

GENDER PERSONAL

EXPLORING GENDER VARIANCE THROUGH ART



Aidan

Gender Personal
Interview

Acknowledgement:

Understanding Grows, Views Change

This interview is part of the Gender Personal project (2013-2014) created by Jacqui Beck. For an overview of the project, including its origin, visit www.genderpersonal.org.

The following is a transcript of two of the nine interviews done for the Gender Personal project. Seven people were interviewed once each, and Jacqui's son, Finnbar, was interviewed twice.

Since that time, the people who were interviewed have grown in their understanding of themselves and their gender. Please take this into consideration as you read.

Appreciation

A huge thank you to everyone who participated in this project, especially to those I interviewed. A more detailed list of thanks may be found at <http://genderpersonal.org/project-origin/#gratitude> (this link will open in your web browser).

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Gender Personal: Interview with Aidan

1. How old were you when you started to experience your gender as different from what the world seemed to expect?

Aidan: I think the earliest memories I have are probably those situations where I might have had to wear a dress. I do recall when school pictures were being taken, or the first day of kindergarten—that kind of thing, where my mom says I have to wear a dress and I'm not interested in wearing a dress. I didn't find it particularly distressing, but it wasn't what I wanted to do and I didn't understand why it was necessary. So I do have some early memories around that time. A lot of this is hindsight.

It's interesting to think about those things because my story keeps changing about those same episodes. When I realized later as an adult that I had an attraction to women and that that's where my sexual orientation was, then I looked back and said, *Oh, there were signs that I was going to grow up to be a lesbian*. But now I think that had nothing to do with my sexuality—it had to do with *who I was*. So I'd say that those early years—I have an identical twin sister—so that always provided a contrast. She didn't mind [wearing dresses], she liked that and that was something she wanted to do. Even though we're twins we still had differences, and I thought, *Well, why can't she wear a dress, and I don't need to wear one. I would rather wear this striped shirt, or whatever it is. I didn't view it as a gender thing.*

Jacqui: More as a personal choice thing?

Aidan: I have a memory of a kid—and I don't recall if it was kindergarten or first grade—but I remember this kid would sit at his desk, and he would sit up very straight. He came to school with a shirt and a tie. And I remember that, and I thought, *I'd like to do that*. I just remember being fascinated by this kid because of how he presented himself. I can certainly get away with wearing ties anytime I want. I don't wear them now, but I do remember . . . I can see that child clear as day.

2. Tell me about your experience of yourself regarding your gender. How do you identify regarding your gender?

Aidan: I was raised by a single mom in the mid-sixties—I was born in the mid-sixties. Second-wave feminism . . . all about empowering women . . . equality . . . those were things she worked very hard to instill in my sister and myself: “Don't let anything stop you because you're female . . . don't go for stereotypical female roles.” She always insisted, “Do not be a nurse, do not be a secretary.” She was very encouraging of me in my non-traditional female interests—sports or career interests that fit outside of what was typical for women.

So I always experienced my gender as female because I was given so much latitude within that word. That made my upbringing somewhat reasonable around my gender. I think I had a couple of situations that I really did not allow myself to think too much about, but just a couple of times

where some thoughts would come up where I thought, *I really wish I were born a boy*. It was very wistful, it was very sad . . . almost like grieving, like, *Oh, that didn't happen for me. Oh well*. I wished I was born into a financially stable family, and I wasn't. Oh well.

So it fell into that category of things that I might like to change if I could wave that magic wand, but I had no wand to wave, so it was just *that's that*. I had pretty much nothing but women in my life: my mother, my sister, and I spent summers with my great grandmother. There were no men in my life. My mother had rotating boyfriends/husbands along the way, but they were all short lived. My grandfather [and] my great-grandfather were kind of background people.

So my life has always been around women, and I look to women for the kind of person that I'm going to be, because I didn't know men. I have a twin sister [and] all of our friends were girls for the most part. So the gender of *male* was kind of a mystery to me, and a mystery that didn't really intrigue me. Hmmm . . . I want to decide if that's a true statement or not. It [male] did in some respects, but it went away as I got older. My attractions to women, my romantic interests, made it go even further away.

When I was younger I remember drawing pictures of faces with mustaches and beards, and male figures and that kind of thing, but I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about *why* I was doing it. It was just sort of like, *Oh, if I had facial hair, I'd be doing this kind of thing*. So I didn't contemplate past that regarding my gender. My gender was female and that was that. I wasn't like many other [trans*] people I meet now who say, "I knew as far back as I could possibly remember . . . as soon as I could start talking I was letting people know, it just took people a long time to come around." That wasn't my reality.

So having that entire upbringing and that socialization and that time period around empowerment of women, and my own coming out as a dyke . . . and at that time as well—in the early '80s—it's third-wave feminism, which is a whole different story as well. It seems like my whole life has been about empowering myself as a woman, and ultimately that's what led me to my gender transition. It's not a story I hear readily from my peers, but it is one that's true for me. So what I've found in my community—my lesbian community—I gravitated towards a contingent that was more on the . . . that had more of that *butch/femme* identity: some who were defiantly more masculine-expressing and some [who were] more feminine. And at that time there was a lot of friction around that. There was a lot of intensity and some clashing of what I might call mainstream lesbian community, and then these other, more rough-edged people.

But I was excited because for the first time my masculinity was embraced and celebrated: "Yes, beautiful! Bring it on. You could do more if you wanted!" That was really nice. Nobody questioned me like my mother did. Like when I needed to go pick out a watch or some clothing at the store, it wasn't: "Why do you want a man's watch? Why are you looking at the boy's clothes? Your section's over here." Nobody was saying that to me at all.

I remember vividly this one young, attractive woman who was flirting with me, and she said, "I think women who wear men's underwear are *so sexy*." I had a huge visceral response, I could just feel it in my fingertips . . . to think that I could then start gravitating towards those things that I would have liked to do but never had any encouragement for.

So ultimately, in that exploration of masculinity, it didn't seem like that long a step to take to actually think about, *Well, actually, I don't want breasts, I would rather have my chest be flat . . . Testosterone would give me that facial hair . . .* The lesbian community that I was part of, a lot of them were older than me. So these were just big, gruff, butch dykes on Harley motorcycles . . . people that I was in awe of, who'd already navigated a lot of adult life trying to empower themselves as the kind of women that they were.

Jacqui: You talked just before that about the leap from butch dyke to . . .

Aidan: Right. And to me it was not a leap, it was just a scooch.

Jacqui: One of the things we've bumped into around Finnbar was . . . Bill and I at one point made the vast mistake of saying, "Why don't you be more like Ellen DeGeneres? I mean, she's a woman who wears pants and dresses kind of masculine, but she's still a woman. Why do you have to be a *guy*?" And he said, "I never want to hear Ellen DeGeneres's name again." But that was us saying, "Do we have to accept you as you are?" Does that . . . I mean, you were saying it's just a scooch. I mean, there's this point where you just say: "You know what? I'm *not* a woman."

Aidan: You know what? I've never said that. I don't know what I am. And I don't care anymore. It's not something that distresses me—I'm not uncomfortable with it. I've made choices around my gender and how I present it to the world based on society's expectations. Right or wrong, they have dictated some of my choices. When I started to take some testosterone, there was a period at some point along that journey, when the people around me . . . I never knew what pronoun they were going to throw out [for me]. I could not anticipate how they were going to receive me, and it was a mixed bag. I could be talking to two or three people, and they would throw out different pronouns. It was really stressful. It was uncomfortable for *them*, because people are uncomfortable with gender ambiguity. But it was uncomfortable for *me also* because I couldn't figure out how to act: I was supposed to act *this* way if they perceived me as female, and I was supposed to act *this* way if they perceived me as male. Or: this *guy* perceives me as male, and I'm recognizing that he's probably straight, so I don't want to appear too feminine or he'll think I'm gay, and then he'll be uncomfortable.

