

Tomboys, trans folks, and the *Times*

## **Gender transitions can be lifesaving. But they're not the right path for everyone.**

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Last week an interesting op-ed appeared in the *New York Times* titled, "[My Daughter is not Transgender. She's a Tomboy.](#)" In it, Lisa Selin Davis, a mother and young adult novelist, details her child's interactions with adults who are confused about her gender.

Davis describes her daughter as a classic tomboy with "shaggy short hair" who prefers the company of boys and the comfort of T-shirts. Well-meaning adults often assume that her daughter is trans, and that she wishes to be referred to as a boy. Davis counters that she is indeed a girl, and that feminine pronouns are indeed correct.

As a grown-up tomboy I found Davis' article familiar. Like Davis' daughter I declined to wear dresses, preferred boys to girls as playmates, and dreamed of playing football. Similarly, I was often mistaken for a boy.

I have long said that had I grown up now, and not in the '80s and '90s, I might have been encouraged to transition female-to-male. I wholeheartedly applaud that fact that trans kids are given support to transition. I know families whose kids have transitioned and it has been nothing short of lifesaving for them. We have to keep supporting those kids.

But, despite our progress, we still fail to adequately support gender nonbinary kids like I once was. I worry about what would happen to a kid like me had I grown up today. Had I felt encouraged to transition, or like transition was the only viable option for me, I may have taken that path. But that would not have been the right path for me.

I say that because the tomboy that I was as a child has grown up into a highly gender nonconforming adult. I am still mistaken as male on a near-daily basis.

But even today, as an adult who has all the social, financial, and legal support and resources necessary to transition, transition is still not the right choice. The reason why is very simple: I'm not a man.

The truth of the matter is that for some people the old gender binary of girl/boy and woman/man just doesn't apply. While much of my life is spent rejecting the expectations of gender imposed on me by my biological sex, at the end of the day I'm more comfortable as I am than I ever would be as a man.

I'm at peace with my body, and equally at peace with my button-down shirts and bow ties.

But as at peace as I am with my gender, others are not. Recently I was [interviewed by Vice about the way gender nonconforming and genderqueer folks can be at risk in public restrooms](#). There are very real dangers for us out there from strangers.

At other times, though, even the well-intentioned can let their own discomfort seep out. A few friends, both trans and cis, have asked me when I'm going to transition myself, implying that my gender is somehow incomplete. A new medical assistant at my very gender-competent physician's office misgendered me on my paperwork as a trans man during a recent visit, assuming that I must be contemplating transition. And when I [wrote in the Christian Century](#) about the TSA's habit of pulling me aside for full-body pat downs, I received meant-to-be-helpful messages about how I could do more to help the TSA not to make this mistake.

As an adult I've come to understand that it's not my own comfort with my gender that's the problem; it's the discomfort of others that's the real danger.

The reality of our culture is that we are highly gendered. Even in liberal and progressive spaces, we too often divide things along binary lines. And for the majority of people, even some trans folks who transition along those lines, that works. But that's not true for everyone, and we still have not learned to communicate that to our kids.

Some of us will never be at home on the gender binary. And that's okay. We don't need to be pressured to fit into the gender box that matches the sex on our birth

certificates. And we don't need to transition because we've already become who we are meant to be.

To too many people, that is frustrating and confusing. And so, they take their own ingrained gender binary, and they try to apply it to the people who don't make sense. They look at a tomboy, and they think "they're a boy." Or, they look at a boy who likes princess dresses and dolls and think "they should be a girl."

And, maybe some of those kids are indeed trans. If so, we should do everything possible to support them. But maybe they're not. Maybe they're kids who will grow up into someone like me. Or, maybe some of the boys who play with trucks will figure out later that they are indeed trans women, and some of the girls who dress up like Elsa will grow up to rock bow ties.

They wouldn't be the first. There are trans women who were Navy SEALs and trans men who were prom queens. That's because traditionally gendered interests and aptitudes do not always determine gender.

And this is where my problem with Davis's piece comes in. As she writes about the desire of other adults to characterize her daughter's gender, I can't help but think she does the same thing. In asserting "she's a tomboy," is this faithful to her child's voice and experience? Did her child consent to having this story told nationally?

Finally, is the author's lack of understanding of nonbinary identity in some ways tied to a gendering of her child that is equally as inaccurate as that of strangers? Maybe her child is indeed a tomboy. Or maybe that child will grow up to be gender nonbinary adult. Or maybe they will indeed transition.

In the end, only the person in question can determine what identity is right for them.

For all of the rest of us, here's our work: confront our own discomfort with gender. Work out why it bothers us when we can't determine another person's gender at first blush. Learn to live with ambiguity. Figure out what things we do that cement the gender binary more firmly in place.

And most importantly, learn how to keep our mouths shut when our confusion or discomfort with the gender expression of others comes to the surface. Because it's our problem, not theirs.

*Note: Since the publication of the Times article this Storify has appeared which makes clear that the gender of the child in question may differ from what the mother describes. I'm [adding the link here](#) because it adds another problematic layer to this whole story. God bless that kid. May they grow up to be exactly who they are meant to be, and not who others think they should be.*

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*