

Trans-Surgery

Gender Affirmation Surgery in Bangkok, Thailand



Stephanie Mott

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Trans-Surgery

*the feelings and events of my gender affirmation surgery
in Bangkok, Thailand*

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Introduction

The journey of 10,000 miles begins with a single step (or something like that). The journey to May 14, 2012 – the date of my surgery – began on December 31, 1957, the day I was born.

The journey of 10,000 miles was the trip to Bangkok, Thailand where the surgery was performed by Dr. Pichet Rochareon. He is my hero. He is the man who gave me my vagina.

This little book is a sharing of my thoughts and feelings and the events of the journey that began just six months ago.

About the Author

Stephanie Mott is a transsexual Christian woman from Topeka, Kansas. She began her transition in 2006 after more than 48 years of trying unsuccessfully to live as a male.

Mott began living as a woman in July, 2007, and had her gender affirmation surgery in May, 2012.

She is a nationally known speaker on transgender issues having presented nearly 200 workshops throughout Kansas, as well as five times at national conferences.

Mott has been the transgender columnist for *Liberty Press* – Kansas’ statewide LGBT newspaper – since 2008 and has published about 56 articles to date (www.libertypress.net). Her writing is also published by *lgbtSr* – a website dedicated to (but not limited to) lesbian, gay, bi and transgender people over 50 (www.lgbtsr.org).

Mott was born December 31, 1957 in Lawrence, Kansas. She was the middle child with an older and younger sister, and an older and younger brother.

Her first book was entitled *My Long Walk Home, a Transsexual Journey* and is a collection of poetry and prose. Her book entitled, *God Doesn't Have a Penis, and Other Writings by a Transsexual Christian Woman* is due to be published in July, 2012.

She is also a contributing author to *A Waiting Room of One's Own*, a collections of writings regarding women's health care.

Mott currently works as the office assistant in the Shawnee County (Kansas) Commission office where she has been treated with great kindness.

She is a senior at Washburn University (Topeka), working on her Bachelor of Social Work degree.

In August, 2010, Mott initiated the founding of Kansas Statewide Transgender Education Project (www.k-step.org). K-STEP is an all-volunteer non-profit organization devoted to ending discrimination against transgender people and their families through education.

In January, 2012, Mott was elected to be the chair of Kansas Equality Coalition, a statewide organization with eleven chapters across Kansas that is dedicated to ending discrimination against LGBT Kansans through political action at the local and state levels. (www.kansasequalitycoalition.org).

Additionally, Mott has served as a member of the board of directors of Metropolitan Community Church of Topeka and is an active volunteer in the Topeka community.

Chapter One
Trans-Surgery: Part One
January 19, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part One

I woke up this morning in quiet thought, the world not yet pulling me into itself. In these moments, I am allowed to let myself imagine the journey, and dream of living in anatomical correctness, to the degree that such a thing is possible, for me.

I am scheduled for gender affirmation surgery in May, in Bangkok, Thailand. There are a million things to do. Each of them taking place in new framework. No longer the framework of someday, maybe. Undeniably in the framework of this is real, this is happening.

Before writing *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler interviewed many transgender women. *They Beat the Girl Out of My Boy, or So They Tried*, is the monologue that came from those interviews. It begins, *At five years old, I was putting my baby sister's diapers on. I saw her vagina. I wanted one, I wanted one. I thought it would grow. I thought it would open. I ached to belong.*

These are the words that will open my monologue on February 24th at the Topeka Civic Theatre in Washburn University's 2012 production of this show. They are the words I have spoken on stage for the last several years. However, this year, they will have meaning much different than in any other performance. I can feel the emotion that will swell up inside me as I take the stage again.

The first thing I remember in my life is the knowledge that I am female, but not like other females. The horrifying impossibility of ever being able to be myself, made life so imposing that I spent most of it simply wanting to die.

When I awaken from my surgery, I will cry. It will not be possible to contain the overwhelming emotions. Simultaneously experiencing great joy and great sadness. I am fifty-four. I will experience myself physically, for the very first time.

Great joy that I am finally there. Not more of a woman. Being female is something I already had at five years old. I will no longer be constantly reminded that I was born biologically male. Every time I dress. Every time I use the bathroom. Every time I see another woman and the way her jeans fit to her body.

From the monologue, *It's like trying to sleep, and there's a really loud car alarm. When I got my vagina, it was like someone finally turned it off.*

I expect that this analogy is quite correct in its description of the suddenness of the change, but greatly underwhelming in its description of the intensity. We live in a world that continues to ignore the medical necessity of this surgery for so many human beings. And in so doing, clearly states that I am not female. It is not a comparison to being unable to sleep. It is a comparison to being unable to breathe.

