

Torn
By: Keyla Holt

Abstract

This is a self-reflection painting that depicts one ‘torn’; a woman pulling them to be more feminine while a man is pulling them towards masculinity. The green ribbon around their neck represents mental health awareness. The anklet worn is the semi-colon because they tried to take their life the day after Christmas, 2017. The semi-colon is the adopted symbol for suicide awareness, “my story is not over yet”. I identify as Black, homosexual, and gender nonbinary and have struggled with my gender identity since the age of five. I am 40 years old and still battle with Gender Dysphoria. Who am I? Fearing rejection, I have successfully hidden my various mental illnesses from the public eye. Considering my culture, the stigma behind mental illness adding to the stressors of not being accepted for my skin color, or the person I love, or who I identify as is often too much to bear. With this painting, I hope to bring awareness not only to Gender Dysphoria, mental health, and suicide, but to intersectionality as well; they all affect everyone, including social workers. It is often said that people fear what they do not know. We as a people are extremely diverse and from that diversity blossoms fear and intersectionality. As social workers, it is our duty to challenge the injustices of intersectionality that have plagued our society for centuries. So, we must continuously promote awareness and arm ourselves with the necessary knowledge needed to create more inclusive, equitable societies.

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I identify as gender nonbinary and have suffered with my gender identity since the age of five. At the age of five, when most children are fascinated with dinosaurs and unicorns, I remember asking my mother why I was not born a boy. She tried to explain that this is the way God wanted me to be, but it never felt right. It was not about the type of toys because I had every toy made from My Little Pony to G.I. Joe. It was not about the color of my clothes because I wore every color of the rainbow. I do admit though, I despised dresses! It was for this reason I had mixed emotions about Easter. I loved the egg hunts and candy but not the Easter dresses. My sister and I were always made up to look like little dolls. Still, it was not about how we dressed. It was deeper than that. I never understood why I always thought girls were pretty and boys were, well boys.

I remember having my first crush in kindergarten but did not know it. I would always give her my snacks and treats. I made sure she was first on the slide at recess as that was her favorite. I would always let her cut in line when we had to line-up for things. At the young age of five, I was already a “gentleman”. I did for her everything I saw my older brother do for the girls he had crushes on. She told everyone I was her best friend. I loved that but was extremely confused as I felt weird around her. I wanted to hold her hand and give her a kiss on the cheek. But no, girls do not do that with other girls I thought. That is why I wanted to be a boy.

For years, I did things to make me “feel” like a boy. I rode BMX bikes and did tricks, I skateboarded, I played the drums, I climbed trees, played in the mud, played backyard football. I would even tease girls when my friends who were boys would tease them. I did everything I could to make them think I was one of them; everything that girls did not do back then. It was

never enough. To them, I was simply a tomboy. That is when I decided I had to be a boy, I was 11 years old. One bright and sunny summer day, my mother, brother, and I went to the mall. The mood was light, so I decided to go for it. I asked for a gender change... My brother instantly broke out into a hysterical laughter while my mother stood there dazed wondering whether to take me seriously or not. Once she realized my facial expression did not change, she knew I was serious! I was publicly shamed as she embarrassed me in the middle of a mall food court. I never mentioned it again. That one moment changed our relationship forever.

The next seven years were extremely hard. I had no-one to talk to about how I was feeling inside and did not know how to make sense of it all. I continued to be attracted to girls but had boyfriends because it was socially acceptable. In fact, it was a rite of passage in middle school. At the middle school I went to, if you did not have a mate by the seventh grade, you were nothing. So, I had boyfriends. My problem was, I hated being touched by a boy. Whenever they would try and hold my hand, I would get this instant feeling of utter nausea. Therefore, whenever it would get to that point in the relationship, I would break-up with them. That continued through high school. I had so many boyfriends by the time I graduated, I lost count. There was one that made me question who I thought I was.

At one point, I was completely infatuated with someone. He was older than I and went to another school. I was 15 when we met; he was one year and seven months older than me. He treated me like gold, like a delicate flower. I still felt awkward being touched but I did not feel sick. I was okay when he held my hand or put his arm around me. In fact, I enjoyed it. We were perfect for 14 months. He accepted my quirks and was okay with me not wanting to go further. At least that is what he told me. It ended a week later when I met his other girlfriend by chance. Back to the drawing board...

I came out as Lesbian when I was 18 years old. I had always been physically attracted to women and decided that I was done trying to live a life that everyone else wanted me to live. I went away to college and entered a whole new world. Homosexuality was a thing, it did exist. There were women who dated women, who knew?! I was attracted to many different types of women, so I decided to get to know many different people before settling on one. I found the woman of my dreams in the Fall semester of my sophomore year. Finally, life made sense. However, I still struggled with my gender identity. I am 40 years old, and still battle with that same issue. Who am I?

Along with Gender Dysphoria, I have several mental illnesses to worry about, to try and keep hidden. Among other things, I was diagnosed with Bipolar I Disorder when I was 20 years old. It has been a rollercoaster trying to keep it “contained”. I have good days then bad weeks then bad months then back to good days. Society still has this misconception of what it means to be Bipolar, so I do not tell people. Along with Bipolar Disorder and several others, I suffer with one other major mental illness. It can be quite debilitating at times, but I have learned to cope and not let it hold me back. Being a Black, homosexual, genderqueer person, I have tried hiding my mental illnesses from the public eye since diagnoses. The stigma behind mental illness adding to the stressors of not being accepted for my skin color, or the person I love, or who I identify as, is too much to bear.

The painting depicts a woman pulling me to be more feminine while a man is pulling me towards masculinity. From birth, boys and girls are groomed to be societally acceptable. They are dressed a certain way, talked to a certain way, given specific toys to play with, and even told what they can and cannot do based solely on their gender. We are all put in a box, either pink or blue. I stepped out of my box and am standing in limbo, unsure where to go from here.

I have a green ribbon around my neck for mental health awareness. Mental illness is more prevalent than people realize. It is time to bring awareness to its existence to help the millions of sufferers from generalized anxiety to comorbid severe mental illnesses. People should not be afraid of being denounced for what they have no control over. By putting one foot in front of the other going in the right direction, we can make a difference.

The anklet I am wearing is the semi-colon because I tried to take my life the day after Christmas, 2017. The semi-colon is the adopted symbol for suicide awareness, “my story is not over yet”. Like many others, I thought this was my only option. Life had gotten to the point where it was almost unbearable. I did not want to feel any worse, so I decided to end it. I had lost my great-grandmother, my best-friend, the Christmas before and thus had no-one to call on. I was lost, dazed, confused, and above all else... I was alone.

In conclusion, I hope to bring awareness to Gender Dysphoria, mental health, and suicide as they affect everyone, including social workers. We should not suffer alone; no-one should ever suffer alone.