

## **Not Quite So Incredibly Brave**

***By Christine Burns © 2003***

***Why do some people go straight from school to Universities in their teens, whilst others apparently delay their transition into higher education until far later in life? Does the explanation need complex psychosexual theories or just a healthy dose of common sense? UK Trans Right Campaigner Christine Burns looks at what we learn from examining people's different solutions to life's big decisions.***

It surprised me to discover recently that Britain's largest University isn't one of the ancient federations of college communities like Oxford or Cambridge. It isn't in one of the well-established cities of learning like my own home Manchester, with growth dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Neither is it in one of the modern campus Universities, whose growth in Britain rocketed during the 1960's and early 70's.

Oxford and Cambridge each have about 16-17,000 students on their rolls. The Universities and colleges in the Manchester metropolitan area have about 30,000 students between them. Yet Britain's "Open University" ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)) has grown to an annual roll-call of more than 200,000 students in the thirty or so years since first opening its doors in 1971.

What is perhaps more remarkable about the Open University, however, is that two thirds of those students are aged between 25 and 44. And the rest aren't necessarily any younger. It is one of the most successful distance-learning institutions anywhere in the world, with a range of degrees to rival all but the most elite of bricks and mortar establishments. In the face of intense scepticism it has proven in subject after subject that home-based study can work given sufficient motivation on the part of the student, and the right kind of support from the teaching and counselling staff. This is just as well, because the leading political objective in creating a truly "Open" university was the widespread acknowledgment that there are many reasons why people may put off till later life the things that others do in their teens.

So-called “mature” students are nothing new of course. Having gone straight from school to college at the age of eighteen I do remember mature students being something of a rarity in a conventional university setting like mine. Nevertheless in 1972 they existed – and were often quite easy to spot. They looked different. They would, of course – they were older! More than that, they were different in other ways though, reflecting their maturity and the varied experiences they had had in all the time since they, too, had left school. They dressed differently, socialised differently – and thought differently about the things which challenge the student mind, in and out of the lecture theatre.

Some of us fortunate-enough to have got to University straight from school also understood how much harder it must be to undertake such a big challenge after such a long time.

Every mature student has their own story, of course – and I don’t need to list the reasons for people delaying their studies, because most readers will know enough from their own life experience to appreciate that there is unlikely to be one single explanation.

Indeed, but for the right support at the right time I know that I could have found myself catching up on lost time much later too. My parents weren’t keen at first on the idea of me going away to become “one of those students”. They had “done alright”, after all. Being a timid teenager with many other uncertainties on my mind, I didn’t yet have the confidence and assertiveness to argue the case either. That responsibility fell to others – my schoolteachers – and, of course, I am forever in their debt. Without doubt the one thing which has made other difficulties easier to face in the course of my life has been that educational opportunity, and the chance to explore the range of my capabilities – intellectual, emotional and creative.

So there is nothing “inherent” about my early entry to academic study – unless you consider the way in which my as-yet-undeveloped self confidence might have combined with environmental factors to produce the very opposite outcome. I knew what I wanted to do, but didn’t have the confidence, aged 18, to press for that conviction.

Later in life I developed the courage, awakened by self-knowledge, to fight for much harder things without other people's help – my entire social identity in fact. Indeed, that was something I dearly wished I could have done from my earliest childhood recollections. Yet thinking your innermost desire to be a girl must be unique in its weirdness (and picking up through childhood the knowledge of how people react to such things) has its own effects. It certainly doesn't help the development of self confidence in some kinds of children, unless they are perhaps exceptional in other ways, or lucky in the support they receive.

Unless you are trans of course you may not be aware of the full extent of the way in which society broadcasts its intentions towards people like ourselves. You don't have to suffer it first hand to know it – you just need your antennae switched on. However, for the unimaginative out there, here is a recent account from a contemporary who was so incredibly brave to take on the challenge in the early seventies, and who suffered terribly as a result. As a successful American businesswoman, now in her fifties, she writes:

*"In the seventies I was raped, fired, beaten, ostracized from family and subjected to about every kind of discrimination you can think of. It didn't matter how good I was at anything, I'd earned my degree in half the normal time, had experience of design work on three leading mainframe computers, knew 7 machine level languages plus Cobol and Fortran - but all to no avail when employers learned of my condition. My first company fired me two months from my surgery date, the second fired me a month later. At the third I worked on classified defense technology before they fired me too .. and said outright that it was because I was transsexual. By 1981 I was beaten down to the point where I was walking the streets, scraping for survival, living in my car, and flipping hamburgers for survival in an roach infested joint."*

And, as I wrote recently in my personal contribution to a new book about the experiences of Gender Variant People of all kinds,

*"It wasn't the prospect of the change which terrified me, but the consequences. I feared the loss of everything else that was important about my life at the time. I was convinced I'd lose*

*my family and friends .. all the people and things I cared for. The very things which underpin my personality were at stake. [...] Strong as the desire to liberate the rest of my self-expression might be, this fear was stronger.*" - Finding the Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender

Diversity by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox, Jossey Bass Wiley; ISBN: 0787965472,

The American lady whose experiences I've quoted was of course incredibly brave, even taking into account the immense power of the imperatives which drive trans people to find their eventual accommodation with life. Personally I wasn't quite so incredibly brave, and it took me three goes over the course of nearly ten years to find the courage I needed to do what I needed to do. – Not to go and seek help. (That bit wasn't hard). But to grasp the solution.

Others, in different circumstances – with different obligations and fear thresholds – take different amounts of time, and they may make their eventual decisions for different reasons and in different ways. We are all unique.

What seems strange, however, is that these most obvious of all considerations seldom (if ever) acquire much weight in supposedly academic examinations of trans people and their enormous diversity. Why, instead, would some researchers look at such massive and carefully weighed decisions in the lives of intelligent people, and postulate far less savoury explanations for why we take widely varying amounts of time to get to our answers?

Could it be that they simply failed to learn much about life first by going straight to University?

(1358 words)

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