I was working in a public interactive customer service type job, where I had to engage with people all the time. I did start to feel a little crazy, but at that point when I looked in the mirror, I thought, *Oh. Look at that! There you are. That's the person I've always expected to see looking back at me, that I didn't see.* And it was an exciting moment, but it was also disappointing, because I also knew that there was no way I was going to live with that daily stress. I wasn't going to do it. It was too much. I didn't have the energy to be carving that kind of path, and I knew it would wear me down. So I decided to actually push past that and increase my testosterone and get to that more male-presenting place quicker. Now the problem is that I'm still not being seen for who I am and it's kind of a . . . well, I made a choice—many choices. It's just a big ball of many, many factors to consider.

Jacqui: Are you saying that *ideally* you wouldn't have taken this level of testosterone if it hadn't been uncomfortable interfacing with other people? That you would have maintained more of a genderqueer, or less binary . . . ?

Aidan: Yeah, probably so. I can't even frame it in terms of any labels. I just knew when I saw myself. And if people had perceived me [as] 100% male at that time, fine. That would have been fine. It would have made sense in a binary sort of way. But they didn't. And the discomfort was daily and I had enough on my plate as it was. I didn't need to add that.

So I still fight for recognition—and I will talk about this to people who are close to me, they know that and understand that—I just feel more present and more on the planet when people know that. If I go out and do a training for a school that might have a child who is gender transitioning in some way—or questioning—I don't bring that into the mix. I give them the real cut-and-dry stuff because people have to start somewhere. They can't wrap their brain around that so I spare them the agony—maybe they'll get that later. I'm starting them on the initial steps of the paradigm shift.

Jacqui: Finnbar and I have talked about that. What he said—and I hope you get a chance to read what he said about this, but it's very similar—he said, “At first everyone was encouraging me to really accept myself as a *male*, and do this ‘binary’ thing. But the more I understand the more I realize that it's not even a line . . . It's not about that. But you've got to start somewhere.” And I really agree with that too.

I talk about it with people who are new to painting. People who are new to painting need to do the basics. They need to start with that, and then once they've kind of figured out how colors mix to make other colors and how paint goes on with the brush and all kinds of things like that, *then* they start to . . .

Aidan: And I think that is also a great example of how younger people—kids—can sometimes take to an activity much more quickly. They can get the basics and then fly with it much more quickly than adults who might have some already packaged-up expectations. So in the same respect the younger generations—like the kids of the families in the support groups—they're light-years ahead of their parents at nine years old, in terms of understanding gender and who they are in the world. They may not have the actual language to articulate it, but they're trying. And I believe that because of this examination of gender that trans* people inspire, it's going to completely change the face of that community. It won't take long before –I *think*, I don't *know*—before even using “lesbian/gay/bisexual” will be recognized as obsolete, because it is *dependent* on only two genders. It's just as rigid as heterosexual construction of sexuality and of gender. So I'm curious to see how the younger generations are going to move with it.

Jacqui: And I'm also curious about how the paradigm shift around gender will affect other parts of society, because that's what I'm seeing. We're so judgmental of so much about human beings, and to have this really fundamental part of a human being—gender identity—*expanding* gets us to think about more than just gender in a different way. I think that's exciting.

Aidan: I give presentations to university students as well as tons of other stuff, and I love it when they click into that because it doesn't take long. We are talking about gender but we're also talking about race and class issues and that interplay of all of that. And it becomes a really dynamic group conversation, and I love that.

3. How long did you know you were trans* before you came out or told other people?

Jacqui: The word *transgender* might not even work for you.

Aidan: I do use that word. Some people at least have got a frame of reference now. It wasn't until—[for] the actual *epiphany* I think I was thirty-three, I think it was my birthday. It was a very despairing realization. I had been part of [the] dyke community from [the time I was] nineteen years old to that time. I felt like I had my place: I had a great group of friends, a great solid community, I was well liked . . . it was lacking in nothing.

And I had had time to witness how trans* people were received in that community, and the initial transgendered people I had seen were trans women, and they were the person sitting alone at the end of the bar on the stool the whole night while I'm laughing and talking and having a great time with my friends, they're sitting there reading a book [and] sipping a beer or a glass of wine.

To me it was a life of isolation where nobody wants you and the lesbians will tolerate you. So that's what I saw as part of the representation of trans* people. The other part was . . . I knew of people who had transitioned from female to male, and it was a very turbulent issue within the dyke community: on one hand, they don't want to lose them, and yet they didn't provide space for them to stay. And I watched as my community spent time trying to create women-only space *with* this issue as part of the mix.

Most of them did not want trans* women there, but some were more okay with the inclusion of trans men. Many of them felt an affinity with trans* men because they'd already been part of the community - been their lovers and friends - prior to transitioning. Others were experiencing similar confusion and grief but felt trans* men had forfeited their place in community. They had lots of reasons that they would articulate, but some would even say, "You know, trans men made a decision! They decided that all of the things that we fought for . . . they're throwing that aside, they're deciding that it's easier to live as men. They want male privilege, let them go and have it, they don't get the privilege to come back here."

So I had been a part of those conversations for a number of years prior to my own awareness. And it was hard for me, too, as a *younger* member of that community—these gals had fifteen to twenty years on me—so to even lend my voice to that discussion . . . I can remember one time—it was for an event that was being put together that was supposed to be for women only and for the dyke community only, but then how to *define* that. And there were basically two proposals that came out of that: one was that you just self-identify, and the other one was this long, chromosomally born, blah blah, long explanation. And a vote was put to the group of thirty-something people, and there were three of us who said, "Let's let people self-identify." And to this day I'm just proud that I could raise my hand at that time.

Jacqui: So you sacrificed a lot to that choice.

Aidan: Yes and no. I had to do my own internal work, because here I am, [there are] no men in my life, I'm thinking about taking testosterone, and I know why I want to do it: because I want to look and feel more like me. It's not so much about some *name* of a gender—I just want to feel more like myself.

And I will never forget this one older dyke pal of mine who said—she got angry when I told her I was thinking about this, she got very angry—“Why do you want to be a man?” and I said, “I don't,” and she said, “Well then you better figure out what the hell you're doing.”

And I was surprised at two things: one, that she was so angry. And she passed as male *all the time!* She's very stocky and had her own natural facial hair without any extra testosterone . . . flat top, you know? So I was surprised at her strong negative reaction about that, like why she wouldn't get it, like: “I'm trying to be like *you*.” And at the same time I was also surprised by my own answer. So quickly I said, “No, I don't.”

And that is a question I still explore to this day, like: *Is that true? You really don't want to be a man? Or are you afraid of men? Do you not know men?* And I think it's probably more the latter, like *I don't know what it means to be a man.* I don't know what that's like. I'm still looking for those male connections, and I'm getting more and more as I travel down this road and I'm finding—shockingly—that men are people, and they're amazing people who have the capacity to love deeply and are navigating the same issues that I do.

They're struggling with sexism in our society. It may play out in their lives differently than it did in mine, but they're hurting too. And they want to be seen for who they are. I had really gotten to a place of not seeing that. They [men] were extraneous . . . not necessary to me in any way at all. And I was always a little pissed when people would say, “Oh you're a man-hater,” and I would say, “I'm not. But I don't have any use for them.” They weren't my romantic partners, they weren't my friends, they weren't my children, they weren't my father, and on and on.

Jacqui: It was a world without men.

