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## **Surviving as a Transgendered Woman in a Dysphoric World**

First of all, let me thank Wally (aka Meredith) and Lynne Bacon, Laura Hedman and the others who have made my first trip to Omaha possible. I also want to thank all of you for allowing me this opportunity to talk with you here in the heartland of America on this, another dark, dark day of reality after what has been, for me at least, a political nightmare, Election Day 2004. For those who do not know me, I am Marci Bowers, MD. I was raised in the Midwest (Wisconsin, actually) in a two-parent home in a town of 9000. I have two younger sisters and a younger brother, all of whom are married with children to their first and only spouses. I too remained married to my spouse of 20 years although our marriage is anything but ordinary. My children (ages 8, 12, and 13, 2 girls and a boy) attend a Catholic grade school in liberal-leaning Seattle and are thriving, despite my absence from their daily lives, thanks largely to their mother, who has always respected me and has stood by me. No one in my immediate family has ever made a single pronoun mistake since my transition in 1998. Remarkable.

Medical School at the University of Minnesota brought a number of personal accolades that eventually landed my residency position at the University of Washington in Seattle in Obstetrics and Gynecology in 1986, the year that Microsoft went public. Had I bought just 100 Microsoft shares then, that value would be over 1 million dollars today. Then again, if it were all about money, would I ever selected the fascinating life choices that have landed me where I am today, the sex change queen of Trinidad, Colorado? The best years of my life thus far have been those early years with my children. I know, you were hoping I'd say that my best years were those after transition but I cannot. It makes me think. Then yet again, I am sure that I'd have done nothing differently and I fervently love being a part of a growing but, as of now, insignificant minority.

My spouse is a PhD in Molecular Biology but uses her advanced degree answering the phone and managing my medical office in Seattle. Somehow, after 20 years of turmoil with me, we remain a team. Interestingly, when I went through my own transition after 8 years as an Ob/Gyn in a large, 85-doctor medical clinic in Seattle, I found that the factors most associated with acceptance of my transition was level of education and race. Patients with higher education and patients with diversity of any sort in their personal backgrounds tended to accept me fully. And although I delivered the children (2 before Marci and 2 after Marci) of one of the city's most prominent Evangelical ministers (who was wonderful to me), quite possibly the poorest indicator for acceptance of me personally was avowed Christianity. That fact has stayed with me as one of the more bitter memories of my own transition and is particularly germane to the state of our nation as it sits now, post-election 2004. Where are we going and what are we going to do? When and why did the Bible become a vehicle for the judgment of others? Where in the Bible does it speak out against transsexualism and just what are we, as a free nation, doing by using the Bible as an absolute blueprint for the future when the Bible itself was written in hindsight by a group of old men reflecting upon past events 65 years and more after the fact? Is it honestly the 'word of God' or is it the Bible's intentions that have been lost by our modern, 'moral value' world? If you ask yourself the simple question WWJD (what would Jesus Do?)....the answer is simple: unconditional, non-judgmental love. End of story. And does beauty not come from within or are must we fit into the pretty Republican picture portrayed on television sets across America or be sentenced to life in gender ghettos in some out-of-the way urban location? And is religion, as Marx once said, truly, the opiate of the masses, suppressing free and independent thought while suppressing diversity and self-expression?

Wasn't it diversity that so wonderfully, more than any other attribute of this country, the factor that most advanced our status as a great nation? Are we in the transgendered community facing societal extermination by continuing to lose employment opportunities with no legal recourse as our civil liberties are removed and as 'judges' are increasingly replaced by those who feel a 'moral obligation' to uphold the values of rigor and 'normalcy', reminiscent of the rise of Nazism in Pre-WWII Germany? It is worth remembering that one of the earliest acts of Adolph Hitler was to smash the laboratory of Steinach in 1933 effectively ending all experimentation in the early treatment of Gender Dysphoria and that gays and other 'undesirables' met their fate in the extermination camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz....and more frightening yet, didn't use the Bible to defend his fears and fascism. Lastly, when will it strike the world as hypocritical to preach the sanctity of human life while meat consumption promotes the stock and slaughter of millions of animals on a daily basis? These are just a few of my current worries and ones that will undoubtedly trouble all of us over these next 4 years as we in the transgendered community attempt to convince others that we are not morally deranged, consumed by satan, mentally ill or child molesters.