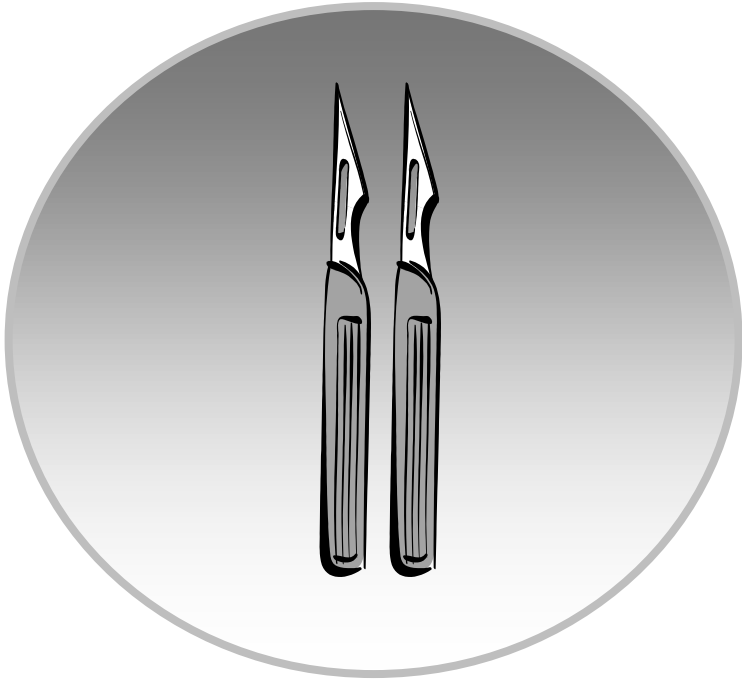
The great joy, is that I will now be able to breathe. For in the years leading up to this moment, I have never truly been allowed to do so.

The great sadness is that so many will never be able to truly breathe. The great sadness that this surgery is not treated like any other medically necessary surgery. No person is capable of knowing another person's gender identity. This knowledge is so personal, so undeniably true, that for anyone to suggest that it isn't, is the premeditated murder of our souls.

Reaching this place in my journey will not solve any of my problems. It must be said of problems, that they are generally easier to solve if you can breathe. There will be no magical transformation from transsexual woman to just woman. To deny the treacherous and life-draining road upon which I have traveled, would be just as much to deny myself, as it would be to deny that I am a woman.

Life is not about having the courage to do a thing. It is about being willing to accept the consequences of doing it. And also about being willing to accept the consequences of not doing it. I am not willing to accept the consequences that come from having the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life, but choosing not to do so. I was born transsexual. I will die transsexual. I will just be more able to breathe. ♀

Chapter Two
Trans-Surgery: Part Two
February 21, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Two

Now that I know I'm going to have my surgery, I am seeing everything through a different lens. Things that have been forever impossible are suddenly within reach. Dreams of a lifetime are coming true. And it is very much, and very much not, about sex.

I have been thinking a lot about sex lately. Not that I didn't think about sex before. I just didn't think about it in the same way as I think about it now. It has been a long journey, so this undoubtedly calls for more explanation.

When I was very young, my dream was that I would somehow be able to be female, and that I would someday find a fellow, and I would be his girl. As I became older, this was most certainly an impossible dream. I placed it in that space in my mind that is reserved for those things that I would dearly love to see happen, but I knew could never be.

It was best, you see, to place this dream in that part of my brain, where I knew it was there, yet it was distant enough that I didn't have to live in the pain of its impossibility. Throughout my life, this dream would make its appearances in the front and center. Life would be unbearable. And whenever I was able to do so, it would once again be relegated to the don't think about it section.

With the dream safely locked away, it was possible to do and be the things that make one a man (as I saw it at the time). Get a job. Fall in love with a woman. Have sex. Get married. I was attracted to women so, from a logical standpoint, it worked. From a “who I am” standpoint, it was never truly possible. Only an exercise in living according to the “rules”, and slowly watching my soul die.

I never had any issue with the sex. And this is the lens through which I have seen sex, for most of my life. It was, sadly, the only lens through which I was able to focus.

Fast forward to 2007. I am finally living as a woman, and there is a slow, but undeniable shifting of my attractions away from women and toward men. The dream is beginning to slip back into my consciousness, and it seems possible for the first time, that I might someday find a fellow, and I might be his girl.

Unfortunately, possible was still pretty impossible. It costs around \$20,000 for male-to-female (MTF) gender affirmation surgery (much more for female-to-male). In 2007, this seemed to be further away than the moon. My insurance had (still has) an exclusion specifically stating that it will not cover anything to do with a sex change. I would like to note that today, more and more businesses are including complete transgender-related health care in their insurance policies.

The dream that had been allowed back into my world, was forced yet one more time into the hiding place. But the lens had changed. Hidden, but not impossible. Perhaps a miracle would happen. Actually, a few miracles did happen. A few of my amazing friends so wanted to see me find my dream that they found in themselves the need to help make it more reachable. For my friends, I will forever be grateful.

Fast forward to a month ago. Putting pennies into savings, and occasional dollars, and I am just over half way to the 20K finish line. I had been closer, but the death of a car necessitated the removal of a significant portion of the dream fund. A Facebook friend was keeping us all posted as she took her dream to Thailand - where the cost is about half, trip included - and my dream once again reentered the world of the here and now. As so it is, that the lens changed again. It would seem that my dream is finally coming true.

I feel like a teenage girl just discovering her sexuality. Everything is changing. How I see men is changing. How I see life is changing. And more than I can describe, how I feel is changing. It's a new and different kind of alive. A different light and a different lens. Things that seemed impossible just weeks ago, are now like flowers unfolding before my very eyes.

