

A Rant About MTF “Stealth”

By Cristan Williams

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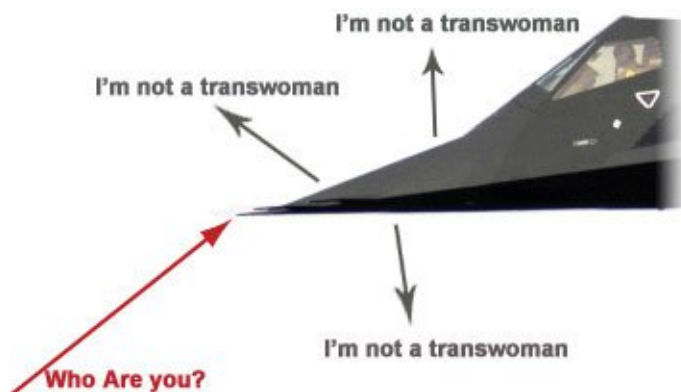
Abstract

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Article

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Articles in this series: The Many Shades of Stealth | A Rant About MTF “Stealth” | Passing and Stealth: Two Words We Should Lose? | Stealth Doesn’t Help The Trans Community | You’re Only as Transitioned and Stealth as the Next Person Says You Aren’t | Not Against Stealth But For Being Out



The use of the word stealth has lost its meaning in the last decade. I hear people who go to trans support group meetings, activities and who run trans websites claim to be “stealth” now. When I came out, going to trans support group meetings, activities, and running trans forums was the definition of being out in a big way! Some now say that “stealth” means one thing and “woodworking” another. I call BS. You can’t woodwork without being stealth. It’s like saying that the word “hide” and “conceal” are fundamentally different. If you’re going to conceal something, you have to hide it; if you’re going to

woodwork, you've got to be stealth. Some say "stealth" just means privacy. Privacy is not telling my spouse that I had a wart removed years ago; stealth is not telling my spouse that I had testicles removed years ago. Pretending that being "out" means telling everyone you meet you're trans is BS. Associating with others in the trans community while claiming to be stealth is a mischaracterization of what stealth is.

Stealth is pretending to everyone that you're a cisgender female. It means living in fear that the spouse you lied to will find out that you didn't actually have a hysterectomy. It means always wondering if your friends would really like you if they knew the truth. Stealth is running away from or verbally running down your trans brothers and sisters so that others won't make the connection. Stealth means that you hide being trans. Stealth is about shame and nothing more. Not telling the grocery sacker that you're trans is not stealth. Trying to get your parents to lie to your new boyfriend is being stealth. Not telling every co-worker in the building that you're trans is not being stealth. Not telling your best friend is being stealth. If you associate with other trans people, you're not in stealth because you're putting yourself in a position of allowing more and more people to know the truth about your history. Isolating and hiding your history is what it means to live in stealth.

Stealth people say things like "I just want to get on with my life as the woman I am" - a sentiment that sounds rational enough on the surface. The problem with that sentiment is that it's also a delusion. Stealth people rationalize their lies by believing that being trans was only a medical problem that was fixed - kind of like a cleft palate; purposefully pretending that there wasn't a social transition that entailed violating numerous cultural norms. Stealth is purposefully taking away the choice of letting the people you claim to love the most decide if they are willing to take on the potential social costs (as unfair and stupid as those social costs might be) of breaking those backward cultural norms by being with you. If you believe that it is only a medical condition, remember that I said that you're delusional when your best friend, your husband or wife, your boyfriend or girlfriend, your adopted child, etc finds out that you lied about your social and medical history. Yes, it is a medical condition that should be treated medically, but to pretend that this medical condition is exactly like having laser eye surgery is nothing more than living in denial. Living an authentic life means having the courage to stand firmly on the ground on truth regardless of what stupid, moronic, and asinine stereotypes and/or fears others may choose to cling to.

Anyway... pretending to be a cisgender female to everyone in your life practically never works in the end. In the digital age, you can never destroy every piece of history documenting your true past and you certainly can't kill everyone who knows the truth. Choosing stealth is a shame-based way to live because it supports the belief that being trans is bad and should be hidden. Being a transwoman and being a ciswoman are just two somewhat different ways of arriving at being a woman; living stealth supports the bogus idea that you're not really a woman and you must therefore hide the truth from discovery. If you want to save yourself a lot of misery, be truthful about the history that made you into the wonderful person you are today with the people who matter to you. You don't need to tell the gas station attendant, but the point of transitioning is that you get to live authentically. Don't put yourself into a position that you have to go back to living a lie; don't go from one closet to another.

Being completely closeted - being stealth - takes away your freedom of choice. After a while, you've constructed a life whereby you can no longer enjoy the freedom of sharing your history with the people

you care about because to do so would risk the very relationships you so value. Choose to give yourself the power of choice. Be judicious about who you give this very important piece of yourself to. Privacy is a good thing in that it's empowering; preserve your right to pick and choose who knows your history. Choose the power of choice and use it to give yourself the best possible shot at a happy life.

Author's Note: I wrote this piece in 2010 after meeting a transwoman who had transitioned in the 1970s. She'd been instructed to live a closeted life by her doctors at the time. Unfortunately, she took their advice, married, and never told him. He found out years and years later and she lost practically everything she valued after the lie got out - to everyone in her life. The devastation her life had become was profound.

Since writing this, I understand that others - especially others in different geographic locations - view stealth and out as a binary continuum so that one can be both stealth and out and proud in the exact same moment. I can see how this view has its conceptual benefits for those who use it in that way. For me - and perhaps this is simply an artifact of my own geographic location - stealth means that one is not out. When I began transition, the only people who were stealth were those who actively shunned other trans folk. For me, stealth continues to have a very specific conceptual framework that does not include being out and proud about being trans.

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