

[Your Parents Names], you both are very important to me, and I don't know how to say enough how appreciative I am to you two for doing the job of raising [Your Name]. That's why I'm writing to share with you this because I love and trust you.

I love being blunt so, I'll just say it; I'm a trans woman. My pronouns are she/her and I'm going by Amber Field now. Well, actually Amber Flannery Field. I have already started the process of transitioning and am about three months into hormone replacement therapy. I think I took my first dose of estrogen the day before that Zoom meeting we had with [Your Name], I'm bad with time.

For now I will say that I'm happy, I'm healthy, and I have an incredible support group of my friends, my church, and the NYC Queer community. Originally I also had "my girlfriend" on the list but she dumped me midway through writing this letter, lol. I'm receiving mental health services and medical monitoring (from this amazing doctor with sleeve tattoos and is a drummer in a band and cusses in front of me) to make sure that this process happens in the safest, healthiest way possible. I didn't really ask for this to happen to me, and it's a decision I absolutely don't take lightly (in fact, while it might feel very sudden on the outside, this is a decision I took years to get to) but it is who I am and it's a thing that can't be changed.

In terms of talking to you, I've been around you, I trust you, I love all of you and I've known you all for about a decade and you all seem like pretty cool people. However, I don't know your day-to-day experience with trans people, so if it's ok with you I'll just start with the basics about trans stuff and then work my way up from there, even though if I had to guess you're probably more literate than a base understanding. If I'm explaining stuff you already know, then you could probably just skip to the last couple of paragraphs.

I guess I'll start by admitting transgender identity is something that is really confusing to people who don't experience it – and there are aspects of it I can't fully describe. I don't even think people need to understand everything about the trans experience other than just to respect our gender identity, use our preferred pronouns and names, and not be too weird or tense about things about when they mess up - I mean, people mess up names and genders of cis people all the time too, and it's just a faux pax. I had a friend point out that when people are overly apologetic to a trans person for messing up, it puts the emotional labor on the trans person to smooth out what's a minor social nicety.

And, I think this is a harder ask, I would like to ask those around me to look at me as a woman. That's ultimately a thing of trust. And I'm not a mind-reader, but I think when interacting with people, it is kind of easy to get a sense who they think they're talking to.

I recognized this in my job as a student tour director; in the job I care for a groups of 20-60 kids from out of state as they visit New York City for 3-8 days. They arrive by airport and I show them around the city and we stay in a disgusting hotel in Jersey at night, and I make sure they hit all the tourist destinations, learn how a city works, get home safe and don't drown to death in the hotel pool.

This means I'm always seeing new faces: I spend intimate time with hundreds of students and teachers in a year. And from that, I get a general sense that there are those who look at me as a woman and those who looks at me as a 'man in a dress.'

I dunno, it's so subtle, but I had one tour where one of my students would address me as "miss" every time and I could hear in her voice a sense of respect and understanding. The tour

after that one, I had two disruptive students who'd refer to me as "ma'am" with this sense of irony, mockery and discomfort.

Or, I had one tour where one of the chaperones kept accidentally referring me as "he" every single time, but then also this teacher never met a trans person before and so he didn't have a lot of experience, but he was also asking incredibly respectful, engaged questions about my experience and to me that communicated that he at least looks at me as a person of transition, even though he was getting my preferred pronouns wrong. And his misgendering was happening not because he was malicious, or didn't respect me, but because part of gender is it is a social reflex, and it's hard to work against that muscle memory.

But then later in the season, I had another teacher who'd refer to me as "she" to my face, but behind my back when he was talking to the other chaperones, I'd overhear him refer to me as "he" every single time. The second teacher struck me as more offensive than the first parent who never got it right and called me "he" every time, as the first guy gave me a lot of consideration to my experience and was fighting against immense cultural inertia, while the other only respected me to my face. And, of course, I think it's a hard ask to internalize that sort of thing. And it's a process, but by engaging me with the perspective that I'm a woman, it makes it easier not just for me, but for everybody.