Aidan: Yes, and not because I meant it to be that way, just because that was the cards I got dealt. And now I'm bringing them into my life. It's all so fascinating. I guess the realization of being Trans* meant . . . and at thirty-three years old, I have an awareness. I'm not twelve or thirteen, having no idea what's ahead in life. I really knew what was coming. So I made some very conscious choices as I took steps forward. It was like, *Okay, they're going to be angry. They're going to be really sad. They're going to try to push me out even though at the same time they're saying they don't want to lose me.*

And so I had to make my choices, and I did. I called it “going to work” to be able to take my friends with me, and take my community with me. So that meant going to our little lesbian bar in Seattle on Capitol Hill, and sitting there. And I'd coax a friend or two to go with me. I didn't really *want* to go. My life *immediately*, from shot number one, got political. People had opinions—strong ones—and I had not lived a life of knowing how to navigate that because—like

I said before—I had my place, I was liked, it wasn't controversial in any way, it was no big deal! But I thought, *I need them to see me do this*. If I hibernate and pop out here or there six months down the road—if people don't see me for long periods of time—they're going to look and they're not going to see me, or they're going to say, “Yep, you're different now,” just because I would look different.

But if they see me every day, they're not going to notice. They're going to notice a little bit, but if your partner puts on twenty-five pounds, are you going to notice? You would if you hadn't seen them for some time, but if you're with them every day . . . if you caught their profile or you saw them from farther away . . . and maybe you'd say something, maybe you wouldn't. [Laughs]

So I pushed them as community and I pushed them in other ways as well. I found that I had good success with people when I sat down with them one-on-one, and let them get angry . . . let them express their sadness . . . and to also tell them what this meant for me and what it didn't mean: “You guys [these older dykes], you have *raised* me. This is my second upbringing. And you led me to this door . . . you don't see it that way, but that's how I see it, and I wouldn't have the strength to do this if I didn't know you.”

So we'd sit there and we'd cry together and all of a sudden this chasm that they'd felt had been created was no longer there, like: “Ok, well, we are the same; you've just made a choice that's different from what I might make.” That was working, that was being effective, but it would take sitting down for three hours.

And I thought, *I can't do that one-on-one with everybody*. So I thought I'd put a workshop together and we'd talk about this. So I made a little flyer, found a place to have it, set a date and time, and I went out again to wherever lesbian community social things [were] and handed them to people.

It was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life, because people would look at it, look at me, look at it . . . there were no trans* people that would *stay* [in the community], and understandably, so it was really hard. It's a lot different now. And I like to think I made my mark—certainly in Seattle—in that effort.

I really pushed hard. But I'd hand these [flyers] to people—strangers and friends alike—and I had a good turnout, and we talked about stuff. We just started to scrape the surface, though. So I thought I'd do another one, and that went well, meaning people showed up and wanted to talk about it.

Then I decided: *Well, there are all these different things that come up; I'm going to break it up*. So I did a six-part discussion series, and even *more* people came to that—that was at Seattle Central Community College. I did one every two weeks *pum, pum, pum*. And it helped to pull people in who were . . . to help keep people from leaving who were exploring a gender transition, and also to put this issue on the table for the community: what does it mean? And I found that there were a lot of people who had thoughts similar to mine—it wasn't so crazy or wacked-out. And that's the start of the organizing piece. But I didn't want to leave, I wanted to fight to stay. And I did. It was hard, it was really fucking hard.

Jacqui: The truth is so much more nuanced, the truth is so much more human. Your story is beautiful.

Aidan: And I go to my own conference, and I get backlash there because that story is one that other people . . . I mean, I don't know exactly . . . but people assume a story based on what they perceive.

Jacqui: I assume a story based on my binary thing. Do you identify as a man?

Aidan: Sort of. Kind of. No, not really. I'd say—I've never decided if it's a *both* or an *either*—but maybe both. Both seems better.

Jacqui: And that's the spectrum . . . the nuance.

Aidan: Ideally someone grows up, and at some point in their development—around eight or nine years old—they still have quite black-and-white thinking. And then, *gradually*, we start being able to handle ambivalence and the complexity of what really is true. I think that's what happens around transgender.

Jacqui: But even in that [binary messaging: trans female to male or male to female] many people viewing it want to be respectful, want to hear this interesting story, want to say: “Yes, I accept this person for who they say they are.” But inside there's this little voice that says, “But really, they're still a girl.” And that's the piece that's really hard to unseat. I know that one of my friends whom I've talked gender with—just really digging in and exploring and stuff—we both have sat there at some point and said, “I'm not sure gender even really exists.” Because it's so hard to pinpoint.

Aidan: And we can agree that gender is more than our bodies, but then if we're looking at activities and behaviors, those don't really have genders, [so then we say] well, I guess our *brains*, or our *souls*, or . . .

Does it really exist? Not to say [we should] erase gender because I always like to say, “My gender? I'm gender-full. I've got lots going on.” That's what I like.

Jacqui: Something that Finny bumped into was people saying, “*Why? Why* do you think you're male?” and he would recoil from that question, you could see him. It's like they're saying *prove yourself* on some level. I thought about that question, and I thought, “Well how *do* you know?”

Aidan: That's true. Nobody's ever asked. I have a friend who was just fine with it right from the get-go, and we have talked many, many times and we really understand each other. She's a big girl—315 pounds or so—and she says, “I understand what it's like to be in a body where people don't see . . . where people make assumptions about who you are and judgments about who you are.” And when I find those kinds of parallels to give to groups that I'm talking to or individuals or any conversation, we can find a common ground to then eliminate those other kinds of questions, of: “How do you know?” It wouldn't even be asked, because people would say, “Oh, I wouldn't want somebody asking *me* that.”

4. Did you have an experience of being afraid to come out?

Aidan: Well, it's a question I have to navigate all the time still. I *want* to tell people because I find that the person that they see now, and how they interact with me, is not who I am. I find that if I don't share that information, people are much more distant.

I don't know how to talk "man talk." I like to talk about *life*, and I will just go there with anybody, but by disclosing this it comes out pretty readily. And I don't think it's actually *right* that it does because if I share this stuff about my gender—to me it's just a part of who I am, it's not a big deal, and I'm not telling you my deepest darkest secrets, but sometimes I get those coming back at me from other people: their sexual proclivities or things like that, [and I'm] like: "I don't want to know that, we weren't talking about that. Gender is different from who you have sex with."

But it really strikes people in their gut, [and] despite the fact that there's lots of stuff to maneuver at the beginning, it brings us closer. They feel like they can be real with me. So many people don't have good opportunities to do that in life. And this issue allows people to strip some things down.

Every once in awhile, though, there's still times where I don't want to do it, but I need to—not *I* need to, but the situation requires it. So there's many times where I just have to be ready. Because [of] my choices in my work life, it is quick: as soon as I meet somebody, I can assume the question *after* "What's your name? What do you do?"

What do I do? I've gotten it partially distanced from me, and I say, "I work with families who have transgender kids," and I can talk with them about that. But then question number three is: "How did you get into that work?" Boom! There it goes. So that's kind of a lot to handle on a regular basis.

Jacqui: I just realized that when I asked this question I thought of "coming out" as an *event*. But you're saying: "In my life, I come out." And you talked about how tiring it was to be in that sort of place where you weren't passing enough so people could figure out where to place you, and that was fatiguing and emotionally draining.

Aidan: It's similar, and yet, why do I make this choice? To disclose regularly, when I wasn't willing to be there *visually*? And to me, that earlier time is much more volatile and more dangerous. I watched—there were two people that came into the shop where I worked, and one of them was deaf and so they were talking in sign language.

