

## FOREWORD

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Many transgender people tell their stories, or use their own feelings and descriptions of their connections to others as a vehicle through which to “normalize” their experience, to make an idea of “trans-ness” comprehensible to people who have no idea what it might feel like. Those who experience their gender as different from their sex are constantly aware of that difference—even if the difference is not visible to others—and they often search for ways to explain their experience. Writers have always tried to work their verbal magic by creating emotional reactions in their readers; and in the case of transpeople, the primary emotion most writers seek to evoke is empathy—the sense of shared experience. This book is not that kind of book. This book is an invocation to empathy through reason, not emotion.

Nick Teich explains what it means to be transgender in a refreshingly clear way. His text is aimed at a wide audience, including young adults seeking to contextualize concepts they have read about in the press or in theoretical settings and anyone who’s had some limited exposure to transpeople and who wants to learn more without prying

deeply into a single individual's personal life events. Autobiographical accounts can be uncomfortably awkward, marred by authors' assumptions that their experiences and observations matter, when they haven't properly laid the groundwork to engage their readers' trust. Nick's straightforward approach casts light on the social realities of transpeople in America without unduly burdening the reader with personality particularities. Yet he also manages to convey the humanity of his subject. For example, his chapter on coming out touches succinctly on the dynamics of relationships between transpeople and the various roles we play in other people's lives as children, parents, siblings, spouses or partners, and coworkers, with just enough detail to make readers aware of the nuances each of us faces.

Nick's perspective is particular to contemporary Western experience, especially when examining the controversy over the path to medical treatment that leads through the territory of mental health. To receive treatment, in most cases, transpeople are tasked with demonstrating to a mental health professional that we are stable, capable people, and that we can understand the ramifications of treatment. After spending our entire lives coming to grips with our gender and reaching a decision on a course of action—particularly for adults—having to ask permission to finally move forward is often perceived as frustrating, if not insulting. Nick presents the controversies and the complexities of this process in a way that invites readers to consider how their own opinions stack up against the prevailing standards, which are guaranteed to change in some way over the next several years with the introduction of the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's seventh edition of the Standards of Care. The grounding that Nick provides in these issues will help the inquisitive reader contextualize the coming changes.

Nick's chapter on the discrimination that transpeople face on a daily basis is enlightening because it grounds the reader in the cognitive processes and historical presumptions about people that most Americans carry around unconsciously. Nick's ideas throughout the book both inform and offer understanding, as well as setting up plenty of

opportunities for deeper exploration for students or the enterprising, inquisitive reader.

Transgender concepts and experience are still mystifying or even offensive to many people, but those who look below the surface to see the human beings affected by gender variance—and the social systems that have led to and exacerbate the condition—cannot help but be moved. With this book, Nick Teich’s contribution toward the kind of understanding that is needed to build a world that is safe for transgender people goes far beyond the summer camp for transgender kids that he started in 2009. Yet that camp, as he modestly describes in his introduction, is literally saving the lives of both children and parents. When it comes to making a difference, Nick’s inspirational efforts are worthy of commendation.



## INTRODUCTION

### Why This Book Was Written and How It Is Laid Out

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Why write this book?

To paraphrase Renaissance philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, “knowledge is power.” Over the past several years, I have spent innumerable hours reading about, discussing, and teaching people on the subject of transgenderism. I have found that even the most educated people know little of the subject, through no fault of their own. I found it disheartening that my professors in social work school, many of them practicing therapists, knew little to nothing about transpeople. I tried to think what I might know about the subject if I wasn’t living it. Would I know anything? Some things? A lot? I find these questions difficult to answer, and it doesn’t much matter. By writing *Transgender 101*, I have set out to educate people of all stripes about the basics of what it means to be a transgender person. There are many clinical textbooks, first-person accounts, and journal articles on different subjects surrounding transgenderism, but I found that a reasonably short, concise introduction to the topic, aimed at a wide audience,

simply did not exist. If this book can help people better understand their transgender brethren, then that is all I can ask for.