Because you're understanding where I am in the world. If you meet someone who looks and speaks like they're American, but then you find out they're Canadian, it changes the framework of the conversation... slightly. When you talk to a Canadian and use the pronoun "we," it means something slightly different than when a American is in front of you. (When you say "We aren't a bunch of weird overly polite freaks that puts gravy on fries or have milk in bags," for example.)

This letter is primarily addressed to you, [Your Parents Names], because you're [Your Name]'s parents and you know him best and ultimately whatever or not to tell him about my situation is based on what you feel is best for his needs. I think it's especially tricky as [Your Name] – at least as I understand child development - is getting to the age where independence and belonging is important to him and when it comes to social groups of his age, there is social consequences to stepping outside of gender lines. I think that makes communicating stuff like gender to him a possibly delicate situation (but also can be easier! Kids are so understanding of these things!) and if you want to explain this stuff to him, I can provide behind the scenes support.

I think I do want to establish that going back to presenting as a man is not an option I can return to. There's something weird about dysphoria, where it's easy to ignore your entire life and you develop coping techniques for the constant imposition of trauma, and once the dysphoria is named, it just becomes existentially impossible to go back and face that trauma. Not living as my true self produces so much psychic (and physical!) pain on the body, and I just can't lie to the world like that anymore. And I think it's especially worth noting that even this early in transition, there are several permanent or semi-permanent changes that has happened that I...while I might not pass as a cis woman at this point but I certainly can't look like a man.

Anyways, just a little bit more on general trans stuff, in case you don't know – but I hope it doesn't need to be said transgender identity is not a fetish, a disorder, or a mental illness, and neither the full medical nor the full psychiatric communities think it is. Transgender people have existed throughout all of history and in all types of cultures – there was a Roman Emperor in the

year 300 A.D. who was trans. There are cultures ranging from the Hawaiians to the Vikings to Chinese to Indians that recognized gender variance as a part of their society. Often in pre-industrial times, intersexed and gender non-conforming people would take on roles of empathy in the community such as caretakers and doulas.

The first major scientific studies of the transgender phenomenon dates back to the 1930s; the majority of this research was unfortunately burned by the Nazis during their rise to power, which meant that transgender identity only recently feels like a “new” phenomenon because we only started catching up in the past 50 or so years.

Science's best current understanding is that it is probably a physiological feature of the brain. My doctor described a theory that, while in the womb, sometimes the receptors for hormones gets mixed up with the hormones the body ends up producing so some people are expecting estrogen their entire lives ends up with bodies making testosterone. And then you flip that for trans masc people and for non-binary people it's split somewhere or something.

And don't like using science to justify my identity, but I think it's worth saying that the current scientific consensus on gender is to look at it through a social lens instead of a “biological” lens, as our bodies and chemistry all vary so much that using a biological basis such as chromosomes, genitals, or hormones to understand gender is very ineffective. If genitals decide gender, what about intersexed people? If it's chromosomes that decide gender (like XX/XY), what about people with XXY or XYY chromosomes? If it's hormones, well, then what about women with PCOS, who have “male” levels of testosterone in their body and start developing male secondary sex characteristics?

Words are all metaphors, and all metaphors walk with a limp. “Gender,” “female” and “male” are our best attempts to comprehend an explosive biological phenomenon of who we are, and we can get close but the truth is that we can never capture the full reality of it in the way that there will never be enough words to describe what we mean to the people we love.

This weird ambiguous space for definitions is actually very common in science – for example, the study of trees is very important for society, but at the same time there is absolutely no scientific consensus for the definition of what a “tree” is, and in fact some of the mainstream, working definitions that scientists use are so broad they could include humans; so even this static, seemingly concrete, inherently biological thing like a “tree” relies on social construction for us to understand them.

