

SHE'S MY DAD

A Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption

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WITH PAULA STONE WILLIAMS

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Chapter 6
MEETING PAULA

“Estrangement isn’t an option. I think I’m ready to meet my father.”

I started therapy about six months after my father’s announcement in my living room. Each session, I brought the anger that lived in my gut into the small office along the Hudson River. I was angry that I carried the yoke of his transition through the first year of my church. I was angry at the fact that I had to analyze and reshape my faith on the fly. Of all the anger brought to the surface, none was more painful than the uncertainty of my father’s personhood. Who was my father? I rarely saw or spoke to him. I acknowledged my father’s new name, Paula, but had yet to see his new body. I’d yet to see the new face, hands, legs, and posture, all of which held her courage and gave Paula her physical personhood.

My sisters, who lived close to my father, saw her often. A text from my sister came through one evening: “You haven’t lived until you’ve seen your dad in women’s pajamas.” My sisters took Paula shopping and invited her to take part in their children’s—her grandchildren’s—lives. The grandkids called her “Grandma Paula,” a personally frustrating name because of the fact that my sister’s children already had a Grandma.

My mother lived full time with another woman, their relationship platonic and incredibly complicated. My mother brought her own resignation to the situation. “Well, you don’t throw away forty years of marriage, but I am not a lesbian. I’m not sure what we are, Jonathan.”

I was angry for my mother. But the transition was complete for my mother and the rest of my family. To my sisters, Paula was no longer their father. She was simply Paula. I hadn’t yet met Paula. My relationship with Paul was strained, but estrangement was not an option.

On Father’s Day, my children brought to me a craft beer and a homemade jar of pickles, in my estimation, the perfect Father’s Day gift. I thanked my kids. They turned on the Mets game and told me that they’d leave me alone for a while. For Mother’s Day, we practically shut down highways, reunite families, and lavish attention on our matriarchs. For Father’s Day, we get a beer, pickles, and unfettered access to baseball. That felt about right, and yet my anxiety ballooned.

“Do I need to call my dad today?”

“I don’t know. Is he still your dad?”

My wife had her own struggles with my father. My father was something that my wife had never expected or experienced—a tall and imposing white man. She latched on to my father, jokingly calling him “Big Daddy,” and delighting in both the generosity and admiration my father showed our family. She had lost my father too, and her tone suggested that, while he was still ours, the pain of calling on Father’s Day might be too much to bear.

Our choice not to call ended any hope of getting my father back. There was a new reality, and that reality told me that it was time to wake up from any delusion that I would get my father back. I should give up any hope I had for our past relationship. Any hope I had for hikes, bike rides, or

Mets games with my dad were no more than yearnings for a childhood that once was.

Not calling my dad on Father's Day created a responsibility in me. No longer was I allowed to be passive. I couldn't choose estrangement from him. I wouldn't be the victim of his decision. My decision to not call my father on Father's Day meant that I acknowledged her personhood. I had no father to call, and there was a new person in his place who had also contributed to my very being, who modeled for me the basics of survival, and cared for me in such a way that I might become a well-adjusted human being. The acknowledgment of my father's new humanity felt foreign and contradictory.

I had a choice to make. I could continue to spiral through denial and anger, or I could accept the fact that my father had slowly faded into a nonexistent realm, like the changing of the seasons. In his place was a new person, utterly familiar and yet completely strange but one I must affirm. I could continue to punish my father for her decision to drastically alter her life so late in the game—and in the process profoundly alter my own—or I could acknowledge her personhood. I could acknowledge that my father took a chance and lost everything to become Paula. I could concede that Paula was indeed one of the brave and courageous ones who believed the truth would set her free, even if it came with great pain. If I was willing to acknowledge that, then it was time for me to meet Paula.

I kept my gaze on the homemade afghan in the corner of my therapist's office next to the Hudson River, as I explained the significance of Father's Day: "I'm going to set up a meeting." I walked out of the room before my time was up.



