

2.3 A Transman's Journey of Deconstructing Gender, Faith and Sexuality

Oliver, Sweden

Introduction

When I was born, someone took a peek between my legs and concluded that I was a girl. That was written on my birth certificate and I was raised according to that information. With that came a whole lot of expectations from the world, alongside a tiny mould I was supposed to fit into. That mould included being compliant, nice, taking social responsibility, smiling at men, becoming a mother, being nurturing – and also being heterosexual. It wasn't until I seriously understood that there was an alternative to the gender I had been assigned that I realized I was also allowed to question the label heterosexual.

Expectations since Birth

My whole life, everything has worked together toward a single goal: to make me a woman and everything that comes with it. From a very young age, I was supposed to play house (where I was to be the mum and nothing else!), draw hearts around the boys I thought were cute in the school yearbook, and get my first innocent kiss from some boy in the next class, behind a fence in the schoolyard. As I grew up, I was supposed to start having more serious relationships with boys, go to the prom in a long, beautiful dress with a handsome boy in a suit. Eventually, I would meet

the one, get married, have kids with him, hopefully not get divorced, and then die at the same time and be buried in the same grave.

Shortly after my birth at the hospital, these expectations were already placed upon me. And all of these images already rush through a parent's head at such an early stage of their child's life. Some parents are probably quite aware of this. They may have a concrete goal they want their newborn daughter to live up to. Other parents are probably less aware of it. They look at their daughter and perhaps just feel love and wonder, take a picture and post it on Facebook with the caption "this is the most beautiful, cutest, most perfect little girl ever created" and maybe in that moment, they're only thinking about her round chubby cheeks. But somewhere in the back of their minds, a scene from her future wedding plays, where they stand at the front with tears in their eyes, giving her away to her Prince Charming.

Throughout my life, people have mostly read me as a girl. Sometime during childhood, I started thinking boys were cute, and with that, the world told me I was heterosexual. Straight. When the world told me that this was the truth, and I couldn't deny that I liked boys, I accepted their label. Even though the word "girl" never really felt right, I felt attraction to boys, and that must simply mean I was a straight girl. There were no other options.

Girls Kissing Girls

In middle school, some girls around me started dating other girls. They had previously shown an interest in boys, so I had assumed they were heterosexual. Around the same time, some church leaders told us that some girls our age experimented with other girls, often to get attention or because it felt exciting to them. The leaders were very clear that this was wrong. These were heterosexual girls who were straying from the path, going off-plan for a short time by flirting with other girls. Eventually, this youthful whim would be over, and they would find their way back to boys.

The leaders' words were internalized. I started to look at these girls, my friends, with contempt. In line with what I had been taught, I believed these "heterosexual girls" would soon realize their mistake and return to dating boys only.

The Trans Realization

Let's fast forward about eight years, to 2018. I was 24 and it was a September evening. I was sitting in the kitchen of the house I was currently renting for a ridiculously low price from a friend. This kitchen, with its bright pastel-colored wallpapers, was about to become the setting for the most significant night in my adult life.

I spent that evening watching random videos on YouTube, and on this specific night, I ended up in a trans corner of this diverse platform. I found myself watching video after video of trans people talking about their lives, about dating, working out, studying – just regular, everyday stuff. It was the first time I had ever heard a trans person talk about themselves, and I know instantly that what they were talking about was me.

During the coming weeks, I spent hours reminiscing about my childhood and found countless signs and patterns that suddenly made sense, looking at it with these newly found trans glasses. I understood why the word "girl" always felt so uncomfortable, why my body always felt foreign, and why the gazes from others hurt so much. I reevaluated everything I'd learned about gender, and with that, I built an entirely new, much more beautiful worldview. As I was deconstructing the gender binary that the world had spent so much effort convincing me was reality, I slowly started to realize that if gender isn't binary, then neither is sexuality.

Once I realized I was not a girl, the label heterosexual no longer fitted. If I'm a guy and attracted to guys, am I gay then? That would explain why I felt so much kinship with the gay men I read about in books or saw in films. It had felt so forbidden when, as a teenager, I watched a TV series about men who got sick and died from AIDS and I felt like one of

them. It didn't feel like I had the right to identify with them. Now that I understood that I was trans, I was still unsure if I could use the word gay. I didn't know if I, as a trans guy, was allowed to call myself gay. It felt like a term that wasn't meant for me.

At this time, I still thought that I only liked boys. I was not yet ready to question binary sexuality any further than that. I thought that I could only fall in love with a cis guy – or possibly with a nonbinary person who was assigned male at birth, if they're comfortable in their body. Society's disgust toward trans bodies was deeply internalized, and I couldn't see how a trans body could be attractive, handsome, even sexy. During this time, I saw myself as a trans guy who was attracted to cis guys or people with normative male bodies.

Friendship Turned Loveship

After realizing I was trans, I felt very alone. I'd barely met any other trans people and felt uncertain whether there were others like me – Christian transpeople. Maybe in the world, but were there any others in Sweden? In February 2020, I contacted the Christian rainbow movement – EKHO – and they connected me with Emanuel. Emanuel and I started emailing and quickly became close friends. Emanuel is also a trans guy and comes from a similar church background to me. We both grew up with strong expectations regarding gender roles and sexuality. We emailed, chatted, and video called.

