

# *No turning back:*

## *Male to female transgender journeys of getting through tough times*

**By Aya Okumura**

Aya lives in Oakland, California, and works as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at her small private practice office and at a clinic in San Francisco. You can contact Aya via email: [aya\\_narrative@hotmail.com](mailto:aya_narrative@hotmail.com)

Female-to-male transgendered people face many challenges during their journeys of gender transition. These challenges can be all the more complex if transgendered people are simultaneously negotiating complexities of culture as well as gender. But along with these challenges also come celebrations, connections, and community. This paper describes the stories of five Asian and Pacific Islander transgendered women, and offers some questions which narrative practitioners may find useful to help trace the histories of transgender people's skills and knowledges in moving through their unique journeys.

Keywords: transgendered people / transgenders, gender transition

What is the experience of people moving through gender transitions? How are the challenges during this journey negotiated? These stories are not usually available in the world – and the stories of transgenders who are of non-white cultural backgrounds are even more invisible. This paper records interviews I conducted with five Asian and Pacific Islander male-to-female transgendered people: Nikki, Connie, Melenie, Noelle, and Tatiana. In doing this, I hoped to create an archive of these journeys of transition, and explore the challenges and tough times faced during this transformation.

I believe that people are on their own personal journeys in life, and everyone I interviewed for this project has shared part of their journey with me. The conversations in this project travel down paths that many people will not usually have a chance to explore. I hope that, by sharing our conversations, the skills and knowledge these people used to navigate their way through challenges and tough times can be honoured. I also hope that, by documenting some of these skills and knowledge, we can make some contributions for other travellers as they continue along their life journeys. As Tatiana describes below, 'People should know more stories about us. There are not just sad stories.'

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE JOURNEY

This section outlines the way I began each of our interviews, and the main guiding questions I used.

### Starting the conversation and questions

I'd like for you to think about your life as a journey. Think about the experiences you have had and the directions you have travelled. I'd like for you to focus most on the transitions you have gone through in your life.

1. As you look back on this journey, do you feel that you have been on the path towards being the person you would prefer to be?

### Beginning of the journey

2. Do you remember when you began your journey towards living the life you wanted? Where and how did this journey start?
3. What were the first steps of this journey?

4. How did you take these steps?
5. Was there anyone who introduced this journey to you? Where, what, who?
6. What were the hopes you had for this journey?
7. What does it say about yourself that you took these steps?

### During the journey

8. What difficulties have you overcome on this journey?
9. Have you ever thought about turning back?
10. How did you overcome difficulties?
11. What made you continue the journey? What has sustained you during the journey?
12. What skills and knowledge did you build up to get through tough times?
13. Why were they important to you?
14. Could you tell me about some history of these skills and knowledge?
15. Who would be least surprised to hear that you have these skills and knowledges?
16. Could you tell me about this person? What are the person's contributions to your life?
17. What did those mean to you?
18. What is your guess about your contributions to this person's life?
19. What is your guess about the meaning of your contributions to this person?
20. What would they say now about your continuing to take this journey?

### Tips for the other travellers

21. If you were to meet someone beginning a journey similar to the one that you are on now, what would you tell them to bring with them on the journey?

Along with using these broad questions, I asked other questions to bring about a fuller understanding of each person's unique experiences. Each of the accounts that follow were generated from the interviewees' responses to the questions listed above.

## BEING MAHUWAHINE AND KEEPING MY CULTURE ALIVE

### Melenie's journey

I started my journey when I was sixteen years old. Right before my father passed away, I told my father that I would live my life as a woman. This happened in the dining room at my house. We just sat and talked. I remember that I was crying because I did not expect my father to be so okay with it. The only thing he said was that, no matter what I do in my life, I should pay my own way through life. So I started working at age sixteen.

My first step in the journey toward making the transition was moving out from my house because of a lot of trauma. The next steps were talking with a counsellor at my school, and seeking out support, because I planned to go back to school in my new role as a young woman. I started thinking about my new name about a year or more before returning to school, and decided my name would be Melenie. My sister, who was also transitioning into a woman, thought that I should wait for my transition until after school, but I could not wait. I had some friends in a community who had been already transitioned and they were available for me. Other transgender women were always willing to help, since they already knew about transitional issues.

