

Sing If You're Glad To Be Trans

Thanks very much for having me here, today.

I guess it makes sense that if you're going to have a really great looking audience, it would be at an all-genders conference, right? I mean, we're not even going to talk about how long I spent picking out shirt, tie, and cufflinks for this speech. Normally I'm on college campuses with the students in Abnormal Psych 101. Not a big challenge to outdress the audience - I've bathed. I win.

I'm making jokes because I'm a little nervous. I'm nervous because I feel like I am about to say something that people are going to be very cranky with me about, and I don't want to upset people. Well, I do – I just don't want to upset people I like. You know what? Never mind. I'm ready now.

I tried to write a nice, balanced, logical speech. I sat down three mornings in a row with my espresso – actually, that makes me sound butcher than I am, what I actually had was an double iced soy mocha, because I really prefer my coffee drinks to be as gay as possible. But, I sat down with them and my

laptop and I tried to Write A Speech. And it ended up sounding exactly like that – plodding, lugubrious, like something you do on a Sunday in your scratchy good clothes with your Aunt Petunia, like the speechifying equivalent of seventeen-grain bread. Good For You, but not really a pleasure.

And I want to offer some pleasure. I am frankly tired of showing up for trans events and listening to people talk about how hard it is to be trans. I am tired of being invited to come and Tell My Story, when I know that what the nice, well-meaning white lady on the other end of the phone means is “come and make yourself an object of pity, reveal all your secret hurts, and let us use them to find you blameless in your condition and therefore have sympathy for you, and give you some rights. Well, maybe not rights. But help. Well, maybe not help. But we’ll stop acting like you’re the bad kind of crazy and tart acting like you’re the sad kind of crazy. Is that better?”

No. No, thank you, it is not any damn better.

Julia Serrano has a new book out, called Whipping Girl, in which she talks about the two dominant trans narratives – the pathetic transsexual and the

deceptive transsexual. This is not enough for me. You don't look pathetic. Do you feel pathetic? No. And I am not deceptive. I hardly even cheat on my taxes and baby, that is more than a lot of straight people can say. The fact that I am not revealing a constant loop about what, exactly is in my pants isn't deceptive – it's a little thing I like to call Having Boundaries. You with me, here? I thought so.

So instead of Telling My Story, I want to talk about what's great about being trans. This is not to say that nothing about it is hard. I've had hard times – we all have. We've all fought with our loved ones, we've all waded through a mountain of paperwork that never does what it's supposed to do, we've all felt unsafe, we've all felt out of place, we've all felt confused and frightened, we've all been felt up by airport security at seven in the morning. Been there. We've all handled misunderstandings and mispronouns and mistakes; we've all been laughed at, we've all been asked who we think we are.

Who we think we are. People say that like an accusation – like it was a surefire way to make us cringe. But I'll tell you – we know who we think we are.

That's the first great thing about transfolk – we have *thought* about who we are. We've thought about it, a lot. We have thought about our genders, and our bodies, but also we have had a lot of things to think about, haven't we? We examine every action, attitude, gesture, choice of work or hobby. We think about what drink we order in a bar and we think about how we wrap our scarves around our necks, for sure, but we also think about how we want to be in the world. We don't follow a path, we forge our own. We have to. And it makes us thoughtful. It makes us all recognize that we *do* have a choice about most things, that we *can* define and enact who we think we are, and that while we're at it? Most of us want to do well. Most of us want to be good people. Most of us want to perform a gender, a sexuality, that is kind and loving. Most of us think about how we speak to children and elders, people of other genders. We find our way to courtesy and kindness.

We have thought not only about how much we want to be daughters instead of sons, but why, and what that will mean. We've enjoyed our fantasies of it and then we have grappled with the realities - and at every turn there has been a cost/benefit analysis. At every turn, we have thought about what it was worth to be who we thought we were.

And how powerful is that? However difficult it also is - we know who we think we are, and we have lived into it. We have decided who we think we are and refashioned ourselves. Let's just say that transfolk, as a community, are not the ones to find ourselves easily thwarted by a difficult task, can we?

By the way? Just, since we're talking about it, this is a job skill. I think we approach job interviews full of dread, full of fear, hoping that someone will "see past" our trans histories, or our trans identities, and hire us anyway. The hell with that. Listen, you should say to your prospective employer. Listen, now. I was born Louise, in Missouri, in 1971. Between then and now I undertook a substantial process of internal review, identified all the steps required to achieve my goal including research and investigation of local, state, and federal laws and statutes. I created a budget, managed a financial plan, engaged in medical research and literature review, created a support network for myself, undertook a rigorous program of education and training, negotiated substantial reworking of existing agreements with all constituent parties, completed all portions of the plan on schedule and hi, My name is Phil, and you should hire me – if not because I did all that, then because when am I *ever* going to say that something can't be done? When am I *ever* going to tell you that a task is too complicated?