Over phone calls while eating porridge or during long walks in the forest, we talked about our gender identities, the church and the Bible, about sexuality and expectations, and quite a bit about trees and nature. As I got to know Emanuel better, I also got to know myself.

Six months after our first email, I finally meet Emanuel for the first time, at the Finnåker Retreat and Conference Centre in the Swedish countryside. We were there to plan a conference for young Christian trans people, but I found it hard to focus because I was so preoccupied with Emanuel's presence. Something in me was drawn to him and I just

wanted more of him. We walked through the autumn leaves down to a nearby stream, and I wished the walk would never end.

Back home in Gothenburg, I reflected on what I'd experienced. What was I feeling towards Emanuel? Was it a crush? Was I a little smitten? A little bit in love? But was that even possible? Could I feel these things for someone like him? He's a *trans* guy. Up until this moment I'd been fully convinced that I couldn't be attracted to trans people, but these thoughts slowly started to unravel.

I started exploring this together with my friends. One day, I was sitting with an old cis female straight college friend in a park in central Gothenburg.

"Look at that guy over there, good-looking, right?" I asked.

"Yes, definitely," she replied.

"Would you still think that if you knew he was assigned female at birth?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I probably would."

"Would you still think that if you knew he didn't have a penis?"

I was so unsure about my own attraction and the definition of sexuality. Everything had seemed so simple when I was growing up. "You're a girl and you like boys, then you're heterosexual, end of story." Now, that felt so inadequate to encompass all of humanity and its variations. But what was sexuality, then? And which aspects define who we're attracted to? Is assigned gender important? Or is it how we perceive the person? Is the label important? Is it how the person themselves identifies? Is it important what the person's genitalia look like? Is it important if that specific genitalia were there at birth, or if it was constructed later on?

These thoughts kept running through my mind over the next couple of months. Sometimes, they were more intrusive, but often, they were further back in my consciousness. I had so much else to think about. While Sweden is often thought of as some form of queer utopia, that is far from the truth. Being trans in this country means that you're in a constant battle. In 1972, Sweden became the first country in the world to offer gender affirming care and the option of changing your legal gender. In 2020, this law had barely been amended and is now vastly outdated. Therefore, there were so many obstacles I had to focus on during

this period. I needed to go to doctor's appointments, join various queues for gender-affirming care, correct people who used the wrong pronouns when speaking about me, change my username and email address on all the thousands of websites I was a member of, register a new name with the Tax Agency, get a new bank card, take a new passport photo, put up a new name on the front door... the list felt endless. There's so much practical stuff to do as a newly out trans person.

Being trans requires energy in ways I didn't expect. Apart from all the admin that I needed to do, there was also emotional work that took up a lot of energy. Wherever I went, I was constantly on edge regarding my surroundings. It felt like I needed to convince people of my gender identity every time I entered a new room. Every day, I got questions related to my trans identity, but rarely did I face the same kind of questioning about my sexuality. Those thoughts simply sat in the backseat for the most part, while I concentrated on dealing with being trans.

My feelings for Emanuel grew each time we met. In August 2021, almost a year after our first meeting, we were at a camp together and shared a room with a bunk bed. One night, we were up for hours talking and giggling. On the way home, we cramped in the backseat of our friends' car, our thighs pressed tightly against each other. It felt like electricity, and I thought to myself, "I must enjoy this touch. I don't know if I'll ever be this close to him again."

Now, it was becoming very clear to me that I was in love with Emanuel. I enjoyed being with him, we laughed and could talk about almost anything, I thought he was handsome, and I got butterflies in my stomach when we touched each other. What else could this be if not infatuation? How Emanuel identified or how his body looked like felt unimportant.

Ten months after I first met Emanuel at Finnåker, we were sitting on a bench in the small village of Dals Långed where he lived. I had decided to tell him that I thought I was in love with him. I was no longer worried about whether I could feel this way about a trans person; I was sure what my feelings meant. With my eyes fixed on the conifer trees across the lake, I told him and he smiled. My feelings were reciprocated. We spent an intense two weeks together, and on September 17, 2021, he asked if

I wanted to be his partner. I said yes and since that day, we've officially been a couple.

Worries Regarding Body Parts

A small worry still lingered inside me and it concerned intimacy. Nakedness. There were many layers and aspects to this worry:

- a) I suffered from gender dysphoria and felt incredibly uncomfortable showing anyone my naked body. It was hard to even imagine letting someone get that close without feeling significant resistance to the idea.
- b) I also lived with the after-effects of a shame-based attitude toward sexuality from the church. Sex was forbidden, and pleasure was sinful. At this time, I had deconstructed my faith enough to no longer intellectually believe it was dirty to be with someone in that way, but my body still reacted automatically and in accordance with what I'd been taught.
- c) On top of those two very heavy sex-related burdens, I was also worried that the resistance I felt had to do with Emanuel's body. What if I actually needed the other person to have a genuine, normative penis in order for me to be aroused? What if it turned out that the attraction lies there after all? What if it simply didn't work for me?

