



Reengineering Nancy

How an unhappy fat man became a trim, confident dyke girl.

Resources for
people
considering
transsexual
or weight
loss
surgeries

By Nancy Evelyn Gold

WE BUILD THE machines of our age with tubes, wires, pumps, chips, and joints. Inventors look to their own bodies to inspire breakthroughs. In this era of artificial intelligence, gene therapy, and nanotechnology, humans are looking more and more like programmable machines.



The components of the biological machine that carries us for our entire lives are not yet something parents can order like a computer from Gateway. Instead, a somewhat random process of genetic combinations and environmental factors set our brains' processor speeds, skin colors, taste preferences, personalities, and various other features for us.

Most of us realize that it's only a roll of the dice that prevented us from being born disabled, or with a 16-year life expectancy, or into a famine-plagued village. And yet, no matter how lucky you think you've been, you know you're a loser on some level: maybe, although you're fast, you're not fast enough for the Olympics; or maybe, although you're good-looking, you can't quite attract the person of your dreams.

I was a teenage fat boy nerd

A genetic/environmental double play began affecting me even before I was born. My genetics included the right codes for obesity: my mother fought a lifelong battle with her weight and I would too. If this Darwinistic screw-you wasn't enough, my mother was also given estrogen during pregnancy (most likely DES) under the guise of preventing miscarriage.

Within weeks of starting elementary school I was attacked with taunts about my size. I was instantly the hunted. It didn't matter that I was a fun-loving child who had enough smarts to explain almost anything and could build cool things out of blocks. I was fat and I

was expected to take my position at the bottom of the social food chain – anything I did to upset the natural order was met with fists. My innocence ended at the ripe old age of six. Years of dieting followed, but there was no escape: it was my biological destiny to be fat.

At home I was taunted for related reasons, although with a different emphasis cause. My father did not like his child's position on the food chain. Exhausted by numerous attempts to change what was biologically set, he began to attack me, seeing this as the only way he had left to motivate change.

Dad was privy to information the kids at school weren't. In the first few years of my life, people often told him what a beautiful daughter he had. He knew that my features were soft, that I sat down to pee, and that I wasn't quite as rough-and-tumble as he'd like to see a son be. Genetics didn't just make me fat; they also made me a genetic male who was very uncomfortable with his gender.

No one – not my parents, not their doctors – had any reason to think of me as anything other than a boy. No matter how many times I was mistaken for a girl, all I needed was a penis to be classified as male. What they didn't realize was that my brain developed in an estrogen-rich environment, thanks to the drugs my mother was fed by her doctor during her pregnancy.

Hormones do the dirty work for genetics, and it's my theory that my fetal endocrine system couldn't overcome the estrogen floating around in my mother's bloodstream. I would literally have the brain of a female in a mostly male body. And so I grew up a very fat boy with a very confused gender identity. My father called me names, forced me to pee standing up, and even threatened, ironically, to put a sign on me proclaiming that I was really a girl.

When I was 12 I had no idea what a homosexual was, but I knew that I was a transsexual. I would pray nightly to awake the next morning as the woman of my dreams. This was the dark secret that I would keep to myself for many years. I was certain that my parents would institutionalize me if they knew the truth. The overwhelming physical reality of my obesity ended up drawing people's attention away from a problem that would have put me so low on the food chain that I might not have survived my teens. As hard as it was to be an extremely overweight child and teenager, it was surely easier than trying to go to school in a dress and living my life as a girl.

By the time I got to high school, I had found that living as a nerd was a convenient way to hide: no need to date and no need to interact with anyone but my computer. Like many other children of the 1970s personal computer revolution, I was employed immediately after my high school graduation as one of many highly paid but socially inept computer engineers. We could afford cool cars and expensive stereos, but we still couldn't get laid. Loneliness and the need to break away from my family fueled my desire to fit in. I wanted to lose weight and get a girl.

Like a ball and chain, my genetics steadfastly prevented permanent weight loss. I tried almost everything but always regained the weight and a bit more. The only solution that showed any promise was therapy and a 12-step program. When I was 23, a 100-pound weight loss and newly found self-esteem from therapy gave me the courage to date. I married the first woman to show interest in me. I hid my true feminine self and lived a self-imposed male stereotype. I worked to make my voice sound deep, cultivated a beard, and welcomed baldness.

Girling out



It took several years, the failure of my marriage, and a few hundred hours of therapy for my fragile male world to come apart at the seams. My therapist at the time had me working to accept my inner femininity. To her, I was a man who was simply out of touch

with his female side. She was right, but off by an order of magnitude. The moment she got me to accept my female side, a door burst open inside me and I realized that I had been living my whole life inside a closet. I was actually more like a woman with a male side.