I often judge a moment of my life to be profound based on my body's physical desire to shut down. If I feel like I'm going to pass out, the moment must be important. The time I stole the ball and, in the process, sealed a victory for our basketball team, I tried not to pass out after the intentional foul sent me to the free-throw line. Then there was the game I lost by misreading the game clock. My wedding day, first sermon preached, and when my second child came into the world early. All were moments that I had to will my body not to shut down.

The elevator ride to my father's room could now be counted as one of these profound out-of-body experiences. Paula had flown to New York from her home out west, and was staying at a hotel in the midst of the shops in Midtown. We'd yet to explain Grandpa's transition to our children, and I wanted to meet the person my dad had become first. My wife and I jumped on the train up to Midtown to meet her for lunch.

Paula opened the door, just as nervous, willing *her* body not to shut down. I come by it honestly.

She wasn't my father. Her eyebrows rested neatly above radiant eyes, and a tinge of red highlighted her cheeks. Her nose was no longer pronounced, something I immediately observed. Her mannerisms, which seemed so out of place just a few months ago when my father curled up on our couch, now flowed expectantly and with the grace borne of wisdom and experience. I gave Paula a hug and noticed she'd developed breasts. Paula's hormones were firmly in charge.

"It's good to see you," she said. I had nothing to say back. I couldn't make sense of her voice. There were no masculine overtones and no more evidence of my father's baritone. I searched for any semblance of my father, the mannerisms and the expressions; all of them were gone.

To be devastated and fascinated all at once is rare. The woman before me was not my father. The grief nearly overwhelmed me as I failed to recognize even the slightest bit of my dad. At the same time, I found myself impressed by the woman who sat before me.

“Where did you go?” the therapist had asked me when I stared silently into the afghan. “What if my father is exactly the same but just wearing a dress?” I’d fretted, “What if she doesn’t pass as a woman? What if she is dressed in a short skirt with heels and a day’s stubble on her face? What if she’s wearing some Hello Kitty getup with a lunchbox and the whole damn thing?”

“Then what?” my therapist prodded.

“Then this whole thing gets so much harder. Then I’d be embarrassed to be with my father. My father is my hero, and that feels like a regression. That feels like the people I see on TV. That feels like ladies I’ve seen walking down Bourbon Street. That’s makes the situation that much harder.” I was wrong.

Paula navigated the Midtown sidewalks, cluttered with stands of knockoff merchandise, as if she’d taken us to the shops before, moving swiftly between the rack of coats and the salespeople inviting us to check out their new luggage. She wore white pants, a sleeveless blouse, and a pair of flats. Her hair was no longer cut short, but had grown out to expose her natural curls. The men standing outside had one eye on their merchandise, and—I was 100 percent certain—the other stared straight through the woman’s exterior and knew her secret as well as I did. I carried her secret, the one she carries every day, through the maze of shops.

I shored myself for comments and even catcalls. My initial reaction was to protect this person who was no longer my father, and yet I was her son. I felt defensive and

alert and soon realized I wanted to protect someone I didn't know at all. I tried to stay upright.

The same disruption my body felt upon hearing my father's announcement returned with a vengeance, not because my father looked like the transvestites that walk down Bourbon Street, but because she looked nothing like my father or any other man. Within the well-dressed woman with a tasteful blouse, balanced makeup, new nose, and soft, high-pitched voice was my father. But I couldn't find him, and I thought that might be worse than what I told my therapist.

We sat down to lunch, and the waiter came to take our order.

"Let's start with the ladies first."

By my count there was just my wife and, "Ohhh-hhh, God." Paula ordered something stereotypically befitting of a woman. I took notice of being the only one with fries on my plate. Did my father love French fries? I don't remember, but I'm sure he did, and now she's not eating them.

I remember none of our conversation. I don't remember saying good-bye. I remember thinking that it would take a lot of time to get to know the new person before me—this person who already knows most everything about me. It wasn't fair. Paula had the privilege of having known me my entire life. I met her for the first time in Midtown West, as we navigated second-rate merchandise.

The next day I saw my therapist, who again asked, "Where did you go?"