Hawaiian culture is more conducive to this happening than any other westernised culture. Transition is viewed as normal in Hawaiian culture. But because of the westernised influence in Hawaiian culture, my family found it hard to accept my transition. What made it even more difficult was that my family was being asked to accept not just my transition but my sister's at the same time.

Nowadays, many more people are transitioning, but still more work needs to be done in regard to acceptance and other issues. It is more accepted in Hawaii because of the movement for *mahuwahine* (transgender woman) and *mahu* culture. There were not many problems for this type of transition back in the old days in Hawaii. The newer western laws now make things more difficult. Not every state in the US allows you to have documentation that identifies you as a female. So there is still a lot of work to be done.

When I was seventeen years old, my hope for my journey was to become 'complete', meaning to

complete surgery and become a woman. I really wanted to have the surgery that was going to give me everything a genetic female has. Now I look at this as not being about the sex change. There is no such thing as surgery that can automatically change who you are. All that changes from surgery will be my genitalia.

Having a strong will keeps me going on my journey. I believe that I am very determined. Transitioning is just a part of my journey. After the transition, there is still life. If I were a puzzle composed of one hundred pieces, the transition would be one piece of me, but there are ninety-nine pieces left. Other things like education and career are also part of the puzzle, and they take determination to do as well. As a Hawaiian, having the ability to attune to spirituality is also very important in my life.

All my ancestors are always here with me. They are part of my inner circle. And they are aware of the skills I have that I don't talk about with anyone else. They are aware, although I also think that they sometimes would say, 'Okay, you have these skills, but you are not using them all the time and you need to. You need to use those skills in order for you to continue with what you are doing on your path and in your life.'

I never knew my grandparents; I lost them at an early age. But if I really believe that they are here with me, it really doesn't matter what time they had with me here on the earth because I can still draw on them. So, I have my father, and my grandmother and grandfather and their parents, and all of them – the whole lineage. If we have ancestors with us all the time, that is the *whole line*. It's not just a generation or two – it's a big family! So you should never feel alone or lonely.

For me, I know that my ancestors understand that the transgender journey is very special. They know that to be *mahuwahine* is a part of our culture. We are creative people, and we are the educators in our culture. Children are our future, and we need to share and instil our knowledge, heritage, and culture in them, for them to pass it along in turn. Transgender people in our culture, *mahuwahine*, were philosophers. They taught children about dance, culture, language, legends. They took care of the community. They were healers. They were very special people in the

community, and maintained the culture and society's wellbeing and succession. Knowing that I am very special and that I can be a philosopher and educator makes me feel proud, but it is also a big responsibility because I want to succeed in helping keep my culture alive.

I could not tell new travellers on the journey what to bring with them, since they are very different and what I did may not be relevant for them. But I could tell them to bring their family with them in spirit, as they are always with you. Bring your honour, love to yourself, self-acceptance, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Bring the knowledge of other people in this world, but try to keep and maintain who you are and don't compromise yourself. Love yourself and hopefully seek help from others who are already on the path. It is about being able to share. But you shape your own journey and you determine your path.

## **FROM SCHOOL PLAYS TO TRANSGENDER PERFORMER**

### **Nikki's journey**

My journey started when I was about five or six. I was spoiled when I grew up and, because of this, I grew up thinking that nothing was impossible! When I was young, I was interested in the creative aspects of life such as food, clothes, and entertainment. I learned quickly about fashion, and always kept up with trends.

I went to an exclusive, private all boys Catholic school in the Philippines. The Catholic Church has a very big influence in the lives of almost every Filipino. While I was at the school, I managed to find some friends, because they all acted feminine and different. Sometimes, we performed very traditional Filipino folk dances, which required us to have female roles and dance female parts. These dances were not fully tolerated, but since it was an all-boys' school and it was for performance purposes, they were allowed. These performances helped me to see who I was, but I had already known this for a long time – I had desired to have smooth skin, long hair, and dress in a more 'feminine' way for much of my life.

