

Chapter 9

Becoming Ellis: The Story of a TransMale as Relayed by His Therapist

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ABSTRACT

The chapter describes the author's experience as a counselor working with a transgender-identifying teenager named Ellis. The goals of the counseling relationship included exploring transgender identity, managing feelings of depression and anxiety connected to gender dysphoria, and helping Ellis process and cope with life struggles that he experienced. The author provides an in-depth description of Ellis's experience in counseling, as well as a follow-up interview conducted five years after termination of the counseling relationship. This chapter depicts the experience of Ellis's transition and his perspectives about what his transgender identity means to him. The author provides insights on how to best work with transgender clients that emerged from her experience of working with Ellis.

INTRODUCTION

Becoming Ellis

It is muggy in my car and the air conditioning is blasting as I try to stop myself from sweating, even in the rain. I hear the faint sounds of brass band horns in the background as I pass a Second Line on the street, and I watch the rain fall from weeping willow trees as I drive through Metairie, Louisiana. The brass band players dance in procession, celebrating a wedding or a funeral, possibly a birth; I'm not sure. Second Lines are parades that are common in New Orleans to celebrate life and death, new beginnings and the celebration of lives well lived. Women wave their kerchiefs and children play trumpets and tubas. Being immersed in a second line is one of the most joy-provoking aspects of the culture here. It is the spring of 2012, and I am in a suburb of the musical, cultural, and historical epicenter of the Southern United

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States, New Orleans. I am a counselor for a community mental health agency that services youths and families on Medicaid in homes and schools. Little do I know, that today is the day I will meet a young man who will change the course of my life in many ways.

I am meeting Ellis for the first time today, but at a previous time his name was Evelyn, and she was 17 years old. Born biologically female, Evelyn (I will address him as Ellis and use male pronouns for the remainder of the chapter) was seeking counseling for a variety of concerns, including depression, anxiety, and questions about his gender identity. Ellis was special, and I noticed that his emotional maturity in many ways surpassed his numeric age. He was incredibly compassionate and empathetic, moved by art and inspired by the creativity he admired in others. He felt deeply and expressed his internal world through music. His passion for music allowed him to express himself while also connecting to the emotions of others through their art. His empathy for others overflowed. In fact, his love for others was so huge, that one of our goals in therapy became learning how to set boundaries for self-protection to control the things he can and releasing the pain of others rather than absorbing it. I point this out to illustrate that from the moment I met him I knew that this individual was relatable, responsive, and possessed great depth and soul.

Ellis' life story unfolded over the weeks we spent together. The reasons he started counseling were to explore his growing and ever-evolving feelings related to gender, to manage feelings of depression, and to have someone to talk with about the life struggles he was experiencing. Ellis had come out as a lesbian at age thirteen to his mother and grandmother with whom he lived. That transition had been easy, as his mother identifies as a lesbian, and had "paved the way," many years previously by coming out to her own mother.

Ellis shared with me intimate details about his family, as is necessary for effective counseling. During our time together, Ellis' mother was battling an addiction to Opioid pain killers, and while Ellis deeply loved and respected her, it had impacted the family dynamic. This was an area we focused on together. Ellis wanted to work through feelings related to his mother's addiction. Despite the struggle of battling her disease, she was supportive of him, and accepted his desire to transition. Her concern was for his health and happiness; she wanted him to be sure about what he wanted before acting related to physical transition. We also talked about Ellis' father, who was in large part "out of the picture." We processed feelings about his inconsistent relationship with his father, but the impression I got was that the family he connected to most deeply was his mother, grandmother, sister, and deceased grandfather. They were the "glue" that cemented his world together and shaped his worldview and values. They were his comfort, his strength, and the people he was most worried about disappointing through his journey of discovery of his gender identity.

Ellis' grandmother worked for the government in a job she had been working for over thirty years. He described her as "his rock," and as also the person he was most afraid of upsetting if he chose to walk down this path for himself. Ellis had lived with his grandmother and grandfather for most of his young childhood, and she was the primary caretaker for him in his early years. Because of this period, he was extremely close to her. Their bond was obvious. I remember her as calm and kind; she had a great sense of humor and unwavering love for her family. Ellis described both of his grandparents as being warm and predictable, and often talked with fondness and nostalgia about the romance that existed throughout his grandparents' marriage. We processed in counseling, the loss the entire family felt when his grandfather (Ellis, who became his namesake) had passed away a few years before. It was obvious that he looked up to his grandparents and had internalized the values that they had imparted in the family.

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