I had yet to talk, and the afghan seemed close to falling off the back of the chair. I opened my mouth, shut it again, and stared back at my usual spot. My shoulders heaved and tears came, exhausting tears, tears that make

an entire body convulse, each muscle contracting and loosening over and over. I put my hand over my eyes and cried for twenty minutes . . . thirty-five minutes? Did I weep for an entire therapy session? I'm sure that I'm not the first. I left having given myself a full-body workout. Every part of me ached, and I stopped at the newsstand for a packet of Advil.

What I couldn't tell my therapist was that my growing up was a lie. Every game of catch in the front yard wasn't with my father. It was with Paula, the woman I just met. When my father lay in bed and read *The Chronicles of Narnia* to me, it wasn't him at all; it was that woman. When my father cheered at school events, or allowed me to accompany him on his church trips, it wasn't my father who supported me. My father wasn't my companion on the trips either. My father never punished me or drove me to the games. It had been Paula dressed in a male costume. She was dressed in drag, and she raised me.

I remembered the bike ride where I learned all about sex. We rode through Heckscher Park for hours, my father carefully explaining parts of the body that he secretly wished not to have and explaining other parts that she wished were hers. My father did not take that ride with me through the park. He didn't teach me about sex. She did. It was her all along.

When my sister locked us out of our car in Hershey, Pennsylvania, my father was furious. We were stuck at Burger King for hours until the police could come and pry open our door. That was the fury of a woman trapped in the body of a man.

When my father spoke at the conferences and told me that I had the gifts to one day speak this way too, it was the nurturing of Paula, a woman I had yet to know: a

woman who forced her way into each and every one of my celebrations, defeats, milestones, and intimate thoughts by virtue of disguising herself as a male. It was she who resided in my center and remained in disguise there the entire time. At best, the crisis felt like an episode of Scooby Doo. We pulled off my father's mask to reveal the woman underneath. "I would've gotten away with remaining your father too, if it hadn't been for that pesky truth."

Meeting Paula jarred me. The thought that my father never truly existed was a knockout punch.

I decided that I wasn't ready to get to know Paula. Whether a fair assertion or not, the thought that my father never existed meant that there was no father to call. So I didn't.

I try to liken it to death, but that's not adequate. I told my wife that my dad was gone. I told my dad that he was gone. I mourned the loss of my dad and, whether or not it was fair, I was prepared to talk about grief and loss with anyone in my church community. I believed that I experienced acutely the death of my father. Each new effeminate quality acquired by my father meant a little less of his existence. When my father curled up on the couch in my apartment, I said good-bye to a piece of his existence. With the loss of my father's name, Paul, another huge piece passed away.

It was the idea of my father's transition as death that brought some semblance of closure, or at least its beginnings.



With our church continuing its growth, there were new people I was professionally obligated to know. I poured my time into knowing those people instead.

They came with similar stories. The Christianity they knew was no longer a fit. They looked for something that challenged the Scriptures, that included all people from every walk of life, and that allowed each of them space for their questions and doubts. To walk with each of my new friends on their journeys brought satisfaction that the kind of Christianity I talked about on those walks with my dad was taking shape.

My vision for our church was still within the confines of the Harvest Network. My father was let go a few months before I met Paula, and I weathered the storm. We stuck around the Harvest Network because they were still my family. My father might be gone, but this was still my tribe. With the vision of an inclusive church still in my head, I wondered how long it would remain family. But after the realization that it was only Paula who existed, I needed family. I tethered myself to the Harvest Network as my ancestry and my heritage. I reached out to my friends in the organization and did my best to explain to them what happened to Paul. I needed to talk to someone, and it wasn't Paula.

Others sought me out, wondering if I too felt like Paul was gone. A few met Paula, and found the experience equally devastating. Again, they asked for my permission. They wanted to know that it was okay not to befriend Paula. They had the luxury to estrange themselves completely from her; they just needed me to be the one to tell them it was okay to cut the cord. Those with good and noble intentions understood my grief. They too felt Paul's betrayal.

Perhaps I was punishing Paula by attaching myself to those who failed to acknowledge her new existence. Perhaps I was harkening back to a time when I felt cared for, secure, my grandparents in a church office attached to my house.