The things I see as possible show up in the energy I send out to the universe. And that energy has a way

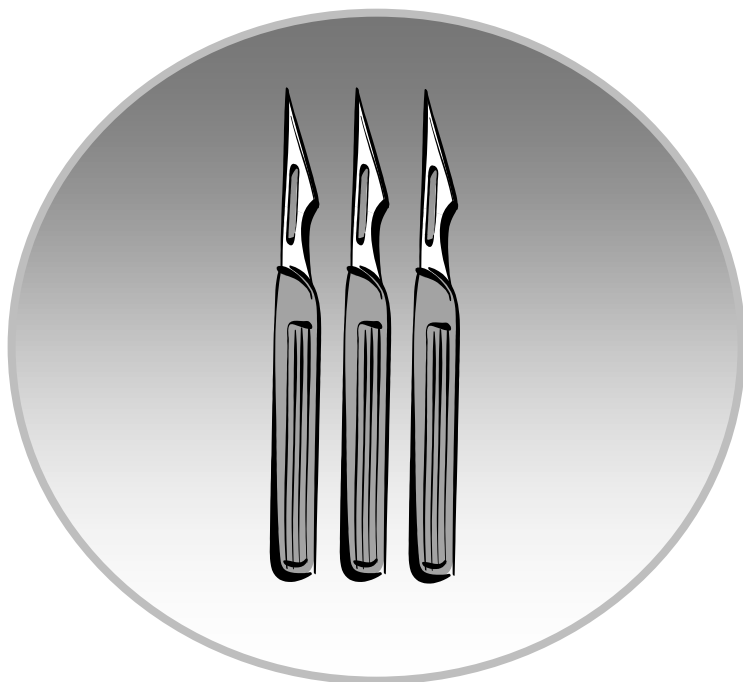
of opening the doors through which I find those things waiting for me.

Anyway, I have been thinking more about sex. It seems that it might could happen. After my surgery, and an appropriate healing time, I am not going to go rushing out and find a guy to sleep with. I am still looking for someone with whom to share my life. Besides, the first dance is reserved for me.

And I am still very much like a little girl. Not even five years old at living as a woman. I find that I will have the same precious gift that most five-year-old girls have. It will be mine, and it will be just fine if I choose to treasure it for a while. That said, someday, I will find a fellow, and I will be his girl.



Chapter Three
Trans-Surgery: Part Three
April 13, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Three

I saw a lot of animals and some ballerinas. And there was a humble dragon. One looked like modern art, a picture I would very much like to hang on the wall of my home. These are the images I saw when I took the Rorschach (ink blot) test during the psychological evaluation my psychologist requires as part of the process of getting the letter I need before I can have my surgery.

It is not required that everyone who is scheduled for gender affirmation surgery have this type of evaluation. The letter from a psychologist (or psychiatrist) is routinely required, but not the series of tests that were part of my experience. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health creates the "Standards of Care" for transgender people. They indicate that before qualifying for surgery, we must live in gender for at least a full year (Real Life Test) and acquire two letters from mental health professionals, one of whom is generally expected to be a Ph.D.

I took the tests required by my psychologist because she was the psychologist to whom I was led by following the path that seems to be laid out for me. Following the path that seems to be laid out for me has worked quite well for me, and I don't plan on changing that technique anytime soon.

I can't help but wonder what images I might have seen had I taken the Rorschach when I was

struggling with trying to live as a man. It would certainly not have been ballerinas and humble dragons. Anger and fear would have framed my responses rather than peace and joy.

As I sat before my psychologist, it seemed that I was as much a teacher as I was a client. Psychology and other mental health disciplines still have a long way to go before they are truly dealing with the issues that face transgender people, which of course, are not our issues at all. Unfortunately, we live in a world that often treats transgender people as though we were mentally ill.

When you live a lifetime having people, sometimes significant people in your world, tell you that you are _____ (choose any one of the derogatory terms that are commonly used to describe transgender people and place it in the blank), you are bound to develop some difficulties.

The people who should be diagnosed with mental issues are the ones who are so afraid of, or disturbed by, transgender people that they apply those terms to us. Actually, transphobia IS diagnosable in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) under *Specific Phobia* – “the marked and persistent fear of clearly discernible, circumscribed objects or situations”.

Part of the reason why society constructs the transgender healthcare obstacle course in the first place, is the fact that the DSM still classifies

transgenderism as a mental disorder. The inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder in the DSM-IV-TR (the most recent version) is clearly used to deny insurance for medically necessary treatment. It is also used as justification, sometimes successfully, for legalized discrimination against transgender people.

The DSM, which is completely revised about once every twenty years, is due for such a revision in 2013. As of now, the new version (DSM-V) will likely continue to identify transgenderism as a mental disorder. In the meantime, people will continue to stand in front of elected officials and say that people like me are mentally ill.

Hopefully, this travesty of justice will be revisited before another twenty years goes by. Until then, transgender people will be forced to jump through hoops in order to receive gender affirmation surgery. And some of us will be required to look at funny little smears of ink on funny little white cards.

I haven't received my psychologist letter yet, but I expect to very soon. However, as I type these words, it occurs to me that perhaps I should have seen something distressing in the images. I do hope that I was "sick" enough to qualify for surgery. Not to worry. My psychologist "get's it". It's not really about having a mental disorder. It's about needing to have my body match my identity.

What a strange little game to play. I do think that there should be a process by which surgeons are able to determine that gender affirmation surgery is indicated, but I don't think we should be subjected to a battery of psychological testing. Someday, that will change. It is one of the changes that many people are working for with respect to transgender equality. For the moment, I think I will just be happy that I see a lot of animals, and some ballerinas, and an occasional humble dragon. ♀

Chapter Four
Trans-Surgery: Part Four
May 8, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Four

My surgeon asks that I compose a letter expressing the reasons I seek to have gender affirmation surgery. I have chosen to write that letter publicly.

