

GENDER PERSONAL

EXPLORING GENDER VARIANCE THROUGH ART



Jenn

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).

Copyright and Licensing Information: © Jacqui Beck 2014-2018. This document is the work of Jacqui Beck. You are free to copy and redistribute it in any medium or format, provided you follow these license terms: You must include this copyright and licensing statement, and indicate if changes were made. You may distribute the document in any reasonable manner, but not in a way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use; You may not use the material for commercial purposes; If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material; You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. The legal language of these terms is set forth at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. Compliance with these terms constitutes permission to use the material—you are not required or encouraged to seek permission from the licensor. [Rev. 10/01/2018]

Gender Personal: Interview with Jenn

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

Jenn: I think I was probably around three or four. I remember that my cousin got a rainbow bright dress and I really wanted one. I think I was three when that happened. But I didn't really connect wanting that [dress] to gender because I'm not sure I really understood [gender] difference. But I was six or seven when I went into Cub Scouts, and I remember the first day I went home and just thought, *That is not where I belong*. I was freaking out . . . silently . . . I mean, nobody knew I really freaked out that night. But I was crying to this cross in our bathroom. So that was probably about . . . between three and seven when it dawned on me.

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

Jenn: I identify as female. I experience life as female. I don't have much of an issue with that. There have been . . . there are moments of dysphoria. But in a way, over time it's become less gender dysphoria and become more body dysphoria, which I feel all women and some men go through at some point in time. So, for the past eight years . . . before that I identified as bored and confused, so I don't think I really ever was particularly sold into the expression or experience of the male gender. I did my best to fake it.

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

Jenn: In a way, that's a really complicated question, just because I think I sort of had an arrested development issue when it came to gender and sexuality and all that stuff. In a lot of ways I had that—I mean I didn't even say bad words in high school. I didn't ever stay out once; I didn't drink . . . I was a terrible student because I didn't do my homework either. I would just stay in my room and read books. That was all I did.

Jacqui: Did you hang out with other people and stuff?

Jenn: I did theater, and I hung out with those people, but that was more during theater hours. And there was a brief stint in my sophomore year where I actually joined Young Life out of desperation to be with people. Young Life is a youth Christian organization that is really aggressive in recruiting high school students. Actually, the dude that took us on our big Young Life trip actually molested a girl on the bus on the way back from the trip. So that was the end of my Young Life experience. I was like, *Okay, these people are phonies*.

But I kind of said it [that I was transgender] to myself, but never said it out loud for a really long time. I think I had a lot of shame: I grew up Catholic, and I think I had this idea that I wasn't trying hard enough. My brother was a total "dude bro,"—he was really good at being a guy.

Jacqui: Older brother?

Jenn: Younger brother. So it was actually kind of embarrassing—he was always way better at it than I was. I think I always just compared myself to guys I knew and tried to build the best façade that I could out of that. And then when I was nineteen my friend gave me psychedelic mushrooms, and I had an insanely cathartic trip. I woke up the next morning and I just felt zero shame about how I felt about my gender . . . for the first time in my life I just felt *no shame* about it. I thought, *It is what it is. It's always been this way. It's not changing.* And I think part of it was just to lose such control of myself. I don't know . . . tripping is interesting, and I don't think you really lose control but you lose track.

And to lose such track of myself and to still find that to be a part of me . . . I think that really meant a lot. To realize how much of a part of the core of me it was and how immutable it seemed considering I had spent so much time trying to change it.

And I came out to my mom about a week and a half later. I came out to my best friend the next day. I was nineteen and in college already. I got into college when I was seventeen. Anyway, I did that, and she freaked out and said it was going to ruin her marriage and that I was being a narcissist, and she said that I was crazy and delusional and I went back in the closet for five years.

And then I tried to go to law school. I thought, *Well, if I make a bunch of money then they'll have to think I'm successful and they won't say anything about my gender presentation. Besides, if I'm a lawyer then I can protect myself.* I hated law school. I went to a really conservative program, and I only ever did some pre-law classes and that was enough for me to look at it and say, "I don't really want to get \$100,000 in debt just to do that." I briefly—for about half a semester—switched to teaching, and then I was like, *Well, this is going to be complicated because if I ever want to come out I could lose my job as a teacher;* but I actually ended up doing some teaching later and loved it.

I went to Seattle on vacation—I dropped out of graduate school and I was just working at Blockbuster and drinking all the time and watching every bad movie ever. So I came out here and I saw how chill everybody was and I saw a couple trans* people downtown and nobody was beating them up or mocking them openly in the street . . . and I never went home. I didn't go back. Well, I went back for trips later to visit my parents, but I never moved back. And as soon as I got here I transitioned. It was 2005.

Jacqui: So, was your mom the only person you talked to after the mushroom experience?

Jenn: A couple of my college friends knew. My best college friend knew—the problem was that we had also dated so that was kind of complicated because we really liked each other and we were very close but she was non-lesbian. Hilariously her sister who looked exactly like her and who I had no relationship with *was*. But you can't win 'em all.

So she knew and a couple of other friends knew, but mostly I kept it under wraps. She knew for a while because we lived together and it was hard for me to . . . especially after I came out to her it was really hard for me to . . .

After I came out to *myself* that night and then I started coming out to her and then my mom, I knew I couldn't do anything about it, but it was really hard for me to stop thinking about it and it was really hard for me to think about anything other than handling that. And I sort of devised a plan—sort of, kind of—and then I changed it and I changed it and I changed it. I was a giant slacker and a procrastinator.

Jacqui: But it's so huge.

Jenn: I think in a way . . . because I find that I'm really ambitious as an adult. I mean, not *really* ambitious, considering that I'm married to a Harvard graduate . . . *she's* ambitious. But I'm much more ambitious than when I was a child, and I think that part of it is that a lot of my RAM was taken up running a pretty large program that I didn't have the ability to turn off. We only have so much emotional and intellectual capacity, and if it's taken up by something, you can't just stop doing that. That's how I felt.

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

Jenn: Yeah, and *a lot*, a huge amount of it, actually. A: I didn't even really know that trans* people existed. I kind of knew. I mean, the first example you ever saw was men dressing in drag for humor purposes in movies. And the first example of an actual trans* person I ever saw was actually an awful example. It was the end of *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, which I thought was a hilarious movie. I was a really expressive kid—I wanted to be an actor so I really looked at Jim Carrey . . . I thought he was hilarious.

And at the end of the movie it turns out that the villain is this trans woman, and they literally strip her naked in front of a crowd who then sees her male genitals and begins vomiting and screaming. And this was my first media example of a trans* person in public, and [it was] in a theater where my brother and my friends were laughing their asses off next to me, and at the time that was really, really normal. The “Finkle is Einhorn” is still all over the Internet. People still pull that out as if it's some kind of funny—the Internet is a terrible place for trans* people sometimes too, I mean, I spend a lot of time online . . .

Jacqui: I'm sorry, the “Finkle” what?

Jenn: “Finkle is Einhorn.” The idea is that he was a football player—the trans woman was previously a male football player named Finkle who went crazy and became a trans woman, and then hid as the chief of police and that's how she was getting away with all these crimes and murdering people . . . and she was sleeping with everyone and they were all disgusted that she was a trans* person.

Jacqui: So . . . “Trans* person = bad.”

Jenn: More than bad. “Trans* person . . . *insanely* repulsive.” So I didn’t really think about being that, and I thought maybe, *Well, I just have some kind of* . . . Well, I don’t know what I thought. I don’t know if I ever tried to put it . . . I just kind of tried to never think about it. And when I thought about it I was like, *Just think about it now and get it over with and stop*. The other thing is I was really confused because I like girls. I’m married to a woman . . . that was *really* confusing once puberty hit. To like girls and to be like, *I think I’m supposed to be a girl, but wait—there are also no lesbians in my immediate family*. Turns out my best friend was a lesbian and we didn’t know until . . .

Jacqui: But it used to be that if you went to a physician and you said . . .

Jenn: And if you said you were lesbian they wouldn’t let you transition. Yeah. I didn’t know any of that, I had no knowledge. I also didn’t have Internet until college . . . zero Internet. So that really restricted the amount of information I was getting. The first places I got information once I was in college were not particularly good.

They were actually from Ann Laurence’s websites which were all about *autogynophilia* which is all about sexualizing yourself as a woman and that’s *all*—for her I guess that’s the entire purpose of being trans*. And she was actually the first psychologist I came to see in Seattle. I saw her for six months and then . . . then I stopped. She was really expensive, too, way more expensive than anybody else. I just thought she was the person to see because of everything on the Internet, so . . . a lot of wrong information.

Jacqui: The impression I have is that because you were so alone with it and you didn’t have a lot of information, that when you would think, *Well, I think I’m female or would like to be or should be* . . . it would feel . . .

Jenn: And it was more like, *But that would ruin my life . . . But that would make people hate me . . . But that would freak my parents out* . . . And the thing is: part of it was that I wouldn’t even let myself . . . I mean, I’m an extrovert by nature, that became an introvert as a child because of this issue.

