My Son Wears Heels

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When a baby is born, a mystery becomes a reality, but reality also opens up mysteries, some totally unforeseen. And so it is for any baby born with a clear M or F stamped on their birth certificate. Already, before the baby is born, eager observers query, “Girl or boy, do you know yet?” And before that baby even exits the birth canal, a pile of baby presents might pile up in the baby’s new room—little pink dresses for girls, little miniature motorcycle jackets for boys. If the letter on that birth certificate is M, we imagine a future of roughhousing, Little League games, darts, or bows-and-arrows. If the letter is F, we envision tea parties, ballet lessons, and baby dolls and dollhouses. These gender-binary images have been imbued in our own growth from birth to maturity.

Such fantasies can be expected in a culture that has clearly divided scripts for boys and for girls. But not all fantasies come true; fantasies of our children’s gender may well not. We think their
gender is carved in stone as soon as the doctor, nurse, or midwife announces to the parents of the newborn, “You have a beautiful baby girl” or “You have a handsome baby boy.” But until that wonderful little baby grows a little (or a lot) and comes to tell us who they are, we can never be so sure about either the gender they know themselves to be or how they prefer to “do” their gender. You may have a son who begs for ballet lessons, a daughter who demands acceptance on the local Little League team, a son who says he’s actually your daughter, or a daughter who says she’s actually your son. Time will tell. And if you’re fast-forwarding to their adult years, forget about wedding cakes with a miniature bride and groom on top. Who your child grows up to love will be a mystery yet to unfold—maybe the cake will have two grooms, or two brides. Again, time will tell.

In My Son Wears Heels, Julie Tarney is not going to take us on a sentimental journey but rather an incredible gender journey. She will teach us what it’s like to discover that gender is not written in stone and that you could have a son who loves high-heeled shoes—a lot. She doesn’t do it through lessons and lectures, but through a moving and poignant account of her life as a mother raising a fabulous, gender creative child.

Little boy, what is your gender? How are you going to “do” your gender? Julie’s son, Harry, takes Julie on a challenging and sometimes difficult ride as she tries to answer these questions to and about her little boy who plays with girls, loves dress-up, never wants to be the father but always the mother in “Let’s play house.” So if Harry likes to dress up in dresses, is he gay? Could he be trans? Could he be confused? Could he just be Harry?
Foreword

*My Son Wears Heels* is going to give you answers to these questions, by allowing us to peer into Julie Tarney’s life as a loving mother to her exquisite son, Harry. A long time ago, I grew up to be a feminist of the 1960s. Looking back on that time, we all thought we were kicking up some dust, and we were happy for it. We had no idea we had started a landslide, earthshaking tremors that would set in motion, with the aid of our allies in the LGBTQI movement, a new era in which homosexuality would be deleted as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (1973), gay marriage would be legalized in the United States (2015), and reparative therapy to try to “fix” the gender or sexual identity of minors would be banned in several states in the United States and a province in Canada. Many of us are mesmerized by the seemingly sudden breakdown of the gender binary—one box for boys and one box for girls, and never the twain shall meet. When even Target stores dispense with gender categories in their toy departments (which they announced in the summer of 2015), we are definitely in a whole new world. As the twenty-first century rolls on, we are bearing witness to an explosion in the acknowledgment, understanding, and celebration of people of all genders and sexualities. Gender used to be bedrock, and now we’ve converted it into moving boulders. Marriage used to be the sole providence of a man and a woman, and I should add as a man and a woman who started out that way. Now we recognize marriage as the loving union between two people of any gender and any sexual identity. It is in this terrain that Julie Tarney birthed her book, *My Son Wears Heels: One Mom’s Journey from Clueless to Kickass*. How can we make sense of her remarkable journey with her son, Harry?
Some Reading Guidelines

I’ve been working as a psychologist and gender specialist for many years now. I’m also the mom of two grown children, both of whom loved tutus—one my daughter, the other my son. As they grew up I discovered that one is straight, the other gay. With that said, from my vantage point as both a professional and a mother, I want to offer you some reading guidelines as you embark on Julie Tarney’s wonderful excursion in *My Son Wears Heels*. I’m going to share with you what I’ve put together as a roadmap for adults in following children’s journeys as they consolidate their gender selves and their sexual being.

