

This month: JOE ON MASCULINITY

'I really like this guy, but he's a drag queen, which turns me off'



Dear Joe,

I've started seeing a guy recently who I'm really attracted to, and have struck a good rapport with. It is rare that I get on with anyone this well. But he recently confided in me that he is in fact our town's local drag queen in his spare time. He says he loves his job and he'd never give it up, but the whole thing makes me a bit embarrassed. Worse still, since he told me, I've found that I'm less attracted to him sexually, and when we do have sex I find it difficult not to imagine him dolled up to the nines as a drag queen, which is not something I find particularly sexy. I don't feel like this is what I signed up for. Am I being overly judgmental, or is this fair?

TEDDY, ADDRESS WITHHELD

Illustration DERMOT FLYNN

Dear Teddy,

You say that you are really attracted to him and your rapport is one that is rare compared with anyone else you have dated. I would hate for you to walk away from the relationship of your dreams for the wrong reasons.

You would be surprised how many times I have seen this in my office among heterosexual couples. A couple comes to consult with me. The husband cross-dresses and the wife can't stand it. Even after she understands that he isn't gay and that he's not going to 'come out' and leave her, she still can't get the image of him dressed as a woman out of her head. He's not a 'real man', and he creeps her out, even though she was fine with him before she knew. They eventually divorce. When I see this, it always seems a true tragedy. A rigid concept of what a man should be is embedded so deeply in someone's brain that it can ruin a marriage that otherwise is fine.

You say his doing drag turns you off and embarrasses you? Why is that? It is because you have been conditioned by society to scorn any man who seems even a little bit feminine.

Gay men are often turned off by anything less than a 'straight-acting' man. This is because we gay men were taught the same rigid and limiting ideas about what men should and should not be - just like everybody else. By straight-acting they really mean 'masculine-acting' and equate that to straight men, as if gay men cannot be masculine.

Being raised male in the heterosexist culture means avoiding and distancing yourself from being viewed as gay in any way. Gay is synonymous with effeminate. This is inherent sexism. It assumes that female characteristics are bad. Being male is a privileged status, and anything else is inferior.

As I point out in all my lectures, workshops and writings on internalised homophobia, being constantly scorned for being effeminate - and perpetuating such treatment among ourselves and each other - cripples us emotionally and literally kills any possibility for relationships requiring true intimacy.

Sadly, the way this destroys relationships is by giving boys and men privilege and special status in society, but only on the condition that they turn their backs on anything feminine, including expressing their emotions, on being vulnerable, on valuing connection more than competition. Ironically, these are qualities that make relationship work. Undoubtedly they are the kinds of qualities that make you 'really attracted to' this man. But the rules are that men must bury personality traits most commonly attributed to women. It is the price of being included in the male fraternity. Those men who are unconventional are punished for it. They are scorned and called nasty names.

I have my own history of negatively judging males who are not

masculine-acting, whether they are straight or gay. Before I reached the age of eight. I would play dress-up in a dress and high heels with my sister and female cousin and pretend I was a woman. Then, my grandmother told me to stop. 'Boys don't do that: she said in a mean way. I felt incredibly ashamed, and of course I stopped playing publicly with the girls. Privately, however, I continued. Girls are allowed to be tomboys but boys can't be sissies. The truth is that many boys are sissies, and there's nothing wrong with that. Yet the disapproving glances from my grandmother, my male cousins and all the adults when I was having fun playing with my sister taught me to disapprove of other males just like they did.

Even as an adult I was ashamed and thought that femininity in men was something to hide and hate, and - even though it was deeply a part of who I am - I scorned it in other men.

At a very young age, little boys, both gay and straight, who naturally want to show their feminine side are still taught they are not really boys or aren't the right kind of boys. Then they grow up feeling they are not really men or aren't the right kind of men. How can they ever feel good about themselves

and be able to date and maintain healthy relationships?

What is my advice to you? Since you've been conditioned all your life to be repulsed by the feminine side of men, now you need slowly and patiently to start conditioning yourself to a more reasonable view. Ask your boyfriend more about his doing drag. Open yourself to curiosity. Attempt to connect with what is going on inside him that drives his desire to do drag. Ask him things like: why

does he like to do it? What inspires him? What does he get out of it?

I recommend going to one of his shows and watching him. Get a good feel for what it is he does and why he does it. Challenge anything that feels like internalised homophobia and work on ridding yourself of the negative beliefs you have about men who engage in 'female' behaviours and activities.

Another thing you can do is to consider dressing in drag yourself. As strange as that might sound, embracing your feminine side might help you embrace his. At retreats that I used to facilitate I included a surprise segment called 'Dragged Out', where I would show a picture of an attractive male from the waist up, to which the retreat participants would shout out positive traits. Then I would show the rest of the picture of the same man wearing a tutu. The reaction to him then was mostly negative. Then I would invite the men to dress in drag, including make-up, heels, dresses and more. Inevitably, the gay men would leave the workshop having a completely different - and more positive - vision of drag.

Don't walk away so fast from a potential dream relationship simply because of his doing drag. Consider embracing it first, learning more about it - and then making a decision.

Gay men have been taught the same rigid and limiting ideas about what men should be

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