I personally think establishing that there's massive scientific support about gender variance is important, especially to people who are sort of unfamiliar with the subject, but on a personal level I frame my gender variance as a more of a spiritual thing. I say this especially as a Quaker; our denomination of Christianity had trans and non-binary Quakers before America was even a country, and there are about a half dozen trans or gender non-conforming members in my current congregation. (We're a goofy religion full of hippie cultists.)

My faith and gender identity are deeply entwined. I don't talk about my faith a lot, not even in my letters to [Your Name], which I think are the most intimate and open I've ever been with someone, just because faith is such a deeply entrenched, feelings-based phenomenon, and I lack the words. But, to me, I abide by the Quaker ideology, which states that the Light of God is in everybody, and that means certain unbreakable concessions. I can't punch people, because that means I'm punching God. I need to listen intently to every person that talks to me, even if I feel they're dead wrong, as God speaks through all of us and the voice of God is the swirl of

contradictions of every voice who surround us. And I have to take care of those around me, because the Light of God is in them, and I have to serve them.

But this philosophy also means being true to myself. If God is infested in me, and my True Gender is a to be a woman, then it's a spiritual obligation to be true to what my body tells me to be. If God is infested in the bodies of all of those around us, and I'm obligated to serve them and give them power, then it's my job to be my most present, healthy self in order to achieve that task. And I would even go far to say that "gender" as a word and institution is like "God" as a word and institution. So much of Christianity hinges on fallacy and tautologies and it's own easily-crumbled logic, and those glaring contradictions is what makes this two-thousand-year-old goofy pile of stories written by a bunch of drunk liars survive to a year where we all have cell phones with unlimited knowledge in our pockets.

I tell you "God is Good" and what does that even mean? I mean, "good" is a term of practicality. When we say we have a "good" hammer, we mean it's good at achieving it's purpose of hammering nails, and not singing 'Freebird.' So there's the question of what is God "good for"? God is, in a sense, good for nothing, but more specifically I'd say God is only good for itself. It's a self-justifying good. God can be no more justified, explained or rationalized (or less real) than the love we all feel for each other. I mean, can anyone seriously say what we are good for? What's our practicality, as people?

And same for gender. What is a "woman"? We all know a woman is a thing, but we can't find a consensus to define it. But still a woman is a thing that exists, we know it's an essence that is out there in the world. And to me, that's why I very readily attach it to the spiritual experience, gender is about an ineffable, powerful force.

So, anyways, a little about the trans experience, so you could understand my perspective; transitioning is a huge undertaking and I'm realistic that there is immense social, health, familial, and financial risks to transitioning. I'm doing this is because saddling all of these risks are still better than the alternative of facing a lifetime of what is called "gender dysphoria" - which is this intense existential feeling of unease when your gender identity doesn't match up with your gender presentation. Untreated dysphoria is extremely deadly. Every trans person I know can name at least one trans person who's killed themselves or overdosed. Dysphoria differs for everybody (and some trans people don't get dysphoria!) but on a personal level, one of my biggest symptoms is physical pain and existential discomfort.

I think the best way to describe dysphoria is to imagine yourself, if you're a cis woman, forced to live life with a big beard you can't shave, or if you're a cis man, forced to walk around life with feminine breasts coming out of your chest. It creates a situation where you constantly have to contextualize your gender to larger society, and cumulatively that constant need for adjustment can take a psychological and physiological toll. Dysphoria doesn't just happen to trans people, all people experience some sort of gender dysphoria. More explicit examples is cis women with PCOS who end up developing secondary male features, and cis men who develop breasts through hormone imbalances both report the same symptoms of dysphoria that trans people feel. Dysphoria causes a lot of weird, existential problems in life that are seemingly unrelated to gender. A way I'd describe it is it's like going through life where my mind is a half-inch misaligned from where my body is, so I'll reach for a doorknob and it's not where I think it is – except for instead of space being misaligned, it's gender. And living that way, I can live a

“normal” life, but I'm always aware and adjusting for this misalignment, everything is always “off.” Small, subtle behaviors are changed because of it. Like, a cliché among pre-transition trans people of any gender is constantly wearing a hoodie, because if you don't like your body, it's appealing to wear baggy clothes to hide your silhouette, which is one of the ways our culture “reads” gender. Nobody told all these trans people to wear a hoodie, subconscious pain and reward sensors in their head incentivized this type of fashion. Similarly, a lot of trans people assigned male at birth might grow what's called a “dysphoria beard” - an unkempt, untrimmed beard, because the idea of staring at the mirror long enough to shave is so uncomfortable on an unconscious level.