One of them was hearing, and so he was the one communicating to me, and they were talking to each other in sign language. And I could see them look at me. They were looking at me, and she did kind of an "up-down" with her eyes, and I said, "I know what you're talking about." And he said, "No you don't," and I said, "Yes, I do," and he said, "Well, then what are we talking about?" and I said, "You're trying to decide whether I'm male or female." And he said, "Well, yeah . . . so which is it?" and I said, "I'm both." And the first thing on his face was anger.

Instantly. And so then I just had to do some fast talking. He didn't want to hear that answer . . . I had to do some explaining.

Jacqui: Were you afraid that he would hurt you?

Aidan: Sure! The environment was such that that would have been a stretch, but I could see how it wouldn't be in other situations . . . other settings. But he thought I was messing with him! So I'm in the middle of the shop, explaining to him and every other customer within hearing distance, about my gender.

I think that surprise and shock and lack of something to stand on . . . people want to know what you are, you know? Lack of foundation inspires that fight-or-flight kind of response. And I think that's why a lot of violence happens to trans* people: they get beat up or killed when either their gender is confusing to other people visually, or [this can also happen] when someone who "passes" as male or female gets discovered in a sexual situation or some other type of thing . . . the potential for explosions is huge.

I don't engage in that, I don't want to do that, that's too much, that's too stressful. In my life now I have learned about people's reactions and how to navigate them. So I know ways to do it that slow it down . . . where I can hold it while they have their discomfort. And even if they're really uncomfortable and I've just told them, I keep talking and look out the window just to give them some breathing time.

And I can share with them how it's often surprising to people and why wouldn't it be? Who's ever met a trans* person before? But I found that most people really don't have a problem with it ultimately. They want to ask questions, but very quickly they get to a good place. So in a very short amount of time—I don't even know how much it took me to describe that—that's what I'm doing with that person: I'm giving them time. They have a right to ask a lot of question . . . they don't have a right, I have to take that back. I give them *permission* to ask a lot of questions. And it's shocking for most people, and I also expect them to get to a good place really quickly. So I've learned some skills.

Aidan: There was something I wanted to tell you and forgot. To break down my own thinking, early in my exploration around transitioning, and *how do I even get comfortable with people using a male pronoun for me?* I decided to redefine the pronouns "he" and "she." So I took "he" and I scooted it over to include myself. *Okay, "he" doesn't have to be how I've normally defined it. I'm going to scoot it over and include me.*

And one of the things that happened when I did that was that I then had a hard time using female pronouns for all my butch dyke friends. So it included me, and I felt that they were exactly like me—not *exactly*—but very similar to me in their gender. And I still consciously make myself remember to use female pronouns for certain people who I feel a real affinity with around gender.

Jacqui: I *really* worked at switching as fast as I could for Finny, and I found that my brain did this thing where I would pause before I used a pronoun. It was like I had this little break that was

going on. And I started to get all . . . my brain got all confused, and I got to the point where I didn't want to use pronouns—I didn't want to be putting people in that box—it just didn't seem right.

5. How has your view of gender—or your relationship to gender—changed over time?

Aidan: I'd say the number one thing is that my heart is much more open and compassionate towards men in the world, for so many reasons. I see how the gender segregation hurts on both sides, if we're going to only say two.

It hurts everybody, what our society allows [and doesn't allow] men to do and be and express. I'll still say, "You know, if I have a choice, I'd say I'm really glad I was raised female and came to male later," because I have tools, [and] I feel like my heart is stronger and able to heal better than if I were to have been raised male and to have that crushed out of me at a young age.

Even when I go to talk to kids in a middle school I talk about some of this stuff, [like] things I've noticed that are different . . . freedom to cry or things like that. And [once] the teacher had the kids all write letters back, and a couple of boys commented on . . . [In] this one letter in particular this kid said he was really impressed that I was able and brave enough to do that because he had already learned to shut down his emotions. And [my wife and I] read it and started crying because he was maybe fourteen or fifteen. I think that's one thing that's definitely come into my life.

Jacqui: I was just thinking . . . you know the thing I said about [thinking about gender] impacting other parts of the world? That could be a huge benefit—side benefit.

Aidan: The other part of this is an interesting part: the things that the lesbian community has to say, the things the feminist community has to say, the things that women as a whole entity have to say about gender equality. . . is missing the mark in some really important ways. I use the word[s] "gender equality" whereas other people would call that being a feminist or the feminist movement. And assuming that equality of the sexes means bringing women up to men's level, well that assumption is not accurate.

Certainly there are some areas, of course: equal pay for equal work and that kind of thing. But to assume that being able to express yourself in the world in equal ways that men do means that we're going to be hurting if we do that, because men do not have gender equality either. Feminism, to succeed, needs to take that into account because if they don't it's not going to work ever, ever, ever.

And what happens—I don't often say this in places that I don't have an ability to add explanation—but I don't like the word "ally," because it *separates*. It says, "Oh, you're going to support me, but you're different from me," or, "You view me as different." And that's problematic.

I've seen that many times when people who care about gender equality come to something that is discussing that very issue, the audience is 95% female, and the few men that find the courage to attend and have the passion for that issue, come and try to lend their voices and they are shut down because their job is to sit there and be quiet, and be an ally.

They represent the oppressor . . . You name it. If they sit there and be quiet and only do what someone else tells them to do—which is doing the job nobody else wants to do—that's the only place. Those guys don't want to keep coming. And because of my gender transition, I've experienced that. I've gone to events that say they're gender inclusive but, again, they're 95% women, and whether someone knows me as trans* or not, I've been completely ignored. Comments that I could easily say as “female,” which would be valuable to the conversation but [are] being said as “male,” are dismissed or attacked. I've even made comments in a group setting where it was completely dismissed, and quite vehemently so, and just minutes later one of the same people who had been dismissive said the exact same thing without even being aware. She had decided not to hear me, and that whatever I said needed to be shut down, yet somehow whatever I had said sunk in enough she just regurgitated it, and it was like the whole room had no awareness of this. It was *fascinating*. A little annoying too, but it's fascinating. And I have been guilty of that in my past and I still at times am doing that. It's interesting to look at sexism and discover it well and alive in my own dyke community.

6. How have writers and other people affected you or helped you?

Aidan: One writer, bell hooks, is somebody that I just . . . there's one book that's called *The Will to Change: On Men, Masculinity and Love*, and she's given me a lot of the ideas . . . she's fed me those ideas that I've then incorporated into my world and pushed back out. That's one person. Recently I've just started reading a book by Julia Serano. It's called *Whipping Girl*. And I have to admit that I've only gotten about a third of the way through, but she's adding to my knowledge about gender, especially as it relates to trans women. Fascinating. Really great stuff... and looking at it in deeper layers—which I really love to do—but have a hard time finding anything beyond Gender 101 stuff. So she's got some advanced thought going on there that I've been enjoying.

7. What do you want others to understand about how you experience yourself and your gender?

Aidan: I wish that there was more of an expectation that we would have to provide everyone an opportunity to name and describe their gender, and have that accepted, and not have it framed around, “I'm not this, I'm not that.”

I don't know exactly when the word genderqueer was framed, but it's one that has fit me since day one. It's not the only gender term I use. I use “trans man,” “trans male,” “transmasculine”; I use “butch.” I use different words because to me it's part of my history as well.

My history as female is important to me too, and I like to keep it all with me because it represents the whole picture. It represents so much more than my body, too; it represents a lot of

these things that I've been talking about: this sort of second-upbringing in the dyke community and how important that was to me, in learning how to arrive at who I am. But I'm bumping up against things quite often—and especially from younger people—that's hard. I am assumed to be [an] old-school trans man, whatever that means to them; it means limited thinking, it means binary thinking. And it's assumed that it happened to me really early—my transition—but it's been just a couple years. Just because of my physical presentation . . . maybe my chronological age as well.

