

Joy Ladin

from *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*

“Why did you have to be a girl?” my youngest asks. It’s spring 2010, almost three years since I moved out. She’s naked and glistening in a bath whose bubbles are disappearing, surrounded by a flotilla of toys – plastic animals, a large submarine, a battered Barbie, an empty vitamin bottle – she alternately buries and resurrects from the fragrant white foam. Her disease has marked her face with a peculiar beauty, blending the cherubic features of a toddler with the serious lines and deep-set eyes of middle age. It’s slowed her physical growth, but so far it hasn’t damaged her brain, kidneys, or heart. She doesn’t realize it, but I look up to her: unlike me, she’s utterly, unapologetically delighted with herself, unscarred by her differences from others, so matter-of-fact in her determination to overcome her physical limitations that I’m not even sure she sees them as limitations. She doesn’t seem to measure herself against her larger, faster, stronger, defter peers. Her delight in herself is part and parcel with her boundless delight in existence.

Despite the chromosomal glitches, she’s grown up a lot since I left my family. She’s no longer an inarticulate, uncritically loving three-year-old; at six, she has found words for what she’s lost. Whenever I see her – now it’s only twice a week – she grills me about the motives and morality of my transition.

The subject first came up between us when she was five; we were at the tiny local public library, and we both needed to use the bathroom. “Why do you use the girls’ bathroom, Daddy?” she asked me. I hesitated. Most parents dread the moment their kids first ask them about sex; for me, the scariest subject was gender. I took a deep breath and did the only thing I could think of: I told her the truth.

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“I use the girls’ bathroom because to other people, I look like a girl,” I said.

“But why do you look like a girl, Daddy?”

“Well,” I said, retreating into the talking-to-a-five-year-old version of my professorial manner, “most boys have boy brains, and most girls have girl brains, but some people, like me, have girl brains in boy bodies or boy brains in girl bodies. It got too hard for me to have a girl brain in a boy body, so now I look like a girl.”

She cocked her head critically. “I don’t see why people think you look like a girl. Your hair isn’t even long.” She giggled, and that was the end of our discussion.

But lately she had started to question my identity again, because she had learned something about her own: that she was a child of divorce. Other kids got to live with both their mom and their dad; she could only live with one and occasionally see the other. When she asked me why my wife and I were separated, I explained that, because of my girl brain, I hadn’t been able to keep living as a man, and Mama hadn’t wanted to live with me if I looked like a woman. Suddenly she understood: the twin cataclysms that had shaped her brief life were connected. After that, each time she saw me, she asked me the questions that would re-enact this discovery, and force me to admit my responsibility for her pain.

She spills water from the vitamin bottle into a heap of bubbles, creating a clear space in which I glimpse her skinny legs. “Why did you have to be a girl?” she asks, with a grin that seems wider than her round, curl-topped face. I start to repeat my well-oiled lines about girl brains in boy bodies, but she interrupts. “But *why* did you have to have a girl brain in a boy body?” she demands.

“I don’t know,” I say. “That’s the way God made me.”

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“Didn’t God tell you why?” Her face is still bright with water and suds, but the smile has turned serious. We’ve veered off script, beyond the ritual of accusation and admission of guilt, into the wilderness of life – her life – whose meaning, she is starting to see, is strangely unreadable.

“No,” I answer slowly, “God didn’t tell me. Or maybe God did, but I didn’t understand what God was saying.”

“Let’s listen,” she says. “Listen to what God is saying.”

She scrunches her eyes closed and listens. I close my eyes too, and hear the usual silence. It isn’t an answer, because I’m not asking this question. God made me what I am, and what I am, the person who could only have come into existence through the awful birth canal of transsexuality, is what I have always wanted to be. That’s been true through the whole agonizing process of transition; it was true during the decades when I pretended there was nothing and no one I wanted to be; it was true when I was my daughter’s age, playing in a bubble-filled bath, telling myself that when the bubbles cleared my body would miraculously be mine.

I’m asking God a different question: why can’t my being myself make my children happy the way them being themselves makes me happy? Because, as the silence reminds me, that’s not what it means to be a parent. Being a parent means working to turn whatever I am, however hard for me or for them, into an expression of love.

“What did God say?” my daughter demands.

“I can’t tell,” I say, half-truthfully, knowing she will think I mean that I couldn’t tell what God was saying, when I really mean that I can’t tell her what the silence said.

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She frowns. “You have to listen harder,” she says reproachfully, squinting into suds from which she retrieves a small plastic figure: Diego, the animal rescuer. “I rescued Diego,” she announces.

“Good work,” I say, wondering if love’s inquisition is finished for today.

It isn’t.

“Why did you have to be a girl when you knew it would be bad for me? Why did you have to leave?”

“I wish I didn’t have to be a girl,” I say slowly, “when it’s so bad for you. Parents aren’t supposed to do things they know are bad for their children, but I did – I became a girl even though I knew that you needed me to stay a boy. I knew it would be bad for you and I did it anyway and you are right to be angry because that’s not what parents are supposed to do.”

Her huge hazel eyes are fixed on mine. Diego, the rescued rescuer, floats forgotten in the little lagoon created by her knees. “So why did you do it, Daddy?” she asks softly. “Why did you leave me?”

“I was so sick,” I begin, and then I realize that’s not what she’s asking. She knows, in a way that my older children can’t, that this girl-body is the real me, the me I had to be. She’s asking how I could have destroyed her family when I knew how much she would suffer, how I could have given up all the hours and days and years with her, all the meals and bedtime songs and wake-up stories and silly games, the whole lost life, the life of her growing up, we should have lived together.

“I didn’t want to leave you,” I say, pushing each word out with a thickening tongue. “I hated to leave you, and I hate that I don’t live with you anymore, and I wish that had I had never left you because it hurts every single day.”

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“Look Daddy, Diego is going to rescue the dog,” she exclaims. She’s smiling now into the wet bubbly world in which everything lost is rescued, in which everything that’s drowned will be revealed as the waters drain away. She’s gotten what she needed today – proof that even though our bodies live in separate houses, our hearts are still floating together, in a shining bubble of love and pain.