It was hard to be very . . . I’m socially and emotionally needy, [and I was also] really perceptive about what people were thinking and feeling all the time and *always* reading it back onto myself. I think [this] was a protection mechanism, [wondering] whether they were reading me as being queer or weird. I was called “fag” ten million times before I transitioned and then zero times after, hilariously enough, when I actually *was*.

So I just never allowed myself to ask those questions. I never allowed myself to think, *What if I told someone about this?* I never even thought about it. I thought, *I’m normal, so this can’t be me*, even though I knew I wasn’t really normal and that it absolutely *was* me. And I both knew and didn’t know at the same time. I refused to admit that I knew it.

Jacqui: Well, and, “What would happen with my parents?”

Jenn: And my grandparents . . . what would happen . . . ? And also I was in theater, and that was what I wanted to do with my life—be a performer. And where does a person who’s in between genders perform? What play has that character in it? Not as many as you’d hope. You might get away with a couple of Shakespeare [plays], and [some others]. I also wasn’t glammy, and I wasn’t particularly femme.

Even though I felt like I was a girl I didn’t want to wear pink dresses and frills and shit. Not that there is anything wrong with that type of Gender experience, it just wasn’t me. I was kind of tomboy-y for someone who probably should have grown up as female. And I liked superheroes and reading and comic books and science and all kinds of stuff that people who were in my immediate environment probably ascribed to “boy interests.” I’ve come to see how silly all that gendering of interests is.

In fact—it’s funny because it’s split—I think about 75% of people who knew me before were like, “I had *no* idea,” and 25% were like, “I absolutely knew, *way* before anybody said anything.” So that was really weird to see. I think the more perceptive people probably ended up on the latter end.

Jacqui: I think the thing that strikes me the most is you saying how there were no role models, no one to talk to . . .

Jenn: Forget role models, there were *no* representations until . . . that *Ace Ventura* movie, which came out in the ’90s. I was already ten or eleven or twelve. There were zero representations of people who were trans* or even thought about bending their gender in any way that wasn’t a joke, or to exploit somebody. They were often painted as exploiting somebody, which is really crazy because I was a really sensitive kid who hated bullies, so I would never do anything to exploit anybody, because I thought it was the worst thing you could do. And I still think so: the worst thing you can do is intentionally exploit someone else.

Jacqui: So nowhere to turn.

Jenn: No. No one to talk to about it with. No one to turn to. And I’m pretty sure that I told . . . I don’t remember exactly . . . but I was in Catholic school the first four and a half years in Wilmington, Delaware. And I got in a fight with a kid. I think I may have bit him or something. And I was too old to be biting kids, you know what I mean?

I went to a counselor and I was having huge emotional feelings and I didn’t know what to do with them. There was this girl, Elaine Z., and I wanted to be just like her. And that was a weird thing to be thinking. And I knew it was a weird thing to be thinking. I wanted to be just like this girl. I looked up to her. I envied her. To feel that way was really confusing.

And I wanted to be with the guys, and they wouldn’t let me in. And I got in this fight with this dude, Tony. And I went to this counselor, and I’m pretty sure I mentioned to her [whispers] that I wish I was a girl. And she immediately, as a Catholic counselor, brushed it off . . . I don’t remember. It’s just a hazy memory, but I feel like I must have said something to her at some point about that.

Jacqui: And that would be in essence an issue, too . . . you put feelers out and get slapped back, you're going to be even less likely to . . .

Jenn: Well, it wasn't like I wasn't hearing people saying "fag" to every guy who was less than super manly. It wasn't like every guy in my family didn't grunt about football every week, all of them, even my super-sensitive grandfather. It wasn't that I had a shortage of male role models. I had tons of awesome uncles. It's just that I didn't feel like I was going to grow up to be them. And I didn't see any of them I felt like I could grow up to be. And so I just didn't ever think about my future. I didn't ever think about "where am I going to be in five years or four years or three years?" And I think that was a lot of my . . . like "what is there to invest in?"

I was never self-harming. I was briefly severely bulimic for a couple of years, but I didn't know that was self-harming at the time, and I don't think that that was my intention. A lot of it just started because I had nerves that were so bad that it became very easy for me to vomit, and I was gaining weight very quickly.

Jacqui: Was this after your transition?

Jenn: No, this was way before. This was when I was like nine or ten, maybe. And I just hated school because I was like a pariah and I didn't really have any friends. No, I actually had tons of friends—they were all just girls, and at the time that wasn't . . . I actually remember that, just before I left, I was the only guy invited to this giant girls' birthday party.

But anyway, I just didn't think of my future, and that continued well into college. I'd just think, *Ah well, I'm just doing what I'm doing now, and I'll figure it out.* And I'm still an in-the-moment kind of person. But now I can imagine where I'll be in five or ten years. I can imagine myself as an old person, which I could not do before. I couldn't even imagine myself as an older person. It was terrifying. Like being an old man was the scariest thing in the world.

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

Jenn: Well, it has changed massively, along with my view of a lot of things. I am doubtful of even an objective reality. Like, you just can't base anything around objective moral situations because you can never see the entire situation. The world is very complicated and being a being that has an insight type of perception in the world, you always have your biases. You can't have an objective perception.

Chemistry—physics, math, there you go, that's objective reality. So, I just don't . . . At the same time I know that I feel female but I can't define—I couldn't tell you what that means. I couldn't.

Jacqui: Imagine how important it would be for young people to hear you say that.

Jenn: Yeah.

Jacqui: I know I'm female, and I can't tell you . . . I can't explain.

Jenn: Yeah, maybe that was the thing is, before, I didn't know I was female . . . before my transition, because I had never been in enough of a situation to wrap my head around what it felt like and to feel it. There's part of human life that's just feeling it. I mean you have to just feel what's happening. I see a lot of people who don't trust their feelings at all, and they're all running into walls. But afterward, and I said this to Rachel, and it's a little graphic, but it's like, you could cut off my boobs and cut off my face and cut off my hair, and I would still be a woman.

And that has nothing to do with any of that stuff. I think I didn't feel that connected. It was all about, like, bits and pieces. It was a lot about how I lived my life before. My conception of gender was bits and pieces.

But having a penis definitely meant *male* before, and now it doesn't mean anything. And penises aren't even inherently male in my mind. So I think it's just . . . it widens and it became more of a spectrum. It became more multi-layered. Now it's what you feel, what your body presents, what your hormonal makeup is, what your chromosome makeup . . . It's what you express and what you feel that are the most important too because . . . I don't know. You only get eighty years. Why be a dick to people?

Jacqui: Do you think of yourself as 100% female?

Jenn: I almost think that gender can't be . . . I think that no human is 100% of either gender in a way because what we really are is human, and that's just an aspect of being human. There's so much overlap. I find that to be an impossible question to answer.

Jacqui: It is an impossible question. It was meant to be, in a way.

Jenn: Yeah. Well, like the thing is . . . okay, I'll be honest because I don't really care if this is out—though I don't like to talk in general with people, but I'm pre-op, so I have issues surrounding that part of my body still, and it's mostly in a symbolic sense, memory stuff. But as far as my body is concerned, I don't know. That's a really hard question to answer. I don't take that and figure that wouldn't be why I don't feel like I'm 100% percent female, and it wouldn't be my chromosomes that make me not feel 100% female. I feel like gender almost isn't . . . again, it's not an objective reality. It's an experience. It's either something you internally experience or it's something you experience that someone else is doing.

I think that's the main thing. Not only is there your internal gender, but there's what other people see your gender as, perceive . . . People perceive from fifty to sixty yards, depending on how extreme your presentation of gender is. And in that way I feel like I'm 100% of the time perceived as female and therefore my emotional reactions don't run up against having to feel not female in social situations.

And since we are mostly like neurons that exist in relation to other people and our situation, in that context I would say I do feel 100% female. But as far as an objective *femaleness*, a quintessential, ephemeral female . . .

Jacqui: What does the question even mean?

Jenn: Yeah, that's the thing. It's either got a lot of answers or no answers.

Jacqui: Yeah, even the whole thing . . . of the binary of female is here and male is here, and you're either here or here... of course not.

Jenn: I'm not genderqueer. I mean I don't . . .this is how I answer that question: No part of me feels male.

Jacqui: No part of you feels like a man, or like . . . male?

Jenn: I would say no part of me feels like . . . well, kind of both. Kind of both, like yeah, both, I would say. Like, even the physiological end of it, even if it is what people would classify as male, it doesn't feel very male to me.

Jacqui: Mm hmm. It's complicated and it's personal.

Jenn: Yeah, and it's not like I'm going to get all new bits. I'm just going to use the same bits. I can't think of the bits as anything other than . . . I just have a future vagina. I have a time-traveling vagina.

Jacqui: Yeah, and you know what's interesting is that when I asked the question I wasn't thinking about bodies at all.

Jenn: Yeah, spiritually and personality-wise, I feel female. I feel like a tough woman, which I think is often read as male or masculine, but I grew up around tough women, and none of them are male or masculine.

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

Jenn: So much! I've lived in books. My first love . . . the only man I'll ever love is Kurt Vonnegut. I can't explain the connection I feel with KV's work. And I know a lot of people feel this way. I think we're all family and Kurt would love that.

