prices along the way. She also had a pretty low opinion of heterosexual relationships in general and was completely uninterested in leaving the lesbian world to become a married straight woman. Yet that is what I asked of her. As a feminine woman she often felt invisible as a lesbian and had to out herself to be seen for who she was. My transition made her decades as a lesbian invisible and even harder to lay claim to. Lesbians now look past her. This has been a painful transition for her which she has done out of her love for me. I wish for you to have such a fine partner as I do. If you do, treat him or her with the love and respect that they deserve.

Everyone else you come into contact with needs to think of themselves differently as well. They will now have a new man in their life. Your friends and colleagues at work may find themselves uneasy about things that they've said and done with you in the past. You are asking an incredible amount of change of the people around you. No one really likes change much. This is one kind of change about which few people have any prior experience to call upon. These are hard habits to break. These are hard changes to make.

When dealing with other people, I think that it is really of the utmost importance to keep the enormity of what you are asking in mind all of the time. This is a good time to make use of the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You want understanding, support, generosity of spirit, kindness, gentleness, patience while you figure out how to be, accommodation to your needs, a sense of humor, respect. Offer it to others and you will receive it back in return.

Transition is driven by a lot of physical changes brought about by **testosterone** and surgeries. Even after reading everything there was to read and talking to a lot of trans guys, there were still a few experiences of testosterone-related changes which took me by surprise. I think because of my many years as a social-constructionist type of feminist I attributed sex-linked differences in sensitivity entirely to socialization. I was surprised to experience how it feels to literally and figuratively have a thicker skin. I find that I have become less sensitive to physical pain. It's not just machismo that allows me to take more of the rough stuff now. I just don't feel it the way I used to. Intellectually I knew that I would

cry less easily. Things just don't touch that sad and weepy place very often anymore. I was surprised at how entirely absent tears have become from my life. My eyes will well up (rarely) but years go by before they actually spill over.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, there are other emotions that have become much more prominent. Anger is the one you hear about most often in relation to testosterone. My fuse has definitely become shorter. With time, I have learned to moderate my reactions, but the effects were stronger than I expected and appear to be closely dose related. I was also unprepared for the upswing in sensitivity issues of maintaining "face." I guess it's that male ego and hierarchy thing. I'm now sensitive in odd ways that I haven't really figured out yet about having my male ego affronted.

Everybody talks about testosterone jacking up one's libido. No surprises there. It happened. Some trans men told me about colours becoming more vivid and smells less so. I've experienced some of that too with the exception that my conscious sensitivity to pheromones has gone way up from zero. Where this all came together in a surprising way for me was in my visual response to sexual stimuli. I never believed men before when they said that they can't help but look at women's breasts and bottoms. Yes, with conscious effort you can control where your eyes go, but as soon as you stop paying attention, the T takes control again. I'm sure that socialization is a factor but the effects of testosterone are a lot stronger than I had anticipated.

**Surgeries** are very hard on your body and for the most part they are irreversible. Shop carefully for your surgeons. Look at before and after photos and stories from people with your body type. You have to live with your body for the rest of your life. You may not like it much going into transition but the whole point of surgeries is to get a body that you will like. Don't economize on surgeries. Save up your money, go into debt if you have to. Get the very best that you can. The better shape you are in the better you'll do with them. Get as healthy as you can. Do everything that you can to heal well. This is not the place to push your limits. You only

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<sup>3</sup> Watching my middle-aged menopausal women friends and my transwomen friends I am suspicious that this may be as much about the presence or absence of estrogens as about the effects of testosterone.

get to heal once. Take your time. Do it right. Treat your body with love and respect so that you can have the body that you really want.

### Life after transition

A lot of people have unreasonable expectations for transition. The reality is that the only part of your life that transition may somewhat fix is the part that's entirely about your sex and your gender identity. All those other quirks and troublesome aspects of who you are will still be there when the dust settles. Fortunately, so will the good parts. You're still you. Good and bad, it all comes with you across the great gender divide. Don't expect miracles.

Even though I'd been aware of (and none too happy about) **male privilege** for my entire life I was still unprepared for the experience of it as an insider. You may not be in a position to benefit as much as I have because of factors such as class, or race, or age, or ability, etc. I'm short for a guy and I look younger than I am but other than that I have it all going for me. I'm white, well educated and well spoken, in good physical condition and not bad looking. I have a prestigious and well paid job that causes me to dress most days in a way that speaks of power and authority. All of this was there before transition but I was not a man then. The changes in how people responded to me were dramatic.

