

Everything I know about a Girl, I learned from a Drag Queen

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To understand anything about ourselves, we have to understand the past. Each and every one of us is, in some way, on a journey of self-discovery. “Who am I? Where do I fit in the world?” Sociologists refer to this as social structure in which each individual fills certain roles and holds status based on a prescribed set of norms. These norms, however, are not always sufficient to embody all facets of identity. We are all part of a much larger group of people – a society; and we are all somehow connected.

Gender and beauty are two terms that are quite often viewed as inseparable, but they are both constructed concepts. These concepts are learned behavior patterns, instilled through constant conditioning by family, peers, and our postmodern society, the ever growing media, are taught to accept without reservation, just as most of us are taught to accept heterosexuality and shun homosexuality. We embrace the norm as it exists within the rules dictated by the majority. We embrace prejudice because we have been taught to do so. Whether that prejudice is based on ethnicity or sexual orientation makes little difference. It is the other that we hate and it is the other that we fear. When people step outside of the norm, they are often subjected to ridicule and alienation not for who or what they are, but for who or what they are not.

I offer you an example.

She is beautiful, my best friend, even though most of the time she does not believe that she is. She has won titles for her beauty and her talent. Her life is decorated with rhinestone crowns and gilded trophies

proclaiming her to be the most beautiful, the most talented, the best dressed. In some ways, she is every little girl's dream – the pageant queen, always the winner. When she enters the room, people stop to watch her glide across the floor, satin skinned and radiant with a smile that makes them feel as though they are the center of her world. She can express a full range of emotion through her eyes – joy, sorrow, and pain. The pain is real.

She is strong. Sometimes, when we go out together, people stop and stare. They make no pretensions of it, no furtive glances cast in shame. They are bold, these outsiders. She says it does not bother her, but I know better. She jokes about it. "I should give them a picture. It would last longer." At first, I am angry. I want to confront them. I want to ask them why they need to make someone else feel like less of a person in order to feel good about themselves. I want to hate them for hurting her, but I cannot hate. I feel sorry for them instead, for they will never be fortunate enough to know her. She is always afraid that her beauty will fade. Is it her beauty they are afraid of, or is it something else?

Sometimes, it is hard to be around her because she is so beautiful. I feel as if I am the dandelion that has sprouted up next to the American Beauty Rose. But I know her on the inside and she makes me feel like I am a part of her world, not a visitor or a spectator but an equal. At other times, I feel like I am the lucky one because I can pass for normal in societies' eyes. They do not stop and stare at me. They do not monitor my every move or whisper behind my back when they think I cannot hear them. I do not have to bear her pain.

In the crowded dressing room we work quickly and often in silence. If she is nervous at all, it will not show. The other girls chatter meaninglessly, make bitter remarks about one another whenever a contestant is out of earshot. She does not engage in their banter. She is focused. I hang her clothes neatly in the little open closet by her dressing table, mentally running through a checklist of what I need to do to help her tonight. I say a little prayer that she will not be disappointed, that God will be kind and give her what she deserves. She has put her heart and soul in this, as always. Sometimes, I wonder why she does this to herself; then I realize that it is just a part of who she is.

She dances effortlessly. Every movement she makes coincides precisely to the rhythm of the music. She is the master of her body, reveling in the control of each tiny muscle. She seems not so much to follow the music but to become one with it. It inhabits her, takes over her spirit and she feels the power it has over her. The audience feels it

as well and they cannot take draw their eyes away from her. They feel the emotion of the song pulling at them as if they were out there on the stage with her, inside her heart and her mind, soaring on illusory notes and transparent breaths of sound. They do not see her pain. Her body has been broken so many times that sheer will is all that keeps her going sometimes. She will cry when it is over. When she is alone.

I like to watch her when she paints her face. She is an artist and her skin is the canvas, a pristine page from which to build a work of art. A transformation happens that is almost magical. Beauty surpasses pain and confidence emerges. She is rapt in concentration, becoming someone else, a “character,” she says. It cannot be good enough, it has to be perfect. She has to be perfect. The person she becomes is somehow stronger, a façade against the hurtful world around her. I wonder, sometimes, why she cannot see how strong she truly is.