#### WHAT LED ME TO THIS TOPIC

I was labeled female at birth. Though as a young child I constantly told people that I wanted to be a boy and often blended in as one, it wasn't until after college, and after a long struggle with a deep depression, that I let the idea of transitioning from female to male take hold. Although this book is not an autobiography, there are highly personal reasons that led me to sit down and decide that I wanted to publish information about what it means to be transgender.

In 2009, I started the world's first summer camp program dedicated to transgender youth, called Camp Aranu'tiq. It is presently a week-long camp where kids do what kids do at camp: an array of different daytime activities on land and water, campfires, playing capture the flag, singing silly songs, staying up late to talk with bunkmates—you get the picture. It's a place for trans youth to feel safe and normal. There aren't too many places like that for trans kids or adults, unfortunately. I have been a summer camp person all my life. I attended a camp in Maine where I subsequently became a counselor, spending a total of thirteen summers there. I still go back often to visit. I always knew that I was very lucky to be able to go to camp. Though I may have presented as a boy, I was known as a girl. At camp my gender seemed to melt away; I was just able to be me.

After I entered the adult world and stopped going to camp for the full summer, I started spending one week in August volunteering at a charity-based summer camp. I loved doing it and became close with staff members who returned year after year. When I announced my impending gender transition to the staff of this camp, I was initially met with enthusiastic support, and I was relieved that my relationship would stay intact. However, in a complete change of attitude, months later the camp's director told me that I could not return “for the good of the kids.” I was also told that the campers' parents would likely be upset if

I continued to volunteer there because, I was told, “a lot of them probably watch *Jerry Springer*” (and thus would think that I belonged on that show and not at camp). After that, most everyone involved with the camp ceased to have contact with me. Though emotionally that loss was one of the most difficult I endured during my transition, it forced me to think. I thought not only about trans adults who are discriminated against, but children as well. What happens to kids who realize their transgender identity at a young age? What camp could they possibly attend? Certainly not a single-sex camp. But even at coed camps, the kids are split up into groups of “boys” and “girls.” What about someone who was assigned one sex at birth but identifies as another? What about kids who don’t know how they identify but know that they are not “boys” or “girls”?

Seventeen months after these thoughts finally solidified in my head, Camp Aranu’tiq had its first summer week, with forty-one campers and over twenty volunteer staff. The incredible positive transformation of everyone involved was, and still is, beyond words for me. I am so proud of the campers for having the courage to be themselves and the staff for taking a chance and subsequently changing lives. It is my hope that in my lifetime I will see all summer camps accept transgender youth just like any other camper.

For one year during my master’s program in clinical social work, I spent three days a week as an intern doing psychotherapy with young adults, a few of whom were transgender. The insight I gained during that time was very valuable. The journey is different for every person in every way, including the timeline, the events leading up to the realization of being transgender, the support systems (or lack thereof), and the struggle with depression, anxiety, and sometimes even suicide.

I learned from this therapy as well as from personal experiences and those of close friends that the tough stuff transpeople endure is almost always due to the stigma that comes with being transgender. The depression, the anxiety, the thought that life is not worth living—this often comes from thoughts transpeople have that they are freaks, sick, perverted, ungodly, and crazy. “And,” a transperson might think, “even if I were able to get over all of this, what would my family and friends say? I could not dream of doing this to them.” Loss of job, status, and respect

are concerns that swirl around in transpeople's heads. All of these thoughts are creations of our human society. They don't exist in the rest of the animal kingdom.

#### A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE

Some transgender people readily answer nearly every question that people ask about being transgender, including questions that no one would ever dream of asking a nontransperson (namely, anatomy-related questions). When transpeople reveal their trans identity to someone, it is a highly personal moment. It takes trust and courage to talk about gender identity or gender transition. If the transperson invites a no-holds-barred question-and-answer session, then ask whatever you wish. But most people draw a fine line between what is someone else's business and what is not. That being said, it is very difficult to be able to say, "I don't feel comfortable sharing that." Most people are unaccustomed to being told that something is not their business, at least not in everyday conversation. The person who asked the question may be overly apologetic, and then both parties end up feeling embarrassed. This is not necessary. It is important to be respectful. The best case scenario is probably to: (1) ask what, if any, questions are appropriate; and (2) to give the transperson an out if he or she feels like you are overstepping your bounds (even though your questions may be born of an innocent curiosity). This makes it easier for a transperson to maintain privacy and integrity.

