

How I Found My Place in the Universe

by Jessica Mink,

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When I told my friends that this was the title of a talk I was giving at the American Museum of Natural History in April, they assumed that I was going to talk about my gender identity. That talk was really about my life's work building tools to map the universe. I covered the evolution of standards and software for astronomical mapping, an area where I have built my scientific reputation over my 40 years as an astronomer and software developer, one of the many dualities in my life which I will discuss.

Today, I'll talk about finding my place closer to home. There are many ways we define our place in our world, in our community, and in our family. Some of these identities happen to us, like being the child of our parents and having brothers and sisters, and some of these are accomplished with effort on our part, like developing a career over decades or getting around by bicycle through somewhat difficult winters. I have always been at the boundaries between identities: astronomer/software developer, bicyclist/driver, bike activist/open-space activist, independent/community-oriented, religious/non-theist. Gradually over my life, I have been reconciling these dualities.

And then there is gender, which to most people is something one is simply born with. But some of us are not comfortable with the gender which people assumed that we had when we were born. Living on the boundaries between so many things in my life, I also found it possible to live on the boundary between genders for a pretty long time. I passed pretty well as a male and preferred women as partners, so it didn't take much effort to live the way people saw me, getting married twice and not lacking for relationships over the years between those marriages. I was lucky to have a body type

which made it fairly easy to be the woman I felt I was whenever I had a chance, shopping and going out to movies, concerts, and plays. In those days, I was gender-fluid, switching back and forth between male and female.

After I turned 50, I began to realize that I had set up my entire life so that I was always around people who reinforced my maleness. I had a minimum amount of time alone and never really got to figure out which gender *I* thought that I was. In the summer before I turned 52, I finally had an entire week by myself, and after spending most of that time working long hours and going to meetings, I realized that it was then or never: I took all of Friday off work to spend 24 hours as I saw myself, for the first time ever! It felt so wonderful to be out in the world that I realized that I really needed to change.

But I was happily married, and my spouse was totally contented with the way I was. To help figure out where I was going to end up and how I could get there, I started therapy. Eventually, my spouse and I started going to a couples therapist who helped us figure out how to stay together long enough to get our daughter through college while I drifted gradually towards a transition. I also got involved with the Boston transgender community and met some friends whose situations were like mine. That was the beginning of the community it took to help me to figure out how to become a woman.

Early in my 8-year-long transition, my daughter called me when I was out at night and when I told her that I was at a party with friends, she responded, "But you don't have any friends!" I realized that my life had not been as full or as happy as I thought it had been. Later on, as I got more comfortable with myself, I unexpectedly found myself with really good woman friends who were soon some of the first people I told of my impending transition. In fact, a couple of them dragged me into the non-transgender world for the first time to a bike race and party, and another went out to a play with me a week later.

One of the first problems I ran into was that it was easy to find lots of advice about how to transition at work and in a family, but there was no template for changing one's gender in the third sector of non-profit volunteering where I spent a good deal of my life. I made my own way, starting with those organizations where I sat on boards. My psychotherapist spouse helped me write a statement before I attended a board workshop on diversity and inclusion which included:

"I know that LGBT diversity has not been a major issue in the environmental movement and may not be on our agenda Saturday, but as the transgender community gains acceptance for our very existence, we have energy which can be devoted to other causes such as open space. In my case, being able to be myself in the world is freeing me from constraints which have held me back from committing more of myself."

As we were riding down the Southwest Corridor together during a storm after a meeting, I told Boston's Bike Coordinator, who welcomed me as a fellow lesbian. A few years later, she facilitated my coming out to the entire Boston Bicycle Community by awarding me with a Lifetime Activism Award, which brought a standing ovation from 500 people, half of whom were learning for the first time that I was different than I was when I had done most of those things.

Taking a long time let me have fun transitioning. The first non-trans person who I came out to was my first wife's second ex-husband, with whom I stayed while attending a conference in the fall of 2008, five years into my change (and a year after our joint ex-spouse had decamped to Hawaii). I drove to his house as Jessica, got in late, and didn't have time to change before he came out to the car to help me with my stuff. Our relationship was open enough that once he knew who I really was, I found it impossible to go back with him. This was an important lesson: in each part of my life that I transitioned, it would be forever.

In the fall of 2011, I had an astronomical software conference in Paris. I wasn't sure before the day I left Boston what gender I was going to be, but I asked one of my best woman friends for help putting together a week's wardrobe of feminine business clothes, repacked a few times to make it all fit in two small suitcases, and flew off. My name wasn't legally changed and I wanted to avoid problems crossing borders, so I traveled as a guy, checked into the hotel and registered for the conference under the name which I was being reimbursed. Before the evening reception, I told some friends on the elevator ride up that I would be different when I came down, switched to a skirt, sweater, tights, and boots, doing my best to fit in with stylish European women, and joined friends to walk over to the Paris Observatory. People were surprised, but seemed to take my change in stride.

Earlier that year, I had started telling people at work that I was going to transition to female in the fall. I thought that I'd come back after the Thanksgiving break as Jessica, but I still had a few people left to talk with, including the director of the Center for Astrophysics and the guy who owned the food truck where I often bought lunch. They were both good with my change; in fact the conservative food truck guy has been one of my greatest supporters. The next day, I came to work as Jessica and have ever since.

Although I had been close to women for decades, I didn't really understand what it was like to actually be one. Even though I had spent years preparing to change, it was soon obvious that the process of figuring out who I was as a woman was just beginning. One of the first things I learned was that friendships between women were very different, and more dramatic, than friendships between men or the non-romantic relationships I'd had with women before. More recently, I've accepted my position as a successful trans woman to work with other minority groups both in the LGBT world, in bicycle activism, and in astronomy.

And finally, there is religion. I grew up in a church-going (and committee-staffing) Protestant family in the Midwest. Going to church, learning the bible (though never really believing the details), singing hymns, and going to pot-luck dinners were so much a part of my life that when I came east to college, I spent some time every week for my entire freshman year helping put on interdenominational services in the MIT Chapel, still one of my favorite buildings in the world. While I liked the experience of religion, my disbelief in a god and most of the events in the bible eventually kept me away from the kind of space where I grew up except when I was visiting my family. I have been lucky that we grew up in a tolerant religion; they all have been fantastically accepting, if not always as supportive as I might like. This is a great gift as many of my friends have been rejected by families which have more closed ideas about what their god can tolerate.

After I really was clear about who I was, I realized that I really needed to reconnect to a spiritual community, and my friend Andrea suggested that I check out Theodore Parker Church, a welcoming congregation. Soon I was singing hymns with words I could believe, reverently and enthusiastically reciting Theodore Parker's "Its temple, all space", being welcomed at candlelight dinners, joining the choir, and co-hosting coffee hour.