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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/style/transgender-men-voice-change.html>

My Voice Got Deeper. Suddenly, People Listened.

My feminist mother taught me to speak up. Now, as a trans man, I am trying to make space for women to be heard.

By Thomas Page McBee



A few months after I began injecting testosterone, I discovered that one of the startling new privileges of my male body was that I could silence an entire room just by opening my mouth.

Despite the fact that my voice pitched baritone low, when I spoke, people didn't just listen, they leaned in. They perched their heads in their hands and tilted toward me for a better angle. It was as if whatever I said, however banal, was surely worth that strain of a neck, or the hurried quieting of all other thoughts.

For me, a 31-year-old trans man who had spent most of my life in a body that was tolerated at best and ridiculed at worst, this was a shocking turn of events.

Before I transitioned, my short hair and men's clothes frequently baffled people. When we think of trans people, we often imagine someone neatly journeying from one side of the gender binary to the other: woman to man or man to woman. But for me, it was a lot more nuanced

I was a tomboy kid, a swaggering teen steeped in queer culture, then a masculine adult. I dated women, and my ex and I were once held at gunpoint by a man who went on to target two other straight couples, shooting the men. That night, my voice — high, sharp, an immediate tell — saved me. When I spoke, something clicked in the gunman's eyes, and he immediately let us go.

But my voice also made me invisible. I was frequently interrupted and talked over, especially by men, and especially at work. I had to fight harder to make a point. Early in my professional life, I was sometimes simply squeezed into silence.

One boorish co-worker at a transcription job I had in graduate school made it his business to reiterate to me, in tedious detail, whatever it was our boss had just told us to do, and it was easier to stand sentry, nodding politely, until he went away. I noticed he never did the same to the man who sat on the other side of him.

I moved to Boston in 2011, and my first week of work at a newspaper there coincided with my first shot of testosterone. The effects of the hormone were remarkably fast, and every morning I'd look at myself in the mirror with reverent awe, charting the muscle forming, the spray of hair covering my chest, the stubble on my lip.

It was so sweet, after a lifetime of blurring my eyes in order to look at my reflection, to find myself looking back at me.

I read somewhere once that first phase of identity formation is figuring out who you are, but the next one — the one we rarely talk about, especially in stories about trans people — is finding your place in the world. To be seen for the man I was felt glorious, sure, but also jarring.

There were the “Hey, brother”s from gas station employees, the oddly subservient “Sir”s from salesmen who wanted something from me and the presumption of camaraderie from men at the gym, on the train, at work.

Sometimes this friendliness led to vulnerability, like the time a beefy guy I sat next to on a plane gulped down two gin and tonics and then told me, tearily, that his wife was leaving him. But there were also more sobering moments, like the time I found myself on a dark street with a woman who quickly crossed to the other side.

Growing up, my mother taught my sister and me to speak up, to be assertive and to take up space. She was a physicist from humble beginnings who went on to be an executive at General Electric, where she faced skepticism, hostility and the loneliness of often being the only woman in the room.

When she died suddenly, at 69, four years after my transition, I dealt with the hole in my chest by trying to honor her legacy: flying higher, achieving more and charging through the glass ceiling that had ultimately caged her potential.

But that glass ceiling didn't apply to me so cleanly anymore.

The evidence was everywhere. Joining a group of women engaged in excited banter at lunch, for instance, I noticed that my own enthusiastic interruptions halted entire conversations. In fact, my voice hijacked rooms all the time.

I could hold an entire meeting hostage as I worked through a half-formed idea, watching as heads swiveled toward me in silent, animal unison, waiting patiently for me to finish even as I stumbled through a thought.

In the past, I might not have had the confidence to even volunteer a thought without rehearsing it first. Now, more than once, I would catch myself midramble and wonder: Am I mansplaining?

I frequently thought of my mother, managing the men who told her how to do her job, or entertaining the wives of her employees during dinner so as not to appear “too threatening.”

I began to see that I had a choice about the kind of man I wanted to be, and the kind of man I didn't.

I began by tallying the evidence: noting who I talked over more often in meetings (women, at a rate of three to one), cataloging whose emails I was quicker to respond to (men) and whose opinions I was less likely to push back on (men, almost always).

Something had to change, and it was me. I began to ask for all kinds of feedback, especially from women. How could I be a better boss? Co-worker? Partner? Friend?

I was running a small team of mostly women by then, and it was through feedback from a quieter female co-worker that we decided to add a round-table question to our weekly meetings, allowing everyone to answer. It led to much more productive team conversations in which everyone felt more heard.

A friend pointed out that it was almost always women who pushed for the acknowledgment of other women in her workplace, so I made it a practice to highlight the accomplishments of my female co-workers to my supervisors, even if the achievement wasn't public facing — especially then.

I also made a point to try to see the often invisible labor that women frequently take on: organizing the birthday parties and the book clubs. Remembering to make the coffee. Making a point to amplify each other in meetings — that is, repeating each other's ideas and making sure that proper credit was given — insisting that one another be heard.

And so I amplified. I made coffee. I listened. And in the process, I got better at doing the things that, as a man, I had been recently socialized not to do: asking for help, giving credit for it and admitting that I didn't have all the answers.

When I failed to meet a goal, I tried to be open about it so that I could learn, rather than get defensive. I also worked to preserve the qualities I liked most about myself before my transition: vulnerability, openness, empathy.

Not too long ago, I was at a meeting where I didn't need to speak at all. It was humbling, at first, to witness ideas being raised, one by one, by my colleagues. But then I flashed on my previous life, when I was sure that the most feminist thing I could do was speak up.

Now, my silence wasn't a weakness but its own power. My new body, my new life, wasn't about silencing anyone. It was about making room for others to be heard.

Thomas Page McBee is a journalist and the author of “Amateur: A True Story About What Makes a Man,” which will be published this month.

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