But, I grew up in fantasy books and science fiction books where lots of stuff was possible. And, in a way, I still (even though I'm an insane skeptic and I don't trust anything) live in a world where magic is real. It just has more to do with the will and less to do with the sparks and the wands.

I did a pretty big piece of transfiguration over my lifetime. I'll show you a picture from before . . . and not only that, I did it with intention, and I did it with, I don't know if there is a latticework of spirituality in the universe that we have access to or if we create it for ourselves—I probably believe the latter more—but regardless, it's very good for us and we should have a personal relationship because part of the things we don't talk about.

We talk about our health. We talk about what shape we're in. We talk about our character. We talk about all these things. But we never talk about our *narrative*. And I think that's an incredibly important thing because we all have one.

Everyone has a narrative about themselves, and it really, really affects the person that you are. Because if your narrative is that "I'm a good person and I try to do good things" then in the future you're a good person and you'll try to do good things. But if your narrative is that "I'm a failure and I'm a user or I'm a bad person or I'm a sad person or I'm a worthless person," that's the story you keep telling yourself.

Jacqui: Can we change our narrative?

Jenn: Oh, absolutely. That's what magic is. It's when you grab hold of your own narrative. When you decide which possible future represents the you that . . . Aleister Crowley called the "conversation with your holy guardian angel," and Aristotle called your "daemon," your most perfect self. And I think you have to grab hold of it and summon it from the future into the now. And that was something that I did very purposefully at some point.

Jacqui: That gives me shivers.

[Jenn goes and gets a walking stick she carved and decorated with runes]

Jenn [showing the walking stick]: This is actually the carved wood. All runes, hand carved; [it took] fourteen months. [It's] stained in my own blood, and it's all runes. This one's my favorite: *gifu*, which is "voice," and it's also "the gift."

And this is the serpent, and this is "isa," which is the "world tree," and it broke. It broke right there, after years, and it had just been sitting there, drying. It broke right along the center of the world tree. I think we're often so far away from what we used to be that we've broken the center of our world.

The real human experiment will be to see if we can fix that. It has nothing to do with politics or religion or money. It's just to see if we can summon the better people, the better humans for the future. Which path are we all going to choose collectively?

Jacqui: Imagine, though, having children grow with the information that we create our own narrative.

Jenn: That's something that I'm going to teach my kids. And I think that's something that I learned accidentally from reading so much. And Vonnegut is such a meta-writer. He writes about writing and he writes about how writers write what they're writing and why they're writing it.

He does it all in allegory. He does it all in his amazing, epic, goofy stories. If I was going to title his books anything, I'd just call them "Amazingly Epic Weirdos."

And that's every Vonnegut book. He could squeeze them all into that mega-title. I wanted to be an amazingly epic weirdo. That was my goal in life, after a point. I was like, *Forget it. I'm obviously not going to be accepted for being cool or normal or fitting in so I might as well be really awesome.*

Jacqui: So was that prior to . . .

Jenn: Post-transition.

Jacqui: Really!

Jenn: Yeah, that I felt that way.

Jacqui: Okay, so you took on yourself and your gender change.

Jenn: Mm hmm.

Jacqui: And then you also took on this other piece . . .

Jenn: *Well, I thought, I'm reinventing myself, so why not? And I even was like, am I gay? Am I straight? And I've never touched a guy, never kissed a guy, never held hands with a guy. But I thought about it. I was like, I'm not going to put borders on myself. I'm going to see how I feel, and I realized I'm really gay [laughs]. But I really did. I was like, I'm going to give myself permission to make sure that this isn't just that I felt like being male bodied and having another male wasn't good. I was like, I'm going to think of everything. Every single thing I need to go through.*

I'm going to just rewire all the broken shit that my parents and grandparents and television put in me that they didn't realize they were putting in.

Jacqui: That's really great.

Jenn: Well, I think we all do it, you know, different levels of self-awareness. My first was Tolkien grand journeys. Tolkien was my hero. There's a poster at the top of the stairs. It is the poster I grew up with over my bed. It's a Tolkien poster by Jimmy Cauty, who was seventeen when he drew it. And I loved those books more than anything, and my mom actually gave me [this drawing of] *The One Ring* when I graduated from high school for my graduation. And, as you can see, when you come in our house, the first thing you see to the right is the library, and it's all our favorite books.

And comic books were the other half. The X-Men were really big for me. Mutants. And the idea that there were mutants that were out there, who were different but exceptional and not

everybody could see that they were exceptional. They could just see that they were different, and that was scary for a lot of people.

And there's a book that I have over there. It was written by Howard Bloom. He's a sociologist. It's called *The Lucifer Principle*. It's about how we create enemies for ourselves, which was a really potent message for me because I don't want to have any enemies. I don't think that it's us and them. And there's another writer, a comic book writer, who came along years later, Grant Morrison, who put it in the perfect phrasing, which is:

We all, especially if you have a liberal heart, and I don't mean politically, I mean you will let things in, and if you grew up like that, it looks like the world is just being stamped out at the root. It looks like good things happen to bad people all the time and bad things happen to good people all the time and everyone seems so lost. And I think that it's because you hope for so much better for them, and in a way it's easy to say, "These are the people I blame." [Jenn's paraphrase]
And I grew up in a Republican town with a Republican dad, and I see how my dad got that way, and I don't blame him for it. And Morrison said, "We were all tricked. It's not a war. It's a rescue mission."

And I think that's one of the most potent concepts about how to deal with people that disagree with you. You can't believe that it's you versus them because then it will be. It's the narrative, and that's magic. When words become the reality, that's magic.

So, when your narrative makes you make someone who was not your enemy into your enemy or someone who could be your friend into your enemy . . .

Jacqui: So you're saying it's our personal orientation that creates enemies for ourselves, in a way.

Jenn: Oh, yeah.

Jacqui: Or how we read that person.

Jenn: Well, some people will be your enemy no matter what, and to a certain extent that's when that righteous indignation has a place. And another thing that I love that's media, not books—*Dr. Who*. I'm a massive *Dr. Who* fan. And the idea that you can have . . . I went through regeneration myself. I know what that's like.

I am never going to change in that I will always give people a chance. And if they don't want the chance, I will revoke the chance. And they will regret it for whatever reason. But I'm not going to hate them. And they're not going to become my enemy in my heart because of it.

I just think it's . . . the idea of *them* and *us*, there's nowhere for them to go. We can't just make *them* live on the moon and we get the planet. And not only that, but I come from these people, so I know that *them* and *us* are one family. It's not like we're separate types of people. My dad is *them* and I'm *us*, so what does that mean? I love my dad. He's wrong. He's really wrong. He's terribly wrong. And he is really self-indulgent in the information gathering end of it because he

is in an environment that encourages a set of beliefs as though it's a football team, and that's exactly what he believes. It doesn't matter what the other team says. Dallas sucks. You can't beat the Eagles, and Dallas sucks. And that's my dad's politics. That's a lot of people's politics. And is it immature and terrible? Yeah. Will telling them they're immature and terrible fix it? No. So show them something wonderful instead.

And then there's Terry Pratchett. He's my other favorite writer in the world. He writes about witches a lot. And I've always really loved the idea of witches. Because I felt like I was really into magic as a kid and fantasy books. This was in 1986, so it was way before Harry Potter. It was not cool. It was desperately, desperately uncool.

He wrote *The Discworld Series* along with other stuff. It's awesome. He's an incredible writer. Do you know Neil Gaiman? Neil Gaiman's another amazing British writer.

And there's this whole series called *The Wee Free Men* about this girl, Tiffany Aching, who grows up in a place where witches have been banned for years and years and there are zero witches and no one is allowed to be a witch and witches are killed on sight. And she, at nine years old, knows in her heart that she's supposed to be a witch. Which is kind of a potent . . .

Jacqui: It's your story.

Jenn: Well, it's how I always felt. And she has this race of rude, Scottish, three feet tall, magical, helping, blue *pictsies*. And there're a lot of things, and she has this mentor called Granny Weatherwax, and there's a lot of really amazing lessons [in these books] for young people that I will make sure I just bash my kids over the head with, and one of them is: Granny Weatherwax says that all evil happens when you start treating people, any people, like they're things. And that's a completely true statement. And if they already think you're a witch, then you might as well be a witch. Another true statement, I think. And witches don't have to wear black hats.

The idea that just because something is important to you doesn't mean it's important, but the idea that any issue, you're responsible for it. Any issue in the world, you're responsible for. Every one of them, all of them, because somebody has to be. And maybe you won't get to all of them. But people should think like that because if they did, we would be a lot better off. Integrity is a word that doesn't get brought up ever any more. It's like we forgot what it meant. And Terry Pratchett writes a lot about integrity.

Writers raised me. Writers were the people who taught me that anything is possible when the world completely told me that that was a lie. And the only reason that I made it was that I never stopped believing that they were right and that everyone else was wrong.

Jacqui: I hear you.

[Question reiterated]: How have writers and other people helped you? Were there any people? Like when you came to Seattle. Was there anybody that helped you?