A three-year-old boy shows up in a princess costume. A common response (if you’re lucky): “How cute. Do you think he’s gay?” Herein lies our first reading guideline: Sexual identity (gay, straight, queer, pansexual, and so forth) is a completely separate developmental track from gender identity and expression. In adult parlance, if this helps—sexual identity is who you go to bed with; gender identity is who you go to bed as. The three-year-old boy wearing a princess dress may indeed grow up to be gay, as many gender-nonconforming children do. But that three-year-old might also be one of our transgender children, eager to let us know that he is not the gender we think he is. Or he may just be a child who likes to break gender boundaries, without changing the sex marked on his birth certificate and with no reflection at all on his future sexual identity. All we know is that we have a three-year-old child who loves to dress up in lace and frills. Where this will go only he knows, as long as no one tries to stop him. So, first guideline: think
of gender and sexuality as if they were two separate sets of railroad tracks, running parallel to each other but sometimes crisscrossing, as when “protogay” children explore and transcend the culturally defined margins of gender on their way to discovering their sexual identities.

In our developmental theories, we posit that children will be aware of their gender long before they are aware of their sexuality. So let’s stay in early childhood for now, when children are learning about, exploring, and discovering gender—their own and others’ around them—but not yet formulating their sexual identities. They do not do this in a vacuum, but in the context of the world they were born into—with a certain set of parents and siblings, in a certain town or city, in a certain country, with a particular set of values attached. To explain how this unfolds, let me introduce you to my personal construction: the gender web. Once a child is born, every single baby will have a job ahead of them—to weave together their own gender web. The gender web is a four-dimensional structure. If we imagine it in space, the gender web will be constructed from three major categories of threads—nature, nurture, and culture. Nature is what we are born with and what is in our bodies—our chromosomes, our hormones, our brains, our minds, our organs. Nurture is the people who raise us—our parents, our extended families, our childcare providers, our teachers. Culture is the social context in which all that nurturing occurs—our religions, our values, our ethics, our laws, our beliefs.

Like fingerprints, no two children’s gender webs will be alike. Each child will weave their own unique gender web. That’s true for you and me as well, as adults. But unlike fingerprints, which will
remain exactly the same from the day you are born to the day you die, our gender webs can change over the course of our lives, engaging the fourth dimension: time. Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, so it is with the gender web. It takes time to put together and it is not indelible. The gender web we spun at age three may look very different from the one we’re working on at age twenty-five, or forty, or sixty. So spinning a gender web is a lifelong process that can evolve over time. And it takes a lot of creativity, which is what made me coin the term “gender creativity.” By definition, gender creativity is the process of weaving together your own unique gender web, pulling together over time all those different threads that are part of the other three dimensions—nature, nurture, and culture. Some children will weave together a gender web that looks very “regular” or conforming, just like we expect a boy or girl to look, by cultural standards. Other children will draw far outside the lines, ignoring the boundaries set by the culture around them on how to “do” gender. These will be our most gender creative children, and you will be introduced to one as you learn about Harry through Julie’s eyes.

Which brings me to the question of parents. Where do parents fit into the gender web? The gender web is the child’s own special creation. If parents step in to put their own stamp on it, they will only leave their child all tangled up in knots about their gender. That mess happens every time a parent says to a little boy who loves his sister’s baby doll, “Honey, that doll’s not for you because you’re a boy and boys don’t play with dolls.” It happens every time a little boy comes to his mother and says, “Mommy, I’m not a boy. Everybody’s got it wrong, I’m actually a girl,” and the mother says,
“Honey, it’s you who has it wrong. You’re a boy because you have a penis, and girls can’t have penises. So let’s just drop that silly notion.” If, instead of stepping in, parents step back and create a safe and loving space for their child to spin their own unique gender web, the child feels expansive, accepted, and delighted in the web they have put together. That celebratory moment happens every time a mother says to her son, “Of course you can have a baby doll. Your friend Alex was just confused when he teased you that dolls are only for girls. Dolls are for people, and you’re a person, aren’t you?” It happens every time a mother says to her son, “Oh, my. Tell me more about getting it wrong. I know we thought you were a boy, but maybe we were mistaken. Does your inside tell you that you’re a girl?” From my perspective, being gender creative is what we want for our children. And this is where parents come in. It takes a gender creative parent to raise a gender creative child. It takes a gender-rejecting parent to crush a child’s gender zest. So here we see the second dimension in play: nurture.