Grief is mysterious and without rules. Grief is a drug that alters the consciousness and creates in us frenetic decisions that defy any social balance or convention. Grief creates unlikely alliances, and also works to divide the ones whom we love the most.

With my grief firmly in charge, I made the decision that interactions with my sisters and mother were as difficult as interacting with Paula. Grief brought about a temporary estrangement from the family I needed, and directed me back to the ones who quietly, subconsciously, held me accountable to “loving” my father from afar. Grief created new allies whom I already knew would ultimately be a poor fit, unable to accompany me on my journey; and yet grief chose them anyway.

However, in my greatest moments of grief and pain, in all of my estrangement, and in the denial of my father having ever existed, there was another voice. It was a voice that expanded on the fascination I had when meeting Paula. It was a voice that told me to stop looking inward and to stop being the victim. It was a voice that had compassion for my father. It was a voice that told me my father was indeed transgender, that there was no mental instability. There were no major *DSM-5* diagnoses. My father was truly transgender, and for her to come and meet me in the body that she had long ago claimed was indeed brave and courageous.

When my father first announced his transition, he wrote a letter to my sisters and me. In it, he detailed how, at the age of four or five, he firmly believed that there was a gender fairy—kind of like the tooth fairy, I suppose—who would come to him and let him choose whether or not he’d live life as a boy or girl. Once the fairy came, he most definitely would choose to be a girl. That’s who he already

was. He just needed this entity, this angel, this spirit to come down and acquiesce to his desire. That fairy never came. My father talks about never quite fitting into his skin. There were daily reminders that he was living his false self.

When he met and married my mother, he confessed his leanings to her. Being that they were nineteen and twenty-one, and steeped in a Christian purity culture that said sex and exploration of bodies was a bad thing if it happened before marriage, neither had a clue as to what to do with that information. My parents allowed the struggle to manifest from time to time in ways that I'm not privy to knowing. There were outlets for my father, allowed by my mother, of which I was unaware.

In the letter, my father talked about having children. He wrote that having children made him feel completely and utterly like a father. Being a father was the only time in my dad's life that he wasn't beset by the daily regret of not being able to choose his own gender.

I read my father's letter again and thought about his bouts of depression and anxiety. I thought about the fact that he had a knack for making the smallest of issues into mood-changing events. I thought about how, in the midst of that depression and anxiety, he took the time to make sure that I was encouraged. He took time out to make each one of us feel incredibly special. He took time out to make sure that we were afforded the best experiences that a pastor with a pastor's salary could provide.

Each of my siblings and I had shared experiences with my father that we still treasure. We accompanied my father on business trips where we got to eat at Bob Evans and stay in random hotels in the middle of Ohio. Each Monday was "candy night," when my father encouraged us

to get the biggest candy bar and then a little piece of candy for later. Saturdays were for the bacon, egg, and cheese bagels my father brought home. The sandwiches came with our favorite Snapple Ice Teas. He didn't wake us up. It was Saturday, and he knew better than to wake a bunch of teens. He knew what we wanted and picked it up. My father lived his lie, but he lived it selflessly, in the hopes that his children might truly have a father.

Yes, those selfless decisions brought anxiety and depression. They brought the mood swings. They weren't easy. But my father's selflessness brought us a comfortable and happy childhood, filled with myriad experiences that I still celebrate today.

I wasn't ready to get to know Paula, but I felt grateful for her. I was grateful for her because she was indeed my father. Somewhere in the midst of Paula, with her new face, white jeans, and curly hair, was my father. He had the opportunity to make the choice to change genders years before. He didn't, so that we could have a father. As absolutely shocking as it was to meet Paula, there was also a sense that she was finally at peace in her true body. For the first time, there was a freedom in her walk.

My father is tall. I distinctly remember being on a basketball court and imploring my father to dunk a basketball, or at least grab the rim! My father shook his head as if defeated, "I've never been able to do it, Jonathan." What I hear my father saying now is, "I'm sorry. This one's a rental. This is not a body in which I have control or that I particularly want. I can't ask this body to perform great feats. It's not mine."

