

Passing and Stealth: Two Words to Lose? Part Two

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Published July 24, 2013 | Updated August 24, 2025

https://www.transadvocate.com/passing-and-stealth-two-words-to-lose-part-two_n_9793.htm

Abstract

Editor's Note: This is part of a series on "stealth." The goal of this series to examine the nuanced ways trans opinion leaders conceptualize stealth and how they feel about it. Suzan Cooke kicked off the series with her article, The Many Shades of Stealth. It should be noted that TA is not endorsing any [...]

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



Figure 1. Stealth bomber

Stealth has always reminded me of military aircraft (stealth bombers), trailing someone at a distance, or peeking around corners, dressed in a black overcoat and sunglasses.

I know the word has a long history in the trans community, and in that context, I take it to mean not being out (at least not to most people), and simply living in mainstream male or female culture as the man

or woman that a person is.

It makes sense, but while the word doesn't offend me, and almost every trans person I know uses the word as a descriptor, even if they are not "living stealth" themselves, I'm not fond of it. To my mind, it represents a secret -- not the "I have a secret, bet you'll never guess what it is, hah hah" kind of secret, but the "black overcoat and sunglasses" kind of secret ... the "I'm in disguise" kind of secret. But we're not in disguise.

A person who believes himself to be a man and who lives as a man is a man, regardless of the body he has. If he was born with a female body (or, to be PC, assigned female at birth), that does not make him a "disguised woman."

Now there have been people who were disguised women, such as those women in history who dressed as men to fight in wars or to hold down certain jobs that they were not allowed to have as women. But if they identified as women and dressed and presented as men for a specific purpose only, such as a job, then, in my mind, they were not trans (I know I'll get some arguments on this -- that's fine; that's the point of having comments), although they weretransgressing gender norms -- but only because they had to.

They were women in disguise for a purpose. When the war ended or they changed jobs or they went home at night, they were women -- they were, in fact, always women. They simply dressed and presented as men to escape some confine of their gender.

But transsexual men are not women in disguise, regardless of what is under their clothes (this goes for transsexual women as well, in reverse). Transsexual men are men. They can choose to identify as trans or not, they can be out or not, but if they identify as men, then they are men.

And this long diatribe brings me back to the reason I don't like the word stealth -- because, like passing, it indicates some measure of secrecy or deception. It indicates a disguise.

As I said in my post about passing, it is my opinion that if I am "passing" for a man, then I am not a man. The same thing holds true for me with the word "stealth." If I am "living stealth," then I am living in secret. I'm secretly a woman living as a man -- and I don't think that's true.

I also don't think that's what stealth means to those trans people who use the term to describe themselves. But that's how the term comes across to me, and possibly to non-trans people, and that's why I don't like it.

Everyone has secrets. Maybe the woman with a mastectomy who uses a prosthetic breast, or the man with a colostomy bag who doesn't show it to everyone he meets, or the person with a prosthetic leg who doesn't wear shorts is living stealth as well -- as is the person with clinical depression or with cancer who doesn't reveal it to all.

But the truth is that they are not really "living stealth" -- they are simply maintaining a level of privacy to which everyone is entitled, including trans people. They are not living "in disguise," and neither are we. We are who we are, whether we are public about it or not.

We are not sneaking around restrooms, peeking around corners, or even flying under somebody's radar. We are just living our natural-born lives (and they are natural-born, no matter what body we had or

have).

My biggest concern about the word “stealth” is not how it might come across to non-trans people, although I certainly don’t think it comes across favorably -- my biggest concern is how, like “passing,” it comes across psychologically to us.

If we think we are “passing” every day as something we’re not, or if we think that we are “living stealth,” or living a secret, it can make integrating our identity as the men and women that we are more difficult. It can make us feel as if we are, or should be, hiding. It can make us feel as if we are “in disguise” all the time -- and that is not a good way to feel.

In the comments for my “passing” post, a reader suggested “blending in,” which I like a lot better. I have used “assimilation” to describe the situation of those people who live as men and women without the “trans” label or without being out about it. That word has its own problems, but it is the closest that I have been able to come so far to the concept represented by “stealth.”

But I would be fine with both “passing” and “stealth” going by the wayside and just “man” or “woman” taking their place.

Thoughts?

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

Suggested citation

mkailey. "Passing and Stealth: Two Words to Lose? Part Two." TransAdvocate, July 24, 2013.
https://www.transadvocate.com/passing-and-stealth-two-words-to-lose-part-two_n_9793.htm