It turns out that my worry was unfounded. After doing some work on my gender dysphoria and Christian sexual shame, there are no issues for me in that department. (It feels really weird telling you about this. I never talk about my sex life in my everyday life and don't feel comfortable doing so, but it feels important in order to tell this story.)

The Search for a Label

At that time, I still felt like I needed a label. Everyone in the LGBTQIA+ community seemed so sure of who they were. In my eyes, everyone embraced their labels by wearing them on a T-shirt or waving their corresponding flag in Pride parades. I thought that you needed to find the correct label in order to be a proud out queer person.

So what would my label be? I was with Emanuel and clearly attracted to him. We were two trans guys. Were we gay? We were definitely in a same-sex relationship, but that doesn't mean one is gay. My sexuality felt broader than that. It felt like I was more than that. But what did that mean?

The only other word I could think of at that time was bisexual. At first, I had a completely wrong idea of what it meant. Like many others, I thought that being bisexual meant you can be attracted to people of *both* genders – like there were only men and women out there. It felt so trans-excluding that I initially dismissed the term completely. But as I started talking more with my bisexual friends and reading more literature on the subject, I realized that bisexuality itself was not trans-excluding. I particularly latched onto the definition that the two in bi initially referred to being attracted to people with a *similar* gender identity to your own and people of *other* gender identities. That the binary, in fact, referred to your own gender and others, rather than a binary division of genders themselves. This fit me well because I was clearly attracted to people of a gender like my own (Emanuel), but I also thought I could be attracted to people of other genders.

Another misconception I had about bisexuality was that a bisexual person felt equal attraction to people of all genders – that the scale must be balanced. I really couldn't relate to that. Since I'd always been so convinced that I only liked men and had only just accepted the idea of my sexuality being a little bit broader than that, I was not yet ready to imagine being able to fall in love with people of *all* genders. For this reason, I believed that I couldn't be bisexual.

I also briefly considered the term pansexual, which had been described to me as someone who was attracted to people regardless of

gender. It felt like that's what happened with Emanuel. I fell in love with him, even though I didn't think I could be attracted to someone with his gender identity. His gender didn't seem to matter to me emotionally, even though I thought it did, intellectually.

Somewhere around this time, I also got tired and a bit sad when I heard about the conflicts in the community – that pansexuality and bisexuality could be pitted against each other, that people within the same community had prejudices about each other. This conflict also made me hesitant towards joining the community, for fear of getting pulled into this mess.

Another reason why I hesitated about using the term bi- or pansexual at the time was learning about bi erasure. I met countless people on the m-spec who talked about their frustration of being erased all the time, within and beyond the lgbtqia+ community. My heart broke for them, and it made me extra cautious around the steps I took. I didn't want to do anything that created further issues in the community. I believed that if I started identifying as bi or pan, but later realized I was not, then that might confirm people's misconceptions about that community. Or that if I started identifying as bi or pan, but wasn't bi enough, then I would erase the "real" bisexual people.

In 2024, the Christian Rainbow Movement, EKHO, started a new community for their bisexual and pansexual members. I was happy and spread the information to friends, but I didn't dare to join myself. I was unsure whether I was welcome there, whether I was bi enough. I knew people in the group had heard me call myself gay and I thought that meant that I couldn't also call myself bisexual or pansexual.

After a few months, I cautiously joined the group. I read others' introductions but didn't dare write my own. It still felt kind of good to be there, in a corner. It became a way to explore whether or not I belonged in that community.

Recently, I've started to calm down a bit about the whole "in search of a term" frenzy. I still try on different labels sometimes and while none of them feel perfect, all of them feel like they speak to one part of who I am. Some days I call myself gay; in some places I call myself bisexual. Sometimes I say that I'm on the m-spec. Oftentimes I summarize it with

the word queer. I'm telling myself that it's ok to not have one word that feels correct always. It's ok to jump back and forth and use a multitude of terms. It's ok to not be just one thing but instead use many labels to describe who you are. Because isn't that the most logical? We are complex human beings and the idea that one word can describe our full selves doesn't quite feel right.

I don't Need a Label

Some parts of me wish that I could end this chapter by saying that there's an end to this rollercoaster, that I've finally found one label that feels like me – a label that explains who and what I'm attracted to. That would have been a nice landing point after this slalom course I've taken you on! But that's not the case. I don't have one good word to fully describe my sexuality.

But I'm not thinking much about my sexuality today. It doesn't really matter that much to me. I know I'm in love with Emanuel and that's enough for me. If Emanuel were to swap his pants for a skirt and let his hair grow out, I would love him still. If he were to start identifying as non-binary or realize he wasn't trans at all, instead going back to identifying with the female gender assigned to him at birth, I would still want to be with him. What Emanuel has between his legs, how his body looks or how he identifies, doesn't matter to me.

When they took that peek between my legs at birth, they thought they could see my entire future. Today, I know that neither gender nor love is that simple. I'm in love with Emanuel – and that's enough.

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.