The biggest thing I did was to move out from my house and from my country. That's when I had more freedom – freedom to do whatever I wanted to

do! I moved from the Philippines to San Francisco when I was about twenty-two.

At that time, I was an adventurous person. I wanted to explore things. From a young age, I was the type of person who explored something and got into trouble. I did not mind taking the consequences. I have overcome a lot of difficulties and tough times. The tools and knowledge to help me go through difficulties include determination, my ability to act adventurously, and being a 'strategic planner'.

When I have faced difficulties recently, this determination encouraged me to go back to my original ideas and plans of what I really wanted to do. I have never thought about turning back. I have no regrets in my life, and life goes on. Starting all over would not be right for me. Things are all doable even if sometimes they may take a bit longer time to complete.

Today, I am a very public figure in the community, as an educator and a performer. I think my main contribution to the community is to let people know that a person like me exists – someone who identifies as a trans-woman and who is capable of doing things. And my community appreciates me for fighting to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. My passion for this issue began out of sadness I felt when I saw many people losing the roof over their heads due to the disease. My own experience of once not having a permanent place to live moved me to strongly believe that no-one deserves to be roofless under any circumstance.

My hopes and dreams right now are to nurture myself more, and to bestow my knowledge onto other people. I would like to tell people who are starting on their journey to bring with them their confidence and determination to move towards what they really would like to have in their life. Confidence comes from using your common sense and making sense of your experiences.

## **HONOURING THE PAST; LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

### **Connie's journey**

When I was a child, in Laos, I thought I should be like my sister, a woman. Even outside, playing and just hang out with other kids, sometimes I thought I was a woman. People always mentioned that I was different, and I didn't fit in with other

kids. When people ask me how old was I when I realised, I think that it is the wrong question, because it has been always there.

As a child, I could not focus on what my future was. I couldn't focus on my goal in life. I was very depressed and mostly lonely, because there was nobody around who looked like me and thought like I did. Even my family could not call me a woman. They would say that I was not supposed to be like that. Instead, I had to be tough, be a man. At the time, it was easy and natural to act like that. I had a big family, and stayed with my family during those first years, and I am glad that my family gave me a lot of support in their own way.

My family would tell me that 'whoever you are, do not let people put you down'. When I was growing up with my sisters, they taught me how to organise, how to clean, and how to cook. But I did not know what I wanted to do. I went to school, but it was hard for me to take it seriously. What was more serious to me were questions like: 'Why I don't have freedom?' or 'Why do people always try to pull me this way and that way?' I was confused.

Many of my transgender friends in Laos were abused and left their families. That is what transgender persons go through. Sometimes, though, being transgender is accepted because it is funny. It is just like a pageant, or a kind of entertainment. But generally the family will try to cover it up and not admit it. So kids like me just fake it. We try hard to fit in.

For example, I remember that I wanted to have a body shape like my sister. When no-one was around, I would put on my sister's dress and look at myself in the mirror, and perform a show. But I had to hurry to put the dress back before someone would come back home. I remember there was one time when, as a child, I showed one of my sisters how I dressed up in her clothes. But in adulthood, I told nobody. That is, until I moved to San Francisco. I never imagined being who I have become until I came here.

Moving to San Francisco was a big step for me. I was not sure whether it was the right or wrong thing to do. I was so far away from my family. But I met friends who dressed up as women and they dressed me up. Finally, I no longer felt that I needed to hide this. I suddenly discovered that I was not the only one who liked to dress up!

And gradually I began to feel that there was nothing wrong with it. The responses I got from other people were compliments and support and this made a big difference.

I am proud to be who I am today. These days, my family accepts me, and I am proud to be carrying on my family's pride and dignity. I know that I am not perfect, I honestly confront others, I help out and share things with others, and I try hard to be healthy and happy. These are the skills I use to deal with difficulties. I use them every day.

Given the experiences I had as a child, I particularly care a lot about my younger family members. I have a very close niece, Linda, who lives in Florida who I talk with every week. We share a lot of stories about our lives. Sharing my life story with her is very important to me. I think of Linda as being the holder of my life story.

To new travellers on their journey, I would say: 'Don't forget your past'. Remembering how you were in the past and comparing your life to it now, can make things better in the present. Knowing how much you have grown and how much more you still have to go is important for the journey.

