

## A Different Breed of Cat: Finding My Queer Self

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There is a standard narrative of the trans experience that has come together in recent decades. A trans person grows up knowing that they are in the wrong body, either a girl in a boy's body or vice versa. At some point they are exposed to the idea of being trans. They recognize this in themselves and begin the process of transition, which involves puberty blocking drugs (if they are young enough), hormones, and surgical procedures. They emerge from this process having flipped a switch from F to M or M to F and proceed through the rest of their life in a body that resembles the gender they were born to be.

This is highly simplistic; it in no way represents the variety of experiences of all binary trans people (let alone non-binary ones), and it ignores the enormous burdens that often lie behind the story. Financial hardships, mental/emotional stress, and family trauma are just a few of them. However, to the extent that modern American society has accepted the existence of trans lives, this is the story that it condones.

It is not my story.

I grew up in a small city in the Great Plains and had a conventional upbringing. I was, to all appearances, a straight White male in a

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1. I rarely feel misgendered when I'm called by any pronouns. I do experience euphoria when called "she" at a time when I'm dressed in a traditionally femme manner. The only thing that truly bothers me is being called "Sir."

German-descended Lutheran family. We went to church and Sunday school every Sunday and to choir practice every Thursday night. My parents came from Minnesota and North Dakota. My mother was an elementary school librarian who was politically liberal, while my dad worked for a big corporation and was more conservative. We were solidly middle class; I went to parochial school through eighth grade and then to public high school. I never wanted for anything, especially books, and had opportunities to play sports and take art and music lessons.

I attended a state college on an academic scholarship. I met a girl (also a straight White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) while working a summer job, and we dated for five years and then got married. We have three kids. I went to graduate school for Library Science and when I took my first library job, it was back in the Plains. I still live within four hours of where I grew up, and within three hours of my parents, who are still married.

Below the conventional facade, though, other things were going on. I've often said about my childhood that I was never very good at being a boy. I had no interest in horseplay or sports. I would much rather play with the girls or, as I got older and they rejected me, sit by myself and read. I wanted in on all the girly trends, like friendship pins and sticker collecting. Most of all, I was emotionally fragile. It was easy to hurt my feelings or make me cry, and I was a target for bullying from an early age. This rarely took physical form but was instead a kind of constant emotional torture, with even the kids who called themselves my friends teasing and making fun of me whenever I felt a little bit good about myself.

I have come to believe, in hindsight, that this was a form of gender policing. My peers saw the ways in which I wasn't conforming and tried, consciously or unconsciously, to make me change. They wanted me to be literally scared straight—and it wasn't just the kids. Over the years, many adults tried to help me address the bullying, but their solutions were just another way of policing my gender expression. I should "toughen up" or "be less sensitive." If there was behavior that caused me to be targeted, I should stop behaving like that. Extreme suggestions were that I should fight back. I should *be a man*.

Back then, in the late '70s and early '80s, I had no way of understanding what I was. I knew that there were gay people, but I definitely wasn't gay, because I was strongly attracted to girls. I knew that trans people existed, but only as the kind of binary female-to-male or male-to-female I described earlier, and they were presented as people on the fringes of society on shows like Phil Donahue and Jerry Springer. As MTV came to prominence, I began to see models of alternative gender expression like Boy George, Twisted Sister, Prince, Eurythmics, and others, but I had no concept of gender as a separate thing from sexuality or of the possibility of being something other than male or female.

At the same time, I was completely fascinated by what I would now define broadly as "queerness." In high school, and especially college, I sought out gay and lesbian memoirs and coming out stories. I befriended queer-seeming people. I played with gender expression in the guise of hippie and goth styles. I grew my hair out, and this became a significant part of my identity to the point where I experienced a kind of existential crisis when I had to cut it off for a role in a campus play. At the same time, I was coming of age politically, recognizing injustice against people marginalized due to bigotry around race, gender, and other identities. I joined environmental groups, protested the Gulf War, and was a founding member of a gay/straight alliance at college.

Much of this was related to people I got to know in person, but even more, it was fueled by my early adoption of the Internet. At college in the early '90s, I was introduced to Usenet and in the *alt.* hierarchy of newsgroups I found subcultures, countercultures, and proto-social-networks in which queerness was something not remarked upon. It was merely one of many possible ways of being, all of which were accepted and even celebrated by people who had been lifelong misfits and were now finding community. Around the same time, I was invited to the Iowa State Computing Association Bulletin Board System (ISCA BBS) and in that group and similar bulletin boards, I established some of the closest friendships of my life. Some of those friends were trans.