I feel dysphoria has shaped a lot of my interactions with all of you – I remember the first time I visited after the adoption, I took a 24 hour bus trip to get there instead of taking an airplane, and I was disheveled (and a little cranky) as a result of that trip. It might seem hard to understand how that is effected by gender incongruity, but not having a full sense of “self” means it's difficult to understand where you're at in the world. Things such as self-preservation, comfort and presentation are difficult to have a gauge of and so it's hard to make life decisions.

Another example I remember is one time I had a panic attack about climate change and I sent you an email out of nowhere making sure [Your Name] is fine. I have a panic disorder that I've been spending years trying to treat, and while this disorder has a lot of sources, one of those is that constant fixations of “I'm going to die young” or “the world is ending” is a common symptom of gender dysphoria; when you don't have a sense of self, it leads to this drastic incongruity where you can't really imagine yourself in the future.

And there was that whole episode in my life I mentioned in one of [Your Name]'s letters one year where I had the showdown over the Proud Boys in the comedy community that ended with me getting blackballed, ostracized and doxxed. And I think what led me to keep pushing against these garbage humans no matter how much they pushed back and how little support I got was the fact that deep, deep, deep inside of me I knew that I was a woman and seeing openly fascist white nationalist Nazis in my community space meant that I was not safe.

This 'essence'... this unconscious suspicion that I'm a woman, has followed me my whole life and it's just so weird! I was socialized as male, and benefited from male privilege, at the same time I feel like I wasn't the only one in the world who read me as “female.” Or maybe, at least, people would pick up this sense of non-maleness around me. Every girlfriend I ever dated has said that “I'm not like a man” and dating me is “like dating a girl.” Those Nazis and Nazi-adjacent podcasters in our local scene came at me a little harder and a little different than other critics who challenged them in our community, and I think because – as an ideology wrapped up in masculinity rigid gender standards – they inherently sensed something “wrong” about me.

Even in lower stakes, when I would hang with a group of guys I could never be a “chill hang,” and I'd always struggle to find chemistry with men, but then I'd get so excited and energized when I'm around women. But then, even that was complicated because even though I desperately wanted to be friends with women, with my lanky male body, I didn't want to feel like I was invading a female space. And that tension it led me to this very isolated world my entire life.

I don't like terms used such as “trapped in a closet” or “a woman trapped in a man's body.” In part, because it feels like a known lie was happening from my end. My transition was a thing I took a very long time to get the language for. The metaphor I prefer is that I'm in a room,

and in the dark, and there's a puzzle box in the center; every morning I wake up and stumble around, trying to do my morning routine in the dark, which I can do but it's a struggle, and every now and then do a few clicks on the puzzle box. And then, one day, I solve the puzzle and the lights come on and it illuminates everything in my life. I can finally see the space I occupy. Transition is about illumination, and better understanding of my world.

I love being trans. It's the greatest thing in the world. My girlfriend just broke up with me, I have to find a new apartment in the middle of a dire housing crisis, and I'm incredibly financially insecure and have never been financially secure in [Your Name]'s entire life. But this is the happiest I've ever been in my life. I walk down the street with a dress and some people make faces and spit at me and call me faggot, but others smile at me and compliment my nails and stop me to take Instagram photos. In spite of my dysphoria, I've always been a confident person, and now I feel like a superhero of confidence, where I'm able to be present with myself and fully make connections with people I've always wanted to make.