## **I AM NOT THAT DIFFERENT**

### **Noelle's journey**

For many, many years, especially when I was young, I had many questions in my mind: 'Why am I like this and different?' 'What is my purpose in life?' From around age six or seven, I just knew that I was different. I remember that I was referred to as a 'feminine boy'. Then when I became a teenager, it started to be more obvious. I had two other brothers, and through the years I could notice their physical changes and see them becoming more masculine. Although I tried everything they were doing to build my body, such as eating right and working out, this did not do anything for me. My thinking, behaviour, and my mannerisms remained feminine.

I was also hanging out with more girls than boys because I did not want to get into rough play with the other boys. When I hung out with boys, they always poked fun at me because I stood out. When I was a teenager, boys treated me as a female and not like one of them. On the one hand I didn't like what they were doing, but on the other hand I liked it when nice boys treated me like one of the girls.

The questions kept coming: 'Where should I put myself? Am I one of the girls or one of the boys?' This was very difficult to go through, and it was very difficult for my family also. I was oldest of the brothers and, according to my culture, as an oldest son you are supposed to carry on your family name. It was especially difficult for my father to accept what I was becoming, since this went against what was expected of me.

When I started college, things started to become a bit clearer. I remember thinking, 'I know that I am more female. I know that I am a female.' So I began to educate myself and my family. It took many years. I started to educate myself using documented literature, video, audio, and books. I read a lot. At first, this journey was challenging and difficult as no-one from my family gave me support. They had been influenced by the idea in my culture that 'This is something families do not talk about'. This meant that initially I was on an 'alone-journey'. But I met other people along the way! Gradually it became kind of like picking up friendly hitch-hikers! And eventually, once I had educated myself, I then shared the books and videos with my family. I told my family that 'We will deal with this together'.

People talk about differences between those who are transgender and those who are not, but overall I feel that I am not that different from anyone else. One of my goals for my life is to let everybody and my family know that I am not different from anyone, and all the labels attached to me previously, such as 'gay' and 'feminine', are irrelevant to who I am as an individual, and as a person. I want to let people know that the things that they can do, I can do. I can overcome challenges that anyone else can go through.

I believe that I am a stronger person for taking this journey. I am walking out into life with my head held up high, with no shame. I know that I don't have to explain anything to anybody. I wish, though, that I could have a bigger voice to explain things when people ask questions and make negative comments. People, especially young people, still come up to me and degrade me, and make very negative comments in public. Depending on the situation, I ignore the comments, but if there is some chance for me to educate them, I welcome the opportunity. My philosophy of life is to continue

to educate people, and to help minimise violence. This is not just to benefit the community of gay, lesbian, and transgender people, but to benefit everyone. Equality in this world is important to me.

I acquired my skills and knowledge of 'not giving up on my life' from bad experiences. And now I use these skills and knowledge to pursue what I really want in life. This is like a promise that I made to myself long ago. This promise is for myself, for my family, and for the rest of the world. This promise has enabled me to keep going on this journey.

## **HOLDING MY MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS IN MY DREAMS**

### **Tatiana's journey**

My journey started when I was ten years old, and my parents acknowledged that I was different. I was different from my other ten brothers as I was more clingy to my sisters than my brothers. I also did house cleaning and cooking with my sisters while my brothers were in the field playing football. When I was ten years old, my mother told my father that I would be a *mahu* which is a Hawaiian term for a gay person. I never identified myself as a gay person, but I wanted to be acknowledged as a person who would like to be a woman.

At the age of ten, my sisters dressed me up in girl's clothes and I enjoyed it. Although my sisters did not think that anything was wrong for me to be tender and timid, some of my brothers had some issues around my ways of being. When I was twelve years old, my school counsellors thought that it would be a good idea for me to go to an all-boys' camp to help me move towards being like the other boys. While it didn't help me to become like them, I certainly liked being there! For me it was like I was in heaven!

