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Newsgroups: alt.support.srs
Date: 03 Aug 2002 20:52:19 GMT
References: <osV29.3950\$Bb6.1194@nwrddc01.gnilink.net>
Organization: AOL http://www.aol.com
Subject: Stealth
Message-ID: <20020803165219.02129.00001468@mb-fe.aol.com>
Xref: archiver1.google.com alt.support.srs:52884

Stealth

By Roberta Angela Dee

The very first time I heard the word 'stealth' used among transgendered and transsexual women, I thought they were referring to some US Air Force secret jet fighter. I thought they were referring to a stealth bomber or possibly some Klingon war ship from the Star Trek television series.

I later learned that the word was being used to refer to an individual who is transgender or transsexual and who wishes to conceal, as much as possible, that they ever belonged to either community.

Stealth Defined:

In order to have an intelligent discussion on any topic, one must first define key words. It is senseless to discuss stealth if we define it differently.

As a writer, I always defer to an American English dictionary. Thus, stealth is defined as follows:

Main Entry: stealth

Pronunciation: 'stelth

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English stelthe; akin to Old English stelan to steal

Date: 13th century

1 a: archaic : THEFT b : obsolete : something stolen

2: the act or action of proceeding furtively, secretly, or imperceptibly <the state moves by stealth to gather information - Nat Hentoff>

3: the state of being furtive or unobtrusive

4: an aircraft-design characteristic consisting of oblique angular construction and avoidance of vertical surfaces that is intended to produce a very weak radar return

Obviously, the definitions most applicable to the transgender or transsexual individual are definitions two and three. Essentially, stealth means that one intends to be secretive about their sex, specifically their original anatomical sex.

When I was growing up, we simply referred to it as 'passing,' that is, not being perceived as anything other than a genetically male man or a genetically female woman. I was told, however, that stealth meant more than just passing. It also meant divorcing oneself from those who were still in the process of transitioning.

For example, if one were a male-to-female transsexual woman, going stealth would be like quietly and secretly slipping into the community of genetically female women and never revealing to those women that one is transsexual. Such an individual would be like some Jane Bond, a trans-007, or something of that nature.

Distribution of Opinions:

The topic of stealth was recently debated at TG Woman - the Yahoo! Group that I moderate for transgender and transsexual men and women. However one felt about being stealth, typically he or she held a very strong opinion about it.

About one-third felt that stealth was a logical conclusion to being fully transitioned. They argued that it made no sense to continue relationships with individuals who could cause suspicion of their being transgender or transsexual.

About one-third perceived stealth as a form of betrayal. They felt that it was unethical to turn one's back on the community that had first accepted their being transgender or transsexual, and that offered support through the transitioning process.

The remaining one-third of the members felt that stealth was a ridiculous concept that had somehow made its way into the gender community, and that it had no real way of being actualized. They argued that there are so many subtle idiosyncrasies associated with both sexes that over a period of time even the most casual observer would at least detect something different about an individual who was transgender or transsexual.

As both a writer and as a moderator, it is essential that I remain as objective as is humanly possible. It is the manner in which I approach every topic, and the manner in which I've approached stealth.

The Practicality of Stealth:

Occasionally, I teach high school and freshman college students. It astounds me how much fashion has changed. Girls don't wear shiny patent leather pumps any longer, and boys don't wear the Florsheim Lexington wing tips. Today, both sexes wear athletic sneakers or hiking boots. A few girls wear the stocky high heel shoes, but for the most part the girls and boys dress alike: sneakers, baggy jeans, loose fitting oversized tee-shirt, some sort of jacket and some sort of cap. Yet, I can still distinguish the girls from the boys.

Gender differences can be extremely subtle. Still, it doesn't take very much to distinguish a masculine gesture from one that's feminine. In fact, I once read that facial differences as minute as one twenty-fifth of an inch are noticeable.

Even without looking at a student's face, I could distinguish males from females. Even when a boy was effeminate or a girl was boyish, I could still tell the difference.

So, when anyone says, "I'm going to be stealth," all I can do is to wish him or her the best of luck. However, from my perspective, stealth is a delusion.

I've been living as a woman for 27 years. I'm totally comfortable as a female. Yet, I'm still going to be read by 20% of the population.

So, when someone comes to me and she's six foot, three inches tall, built like Mr. Universe, and tells me she's going to be stealth, what can I say?

You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can never fool all of the people all of the time. It's really that simple.

More importantly, why should anyone have to hide who they really are? If you must make an effort to conceal that you are transgender or transsexual, doesn't that suggest that you're ashamed?

I've accepted jobs and never told anyone that I was transgender. If I told them, I doubt they'd hire me. So, basically, I lied. Yes, I lied, plain and simple. I didn't call it being stealth. I called it lying out of necessity. The necessity being that I had to earn a living.

I've never walked around with a sign that read, "Roberta Angela Dee is a transgender woman." Yet, given the right circumstances, I was never ashamed to admit that I'm transgender and different from most other women. I'm not ashamed of who I am. I deal with society's prejudices only because society leaves me no other choice.

Conclusion:

Sometimes life forces us to be deceptive. However, if we are being deceptive, we need to be able to acknowledge we're being deceptive. I'm not stealth. I'll never be stealth. I'll simply be as honest as society allows me to be.

The End

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