I take her picture in the mirror; the camera carefully concealed by just the right angle so that all that remains is an image within an image. I am a photographer. I like the way the camera feels in my hands, the play of emotion that is captured by split second timing and the right slant of light and shadows. Pictures are like mirrors. They reflect back to us an image of ourselves. But it is only an image. The artist cannot capture what is really there. Like moments in time, like memories, we can save them, store them up and keep them safe, but they are not really there. We can hold them in our hands and touch them and feel them. But we cannot relive them.

My favorite picture of her sits on my desk, watching me, but not smiling. It is in black and white; she is peering through the branches of a dogwood tree in full bloom, hair tousled slightly by the warm spring breeze. Her face is like a canvas of shadows from the leaves of the tree, but her eyes still speak to me. She is like a woodlands fairy, a mythical creature that is somehow more than human for her difference. The tree accepts her for who she is. It surrounds her and encompasses her, yet she is one with it, an equal. Nature is like a child in that respect. It does not seek to question or to judge.

Sometimes she wants to die. All that is on the outside is then an illusion. Sometimes the scars not seen hurt more than the visible scars. Bruises fade in time. Like memories. Some memories. But the deepest hurts are the ones that no one can touch, no doctor can heal. So, she learns to hide your pain. These are the times that I want most to hold onto her, absorb some of it into me and leave her free to fly off into the sky like the mythical winged horse, all grace and beauty. Or like an angel. But all I can capture are tiny shards of razor glass reflective darts

of hurt that litter the air around her and keep her trapped inside the eye of their storm. They cut me too. I bleed sometimes.

First runner up. They hand her the flowers and she smiles as radiantly as if she had won, but her disappointment is not lost on me. So much sweat and tears, and it all comes down to someone else's idea of beauty. The true measure of a person should not be based on the opinions of people who only see the outside. To love another person is to see the face of God. To judge another person is to see the face of man. They do not know the hardships she has faced just to stand up there before them. When they go home tonight, they will not think about all of the dreams that were shattered here this evening. They were outside observers, spectators who were asked to give an opinion. That is all. In this they are nothing more than the rest of us.

A fight breaks out. The losers cannot accept defeat graciously. The mob becomes vocal, hurling insults like "bitch." I am reminded of the old saying "Stick and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me" and I am struck by the realization of how wrong that is. Broken bones heal much more quickly than shattered souls.

Sometimes she wants to run, to leave all of this behind her. Then I am afraid. I don't want to lose her. True friendship is not an easy gift to find in this lifetime. The hole in my heart that she will leave behind when she goes will never fill. These are the times when I cannot seem to reach her, when all of the words are meaningless. She has heard them before and they have been lies. It is then that I become just like the rest, an outsider.

We have matching wish boxes, she and I. In them, we are supposed to place your pennies and our hopes and our dreams. Can a dream really fit into such a small container? Is it possible to contain all of a lifetime full of hopes and fears into a tiny fragment of constructed space? I am always finding pennies on the ground. They are supposed to bring you luck. I give them to her because I have nothing else to give. When I was a small child, I always found the four leaf clovers. I believed in dreams, and in fairies, and all sorts of other mythical possibilities. The world seemed like a friendly place back then. A friend was someone who took your deepest secrets and kept them safe, guarded your dreams as fiercely as her own and protected you from the demons who had no faces because they were always under the bed in the shadows where you could not see them. They did not walk the street in broad daylight wearing designer clothes and casting superior glances at you when you walked past them. They could not hurt you because they were not real.

Drag Queen. She hates that name and all of the negative connotations that come with it. Like fag. Like Queer. Like bitch. She prefers the term gender illusionist. But she is not an illusion; she is real. She is beautiful, my best friend.