#### A MAP OF THIS BOOK

Chapter 1, "What Does It Mean to Be Transgender?" focuses on answering that question in as simple yet as concrete a way as possible. It begins by calling into question your view of your own gender. We will move through some important definitions such as sex, gender identity, gender expression, and the gender binary. Some examples and helpful



tables will lead you through this material. Chapter 1 discusses how to refer to different transpeople as well as the estimates of the numbers of transpeople that exist today.

Chapter 2, “Sexual Orientation Versus Gender,” looks at the differences and similarities between the words *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *transgender*. We will define some more terms and look at scales and spectra that are used informally to measure sexual orientation and different aspects of gender. We will go over what might be confusing about differentiating between sexual orientation and gender and why the two are often conflated. Chapter 2 covers marriage and relationship legality issues due to gender and sexual orientation as well as a bit about the communities of gay, lesbian, and bisexual versus transgender and why they do not always get along.

Chapter 3, “Coming Out as Transgender,” discusses the ways in which transpeople come out, or reveal their trans identities, and the ways in which they do not. It explores the common reactions from different people when a transperson comes out (e.g., family, friends, others) and outlines the steps that some people go through to try to accept someone’s trans identity. Chapter 3 also touches on transgender children and their coming out.

Chapter 4, “Transition,” outlines the multifaceted transition process that many transgender people go through. This includes social transition, changing documentation, surgeries, hormone regimens, and an explanation about how some transgender people do not go through any medical transition (surgery and/or hormones). Chapter 4 also includes a brief description of transgender kids and what some of their transition processes might look like.

Chapter 5, “The History of Transgenderism and Its Evolution Over Time,” looks at some historical figures in the trans movement, a timeline of trans events in America, and a little bit of biology and evolution that might lead us to think about transgenderism as something that is completely natural. We will also briefly explore transgenderism in

other cultures, both in history and today. We will look at one famous case example, that of David Reimer, who endured a botched circumcision and was subsequently raised female until his teenage years, and how this case impacted the nature versus nurture debate.

Chapter 6, “Transgenderism as a Mental Health Issue,” discusses the controversy surrounding gender identity disorder and why some transgender people continue to be diagnosed with it. We will look at some examples and different sides of the ongoing debate, as well as the changes that are currently being made to the diagnosis.

Chapter 7, “Discrimination,” explores some different ways that people, both consciously and unconsciously, discriminate against transgender people. We will look at nondiscrimination and hate crime laws, the debate over public restroom use for transgender people, custody issues, a study that shows what transgender kids face in schools, discrimination in religion and the military, and what it means to pass as a nontransgender person.

Chapter 8, “Lesser-Known Types of Transgenderism,” shows us different kinds of gender identity and expression that are found under the umbrella of transgenderism but that are often left out altogether. These include drag queens, genderqueer people, two-spirit people, cross-dressers, and gender-variant and gender-nonconforming people. We will also look at the difference between transgender people and those with disorders of sex development (sometimes known as intersex) and how these two are not mutually exclusive terms. The chapter ends with a reflection on what we have discussed in the book and what one might do with this information.

A glossary of terms and resources for readers are given at the end of the book. When reading the glossary, keep in mind that there are many more terms than I have listed there that transgender and nontranspeople alike use to describe gender-related phenomena. I believe that language often boxes people in instead of freeing them to be who they are. However, as human beings, we communicate using language as part of our

daily existence, so it is important to define some terms. Most of the terms in the glossary are ones I use within the chapters of this book. Other people may use variations of these definitions and, likewise, the definitions of these terms may evolve over time.

#### A NOTE BEFORE WE GET STARTED

My hope is that you who read this book will enjoy yourselves and gain enough insight to be able to tell others that transgenderism is not about what people see on shows like *Jerry Springer*. It's about people trying to find their way through life just like anyone else. It's about people being themselves and hoping to be content with who they really are. Isn't that all any of us can ask for?