And of course, we can’t forget about the world beyond the parent—the cultural threads of the gender web, the third dimension. Not everybody embraces the gender creative child. Not everybody looks kindly on the gender creative parent. So to negotiate a world that may not always be friendly to gender-nonconforming or gay or queer people, children and parents alike will have to learn how to build their gender resilience, defined as the ability to stand up with pride in the child’s gender creativity, regardless of what anyone else thinks. I’m thinking of an eight-year-old boy who wore his pink sparkly butterfly shirt to school. An older fifth-grader came up to him, wrinkled up his nose, and belted out, “You
can’t wear a pink shirt. Only girls wear pink!” And our little eight-year-old responded, quite calmly, “Well, I’m a boy. And I’m wearing a pink shirt. So I guess boys can wear pink.” That’s gender resilience. And now I’m thinking of a mother who accompanied her child, Danny, to the first day of school after Danny transitioned from being a boy to being a girl over the summer, choosing to wear a dress and fancy shoes for this special day. A classmate came running over and screeched to a halt, staring at Danny and then grilling the mom: “Wait a second, I thought Danny was a boy.” And the mom stepped right up and explained, “Yeah, so did we. But then we discovered we were wrong. We learned Danny’s a girl.” That’s gender resilience, executed by a mom on behalf of her child. And I should add that once the issue was clarified, this little classmate was delighted to discover her new girlfriend, as the two skipped off together to the playground. These are not isolated stories. I am witnessing such heartfelt and profound gender resilience every day, as I am fortunate to get to know so many gender creative children and their families. It is this very gender resilience that we will witness passing back and forth between Julie and Harry, mother and son, as Julie unfolds her story of raising her son who wears high heels in a world that does not always look so kindly on that.

So let me summarize the reader’s guidelines:

- Gender and Sexuality as Two Separate Tracks
- The Gender Web and Its Four Dimensions
- Gender Creativity
- Gender Resilience.

I invite you to use any and all of these features as your GPS as you join Julie Tarney on her parental journey from clueless to kickass.
Foreword

From Blame the Parent to Thank the Mom

As you read through the chapters of My Son Wears Heels, always keep in mind the lines from Kahlil Gibran’s poem The Prophet: “Your children are not your children . . . They come through you but not from you.” Translated to our topic, the vast majority of parents who have a child who defies the gender norms of the culture from an early age will tell you something like, “My child just came to me that way. I swear, I did nothing to encourage it. As a matter of fact, I have three other children, and they’re all boys’ boys or girls’ girls. It’s just this little one that’s breaking all the gender rules. I don’t know where she comes from.” When it comes to children’s gender, my profession, in the field of psychology/mental health, has traditionally paid little heed to the words of Gibran’s poem, seeing children not as coming through but being molded by their parents. In short, collectively we have been guilty of blaming parents, particularly mothers, if their son wears heels. A boy likes “girly” things. Mom made it happen by being too involved with her son, keeping him too close to her bosom. Mom didn’t stop it, maybe even encouraged it, leaving her child gender disordered and sure to grow up gay—and this is not seen as a good thing but as a thing that could surely be “fixed” through reparative therapy for the child and mental health treatment for the mom. Result: Traditionally, mothers of gender creative children were totally silenced. No mother would ever come forward to tell her story, unless she wanted to be skewered publicly and morally condemned. In that historical light, My Son Wears Heels is both transgressive and transcendent. Transgressive, because it defies my profession’s misguided tropes on children, gender, sexual identity, and parenting.
Foreword

Transcendent, because like Black Power, Women’s Liberation, Gay Pride, and Rainbow Pride, mothers of gender creative children can now come forward and share their joys, their struggles, their commitment, and their love for their sons who wear heels, their daughters who have buzz cuts, their children who tell them they are not the gender everyone thinks they are, their sons and daughters who declare their sexual identities as gay, lesbian, or queer. As Julie Tarney allows us into the innermost sanctuary of her relationship with Harry, she knows all too well that our gender creative children not only go through us, they teach us as they go.