Perhaps you are wondering what this example has to do with the points that I am trying to make about self and identity. My own interest in this subject, gay rights in general and gender illusion in particular, began as a result of meeting Christian St. John and his drag persona Kirstin, a talented actor and a person who I am honored to call my best friend. Through him, I became actively involved in his life and, in turn, in the world of drag, meeting a wide variety of people from transsexuals to transvestites to gender illusionists. I have experienced the diverse worlds of performance drag and pageant drag, as well as having been given the opportunity to meet individuals who choose to live out their entire lives in drag. To say that the experience has been an eye opener would be a vast understatement. At one time, like many people, I would have classified “drag queens” as the “other” in a negative way. I would certainly not have gone out of my way to meet them or to become friends with them. I never would have expected that the talented actor who shared so many of my ideas and visions when he appeared to act in a production of “Boys in the Band” that I was directing was also a gender illusionist. Why is that, I wonder? Often, we are afraid of that which we do not know. Times are changing, oppression and discrimination are becoming far less prevalent, but they still exist and they exist, primarily, out of a deeply rooted fear of anything that we do not understand. In order to understand, to bring that which is outside of the norm into perspective, we must first understand history.

I am a teacher by trade as well as an artist. As an educator I try to stress the need to understand *our* history as it is codified in literature. When I say *our*, I am not only talking about the need to share the past with other gay, lesbian or transgendered individuals, because it truly is not *our* past so much as it is a part of all of our pasts as a society. Just as the Holocaust was not just a moment in Jewish history, and the Civil Rights Movement was not only a part of African-American history, the history of LGBT people and their struggle to obtain freedom and acceptance is a part of our past, and a part of our present. It will shape us as we move on towards our future. The good, the bad, the happy and the tragic do not just affect single individuals, they affect us all.

Throughout the 1960's, an ever-growing dissatisfaction with inequality led to the beginnings of change. Shortly after midnight, while the gay community gathered together at the Stonewall Inn in New

York City to mourn the death of their icon Judy Garland, on June 27, 1969, at the end of a decade of awareness and activism, the Gay Rights movement received its first major boost in the form of a spontaneous act of unification against unfair treatment of homosexuals by the police. This night and the days that followed have been immortalized in history as the Stonewall Rebellion. As the mourners gathered peacefully, without prior warning, a police inspector and seven other officers from the Public Morals Section of the First Division of the New York City Police Department entered the bar just after midnight. They carried with them a warrant alleging that alcohol was being sold without a license, ejected the majority of the bar's patrons, and then began to arrest employees. This scene had been played before, but this night was different somehow. Perhaps the winds of change just chose to take that moment to turn, but something provoked a reaction. Various accounts of the evening differ dramatically, but what seems consistent is that a crowd began to form and, instead of remaining silent and watching, they began to fight back, led by none other than a few drag queens who no longer wanted to hide in the shadows. Many brave people who took a stand that night, gay men, lesbians, blacks and whites and Hispanics. However, it was the role played by a group of drag queens, transgendered individuals as well as gender illusionists, that stood out to mark this night as one of the key events in the history of gay rights.

Since then, efforts have been made to encourage greater understanding and acceptance of the LGBT community, but they have not been sufficient to negate the hate. On October 7, 1998, a young gay man went into a bar in Laramie, Wyoming. He accepted a ride home, or so the story goes, from two other young men, later identified as Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. He never made it to his destination. Instead, he was brutally beaten and left to die, bound to an old wooden fence overlooking the lights of Laramie. He did not die, at least not immediately. He changed the lives and the outlooks of many people across the world before he passed away at 12:53 am five days later in Poudre Valley Hospital in nearby Fort Collins, Colorado. His name was Matthew Wayne Sheppard.

Hate crimes against homosexuals in general have been brought into much more careful scrutiny since the murder of Matthew Sheppard, but crimes against transgendered individuals often are swept under the carpet, hidden away because they are too much for the mainstream to understand and accept. But they exist. They existed long before Matthew's name became a cry for help, and they exist still today.