Dear Dr. Pichet (Rodchareon),

As the date of my surgery is fast approaching, I sit at my laptop for the purpose of sharing my thoughts and feelings with you. The first 48 years of my life were horrifyingly painful. The last six years have been more full of joy than I could possibly imagine. The slipper fits, borrowing the story of Cinderella. The “Steven suit” was never mine; assigned to me by factors not of my control, or my choosing.

The journey is, of course, Disneyesque. But yet not. Shades of Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, and Beauty and the Beast. Or maybe it was Jiminy Cricket (From the movie Pinocchio) – “When you wish upon a star. Makes no difference who you are. Anything your heart desires will come to you.” Like Pinocchio, I am no longer a wooden boy. Unlike Pinocchio, I dreamed to be a “real” girl. For being a girl is my “who I am”. My true and honest nature.

About two years ago, a great and religiously conservative friend of mine and I were discussing transgenderism. He said, “I can’t imagine how it feels to have your mind not match your body.” I said, “I can’t imagine how it feels to have them

match.” He said that it felt natural. I said, “So does this.”

Not natural in the sense that it is easy or correct. Natural in the sense that it is of nature. Not different from a rare and beautiful flower. No less real than the Earth itself.

I have heard it said that your gender is the thing about you, about which you are the most certain. I find that I agree. I have never once believed that I am not a female. Never doubted. Never uncertain. Never untrue.

I shared my story soon after I began my transition, nearly six years ago. I spoke for only a few minutes. I was very nervous. The words were difficult to find. But after I had finished, a young transwoman came to me in tears, hugged me, and told me that I had changed her life. She was now able to believe it was possible for her to be a woman.

As she shared her courage, I realized that she had changed my life. I was now able to see the value in sharing my journey with others. If one person were to discover that they could be who they are, everything would have been worth it.

As I tell my story today, I often say that it is as though someone opened a door through which the nightmare is not allowed to follow. It is my place today to hold open that door. This surgery, another way to offer hope and create change.

Were that I were so noble as to have that be my only motivation. That which comes from me is not of me, but rather of a power infinitely greater than me. It matters not if you call that power God, or the universe, or truth.

As I woke up this morning, I thought to myself, *Only ten more mornings must I wake to find this lie my body tells.* It seems strange that anyone would believe the lie. But I must now remember that I believed the lie for far too many years. Physical truth is near.

It is both unbelievably surreal, and unbelievably real. It is both an impossible dream and the reason for my existence on the planet. And it is both the end of the journey and the beginning.

There can be no other moment so defined in my lifetime. The moment in which I become myself in a way that can only be made so by the taking of the step at hand. The moment in which I experience the naturalness described by my conservative friend. Having my body match my soul.

Natural in the sense that it is easy and correct.
Natural in the sense that it is of nature. Natural in the sense that it is me. ♀

Chapter Five
Trans-Surgery: Part Five
A Lesson in Culture
May 19, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Five
A Lesson in Culture

In the spring 2012 semester at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, I took SW 353 (Macro Social Work Practice) and SW326 (Macro Human Behavior in Social Environment). My last final was on May 10th and the flight to Bangkok for my surgery was in the morning of the 11th. The classes are over for another semester, but the lessons are continuing. My few days in Thailand have been a lesson in culture.

The voices of Professors Mark Kaufman and Sherrill Robinson have reached across the Pacific Ocean. I am suddenly aware of my great lacking in cultural competence and the great opportunity to grow.

As I was signing the pre-surgery paperwork, I was asked to sign a document stating that I would not speak badly of Dr. Pichet (Rodchareon), should I not be pleased. I have spent a lifetime in a world that nonchalantly denies me my rights on a daily basis. I have spent the last several years as an educator and activist, hoping to help change the callous nature of oppression and marginalization in Kansas and in the United States. I viewed this document as being an infringement on my rights, and I was not willing to acquiesce.

I watched my opinion become less valued as I began to be seen as a woman. It was not less

valuable. It had become less valued. It has never occurred to me to acquiesce. I was engendered with male privilege and although I once believed that I actively sought not to utilize said privilege, I have come to discover that to do so would have been only made possible by fighting to eliminate it. Yes, I have become a feminist.

The way I viewed this document, and the way it was intended were two totally different things. What I saw as an attempt to lessen my rights, was intended to be a “gentleman’s agreement”, and I use the term loosely. Of course, I objected to signing the document. What I failed to see, was how that objection was a great insult to Dr. Pichet.

He said that he has done thousands of these surgeries and I was the first person to make such an objection. He was clearly disturbed by my concerns. He was kind, but disturbed. In the course of our conversation he suggested that I might be planning to take some legal action against him, which had never crossed my mind.

What he failed to see was how that was a great insult to me. It was at this point in the conversation that my “third eye” began to focus - Thank you Professor Robinson. All of the sudden I realized that my inadvertent insult had created the situation, and immediately took steps to deescalate the situation. Soon after, the conversations and feelings were forgotten, and I am glad to have been gifted

with access to some ability to see a situation at the same time I am in a situation.

I still believe that it was appropriate for me to question the document. It was inappropriate for me to do so without considering the good Doctor's culture. I am not embarrassed by the fact that I was the first out of thousands to choose not to acquiesce. In fact, I see it as something of a compliment. However, had this been a first meeting with a client in my someday social worker world, I would have destroyed the opportunity to build trust with that client.