Then in the seventh grade, I and two other friends got together to talk with our physical education teacher about how we would like not to play football. The teacher agreed, and let us stay out of the football practices. Then, me and my two friends decided to become cheerleaders instead of just resting under a tree! Before I got to the point of talking with the teacher, I first talked with my parents, and asked them to be my allies. I also made a point of getting good grades and not cutting

classes, so that my teachers would consider me to be a good student.

Finally, in the eighth grade, my teacher encouraged me to be on the varsity cheerleading team! I again talked with my parents about this. My father told me to do whatever I felt like, and just to not disgrace our family name. However, my brothers who were coaches of the high school football and basketball teams tried to convince me not to do it. It was a hard thing for me to convince my brothers. I got scolding, lickings, and hit by a chair. I told myself that I needed to prove that I could do this. The day I went out onto the floor to try out for the team, my siblings were there to watch me. Right after the performance I ran out of the gym, got to my house, and hid under my bed. I was afraid of my brothers' reactions. Then I heard my brother asking my mother where I was, and saying how great I was, and that he needed to hug me! He said to me: 'You were fabulous and you were the best among the ten girls. The whole school was talking about you!' That was the last time I got called names or was hit by my brothers.

My grandmother introduced me to this journey. My grandmother knew that I would be different, and that I would be a *mahu*. My hope for my journey was that I would have a more beautiful heart. I now know that I am special because I have become a model to many transgenders on the island. I realise that I am loved by a lot of people.

The biggest difficulty I overcame was my fear of the surgery needed to make me completely female. I had not had much experience of surgery, and it was very scary. In order to prepare for the sex-change operation I tried to remember three years ago, when I had my breast implants. When I woke up after that surgery, it was done and I did not have any pain. So I told myself that: 'If I could do that, I can do this too'.

What really made me feel good and comfortable about my sex change was my consultation with the surgeon. He told me: 'All the Hawaiian girls who have come to me had good energy, and I want you to know that this is 30% of the healing process'. I was taken by his words because I heal myself from dancing. I knew what he meant when he was talking about calm energy and good energy.

The day before the surgery though, I thought: 'Oh, I am never going to be a boy again'. Crying and

fear came again. I meditated and calmed myself and called my mum and my grandmother to be there with me in spirit. I knew that by holding their hands in my dreams, I would be comfortable. When I do that I know that I can walk ten more miles.

After three days of surgery, I was lying in the hospital bed, and I just cried because I was so happy. I was very thankful to all the women who had been role models in my life: my sisters, my mother, my grandmother, and my best friend. These are all inspiring people who actually said: 'Go ahead and do it'. I was lying there thinking: 'I am finally one of them'. I would never turn back or give up this lifestyle for anything! Not even for a million dollars.

My grandmother was the most beautiful person in the world and I am sorry that I did not spend more time with her. She passed when I was about ten years old. She actually left me a haunting memory in words she said to me. She said, 'Baby, when you wake up in the morning, you ask yourself what kind of day you would like to have'. I asked her how this was going to work. And she said that every morning she would say to herself 'It's going to be a beautiful day'. I always thought that she was a strong woman, but when I grew older and reflected on all the things she said to me throughout my childhood, I realised that she was awesome! She had great skill and an ability to get through difficulties and tough times, and now I use these same skills for my own healing. My experience of coming from an island and a huge family where we lived with nothing also helped me. I can live with nothing again, because I already know what it feels like. I believe that when you do not have money, whatever you give is richer than anything money can offer. I also know that you cannot buy respect or love from people; you have to earn it. I believe that these skills and knowledge are important to me and are helping me to be who I am today.

If I were to talk to new travellers going on this same journey, I would tell them to follow their heart and make sure that their thoughts and mind are together for the transition. I also think that staying focussed is important since this type of journey has a lot of bumps along the road. This is a fabulous journey but you have to focus. And when you look back on the journey you have taken it is all worth it. My hope now is to raise children. In the future,

I would like to open an orphanage somewhere in an Asian country. This would be just like bringing people together and building a bigger *Ohana* (family).