Herrea, Samara, Zapata, Araujo – these are just a few names that belong on a collective memorial wall of shame – not shame for the fact that they were transgendered, but shame on the part of our society for fostering belief systems that encourage the isolation and abuse of anyone who steps outside of the norm. Jaheem Herrea was just a small boy, an elementary school child who was taunted and called “gay” by his peers until he took his own life. Whether he was truly gay or not is not the issue in this case. At eleven, kids shouldn’t really be thinking about sexuality to begin with. What is the issue in this case is the fact that it is still “socially acceptable” to use the label “gay” as a derogative insult in public speech. It’s used all the time. Even the media can be heard to utter the phrase “that’s so gay” in response to anything that is “not good enough” or “not the norm” and no one says a word. Tesia Samara was a little bit older, 15 to be exact, when she gave up on a world that did not understand her and refused to even try. She knew that she was a woman encased in a boy’s body, and she was going about her plans to change her gender in all of the right ways. She did the research, she knew what her options were, and she planned to take steps to become a woman. However, the taunting at school was overpowering. She even wrote to her teachers, begging them to help her or at least to understand her perspective, but when you are gay in a small town in Texas you are unwelcome; when you are transgendered, you do not stand a chance. She gave up and ended her own life, but I can only wonder how long it might have been before someone ended it for her had she not taken matters into her own hands.

Transgender murders have also made the news again recently with the first degree murder conviction of Allen Andrade for the beating death of his girlfriend, Angie Zapata, whom he did not know was transgendered. The rapid response of the jury in this case shows that, in 2009, there is a growing sympathy and awareness of the fact that such hate crimes should not go unpunished. This is a far cry from the voluntary manslaughter conviction of Jaron Nabors and the second degree murder convictions of Michael Magidson, Jose Merel, and Jason Cazares who beat to death Gwen Araujo in 2002. In Gwen’s case, it took two trials before the jury reached a decision that did not result in a deadlock, and even then members of the jury still placed blame on Gwen for what they viewed as her “deception” in portraying herself as a woman when, in fact, she was genetically male.

While the fact that Zapata’s jury acted swiftly and her killer will be spending his life behind bars is encouraging, it is not enough. It will not bring her back, nor will it bring back any of the others whose lives

have been lost due to self-inflicted means or outside violence. Labeling it a hate crime does not change it either. All violent crimes are hate crimes because they carry within the nature of the act some degree of animosity on the part of the perpetrator toward the victim. It is not just the schools that are at fault, it is society as a whole. We need to rethink our perspectives and learn to live in acceptance of others, even if they live their lives outside of what any one of us perceives as the norm. Tolerance needs to be taught at home. Even if you disagree with someone else's lifestyle, that is their choice and they should be allowed the freedom to live that choice without fear. Teachers, administrators, and parents need to be more actively involved. Labeling, even in jest, needs to be stopped. When we learn to accept the other as merely a mirror image of the self, distorted but still essentially the same, then, perhaps, we can all live free from fear.

For the gender illusionist, the drag queen, the transvestite, fear of public recognition and the response it may provoke is overwhelming and not at all unwarranted. One of the questions that often arises in response to gender illusion is the overwhelming attraction factor shown by heterosexual men who encounter particularly convincing drag queens outside of the performance setting. There have been several occasions when I have gone out in public with Kirstin and, invariably, she is the one to whom all the men are drawn. Many of them never realize that the woman they are staring at in open-mouthed sexual desire is, in fact, a man. Those who do, show in their eyes the moment of realization – anxiety, guilt, fear that someone else made the connection first and the resultant embarrassment. Desire instantly shifts to scorn, aversion. Yet the external image that was initially the catalyst for that desire remains unchanged. The knowledge of difference creates an insurmountable barricade. But the desire never, in reality, had any basis in truth, for truth is found within a person. Beauty is an illusion, a construct. Taken to its extreme, men's subverted desire to possess that illusion can lead to the desire to destroy it.