During the conversation, I told Dr. Pichet that I trusted him. He responded by telling me that I did not. You see, I see trust as a decision, not a consequence. I believe that the consequence comes after the decision. I choose to live in a world where I trust, as opposed to a world where I don't trust. It offers me great peace. That doesn't mean that I stand silent when I feel as if my rights are not being respected. It just means that I need to continue to learn how better to respond, rather than to react.

Fortunately, with my third eye in focus, and with some of the grace for cultural competence that is amazingly demonstrated by Professor Kaufman, I kept my opinions about trust to myself.

Dr. Pichet performed the surgery, and from what I can tell, everything went splendidly. I will be penning some thoughts and feelings about that soon.

For the moment, I am pleased to be contemplating a lesson in culture. ♀

Chapter Six
Trans-Surgery: Part Six
In God's Time
May 26, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Six
In God's Time

In God's time, I would say, *In God's time*, as I went without cable or internet access and scrimped and saved to place money aside. *In God's time*, I would say when my car died and I took \$6,000 from my surgery fund to buy another one. In God's time was not just something I said, but something I believed with all my heart.

Life is of great comfort when faith opens the door for peace and acceptance. At the same time I realized that the purchase of the much needed car had set back my plans for surgery by at least two or three years, I watched a Facebook friend post about her surgery in Thailand. Perhaps, it was God's time after all.

Not too many days later, my amazing friend Jaymee and I were on the way to Bangkok with a May 16th scheduled surgery date. We came a couple days early because it would give us a chance to see a bit of the city before my surgery.

We landed just before midnight on Saturday, May 12th and then began marking off a few of the items on the list of things to learn. On the morning of the 14th, the Doctor's office called and said they wanted to do the surgery that day. It turns out that God's time was two days earlier than I thought.

I woke up several hours later with the knowledge that my surgery was done, that it had gone very well, and that my friend was by my side. Jaymee is one of the two women who first reached out to me in warm and loving kindness when I took the first frightening steps into the world of revealing myself as transgender, some six years before. She has been a wonderful friend from that day. What it means to me that she is here with me, is beyond words.

On Thursday, the 17th, they removed my packing for the first time, and I saw myself. I had viewed myself many times before. For the last few years, I have woken up each morning and found a woman looking back at me when I looked into the mirror. But I had never seen myself before.

What I saw belonged to me. It was no longer the mismatched lie that incited sickness in a less-than-understanding world and screamed darkness into my soul. It was mine. It was me. That day we left the hospital and we are staying at the Watana Mansion hotel.

Jaymee and I are only now setting out to explore Bangkok and there is far more to see than can possibly be seen in the next two weeks.

It is an enchanting city. There are so many secrets yet to discover; secrets only beginning to reveal themselves and lend meaning to the sights and sounds.

As the sun comes up over Bangkok, it is as though one world is fallen asleep and another world is preparing to awaken; both worlds entirely unlike the world from which I come.

There are traces of America: 7-11, KFC, McDonalds. Tall hotels and office buildings overlook the city with beauty and whisper familiarity to scenes of before.

Beneath the stalwart guardians exists a world of endless activity. Never-ending lines of cars and motorcycles and pink taxicabs scurry down the narrow streets moving in unison something like a flock of birds, each sensing the forthcoming movements of the others.

Stands – everywhere – showing freshly gathered fruit and sending the tantalizing aroma of sizzling meat throughout the air.

Stands – everywhere – displaying endless collections of handmade artistry and craft; often breathtaking in both simplicity and elegance.

Stands – everywhere – offering enticing clothing and shoes; most of which might be found in the young women's section of an upscale American department store.

There is great wealth here; wealth of spirit; wealth of soul. There is great humanness, humility,

honesty, and honor; great simplicity, singleness, serenity, and selflessness.

All of this takes place amidst the secrets only beginning to reveal themselves as to my new experiences as a woman. There are so many secrets yet to discover; secrets only beginning to reveal themselves and lend meaning to the life that is now unfolding before me.

There is only one thing of which I am quite certain. All of it will unfold . . . in God's time. ♀

Chapter Seven
Trans-Surgery: Part Seven
June 7, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Seven

It is my birthright. It has been kept from me by the forces of ignorance and fear; held captive by demons holding bibles and claiming some right or ability to speak for God. I'd sooner say there is no god, than to believe that anyone of this earth has knowledge of God's will for everyone. That is the gift of truth that has led me to this place, along with the gift of determination, and I am no longer able to live in fear.

I am weakened by the events of the last 30 days, unaccustomed to not having the energy to dance and dash through life and hopefully offer hope to some who need it. Yet, I am everyday drawn nearer to another day's battle in the fight for human dignity.

There is great wide wonder in the diversity of humanity. This diversity is the makings of God. Each soul – without exception – another part of the trillion-piece puzzle that comes together, as God, and creates the forces in the universe that strive to protect and reclaim said dignity.

In this journey, I have experienced a part of God I had never known before. It is not contingent on what someone believes or who they are or who they love, but that they love. It is the spark of human kindness. It wears no particular hat. It sings no single song. It dances in joy and freedom and truth and all eyes turn as it enters the room.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”, says Jesus in Matthew 7:7 (NIV). I came here seeking my physical self, yet I wonder if not it is the spiritual self is changed more than might be imagined.

Ask; I did. When I was five, “God, please help me be a girl on the outside.” When I was thirteen, “God please help me not be a girl on the inside.” And when I was forty-eight, “God, please help me be the person you intend for me to be.”

