

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2010, Non-Fiction Winner

By Joy Fisher

How Could Anyone Ever Tell You You Were Anything Less Than Beautiful?

“Carol’s dead,” my friend Anna told me over the phone. “She killed herself.”

Shocked, I wondered what could have impelled this woman to suicide. Carol had survived so much in her life that I knew it couldn’t have been the act of a quitter.

Once my shock subsided, memories of Carol began to surface. I’d met her in 2005 when a handful of us were struggling to organize an Interweave chapter for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members of the Unitarian-Universalist Society of Sacramento. Carol began coming to our meetings. She was a tall, raw-boned, but impeccably stylish, woman who often dressed in soft pink to accentuate her white hair and blue eyes. She had reached her “golden years” and was ready to lend a helping hand to others. Carol made herself useful, staffing our booth at the local gay pride festival. I was grateful to our new heterosexual ally for her support.

It didn’t occur to me at first that Carol was one of us, and, at first, she didn’t own up to it. Eventually, however, I learned that Carol was a pioneer, a male-to-female transsexual who had transitioned in the 1970s, when it took great courage and was costly in every sense of the word. Not only had she paid for her surgeries out-of-pocket, but she had lost her family. She had fathered two daughters when she was still trying to fit into the world as a man, and both had cut off contact when “Charlie” became “Carol.”

She had caught a few breaks, though. In those days, she was working as a manager at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. She had been an electrical engineer, part of a team that developed the communications system for the Mars Rover. One of her favourite stories was how she’d gotten approval from her boss to get her name changed on official NASA records. Still dressed as a man, she walked into his office carrying her medical files and official records. While her boss read them, she waited for his reaction. Finally, he’d looked up, surveyed her in her man’s suit, and said, “Well, I guess you’ve got a lot of clothes shopping to do.”

By the time I met Carol, she was retired, living in Elk Grove, south of Sacramento, California. She hadn’t found the “man of her dreams,” but she hadn’t given up

hope. The reason Carol hadn't owned up to being a transsexual when she first started attending Interweave was that she didn't want that information to get back to the rest of the congregation. She was afraid it might scare away "Mr. Right." Once she came out to us, we agreed to keep her secret. We were "out and proud," but we were willing to give Carol her chance at happiness.

Carol had a keen intellect and an understated, acerbic sense of humour. One of her characteristic comments, when giving praise, was: "That is absolutely—adequate!" Sometimes I wondered, though, whether Carol believed she herself was adequate. After I'd known her for about a year, Carol told me she was going to have cosmetic surgery. She wanted to "soften" her cheek bones and jaw line. As a second-wave lesbian-feminist who'd given up make-up decades before, it was hard for me to understand Carol's concerns about her appearance. She looked fine to me just as she was.

After that conversation, Carol was gone for awhile. When she came back, I greeted her and asked, "Hey, Carol when are you going in for your surgery?" As soon as I asked, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake: Carol looked as though I'd slapped her.

"I've already had it," she replied, finally. "I stayed away until all the bruising healed."

I felt like an insensitive jerk. I hadn't noticed any difference in her appearance.

Carol forgave me, but I never quite forgave myself. Over the years, I have realized that Carol and I were more alike than I ever thought. More than anything else, we both wanted to present our authentic selves to the world and be recognized for the persons we felt we were. For me, that meant taking off the dresses, make-up and bras that were part of the image expected of women in our culture; for Carol, it meant putting them on. In everything she did, including the cosmetic surgery, Carol tried to bring her outer self into harmony with the woman she felt herself to be on the inside.

Not long after that incident, I moved to Canada. Sometimes I would hear about Carol from Unitarian friends. In 2008, Carol's photographs were exhibited at the Unitarian Society. My friend Anna, also an accomplished photographer, took pictures of Carol for the event. Anna told me she had two sittings before Carol found a pose she was satisfied with. I wasn't surprised. Anna emailed me copies of the posters used to advertise the show; I was awed by the quality of Carol's work. One friend, more articulate than I, said that Carol had a gift for selecting the enduring aspect of each object she photographed. That's because she's endured so much herself, I thought.

In 2009, during the Christmas holidays, I heard that Carol had been in a serious car accident and was in hospital. A mutual friend, Mary, told me Carol was travelling in heavy traffic on Interstate 80, one of the main freeways through Sacramento, when traffic ahead slowed down abruptly. Carol managed to stop her car in time to avoid serious collision with the car ahead, but a bus slammed into her from behind. She was wearing her seat belt; her body snapped backward, breaking two vertebrae in her neck. She couldn't move her arms or legs.

The surgeon operated on Carol all night. He replaced her shattered vertebrae with cadaver bone, but he didn't expect her to live and thought, if she did live, she would be a quadriplegic. He instructed staff to contact him if there were any signs of movement. Before he left the hospital parking lot, his cell phone rang. Carol was moving her arms and legs. While she was in rehab, Carol started walking. The doctor told her, "You're my miracle patient!"

Mary asked Carol whether she would like to contact her daughters, but Carol declined. What she lacked in family, Carol found in friends. Her hospital room was filled with cards, flowers and visitors. She told Mary, "I can't believe how many people care for me!" She felt there must be a reason why she'd survived, and she was determined to discover it.

The surgeon had operated from the front, through her throat, so Carol couldn't swallow. She was told she couldn't be released until she could. Carol didn't want to stay in hospital. They weren't giving her hormones, so her facial hair had started growing again; she was mortified. Mary brought her an electric razor, but Carol wanted to go home. With the help of an attorney, Carol arranged for 24-hour nursing care at her own expense. This satisfied hospital staff. They inserted a "tummy tube" so Carol could be fed, and home she went.

Mary saw Carol frequently. She was receiving speech therapy to help her learn to swallow. She was scheduled to do a final swallow test right after Easter. If she passed, the tummy tube would be removed and Carol would be able to eat again. The worst would be over.

On Good Friday, Carol's speech therapist made a house call. Carol was doing well; the therapist believed she would have no trouble passing the swallow test. Later that morning, Mary called. Carol sounded upbeat during the conversation, but, 10 minutes later, Carol called the police and told them she was going to kill herself and she didn't want her neighbours to find her body. When the police arrived, they found Carol dead

on her bed. She had shot herself three times, once on either side of her body, the third time in the head. She had placed a pillow on the opposite side of her head before firing so as not to make a mess. Her purse and address book lay beside her so she could be identified and her friends notified.

What was it that had pushed Carol, after all she had endured, beyond the limits of endurance? Mary tried to puzzle it out. In the end, she gave up. "I have learned I don't have to know why she did it," she told me. "She knew why."

More than a hundred people attended Carol's memorial service. Carol's photography and painting were on display, along with some of her NASA plaques.

They played her favourite song, "Over the Rainbow," and the congregation sang one of my favourite Unitarian hymns: "How Could Anyone Ever Tell You You Were Anything Less than Beautiful?"

I wish I'd been there to sing it to Carol. I wish she'd been there to hear it.