Jenn: Actually a lot of buddies. I was lucky in that when I was in college I had this. It was funny because the core group identity was like stoner/ slacker, like under-achiever, chronic underachievers—really brilliant, funny people. They just weren't interested in attaining any kind of evidence that . . . that they went to college. They ended up moving out here with me . . . dudes from Virginia and New Orleans—low-income Southern-people-raised dudes. They were not only accepting but were absolutely the most amazing support I could have possibly had.

Jacqui: So, are you still in touch with those guys?

Jenn: Yeah. They were in my wedding. Both of them were like my bridesmen, and then my brother. One of them was my best man. Not that I don't love my brother, but Josh, he's more purposeful, you know.

Jacqui: So they kind of walked the walk with you as you went through . . .

Jenn: And were just endlessly supportive and I just knew had my back. Really they were . . . I can't say how important they were. Because I always thought that it was friends like that that I [would] lose over this stuff. I didn't end up losing any friends. My family was fine. My grandparents are wonky, but they're ninety-two and ninety-six, so, they don't understand what's going on [laughs]. If they don't understand what's going on when the TV is on, they're not going to understand this.

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

Jenn: It's almost just that I wish people were . . . it's not about my gender. I don't have feelings on this about my gender. It's almost I just wish that they would respond more appropriately to other people's genders.

I am really blessed in that I got a lot of cis-sexual privilege immediately upon transitioning and I've never had anybody treat me as other than female after my transition. Not one time and I've never had anybody point me out as a trans* person and mock me for being a trans* person, or realize I was a trans* person unless I told them or someone else said it, so in that way I have a lot of bizarrely rooted survivor's guilt. I have to watch a lot of people whose gender is just as valid as mine run into a lot of roadblocks, and I end up trying to defend them more than myself. I don't need any defense. I'm fine. I got lucky. I got the long end of the stick, so that's cool. I don't mean to sound vain.

Jacqui: No. No. So, most people wouldn't know, so do you tell people that you're transgender?

Jenn: Oh yeah. I'm not stealth. Some people know. Some people don't know. It depends on how poignant it is.

Jacqui: Like how relevant?

Jenn: Yeah, like there's people in Rachel's family that know and people in Rachel's family that don't know.

Do you know the joke like "How do you tell if someone's vegan?" à "They'll tell you." Like, I just don't want to be that, and I don't want that to be the impression people have of trans* people.

Jacqui: The first thing you say is, "Hi, I'm Jenn and I'm trans*."

Jenn: Let's make everything about being trans*. In a way, I think that people could fucking benefit if for five minutes everybody made everything about being trans* because then maybe we wouldn't have so much gratuitous violence against us, or as much oppression or as much discrimination on every single level of society against trans* people. But this is one of those things that the more you push, the more the pendulum pushes back, and so I never like to make it a big deal, but if it comes up, it comes up.

And I . . . I'm waiting for the day that it comes up when I hear someone being a dick about being trans* and I'm like, "Look, motherfucker, I swear, nice Jenn leaves the room, and I get to come in and talk to you about your feelings." I find that "Mom-voice" is extremely effective.

Jacqui: Mom-voice?

Jenn: Mom-voice. It's the best thing I ever got. When I got that, I thought, *Today, I'm a woman!* [Jenn uses the Mom-voice]: "I'm very disappointed that you think this is appropriate behavior to be bringing in here. I really thought we had set some better boundaries than this." You know that voice? It's terrifying. They remember. No matter how old they are.

Jacqui: At Ingersoll last week, I was in the social group, and one of the things that came up, one of the people in the group was trans*, and she said, somebody said to her, "You're the only trans* person I've ever met." And she said, "No. I'm not," and the person said, "Oh . . ." Right? And I think that . . . to me that was poignant.

8. What is gender?

Jenn: Gender is an experience, either one that you have of your own gender or that someone else has of the gender they perceive you to be. It's mostly decorated with social constructs. I've felt my own gender my whole life. It's funny . . . post transition I stopped thinking about it. I didn't have to think about what gender I was any more. I just knew what gender I was. We don't know why transsexualism happens. And in a way I think that's kind of an amazing thing to say out loud. We don't know why people like me exist, people like Finnbar exist. And that's why I think you aren't male or female. You are either appropriately gendered, which means gendered according to what you perceive your gender to be, or inappropriately gendered

which means gendered according to what *they* see your gender as, regardless of what you see your gender as, and often in direct opposition to it.

9. What have you learned about gender and gender expression?

Jenn: Everything! I've learned that to me it's like they weren't the answer, as much as they were the key to the real answer which was that it was about being yourself. In a way I feel bad for people that aren't trans*.

I watch my friends who are in their mid-20s and their early 30s that have no idea when their catharsis is going to happen, when they're going to know what their life is about, when they're going to understand why they didn't succeed more or why they have an emotional dependency issue, whatever . . .

And they might never figure it out, and if they do, it's going to be in awkward bits and pieces that have no cohesion because they're just glancing blows, but this was such a central theme that in a way it really caused me to reevaluate everything about my life and therefore life itself.

So, I think that gender is just one of those things that when you feel it, you feel it and when you don't, you don't.

Jacqui: It's a really hard question. You talked about "subjective" . . .

Jenn: Yeah, I have my version of my gender and there are people who would argue that I'm male because I have XY chromosomes or because I have male genitalia and I would argue that I'm not. And who is to say which of us is right?

And that creates a position. You just have to not care. When did that start to matter? Who is right about it? I am happy and I'm a good person, and I love my wife and she loves me and I have a pretty awesome life, and that's all I care about.

It's like the idea that, it's almost like . . . that's one of the things about magic: the symbol for the thing is the thing, like the Platonic Ideal is the thing.

It's almost absurd, almost completely absurd. They should act how they feel they should act, unless it's hurting someone else, and then they should fucking stop it. And I think that's the most amazing realization that anybody can have. That's the basis of all reality: If only we could stop giving a crap about what other people did unless it hurts somebody.

And the thing is, that people are like, "Well, it hurts my feelings." I don't know . . .

Jacqui: Like, "It upsets me to call you female."

Jenn: Yeah, well, it upsets me to not say, "You can go fuck yourself," is my response to that.

Jacqui: [laughs]

Jenn: [laughs] Like I said, I was raised by a strong woman. That's what upsets me. I don't give a shit. I just don't give a shit. I only give a shit when they're going to go and behave [badly] around people.

Jacqui: Mm hmm.

Jenn: I only give a shit when they're going to go and behave that way around other people who don't have the grounding that I have.

Jacqui: Yes, when they're in that tender place.

Jenn: You can't move me. That's the thing, in a way I was in a fantasy, but I was also raised by a devoutly Catholic man. I really liked all things about religion, about that feeling of assurance. And it's funny—it wasn't until I was a complete atheist that I really felt like, you can't move me. You can't throw anything at me that will make me move a single inch, and it drives people nuts. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing you could say to me. You can't tell me the sky's not blue. I'm not going to just believe you if you say that.

Jacqui: I am who I am. I know who I am.

Jenn: Yeah, and that's the best human experience that you can have, I think.

Jacqui: Yeah.

Jenn: And that's the one thing about people who try to stop others from experiencing their own gender, and that's why it's such a great sin. That's where religion becomes a sin. You hand someone a book and you say, "Here's all the answers, all of them, every one you'll ever need, and you better listen to all of them, and not only all of them, but what I say that they mean."

Jacqui: Yes, my interpretation . . .

Jenn: That is a sin. Ideological gluttony— go have a chocolate bar. Don't do *that*.

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

Jenn: I think most of it comes from men. I think most of it comes from the idea that homosexuality is bad, and it's kind of a double-edged sword, and I've thought about this a lot. Because men . . . and this is where I got my answer from—the Internet. There's one joke that shows up all the time and it's, "Surprise!" Inevitably "tranny" is the phrasing. The idea that someone you're into and making out with is going to expose male genitalia to you is the single most fixated point about trans-ness on the Internet. The joke happens over and over and over again, with endless iterations.

And the thing is, the hilarious thing is, it's really double edged because it's truly insulting to trans women because it's saying, "You're really a man." But the reality is that these men are not homosexual. It's a weird internal thing. It's more about the psychic ribbing of your buddies, like "You're a homo. You liked someone with a penis."

And it's sad for men in our culture that having a penis is all it takes to be a *man*. That's sad. Shouldn't it take more than that to be a man? I mean, anyone can have a penis [laughs]. We can make 'em these days, out of anything. It's just that reaction, especially backed by Western culture, especially backed by the Abrahamic religions, the idea that homosexuality is bad, and that being somehow "tricked into being a homosexual" by being attracted . . . and the reality is, "you were attracted to the things you saw as female." So it's not even a homosexual impulse. It's a completely heterosexual impulse.

It's the mislabeling of the genitalia of being exclusively male that caused this weird turnaround, where they're like, "so that's a dude." And that's even the phrase they use, "so that's a dude." And it's like, no, that's not a dude, and you're not homosexual for having that attraction. And so it manages to betray everyone involved in the joke, the people telling it, the people it's about. At least it's an equal-opportunity hate joke [laughs].