We have already learned how not to invest myself in someone else's No. We have already heard No a million times in our lives, and we've heard it from the most powerful people in our lives, many of us – parents, teachers, religious leaders, medical professionals for some of us – and yet we have not been deterred. Maybe for a minute, maybe we have retreated and regrouped and planned and returned again but we have not let other people's Noes run our lives, and we have not let them overrule the Yesses in our hearts. And that is why it is *great* to be trans.

That is, of course, leaving aside the reality of how good it is, how satisfying, to occupy a body you had a hand in creating. Let's think about this. Most people just spend a lot of time complaining about their love handles any dyeing their hair a darker red. And while that's fine – and hey, I'm not that excited about my love handles some days either, by the way – it is not the same as taking a good long look at what you're working with and making substantive changes. I know a fabulous transwoman who was once vigorously scolded by a religious fanatic about mutilating the temple of her body. She retorted: I didn't mutilate it. I remodeled the kitchen, I added a breakfast nook, and I put on a little front porch.

Listen, no one is saying you should have surgery, or that you should take hormones, or that there's anything better or less good about any of those ways. Well, okay, not true – people are. Other people have all sorts of opinions about what transpeople should or should not do to our bodies, or with our bodies. I am here to say you can freely ignore them. But I am also here to say that that is, in itself, a miraculous thing. Transpeople have a lot of choices about how we embody ourselves, and I don't just mean physically. We are none of us doing it exactly the way they did it at home. Okay, some things – I am making my grandmother's chicken soup the exact same way she makes it, and I'm not giving that up. But overall - we have already learned that there is more than one right way.

And some of us are making changes to our bodies. We're taking hormones, we're having surgeries, we're at the gym, we're in the bathroom with a secret tube of cheap mascara brushing it onto our lashes or trying to make our goatees look a little better....um. Maybe that's just me. But regardless, we have our ways. We are making our ways, and we're looking in the mirror every morning for signs of change and when they happen we are so excited! So pleased, to be moving toward what we need to look like, how we need to

walk through the world, what it is we need to see when we examine our reflections in the mirror for ourselves. We've taken change in hand, and we've made it, and that is so satisfying. It is like living in a house you built yourself, paddling down the river in a canoe you built with your best friend – making something with great tenderness and great care that will serve you forever and give you a lot of pleasure. And that is why it is *great* to be trans.

While we're talking about pleasure, can I just say this? Queers and transfolk have great sex. We do. No one wants to talk about this. There is a movement afoot in North America in which we think sex is frivolous and selfish, in which we think if we talk about sex we will not be taken seriously, and so we edit it out. We do, we have learned that it makes the religious fundamentalists go batshit crazy and start lighting up the phone lines when we talk about sex and so we have stopped. We censor ourselves away from it. And that is not fair. Sex is great! It's fun, it feels good, it's good for us – and let me tell you the truth about something. The fundamentalist right wing is not going to like you any better if you don't talk about sex. They will not. They already think we're irredeemably perverted freakshows, so let 'em. I am not going to pretend I don't care about sexual pleasure in order to appease a group of people who are never, ever going to be happy with me

anyway. Are you really prepared to let a group of mean strangers guide your life? Guide it more than your own pleasure? Your own wellness?

And queers and trannies, as a group, have better sex. I am sure of this, even though I can't prove it. I can prove that that people who have sex an average of once per week over the course of their lifetimes live longer and report much higher satisfaction with their lives, or at least I can point to the research that says so, and I want us all to live longer. I want my world as an elder to be populated with old queers and trannies sitting around on the porch telling activist stories and raising up young people into our culture and dropping ur napkins repeatedly so that the hunky nurses assistants have to bend down and get them. Ahem. So I'm just going to say this like it's a fact – we are having better sex. We are having amazing, transformative, delicious sex. We started learning about our genders, many of us, through sex, and we learned that we can be anything we want while we're fucking. That's a lot of power, right there; that is a lot of possibility. While we're busy doing things our own way, nowhere does that exist more than in bed (or alleyway, or backseat, over the arm of the couch, or whatever you've got going on) – we already know that we can try on, or try out, new ways of relating, new genders, new sensibilities. We have already learned to communicate about

sex, to say please touch me here and not there, please call my parts this, or this, please touch me in a way that makes me feel okay about myself. We've already learned that we can choose no to have sex with people who won't sign on to our comfort as being a high priority, and we've learned that if you break the barrier and talk about how you want to be touched, you get to have much better sex.

Much better sex. I am just sayin'.

