TRANSADVOCATE

The Many Shades of Stealth

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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

I love Lynn Conway's piece "Many Shades of Out" and this piece is meant to add to what she is saying rather than criticize what she said.

Yes indeed there are many shades to out and conversely there are just as many shades to stealth.

Lynn's transition preceded mine by several years, but we were both part of that first wave of transsexual people transitioning within the US Medical system.

While we differ greatly in our background we do share many things in common.

We had to be trail blazers because we were among the first. There were no real maps or guidelines.

The people offering advice were as clueless as we were in creating strategies that worked.

Most often our peers were the most rigid advice givers and the harshest critics of those who deviated from the group think of the time.

Many of us went our own way back then. I learned from the memoirs of many. Those memoirs are worth hunting for and preserving because they show what a diverse bunch we were.

Very few of us were actually deep stealth to the point of not telling our partners. Most of us had

friends we could let our hair down with even if only to reminisce on a long distant phone call.

Which is why there are many shades of both stealth and out.

Even today the ability to earn a living, while out is a challenge. Thanks to education, corporate policies and a low level of expectation of the peons working the concrete floors in big box store or the fast food industry life is little easier.

What isn't easier is being out.

So many of us were raised with shame and guilt about our being trans. So many of us have had lives filled with abuse and violence because of our being trans.

Stealth was always our friend. Hiding our being trans when we were young eliminated some childhood bullying and abuse from both parents and peers. We brought that experience to our adult lives having learned the wisdom of not letting others see our being trans.

When we transitioned many of us experienced loss. We were rejected by family and friends.

We armored ourselves from that hurt, short circuited it by being proactive and cutting off friendships and contact with people we knew before. Sometimes we went so far as to cut off contact with our sisters and brothers we went through transition with.

We walled ourselves off from people who provide support networks of friends.

I often had two separate circles of friends.

When I was involved with the Women's Movement a few feminists knew, a number acted as though they didn't. I never really hid parts of my photo portfolio and at a time when there was a great deal of hostility towards transsexual women within the lesbian feminist community, my photographs show us to be ordinary women. I showed drag performers and gender queers as being human. I showed gay men the same way because I saw myself as documenting the LGBT world along with the music scene.

I was a photographer for and a production artist for the Lesbian Tide during the same period when Sandy Stone was being trashed. I lived with the understanding I would be disavowed if my history were to come out.

I thought I was improving the level of acceptance of TS women within the movement by being an exemplary token.

Maybe I was, but maybe I would have improved things more if I were out.

The Transgender Movement that started in the 1990s has had aspects I detest. The extreme level of mandatory political correctness has rankled, especially given the awareness of how wonderfully politically incorrect so many of my sisters and brothers are. The dogmatism has bothered me greatly, the cultish aspects embraced by some drive me up the wall.

But then in the late 1990s, when I was living in Hollywood and involved with the LA Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center I started attending events where the LGBT communities' history was discussed and celebrated.

I started speaking up about how I had been a part of that movement and how other transsexual women and men were too, but how we had been invisible out of fear of the trashing and purges.

I used to agonize before coming out to a friend. My outing myself required a great deal of trust and a desire to have a life-long friend.

For me the last twenty years have been marvelous beyond word. All the silliness of the ideological arguments aside.

We've torn down so many walls.

Some of the Facebook groups I am on are made up of veteran 1960s Movement people. I'm out about transitioning amid the tumult of the 1960s activist movement.

I have this blog.

I'm still stealth when it comes to strangers and consider my history TMI for the work environment.

Old habits die hard, yet I've reconnected with a friend from High School and my cousin.

I enjoyed a conference I went to and I'd go see Namoli Brennet in a heart beat if she were to play the Kessler or Uncle Calvins.

There are so many sisters and brothers out there performing music I can see those who play in a genre I like and ignore others knowing full well that they too had an audience.

I buy the memoirs of a lot of my sisters and brothers because I like reading their stories.

But marching in a Trans-Pride Parade is a toughie for me. I did it a couple of times in the 1990s and I don't think it is something I feel comfortable with.

But then I was always more comfortable behind the camera than in front of one and if we had such an event in a city where I lived I wouldn't hesitate to be the one doing the documenting.

I suspect my feelings are shared by many sisters and brothers who sit on the sideline and say, "Go team!"

Some of us are from a time when stealth equaled survival, others of us still carry the scars, as a result we still manage our information.

We still have the internal debates, the conflict. Many of us don't want to have Transsexual or Transgender as an honorific.

Yet we are getting old, our friends are dying one by one as time takes its toll and we do not want to return to the isolation of our childhoods. We are often conflicted, wanting people to know what we did but also not wanting that label to obliterate the reality of lives lived as ordinary women and men.

So we negotiate in a world of gray tones neither deep stealth nor fully out to the point of wearing t-shirts and publicly embracing TS/TG as a label or identity.

Cross-posted from Women Born Transsexual

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