It's insulting to everyone involved, and it's the most prominent conversation on the Internet that isn't made by Trans* people. It happens so often that Trans* people make a concerted effort to point out how wrong it is, and then there's a whole bunch of victim-blaming about how "they always come around and ruin things, and they can't take a joke?" Then inevitably trans* people say, "But what about all this violence? What about this discrimination?" And then it just devolves into name-calling.

So in a way people react badly because they are running a program. Not every culture reacted badly. I grew up being told I was part Native American. apparently Native American people had no real problem with homosexuality or transsexuality. It had a place in the society, like an honored place in society. A lot of people did.

And in a way it's because I know what it's like to see from the eyes of someone living life as a man, whether I was a man or not, I was living life as a man, and also as a woman. That's a huge amount of information. It's more information than anybody else gets.

How could we not be shamans? How could I not believe in magic?

Jacqui: So what's the fear?

Jenn: I think the fear, honestly, is that a father figure, or group of father figures originally put this conflict in your head that homosexuality is faggy and queer and lame, and that any relation, or it's even like . . . If anybody even says kind things to another man ten or fifteen years ago, it was "faggy." Any femininity . . . femininity becomes poison to the super-macho society.

Jacqui: So Trans* women, then?

Jenn: I think it's just women, actually. I think it's any femininity where there should be masculinity looks like poison in this incredibly patriarchal society. And I didn't believe that before my transition. I was super liberal, and I still didn't believe that, and then I transitioned and I saw that, no, no, no, that's really true.

I think we've been taught that malehood is superior, like even the way we insult each other, like "Go suck a dick." Well, some people like sucking dicks. That's not an insult. Like some people have no problem with that. Why is it insulting? Because it's feminine. It's a female thing to do, and that's even more pigeonholing because it's female. It's all about these ideas . . . Terry Pratchett, the best quote ever from the writer I love: "I would rather be a rising ape than a falling angel."

The idea that there are standards by which humanity is supposed to live up to that is more than just: Be a decent human being. Love people. Don't be a dickhead. I wouldn't have made the best god.

It's more than those. It's about keeping you in a box so that they can . . . because the box is easier to drag around.

Jacqui: So that makes sense. Your explanation makes sense for trans women. What about people feeling uncomfortable, like plenty of people are uncomfortable with Finnbar?

Jenn: I think in a way it's partly because Finnbar is in the middle of his transition. There's this double-edged sword. You're going to see this. And this is not me saying that anybody has it easier. It's both ways. Trans women have it harder socially and trans men have it harder surgically. And that's it. It's like you can put testosterone in anybody and give him five or six years and your son will look like everyone else's son. You cannot do that in reverse. You cannot give any trans woman five or six years of hormones and have her look like a cis woman. It happens, but testosterone is the next step in the development period. It's the addition. You can't easily make it go away once it's in there.

I know it's a fact that there's much more violence against trans women. You're lucky he's a trans man. You're really lucky. And he's lucky, and I hope he sees that. He's just not going to have to be the center of the controversy unless he wants to be. But trans women don't have that choice most of the time. Any room we go into, or any time we mention we're trans*, everyone has opinions about it. And you don't even have to mention it most of the time.

I have to. Like I said, I have it really easy. But a lot of women that I know that are dear to my heart, they are sisters that I didn't have and I would have given anything if they didn't have to be the center of a controversy that they didn't have a choice about. I mean, it's "express yourself or don't express yourself" but that's a shitty choice.

Jacqui: So, most intolerance is toward . . .

Jenn: Almost all of it I think, like 90% is all towards trans women, much of it towards trans women of color, and it's almost all under the gay panic response.

Jacqui: And now that you've explained that, it makes sense.

Jenn: And the thing is that trans men have it hard in relationships, sometimes, like anybody with genitalia that differs, like men with micro-penises have it hard in relationships.

The female [surgery] is just way more advanced. And I think more of that was just because there was such a . . . Men never talked about their penises or what was wrong with their penises and so surgical culture didn't build a repair-the-penis thing. But women's genitalia not being what's expected of it is out of the question, and so all of these . . . I mean, transsexual surgery was pioneered by cis people doing corrective surgery on cis people. There's a lot more surgically going on in that area for women than there is for men.

Part of transitioning was . . . men just . . . fish wouldn't have a word for water because they're completely covered in it, and men don't understand privilege. When I moved across the barrier, I was like, *Wow, this is a very different world*. Just like my personal space was invaded way more often, especially by men.

Jacqui: Men touching you?

Jenn: Yeah, I was waiting tables at a Mexican restaurant when I first transitioned, and I waited tables for salsa night and I was groped every single time and I . . .

Jacqui: Did you complain?

Jenn: No, because I would have been fired.

Jacqui: That's outrageous.

Jenn: Well, I told them to stop it. But "Don't have a problem" was the manager's advice. I was the only waitress in the place, so . . .

Jacqui: It gives you a unique perspective, to have . . .

Jenn: And the hilarious thing is, I was teaching in the afternoons as a male, presenting completely as male. This was after I had already transitioned full time for a while. Because Sylvan Learning Center had a job opening and I really needed the money and I wanted to teach and so I was a teaching assistant at Sylvan Learning Center and I would put on my button-up shirt and pull my hair back like a hippie and put on my baggie slacks and my big watch, and I talked in this deep voice [deepens her voice] and I'd talk like this for a few hours, and I had a good time with the kids.

Jacqui: How bizarre for you!

Jenn: And so I did that, and then at night I was a female. It was how I survived. My parents are middle class and didn't like, chuck a bunch of money at me so that I could transition. My degree

is in theater, and an “unclaimed minor” in English, like I had the credits but I didn’t file for it, so I don’t even have that.

When I started my hormones I ended up having it insinuated that it would be a terrible idea to transition on the job at Sylvan Learning Center . . . in a state where that is illegal, but where was I going to afford a lawyer, especially if I just lost one of my jobs?

That was seven years ago. That’s the crazy thing about Seattle. I have so much hope for this place, because in seven years it has changed as though it was twenty. And if that can happen, it can happen again.

And Ingersoll, as much as it has its flaws . . .

Jacqui: Every organization has flaws.

Jenn: Yeah, it totally does. In a way it’s just that it does what it does, and there just needs to be more. There need to be more organizations. But in a city where you have the world’s oldest trans* organization, no one else can get grant money.

Jacqui: So there is a focus . . .

Jenn: I don’t know if it’s the focus, but now Danielle is there, and she’s amazing at getting grants, but they [Ingersoll] are such a visible part of our community for so long, that to start a new up-and-coming trans* organization in Seattle, which has a bad history . . .

Because Verbena, which was a trans* organization that Danielle worked for—the person who ran it embezzled all their money, and the place got shut down. So there’s this past, and that person I would love to put in a headlock and never let out. I just can’t imagine . . .they just can’t know the damage they did to people.

Jacqui: You do voice coaching?

Jenn: Yeah. I was always a mimic, and part of that was growing up with a singer of a grandfather, and when I was in college, right after I . . . This was in between when I came out to my Mom the first time and when I came out full time and moved to Seattle—I would [do a lot of driving [for work], four and a half hours each way.

In the car I would just practice and practice and practice, and record on my phone, and God bless phones having a recording device in them—not the kind they track you with [laughs]. And I would just record it over and over again until I would hear things, what hurt and what didn’t hurt, and I would just guzzle water the whole time . . .

Jacqui: It seems when you’re speaking now . . .

Jenn: I don’t have to do anything. And that’s the thing, once I found it, there’s no effort involved in my voice. If I’m talking in my sleep at three in the morning I talk like that. It’s an effort now to push it back down. Because voice is just muscles and so it habituates to wherever you put it. And it builds whatever new muscles around it. And so I don’t have to do anything to

keep my voice here. I mean, I have froggy mornings, if I'm sick, but at no point does my voice drop below the male/female sound barrier, unless I intend it to. And that's the beauty of having a technique.

That's what I try and teach people and it's difficult because I wasn't taught clinically and so I've had to figure out how to tell people all this stuff, and I've had varying amounts of success, but I hope it's getting better.

And I wish that I could just, like, it's the one superpower . . . But I would just give it to everyone if I could. The only reason I charge for it is, A: people wouldn't believe that it's worth anything if I didn't charge for it, and B: it's a huge amount of time. But at the same I time I feel like I would give it away for free, if I really could.

Jacqui: So could you be part of the grant program?

Jenn: And I guess this is where I start to get worried about stuff. It's like, yeah, I'd love that, except I'm not certified in any fashion except that I can do it. I have zero credentials in that department and that's very big . . . it's all about the symbol of the thing and not about the thing. It's all about what the thing is called and not what the thing actually does . . .

11. How do people respond to you?

Jenn: I don't know if you've ever played *Dungeons and Dragons* before, but in *D & D*, the basic characters, they're stacked [with attributes] like intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, strength, and charisma. You roll a die, it's a level, and it's like, somewhere between usually ten and twenty. And the joke in anything in *D & D*—if you use a twenty-sided die, and if you roll a twenty, it's perfect. It's called a “nat 20.” It's the best of the best.

And my friend came to me and she said, “You know what your problem is? You're a “natural 20” in charisma.” And it's like, okay, I don't see it, but other people seem to respond to it. I get great reactions from people.