Dreaming

Let’s go back to, “When a baby is born.” As parents, we start dreaming about our children before we ever meet them. Before they’re born, we can’t yet meet them in our waking lives. So we bring them to life at night or when we nap—in our dreams. We close our eyes and let our unconscious draw portraits and create animations. And those dreams don’t stop when our children finally enter our lives as real little people. But now they are waking dreams. Most babies don’t mind this. As they grow, children like to know that they’re important and special enough to enter their parents’ dream lives. To a point. Things turn south when parents’ dreams dominate children’s realities. It is the parent who always dreamed their child would be a piano virtuoso, maybe because they themselves never got a chance. So they send their child to piano lessons and organize scheduled practices every day. The only problem is that their child is dreaming something very different—maybe they want to be an astronaut or a football player or a fashion designer,
not a pianist. To have a good go of it, that child needs to claim their own dreams, and the parents need to put theirs to rest. So it is with a child and their gender, and later their sexuality. Both are their own possessions, no one else’s. Their dreams for themselves may be totally opposite to the ones their parents have been having for them. Maybe they will be boys who wear heels or girls who love girls, dreaming of the life that will unfold from there.

There is one simple rule to remember when our children come to us in all their gender creativity. These are not our dreams, but theirs. Parents’ work is to come to a place where they can embrace all their children’s dreams, even when they don’t match their own. When it comes to children’s gender, I have a saying: “It is not for us to tell, but for the children to say.” Our job is to listen, and to stop our own dreams from clouding our vision, thereby losing sight of what our children are trying to show us.

So one three-year-old boy sleeps in his princess dress every night, he loves it so much. He dreams wearing it. He dreams of himself wearing it. In that moment, we don’t know if that little boy will be grow up to be gay (which is the stereotypical fallback when we observe a boy who likes to do “girl” things). We don’t know if he will discover that he is transgender. We don’t know if he’ll just be a gender expansive, gender creative person all his life. What we do know right then is that happiness comes with getting to wear his princess dress, and that he is telling something very important about himself, all the while bucking the socially inscribed expectations, prescriptions, and proscriptions that dictate how boys should be and girls should be, if he is even aware of them. At that moment we can’t know where the path will lead. Only the child can dream it.
Our job is to let the child take the lead and see where it ends up. As adults, we can put up roadblocks or we can strew rose petals and love as we walk alongside our children on their gender paths.

The task of relinquishing our gender dreams and instead honoring the children’s is not always an easy one, and may come with inside contortions and outside snags along the way. Some relationships even fall apart in the process, especially when two parents can’t see eye to eye about their child’s gender or sexuality. To buttress ourselves during the process, we can just keep repeating this mantra: These are not our dreams, they are our child’s dreams.

**Compass in Hand, You’re Ready for the Journey**

If I am your roadmap, then Julie Tarney is your compass, guiding your path, starting on the very first page of the book, when two-year-old Harry questions Julie, “Momma . . . How do you know I’m a boy?” And they are off and running in a wonderful mother-son duo, with us following behind. I won’t give away the punch line, but suffice it to say that you are headed for a wonderful treat as Julie Tarney invites us to come along on her journey from birth to maturity with Harry, as she moves as a parent from “clueless to kickass,” never leaving her son’s side for a moment as he carves his path with her support. As you read, you will also witness a little boy growing up weaving his own gender web as he goes, in the most creative of ways, affirming both his gender self and his sexual identity. Harry doesn’t just wear heels, he challenges us to rethink all of our stereotypes of boy, girl, man, woman, who they are, and who they love. And all the while, Julie Tarney provides the voice-over of what it is like to be the mother on the journey.
Foreword

When I was a child, I loved to watch Hit Parade (I divulge my age here). Every week I waited for them to sing, “When I was just a little girl / I asked my mother, ‘What will I be? / Will I be pretty, will I be rich?’ / Here’s what she said to me, / ‘Que sera, sera. / Whatever will be, will be. / The future’s not ours to see. / Que sera, sera.’” And then Doris Day was singing it every day on the radio. “Will I be pretty?” was a trope offered to any girl growing up in America, still is. But if I were to change the words to fit the changing terrain of twenty-first-century life with our moving boulders of gender, children may be asking their mothers, and fathers as well, “Will I be female?” “Will I be male?” “Will I be straight?” “Will I be gay?,” and their mothers, and fathers, will croon, with love, acceptance, and anticipation, “Que sera, sera. / Whatever will be, will be.” And I can hear Julie Tarney as the lead singer.

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My Son Wears Heels
July 4th at Crystal Lake, Wisconsin