So I guess I wish that there was more opportunity to do that [to name and describe our gender when we meet someone]. And I [would] have some opportunity to squeeze my voice in there, so I do [create the opportunity].

I have this conference, and one of the workshops that I do is called *What's the Rush?* It's probably the one I consider the most important workshop in the whole conference, and I like to be in on that panel every time. It [the workshop] is about taking that exploration of *all* the implications of our gender and our choices around that, and asking ourselves what we want to do. *What's going to work best for us as an individual, with not only our bodies but our family, our friends, our community, our careers, our children?*

And we validate all of those factors as being reasonable because there are things I've heard like: "If they're your friends, they'll be your friends through this." Well you know what? That's not true. Sometimes our friends . . . it hits them in a way that they can't be there, or maybe it takes them a long time, much longer than another issue might. So we need to value that.

If somebody says, "I don't want to lose all my friends, so I'm not going to transition," then that's a reasonable thing. Who wants to lose their parents? Who wants to lose their children? And some of the deepest grief I've seen—which I don't hear articulated very often—[is] from trans women who have lost their children and divorced. They will spend the rest of their lives not talking about it, but it is the deepest pain they have.

And I came really close to losing my daughter. I had a legal battle and a full year without seeing her, and it was really the darkest time in my life. People will ask me sometimes, "Aidan, if you had this all to do over again, would you do it over again?" and I say, "No," because I lost a good part of my relationship with my daughter as a result. It turned out okay—she's in my life now—but she got hurt by it, she got damaged by it. I got hurt, I got damaged; the relationship is different than it was and I miss that to this day. Hindsight is not worth a whole lot, but if I could go back in time and know for sure that that wouldn't happen—that she and I would be able to maintain our relationship and be really close—would I make that choice? Probably not. I might make it later.

Jacqui: How old was she when you [transitioned]?

Aidan: Seven. And my ex was the one with more custody. I had to consider myself lucky that I was also legally her parent. I was on her birth certificate as the adoptive parent. That's the only reason she's in my life—that, and patience I didn't know I had with a whole legal system that had *no clue* about this stuff whatsoever. So even though my ex was being vindictive, I was the

one under the microscope, and I had to be . . . yeah . . . I still don't know how I did it, but I had to have patience beyond patience.

Jacqui: How old is she now?

Aidan: She's twenty-one. Almost twenty-two.

8. Why do you think people are afraid of gender variance?

Aidan: I've heard different things along the way in my explorations, and I remember a linguistics professor talking to me and saying, "Gender is tied to sex drive. That is part of our reptilian brain." And so I also think that's why pronouns are hard to change, *really* hard to change: because they're tied into that as well. The pronoun represents a gender, and even more so our instinctual sexual drive, along with the other very base animal components of our being. So when people can't assess your gender, it hits *there* first.

Then we try to move to our neo-cortex to sort it all out, and there's nothing there to help us because we don't discuss it as a society. We have two boxes [and] that's the end of the story. So we either quickly look for the cues that will help us determine one or the other, or then it's a "someone to beat up, someone to ridicule, someone to get away from, take your kids and pull them away from" message. Society can deliver all sorts of bad messages.

Who was it? Barbara Kingsolver? She wrote *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Great book, right? It's all about the family growing food, but somewhere in there she's got this little thing that just jumped out at me. What I received was that gender and race are two things that we have to legislate behavior [for]. We have to create legislation to make us behave around those things because we are busy with this instinctual response of fear of the unknown—fear of another race, fear of another culture, fear of a gender *thing*. She wasn't talking about gender variance at all, but I wanted to dig in. I actually wanted to write to her and say, "Tell me more about this," I was so excited about it.

So this response happens, my brain needs to kick in—not my brain, but my neo-cortex, the newer but more reasonable brain—and if it can grab something, like: "Oh, I can't be mean to that person just because they're a different color because society tells me I can't, and I actually know that I can't. I still have these *feelings*, but I overcome them with logic and reasoning."

9. How do people respond to you?

Aidan: People respond really well to me for the most part. They'll do these validating things that I find annoying, but are important to them, which is: "Wow, I never would have known . . . you just look like a regular guy. . . blah, blah, blah . . ."

Jacqui: "I know you're *not* a regular guy, but you *look* like one."

Aidan: I know . . . and I don't get angry about it, I just think . . . well, I don't know what I think, but it's an interesting statement. I am a little bit disappointed in my culture. There's a way that people respond to me that kind of has a positive outcome, but I'm disappointed that it exists. And that is [that] as a woman—female, but with a masculine presentation—society didn't really want that. It's like, "Oh, you're one of *those*. You're lesbian, you're different, you're strange, you're other . . . We don't want to engage with you." And now, even though I'm trans* too, I look "right." Kristin and I look "right" in the world. We can move around here, and it's okay. Even people who have unfamiliarity with trans* issues or trans* people, and maybe might not have had a positive thing to say before, are still willing to come onboard because I think that they look at me, and they [say], "Oh. You fixed the *gay thing*. At least you *look* like you belong." So in some respects it makes my life a little easier, but I'm just disappointed about that.

10. How do you wish people would respond to you?

Aidan: I'm not sure I can answer that. I guess, simply put, I would like people to be excited about meeting me in the ways that I'm excited about meeting them, that it were a process of discovery and [to] not have one particular thing be so incredibly unique. That's kind of boring. Because it's not that big of a deal. In this house, it's not a big deal. It's not a part of our relationship, it's not something that causes tension, it's not something that causes great joy, we just have a great relationship because we are two people that really love and care about each other. That's nice. Kristin is actually someone who did not process the interminable amount of time that most people do—including myself—about this whole gender thing. It's just not been an issue for her, and that's very, very rare. I guess I wish I would find a time when that would be more common. That would be nice.

11. What are the hardest things you deal with or have dealt with?

Aidan: Definitely the stuff about my daughter. That was a really, really dark time. It was just awful. I was coming out about the gender stuff and taking steps—or *almost taking* physical steps—but definitely letting people know. And it was changing everything. Everything in my life was unpredictable and unstable: my relationship with the girlfriend I had at the time was not going well because of it. Even my sister was having a really hard time, so she couldn't really be as strong of a support as she might want—she was navigating her own stuff about it. And, really, I felt like I lost my child, and that was just the hardest thing.

I've had other things that have happened as a result. I can't say that my time in my community has been all peachy and rosy. It's taken a lot of work and I've gotten backlash a couple of different times because I continue to do organizing and have that more visible existence. So I feel like I've gotten some powerful punches from the community as they grapple with the issue. And I have found that when I talk to a number of trans men that I meet—and specifically ones who without a doubt pass as male, not the more gender ambiguous presentation or anything like that—that there's a really strong rage that comes.

Jacqui: From the lesbian community?

Aidan: Right. I believe this to be—because I’ve had lots of time to think about it—that they have an opportunity to express rage at a man safely, finally, and one who will get it and one who will *take it*. It’s been a number of years since the worst time, but there was definitely a horrible time when I almost quit doing conferences—in 2005.

Actually, there’s another person who was influential to me: the author Mini Bruce Pratt. Do you know who Leslie Feinberg [author of *Transgender Warriors*] is? Leslie’s partner is Mini Bruce Pratt, and she has written extensively about being a femme dyke. The parallels to that experience and my own as a trans man are *very* similar. And I’ve found that her writing just really nails it. She came to keynote at a conference that I had put together, and I had been experiencing this huge backlash where it wasn’t “trans men are evil” or anything, it was “Aidan Key is evil.” It just had my name all over it, and this *huge* rage from community in a way that really put a big schism in the community that I think maybe we’ve mostly healed from.