As a result of the time that I spent in Kirstin's world, I decided to perform an "experiment" of sorts. In the fall of 2001, I was working on completing a master's degree in English at the University of Florida. While teaching Writing about Literature, I decided to introduce my students to the concept of Queer Theory. Thanks in large part to multiculturalism and gender issues in literature, Cultural Studies, as a discipline, has become a vibrant part of many university English departments. Because literary and cultural studies have become

intertwined, as have the related fields of film and media studies, my classroom became a perfect place to start teaching tolerance.

It is important to understand, first off, the composition of student population in my classroom. Gainesville, Florida is not exactly your typical small American hometown. It is a bit more open-minded, a college town with a thriving gay/lesbian component to it. But, and this is key, it is still a part of the southern culture where racism, prejudice and a steadfast connection to the “Bible Belt” still prevails. The students in my classroom were mostly freshmen, largely native Floridians, barely out of high school and still firmly entrenched in the beliefs of their heretofore sometimes-sheltered world. To be fair, the University of Florida is very diverse ethnically and economically, but the privileged class, those from higher income families, comprises the bulk of the student population. College is, for many of them, their first contact with a multi-cultural world. I even had what I ultimately recall with fondness the “pleasure” of three University of Florida football players in my class. I had been warned by my peers that the “jocks” were the ones to watch out for. These three young men proved me wrong in my cultural assumptions as much as I hope I proved them wrong in theirs.

I began talking about identity in literature by discussing the Black Art Movement. We went on to look at feminism, and, ultimately, I introduced them to a basic understanding of what identity really is concerned with: the concept of the “other” (everything which I am not or that which I do not have) and how it relates to gender and identity. The understanding of the “other” lies at the heart of hate, jealousy, fear, and even, someday, perhaps to love and understanding. The self, the subject, is the “I” form, the individual, me, myself for example, or you, the reader. It is unique, and can only express itself in terms of its own frame of reference. No matter how clearly you read these words, or how much you may think you understand me or want to understand me, you cannot be me. I am your other. You are my other. But we can and often must relate to each other.

One way that human beings interact is through the expression of desires and needs. We communicate through language, but that language is not always verbal. The signs we use are often physical, body language for example, and they may even be expressed through the way that we dress, act, style our hair, or, particularly if we are “girls” or gender illusionists, wear our make-up. We often wear certain “signs” on our persons as outward expressions of the social groups to which we belong as well; for, while all of us are individuals to our unique self, and “others” to each other, we like to congregate with similar “others”

instead of with those who are truly different. Where Childers and Henzi make their most crucial point, however, is in the statement that these signifiers also link everything that the other has to that which the self does not have. Consider, for a moment, Matthew Sheppard. He had money and education. His killers did not. He was gay. They were not. He had what they did not have, and he died for this.

The dichotomies of “otherness” exist on many levels – old/young, black/white, male/female, rich/poor, gay/straight. That is what society has conditioned many of us to think, but it was time to introduce my young and eager college students to the ever-emerging field of “Queer Theory.” Armed with a desire to make a difference as an educator, I developed my “grand idea.”

I really wanted to “shake things up” in my classroom, challenge gender stereotypes and teach not only about gendered identity, but also about the danger of making assumptions based solely on external appearances. I began this endeavor by showing my students the film version of Terrence McNally’s Tony award winning play *Love, Valour, Compassion!* The play is about seven gay men, the times they share together, their friendship, their love, and also the losses they experience through AIDS. It is not about being gay, however. It is about being human, about friendship, a tie that binds more strongly than any other. Fitting, when I think of how much one friendship has shaped my own life.

