

## SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

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### WILLIAM AUTREY

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As an 80-year-old man who has been married three times (yet sexually attracted to men all my life), I feel I have had the good fortune to have loved both men and women during my (as yet unconcluded) lifetime. I do not feel "transgender" per se, but as if two different people cohabitate in one body, reacting differently in different situations. Neither do I feel "transsexual", just blessed with the ability to explore the richness of an unencumbered sexual life well into my later years.

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If you were to meet me you might notice that my appearance and voice is neither male nor female, but rather a curious mixture of both. I do not feel that I strongly belong to either group, making it hard to fit within the social priorities that our society insists upon. To be certain, I was born with male genitalia, but higher up in the abdominal area than other typically "masculine"

men. I have more breast tissue than most men, with nipples so sensitive that they have become the key to my sexual arousal and response at this later stage in life (in the absence of an erection, stimulating my nipples can often produce multiple, long-lasting orgasms). I have noticed that some men have no sensitivity in their breasts, while many others have only limited sensitivity. And if pornographic portrayals are to be believed, men with sensitive nipples appear to dominate gay pornography.

The embarrassment of having a smaller than average sized penis located higher in my body than what was considered normal was difficult to deal with as a teenager, but as time went on, it did not seem to be a hindrance to having sex with men or women. And while my sexual experiences with women were often less than outstanding, my sexual experiences with men didn’t seem to suffer from lack of size. Perhaps it is a cliché, but a romantic feeling of love for my partner definitely has to be present in order for me to respond sexually with men or women, otherwise it is difficult for me to become aroused. Masturbation would often provide the only satisfactory sexual experience for me and considerable manipulation of my nipples while massaging the head of my penis would be necessary for full release. For me, this results in strong, lengthy multiple orgasms -- just as I might experience if I were a woman massaging her clitoris. When my sexual partner stimulates my breasts, I don’t have trouble at all in responding sexually with either sex.

I’ve often wondered whether these elements common to both sexes -- nipples and genitalia -- are the “missing link” for those of us “in-between”. After all, isn’t it only a specific mix of various hormones found in both males and females that makes a child distinctly male or distinctly female? Not every baby will have the necessary mix; variations are bound to occur in a percentage of all newborns. Those of us who believe we were born with a balance of male and female hormones can only be glad that our “abnormality” allows us to relate to being both male and female and follow our sexual bliss with whatever sex that might be.

In the gay community, I have observed a wide range of men whose appearance and mannerisms are very feminine, very masculine, or somewhere

“in-between”. My observations of human sexual behavior tell me that there is no such creature as someone who is “totally male” or “totally female,” regardless of body structure and our attempts to separate everyone into those two extreme categories. I often wonder whether this purely intellectual, dichotomous categorization of the sexes is an attempt to buttress the current social/religious value placed on procreation – and to ostracizing people like myself who are genetically in-between male and female.

Physical gender often fools us into believing that it is the only criteria for deciding how we live our lives. Many children are born without identifiable genitalia and their true gender identity only erupts at puberty, when their emotions collide with their physical development. The all too familiar (and all too painful) social anxieties of junior high causes many young people to hide their true feelings and true sexual orientation, creating a phobia of anything "not normal". The trauma that many differently gendered young people endure greatly affects how young people develop their personality and sexual identity, threatening their safety and sanity at the same time.

As a bisexual man born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I grew up in a society that pressured me to choose a heterosexual lifestyle and conform in order to survive and succeed within its norms. The social changes of the past 60 years has lead to a better acceptance of those of us who are "queer" but is just beginning to acknowledge and accommodate those of us with both male and female inner selves. Society is slowly warming to the idea that people ought to be free to follow their sexual orientation and desires without choosing a gender role or lifestyle based on the approval from others.

Growing up in the 1930s in a small rural town was not the best situation for exploring unconventional sexual identities. During my teenage years, I did not feel comfortable to freely explore my sexuality with either men or women. By the time I was 25, I dove headfirst into a marriage that I was not prepared for in order to put an end to my gender anxieties. So began a life of denial.