In 1969, a then 45-year old general surgeon named Stanley Biber, who had been practicing medicine since his engagement during the Korean War, was approached by a young social worker in Trinidad, Colorado. She politely asked if he would do her surgery for her. Dr. Biber, not lacking in confidence, replied "Certainly" but asked, "What surgery would you like?" When she indicated that she was, in fact, a transsexual, Dr. Biber, without blinking a discriminatory eye said, "well, I will need to do some research but I think we can manage". He then sent for the original surgical descriptions of the surgery from drawings at Johns Hopkins Medical Center that had drafted copies based upon the original work of Dr. Georges Burou. Dr. Burou was a gynecologist and surgeon who first refined Sex Reassignment Surgery and patterned the now-standard penile inversion technique. Dr. Biber took these simple drawings, added his own modifications, standardized the procedure and....the rest, as they say... is history. I also arrived in Trinidad at age 45, worked alongside Dr. Biber for 6 amazing months, attended his 80<sup>th</sup> surprise birthday party and found that both he and my mother shared the very same date of birth, May 4<sup>th</sup>... my mom and 'dad'..

Meanwhile, in 1969, I was an 11-year old skinny white kid from Wisconsin, popular but insecure, always picked last for any team sports, miserably unhappy in the body that God had 'given me'. But, I was expected to live in that body and, by God, I did my best. I actually became a fairly good athlete (by female standards anyhow), was always a good student, but thoroughly cherished my 'feminine side' in art and in music particularly. I didn't play much with the girls as I hoped to keep those desires a secret though was certainly jealous of the beauty and the grace with which, it seemed, most girls were effortlessly able to carry themselves. I liked their clothes. I liked their eyes, their hair, their mannerisms, their interaction with the world....all of it. I knew I was a 'boy' but dearly felt that I was horribly miscast in this play on 'life', my life and I was irresistibly drawn to that which I saw as 'feminine'.

When we moved from our secure Wisconsin home to Suburban St. Louis, Missouri before the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, my life turned sharply for the worse. Judged now for how I 'looked' rather than for who I was, my friendships lost and new ones hard to make, my life felt in ruins. I fell in with the 'wrong crowd', I grew my hair long, my grades suffered, I became a target for the school bullies, was called names and was physically assaulted time and again. My parents were always there for me though and they recognized my misery. We moved back to Wisconsin in less than 2 years but all was not settled. My cross-dressing had been a constant since age 4, my earliest memory as John F. Kennedy lay dying, when my mother first found me in my sister's Sunday dress. When times were worst, my private cross-dressing became a release. I felt free, I felt loved, I felt myself. But I felt ashamed. What was going on? Was I consumed by the devil? Was this wrong? How is this possible? And yet, why did it feel so right?

I spent much of my adolescence and college years traversing through intense self-discovery, punctuated by lengthy periods of conscious cross-dressing, fantasy, and then self-doubt, revulsion and purging. I maintained solid grades and grew to make strong friendships. I found female companionship but maintained an inner sense of jealousy and, as a result, became a reasonably good lover, never content until female orgasm was attained, imagining that I might be her. But it was not enough. I had been hoarding female clothing since my freshman year in college and finally left UW-Madison in 1978 in order to live the rest of my life as a woman. I was 19 years old. My journey away from school took me to San Diego, California. I was still searching for meaning in my life and thought, as many do, that religion might do the trick, an opiate for my 'moral decay'. I spent my first week there, whisked away into the San Bernadino Mountains to a religious camp maintained by the followers of the Reverend Sun Young-Moon and the Unification church. I will never forget the frantic phone call with my mother from a payphone over the fact that Reverend Moon had recently been exposed on '60 Minutes' and that I was in a CULT. Honestly, if I had found what I had felt I needed in my life, I might have stayed but that was not my destiny and I sincerely felt always that my destiny lay within my hands (or perhaps more correctly, in the hands of God).