But she [Mini Bruce Pratt] walked into this—she had heard what was going on—and she called me and said, “What’s going on?” and I told her the briefest bit, and she said, “Well I’m still coming to deliver the keynote, and I’m going to talk to this other group as well, and that’s all I really want to know about it. I don’t really want to be involved in the middle in any way,” and I said, “No problem.”

Well, she came and attended and was hearing and seeing a lot of this volatility, and she changed her mind. She sat me down and she says, “Okay, tell me what’s going on here.” So I related as best I could how a couple personal things had just caught fire and gotten bigger and bigger until it was playing out in “Aidan Key is [a] misogynist and racist.”

So, she was wonderful, she listened to my spiel and then she was quiet and just sat there for a second. Then she said, “You know: 1969 in Selma, Alabama, there were a bunch of us in the civil rights movement and we were working with a group of African Americans on issues related to racism.”

“It was mostly white women and African American [women] because that’s where we were in the south. But the African American women were really mean to us, angry at us, and hardly talking to us, so we went to them and we said, ‘*Why?* We’re on your side, we’re doing this work, we care about this issue, why are you so angry when you talk to us?’ And their response was, ‘Just be grateful that we’re talking to you at all.’”

And she went on to explain more, but what I got from that is—again—this was their first opportunity to say what was really on their minds. Somebody had opened a door that was safe to express that rage, and they had no ability to control the amount of pain and hurt that was coming out, and it came out and was hitting the first people that were there . . . the first white people that were willing to hear and listen. And so she just gave me this huge gift by giving me that analogy because she was saying, “Aidan, this is what you’re experiencing. You’re tapping into something very deep and painful, and you’re just happening to get the brunt of it.”

It was hard. As a matter of fact, that conference got over, and it was just horrible, horrible, horrible. Even the people on the committee lost friendships, it was just terrible. And three months later [the] Gender Odyssey [conference] was supposed to happen. I met with the

committee and I said, “I can’t. I can’t do this. I can’t hang in there for three more months; it was all I could do to survive until now. I can’t do this.”

And they just said, “Well, we don’t want them hijacking *our* conference. We want this conference to go on.” And I had asked the person to be the head of the committee, and she was coordinating the meeting, and she just said, “Aidan, if we can shoulder the burden, are you willing to go forward with this?” and I said, “I’m not sure. I don’t know. It’s really the only way I could possibly consider it, but I don’t know.” She gave everyone twenty-four hours or something like that, to think about it.

Even people from the other committee came to that committee and told them to shut it down: “You’re not signing up for this. This is too much; protect yourselves,” and all that. So she gave everyone the time to think about it, and [told them to] let her know if they were in or out; and I decided that I was out. And then I just never sent that e-mail.

So these folks just *did it*. They picked it up, they held the conference; they held *me*. It’s been a while, but it’s still there, right? And I got to [the] Gender Odyssey [conference] that year—and sometimes Gender Odyssey can have its volatility too—but not that year. There was just nothing but love.

And those folks didn’t know about what was going on. To the best of my knowledge it seemed like most people weren’t aware of the other stuff, but it was what I needed. And I have a really wonderful group of African American transmen who have gone to great lengths to support my work, and to support me personally. To have that happen after just having had these accusations about racism and all of that...I needed that so badly. I had this moment of going, “Ok, well, do I care? Do I care *enough* about racism to keep going? I’m not sure.”

The concept of “It’s not my issue” [can be considered here] . . . but I know better. I know better. It *is* my issue, it *does* hurt me. And so I had to decide that it was important enough that I would pick myself up and continue to do anti-racist work, even though I was being labeled by every other anti-racist [group] as racist.

It was really muddy. The interesting thing was that I spent time afterwards trying to look at it and make sense out of all that happened because, like I said before, I was not a controversial person ever in my life, only since my transition, so *why? Why, why, why, why, why?*

And I looked at the division in the community, and theoretically—because of the accusations—it should go down gender and race lines, but it didn’t. It went down age and class lines. If you drew a line and said, “Okay: working class/older (older being over thirty), and then on this side: middle class/younger.” The middle class younger ones [were making the accusations]. All the ones that had been to college. All the ones that got gender theory and anti-racism, and then popped out of college into the streets where I’m doing my work. That’s how I perceive it. I didn’t get gender theory in school; I didn’t go to college for advanced degrees or anything like that. I just got it by absorbing, observing, talking, living . . . that kind of stuff. That’s not new. There’s always young kids popping out of college with their newfound knowledge and understanding and telling everyone else how it goes. It was harsh . . . very hard.

12. Do have a motto or something you say to yourself that helps you get through?

Aidan: I'm always reminding myself to breathe. I find that I will hold my breath when things get stressful, so I'm always reminding myself to breathe. I have to remind myself regularly that I'm strong, that I *can* do this, and that it's okay to fall apart for a little bit . . . that I won't totally fall apart.

Actually, one of the things that's been really helpful [to] all my organizational work was an interview I listened to on the radio with someone who was—I don't remember the organization he worked for—but he had made some huge change in the world . . . really powerful stuff. He talked about . . . I guess the question [placed to him] might have been, “How did you do that?” or “What was your plan?” but he said, “I didn't really have a plan, I just did the work that was in front of me. Every once in a while I would look up, look around, get a sense of the big picture, get overwhelmed, put my head back down, and work on what was in front of me. Just little manageable pieces.”

And I can very much relate to that on a regular basis. I get overwhelmed and I go, “You know what? What can I get done right now so I'll feel a little better?” Because it's too big. All the things I have on my plate—all the things I *want* to have on my plate—are too big for me to handle. And yet, I am. I'm not doing it alone, absolutely. But I shoulder the responsibility, and sometimes it feels too huge. So that's part of my own thinking: you know you're not responsible for all those children; there're a lot of people responsible for those children. They're looking to you for some advice, and you do your best to give them whatever words you can that may be helpful, but they have parents that are also doing the same thing, they're reaching out to other people as well, it's a collective process. Those are thoughts that I use regularly.

13. What is gender?

Aidan: I don't know.

Jacqui: Me either. [Both laugh] But it's a good question. It's a good question, because we *think* we know . . . we *act* like we know.

Aidan: I educate people all the time. I break it down for them, I tell them what gender is, but even as I'm saying it sometimes, I think: *Do they know that I don't really know? Can they tell?*

Jacqui: And could they *tolerate* the fact that we can't know?

Aidan: They can, ultimately, but they need to have that . . . they need to start breaking it down because a lot of us have grown up knowing gender [as]: male or female. It has to do with your body and that's that. When we start to pick it apart we say, “No, there *are* differences. There's your body. There's what you choose to wear, how you choose to behave, what activities you choose to engage in, your gender expression. There's who you *feel* yourself to be.” But what is that really? Is that based on all of those things, and pieces and activities that don't really have a gender because you like them? Is that informing here? Or is it your sexuality? I'll have to think

about that as it relates to kids because in my adult mind—and especially as a sexual being—I could think about the exchange that happens between two people either in actual everyday relationship type stuff, but actually even more so the physical sexual energy that can be exchanged—this sort of giving and taking.

There are a couple different types of energy flow that can be exchanged regardless of a person's gender. And because I've had sexual experiences like that, where I thought: *Well, we both know our genders outside of this room*, but once we got inside it just went away: body parts went away, none of that really mattered. I guess we could get down to the yin and the yang, when I go there that gets a little more accurate. But gender—as it exists now—for me, is kind of pointless.

Jacqui: And yet we've talked about [sexual orientation]. I mean: sexual orientation is an orientation toward gender. If we say, "I'm attracted to women . . ."