## THANK YOU LETTERS/OUTSIDER-WITNESS FORMAT LETTERS

After the conversations/interviews with Nikki, Connie, Melenie, Noelle, and Tatiana, I decided to write thank-you letters to them. I was wondering what format I should use to write the letters, and I came up with the idea of using an outsider-witness format (Russell & Carey 2003). Here is an example of the letters I wrote:

Dear Tatiana,

Thank you very much for sharing the story of your journey. I felt very grateful to know more about your transition and the courage you showed while going through difficulties. I also enjoyed picturing you getting an award for cheerleading. Actually, you cheered me up by telling me your story!

I was particularly drawn to your relationship with your grandmother, how she knew you were different from other children/grandchildren, and how she taught you to start each day by saying, 'It is going to be a beautiful day'.

I had an image of you in the beautiful island of Kauai with your grandmother. You are really listening to her and observing her healing practices. I see the strong bond between you and your grandmother. I was wondering what she would say about you and your journey now. What would she say about you starting your day by saying 'It is going to be a beautiful day'? I also wonder what it means for her to know you learned a lot of your healing practices from her.

I was struck by your relationship with your grandmother because of my relationship to my grandmother. Over time, I have realised how much I learned from her as well. I remember that my grandmother also struggled in dealing with her husband's behaviour like your grandmother did, and she taught me how she dealt with it. She taught me a lot of practical

things and different ways of looking at life. For example, if I dropped an egg on the floor, she would say something like, 'It must have been time for you to clean up the floor. Now you will have a beautifully clean floor.' So, instead of focusing on me dropping the egg, she made it easier and more meaningful to clean up messes. You reminded me of all the knowledge and skills that my grandmother passed to me. Now I also have the wisdom of your grandmother. Your grandmother's voice will remain with me. I've started to tell myself, 'It is going to be a beautiful day!'

I value your story because I now have more appreciation about what my grandmother and other ancestors have taught me. They gave me their skills and knowledge of how to go through difficult times. When I think about all the skills and knowledge passed onto me through the generations, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestors. Knowing that I have their wisdom with me makes me feel more confident about my ability to get through difficulties in the future.

Again, thank you very much for your time and your contribution to my life.

Love,  
Aya.

## REFLECTING ON THIS PROJECT

When most people think about San Francisco and its surrounding cities, they may think that the Bay Area is the most liberal place in the world. They also may think that the people here all live together well, although there are many ethnic, cultural, language, sexual orientation, and other differences. A lot of people know San Francisco as the gay capital of the United States. This story is true.

And yet, in October 2002, Gwen Araujo, a seventeen-year-old transgender female was murdered by three young men. She was beaten to death and her body was found in a shallow grave one hundred miles away. She lived only thirty miles away from San Francisco where most people think that people are more open to differences.

In September 2005, nearly three years after her murder, some justice was finally achieved and two people were convicted of second-degree murder. During the two-year trial, two juries argued that Gwen was responsible for her own murder.

Many transgender females and males are still the subject of discrimination and injustice. As Melenie mentioned in our conversation, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to ensure the safety and the ability to have equal living situations even in San Francisco, this 'capital of liberalism'.

Throughout this project, I have heard stories from those who have transitioned about the critical importance of connection with other 'sisters' and for community support during the journey. Because of this realisation, I now have more appreciation towards people who assist newer travellers on this journey. Since all the people I interviewed are in a prominent position in their community, I became more curious about what moved them to take on this position. Why did they decide to be a public figure? Do they feel a sense of responsibility to be in this position? Did they have a choice not to take on this role? How do they feel about being a public figure? How did they prepare themselves for this? What steps did they take to do this? Who encouraged them to do it? I now have so many new questions to ask them!

I also wonder how non-transgender people, like me, can work together to create safe, fair, and comfortable living in this world for everyone. I was born as a female, raised as a female and live as a female, and am aware of my privilege compared to a transgender female. How can we support each other as 'females' (even though we have differences) and work together towards more equality in this world? I believe that females of all description are still the subject of marginalisation and oppression in many parts of this world. There is still a lot of work that needs to be done towards equality and justice.

## CULTURE

While I was interviewing people and writing this paper, I realised how much western culture has strongly influenced other parts of the world regarding transgender transition. In Hawaii, the population of *mahuwahine* was traditionally more accepted and carried respected and specific roles in their culture. However, once the laws of the United

States dominated the Islands of Hawaii, *mahuwahine* and the broader culture suffered from the new regulations.