I think I come off as pretty intimidating to people a lot of the time, which is pretty unintentional because I never was. I was a dork my whole life. I don't understand how that happened.

I have no problem dealing with any people at all, except for idiots. I just try and dance circles around them until they spin themselves to sleep.

Jacqui: And you're not being misgendered by them?

Jenn: Never. I've never been misgendered. Not one time, post-transition.

Jacqui: And that's what this question mostly comes from . . .

Jenn: Oh, it's in regards to gender. No, I've never had that . . . No, and not only that, but being the trans woman I am is a gift because I get to be the first trans woman that people meet a lot of the time. I have shaped the way that people think about trans* people from then on, and I always try and make sure that it's in a positive direction and . . .

Jacqui: So, you're a pioneer in a way.

Jenn: I think any Trans* person right now is. It's the last bastion of prejudice for a thinking person and that's hilarious. And it's so obvious, that's the crazy thing. If you just take a step back and think about it, in any terms other than the ones we've been using for the last hundred dark-ages years, it's so obvious. Why even fight it?

Jacqui: Like, "What's your problem, bud?"

Jenn: Exactly. Yeah. And the thing is, I was expecting way more resistance. I saw myself, when I looked in the mirror, I still saw my face as male for a really long time, so I couldn't understand how people didn't see that. In a way, that was an amazing piece of insight.

Because I realized that all Trans* people see the most horrible things in themselves, every time. And Finnbar is probably going to have this, and I'm sad for him and I'm sad for you to have to watch it. He's going to look in the mirror and he's going to see things he doesn't like. He's transitioning young, so he won't have to see them for long, but he'll see them even when they're gone. He's going to be a handsome dude. He's going to be fine.

Jacqui: And his voice . . .

Jenn: Yeah. His voice was super low. I love watching people transition and having it be public. That means we're winning. And we're winning for them. Because no one is going to have a family where there isn't a Trans* person or a gay person. No one. Your grandkids or your great grandkids or their kids or the people they fall in love with are going to be Trans* or gay, and there's not a goddamn thing you can do about it.

If we win, you win. You win, no one wins. So, we have to win. It's happening more and more.

Jacqui: And as people come out . . . we know so many gay people who ten years ago weren't out, and now they are.

Jenn: It's literally every best friend I've had, except my first, every single one of them has come out of the closet. We never talked about this stuff. We never even hinted, as kids. And not only that, some of them were really, really straight, like adamantly straight, and are now flaming queers, of whatever stripe they choose. And it's awesome. It's much better. It would have been better if we'd just been honest with each other then, but I don't think we could have.

Jacqui: But we are doing better.

Jenn: Yeah.

12. How do you wish people would respond to you? And because you aren't getting misgendered, you can answer this for the Trans* world.

Jenn: I wish that empathy had more value in our culture. I wish they could give people the benefit of the doubt. Everyone is having a hard time. It's one thing that Vonnegut talked about—in the American culture, no one sees themselves as poor. They're all just momentarily displaced wealthy people. And to them poor people are disgusting.

[Some of my ancestors are] Scottish. That's the entire thing we have. That's all we have: "Yes, we're poor. We live on rocks, but we're tough and we're Scottish, and we love it." We don't have that in this country. There's a lot of victim-blaming. In ways, the entire conservative mindset is that "it's already fair enough." And anybody who asks for any kind of consideration is just gaming the system. I wish that was over. I'm tired of it. It doesn't give anybody the benefit of the doubt. It creates the very thing it pretends to despise. It's a horrendous misappropriation of both emotions and resources. I just wish people had more empathy. [It's about] more than just Trans* stuff.

Trans* stuff to me is not different from any other stuff. It's not Trans* stuff and then the other issues of our society. I often talk about how becoming a Trans* person is insanely relevatory because you become this microcosm of our society, especially a trans woman because you were hyper-masculinized.

Most trans women that I know spent time trying to be hyper-masculinized. These dudes that aren't even Trans*, just regular dudes, and Finnbar is going to have to watch this, too. They're going to think they should be hyper-masculinized. And that's not *maleness*.

My grandfather killed Nazis. He was a gunner on a B-52 flying fortress and was an absolute badass his whole life and he was also soft and he was kind and he was sweet, and he was a man. And it had nothing to do with being tough or rough or misogynistic. And I see that happening in young men, and in Trans* men, too, which is really scary.

It just seems that we need to re-evaluate all kinds of things with gender being just one of them.

Jacqui: Have you read *Trans Warriors*?

Jenn: No.

Jacqui: Leslie Feinburg. It's a good book—it's by a trans man who is in a relationship with a woman who is really cool, and has written some good stuff, too. Leslie is Jewish, and at one point . . . he's looking at oppression . . .

Jenn: Well, God bless Reformed Judaism. It's the one branch of Abrahamic religion that has seen so much oppression and responded to it internally by building structures that actively oppose oppression.

Jacqui: Good to know.

Jenn: They're not always successful, but there is a mantra in Reformed Jewish community that social justice is important. And that doesn't exist in fundamentalist Christianity.

Jacqui: Right. Fundamentalist anything. Leslie talks about oppression and the interconnection of economics, race, gender, and sexual preference issues. It's a very interesting book.

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

Jenn: The hardest thing that comes out immediately was in dealing with my mom, who was so lost when I first came out to her and so afraid of what it meant for me, what it meant for her, what it meant for our family. She had so little information on Trans* people and so little contact with any of the concepts of their lives that she only saw the worst.

And years later I got it. You think you know your kids and you think that you're so close, and you think you really understand them. I think that all parents have, naturally, a period of their lives in which their children are extensions of themselves and then there's a period in which you realize that they're not.

And it was really hard because my brother and my dad are pragmatists. Well, my dad's kind of an idiot about where he gets his information, but when he has the information, he's very pragmatic about it. He's not an emotional dude. And they would have been fine if she hadn't been so hurt by the whole thing; I think they would have been okay.

And so hurting her, and having to hurt her and having to stand up to her in the way they always taught me to stand up to people who are acting like that. They never said, even if it's them; I had to extrapolate that no one gets different rules.

It was my grandfather that taught me that. Everyone gets the same rules. You treat every single person exactly the same. No one gets special treatment except for the person that you love. And that one person gets a softer you, no matter what, until the end of time. And those were the rules. But when it came to defending myself and my gender and my life, I had to get very vehement. And I got very upset.

Jacqui: How old were you?

Jenn: Twenty-five. And I hadn't really challenged . . . I'd always been sort of the "disappointing kid" to my parents, but at that moment I really thought I had solidified my status. And now they don't feel that way at all and neither do I, after years of fixing it.

Jacqui: So your mom's okay?

Jenn: Yeah, now we're fine. It's just that my mom was really attached to the idea that she had *sons*—two Irish boys. She had a future for me she'd already written. Whether she meant to or not, whether she did it on purpose or not. You just hope for your kids. You have to hope. It's

what keeps you going. It's what keeps you working for them when they drive you nuts. I understand that. I really do, and I'm going to be a great mom.

I'm going to love being a mom. And part of this is that I had a great mom who tried really hard and had stuff hit her that she was not ready for. And that can happen, and she still tries really hard.

And still to this day, she has never called me her daughter. She said I was beautiful at my wedding, so that was really nice, but she wouldn't use the word *daughter*.

I don't think they talk about me, in fact I know that they don't discuss me with their friends or people that I used to know. I don't think it's an embarrassment so much as that they're such private people, they just don't want to have that conversation at all, and that they honestly don't know how to have that conversation.

But, it sucks. I have to make an effort to not feel like it's because I'm not good enough. That is hard to have to deal with. The ridiculous thing is that my mom was wrong about everything she thought. She thought I was going to have people hate me and mistreat me and fire me. And I did have some shitty stuff happen, but it wasn't as bad as what she thought would happen.

Let's just admit that your twenties and thirties are when you get all your ideas of the world, and you think because they happen over such a large percentage of your life when you're so conscious and so aware that that's the way the world is.

And so my mom looked at how Trans* people were painted in the '70s and '80s, (which were the twenties and the thirties for her), and that was the WORST possible time, the WORST possible time! [Think about it:] the extremism of the '70s, and then the extreme turn to the right in the '80s.

I love the '60s. I listened to "I Almost Cut My Hair" about a million times. That's an incredible song for me. It feels good to live up to the kind of person you're supposed to be. Even though my grandparents would have been confused, I think that they would be very proud of the person I am now.

Jacqui: It must feel good to know that.

Jenn: Yeah, and I've known it for years. And I know that they love me. I know that my mom loves me. I just . . . my mom and my dad both said terrible things to me and I reacted as though they were not my parents because that was the only way that I could make it.

I told my mom, "Fuck you." And my dad came in and yelled at me one night that I was a narcissist and that he would call me a blue elephant if he thought it would make me happy, but if I'm a woman, then it might as well be that the rain will be going up tomorrow for how unlikely that was, and he was yelling. And I realized then that he always yelled at me.

And in front of my mom and my brother, I stood up and I said to him, “If you ever talk to me like that again, I will take you outside and I will beat your ass,” and he never talked to me like that again.