Aidan: Well, I just wonder: if you were to eliminate the social expectations and restrictions and all of that around sexuality and around what kind of people we can be: we can all wear whatever clothes we want—there was no stigma around any of it—then what would our sexual orientation look like? People often say that sexual orientation is this "fixed" thing. I think we can have certain inclinations—we might be more attracted to a certain type of person—but we're changing it all the time. Who might have caught your eye when you were fifteen is likely different than when you're twenty-five.

We're changing those things because we're interacting with people, we're learning more about ourselves, we're learning more about what's valuable to us. You may have never looked at a redhead when you were fifteen, but then you met a redhead that really knocked your socks off, and after that, you were like: "I'm attracted to redheads!" We can morph it in that way.

Jacqui: The other piece—we talked about the fear piece—is the whole thing of: "I would be attracted, but I'm afraid." Whatever that whole thing is about . . .

Aidan: I'll tell you what: the other sort of interesting thing that comes with disclosing gender in my life is that it can immediately—someone who expressed no romantic, sexual interest in me before—all of a sudden is right there, and being flirty.

Jacqui: So, you tell them you're trans*, and all of a sudden their behavior toward you changes?

Aidan: Right. Quite often. Sometimes to the point where I really have to say, "No. It's not going to happen. Whatever this is, is your issue. Go figure it out."

Jacqui: And they might not even realize what's going on.

Aidan: No, they don't.

14. What have you learned about gender expression?

Jacqui: I wonder about what gender expression even means. Does it mean what you can *do*, what you *wear*, how you move your body, how you use your voice, how you face your body towards someone or looking at them or not? Mannerisms? The things you can do with your hands if you're a man or if you're a woman . . . the things you're not supposed to do if you're a man or a woman. I haven't had the experience of being a man, having male gender expression. I don't know what I'd do differently.

Aidan: Honestly, if I were to send a message to trans* people anywhere, it would be to *not* think about that. Let your natural expression come out. Because I have talked to a number of people that even said [that] once they *did* have the ability to pass in their preferred gender increased, their natural expression came out. Because otherwise everything else was recognized as a little more contrived and not necessarily natural. So it tended to catch people's eyes and make them scrutinize more. I'm thinking of one trans woman who always passed, and she didn't wear a darn-tootin' thread of feminine clothing. She wore sweatshirts and sweats and tennis shoes, running around, being athletic. We have a context for that kind of woman, and she was in her body.

That time when I said people were fifty-fifty on the pronouns and I never knew what to expect, I was trying to adjust my behavior, and it was making me crazy, it wasn't improving anything at all, and I finally just said, "Fuck it. I'm just going to be myself, and we'll see what happens." Lo and behold: male pronouns [over and over]. So I thought: *Well, all right.*

And my sister said something to me when she saw me—we weren't living in the same state when I transitioned, so she did have those gaps—the first time she saw me after I was definitely looking more male and being perceived as male, she just said, "It fits all of a sudden. I felt like you were somebody who had a suit on before that was just too big, and it didn't look right, and now the suit that you have on, it *fits*." She may not have gotten it at first, but once she saw me becoming me, she said, "Oh. I get it now." Because she's seen the inside, and I think so many people see the inside. I grew up always playing the boy part in any child games. The girls always put me in that role. I wasn't saying, "I have to do this"—*they* were doing it. They recognized it.

15. Is there anything you'd like to say to gender-variant people or people who wonder if they're gender variant? (and) Is there anything you'd like to say to everyone?

Aidan: It's the same answer, I think: I'd say that if there's a universal goal for us as human beings, it's that we're trying to be ourselves, to be recognized for being ourselves, and to find out who that is and to allow that to evolve.

My path seems to inspire that in other people, [but not just] about gender. People go, "Wow, he's so brave. If he can do *that* then I can do *this*. I can go back to college," or whatever it is. It's taken a lot of bravery. I don't think I'm any braver than anyone else, but it has taken a lot of bravery, so I'm not going to lie about that. But I do feel that there are other people that have faced even bigger challenges that have required more bravery.

I would really want gender-variant people, as well as anyone on the planet, to have the freedom to find out who they are and face those societal pressures that say, “*You can’t do that,*” and choose to be authentic, to be truthful, and to do it in an open-hearted way. I think that probably the hardest part in anyone’s life journey when experiencing painful situations is to figure out how to keep your heart open. It’s so hard, and it gets hurt and we have to stitch it up and let it heal, to be willing to expose it *again*.

I want to believe that that’s the right thing to do, [and] most of the time I do. I know I have a very clear awareness of—around 2005, when all that horrible stuff was happening—I could feel myself closing up. I could *feel* it, and I was aware of that feeling . . . that a sort of coldness was happening. I just thought, “I don’t want to do that. I don’t necessarily know how to get out of this, but I don’t want to do that.” But I could see clearly how people could get there.

Jacqui: Because it hurts so much.

Aidan: Yeah. All those lovely little sayings and platitudes out there sometimes drive me crazy, but sometimes they’re what you need.

16. What’s unique about you?

Aidan: I’m okay with ambiguity, and I have no problem articulating things that other people might think are contradictory. I’ll say, “I have an identical twin sister,” and they’ll say, “No you don’t, because you’re not identical.” Even if I say, “Yes, that’s true,” they’ll say, “Well, you’re not [identical] anymore.” And I say, “Yes, I am. Just because it doesn’t fit with what you expect doesn’t mean that it’s not true.” So when I go out into the world and tell people I’m male, and at the same time—in the next situation—I can still claim female identity, I just have no problem with that seeming contradictory, because it’s truthful.

I don’t tell the whole truth because I don’t have *this* [large] amount of time to talk to people. But I’m okay with telling whatever [part] of my truth in [a given] situation—especially as an educator—that will help move people to greater understanding. I haven’t met a lot of people that do that, so I guess that’s one of the things that I can come up with and can say is kind of unique [about me].

17. What are a few of your favorite books? (not necessarily to do with gender)

Aidan: I mentioned that I spent summers at my great-grandparents’ house, and they had all these old, dusty books around. I really loved reading the old books. They were in a more formal language and I got to read them at an age that was considered too young to understand them, but I enjoyed reading them because it’s a whole new language which then provides a window into a culture. So the way that’s translated in my life is that if I find books that take a little bit of getting used to when you’re reading them—the language or the flow—I like to dig into that a little bit and see if I can stay with it because I will likely find a window into another existence, and a community or a culture that emphasizes different things.

18. What are a few of your favorite pieces of music?

Aidan: Well, I sure love disco. I love that music—it was at that influential time of life, of development. It’s fun, it’s light-hearted [and] I need that in my life.

Jacqui: Do you like to dance?

Aidan: Yes, I do. It lifts my spirits every time. So, I like disco, I like classical music. Again, I think exposure as a kid to something as simple as *Fantasia* the movie . . . just seeing some animation of someone’s interpretation of different pieces of music . . . it gives me permission to do the same. It teaches you how to be creative.

I like The Pretenders, I like Linda Ronstadt, I like Abba.

19. What do you wish I would ask you? What have I left out?

Aidan: Nothing comes to mind. The questions allow for a lot of expansion. I can’t say that there’s anything I would add.

You know, here’s a question that might be good: if you could change yourself and become any movie star that you wanted to, who would that be? Or anyone, really, it doesn’t have to be a movie star. Maybe a more generic thing, like: who is that person—independent of anything going on in your life—whose body would you step into?

Jacqui: Do you want to try it?

Aidan: Let me think about this for a second. I should tell you the first thing that came to mind: I think somebody like John Travolta—not older now, but his skinny little dancing [self]. There’s *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*. He’s just so sassy and sexy and cute and *masculine* and yet *not*.

Jacqui: Could you say the thing about the . . . you said when you help people to decide where they’re going that you talk about the deserted island . . .