I hid my true feelings and desire for people of the same sex my entire life, unable to let what was inside me merge with my daily life. Being the son of a domineering mother, I tended to choose strong willed, domineering wives. In such a household the gender roles were often reversed and I ended up taking care of the domestic duties while trying to fulfill my socially imposed role of father and household provider. I managed to perform sexually and produce two beautiful daughters, yet I remained sexually confused and desiring of sexual contact with men. I loved my wives and, being a devoted father and loving spouse, I didn't act on my same-sex desires with others, yet I indulged my same-sex fantasies while masturbating, prompting plenty of self-imposed guilt.

In my fantasies the men I desired to be with embodied the most masculine traits possible. Secretly, I was hoping that somehow, perhaps by “fantasy osmosis”, I could satisfy both my masculine and feminine needs. I yearned to abandon my “male” role and embrace that of the female, being enveloped by that which I felt I was not.

Based on my life experiences with all kinds of people, I've found that, although some people are truly exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, a great majority feel some level of attraction and desire to both sexes. The men of my era – the “grey flannel suit generation” – were expected to be manly men and take care of their wives and children. The hidden lives of several of my male friends came to light only after I reached retirement age. A close childhood friend (whose wedding I attended during the 50s) recently contacted me after his wife died to tell me that he and his boyfriend were moving to Key West! If I had known that he was gay, I probably would have taken him up on his offer to go hunting all those years ago. I wistfully think of all those extended trips he took with other “buddies” of his. I suspect that the *Brokeback Mountain* story is not unique: In the woods no one will be wiser as to how physically intimate two men might be.

I have spent most of my 80 years trying to understand why I was born into the body I was and why I feel the way I do toward both men and women. It wasn't until recently that I discovered that I was not "abnormal",

but part of the entirety of the human condition. Just as there is great variation in the human form, there is variety in human sexual desires. Once society acknowledges these sexual variations, people with complimentary sexual desires, gay or straight, will be free to openly build their lives together and satisfy their sexual nature.. And once society is open and honest about sexuality, the surprises and disastrous repercussions of mispairings and marriages based on misunderstandings, sexual denial, and outright deceit will begin to fade.

My life's path has been determined by what I had to do in order to survive until I was old and secure enough to ignore what society wanted. In my dotage, I am celebrating my true inner self and feel really and truly free for the first time in all these years.

The title of this anthology, "BEYOND MASCULINITY," implies that perhaps the feminine in all of us can be developed and celebrated, if that is our inclination. We're all "queer," really. Very few people measure up to the idealized roles that our culture dictates for our bodies. Suppressing that part of us that society has, in the past, rejected may not be the norm in succeeding generations. Many more young people are entering puberty ready to express their true sexuality with emotional openness and honesty. Depending on the social, parental, and peer reactions they encounter (as well as pressure to conform), they will either proceed into adulthood with sexual maturity or may become maladjusted based on the sexual experiences and fantasies of their youth. A yearning to return to that earlier time of exploration and sexual freedom can often be inappropriately acted out later in life. Society has a role to play in seeing that everyone expresses his or her sexuality, whatever it might be, in a healthy, honest, and emotionally open way.

My story is not unique. In all cultures there are men and women who live with a blend of masculine and feminine striving to exist beyond the traditional masculine / feminine dichotomy of society. Most people want to create something of permanence and value in their lives. Yet not everyone needs to produce children to achieve that. Those who don't are free to channel their creative energies into other areas that may contribute to and

improve society. Love has no gender preference. From what I observe about the younger generation, they are embracing the freedom of a "bisexual" identity with androgynous looks, gender neutral activities, and couplings based not on social/genetic "survival" but on attraction alone. I hope that future generations will be able to explore and express their sexuality freely and not carry fear, shame, denial, and frustrated desires into their adult years.

We are all products of our times and, at least during my lifetime, the times have changed dramatically. I discovered my true nature far too late in life to openly be who I was meant to be and create the life I truly desired. Watching the youth of today openly discuss their sexuality and express their inner desires at an age when it really matters (adolescence) gives an old man hope that the next generation will push society "beyond masculinity" into a new era of sexual acceptance and emotional openness. A new era is coming; if only I could be here to see it.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*William Autrey is an 80-year-old gay man, military veteran, astrologer, and life-long resident of Boulder, Colorado. Pressured by the social and sexual mores of the mid- to late-20th century, Bill married three times before returning to and accepting the realization he initially had at age 17 -- that he was sexually attracted to men.*