Holy shit! Now what? I was 28 years old, I weighed over 350 pounds, I was balding, I had a beard and I was 6 feet tall. Just how the hell was I going to be anything less than a freak? I envisioned myself as a linebacker in a dress. I was stuck, but I was finally sure to my core that the only solution was to accept that I was transsexual. My sanity and survival now depended on my morphing into a woman.

I turned to the then adolescent Internet for answers. On e-mail lists and in newsgroups I found the basic blueprints for my transformation. I lost the beard and found a support group for transsexuals beginning their gender transitions. My peers demonstrated how to, and more importantly how not to, convince the world that I was female. The next few months required a series of deep breaths and blind faith. One step at a time, I learned how to "act" like a woman. On weekends I would trade one stereotype for another, with a close shave, a hat, fake breasts and enough makeup to keep Clinique in business for decades.

Shopping malls, restaurants and clothing stores became the proving grounds for my identity research project. With store clerks as my audience and judges, I confronted my fears. I thought the laughs, muffled comments, and stares would surely send me to a full bottle of Valium and a bottle of Southern Comfort. Instead I accepted that even when I was so obvious as to use my male driver's license to write a check, there was still an overwhelming peace to being a woman. I quickly realized I had a right to save my life and everyone would just have to enjoy the show. If I needed to play the clown, then so be it. I already had the make-up.

The Monday following my first weekend lived entirely as a woman found me dressing for work in a very uncharacteristic fashion: I donned a T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. I had feared T-shirts since I was 14 because the fat on my chest looked a little too much like breasts. But that hardly mattered anymore – in fact, I was proud that I had a head start over my often anorexic-looking tranny sisters.

My desire to go all the way and become a biological woman picked up momentum like a giant freight train, and I decided that surgery was exactly what I needed. It was time to morph myself, to take what nature gave me and reengineer it into the woman of my dreams.

If only my change had been purely a physical one, I would simply have needed to find a surgeon, fall asleep, and awaken to live happily ever after. In reality, however, becoming a woman requires social, chemical, legal, and physical changes. To protect itself and its patients, the medical community imposes a set of rules which dictate, among other things, that a person needs to wait three months before getting female hormones and 12 months before becoming eligible for surgery.

I sentenced my male self to die in four months and began to tell friends about my plans. Some were really happy, telling me that somehow I made sense to them now. Other friends were very worried, and suggested that I could be happy just dressing up like a girl on weekends. Still others were worried about the permanence of gender reassignment surgery. A few dropped into the background and I lost contact with them.

A woman in the working world

At last, I began the physical process. I endured what would become 400 hours of painful electrolysis to remove my facial hair; I went on shopping spree after shopping spree to replace my entire wardrobe; and I purchased a hairpiece to cover my bald head. As I waited to start hormones I tackled my most difficult task: telling my employer and coworkers.

The management at my company didn't know what to make of my story. Some thought I didn't know what to do with my IPO money so I was spending it on changing my sex. The H.R. department wanted me to keep things quiet and simply tell a few coworkers. But the idea of my coming into work one day in a dress without informing anyone seemed ill-advised at best. It took some convincing to get them to agree to the idea of sending out an e-mail announcement to everyone in the building where I worked.

Some of my coworkers were bewildered. Many were supportive – some out of friendship, some just enjoying the spectacle of the whole affair. Those who were negative tended to fall into two groups: the macho, homophobic guys, and the women who were terrified at the thought of a "man" entering their exclusive territory. The question of which bathroom I would use was controversial for everyone. Once my plan was out, the men weren't exactly happy

about seeing me in the men's room. And yet the number one question from women was whether I would be using the women's bathroom. Many worried about bizarre issues such as whether or not I would stand up to pee. A few secretly or openly worried that I would be peeking into the stalls.

Most people assume that a person's gender is something that doesn't change. When you demonstrate that something people have believed since early childhood isn't reality, it rocks them to their cores. This is the main reason why many people hate transsexuals. If I hadn't been so obsessed with my transition at that time, I might have once again headed to that Valium. But there wasn't enough time to worry about it. I had work to do: I needed to change my name, get a new driver's license, and convince my bank and Charles Schwab that I wasn't out of my mind.

A group of supportive women from work took on the task of reeducating me. They taught me to stop walking ahead of people to open doors. They taught me how women work together. It "took a village" to undo 29 years of male education and re-raise me as a woman.

On Aug. 9, 1993, I walked into work as Nancy for the first time. Friends congratulated me and sent me flowers. I wore a tan cotton skirt, brown tights, cotton shirt, and vest. The V.P. of my division thanked me for making things easy on him. I suspect he was expecting me to look like a drag queen.

While I wasn't a drag queen, I wasn't exactly natural-looking either. Genetic women have a lifetime to develop their look, style and personality. In four months the best I was able to do was to look like a catalog picture, act like a stereotype, and talk like I was on helium.

