

Been There, Done That

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My born name was the gloriously Celtic “Donald.” It means in Old Irish “world ruler,” and is out of favor now for its association with a duck. One wonders what The Donald’s impact will be. In 1995 to keep the D and the Irish I chose “Deirdre,” which may have meant “wanderer,” and whose ravishingly romantic myth inspired two plays in the Celtic Revival, by Yeats and by Synge. The fact, and that university teachers in Britain are called “dons,” illuminates the best headline I have ever seen – up there with *Variety*’s “Hicks Nix Styx Flicks” or the fictional one about Ted Williams’ retirement from the Red Sox, “Hub Bids Kid Adieu.” It was written by some genius at the (London) *Times Higher Education Supplement*, affixed to a column I had written saying that transitioning in academic life is easier than, say, in the Navy or on a football team. “It Helps to Be a Don if You’re Going to be a Deirdre.”

And it’s still true, though even in 1995 I met someone who transitioned in an *auto factory* in *Tennessee*. She had little trouble, being very open about it, and had acquired through sheer force of will, and practice, practice, a suitably feminine voice. In one particular way 1995 was easier than 2015 – the lawyers had not arrived. When in Iowa City I went to the courthouse to change my name, the judge had seen it before, and had no over-lawyered regulations to undermine Iowa common sense. Likewise at the Iowa Department of Motor Vehicles. Even the official at the passport office in New Hampshire, to whom a few day before flying to Holland to teach for a year I pled through tears on the telephone to send me an F passport to my refuge in Philadelphia with Herb and Gayle Simon, could allow her common sense (What’s the harm?) to trump regulations, then pretty much non-existent. By contrast, the U.K. would not issue target-gender passports until a case in 2002 before the European Court of Human Rights forced passage of a law in 2004.

And even early in 1997, when I came back, terrified, to teach again at the University of Iowa, the kids didn’t mind. They had grown up with Boy George and rock musicians in eye make-up. The swing to toleration, or indifference, had begun. “Oh, Professor: you changed gender. Cool. Say, how about them Hawks!” It turned out, actually, that well before 1995 the University of Iowa had a written and highly liberal policy on gender crossers. Fair Harvard, with the other privates, did not until much later. Again, common sense ruled. My business-school dean Gary Fethke at Iowa said, “Thank God! I thought you were going to confess to converting to *socialism!*” And “This is great for affirmative action: up one, down another!” And then he acted Iowa calm,

protecting me from the few illiberal doubters. At the time I heard about how the president at the University of Tennessee, a businessman, had reacted to an assistant rushing in to report breathlessly about a “crisis”: the chair of the chemistry department *was going to become a woman.*” “You call that a ‘crisis’?! When the legislature cuts our budget in half, that’s a ‘crisis’.” Up one, down another. When in 1995 Terry Branstad, then as now the conservative governor of Iowa, was asked about the gender-crossing professor at the University, he replied, “Can she still teach? Is her CV the same?”

But now it’s even calmer, on most college campuses boringly regularized. People do it younger – sometimes, wisely, as adolescents. Understand, changing gender is a distinctly minority desire, something like 1 in 400 births, male to female or female to male. True, it’s more common than you think, and hugely more common than the psychiatrists, who are mystified by it, had long assumed, the better to “cure” people. They are still trying the discipline cure up at Toronto’s Gender Identity Service in the Child, Youth, and Family Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, torturing Canadians on the assumption that a harmless human desire is a matter of addiction and mental health. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival still had in its 40th and final meeting, this last August, big women assigned to root out the transgendered. But gender change is no threat to male/female ratios, and certainly no threat to sanity or music or feminism. Calm down.

The calming has mainly come, as Lincoln said in 1858, through public opinion, not laws: “he [or she, dear] who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.” Oprah had a show on trans issues every 18 months or so (I was on one), asking the questions your girl-friend would ask. When among my relatives in Norway I was to reappear not as Donald but as Deirdre, an elderly female cousin of mine, whom we thought would have a hard time, said, “Oh, I know about that. I saw it on television.” She urged me to try on her *bunad*. The sweet and accurate and funny movie in 2005, *Transamerica*, with an Oscar-nominated performance by Felicity Huffman, did more than any army of lawyers and psychiatrists to make the unusual normal. Caitlyn (another sweet Celtic name) is icing on the cake.

Aside from some confused “Christians” – I am an unconfused one myself – who haven’t asked themselves how our Lord and Savior would actually respond to a Deirdre or a Caitlyn [hint, hint: ask Papa Francesco], colleges have calmed down.

Carry on, deans.