And it was like, “No, not even you.” I don’t care if you made me. I don’t care if you raised me. I don’t care if you worked all of your life. You don’t own me. You don’t get to tell me what kind of person I get to be, or what kind of life I get to lead. NO. That’s over the line, and you don’t get to come over the line. No one gets to come over the line.

And in a way, that was the hardest thing I ever did. I regret all of the things that I had to say. I regret having to be that hard with my family. In a way it distanced them from the person that I used to be even more ‘cause how could I say these things? “In self-defense” is the answer, but at the time, they didn’t see it that way. And I think it was very hard to be that distant.

And they also demanded that I not talk to the rest of my family because my mom didn’t want to have to explain it. I was raised with eighteen first cousins. My mom is one of eight. And I have all my aunts and uncles and I wasn’t allowed to talk to *anybody*, or my grandparents, for five years, while my parents dealt with this.

My family—I love my family. It’s weird to be the deviation from the norm. It’s hard. Hard to be the first. There’re no other gay people in my whole family. It was intimidating.

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

Jenn: *This isn’t a war. It’s a rescue mission.* The hardest thing about being trans* is my hating the world for it.

Jacqui: For how they treat you?

Jenn: Yes. And how they treat everyone who is like me. We’re not the first people to have had that experience, for sure. But to have that happen to you—I have a lot of anger issues. It would be really easy to blame a lot of people and hate them. I’m not going to let it happen because it seems like a giant bummer to be a person who just hates all the time. And I’d rather believe that part of them is a child that could have played right next to me and [could have] been my friend, no matter what goofy things they’ve come to believe over the years, the terrible things they’ve decided to do. That’s not going to make me hate them.

That was the biggest thing for me. *It’s not a war. It’s a rescue mission.* That’s the motto of my life. I tell people that all the time, remind them, remind myself.

Jacqui: So, the rescue mission is . . .

Jenn: Those people that disagree with you, you’re not fighting them. You’re trying to save them.

Jacqui: Okay, so it’s *them* you’re trying to save.

Jenn: Yeah.

Jacqui: Not just yourself and others . . .

Jenn: No, we're the force. We're the people who are . . . They would say it's a war, between us and them, and I say, "No, it's a rescue mission. We're just trying to get you guys out of here alive. You don't even know what you're doing to yourselves or your children or your children's children."

Jacqui: Okay. I get it. And what we're doing here, it's part of that rescue mission.

Jenn: Yeah. I agree. And a lot of stuff we've talked about. Another one of these ideas that this guy Grant Morrison . . . He didn't really come up with this idea, he just expressed it, where his character is in a big tent in Southeast Asia somewhere, and they're doing a shadow-show for the kids. And the guy says, "There's a secret. There's this guy, the *dhalang*, the puppeteer. Well, it's more than that. The *dhalang* is just one man, but he makes you believe that there are two armies fighting each other, Good and Evil. But there are no armies. There's only the *dhalang*. And I thought that this was an amazing statement about reality: There is no opposing army. There's just the *dhalang*."

15. What helps you get through the tough times?

Jenn: I'm the witch, in a great way. In a way where I thought about it and that's not a scary thing.

The reason people burned witches is because the witches had truths they didn't want to hear and there were people that had invested time and energy in building these hierarchical structures that passed information directly down as opposed to one to one and with communities . . . and the old ladies. It's what the old ladies did.

Jacqui: They challenged the system.

Jenn: Well they just kept people honest, in a way. There're a lot of old ladies' sayings that are just... like "It won't heal if you pick at it." That's wise shit, if you stop thinking about it as just an adage.

I want to be a witch. I want to be that. There's also a connection of things that that story told itself about how Terry Pratchett said, [Jenn's synopsis] "a witch is someone who tells the land who it is, and the land tells them right back who they are."

I think that Seattle is like that and I feel like that when I'm here. I get to decide what this place is from now on.

There are great projects [that need to be done], like being the head of a nonprofit. That's always wonderful. But being the person that always picks up when someone needs help, that's a different thing, and you don't get a certificate for that. And that's a much bigger job, in my mind. So that's what I'm trying . . .

Jacqui: Follow through . . .

Jenn: Yeah. I'm just trusting what I know. I hope I don't sound like I'm just blowing smoke up your ass about my greatness. [Laughs] I want to be that. I hope I am that. I'm excited about being an old lady. I'm really stoked about it. It's going to be awesome. I'm going to have so much fun.

Jacqui: Have you read that poem about "When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple . . ."

Jenn: My grandmother's favorite poem.

16. A: Is there anything that you'd like to say to gender-variant, or people who wonder if they're gender variant and B: Is there anything thing you'd like to say to everyone?

Jenn: I would say, when it comes to people who are gender variant, "Don't believe in false binaries." I knew I felt feminine and I felt female, but I didn't have a goal, like *I'm going to get this surgery. I'm going to do all these things. I'm going to become female.* It was, *I'm going to do the things that I need to feel okay, and I'm going to do them as I need them.*

Give yourself the permission, at any moment, to be *anybody*, to be any person that has ever been or will ever be any version of yourself. Because when you finally give yourself that permission to be *anybody*, you know exactly who you really are.

When you don't have the restrictions of "I can't be this, I can't be that," it just becomes really obvious. People are like, "How'd you get your voice?"

And I always say, "I didn't pick it." When I realized I could sound like anybody, I knew exactly which voice was my real voice. It just was the one that was me, you know. And it is. I could have done a much more feminine voice. [In a Valley Girl voice]: "I totally entertain my friends, and pretend I'm some Valley Girl from San Diego . . . Oh my god, and I spend all this time on Facebook . . ."

I didn't want to be that chick. I could have been that chick. And I also . . . I don't want to be Christopher Walken. I can sound like him. It doesn't mean I want to be him.

All the options were open. I mean, really open. Really, really open. Good and bad. And when that happened and I wasn't trying to judge it, it was so clear what person I was. It had nothing to do with an exterior binary. I happened to fit into one visually, for most people, and that's fine, because it makes it easy, but it wasn't necessary and it wasn't the goal.

Jacqui: And is there anything you'd like to say to . . .

Jenn: Everyone else do the same thing, but not with gender. You should just let yourself, at any point in your life, no matter what you've been before, take moments when you're allowed to be any version of you, any human being, any kind of human being. Just grab it by the horns and steer it. Because if you don't do it, someone else is going to drive it for you.

But until you let yourself be anybody, you're not. You've got to let yourself hit bottom, in a way. I think hitting bottom just means having nothing to hang onto. It doesn't mean losing everything. It means not acting reactively. Like you're desperate.

Just let yourself go. You'll find where you ground out. And everyone should do that more often, should reinvent ourselves all the time. It's hard, and you judge yourself, and you judge yourself because you think everyone else is judging you. And more often than not they're so caught up in their own shit that they're not paying any attention to you, so you really shouldn't worry about it.

17. What is unique about you?

Jenn: Not a lot. I don't think anything about me is something that I have that no one else has. I think the only unique thing would be the combination. Nothing is more unique about me than is unique about any other person.

Jacqui: So, how about what is special about you? What do you celebrate about yourself?

Jenn: That's a really hard question. I have control of my narrative [laughs]. I don't know. I'm me. No one else is me. I can't think of a quantitative or qualitative feature. I would say that in this day and age, I am in the minority of people in my generation that think of things as much as I do. I didn't know that until I was 25 or 26. I just thought everyone thought about stuff this much. I didn't think that I was the only one.

Jacqui: That's what I was talking about . . .

Jenn: I think that I just think that I always . . . metacognition. That's what I would say is unique—it's not that it's unique, it's just that I'm part of a subset of people who engage in it as a process, the ability to think about how you think about things. It's not taught and it's not endorsed by any major anybody, and only some people do it.

It's a self-selected group, and it's always been a self-selected group, and it probably always will be a self-selected group. But if we don't start doing it a little more often, we're going to have a problem, because the consequences as we escalate, in both the impact we have on each other and the number of us in the world, can get nasty.

We have to start thinking about what we think about things. So that's probably it.

Jacqui: And I guess when I asked the question . . . For me, that's one thing I celebrate about you.

Jenn: I just don't think I'm unique in having it. I think that . . . I know a lot of people with it, and I know that anybody . . . it's funny, you only have to have one conversation with some people to get them to realize it's a thing, and then they have it the rest of their life. It's just hard to . . . Coca Cola is easily packaged. This is not. It doesn't sell well.

Jacqui: Huh. Imagine if we actually . . . that's one thing in *Summerhill* [by A.S. Neill]—the whole thing of not shutting down. By not telling kids what they're supposed to learn . . .

Jenn: The whole “unschooling” process . . . Public school, and private school is equally horrifying . . . just that. It's not unique, it's just rare.

The crowd that's going to go and see your stuff is the crowd that already does this. Seattle has more of this than other places have. It's not unique. It's a rarity more so because it has specifically been oppressed as a behavior. In a way a lot of our culture says, “Don't think about things too much. Don't think about what you think about. Just think it, or just do it.”

Jacqui: Or, “Here's what you should think.”

