

The bathroom battles raging in the United States today (which toilets transgender people can use) reminds me of how little new there is in the world. For eons, some human beings have been born aware of wiring (or something else) amiss in their gender.

Ancient Greek mythology has been a gift to the world. Tiresias was the only human being who had been both male and female. He was a blind prophet who could warn kings of danger but was often not believed until too late. In one of the Greek plays, we learn how Tiresias became a seer. He was walking in the fields one day and saw two cobras copulating. The snakes, being sacred, were outraged and turned him into a woman. He lived as a woman for a decade and then finding this situation dreary, he returned to the field and again spied on the snakes making love. This time they turned him back into a man, but left him blind. When asked by curious people whether it was better to be male or female, he said being male, even a blind one, was better.

Throughout history, there have been cases of females disguising themselves as males so that they could go to war (or just run away from being female). There was even one story that a woman, disguised as a man, became Pope (Pope Joan). Certainly throughout much of history, being female was drudgery and oppression. In much of the world, even today, this is so.

In the pious Muslim world, being female is a straitjacket hedged with deadly punishment for violating the rules. Rural Afghanistan and Pakistan are probably the worst places to be born female. During the Taliban\222s seizure of Afghanistan, life for women became even more dangerous and deadly than ever. Women were under house arrest, a problem for families in which all the menfolk had been killed. There would be no way to earn money, to shop in the market for food, or even to go out in the sunlight. We don\222t know how many starved.

In 2003, a movie (Osama) made in Afghanistan by a woman filmmaker, followed a pre-teen girl who, to support her mother and grandmother, had to risk dressing as a boy, getting an apprenticeship with a baker. The Taliban dragooned all the boys in town to attend a brainwashing school (memorizing the Koran) and military training (future terrorists or suicide bombers). This initially frightened the little girl, but she soon managed to deceive the Taliban until----one day her first menstruation came. She was outed! The judges showed "compassion" in not executing her, marrying her off instead to an old man with a household of miserable wives.

Although this was a movie, it certainly reflected reality. Many girl children in Afghanistan and tribal Pakistan disguise themselves as boys in order to have any sort of happy and free childhood. One such, Maria Toorpakai, a Pakistani from Waziristan, recently wrote her memoir about her family permitting her to masquerade as a boy, where she so excelled in the sport of weightlifting that she won second place in a national contest. After puberty, she resumed as a girl, but also as an athlete, a prize-winning squash player. This subjected her and her family to constant abuse, hostile sermons preached by clerics, and threats of death.

But girls dressing as boys is not the only cross-dressing practice in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pashtoon (the largest tribe) men really do not like women at all; they much prefer young boys dressed and dancing like women. Beautiful young boys are bought from impoverished families to become playthings and entertainers at men\222s parties, sexual favors being part of the entertainment. I cannot imagine an uglier culture than this one.

I am old enough to remember when it was not as easy to be a woman in our own culture as it is today. My daughters and granddaughters rarely give it a thought; they know that they are equal to males, which makes me happy. Maybe someday one of them might become president!

681 words

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