I saw a little bit of God, today. A piece of God I had never seen before. I know it is a piece of God not because of the color of their skin. Not because of the language that they speak. I know because of the love.

I am changed. Forever moved toward an understanding of truth that was not made available by the journey of 10,000 miles, or by the surgery for which I came. It was made available through the winds of the heart, which climb mountains as though they were ant hills and travel oceans as if they were raindrops.

I came here to find myself. The bit of myself I found was not what I expected. The door is now open for me to find the relationship with a man I someday hope to find. But the door of understanding is now opened so much further as the

truth of our purpose in this world becomes ever more certain in my heart. It is the purpose of love.

Its scenes are played out in this place in the South Pacific Ocean. Whether it be the ladies at Bangkok Plastic Surgery who offer care unlimited to those recovering, or Doctor Pichet who performed what I still consider to be a miracle. Whether it be the people on the street who choose to help the obviously disoriented American rather than harm. Whether it be the amazing woman who spent her own money and took time off work to be here for me, and who has helped heal the battle scars of before and tended the battle wounds of this journey in selfless kindness. It is love.

It is my birthright. It has been kept from me by the forces of ignorance and fear; held captive by demons holding bibles and claiming some right or ability to speak for God. I have seen the faces of God, and they are love. Ask, and it shall be given. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened.

When I was five I asked, “God, please help me be a girl on the outside.” When I was thirteen, “God please help me not be a girl on the inside.” And when I was forty-eight, “God, please help me be the person you intend for me to be.” It is this third asking that opens the door of love. For my ability to love is so directly in tune with my ability to be me. ♀

Chapter Eight
Trans-Surgery: Part Eight
The Surgery
June 12, 2012



Trans-Surgery: Part Eight
The Surgery

I am 163 centimeters tall. I did not know that I would need to know that when I arrived in Bangkok. It is just one of the dozens of things I did not know. This is the piece I need to write about the surgery itself. This is the piece I hope illuminates the path a bit for others who will be on the same journey.

Although the journey began when I was born, the surgical journey became very real as we landed in Bangkok, and found our way through baggage and customs. I was surprised that our baggage was not rechecked in the Bangkok airport. The reality set in further as we walked to the designated area and saw a smiling young man holding a sign that had my name on it.

We were chauffeured to the hotel by this very nice young man. The next day we did a bit of exploring and rested. The following day turned out to be the day of the surgery. We were picked up at the hotel and taken to the clinic where the surgery was to be performed to fill out paperwork.

Before my surgery, I was taken to a hospital where I was given an EKG and also met a young female psychiatrist who filled out the certificate required by the government for me to have my surgery. She didn't ask me any questions about why I wanted the surgery, although I suspect that she had the

information I had given to Dr. Pichet. She did, however, want to know how tall I was. I am five feet four inches, but she wanted to know in centimeters.

The following is from a statement issued by the Thai Medical Council in June, 2009, “In the event the ailing person is a foreigner and has received approval from a foreign psychiatrist already, at least one Thai psychiatrist must assess and evaluate the person prior to the operation.” (<http://www.thailawforum.com/Guidelines-sex-change-operations.html>).

These services were covered in the cost of the surgery. When we got back to Bangkok Plastic Surgery (BPS), I was prepped for surgery, which included a UA. Of course, I went to the bathroom before we left the hotel and I was told not to have any food or water before the surgery. Peeing in a cup turned out to be an event, or should I say, a non-event, for quite some time.

Next was the required cleaning of my bowels, which is not pleasant and probably does not require graphic illustration. Finally they took me into the operating room which was busy, busy, busy. No less than ten women were all tending to individual preparations, each seeming quite skilled at the task at hand.

The anesthesiologist came up and as he wanted to know how tall I was – in centimeters. As we talked,

he noticed the scars from my hip replacement surgeries. He asked me about my anesthesiology from those operations and I shared that I had been given a spinal block and then kept sleeping during the operation. Then he asked if that was what I wanted to do, and I said yes. It is much easier to recover than from general anesthesia.

I faded off looking into the faces of the scurrying angels busily at work for the purpose of my care, each of whom seemed to glaze up at just the right time and offer a kind smile. Kindness is of the eyes, and although I could not see the smiles beneath the angels' green face masks, I knew that they were there.

Warning – Skip the next two paragraphs if you don't want to know what they do during the surgery. The surgery is called a vaginoplasty (Scrotal Skin Graft Technique). First, an incision is made along the penis, from the base of the scrotum to the tip. Scrotal skin and the testicles are removed, and the skin of the penis is carefully separated from the erectile tissue and removed. The erectile tissue is then removed. In the meantime, the scrotal skin is reshaped into a closed tube which is grafted to the penile skin, to increase the depth of the vagina to be created, and the glans of the penis is reshaped and sewn into position to form the clitoris.

The skin of the lower abdomen is carefully lifted away, and the process of creating the vagina begins. The penile skin, with the attached graft, is inverted,

and placed inside the cavity made by lifting away the skin. The penile skin is then carefully sewn into place. The urethra is also rerouted at this time. The remaining scrotal skin is trimmed to make the labia. Packing is placed into the vagina to help hold the shape during initial healing, and final stitching and cleaning up is done. The preceding was taken from a post by “Saige” and closely matches the description I was given by Dr. Pichet. (Saige’s post <http://everything2.com/title/Sex+reassignment+surgery>).

