

the agony of
Nurturing the Spirit
a mother's recount of raising a transgendered child...

Rachel is a beautiful, well-adjusted, happy and healthy nine year old little girl. She likes to do all the things little girls at this age like to do. Sleepovers and ice-cream sundaes are by far her favorite things in life.

But her life to this point has not been easy. Rachel was born with a boy's body. This is our story...

A baby boy comes home...

In 1996, I gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, Ryan and Alissa. They were the most beautiful babies I had ever seen. I had struggled to have children; these two were the result of 11 invitro fertilizations in five years, with five miscarriages along the way. This was, by far, the happiest day of my life.

I was not the type of mom that learned everything from books; I thought that the best parenting would come from within and I wanted to tap into my maternal instincts. I had no expectations for my children's lives; I just wanted to raise happy, secure, productive adults.

It was apparent from the beginning that these two kids were completely different. Alissa was active and alert and always needing to know what was going on; she slept in short intervals. Ryan was very quiet and serious, he enjoyed cuddling and sleeping and he hated to be held by different people. My mom and I would joke, "typical boy".

By two-and-a-half, both children were active and speaking. Ryan would always correct us when we said things like "Good Boy" or "Boys do it like this". He would say "But I'm a girl." He would get upset when he wore blue while his sister was dressed in pink. He was not interested in typical boys' toys nor did he like us to describe him as "handsome"; he insisted on "pretty" or "beautiful".

We attributed all of these behaviors and confusions to having a twin sister who hit her milestones earlier. She was the first to crawl, the first to walk, the first to speak and the first to potty train. Ryan was always competitive, even early on, so we thought that Ryan just wanted to be like Alissa.

Something is definitely wrong...

One night I was bathing the kids; they weren't three yet. After the kids played and washed up, I took them from the tub and wrapped them in towels. I left the bathroom for a moment to get something (I can't remember what) and when I returned, Ryan was trying to remove his penis with an unopened nail clipper. Shocked, I said, "Hey

Buddy, what are you doing?" He replied, very innocently, "I have to cut this off, it doesn't go there." I told him that it would hurt and took the clippers. We continued with the rest of the nightly activities; I went on as best I could.

As time went on, Ryan's need to express like a girl became more and more apparent. He loved nail polish and lipstick. He liked to play dress-up for hours to the point where they became his daily attire. He gave us a hard time when it was time to go somewhere. He got upset when his sister would be able to wear a dress and he couldn't. He stopped attending his own birthday parties and refused to open gifts. Even Christmas was disappointing; he needed to be coaxed through each present, constantly eyeing his sister's booty.

Ryan's mood was more and more depressed and he was only four years old. I kept hoping that this was just confusion or a phase, but it wasn't ending, it was getting worse. At home during the day, he was happy in his dress-up things or wearing some of his sister's old clothes. He played with other little girls in the neighborhood and it was really apparent to the other moms that Ryan was very feminine in both his actions and his activities.

Time for school...

Ryan and Alissa started kindergarten at age five. I went in and met Ryan's teacher and told her that he preferred to play as a girl and that was okay with his father and me. I asked her to tell me if there were any problems or if kids started picking on him and she promised that she would. She supported a child's right to be happy even if it meant not behaving as defined by our society's roles for gender.

Kindergarten was uneventful. Ryan's grades were average and his friends were girls in his class. Mornings were brutal however; he never wanted to go to school, and he never wanted to get dressed. It was a constant struggle.

Just before first grade began, one hot August night, I was putting him to bed and we were saying our prayers. When he ended, he looked at me and said "I'm so mad at God. Every night after I say my prayers, I close my eyes and ask God to make me into a girl, and every morning when I wake up I'm still a boy. God made a mistake mommy and he won't fix it, no matter how hard I wish."

My heart broke. I said, "I know honey. I know you want to be a girl. And when I was your age I wanted to be a boy. But when I grew up I was glad I was a girl." And he asked "What if I grow up and I still don't want to be a boy, what then?" I replied, "Then I'll help you find a doctor that can change your body into a girl's". His face lit up like it was Christmas. "You mean like when I'm 25?" I said "yes, when you're 25". He slept that night with a smile on his face.

When first grade started I explained his needs to the teacher and again asked that she watch for bullying. This teacher too, was supportive and understanding. Each day was again met with a struggle and matters got worse. At school, Ryan began to have panic attacks; he had emotional breakdowns daily. He was unable to do his work; he could not concentrate or pay attention.