In 1995, Christian performed in this play in Atlanta. His experience as an actor gave me the angle I needed to bring him into the classroom as a person, not as a gay man. We watched the film over the course of three days, my class meeting Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We discussed certain ideas as they presented themselves, such as the similarities between gay friendships and relationships and their counterparts in the heterosexual community. Christian and I watched the discomfort on the faces of many of the male students as they were faced with scenes of male nudity and homosexuality. We also watched as slowly the class as a whole became more comfortable with the subject matter and began to look beyond the surface and into the issues and the characters. Fear and disgust gave way to tolerance, to acceptance and, in some cases, to the very compassion McNally sought to exemplify. Attitudes changed, assumptions were challenged. As the week progressed, they began to realize and accept that Christian was gay. While seeking to understand him and his life, their initial questions seemed shallow, overly concerned with sexual behavior, but, to be fair, they wanted to know. A desire for knowledge is the gateway to understanding. The discussions revealed just how rampant stereotyping

of the gay community is. Many of the students were truly surprised to learn that gay people are just like straight people – normal. We laugh, love, eat, sleep, work, play and die. The only real difference is sexual intimacy.

If we had stopped there, I still believe that, as an educational experience, what we taught to those students was invaluable in terms of fostering understanding and tolerance. This, however, was not my complete plan. They were beginning to accept homosexuals as people. They accepted Christian, but how would they react to discover the existence of Kirstin? It was time to really open some eyes! What I had planned for them then was the ultimate example of the dangers involved in making assumptions based on external: appearances. I hoped to show them that the external does not dictate who a person really is on the inside, as well as to encourage them, as they walked through life, to take the time to really get to know people for who they are, not just for who they might, at any given moment, appear to be.

On Monday morning, Kirstin appeared at my apartment. We walked together through the University of Florida campus, attracting no attention aside from appreciative male gazes. Dressed in capri pants and a casual shirt, she looks just like a tall, thin young woman. She waited outside in the hall as I went into my classroom. I told my students that I was going to further expand on the idea of gendered identity, and that I wanted to start by reading them a passage from a work in progress. I was terrified. I had not yet admitted that the work being read was my own, nor had I allowed anyone aside from Christian to read it. With shaking hands kept carefully hidden, I read them the portion of the text contained in this article. They were, predictably, shocked to hear the words “drag queen” – but that reaction paled in comparison to the dawning awareness on their faces when I introduced them to my best friend, well, to an aspect of my best friend, Kirstin Nicole Montgomery, the reigning Miss. Gainesville. She walked into the room and promptly thanked them all for welcoming her into the classroom the preceding week. Kirstin was Christian; she was he. Nothing had changed; yet everything had changed. If you accept the internal first, the real person, to change or remove that acceptance solely because the external appearance changes is tantamount to hypocrisy. The responses of the students ranged from shock to amusement, but they walked away from the experience with a greater understanding of human beings as equals, in spite of their differences.

I often wonder if, had I met Kirstin first, I ever would have had the chance to share a portion of my life with the person who I still call my best friend. In my heart, I know that I would not. It saddens me to admit

this, but I also believe that things happen for a reason sometimes. Much of our lives are spent not looking past what we see on the outside. We meet a person, and we instantly create a judgment based on appearance. People who “meet” Kirstin, in clubs, at performance venues, often think that this persona is the real person, and this persona is often viewed with trepidation. She is strong, distant, and, to many, threatening in her demeanor. She exudes all of that confidence that it takes to exist in a world that does not welcome difference.

This is something we all do, to an extent. Who we are on the inside may not be who we show to the world. We ask ourselves daily if who we are is good enough, and the answer we give to ourselves is often a resounding no. We are afraid that, if we exist in this world just as ourselves, no one will like us, people will not treat us with respect, we will not succeed. So we put on a mask and we hide behind that mask. Does it matter if that mask is one of “business professional” or “librarian” or “seductress” or any of a countless number of illusions? What really matters is how we feel about ourselves. If we spent more time looking inward and less time looking outward, we might discover that the inside and the outside can be the same. It is all just a matter of perspective.

SUMMARY

On July 19, 2000 a chance encounter changed one writer’s life and reshaped her perspectives on self, on the other, and on gendered identity within the LGBT world which must exist within the constructs of a society that shuns it. Part memoirs, part socio-political and cultural history, this article contains excerpts from a larger work, *Everything I Know about Being a Girl I Learned from a Drag Queen*. It is an account of life, love, and acceptance that explores the issues of gendered identity and bridges the gap between the academic realm of gender studies and personal experience.

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