There was never a moment when I thought about not going through with the surgery. I have waited a lifetime for this moment. When I woke up, my friend was with me and much of the next day was pretty blurry. I didn’t like being on the morphine and asked within the first 24 hours to be switched to Tramadol. I was pleased to know that there was Wi-Fi in my room and being able to get online was so much appreciated.

For three days, the many kind attendants swept in and out of the room and check my vitals and urine output and dumped an occasional does of antibiotics into my IV. I was amazed that they allowed me to eat the next day, and even let me have coffee. Every few hours there were doses of medicine for swelling and pain, and more antibiotics.

There was a lot of noise. The normal “people coming in and out of the room” noise you would expect, but also street sounds of traffic and

construction nearby. It was nearly impossible to sleep and I dearly wish I had brought some ear plugs or something to take the edge of the noise. Lesson learned. I made a point of not drinking any more coffee and by the third day the noise was beginning to be filtered out by my brain as not important enough to keep track of. I was finally able to get some sleep.

I noticed a Facebook post by Annette, a dear friend of mine who is also a nurse, reminding me to do my deep breathing exercises and leg lift exercises. I have two hip replacement surgeries under my belt (sorry – couldn't resist the pun) and hospital staff had me doing these exercises from the get go. However, at the clinic this was not happening, but I knew enough to follow my friend's advice and begin my own exercise regimen – this is very important.

On the second day after the surgery, they got me up so I could walk around a bit. Of all the moments of pain I have experienced in the journey so far, the getting up was by far the most painful. An inch and a half of padding was covering the surgical area, and when I began to sit up, that padding pushed down on the bed and up on the surgical area and my exact words were “ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow”, and “oh, my God”.

This was the only time in my journey that I experience nausea, undoubtedly brought on by the pain. I was able to walk around without much

difficulty or pain, but they had me using a walker, just to be safe. They had me sit up again the next day, but I was more prepared for what was happening and able to use my arms to lessen the pressure on my surgical area and thereby, lessen the pain.

That afternoon, they removed the padding that was covering me. They handed me a hand mirror and I got to see myself for the first time. I knew that it would not look the same as it will look after about three months, and both the doctor and the nurse had warned me that it would be “ugly” at first, but it was beautiful to me. In the few short weeks that have passed since the surgery, the swelling has gone down a lot and the healing is taking place and it becomes ever more beautiful each and every day.

After that it was time for them to unpack my vagina. When the vagina was formed, it was packed with a long stream of gauze to help it hold its shape in the first few days of recovery. Everything I had read indicated that this would be painful, but in fact, I hardly noticed it. I should mention that I was still quite under the influence of Tramadol at this point.

Next, they removed my catheter and told me I could leave after I peed twice. I’m going to tell you that I am not a fan of hospital beds, and this was great news. The nurse had me watch the cleaning process so that I could do it back at the hotel. Then they brought me five bottles of water. I will took this to mean that they sensed my joy at the thought of

sleeping in a regular bed, as opposed to the thought that they were trying to get rid of me.

Before I move on, I want to talk about the selfless love that was given freely and abundantly to me every moment I have been at the clinic. It is just amazing, truly humbling, and wholly comforting. The spiritual beauty of these angels will be one of the things I will always take with me into my life yet to come. The following is my Facebook post regarding these amazing women.

They are the children of angels. Walking gracefully on the earth in the purpose of bringing joy and peace to all who suffer. They are the miracles of miracles, shining love as love is meant to shine. Giving without consequence. Offering no expectations. Humble in self and glorious in the light. These are the ladies of the home of my miracle. I am honored to have met them.

I am not going to pretend that I knew exactly how this peeing thing was going to work. I did not. After about the third bottle of water, my tummy was full, but my bladder was still trying to figure out what was happening. Anyway, I sensed a need to pee within an hour or so, and managed to accomplish the task at hand. *Adventures in Peeing* was only at the beginning of the story and there would be additional adventures to follow.

The nurse cleaned me up again while I watched in the hand mirror, and I tried to learn what she was

telling me. I should mention that I was still quite under the influence of Tramadol at this point, and this was not an easy thing to do. I was to clean two times, morning and evening, and I was introduced to feminine napkins.

They brought me back to the hotel. This was Thursday, late afternoon, and I had an appointment to see the doctor on Saturday. The five bottles of water consumed at the clinic were beginning to wake up my bladder. It was good to lie down on a regular bed again so after using the restroom, I spent the next few hours resting. I woke up feeling like I could pee, but I sat down for a minute in the chair. Within moments it was clear that I should have gone directly to the bathroom, and I had my first experience with not knowing how to predict or control this particular bodily function. Fortunately, the learning curve on this one was pretty short.

It was time for my evening cleaning of the wounds. This is a point in the journey that neither I nor my friend had anticipated. I was trying to remember how I was supposed to do the cleaning and figure out how I was going to do it by myself when she offered to do it for me.

I will be forever grateful for my friend and the fact that she was here with me. I can not begin to express my love for this woman who, like a sister, has given freely of her time, money, and love so that my path would be less difficult. In the course of our conversations regarding this experience she said

that she could not imagine how women who come here by themselves are able to do it. I said that I was sure there were times when they undoubtedly shed tears of pain, tiredness, and loneliness. These were tears I did not have to cry, because of the kindness and care she has given to me. If there is one thing of which I am certain in this life, it is that when such a precious thing is given to me, life will offer me the means by which to pay it forward.