After college and three uncomfortable years teaching English in rural high schools, I moved to Minnesota for library school. My political

awakening continued there, as I was living in a large city for the first time and exposed to a more diverse population. I made my first close friend who was gay and out. He was a co-worker of mine, and he introduced me to queer cinema and took me to my first gay bar. In my mind, I was still a curious observer rather than a fellow queer person, but I felt a kinship with him and the friends to whom he introduced me. I recall a specific conversation that seems pivotal in retrospect:

Karl: What would you call someone like me who is straight, but fascinated with the lives of gay and lesbian people?

Friend: Before I met you, I would have said “closet case,” but that’s not you. I really don’t know. I don’t think there’s a word for that.

After library school I moved to Oklahoma for my first full-time position as a librarian. Returning to the Bible Belt involved a lot of culture shock. I had truly become a different person in Minnesota. Becoming a librarian was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. I was that rare child who, when asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” would answer, “A librarian!” But it also had another consequence. I had always been a voracious reader, but except for a brief few months working at Waldenbooks, I’d never been surrounded by books all the time. I found that my reading habits began to shift as I discovered new things in the stacks during paging and shelf-reading. It was during this time that I encountered three books that truly changed my life.

My first introduction to the notion that gender expression was a thing apart from gender or sexuality came from reading *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior*.<sup>2</sup> The author reflects on his personal experiences in gay male communities and the disdain and disgust that he’s seen directed at expressions of effeminacy. He then draws connections outward to general anti-feminine sentiments in society and misogynistic ideas about weakness, powerlessness, and vulnerability. Reading

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2. Tim Bergling, *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001).

*Sisyphobia* started me on a path toward reframing my childhood experiences as gender policing and expressions of patriarchal dominance.

*Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* is, first of all, one of the most powerful and moving works of fiction I've ever read. It's a semi-autobiographical novel in which Jess Goldberg, a butch lesbian, is exploring various forms of gender expression (including passing as a man) in search of a way of being in the world that satisfies hir personal identity, hir desires to love and be loved, and hir need to survive.<sup>3</sup> This had a profound emotional effect on me, and it taught me about the concepts of gender fluidity and the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Jess is a butch lesbian, but also Jewish, working class, and a Communist. All of these identities are inseparable and inform every experience zie has. As I sought out more information about the author, Leslie Feinberg, I also learned that zie used non-binary neopronouns, and I read hir other books: the follow-up novel *Drag King Dreams* and the nonfiction *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*.<sup>4</sup> All of these works broadened my understanding of what gender could be. No other single individual has been more significant in my gender journey.

Tragically, Feinberg died in 2014 at the age of sixty-five. According to a life history published by hir spouse:

Diagnosed with Lyme and multiple tick-borne co-infections in 2008, Feinberg was infected first in the early 1970s when little was known about the diseases. Zie/she had received treatment for these only within the last six years. Zie/she said, "My experience in ILADS care offers great hope to desperately-ill people who are in earlier stages of tick-borne diseases." She/zie attributed hir catastrophic health crisis to "bigotry, prejudice and lack of science"—active prejudice toward hir transgender identity that made access to health care exceedingly difficult, and lack of science

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3. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (Boston: Alyson Press, 2003).

4. Leslie Feinberg, *Drag King Dreams* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

due to limits placed by mainstream medical authorities on information, treatment, and research about Lyme and its co-infections.<sup>5</sup>

When I found Kate Bornstein and her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, I was delighted by her funny, frank voice.<sup>6</sup> The book is compellingly readable, well-researched, and at times painful. It is part memoir, part essay collection, and part manifesto, with the full script of a two-act play thrown in. Some of her information seems dated from the perspective of 2022, but though Bornstein identified as a woman at the time, she spent a lot of time questioning the gender binary (as the subtitle implies). *Gender Outlaw* was the first place I saw someone clearly spell out the differences between sex, gender identity, gender roles, gender expression, and sexuality.

All of this reading was leading me in the direction of answering that big question: “What am I?” And really, the question behind the question: “What do I call myself?” In many of the memoirs and coming out stories I’d read in the past, a queer character would look in the dictionary under “gay” or “homosexual” or some other term and have a powerful moment of recognition. Names, labels, and categories are important for humans. They are the ways in which we determine who we are like and unlike, who we belong with and who we shun. A metaphor I have used in the past is that any cat will tell you there’s a big difference between being put into a box and putting *yourself* into one. For me, the final step in crystallizing my gender identity was hearing a single word: “gender-queer.” I wish I could remember where I first heard it, but I know that it must have been sometime in the mid-2000s, and I know that it felt perfectly right to me. Genderqueer was my box. It combined so many ways of thinking that felt right to me:

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5. Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Platt, “self – LESLIE FEINBERG,” Internet Archive, March 27, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210726214430/http://www.lesliefeinberg.net/self/>.

6. Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

1. It reclaimed a slur and turned it into a point of pride.
2. In a throwback to earlier meanings of the word “queer,” it represented bending rules, shifting categories, making things strange and uncomfortable. It’s a word of activism and unrest.
3. In academic circles, “queer theory” takes a text that may not have been intended to evoke LGBTQIA+ themes and puts a reading of those themes onto it, like reading Gilgamesh and Enkidu or Beowulf and Hrothgar as if they were lovers rather than friends. In a very real way, this is what I was doing with the story of my own life as I came to understand my gender. I was “queering” my self.

At this point, I was approaching forty years old. I had spent all that time with an incomplete understanding of my identity, and it took me a while to experiment with this new frame of reference. I had never experienced any kind of gender dysphoria, which is a primary reason that I didn’t identify easily as trans, but once I started thinking of myself as non-binary or of presenting as more feminine, I experienced enormous gender *euphoria*. This was the way it was meant for me to be in the world. Once I reached a certain level of comfort and self-acceptance, I began to think about coming out. How would I tell the important people in my life this essential truth about myself?

As one might expect of someone for whom online communities and social media were so significant, I decided that I would post on Facebook. I used the “Notes” feature and made a public proclamation in March of 2011 which read, in part,

I tend to value aesthetics above practicality, feelings above analysis, love above power, creativity above acquisition, relationships above status, and emotional expression above stoicism. On small group nights there is invariably a moment when I look up and realize that we’ve split up, with men on one side and women on another. When that happens, I’m with the women every time.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Karl Siewert, “Guy :-),” Facebook, March 12, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10164321179275290/>

Other milestones followed. In the fall of 2012, I began using a personal “logo” on Facebook, Twitter, and other websites which combined a rainbow flag, a genderqueer flag, and the library symbol.<sup>8</sup> I had pierced my left ear back in high school, when it was fashionable for guys to wear a single earring, but in January of 2017 I had my right ear pierced as well, and I began intentionally wearing pairs of earrings in dangly feminine styles. I experimented with nail polish and makeup, including at work, and later that year I participated in a public event called Ignite Tulsa, where I spoke for five minutes about my own experience of non-binary gender.<sup>9</sup>

Then, in June of 2020, I came out at work. I spoke first to my supervisor and then to my colleagues in a staff meeting about my gender and told them that I was going to begin wearing skirts and dresses on occasion. I invited questions, and the general response was positive. This was in keeping with the pattern I had seen thus far. Most of the people who responded to things I put on social media or to my appearance in public and private were complimentary, but at this point something changed. As I started wearing more feminine clothing at work, I started to take selfies and post them on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

To me, “dressing out” seemed to be a natural next step, an outgrowth of the things I’d already been doing. I thought that, by sharing the things I had on social media, I had prepared those closest to me for this, but that was not the case. Some members of my family felt blindsided. They hadn’t seen this coming, and they didn’t react positively at all. This is something that I am still trying to work on, but some relationships have become strained to the breaking point.

Despite this, I remain committed to being my authentic self, both internally and externally. I consider dressing femme to be a privilege, but also in some way a responsibility. Because I am able to wear a dress and still keep my job, it’s important for me to be visible—to stand out

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8. Karl Siewert, *GQlibraryweb\_400x400.jpg*, Twitter image, 2012, [https://pbs.twimg.com/profile\\_images/1410547301/GQlibraryweb\\_400x400.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/1410547301/GQlibraryweb_400x400.jpg).

9. TulsaLibrary, *Karl Siewert: Queering My Self: How Not to Be a Good Boy, Ignite Tulsa 2017*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es3u3NWmgTY>.



and stand up for those who can't. This is even more essential in a place like Oklahoma, where bigotry is displayed as proudly as any rainbow flag or drag outfit.

This is far from the end of my story. I will turn fifty-one in a few months, but in a way, my queer self is not even an adolescent. Every day, it seems, I learn something new about myself, and I am fortunate to be able to explore it safely. Many do not have that luxury. I hope to continue to be an advocate and activist in the library community and beyond, and I encourage you, my colleagues, to do the same.

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### **About the Author**

Karl has been an academic librarian in Oklahoma since 2013. Prior to that they spent eleven years as a reference and teen services librarian in a public library, and before that they taught English, poorly, in rural high schools. They are a maker of many things, from fiber arts to musical instruments, and they love their kids like nobody's business.