He would say things to me like “You don’t know what its like to be me” or “Mom, I wish I was dead”. We had long talks about his need to be a girl but he would not discuss these issues with anyone else. My heart was breaking. I could not find a doctor who understood what he was going through. Doctor’s didn’t want to get involved with a child so young for fear of lawsuits in the future. Ryan was only happy when he was able to express as a girl so I found myself becoming more and more lenient with this behavior. His father, on the other hand, was doing his best to “mold his son” into a boy. This caused added tension into a house that was already in turmoil.

The Agony of Nurturing the Spirit...

I was often accused of “encouraging” Ryan’s feminine behavior, but I couldn’t have stopped it if I tried. To me, it didn’t seem right to force a child to like things he didn’t like, or dress in a way that made him uncomfortable, or play in a way that wasn’t fun, just to please everyone else. My gut told me something was wrong, and the solution was uncomfortable for everyone except me and my child.

I remember making the analogy of having a child who was trapped in a wheelchair. If this were the case, and I could do something to allow this child to run and play like all other kids for a few hours a day, wouldn’t I be lax as a mother if I didn’t allow this miracle to occur. To me, Ryan had a little girl trapped inside, and letting her out made him happy, and seeing him happy made me happy, no matter what it took.

I always believed that each child is born with a spirit, a reason to be. It was my greatest responsibility as a parent to nurture that spirit and help him become who he was meant to be, not who I wanted him to be. But how do you, as a mom, allow your child to express behaviors that are appalling to society. My dilemma was clear, and so was my mission. I needed to create an environment where Ryan could be happy and others could accept him. But how?

By six years old, Ryan was suicidal. We had to lock the windows upstairs because he threatened, on a regular basis, to jump out and end his life. I spent my days crying to anyone who would listen, insurance-care providers, doctors, secretaries, receptionists, teachers, family members and friends... the list goes on.

The term is Transgendered...

In March of that year, we found a pediatric doctor who specialized in child behavioral and gender issues. She explained that Ryan had Gender Identity Disorder; he is Transgendered. Putting it into laymen’s terms, she told us that while not much is known about this condition, it is believed to be caused when the child’s brain develops like that of the opposite gender, in this case female. This development takes place in utero; a signal from the fetus, depending on the biologic gender, tells the mother’s body to produce estrogen or to masculinize that estrogen into a form of testosterone. The hormones produced then wash the brain causing a part of the hypothalamus to develop differently in men than in women. The XX and XY chromosomes control fetal body development only.

It is believed that something in the hormonal wash goes wrong, or the signal from the fetus is misinterpreted, and the brain develops resembling that of the opposite sex as opposed to that of the biologic sex. That is why Ryan felt like a girl inside, because, chances are, that his brain was developed as such.

The good news was there was a diagnosis. The bad news was that the only “cure” for such a condition was to allow an individual to express as the identified gender. She was not aware of any cases where a child this young was allowed to express openly in this manner. She explained the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care for Transgendered Adults, and said if we chose to allow our child to follow these standards, she would support us, but it was going to be a tough road for all.

The Transition...

Slowly, Ryan began his transition. It started at home and in the neighborhood. He was allowed to freely wear whatever clothing he liked; I began purchasing him his own wardrobe of “girls clothes”. I also spoke to anyone that would listen, explaining the best I could, what this condition was and how it affected him. People were understanding, and for the most part, accepting; but I always got the feeling they walked away saying, “Wow, she’s got a handful, glad that’s not my kid.” But I was glad that Ryan wasn’t theirs too.

Ryan started second grade as Reggi; his initials are REG (and Reggi was the girl character on his favorite cartoon). Because of his anxiety during first grade and his inability to learn or retain, he began second grade testing at a mid-year kindergarten level. I explained his recent diagnosis to the teachers and administrators; all were accepting and understanding and willing to do whatever it took to help him out.

The first few months seemed to be confusing for everyone but Reggi. His hair was growing a little longer; his clothing was all purchased in girl’s departments but “unisex” would be the word I would use to describe his attire. Reggi was happy; happy to go to school; happy to be learning; participating in all the lessons for the first time in his life.

All of the teacher’s noticed his change, but so did the other students. While I could go to the staff and explain what was occurring, no one could discuss the subject with the other students without parental permission. So the kids asked questions like “Hey, is your kid a boy or a girl?” and I would reply “It doesn’t matter to me as long as Reggi is happy.” Funnier yet, no one knew what pronouns to use, so everyone avoided them. I would joke with the teachers that we all spoke like Elmo on Sesame Street.

Reggi settled into 2nd grade and had an incredible year. For the first time he was invited to a birthday party. He came home and said, “Mom, I got invited to Julia’s Birthday Party for next Saturday. All the girls in the class were invited! Can I go? Please?” Of course my child was attending.

From a Caterpillar to a Butterfly...