Aidan: It’s an exercise that I did—and I didn’t really frame it as an exercise, it was just, *How do I make this decision?* There’s a book that’s just called *FTM*, it’s just this ridiculously long, repetitive research project of forty-five trans men, and the researcher asked them all, “Anybody considering this decision, what would you say to them?” And many of them said, “Just be absolutely sure that this is the right thing, because there’s no going back, blah blah blah.” So I thought: *Well, okay, well I’ll just wait until I’m absolutely sure.*

And I thought, *Well, what do I need to do?* I read, I did all this stuff, and still I wasn’t sure. And still, today, am I sure? So what I did was say [to myself], *Okay, if I’m on a deserted island, and there’s nobody there, and it’s nice and sunny and warm, and I have what I need, what would I want my body to look like? Just for me?*

And to spend time and do that I think is really great. What came out of it for me is that I would like a flat chest. I didn't care so much about genitals. I don't remember if there were other things that came out of that.

So that was a good exercise, and I thought, *Well, great. Does that help me get sure?* And I thought *No, because I don't live on a desert island. I have a life, and I want to engage with people.* So what that did for me too was just to make me validate all of those pieces as something to be reasonably considered in this personal decision: *Well, actually, I do want to think about everyone else. I want to take them with me on this journey if I can.* So some people will do a letter—a kind of big disclosure—I just let everybody in on it right away: with my exploration, my confusion, my looking for answers because that's what I wanted. I sort things out verbally usually. Some people do it in writing. So that was helpful to me.

Jacqui: I myself get confused because I think so much about what everybody's saying, so to take myself away, even in my mind . . .

Aidan: If you were [on an] island and it was only you for the rest of your life, you don't have to consider anyone else. You might still want to change some things. And when you *do* bring everybody back into the mix, it can help you sort them out.

Jacqui: I forget how you said it, but you were talking about when you present, it's not just to get them to understand, it's to understand that dealing with gender impacts our whole life. We can't separate it out. When you said you don't like the term "ally," one of the things I wondered was: it seems unidirectional. Is that what you were saying? The other thing is: sure, we want to get other people to support us when we go through difficult times, but . . .

Aidan: It says to me that, "I want to support you but you're just so different that your stuff needs extra support. And I don't understand it, so tell me how I can support you." And I've had people directly say that, "I want to be a good ally to you. How can I support you?" And it's a good question, it comes from a good place, and yet it shocked me. I just felt like all of a sudden . . . I thought we were conversing and seeing each other as human beings.

Jacqui: So what would you rather the question be? Or maybe there isn't a question.

Aidan: Yeah, maybe there's not a question.

Jacqui: Well, I mean, we support each other as friends, that's what we do. That's something friends do.

Aidan: It would be a comment: "Hey, I just want you to know, I'm here for you. And I think you're great. And if you ever need anything, here I am." That would be a good way to do it. I mean . . . just *friendship* stuff, right? Maybe I don't even know, and somebody says, "I'd like to help you because you seem to be going through a challenging time. Is there anything I can do? Can I cook you dinner?" I don't know what it might be, but it could be a number of things. It doesn't have to be about identifying as this unique thing.

Jacqui: And you're not the patient.

Aidan: Because that question is . . . well, I *do* like to educate people, but I want to get them to a place of recognizing that—that we are equal.

Jacqui: Because it's a one-up, one-down thing to be the helper of the poor trans* person.

Aidan: The oppressed.

[Final comments, not related to a question]

Aidan: This was really profound for me: when I started working with families and little kids. I thought I had a good grasp of gender and all the machinations of it until I met a little kid—a trans* kid being supported by their family—and then I realized that I was still coming at it from an adult perspective. To me, gender, as an adult, absolutely means: how do I interact with another person? And bottom line for me: sexuality always comes into it. Not that every situation is sexual, but we *care* about that as adults. We are sexual beings. Even if we are identifying as asexual, it's still part of something that we consider, that kids aren't [considering]. So gender, for little kids, becomes: What toys do you play with? What colors do you wear? Who do you feel yourself to be?

It's almost like that deserted island, at least a little more so. The hard part for adults—I guess I'll generalize—is that we can separate those things out (our sexuality and our gender), and say, “Oh, gender: who we are by ourselves. Sexuality: who we interact with.” But even more so, their [gender and sexuality] are just *pulled* together. They're just *magnets, interwoven*, you know? Whatever kind of analogy you want to grab. That's the other part that makes this issue so scary. And that's the part that I need to hack away at when I go into school to talk . . . if it's an elementary school: that I'm helping the staff (principals, teachers, parents, all of them) to pull it apart, and helping them remember.

Jacqui: What it was like to be little.

Aidan: Because that's what we're in there talking to the kids about. Otherwise they're like, “What are you talking to my kids about?” Sex, and perverted sex. It's really honestly an incredible mystery that I can walk into elementary schools, but I do. As an out trans* person.

Jacqui: That is so great.

Aidan: It's amazing.

Jacqui: One of the things I have thought is: I *orient* to people around gender. I look at people and say: *female, male*—as I'm walking down the street . . . when I go into a store and I'm talking to somebody. *Do I talk differently to someone who's male and someone who's female?* And I thought about that coming here. I know Facebook, I know how I orient with him, but I'm his *mom*. So, Laura—I made dinner for us the first time we got together, and I thought: ‘*Well,*

women really like salad, or whatever.’ And that was interesting. I kept having these *gender* thoughts. So I’m *noticing* that you’re a guy. I just think about that— it’s part of how I orient. So, somebody who’s ambiguous *would* throw me off.

Aidan: And I think that it ties into that “threat assessment.” We’re walking through the world—and sexuality does play a part—if I meet someone, and I perceive her to be female and heterosexual, I will behave in a certain way (that is hopefully not threatening).

If she perceives me to be male and heterosexual, she’ll act a certain way, but if she perceives me to be *homosexual*, she’ll loosen up and be more open. I’m not a threat. If she smiles, I’m not going to then take several aggressive steps forward and say, “What’s your phone number? Let’s go out sometime,” because that can be perceived as an invitation.

So there are all types of things that—like you said: we assess so quickly. I will go into classrooms—when I can do this—and I’ll ask the instructor not to let them know *why* I’m there. Just: “We have a guest speaker today. His name is Aidan, here he goes.” And then I hit them, I’m like: “We’re going to do a little exercise: tell me who I am. *Everything* you can think of: race, age, gender, am I married or not? Do I have siblings? Do I have kids? Anything you can think of: Do I like music?” and I watch what gets thrown out. And I can change my shirt from one classroom to the next and the answers are hugely different. Something like this [shirt] compared to a button-down shirt or something [gets me] vastly different answers.

So we do that really quickly and then we go back and I say, “Here’s where you hit the mark and here’s where you didn’t.” I *always* have to tell them to tell me my gender. They won’t throw it out because it’s *just a given*. They don’t even think to say it. I say, “And my gender?” And they’re like, “Ah, ha, ha, ha, *male*.” And I say, “Yeah? Well, let me talk about this.” That’s my segue in, and it’s really fun.

Jacqui: And how do they respond? At different ages, and stuff?

Aidan: Oh, they *love it*. People love to talk about it. It’s not because I’m so unique and interesting. It’s because it brings up stuff about who we are as people, what we take for granted, what we thought we knew about life.

And I’ll tell you what: the younger the people are—which I also think ends up being the more honest and straightforward [group] because there’s less filtering—the more they want to talk about themselves.

So it’s about: *Who am I as a gendered person in the world?* [From] little kids on up. *Who am I? What are the things I’ve been told I can’t do? Where do I feel that pressure or fear: that I’m not a strong boy. I’m afraid people will think I’m a sissy because I really like the color pink.*