Circumstances in San Diego never allowed for a transition of any sort. When I went out in public, I really didn't have any idea on how to 'pass', I never fell into any sort of cross-dressing crowd, and just never quite managed although kids would ask me routinely if I were a boy or a girl even back then, which I found intensely gratifying. I worked by photographing little kids sitting on Shetland ponies, driving a beat-up, 3-in-the-column 1966 Dodge Pickup truck with plywood slats along the sides and a makeshift ramp in order to contain my trio of Shetland ponies. I would drive into suburban neighborhoods, open my ramp and out would trot the 3 ponies. My photography colleagues and I would attempt damage control as the ponies would launch themselves...Blue, Jack and Pancho...truly, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Shetland ponies...onto well-manicured suburban lawns, sneaking a quick 'meal' before the besiegement of hundreds of small kids, who we dressed in chaps, kerchiefs and cowboy hats for 'Pony Pictures', many of which still hang, no doubt, in the homes around southern California. It was quite the job. When I returned last fall to San Diego, my old bosses' headquarters in the Hillcrest neighborhood of San Diego had been leveled, replaced by the entirely gentrified 'Starbucks and Java juice'. I realized in San Diego that transition would take money and that money was possible only through education. I returned to the University of Wisconsin...still a 'man'... in the fall of 1978, graduating in 1980, the year I met my future wife, Ann. We were married in 1985. I briefly went on hormones during my residency in 1987 but left them for several years as my children were conceived, still believing that I could now put my notion of gender transition behind me. I could not.

As I entered mid-life in 1995, my life was at its pinnacle. I had two beautiful daughters with my wife pregnant with our first son, was department chairperson of one of the largest Medical Centers in the United States, and had just completed a gorgeous remodel of an old beach house located on the shores of the Puget Sound. I was well-regarded as a physician and my career was clearly 'on the rise'. One morning, I walked onto the floor at our local maternity ward and was approached by an attractive 30-ish nurse there and was asked, "Dr. Bowers, did you hear?"

"Hear what?" I replied.

"You've been voted hottest man on Labor and Delivery". Needless to say, there was no formal award presentation ...but the message was clear. This skinny white kid from Wisconsin ...to my shock and horror...I had unknowingly become a 'hottie'. However, what the nurses there hadn't factored into their informal poll was that underneath my Armani suit, pressed white Oxford button-down shirt and Jerry Garcia tie, was a most lovely lavender and lace matching bra and pantie set that I'd just received mail-order from Victoria's Secret... and they even matched my tie. Anyway, so yada yada yada my story, **my** little secret became unofficially known less than two years later as my hair grew, my ears were pierced and I appeared at the American College of Ob/Gyn's annual Meeting in Las Vegas as Dr. Marci Bowers. Whoosh, that story made it back home to Swedish Medical Center faster than the credit card statement from a bad gambling weekend.

There are so many memories and stories to tell regarding my own transition and the acceptance I received during my first week on the job as Dr. Marci Bowers. During that amazing week of June 1998, I received more than 200 letters of support, dozens of floral bouquets and hundreds of well-wishes. A young nurse slipped me a scrap of paper on rounds one day that said simply 'I am excited for you'. Finally, I received a letter that brought tears. It read,

*Dear Dr. Bowers,*

*Although I did not realize that my daughter, Kathryn was a patient of yours, I read your letter (one of more than 3500 explaining my transition to patients) with interest and felt compelled to respond. Kathryn died earlier this year of leukemia at age 28 but would have wanted to share her support for this most courageous of decisions. Someday, when your children are older, I am certain they will come to know how truly brave their father was.*

*Sincerely,  
Jack McCarthy*

So now, more than 90 genital changes later, here I am ascending once again, entering the limelight, holding the torch, carrying the baton, trying to hold it all together in the face of criticism and high expectations in a dark and very fearful America. I have been acting as a consultant for CBS television's CSI series as they prepared a blockbuster episode featuring a transsexual murder case. I had made some editorial changes, very well received and was asked by the co-producer just 2 weeks ago to read for a small part in the show. Sure enough, after hurriedly throwing an audition tape together amidst genital reassignments, I beat out 8 other local actresses for the part. So 2 days later here I was flying out....ok it was only coach....but with a limo waiting for me in LA...Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, and John Travolta had sat where I was less than one week ago and here I was... this skinny white kid from Wisconsin riding to the Hiatt Regency. On the set the next morning I hardly knew CSI from an IUD but found myself about to appear on camera for their historic 100<sup>th</sup> episode. Katherine, Grissom, Warrick, they were all there but I really didn't know who they were....their 'presence' told me they were stars. I recognized Marg Helgenberger from her previous role as a nurse on China Beach. She and I hung out for most of the day when not shooting. I listened as she scheduled her next mammogram around a lunch engagement in Malibu. We talked about our kids, careers, the usual. The shoot went well with many stories and memories I'll not soon forget. Some asked me who I was on the set. I said, 'well, I'm actually just a doctor but I play an actor on TV'. The show airs November 18 and I hope you'll watch...not a perfect transsexual portrayal but exposure nonetheless which touches on many transsexual issues in subtle ways and with a sense of humor which I view as essential.