I would like to share that this was not easy for her, or for me. Neither of us knew that this part of the journey would unfold the way that it did. For me, it meant abandonment of modesty, with this particular type of modesty being one of my most deeply seeded characteristics. For her, it brought back feelings of difficult times; feelings that brought back memories and pain. Of all the things I hope for her, and there are many, one of the most significant is that this experience will bring her the same healing that she has gifted to me.

Among the supplies that were sent with me from the clinic back to the hotel - among the cleaning solutions, gauze pads, packages of pills, and feminine napkins - were two condoms. At first I thought it was interesting that they did such a thing, remembering the ongoing battle fought by Kansas Equality Coalition to create a statewide requirement for comprehensive sex education in Kansas schools. What I didn't realize was that they were for the dilators (the plastic pieces in graduated sizes that are used to dilate the vagina).

Also among my supplies was Somsa – a round inner tube about the size of a chair seat. Somsa is the name I chose for her because she is soft on my surgical area (sore ass can be used as a substitute for surgical area). She travels with me nearly everywhere I go. I have taken quite a liking to her and she brings me great comfort.

I found that I was able to get out for short walks, which was wonderful, although the temperature has been in the 90s with high humidity since we arrived. Next month, beginning in June, is the rainy season, which is followed by the cooler season (highs in the 80s) and we arrived near the end of the hot season with the temperature actually beginning to taper off a bit.

The doctor's appointment on Saturday was good, and another appointment was made for the following Wednesday. By Tuesday, I was weaning myself off the Tramadol as the pain was far less than I had imagined. By Wednesday, I was just taking Tylenol.

During one of our short walks/shopping trips I purchased a blouse that I really liked and on Tuesday afternoon I put it on without washing it. Yes, I know that I should have washed it before I wore it, but nothing in my past would have caused me to expect what happened next. I developed a quite impressive rash all over my upper torso, which proceeded to spread in a less impressive way

to any place that I scratched after having scratched the rash. Fortunately, my appointment with the doctor was the next day, and while everything else was just fine, my rash created quite a stir. Also fortunately, the doctor gave me anti-itch medicine. Unfortunately, the anti-itch medicine took away all my already limited energy and the next few days were spent resting. That might have been the best thing for me in the long run because I probably needed the rest anyway. It also gave me time to work on my book, which I hope to publish in July.

At the appointment with the doctor on Monday (now two weeks after the surgery), the doctor discovered that I had some dead skin inside my vagina. Although I don't believe this is typical, it was nothing to worry about but the skin needed to be removed. He wanted to try to do it that day with me awake, but if he was not able to do that, it would require me coming back the next day and being put to sleep for the procedure.

They led me to a room with a bed with stirrups attached to the bed. As in all of my female medical firsts, both excitement and apprehension flooded my mind. Excitement gave way to significant discomfort the moment they strapped my legs into place. Discomfort gave way to previously unimagined discomfort when the doctor created the space through which to perform the procedure.

I kept thinking to myself that I needed to relax because my “analyze everything” brain had

determined that if I was able to do so, there would be no need to return the next day and therefore no need to have to go through the ordeal of waking up after having been put to sleep. It almost goes without saying, but relaxing was not an easy thing to do at the time. For some reason, the Eve Ensler piece from *The Vagina Monologues* entitled *My Angry Vagina* kept going through my mind. The only thing left to say about this experience is, “oh, my God”.

The doctor was able to do what he needed to do, no doubt facilitated by my highly tuned relaxing skills, and there was no need for a return trip the next day. I was shown how to do the dilation and told that I could begin when I got home. It is very simple consisting of inserting the dilators into the vagina for 15 minutes a day, beginning with the smaller dilators and progressing to the larger ones week by week. My final appointment was scheduled for Thursday – the day before we were scheduled to leave.

Each day, I am getting stronger and more able to spend a little time in Bangkok. I am glad to have been faithful to my breathing exercises, as I have needed every bit of the capacity of my lungs when walking through the heat. On Tuesday, we went to the river, and took the express boat to the Grand Palace. My eyes have never beheld such beauty in all my life.

I had my final check up on Thursday morning. We flew out early Friday morning (Bangkok time), and got back to Kansas in about thirty-three hours later. It was with both gladness and sadness that I left this amazing place. There is such reverence there. I am constantly struck by the kindness and the diversity of the people who live there. I have taken part of Bangkok with me, and she will always hold a place in my heart.

I am home now, and I have started doing the dilation of my vagina. There is not much to it; inserting the dilators beginning with the smaller ones the first week, and moving to the larger ones in the coming weeks. Not painful at all. It was kind of fun to go to Wal-Mart and buy a box of condoms (used to help keep the dilators clean) and some personal lubricant. I have now stood in the aisle looking at all the choices of feminine napkins and picking out the ones that work for me.

I will be going back to work in about three weeks. I am changed. I will never again be a person who has not traveled beyond American borders. I would imagine that there will be other trips abroad in my lifetime. I have met the people of a world about which I previously knew nothing. And I have been humbled by their spirit of service to humankind.

I popped into the Shawnee County Commission office this morning, knowing that there was a meeting that offered me the chance to say hi to the many people there who have been so supportive of

my journey. I walked down the hallway in the courthouse and saw the other women there. I smiled, ever so slightly, knowing for the first time - I too, have a vagina. Also knowing – I am 163 centimeters tall. ♀

