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Medicine and Transgender Identities

Poet/Artist Statement

Johnny Sparrow

I am a senior double majoring in women and gender studies and psychology. I plan to pursue a master in social work with an emphasis on gender studies so I will be able to work with the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) community. One of my biggest influences when it comes to feminist theory is Michel Foucault (1980), Judith Butler (1999), and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2005). Through theory, I have finally found a place to put my questions to good use. Butler's (1999) idea that gender is not something we are at birth, but something every person puts on to go about in society is a theory that made it easier for me to function every day. It gave me a scope to see myself through. Butler (1999) captures this best in her book *Gender Trouble*:

Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all (p. 140).

When asked to contribute to the first ever online journal for The College at Brockport's Woman and Gender Studies Senior Seminar, there was no question that I wanted to write about a topic that is close to my heart in a way that would expose others to this very urgent call to action. I choose to shine a light on being transgender and specifically, the lack of medical care and health insurance coverage for what is labeled as "Gender Identity Disorder" in the *Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) (2000). This term is controversial. Many transgender people feel this term is a way to say that being transgender is a mental illness

that needs to be corrected or fixed. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2005) explains the western world looks at disability in a way that mirrors many of the same ideas patriarchy has on transgender individuals.

Women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless. In contrast to normatively feminine women, women with disabilities are often stereotypically considered undesirable, asexual, and unsuitable as parents (p. 1567).

It is the great strain of being able to survive when your body doesn't match your spirit. The greatest challenge is the struggle from within to know who you are and fight your way in this world to be you. This is represented by Foucault's statement, "...if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing" (O'Farrell, 2010).

Poem

Plague

Plague Doctor comes to visit me.
He holds my hand that shakes
He sees my spotted soul quarantined
in here
through goggles caked with disease, blackness
and rejection.

I've sat inside this box,
blinded by darkness that is occasionally broken up
by pinholes of light.

I've been here 25 years
waiting to die,
waiting for a cure.
Wanting to rip this sickness out of my head
off my body
These tumors grow larger
every time I breathe.

I ask the Dr of death to help,
to cut me from I
let spirit fall out
let the body purge itself from toxins,
from something that is more than this.

He's the only one who comes to see me.

He's the only one who comes to see this atrocity of error in nature,

cuts and seeping wounds.
My body is punctured with needles
like Jesus was punctured with nails.
He died for the sins of others and I
have lived with the sins of others.
My body is scorned and stripped down
to its most natural form
but I carry a heavy cross as well.

I carry the weight of wrongness, shamefulness and hateful disgust.

I don't have a father to save me, or a mother that weeps at my feet.

I've tried to cut the swelling and sore lumps from this chest,
only to be infected and called crazy.
The raven masked man is here now,
here to make it stop here to make me whole by taking away.
Looking into the hooded and dark eyes
I count backwards, leaving exactly how I came into this world
pure, unmarked by fate and wounded wings of gender.
He patched me up where the scars cut across my torso.
He gave me life when everyone else thought I died.
Plague Doctor see's me like I see I.
Wings corrected and back straightened to fly up and out
blinded by sky
up where
I am alone as I descend to my heaven,
to my new body.

Abstract

I wrote the poem "Plague" as a reflection about healthcare and the "sickness" a transgender individual may feel when there is no apparent way to become a functional individual in society because of the way society quarantines individuals who fall into the margins. Many states do not have laws protecting individuals from being fired or not even hired because they are transgender. There are very few companies that provide health insurance for transgender individuals.

In addition to being denied health insurance coverage, you may experience gender identity- related health care discrimination when seeking care and services from doctors, nurses, hospital staff, and/or other health care providers (such as acupuncturists, chiropractors, or mental health therapists). Gender identity

discrimination can also occur in residential/long-term care facilities (such as mental health or drug treatment facilities) and public health community-based organizations (such as HIV prevention agencies) (Transgender Law Center, 2011, p. 3).

Although many health insurance providers can deny you insurance coverage if they find out you are transgender through medical records, very few providers cover hormones and sexual reassignment surgery. In most states and for federal government purposes, transgender people cannot get the sex marker (i.e., “Male” or “Female”) changed on their identity papers (e.g., birth certificates, drivers’ licenses) without proof of some form of surgery. A few states, such as Massachusetts and New Jersey, will allow changes to drivers’ licenses with medical documentation short of surgery (Fenway Health, 2010, p. 13)..

”Plague” also speaks about depression and the corners of someone’s mind when she/he is at the lowest point. The poem also hints of suicide which is way too prevalent, especially in transgender youth. In writing this poem, I considered Eli Shipley’s poem “Etymology”. This poem reveals the religious experience of Eli when injecting testosterone and his feelings about being transgender. The poem influenced my writing about being transgendered and how religion affects my thinking. I have included Shipley’s poem so you might understand how it informs my poem.

Etymology (Shipley)

Testosterone, strange that you’d let me
give birth
to my own body

even though I know I’ve always been
a boy, moving
toward what? Manhood? A constant

puberty? I could replace my menses
with a thick needle
filled with your fluid, thrust every

two weeks the rest of my life
into my thigh. And I think
of the six days of creation before

god rested, because I too am tired
and because my voice, would it suddenly be
god-like to me, thundering,

waking in a deep vibrato as if from atop
a mountain, maybe Olympus, maybe
a lightning bolt shot sharp

through my heart because I am
startled, scared, delighted? Testosterone,
you are the Magnetic

Fields, Elvis, and molasses, the first time
I heard Nina Simone sing, unsure of her
and my own sex at the age of 13. You are

an eighteen-wheeler ripping through
a hail storm, the umpire breathing
over the catchers's shoulder until

the ball burns into the mitt
and there is a deep growl
ascending, Strike one!

And I am struck
hard by the beauty of you. I am
again an eight- year- old boy, simply

admiring a tree in the school-yard, my only
friend, who lifts me
and lifts me so that I can pick

its single spring
flower, the lowest one, maybe
for my mother, maybe my father-

but end up placing it inside
my first and only dictionary, a gift
from my father on the first day

of that school year. And later
when it has dried, wilted, I
remove it. Only a stain left, small

shadow, the handprint
of a child quieting the words
it covers, tucks into his

memory, already knows by heart, and keeps there, where they wait for him
until he is ready.

Painting/Mixed Media



Enter Death, Exit Cure by Johnny Sparrow



Abstract

I painted “Enter Death, Exit Cure” as support for my poem “Plague”. It is a visual representation of the words and thoughts of someone, struggling with the idea that the body that they want is so far away, it may as well be a god. In this case, the painting and poem are my own story. Many have a hard time believing in something when you can’t see or touch it, and that’s exactly the hopelessness I felt. Importantly, not every trans identified individual has these thoughts, feelings and desires. Some are perfectly happy with the body they were born into.

Whether you are comfortable in your skin or not, there is a need for improved transgender healthcare. Doctors should not treat us like we have the plague, but learn about our needs and concerns. This is important to any transgender person.

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