Doing comedy, there was this peer named Jo Firestone, who's this friendly, bright, kind of spotty-minded comedian (she has a Netflix special worth checking out) and one of my friends told a story about how they took an improv class with her, and also in the class was this dottering old woman who didn't fit in and really wasn't learning on the level of the rest of the class and the other students didn't know what to do with her. Months later, my friend bumped into Jo and the old woman out together, and Jo explained that she asked her out to go see a movie together. And I remember feeling deeply jealous hearing that story, because I could never figure out how to connect with strangers in that way.

Every connection I made with people was superficial, distant, fleeting, 'nice' and devoid of intimacy. But now I know myself, I know where I am on the map, and I can act that way and make my own connections with people in the way I always wanted to make. Last week, on a lesbian classified ad site, someone posted that they had COVID and were feeling isolated and were looking for movie suggestions. I messaged them back telling them that I had a bunch of extra food stamps and can do a grocery delivery for them if they wanted to and within 24 hours, I brought a bag of groceries to this stranger's door, dropped it off and left, never even to bother to learn their name. That's the connection I've been seeking all my life.

I think a lot of the way we talk about transitioning in our culture is framing the trans experience as a "tragedy" but between myself and the people I know, I think it's more of a happy story. I even have mixed feelings about my time before my transition. There's part of me that's very mad to be coming out at 36, and that anger is pointed at both myself and the the medical, political, and cultural systems that kept Amber from the world. But all that discomfort, dysphoria, crisis, homeless episodes has still led me to strive and survive, and that drive to survive led me to have so many adventures and unique experiences and build incredible skills. Amber is an exciting, loud, annoying, friendly caring person and she was showing up in little ways all my life no matter how much society tried to suppress her.

I think transitioning is a happy thing. Even this early in my transition, looking at photos of myself before I transitioned and after, my eyes went from being dead and unfocused to bright and alive. Transition is a victory; my brain has been quietly whining to my body my entire life to be a certain way, and I'm finally listening to myself. And I want to share this happiness with as many people as possible.

Ok, that's enough covering my bases. Now the fun stuff! My name change! I'll be going by she/her pronouns, at least for now. I feel strongly that I am a binary woman, but sometimes the changes from HRT and transitioning and age can bring out feelings in some trans people that causes them to shift their gender identity further, so I'd hope you'd understand if in the future I inform you there have been shifts in my gender identity. However, I don't really think that's the case with me.

When it comes to my new name, I always think there's a poetry in names; it's the first gift a parent ever gives to their kid. But, as we've seen in the case of adoption, sometimes a second gift can be given. As someone who was adopted my birth name was...actually, I just realized while writing this I don't remember what the name my biological mom gave. But, anyways, the name my adopted parents gave me was Jonathan Hohensee. When I started comedy, and got to know my biological mom, I started going by the stage name John Field (even my girlfriend called me John Field), with 'Field' being my biological mother's name – I considered it a tribute to her.

I am now changing my name to be Amber Flannery Field. I chose Amber because I think it pairs well with "Field" - "amber fields" is reminiscent to "amber waves of grain," which I think is fitting because nickname among the stand-up scene in New York City is "America's Comic." Ok, that's pretentious, but it started as a joke with my best friend who's an immigrant was nicknamed "Columbia's Comic" and it sort of stuck. My middle name, Flannery, comes from the author Flannery O'Connor, who is a Southern Gothic author that had a huge influence in my life. My full legal name will be Amber Flannery Universal Friend Field, but that's just what will be on my birth certificate. The 'universal friend' being a traditional Quaker last name converts took that has meaning I don't want to get into because I wanted to keep this letter under 5,000 words, lol. That's about it. Thank you again for reading. I know this has a whole lot of what-the-hell, but I really can't keep living as I was living and...live. I know you'll have questions. I'll try to answer them.

Please don't be afraid to ask questions that feel weird or intrusive, because I'd rather you know the honest truth than have some misunderstanding cause problems down the road.

I love all of you,

Amber