And we know how to try things out, do we not? And evaluate them to see if they are working. And again, we are not so excited as all that about How Everyone Says You're Supposed To Do It which, if you ask me, is a key point in the road to great, hot, intimate, transformative fucking. You do what feels good. We do what makes us shiver. We are not measuring ourselves against porno robots, and we are not letting ourselves get bullied into the idea that there's only one acceptable way to have sex (which seems often to suspiciously match exactly what the bully in question wants to do). Not that this has never happened to any of us, which of course it has, but we know better now. We know how to say no, thank you to that. We know how to hold ourselves and other to the higher standard of what actually works for

us, in our bodies, right now. And if you're not there yet, honey, come on in – the water's fine. It is okay to want to have sex, it is okay to want to have great sex, and it is okay to want to have playful sex, perverted sex, solo sex, partnered sex, group sex, tender sex, rough sex – all of it. And if all the hot tranny sex isn't a good enough reason it's *great* to be trans, then the fact that a university has paid me to come here today and remind you about it is.

Because we do know how to talk about things, and we know how to share information. We, as a trans community, take on the task of teaching our youngsters and caring for them, whether or not they are chronologically younger than us. We step up to that plate. We are aware that we are needed, that our experience is valuable, that there are people in the world who are tentatively standing in front of the exact same hurdles that we have already jumped, nervously looking at the same flaming hoops we have jumped through – and here is where we are amazing, as a community. We do provide advice about hurdle clearing and hoop jumping and fire safety. We do, because for some people those things are going to be inevitable but also – we have knocked down some of those hurdles for the next people who come along after us. We have extinguished some of those flames. We have not just learned how to master the system, we have started to dismantle it. We are

educating doctors and agitating about the Harry Benjamin Standards and establishing WPATH to do better. We are passing along our therapists names after they have already been pre-trained about trans stuff and queer stuff and whatever else we are. My therapist likes to joke that I have made him a lot more interesting at cocktail parties. Those of us who are further along, who have more access and privilege and money and power have used those resources to clear the way for the ones coming up behind us and you know how rare that is. You know how much our culture encourages us to consolidate power, to expand privilege, to climb the ladder and then pull it up behind us. But we don't do that. We share time, we share experience, we share money if we have any – when I was outlining my vision a minute ago about being old trannies together in the old folks' home, raising up our youngsters, everyone nodded along with me. We share a vision, that this is vital to the survival of our community, and we are willing to put in some time to mentor the next generation. We are willing to talk about even the parts that are hard for us – even though it would be easier for *us* to bury them – because we know they're needed. Because we know that keeping them on our fresh and tender skins will help some person we don't even know yet. We share information, we trade experiences, we field hysterical middle-of-the-night phone calls, we swap doctor referrals, we talk about the

hard parts. We talk about the great parts. We hand down our clothes and our packers and binders and gaffs and falsies and wigs and spirit gum and who knows what all else. We understand, as a community, that we can take care of each other and we have made a decision, as a community, that we should. That we should, even when it's hard. And we do, we do not leave our newest members alone to prove themselves, we help them and ease their way and try to get them through the first hard parts better than we managed when we were there and that, is why it is *great* to be trans.

Now. Are there bad things? Of course there are. Could I give just as long a speech about them? Of course I could. Hell, I can give a speech about anything – anything. Ask my friends, they'll tell you. But part of what I am here to say today, in addition to speaking about all the ways in which being a tranny is fabulous, sexy, honorable, and a good job skill is to say – we do not have to be defined by them. We can choose to create and tell another story about being trans, one in which the story does not stop when then hardships are overcome. A story that makes our triumphs as powerful as our tragedies – that makes our triumphs more powerful than our tragedies, no matter how much the Nice Liberal Ladies who want us to Tell Our Stories encourage us to lean on the hard parts. We can say – my happy and successful adult life is

at least as important as my miserable childhood. We can say - the hot sex I get to have now is just as valid as the years I never let anyone touch me because I couldn't bear it. We can speak up, and speak out about our wellnesses, our pleasures, our satisfactions, and choose not to internalize the message that we are pathetic or deceptive creatures. We can quit practicing the dramatic monologue all the damn time and instead do a little stand-up. We can have a little fun. We may be starting off in life with an especially odiferous batch of shit-smelling compost, some of us, but Please. Please let us please stop pruning back the gorgeous flowers and pruning back the delicious, nourishing vegetables and pruning back the sweet, sweet fruits that grow in it so we can point to the mound of shit more effectively. Stop that. Stop. Those good and sweet things? You did that. That is the fruit of your labor, yours and all of ours. That is the gorgeous ground you have cultivated. Sit and enjoy what is growing, enjoy how far you've come from the mound of shit, enjoy the people who helped you much and hoe and cultivate when there was not much to look at and everything was dirty and it stunk and they stood by you anyway. Revel in it. Send some flowers to the worst bully of your childhood, who is guaranteed to still be suffering in the muck of meanness and shame. And then invite everyone you know and like over to

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dinner. Invite them over, and cook them some of those gorgeous vegetables, and talk about how great it is to be trans.