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The Queer Truth

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The Queer Truth

Abstract

I remember learning about [intersexuality](#) (then called hermaphroditism) for the first time in my health class when I was twelve years old. In that lesson, my teacher mentioned that when a child is born intersex, the parents will likely choose a binary sex (male or female) for the child, have the child undergo sex reassignment surgery, and raise the child to fit the corresponding gender. My teacher went on to explain that sometimes the parents pick the “wrong” sex for their child, and the child grows up feeling like he or she should be the “opposite” gender. Implied in this discussion was the notion that binary gender is predestined, an inevitable part of your essential self, as explained in [this Surge](#) article. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, gender, intersexuality, queer, binary gender

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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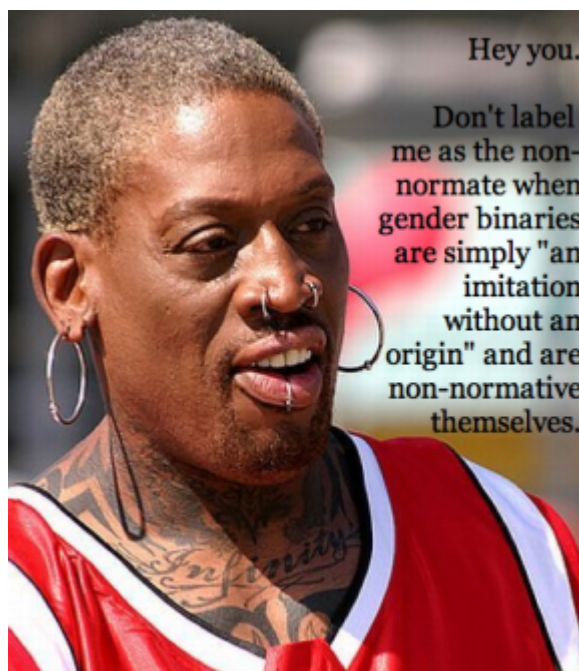
SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE QUEER TRUTH

June 3, 2013

I remember learning about [intersexuality](#) (then called hermaphroditism) for the first time in my health class when I was twelve years old. In that lesson, my teacher mentioned that when a child is born intersex, the parents will likely choose a binary sex (male or female) for the child, have the child undergo sex reassignment surgery, and raise the child to fit the corresponding gender. My teacher went on to explain that sometimes the parents pick the “wrong” sex for their child, and the child grows up feeling like he or she should be the “opposite” gender. Implied in this discussion was the notion that binary gender is predestined, an inevitable part of your essential self, as explained in [this](#) Surge article.



My response to this lesson was to have my first ever identity crisis. I already knew I wasn’t like other girls my age: I didn’t care about makeup, refused to wear skirts, loathed the color pink, and was far from proud of my budding breasts. Was all of this evidence that I was really supposed to be a boy? Was I born intersex and my parents had made the *wrong choice*?

The thought haunted me for months. I contemplated asking my parents if my suspicions were true, but I had so convinced myself that they were that I couldn’t bear to hear it confirmed. Instead, I just resented them for condemning me to a life in the wrong body. How could I go on living if I knew that I was destined to be a boy but was erroneously forced to live as a girl?

Eventually I managed to push my suspicions to the back of my mind, never having worked up the courage to confront my parents, but only as the smorgasbord of insecurities that come with entering high school took over my consciousness.

I tell this story because it illustrates the first of what would become countless instances of my frustration with gender. My frustration then is the same as my frustration with gender today: we’re raised being taught that we’re supposed to, as biological fact, fit into one of two narrow identity markers. There is no in-between, no switching sides, and certainly no rejection of the system altogether.

But lately, all I want to do is reject the system and the categories. They are meaningless, after all, and I'm a strong believer in simplifying our lives, throwing away anything that no longer serves us a purpose.

I think Mads Ananda Lodahl, a Danish queer rights activist, put it perfectly when he explained to my Political Activism class why he chooses not to identify as a man. (*I use "he" here for ease of understanding for the reader and because Mads expressed no preference in pronoun usage. You can read [here](#) about some current discussions relating to pronoun use.*)

"I don't identify as a man because I don't know what it means to be a man. I spent 25 years trying to understand what it means to be a man, and it doesn't seem like anyone has a good definition. In science, you categorize things through shared characteristics, but I haven't been able to find one characteristic that relates to all men and only men. I can't identify with something that I don't understand."

But the absence of satisfactory definitions for "man" and "woman" isn't the only reason I think we need to get rid of gender labels. Even if we could create useful definitions of each, I see no benefit in doing so. Why should we force everyone into one of two boxes and tailor their personalities to fit? Forcing people to conform is precisely what causes personal crises like the one I described above. Is it fair for us to make choices about how others should be identifying themselves? Is it fair for us to label them as a *problem* or an *issue* if they just so happen not to conform? And perhaps some intersex individuals, or even others, do not want to conform to male or female. Why don't we accept that intersexuality in itself can be a gender? Or do away with labeling people with genders entirely? Because we keep forcing people to *conform* — not because it's natural or right or honest to who they are— but because we want them to fit into a silly system.

The way we cling to gender categories seems reminiscent of the "separate but equal" attitudes and practices that has haunted America's race relations after Reconstruction. I just don't see how men and women can ever be equal if we constrain them each to dichotomous roles, behaviors, and traits. In order for true gender equality to exist, we need to look past gender as a binary system entirely. And because gender is a social construct, it would dissolve without the support of the structures that currently hold it in place. Instead, we could all be true to ourselves, existing as we wish without fear of chastisement from the gender police.

There are a few steps we can take to make this happen. First, we can start with keeping our judgment in check. If someone doesn't necessarily fit the mold for the gender expectation that we hold for them, we need to try to withhold judgment. We need to learn to accept that it's not our place to make assumptions about how someone is choosing to identify based on the way they dress or the subjects they take interest in. We can take little steps like establishing the option for gender-neutral bathrooms. And we can begin to teach acceptance for those who don't necessarily conform to our gender expectations, too, just [like this teacher did](#) for her elementary school students. These are small steps— but small steps are all we need to begin with. They can push us to challenge our expectations and that alone can lead us down a path towards acceptance.

Gender is a performance, and I think it's time we call off the show.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/the-queer-truth/>