That night, Spike (the Men's network....shhhhhh, I know many men who watch WE) showed back-to-back-to-back episodes of CSI Las Vegas, the number one show in America, for which I had just filmed. I was horrified. I had never seen the show as it stood for everything I find morally wrong....glorification of violence, sexual exploitation, debauchery ....filmed in Sin City. And since then, the answers have sort of come to me, in my post-election funk... I think there is something that resonates for people in these kinds of shows, this insatiable need for exposure to violence. It is a detailed, edgy show but yuk, grossity upon gross...maggots, dead bodies, people chopped up in wood-chippers, throats slit, stuffed into ice makers, floating bloated in bathtubs, reeking of death. This was **my** show? **My** network television debut?

I suppose, like the news that Mayor Gavin Newsome of San Francisco had proclaimed the legitimacy of gay marriage in February, shows like CSI were the seeds of GW Bush's 2004 election victory in middle America. People in middle America, it seems to me, are a bit scared with this changing world. When I grew up, we didn't know that gays even existed whereas any town of any size is likely to have openly gay members of its community. Black people and big cities like Chicago were to be feared from my town in southern Wisconsin...but not this....but now fear....everywhere....causing us to hide increasingly within our homes, in our suburbs, in our cars, in our small towns, away from the violence and the ethical squalor of the decadent urban lifestyles of the west coast and the northeast...where the sinners live and morality has slipped....paving the way to further decline of our great nation, the Sodom and Gomorrhah of our day. It was safe to watch these CSI's in Miami, Las Vegas, and New York City, known havens to criminals and deviants...for they **validate** the fearful messages shouted loudly from the pulpit and from the Trinity Network...and the Bible **says so**. You can see why fear has worked so well. It is the number one show in America.

And transsexualism? The most fearful of all....beautiful women who were once men? ....the most unthinkable outcome of the 'Homosexual Agenda'...another likely extension of GAY MARRIAGE, passed off as imminent amongst the churchgoers of middle America, appearing in previously pious places like **Europe** and **Canada**? Transsexualism scares the **hell** out of middle America and there is no way around that fact. But, I believe, there is hope among the fear, there is silver amongst the clouds...but it will found within us, through education, and through faith....There are many including myself that believe that we in the transgendered movement have the moral upper hand and a closer, more spiritual connection to God : we are relatively sexually inactive, our thoughts are not dominated 24/7 by sexual thoughts and we have lived both sides of the gender divide providing enormous perspective.

But there is a battle coming and it is incumbent upon us to win it...for nothing less than the future of the world is at stake...literally. Are we to define the world as black and white or is it a spectrum? Is the world religion Christianity only or are there truths from all religious entities, God's truths that have been gleaned from earthly experiences and Divine intervention? We cannot allow the world to recoil in fear, seeking refuge behind suburban walls, homeland security and military power. Recall the beginning of WWII....it was fear....of Jews and of non-conformity...that fueled the rise of Adolph Hitler. Women were quiet then but cannot, must not, remain in quiet subservience to their men. Understand world Karma, realize that what goes around comes around. We need to project poise, grace, and respect as we promote, unabashedly, the acceptance and unconditional love for all. And remember finally, it is bravery....true bravery....not via bombs and missiles... that advances the causes of society.

I will leave you with my brief list of Clues that your husband might be transgendered...

10. He always leaves the toilet seat down for you....always.
9. He comments about how nice you look....and means it.
8. The mail order catalogues arriving at home are usually in his name.
7. He knows all of your sizes...all of them.
6. He notices attractive women but comments on their shoes.
5. He knows what aisle the hair removal products are at Target.
4. He carries Midol in his wallet.
3. When you cramp, he truly feels your pain.
2. When you go out at nite, he smells better than you do.
1. When the UPS truck comes, he runs to the door and says, "that must be mine"

Marci Bowers, MD

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