Feminists sometimes talk about how men are just assumed to be competent until proven otherwise, whereas women must prove their competence over and over and over again. Most women can't assume that they'll be taken seriously, nor can they assume that having proven themselves once, it will be generalized to other situations. Women who are keen to succeed, like I was, often feel defensive as a result and become pre-emptively aggressive to compensate. (Of course, other socially excluded or discounted people often find themselves using similar survival techniques.) Almost overnight all of that evaporated. Whereas before I felt as though I was swimming upstream in molasses, after transition I felt as though I was sailing with the wind at my back. My experience was that when women make mistakes it is often seen as confirmation that they are incompetent, and they never really get to put the mistakes behind them. After transition I found that I could make mistakes, even some fairly big ones, and still not lose my credibility so long as I was willing to acknowledge them and do my best to fix them. Success and authority came easier because people

assumed that I knew what I was doing. When people believe in you it's easier to believe in yourself and to blossom. My advice to you is to watch for how this plays out in your own life so that you can drop old, no-longer-productive behavior patterns as soon as possible.

Another phenomenon that took me aback was when I realized that I had developed a voice and look of authority, and also one of danger. Not all transmen get the voices or the appearance that they want. A lot of guys get stuck looking and sounding pretty adolescent. Although I don't look my age I do look like a substantial adult. My voice dropped nicely and I learned how to modulate it. One side effect was that everything I say now sounds more authoritative, or more ominous, or both. Sometimes that works in my favour. Sometimes, especially with women, that evokes fear, resentment, or hostility. I think that I'm just making a plain statement. They see and hear me throwing my weight around. I get tense and may raise my voice a bit in anger because I'm hurting. They perceive me as being scary and abusive. Similarly, men's voices sound more bland to me now than they used to and sometimes my own manner causes other men to feel that I'm challenging them when that's not my intent.

What I've learned is that I need to be much softer in my conversations with most people. There is no longer much reason for the pre-emptive aggression and defensiveness that I felt before and this must be reflected in my speech and non-verbal communications patterns. Otherwise I just scare and alienate people. My words, my stance, and my inflection may feel the same on the inside but they really do come across differently to others. Fortunately I do feel less defensive now so it hasn't been too hard to break those habits once I realized that I must.

Although I am aware that I have gained a lot of male privilege I do believe that the glass ceiling is still there, only higher up than it used to be. The information that I am trans is available for anyone who cares to know it. I'm not just another straight, white, middle-class, middle-aged man with every opportunity open to me. I'm a straight, white, middle-class, middle-aged *trans* man. I don't know yet exactly when I will bump up against that glass ceiling but I expect that one day I will. Maybe I already have. It's hard to know. As I've done all my life, I'll keep trying to do my best and see where it takes me.



My relationships with my **men** friends have changed for the better. My friendships have deepened and become more open, softer, easier. There are more ways that we can talk together and more topics that are open for discussion. Yet conversations from the heart are rare and, to me, not as nuanced as those that I've had with women in years gone by. However, the very fact that they are so rare makes them all that much more sweet to savor when they do happen. When one of my men friends opens up his heart to me it feels like we have shared a very special gift.

At the same time I've had to learn how to place myself properly in a more rigidly hierarchical social structure than I ever experienced before. I've found that positioning is very important in casual and business relations among men. So long as I observe the right protocols of power for the group, then I'm OK. If not, things can get pretty uncomfortable and it will cost me in some way. The trick is figuring out what the currency is for trade in particular groups. It has always been my policy is to keep my head down in new situations until I've sniffed out what the rules of the game are. To do otherwise can be troublesome, or even dangerous.

One of the losses that I anticipated and I mourn is in the nature of my relationships with **women**. To pretty much all the women in my life I am now "other" in a way that I never was before, no matter how outside of the norms I was as a woman. To me it has been quite a dramatic transformation. Most surprising to me was that it happened even among many women who had known me for years before. I could almost hear the doors clanging shut and see the emotional walls going up. Somehow, even among those who know, even among those who know you from before, your past doesn't count for much any more. My few women friends who haven't shut me out of their lives in this way are a real oasis and I don't thank them enough.

There are some things that women just will not talk about with you or in front of you any more.<sup>4</sup> There are many topics about

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<sup>4</sup> One day I walked into a room where my wife and an old friend who had known me for years before my transition were having a conversation. As soon as I appeared a strained silence entered the room. They both stared at me with that looks that says "when are you leaving so that we can continue our conversation?" I took the hint and exited. Later I asked my wife what they had been discussing.

which you are assumed to be either stupid, incompetent, or just uninterested: for example, interpersonal relationships, household matters, women, children, and especially sexism. On the other hand, most women will find you extremely handy for heavy, dirty, dangerous, or fix-it jobs and you will probably take them on even if you are inexperienced or lack talent just because your masculine ego doesn't want you to lose "face." I usually do these things when asked and try to be careful not to end up hurting myself too much for the sake of my ego.

Women also now do a lot more to inflate my ego than they ever did before. There's lots more flirtation and flattery going on. Don't be fooled by it. Occasionally it is sincere. Most of the time it's just a game. Sometimes it's a way to have fun together. Sometimes it's a way to keep you happily excluded from any real conversation or meaningful human connection. Sometimes it's a way to get you to do things. Sometimes it's a way that women use to deflect men who they think may be dangerous to them.

Unfortunately I do know enough about sexism to know that most women have lots of good reason to suspect most men of being at least potentially dangerous. Unless you are young enough and cute enough to be treated like a sweet little puppy dog (probably not anything to which you would aspire anyway) or are in some other ways very disempowered, most women are at least a little bit wary of most men. They seem to see us as tame pet animals who could at any time go rogue. Hence their protective and mollifying behavior so much of the time. We seem to be just too unpredictable and dangerous to open up to except in the most circumscribed of circumstances. Try not to take it too personally or to be hurt by it. It's not really about you as an individual. It seems to be a kind of reflex reaction to our masculinity. You could take it as a kind of ironic compliment. It means that you're being taken seriously as a man.

I suspect that questions about **being out** will always be with me. The fact that I am trans is public knowledge. When I transitioned it was considered to be news by the top national newspaper and newsmagazine. There was a full page spread in my

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The answer: the start of menstruation for one of our kids. They couldn't talk about menstruation in front of a man even though I had menstruated for years.

local newspaper. My story was broadcast on national television and it's been repeated all over the Internet. Hopefully, you'll get to have a bit more privacy. Nonetheless, that was then and by now, mercifully, it is no longer news. What that means is that people don't know until someone tells them. Most often that's not me. I assume that anyone who knows me, or about me, for more than a brief period of time will eventually know that I am trans, however I usually don't know when that happens. Staying closeted indefinitely isn't really much of an option for me. This is generally a good thing. Other people out me so I don't have to do it and I don't have to deal with very many shocked faces or intrusive questions. However this still leaves me in the position of having to figure out when and how to talk about being trans.

I don't usually bring it up right away because I like the illusion of feeling like a regular guy for a while. I like giving people a chance to get to know me without all of their misconceptions about transness right away coloring how they perceive me. That way I feel like they get a more realistic view of who I am before we have to start dealing with the whole trans thing, which can quickly get more personal than I'm ready for.

However, when I don't talk about being trans I find that sometimes it feels like I've dug a hole for myself. On the one hand, I enjoy being accepted as a man with no adjectives in front of the word to modify what kind of man I am and to make my manhood less full. The longer this goes on the more reluctant I am to disclose because I've gotten used to it and I don't want to run the risk of becoming less of a man in their eyes. But then I feel like there is a secret in our developing friendship and it becomes a barrier to further closeness. I wonder what they will think of me if they already know because they've heard it somewhere else. I wonder if they will think less of me for being trans, for being closeted for so long about being trans, for being deceptive with them by not telling them, or for not trusting them enough to tell them. It becomes a trust issue both ways. Can I trust them to handle the information in a way that increases our friendship? Can they trust me to be honest about what's important?

I always feel better and more whole when I feel able to speak freely about being trans. What I usually do is wait a while before I bring it up. Then, when there is a reason to mention it I do. Sometimes it is because I want to say something specifically

about being trans. More often it is so that I can speak about some experience I've had in the past when I was a woman. What I usually do at those times is to just casually make a comment like "you know that I'm trans don't you?" They almost always do know by then and I can just go on to tell the story that I wanted to tell. If I'm pretty sure that they don't know, I'll censure that story unless we're alone and can have a private conversation.

When I say that I'm trans to people who don't already know that fact then we have to divert into dealing with their surprise and questions. I hate that, but sometimes it just has to be done. I answer a few questions. I set some limits on what I'll say (I don't ask them to describe their private parts, do I?). And I try to keep it short. Later, after they've had a chance to absorb the information, I'm fine to talk about it some more for them. Mostly, we don't need to do that and we can get on with the real reasons that we were becoming friends in the first place.

For me, being closeted about being trans is hard. Being out is hard too. Not everyone has the choices that I do. You may look trans all or most of the time and so you may not really have or want the choice to be closeted. You may live in an environment where being out is just too dangerous most of the time. Your transition story may be known to very few people so you may have to do all of your own telling. There are a lot of variations on how it can go.

The one thing that I can tell you for sure is that we all do this so that we can feel more real, more whole. We do it for ourselves but we cannot do it by ourselves. Others have come before us taking staggering risks, and no small amount of abuse, so that we can claim our rights to be true to ourselves. Others stand beside us now as brothers, family, allies, and as supportive professionals. All of them, too, have to take risks to stand with us. It is important to honour the sacrifices and kindnesses of all of these people by doing what we can to make our world still better for those who come after us. Telling our stories of transformation, advocating on behalf of trans people, living honourable and ethical lives, and contributing our special gifts to society are just a few of the ways that we can work together toward a better future. Having risked so much to come this far, being true to ourselves, and about ourselves, is our biggest reward and will be an inspiration to others—trans and not.