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What Transgender Humans Might Offer for Healing America August 13, 2018

"You don't know what it's like to walk in my shoes."

Of all the phrases voiced by individuals and groups who feel marginalized, this stands out the most.

And it's true: no one can really understand what it's truly like to be a member of a certain group or tribe unless you are one of "us." Outsiders—those who aren't group or tribe members—constitute "them" or "Other."

However, some people do move from "us" to "them," sometimes dramatically. For example, persons without disabilities who suffer a traumatic injury resulting in paralysis or another form of disability. Those survivors suddenly understand what it's like to be propelled into "Other."

There is another group of humans that also knows what it's like to walk in the shoes of someone else: persons who have transitioned genders. Transgender people have the rare distinction of having lived in each gender and we uniquely understand the privileges and detriments of being male or female.

Small case in point: when I presented as male, the word, "hysterical," had no particular meaning to me. In fact, I'm sure I sometimes referred to "emotional" women as "hysterical."

Once I transitioned genders, the phrase took on a completely different meaning. I painfully recall the moment not so long ago when a publisher (an older man) referred to me as "hysterical" as I passionately argued why a piece I had written should be published. The memory of hearing that word being thrown at me still stings.

Given how our perspective inevitably expands once we transition genders, I submit that transgender persons can add to the pressing conversation about how to make our divided America (and the divided world, too) more compassionate and understanding. Maybe we can even help with healing the wounds from those divisions.

For starters, we are used to division. Many of us lived decades divided internally as we tried to navigate a society which says that gender—based on birth anatomy alone—is immutable. We had to literally wage war with ourselves trying to conform to a society

where most people ("them") don't understand what it's like to be "us" where our brains don't match our bodies.

Because of our internal conflicts, we've discovered the importance of empathy and compassion for self. We've learned the power of gratitude and have come to appreciate that no one can really understand what it means to be someone else—certainly not by their appearance.

As I worked past my internal divisions, I learned to have greater empathy and compassion not only for me but for others—including people I used to ignore or fear. I came to keenly understand that everyone, regardless of color or financial standing, struggles to survive the Human Condition. This empathy and compassion for others helped to make me a better person; now, I have a far better understanding of what it means to struggle with arbitrary rules and systems that seek to hold you back or down. (Don't get me wrong; I don't have all the answers, but I do have some.)

Now, I appreciate way more what it means to be female in today's stereotype-charged world. I get it that some men treat women differently (and often less equally) than they treat other men. I now know what it means to walk into a room of men and be ignored because I'm female.

Moreover, I know the uncomfortable feeling that borders on fear when men catcall you on a public street—something that very few men ever experience.

Given that transgender people have this unique experience and perspective, what is that we can teach others about reconciliation and healing?

I submit, a lot.

America is on the verge of tearing itself apart over our differences at a time when we should be celebrating and cherishing them. Transgender humans have learned the art of healing; it comes with self-honesty, mindfulness about our fears, and a willingness to take risks. We've also learned that healing requires work, much work.

My friends—I consider everyone a friend regardless of whether you are red or blue or Bernie, or white or of color, Christian or Muslim, without disability or with disability—ask us, transgender humans, for our perspective as you struggle with the divisions that grip our country.

We have much to offer.

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