In the Philippines, the Catholic religion has made a big influence in the lives of transgender people. I remain curious how transgender people were treated before Christianity came into the islands of the Philippines. When Connie left her country of Laos, there may have been less western influences compared to Hawaii and Philippines, but I wonder how transgenders were treated back in the old days in Laos. In my home country, Japan, I wonder how transgenders were treated historically? I only know that they were very accepted in the theatres when they performed female roles, but I do not know much about how they were treated in the general population. I would like to learn more about the place of transgender people in different cultures, over different times. It seems that this area of how culture influences and is in relationship with transgender issues, is one in which we need more education. I guess we will learn most from the knowledge of people who are living transgender lives in different contexts and cultures.

## FINAL THOUGHTS – RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY AND 'FAMILY'

Tatiana, my caring and loving sister, has always welcomed people into her life with smiles. I felt a great honour when she invited me to visit her home in Kauai, Hawaii, and have cherished the ways in which she has included me as a part of her family for more than a few years now. When I was in Kauai, I witnessed how her family loves her and accepts her as who she is. Almost every one of her family members knows that her somatic (bodily) sex was male when she was born, but she is warmly accepted as female.

Whenever and wherever she goes around her home island, everyone seems to know her and greet her with familiar smiles. They also all seem to accept her as who she is. I was very curious how she made herself so comfortable being who she is, and how it was that she had built such connections in her local community. It was because I was inspired by Tatiana's example that I decided to collect the stories of the journeys of people who had experienced gender transition.

Since then, these people have become not only

friends, but also great supporters, and powerful models for me in my own life. I remain curious about how it is that people who have often been so marginalised choose to make such strong connections with others – not just in creating community with other transgendered people, but in being so welcoming of people outside these communities. What does it mean that when families have often been so disqualifying, transgendered people can create their own families and communities? What is it about connectedness and community that they hold dear, and how does this touch the lives of others? What might it mean if non-transgendered people also worked to build ‘communities of concern’ in similar ways? These questions inspire and encourage me to not only find ways to continue to honour the stories of transgendered people, but to seek opportunities for connection in the broader communities in which I find myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge many people who supported me through this project. First, of course, Nikki, Connie, Melenie, Noelle, and Tatiana, for making it possible by sharing their stories of their journey. Thanks also to: the members of ‘Ladies of Passion’ for the night of Hula; David Denborough for the inspiration for the project, and consultation; Lisa Berndt for the weekly consultation and reflection; Ippei Yasuda, Kaori Kasai, and Yasutoshi Hirayama for emotional support by daily checking in

over the phone and telling me ‘*Gambatte!*’ (Japanese for ‘do your best’); Makiko Ueda for covering our small office during my absence; Janet Gee for physical comfort and relaxation by teaching me healing and Chinese martial arts; Motoko Okumura and Takashi Okumura for financial support to attend the International Narrative Therapy Training Course; and, finally, Rich Johnson for correcting my English without complaining, and all the generous emotional support through the project. *Mahalo, kob chie, salamat, arigato*, and thank you very much.

## REFERENCES AND RELATED READING

- Russell, S. & Carey, M. (2003) ‘Outsider-witness practices: Some answers to commonly asked questions.’ *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1:3-16. Republished 2004 in Russell, S. & Carey, M. (eds): *Narrative therapy: Responding to your questions*, pp. 63-90 (chapter 4). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Benestad, E. E. P. 2001: ‘Gender belonging: Children, adolescents, adults and the role of the therapist.’ *Gecko: a journal of deconstruction and narrative ideas in therapeutic practice*, 1:56-80. Republished 2002 in Denborough, D. (ed): *Queer counselling and narrative practice* (chapter 27), pp. 204-225. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Lev, A. I. (2004). *Transgender emergence: Therapeutic guidelines for working with gender-variant people and their families*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Nestle, J., Howell, C., & Wilchins, R. (2002). *GenderQueer: Voices from beyond the sexual binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications.
- Wilchins, R. (2004). *Queer theory/gender theory: An instant primer*. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications.