

### Narrow Bridge

#### Aaron Devor

*Editor's note: Aaron Devor is the Dean of Graduate Studies and a professor of Sociology at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. His first book, Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality, was a groundbreaking study on transgender females. His second book, FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society, was a landmark study on Female-to-Male (FTM) identity formation. Devor is in the first generation of scholars who are transgender themselves and who study and write scholarly works about transgender concerns. This short essay tells the story of how he ritually marked his own gender transition. The story outlines the value that this ritual had not only to Aaron and his wife, but also to members of their community as they learned to adapt to his new identity.*

כל-העולם כלו גשר צר מאד  
והעקר לא לפחד כלל

*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar m'od  
V'ha-ikar lo l'fached k'lal*

*The entire world is a narrow bridge  
But the main thing to recall is not to be afraid at all.*

*-Kol Ha'olam Kulo, Hebrew Song. Words by Rav Nachman of Bratslav*

I didn't think it was a good idea at first. After all, I had spent pretty much my entire life up until then trying not to be such a spectacle. People had been staring at me and wondering about my gender since I was in my early teens. In the early days, other kids, intending to humiliate what they took to be a long-haired hippy boy, would call out, "Is it a boy or a girl?" Later, people on the streets just gawked and wondered. Women in public washrooms would get scared and either leave or screw up their courage and tell me that I was in the wrong place. Going out in public was rarely ever casual.

Over the years I learned how to be graceful about it. I knew how to put people at their ease when I could, and how to avoid those situations where I could not. I built a very successful and polished professional life for myself in which people learned to overlook my "difference." Still, it took a lot out of me every day, steeling myself for the effort. I used a lot of psychic energy every day just calming the waters as my passage through social spaces created whirls and eddies of befuddlement and unease. It wearied me and I became emotionally exhausted and brittle inside from the effort of making it possible for everyone around me to remain undisturbed by my presence among them. Of course, no one knew any of this other than my wife and a very few of my closest friends. For my efforts to succeed, my surface had to remain smooth and unperturbed. It had to look effortless or the effect would be lost.

When I finally decided to make my life easier and to start living full-time as a man, I knew that a great many people would have to make their own transitions along with me. They would need to learn to think about me in a new way, to see me differently, to speak about me differently. For most of them this would also mean that they would need to examine and adjust some of their deeply-held beliefs about the nature of sex and gender, about the meaning of identity, and about the limits of meaningful personal change.

Out of respect for the processes of the people around me I took it upon myself to have personal conversations with upwards of 100 people to tell them directly that I was soon going to be living full-time as a man. I wanted them to have a chance to ask me their questions and to have some time to digest the news and prepare themselves before participating in and supporting my transition. Having worked so hard for so many years to put people at their ease, no one reacted poorly and few were surprised. Mostly they just wanted to know why I felt the need. It seemed to them that I was so entirely comfortable with myself that they couldn't see why I would bother.

One of the many people with whom I had one of these conversations was the rabbi at my synagogue. He's young, and cares a lot about being socially progressive. His first words were: "That's so cool. Let's have a ceremony!" "No, no, I don't think I'd like that," was my reply. The thought of ritualizing it, of making it a public thing was the last thing on my mind just then. I was, instead, preoccupied with concerns about how much I had at stake in making this move. I had a highly-paid, highly-responsible job in the public eye. I had a professional reputation that stretched around the globe. I knew that those closest to me would go with me but I didn't know what the rest of my world would do with this news. I wanted to go slowly and cautiously. A ceremony just seemed too public. I didn't want to shine a spotlight on what I was doing. What I really wanted was to magically fast-forward to a time when it was all so far in the past that no one even gave it a thought.

The weeks went by as I went through my list of people to tell. One by one they wished me well and I became more confident that it was going to be OK. When I told my brother, he said "Just make sure you do it healthy." When I told the

president and vice-president at work (my immediate superiors) their first response was "What can we do to help?" Because my job required me to interact with thousands of people I had decided to choose a date (my actual birthday) to make an all-at-once public announcement at work. The president and vice-president suggested that we issue a joint statement on the president's letterhead. As that day drew near some new feelings bubbled to the surface.

About two weeks before the big day I had a dream. The dream told me that I needed to say goodbye to my old self before I could truly move into my new life. That morning in our pajamas in the kitchen before breakfast I told my wife, Lynn, about my dream. I said to her, "I think that I need a ceremony after all." A bit exasperated that I had left it to the last minute to figure it out, and a bit relieved that I had finally figured it out, she got to work. She called on her best girlfriend and the rabbi, and they made it happen. One week later we had a beautiful ceremony.

It was early evening on a calm and mild fall day. I didn't know what to expect as we gathered in an expansive, lush, and picturesque public park. The location they had chosen was an old stone bridge over a duck pond on which wisps of mist were rising among the languid mallards and Canada geese. People came from all parts of my life: family, friends, my workplace, the synagogue, queer people, transgender people, people from all stages of my life and in every stage of their lives from babes in arms to octogenarians. The women stood at one end of the bridge as the men waited for me at the other end. Seven women had been asked to write and recite their own seven blessings (reminiscent of the *sheva brachot* spoken at weddings) to guide and protect me on my journey. The eldest, a woman in her eighties who had known my mother before she died, gave me a double blessing by invoking my mother's name along with her blessings that day.

After many hugs and loving tears from the women, my wife accompanied me part way up to the apex of the bridge. The women sang sweetly in Hebrew and in English. She then returned to the tears and arms of her women friends as I continued alone to the top of the bridge where the rabbi waited.

We stood together as he blew the *shofar*, the ritual ram's horn, and boomed out a proclamation first in Hebrew and then in English renaming me and welcoming me to my new life among men. The rabbi then walked me down to the other side of the bridge where the men waited. They immediately surrounded me and began to sing as we danced, our arms on one another's shoulders, to the traditional Hebrew song *Hinei Ma Tov*, "How good it is for brothers to be together." After much backslapping, handshaking and many *mazel tovs* a few of us repaired to a local coffee shop for refreshment and conversation.

At the time, my wife and I thought that the ceremony was just for our benefit. Everyone else was there to help us along our path. It never occurred to us that it would mean anything for anyone who had not been there. In the weeks and months that followed we learned many things about the value of that ritual honouring the traditions of our people and our revision of those rituals for a new future. We learned that invoking ritual proved to be surprisingly helpful in easing the transformation for all of us.

An entire community of people needed to make that transition along with me. The ritual assisted each of them in their process of learning to think and act differently with me, and about me. It supported each of them to examine their own beliefs and values about the meaning of gender in their own lives as well. Enacting a communal ritual gave everyone there, and everyone who later heard about it, a way to connect to and to participate in marking their/my transition. It marked their own experience of transition for all who were there, or who knew about it. And in so doing, it allowed everyone around me a way to process it among themselves. Because I had chosen to make such a public event of it, everyone knew, at the same time, when they should start to adjust their thinking. The public nature of it also gave people permission to speak freely among themselves about what was happening. This made it easier for them to talk to me as they needed to sort things out and to help each other to move through their own mental/emotional transitions.

Somewhat remarkably to us, it also gave a surprising number of people the courage to share and heal some of their own private wounded places. Somehow, they felt that if I could have the courage to do what I was doing then they could be brave too. If I could share with them something so deeply personal and so profoundly life changing then they, too, felt emboldened to move out of some of their own long-hidden hurts. People shared with us, and with the rabbi, that our bridge ceremony had enabled them to uncover their own stories of past pains and deeply-buried shames. They too began to shed patterns that had imprisoned them.

In the end, an entire community of people benefitted from a ritual collectively enacted. In Judaism, we celebrate our life passages communally. I did not walk across that bridge alone. My community witnessed and supported me every step of the way. As they did so they opened their hearts, not just to me, but to themselves, to each other, and to those who will come after. I think that we all learned that on the narrow bridge that is life, the main thing is not to be afraid.