Luckily, it didn't take long for me to "find myself." Three months later, I was in my first lesbian relationship, I had a new motorcycle, and I had traded in the skirts for jeans and boots. Many people around me, especially other transsexuals, thought I was going back to being a male. They didn't realize that I had quickly discovered one of the secrets to being a woman: it has everything to do with how we feel inside and interact with the world, and nothing to do with what we wear. My ex-wife commented that I went from being a weak man to a strong woman.

As I grew more comfortable with my new gender, I noticed subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in my coworkers' behavior. Women began working more closely with me. They confided in me, shared political information about management, and gave me a new definition of teamwork. The men also treated me like a woman: they stopped listening to me in meetings and often would offer up my ideas as their own even after I had shared them with the group. It was as if I had become invisible. Before transition, I was a highly respected leader, but within months, I was a micromanaged, often berated engineer.

The surgically created clitoris

As my hectic 12-month wait for surgery came to an end, I was facing two problems. One was work. I was now a poorly ranked employee facing "performance plan" (probation) and termination. The other was my weight. I still weighed 350 pounds and the leading surgeon at the time, Dr. Eugene Schrang, refused to even discuss performing my sex change until I weighed 250. I turned to Dr. Toby Meltzer in Portland, Ore., at that time a dark horse of the gender world. He agreed to perform my surgery and offered something that no other surgeon could at the time: a functional clitoris.

Everything came to a head in month 11. My employer put me on a performance plan. Although I was getting close to having my surgery covered under the company's medical plan, I quit and went to work for another company. The H.R. department was shocked. It turned out that they didn't really want me to leave – they just wanted me to "behave." An H.R. manager even informed me that everyone had been sure that the promise of paying for my surgery was going to keep me at the company. Sounded like surgical blackmail to me.

My new job offered me the opportunity to be accepted by people who didn't know my past. I counted down the remaining month to surgery and prepared myself for what would be my graduation. Just 10 days before my date with the knife, my weight problem attempted to steal my dream. My surgeon decided to back out of the surgery based on the perceived risks my weight presented. I was devastated, but I didn't let go without a fight. I tracked my surgeon down on vacation and sent him a letter making it clear that I was healthy for surgery and I backed it up with lab reports and medical opinions.

On Aug. 25, 1994, I awoke from the 10-hour surgery as a physical and legal female. The U.S. government would now grant me a passport with the all-important word "FEMALE" stamped on it. If there were ever a question about my gender, I could drop my pants. I was legitimate. The women's locker room and bathhouses were now open to me. For the price of \$15,000, a year of hard work, and a lot of pain, I was now firmly and permanently a female.

I settled into the life of a happy lesbian. The weight never went south of that 350, but having successfully morphed into a woman, I was satisfied. I even embraced my size and became part of the Fat Dyke movement in San Francisco. I was healthy and I saw a long, happy future for myself. Every year I rode with Dykes on Bikes in the Pride Parade, and I often rode my motorcycle in the mountains with my new sisters.

Things get heavy

That happiness lasted a couple of years and 100 pounds. After reaching 450 pounds, I injured my back and my quality of life was lost in a haze of painkillers. I had already faced the plague of the computer industry, carpal tunnel syndrome. Two surgeries eventually solved that problem. But now I was far more disabled, and the painkillers took me the rest of the way. It still amazes me

that I managed to stay employed. The joy had run out of my life and it seemed like the yearly Pride Parade was the only time I caught up with my two-wheelin' friends.

By the summer of 1999, I was deep in a drug-induced haze. My five-year career with a major computer company was falling apart and my wrists even began to bother me again. I sought out a new doctor and set out on a two-month-long project of getting myself off the drugs. As I worked my way out of my 24-hour stupor, I toyed with the idea of another round of surgery to fix my wrists and possibly my back. Then I remembered that earlier that year a friend of mine had had surgery to lose weight. Carnie Wilson, one of my fat heroes, also had surgery and was losing weight, too.

The answer was so obvious, and I had missed it for so long. I had worked so hard to accept my weight. The dogma of organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) led me to believe that my advancing disabilities had nothing to do with my weight. NAAFA may be right about some folks, but maybe not all, and definitely not me.

I realized that I had given up on my weight because nothing had worked. Surgery looked like a real answer. In light of this possible solution, I realized it was time to let go of my weight. It insulated me from the world, from people. It gave me every reason to play the freak and every excuse not to succeed at being "normal." But I had come too far to have the life of a vibrant woman slip out of my grasp. With every ounce of remaining energy, I performed my life's second magic act: it was time to reengineer my size.

