

## The Gender Divide: A Parent's Perspective

*Kelly W. Kemp, CCLS*

Five years ago, one of my children was diagnosed with gender dysphoria. My husband and I were completely caught by surprise at this news, and like any other health diagnosis, a million questions entered our minds. “What now? How do we help this child?” (who was at that time 18, exiting pediatric medicine, and our ability to have a say as parents). What does a road map for gender dysphoria look like? We also faced pressing, social questions. “How will people react to this news?” “Will we lose friends and family members?” “What do I do with a lifetime of pictures, Christmas Tree ornaments, memories?” “Will someone target my brilliant, creative, funny, kind baby for political gain?” “Will my child become a target for a hate crime?”

I wrote the following letter in 2020 to close family and friends to inform them of the change in our family dynamic. I chose to use the form of a letter so that there would be written documentation of clear guidelines and boundaries where Hunter, my son, was concerned. We also live across the country from many of our family members, so a letter seemed to be the best way to communicate this news to them. The letter was received well by most, and with heartbreak by others.

I have not spoken publicly about this, because quite frankly, all our focus needed to be on loving and supporting our family. This journey has been the hardest thing that I have ever known. The pain of having a child with gender dysphoria is not the child-it is the world. It is a society that constantly says “You don’t exist. You should not exist. You are wrong. You were born a girl; you cannot be a boy.” It is the constant questions from people when they hear about my child. “Are you going to let him have a sex change? Are you going to mutilate your child’s body?” I have also heard that I am a child abuser for allowing my now adult child to live his most authentic life. It is the quiet grief of unspoken words, knowing that all I can do is be present for my child when he struggles in a world that does not welcome him. It is also the joy of discovery, as I have learned to see the world with a completely different lens. One that is inclusively beautiful in ways that I never imagined.

As a child life specialist, I know that my child’s emotional development is paramount to his health journey. As a mom, I never expected to carry a heart that is so torn between love and grief, pride and fear. Torn between the deep joy of knowing my child exactly as they are, and the unbearable pain of watching society struggle to do the same. The pain comes in the deep loneliness of feeling like no one understands how hard this can be, how much we love him, and how hard we are trying. It also comes in the form of tasteless and cruel social media posts from people without any knowledge of what this journey is like for families. If I can feel the stares, whispered comments, and judgement, what does my child feel?

My child is brave, incredibly talented, and focused. He is living an authentic life in college and is thriving. I have hopes that one day, my child will be able to live as freely as any other American citizen. Until that time, I will use my voice to advocate. There are so many brave parents who advocate daily for their children. They serve as uncommon heroes in a society that consistently seeks to deny their children’s basic rights. Happy Pride.

## Letter to Family and Friends

*Family and friends,*

*We hope this letter finds you and your loved ones well. If you are receiving this, it means that you and maybe even your child are very important to our family. We wanted to share some news that is deeply personal and involves Victoria, who you all know and love. We apologize for the impersonal nature of this, however it is impossible to talk to each and every one of you individually about such a personal and complex matter.*

*Many of you have known Lance and I all of our lives. You have watched and supported us as we wed, became one, and raised 3 wonderful children. The past few years have been life altering for us. Have you ever lost your child? I don't mean like did you leave them at Target when they were little (still sorry for this Kenny). I mean, have you ever lost them, have you ever woke up and the child that's sitting at the kitchen table is just a shell of the child you raised. Have you ever watched your child have some internal battle but they can't explain what that battle is. Have you ever watched your child slip down into a hole so deep that you were afraid you would never be able to pull them back? Have you ever had to brace yourself before you opened their bedroom door for the pure fear that you would find your child dead? I have done all of these things. I watched a happy, vibrant child who was full of life rapidly slip away. I knew that all of her risky behavior was a sign of something much deeper, but I was powerless to stop what was happening. We were terrified to lose our middle child. In March, we sent her to Alaska to live with Her Uncle Michael. He saved our precious child's life. I am forever grateful to him.*

*We have big news. For Lance and I it has been the source of an "aha, that makes sense". It is also the beginning of a wild, joyful adventure. Victoria is transgender, and will now go by the name Hunter. Our initial response to this was "we are behind you 100%. We will figure this out together. You are amazing and strong, and we love you. Thanks for trusting us with this."*

*Of course, as most of you know, our home has been filling with rainbows for a while as we have read, prayed, researched, and come to affirm the LGBTQ people that we are blessed to know. We are thankful for that, never more than now. We are blessed to be in a church that is willing to walk this journey with us, constantly showing the face of Jesus.*

*Here is what we found in our research:*

- Transgender adolescents are not just going through a phase. There is much research that I will include in this letter to support this.*
- Transgender kids need acceptance and support, especially from family. Need. Full stop. Without it, they are at enormous risk for depression, self-harm, risk-taking behavior, and suicide. With support trans kids have close to the same risks as any other teen. Being a teen is hard. Being a trans teen without support is deadly.*

*In the last few months, we have seen our child come out of a very dark place, as with the help of medical specialists, therapists, and gender specialists we will do what is needed for our child to feel truly seen and known, supported and celebrated as every child should be.*

*So while Victoria Louise Kemp's life is ending, Hunter Luis Kemp's life is just beginning. We understand that for many of you this comes as a surprise. We know that for some of you, this is very hard news. We also understand that you will need to process this information and figure out how it fits in to what you know about life and love and family and faith. Besides the work we had already done to becoming LGBTQ affirming, we've had a full two months to adjust to our new understanding of our child. Hunter has had even longer. It can be challenging to wrap your head around and to see someone with new eyes, and we honor you as you figure out how you can best support Hunter.*

*In the meantime, and as we continue this journey together, here's what we'd like to ask of you:*

- The number one thing listed by transgender people as being hurtful for them is when family refuses to use the new name and pronouns. So, because Hunter needs your support at such a critical time in his life, we ask that from this day forward, you will do all in your power to name him with the name he and we have chosen and to refer to him as the gender he knows himself to be- boy, he, him, brother, son, grandson, nephew. We know this is difficult. If you slip up, apologize and correct yourself. If for some reason you cannot chose to do this, we ask that you do not contact Hunter until you feel ready to speak to him in this way.*
- We ask that you learn about gender identity. I will be including links to websites, videos, podcasts, support groups, books, pamphlets. Pick whatever seems the most helpful to you and do the work to understand.*
- Once you have looked at the resources we have offered, if you still have questions about how best to support Hunter and our family, we'd love to answer your questions. We want to help! But- please don't use us as a sounding board for negative opinions. If you need help processing difficult emotions, please contact the support groups that we have listed. Also, we will not engage in debate.*

*We are looking forward to a time when we can see many of you, and I am personally looking forward with hope to more support for Hunter and for us from the people who have consistently loved us best.*

*We know you love us.*

*We love you too.*

*Lance, Kelly, Kenny, Hunter, and Olivia.*