Paula's body was hers now. It was no longer the rental. She willed it and exerted over it great control. She was in charge. If she was at peace, then it was my turn to

make selfless decisions and to get to know Paula so that her life could be filled with experiences of children and grandchildren. It was true. My father was gone. But I stopped wondering if he ever existed. He did exist, willfully, consciously, and with great effort, each and every day of my growing up.

My father's existence was brave, courageous, and selfless. To reflect on my father's selflessness was to have compassion. Reflecting on her selflessness warranted a change within me. While there is pain surrounding my father's transition, it's nothing compared to the pain she endured in striving to be a father. For that I forgave my father, and with that I hoped that she'd forgive me.

Paula Responds

A few weeks after beginning to live full time as Paula, I met Jonathan for the first time. I stayed in Manhattan at a hotel in Chelsea that I knew well and at which I felt comfortable. I wasn't sure staying at their apartment was a good idea. What if things did not go well? Jonathan and Jubi met me at the hotel on a warm September day.

Shortly before they arrived, I began to worry about the stupidest thing. It was after Labor Day, and I was wearing white jeans. You don't wear white after Labor Day in New York. New York has rules. It was one of many things that felt out of season that day.

As well as I thought I knew my son, I could not tell how he was doing. There was small talk, and then we went to lunch at a Mediterranean restaurant up the street. I could not tell you what I ordered and whether or not I ate it. Jubi left shortly after we finished our meal. I thought Jonathan and I might go back to the hotel and talk for a while, or maybe walk down to the Highline and take a stroll. Instead, we walked back to the hotel and Jonathan left, quickly. I thought, "Well, that's not good."

And then I did not see Jonathan for eight months.

Those months were some of the darkest of my life. It was not Jonathan's fault. I had badly underestimated the impact of my transition on those closest to me. The fact

that I had lived with the diagnosis for decades did not mean they had. I said to Jonathan, “I’m still the same person.” Jonathan said, “No, you’re not. You’ve fundamentally changed.” And it was true.

I had always sensed that my brain functioned differently than most males. A study confirmed that reality when neuroscientist Julie Bakker presented results of her functional MRI study of 150 pre-hormonally treated transgender adolescents.¹ The study found that the brain activity patterns of the transgender subjects were very similar to their experienced gender, not their birth gender.

Once hormones have been added, the differences are even greater. The body changes—significantly and obviously. If you transition from male to female, muscle mass shrinks; fat is redistributed; the skin becomes softer and body hair becomes finer. And those are just a few of the physical changes.

Estradiol and testosterone are powerful hormones. The neurological changes do not show, but they are every bit as profound as the other physical changes. They do not appear overnight, but over the course of about three years, the changes touch virtually every part of your being. I was not the same person. I had changed.

During that eight-month period, I had a lot of time to think. I met with a few younger male ministers from my old life. I had been a father figure to a number of them. One said to me, “You really messed with me. You were my only example of an alpha male who was gentle.” His words really struck me. Sure enough, I had been an alpha male, and I was gentle. If my transition had been so difficult for a young ministry leader I saw only occasionally, how much more difficult was it for my son? I could not begin to imagine.

I gave Jonathan his space. I had no idea how long it would take him to come back around. On my darker days, I wondered if he would ever come back around.

That first day we met will always be a painful memory. It serves as a reminder of how helpful it would be if they could find the cause of gender dysphoria and cure it before birth. Occasionally I encounter a transgender person who is glad they were made as they were made. I am not one of those people. I would have much preferred living my entire life as a person happy and content in the physical body in which I was born. But that is not my story.

If I had the information then that I have now, what would I have done? It is impossible to know. We make the decisions we make with the information available to us at the time. But this I do know: The call toward authenticity is holy. It is sacred. And it is for the greater good. It was my trust in the fact that the truth sets us free that kept me moving forward through the road of trials, and it is what keeps me moving forward today.

Cathy and my children and their spouses have been on their own roads of trials. They all continue to be gracious and loving toward me, while doing what they must in order to move forward in their lives. All of us keep the company of each other as we can. Our family bond is strong. It has been stretched, but it has not broken.