Jenn: Yeah. That's what it really is: “Here's what you should think.” And it makes people like us . . . people who don't follow the dogma think that people like us want to be revolutionaries and we're more naïve as to the real nature of the world, and we just don't want to face how it really is, and that's the thing, you can convince yourself from either stance.

18. Any favorite movies?

Jenn: *The Adventures of Baron von Münchhausen* by Terry Gilliam, which is based on a German folktale which is also awesome. And *The Neverending Story*. Like thoughtful, deep, crazy kids movies.

I really like *The Life Aquatic*. I like it because it's about a guy who literally thinks his life is over and finds through getting some things and losing some things that his life is not over. And he does redefine every time he does anything, and he can always change the kind of person that he's been.

I love that movie. It's beautifully written and beautifully shot. And it almost forces people to reevaluate how they think about their life when they watch it. And I don't think that people know that that's what's happening. I think it's Wes Anderson's best movie, and I think it's his most critically acclaimed. Bill Murray is so good.

Jacqui: I have a question that's not about a movie, but if you think about a movie, let me know. You said that in a way this project is preaching to the choir.

Jenn: I just think that anything you do . . . The reality is that we live in a society with structures like FOX News. The point of FOX News isn't to win over people, it's to make sure that the people that they've already won don't question anything that they're being told.

That pattern—that piece of big dark magic that someone did—it's in a lot of stuff. It's in a lot of our organizations, and to a certain extent it just means that those people right now are not going to question things. And in a way, it's okay because the best thing we can do now is that the people that will question and think about it do need to celebrate it and do need to express it. Because we can build on it. We can extrapolate further concepts on it. We can understand more about ourselves through it and more about other people through it, and that does make us more valuable tools when it comes to this rescue mission.

Jacqui: Can you think of a way that it can gently move beyond the choir?

Jenn: I think the only way—it's weird because I actually think the way to people right now is to get young people and to use comedy, which is not good for paintings, but—I think young people respond to wit. They naturally do. And wit is often about making people uncomfortable and making revelations that they didn't . . . like, “Surprise!” And we laugh because we're tickled. Comedy that has this many ideas in it is rare, has happened, but has not happened with this inclusion of these concepts: gender . . . Bill Hicks did it. George Carlin did it. People have done this. That's what people are going to respond to next. And it's going to be someone who is really different than anybody else they've been listening to. It's not Dane Cook, the most bland, over-processed. Not interesting, not deep, not esoteric. People want that, the depth. People crave it. The more that we swing toward the edge of people being told that they shouldn't have that, the more people crave it.

Jacqui: So Vonnegut said you can't understand yourself if you can't laugh at yourself?

Jenn: I don't know who said it, but it was certainly in his writing.

Jacqui: And you can't understand the world if you can't laugh at it.

Jenn: Yeah, that's in a lot of his stuff, that concept, Cat's Cradle, is super serious. It's the end of the world and this spiritual savior of mankind is the silliest person he could create, Bokkonon, who thinks you can understand people by pressing the bottoms of your feet against the bottoms of their feet. But his little weird adages are dead on when it comes to understanding humanity. Silly is wonderful because you can't be evil.

Jacqui: Yeah, that reminds me of a story about this guy who got an audience with the Dalai Lama. And the Dalai Lama just stands there and looks at him and then pokes him in the belly button.

Jenn: Mm hmm. He tried to get there first, like, “Ha, got you!”

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

Jenn: Most of them are modern. I love, well, my favorite of all time is not modern at all, and it's actually two different songs that are sung in the same style, and one of them is called *Tom of Bedlam* and the other is called *Bedlam Boys*. They are sort of . . . I have to play them. I don't even know how to describe them. They're often badly sung at Renaissance Faires. But they're great, and *Mad Maudlin* is like, if I was to name my story, I would call it Mad Maudlin. I should really play that for you.

I like *Heartbeats* by The Knife, which is a really awesome sort of edgy, weird, Swedish, electropop band, but *Heartbeats* is a beautiful song. They managed to write this really beautiful, simple song. I think it's the most perfect song. And my third favorite would be *Don't Let It Bring You Down*, by Neil Young. Actually that's my first favorite. *Don't Let It Bring You Down* is my favorite song of all time.

20. What do you wish I had asked you, and what have I left out?

Jenn: You were pretty thorough. [Laughs] Along with "What would you change?" I would say "What do you hope for the community and the future?" And I would also want to say . . . I would like to know people's answer—I don't know if you want to ask it—I would like to know people's answer to "What do you think the world's responsibility is to people who are gender variant? And what do you think is the responsibility of gender-variant people to the world?" I think that is a really potent question.

I think we used to be . . . If we look at Cybele, who is an ancient Roman goddess. Her Cybeline were mostly what we would today call trans women. The oracle at Delphi was a cybeline. That's not talked about. Historians say eunuchs and not trans women because they didn't have [a word for] trans women.

So there were powerful people in the ancient world who were gender variant, and I don't think it's what we deserve or something; I think that it's to demonstrate our value to other people. I think that the Cybeline are still around.

It's just we don't have . . . We don't know who *Magna Mater* is any more. We don't know who this Great Mother is, when she calls us; or Great Father, for trans men; Odin, the classic, awesome figure, the badass, the trickster, the one who could have all the women, who knows the name for all the gods. *Magna Mater*, Odin. They're just symbols. They're just ideas. They're sort of the Platonic solids for these grand arching human behaviors. I don't think they live somewhere.

And at the same time, they're a name for a big part of us, and we don't have a name for that part any more. And I think it's a two-way street when it comes to people like us and people who aren't like us. Our experience is valuable to go both ways. We need to know what it's like to not be us as much as they need to know what it's like to be us.

Jacqui: I'm also hearing . . . we're not just a bunch of weirdo, oddball, hurt individuals who need you to help us.

Jenn: No, and not only that, but we're not just individuals. We are all part of this massive interconnected net of human behavior, that every piece . . . Dr. Who, I love Dr. Who, and something he said, "In nine hundred years of time and space, I've never met anyone who wasn't important."

And these are the things that I find, and I'm like *YES! That jives with me. I can dig that. And that's how I feel about everybody*, in the way that we are not the only people who have been relegated to dust in history because we weren't shiny enough for their liking. It happened again and again and again.

When we stop fighting these little individual battles, we start fighting the one big problem.

Jacqui: It's not just "not shiny enough." It's: "You scare the shit out of me."

Jenn: "What's the best thing about being trans*?" should be another one of your questions. Because I think it's awesome to go into a bar full of straight men and to be the scariest thing in the room. I think it's awesome. I think it's awesome to know that I could get hit on and if the guy's an asshole, turn to him and like [deep voice] "You're such a dork, go away!" Totally blow his mind. Ruin his entire night, freak him out completely, just blow him away. The more they hate us and dislike us and don't understand us, the more mysterious and powerful we become.

Jacqui: Yes.

Jenn: The symbol of us is terrifying, and it's only terrifying because of what other questions it begs about, what is and what isn't, that they think they're so solid on, because they've been told what is and what isn't.

Jacqui: That's what I think it is. I think it's the ground. You don't know where your ground is.

Jenn: Because everyone forgets you have to make your own ground. They keep trying to borrow each others' ground. You can't do that. You can't have one big ground you all stand on. You've got to have your own damn ground. Integrity. The last little inch.

Nobody can take it. Nobody talks about it. I don't even remember the last time I heard the word. I can't remember a TV show or a movie. Integrity.

Jacqui: We talk about it at home.

Jenn: Well, not everybody does, but they should. Our culture doesn't. Culture can do things, but it can also really hold people back. You know Terrance McKenna? That's a great hero of mine, an ethnobotanist—how people use plants around the world.

Jacqui: What kind of botanist?

Jenn: An ethnobotanist, specifically in psychotropics. If your kids start smoking pot, don't stop them. It won't kill them. And make sure he's over eighteen when he starts.

Drugs saved my life. I would not have been the same without them. I also wouldn't have understood why I loved '60s' music so much if I hadn't been so high. I think part of it is . . . (psychotropics—I'm not talking about cocaine or anything like that) . . . mushrooms and weed, they force you to not give a shit about the things that are not important, to a certain extent. You cannot care. And paranoia with pot would not exist if it was not illegal. I can't think of a damn time that I was paranoid about bud when it wasn't about *someone's going to come and catch me with this bud*.

I was such an uptight kid and I was so terrified of everything and I was so terrified of myself and that wall was so big and so tall. God bless Mary Jane. I would not have gotten over it without her. I think it's an amazing, blessed thing. And I think it's shat on. And I think it's another thing that's totally misused in our society. It's completely misunderstood. Alcohol should be illegal. Pot—everyone who wants to should be smoking pot.

People would be so calm. Every restaurant would be doing well. Do you have any idea how many flavors of potato chips there would be?

Jacqui: I love potato chips.

Jenn: Did you grow up in the Northeast?

Jacqui: I was born in Illinois . . .

Jenn: People are like, "Pot's so powerful now!" Yeah, but you don't smoke five joints of it. You smoke one little bowl. Less plant matter, more psychotropic substance. Less bad stuff and more good stuff.