In March of Reggi's seventh year I found an incredible internet support group, www.transfamily.org, that provided a method of communication among parents of transgendered children. Most of the parents on the list were moms of children in their 20's and 30's, but several of the moms had children as young as Reggi. Within 48 hours of finding this site, I found more information than I could have imagined about children suffering in bodies that don't match their identified gender.

After discussing this new information with the rest of the family, I went to the school and told Reggi's teacher that we were ready to start using female pronouns. This was by far, the hardest part of our transition, using "she" and "her" instead of "he" and "him", but the teachers seemed get the hang of it right away; the other children caught on quickly as well. At home it was a little rougher, but each time we made a mistake and used a male pronoun, we corrected ourselves and moved on with our discussion.

We watched our child's spirit come to life. It was like witnessing the metamorphosis a caterpillar makes to become a beautiful butterfly. As her outward appearance started to resemble who "she" felt like inside, her academics and social skills improved as well. Soon she was reading and spelling with little or no effort and that year, she completed 2nd grade testing on a 4th grade level.

But not without Consequence...

Reggi began to excel in all areas. She was being invited to friends' homes for play time and sleepovers and her grades became all A's and B's. But the children who couldn't understand what had happened, and who couldn't forget that Ryan was in their Kindergarten and 1st grade classes, started to become abusive. They would reserve their comments to times when an adult wasn't present, like on the playground or on the bus. They called her "Gay-Boy" or "the Girl with a Dick"; they tried to trip her or entice her into a physical confrontation. But Reggi, loving who she was allowed to be, didn't respond; she seemed to just want it to go away. In fact, the only reason I found out what was happening was Alissa, Reggi's twin, was usually present but had been sworn to secrecy by Reggi.

One day Alissa got off the bus crying. "Mom, I can't take it any more" she cried. The kids on the bus had a yearbook from the previous year and they were harassing Reggi, pointing out pictures from 1st grade captioned "Ryan" and saying things like "See, you're a boy that likes to wear skirts you little fag" or "no matter what you call yourself, you'll always be Ryan Grant, Ryan Grant" (tantalizing her with her birth name like it was a bad word). Even the bus driver pointed out the name on the bus pass was "Ryan" so "he" had to be a boy.

Reggi's response was slight of emotion. She just said "Mom, I don't care what those kids say. They are jerks and I wouldn't play with them even if they were nice to me". I knew inside she had to hurt, but I realized why she could not tell anyone; to repeat what was happening just caused the event to go on – and she just wanted it all to go away.

The school, once again, handled it great. They brought the children into the counselor's office in small groups and discussed what was happening and tried to explain what Reggi was dealing with. They allowed the children to ask questions and discuss their behavior in the security of other children and without repercussion. To this day, out of some 600 students that experienced Reggi's transition, only one or two bullies continue, very subtly and infrequently, and the school takes a "no tolerance" approach toward the behavior.

From today on...

In August of 2005, Ryan's name was legally changed to Rachel Elizabeth; Reggi would still work as a nickname. This was done so that all school records could be changed and class lists would be distributed with a girl's name as opposed to a boy's. In this way, Rachel would not be singled out by substitutes or bus drivers; nor would explanations be necessary in many settings.

As Rachel approaches puberty, a whole new set of issues arise which we can only prepare ourselves for. Our plan is to wait until we notice signs of secondary sex changes such as body hair or voice change. We then will probably use hormone blockers to prevent these changes. If all is on track, (if she still expresses as a female and desires to live as one) we will begin HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and allow her body to develop with feminine characteristics. Surgery, at this point, will be her decision when she is of legal age to do so.

But this is just our Plan. If puberty changes her internal feelings, then Rachel will be able to grow into a man. This has to be Rachel's choice with our guidance and support. She has already begun seeing a therapist who will keep her in touch with her internal feelings; alerting us to any confusions that may arise.

There are no "Absolutes" in Life...

The one thing I learned through this journey is never make a plan that can't be changed. So many "life-rules" I took for granted have been questioned over and over and now I live with a truly open mind and heart. There are so many basic facts like, the sun will rise in the morning and will set at night, and what goes up, must come down, that I didn't question when I gave birth to a girl, that she would grow to be a woman or when I gave birth to a boy he would grow to be a man.

But now I look at life a little differently. I ask myself "What if...?" What if I throw something up into the air and it doesn't return – would that necessarily be a bad thing? Or what if the sun forgot to rise; if my life continued in some way, would that be all bad?

My child has taught me more in nine years than I learned in the entire 37 years before she was born. She has taught me the true meaning of tolerance, perseverance and patience. She has taught me to take nothing for granted and not to be scared of the "What If's" in life. These are life's challenges and adventures which, when celebrated rather than feared, make our life experience whole.