On the first Tuesday of 2000, I went under the knife once more. Dr. Robert Rabkin performed a type of weight loss surgery known as duodenal switch. The surgeons removed 75 percent of my stomach and rerouted my intestines so that I now processed only 40 percent of the carbohydrates I ate and 15 percent of the fat. Unlike my sex change, this surgery caused no immediate external change. There were no complications and I returned home in just four days, still 437 pounds. But the surgery was just the beginning of a whole new stage in my physical metamorphosis. Anything more than a few bites of food hurt my now-shrunken stomach, and if I ate too much fat I paid for it soon after in the closest ladies room.

It didn't take long for my size transition to begin. Within a week I had lost 20 pounds, an amount barely noticeable except on my scale. What *was* noticeable was the change in my eating habits. One scrambled egg or two slices of deli meat were feasts. The disbelief on the faces of my friends was priceless. The same people who worried about how much I ate before now worried that I wasn't eating enough. Of course I wasn't eating enough – it was time to live off the fat I had stored my whole life like a squirrel storing nuts for winter.

A slow trickle of positive comments started after I had lost 50 pounds, and after 70 pounds people were impressed. "Nancy! You're going to be with us for a while!" exclaimed a friend and former coworker who had obviously equated my weight with a

limited life span. Unlike watching someone transition from man to woman, watching someone go from being fat to an acceptable size is not met with bewilderment or hate. As if they were on the sidelines of a marathon, many of my coworkers became a cheering section as the pounds came pouring off. When it comes to size, most people know one thing: they don't want to be fat.

The box that supersized people (more than 100 pounds overweight) must live in is inversely proportional to our size. Movie theater seats cause pain greater than the plot of the worst movies. Airline tray tables won't drop to their unoriginal unlocked positions so that we can eat the small meals. Roller coasters taunt us with their thrills but deny us access. The larger we get, the harder it is to get companies to take our money. Buying clothing becomes increasingly difficult. Department stores carry up to women's size 24 at best. The large-size outlets for the Limited and Lane Bryant only offer clothes up to size 28. A few stores sell up to size 32, but once you're past that size, every stitch of clothing must be purchased from catalogs that at best carry up to 36 (I wore 36 tightly at my highest weight).

Over the last eight months, I have marked time in lost pounds and sizes. I was able to stop shopping out of catalogues at 50 pounds. By 70 pounds Lane Bryant offered me clothes that actually looked something like what my thin friends were wearing. The triple-digit rollover presented me with an airline seat that fit and a seat belt that didn't need to be extended. The world seemed to be opening up to accept and welcome my money. How could I not take advantage of it?

In the last two years I've seen almost all of my movies on video. Theater seats were just too much for me to handle. I began to see two or more movies a week. My diet soda sat happily in the cup holders that used to dig into my fat body.

I was at one of these movies when I was suddenly besieged with an overwhelming feeling of loss. As a supersized woman walked past me – followed by people's stares – I realized what had happened. I wasn't the biggest woman around. No one was staring at me. My size was no longer the object of people's pity and disgust. Instead of dancing for joy and running naked through the Metreon in celebration I sank into a depression. Each passing pound was a bittersweet experience. I was happy to see the weight go, and terrified at the same time.

A transdimensional body

My identity as one of the supersized underclass was something that my surgeon could not change. I was now a 437-pound woman in a 290-pound body. The world was not changing to accept me, as I had always fought for; instead, I was changing to accept a world that infuriated me to my core. I didn't have a year to get ready for this change. I feel almost transdimensional, as if my body is shifting into a new, strange world like Alice through the looking glass.

Just as I saw gender discrimination at its most fundamental during my gender transition, my size transition is revealing the cold reality of size discrimination. Knowing that discrimination exists is not the same as living through it. And yet most people wouldn't realize, to look at me, that I had known discrimination. I had reengineered myself; I had climbed the social food chain. But I have hardly forgotten what it was like to be at the bottom, struggling to define myself in a world of stares and catcalls and worse.

It's been eight months since my weight loss surgery, and I am now 167 pounds lighter than when I started. At 270 pounds and size 18, I'm now entering the world of the large but normal. The consumer world is reaching me, and I once again feel fat. I'm the largest size that Old Navy carries, and now it feels like the clothing industry can't wait to get me bought into being a size 12. Those airline tray tables easily hold a meal just big enough for my new tummy and I haven't yet met a roller coaster that doesn't make me scream with happiness.

My surgeon's office tells me that there are only another 40 pounds of fat left to go. After that, it's another surgery to remove about 30 pounds of overstretched excess skin. By 2001, I will no longer be one of the 97 million overweight Americans.

I'm completing the last act of my reengineering effort. Instead of accepting what I was given and where that placed me in society, I've broken the rules and I've won. Some may feel I sold out, that I should keep working to change the world. I haven't, and I will. My size and my gender now suit my gray matter. Biology is not destiny. It's just biology.

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