

Just Because Your Transgender Parent Isn't Messing With You Doesn't Mean It Doesn't Happen

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Prompted by a dinner-table discussion with her parents, Elle Tannehill, a 13-year-old girl, gave an eloquent response to my Federalist article "[Having Transgender Parents Will Hurt Kids Like It Hurt Me](#)." I learned of this family discussion because Elle's second mother (who until fairly recently was her father) wrote it up and sent it to [The Huffington Post](#), where it was published.



Elle goes by the nickname Honey Badger. If you know anything about honey badgers, you know they're fierce little creatures that inhabit African bushlands, and are known to take on much larger predators. So I suspect Elle is a formidable young lady. But even formidable people have a breaking point.

Sometimes People Do Need Talk Therapy

In her discussion, Elle suggested that Help 4 Families is a reparative-therapy ministry. We are not. We are a support ministry for families who have a loved one who identifies as transgender. That is an important distinction. Family members typically go through a grieving process in dealing with the ordeal of a transitioning loved one. (Whether one is willing to admit it or not, such news from a loved one is always shocking, and, at least initially, is an ordeal.) We help such families through the grieving process. So, as I said, we are not a reparative-therapy ministry. I do, however, believe in therapy, in some cases.

Reparative therapy is nothing more than good talk therapy. People in general need to talk about personal things. Some gender-confused people, like my dad, have been molested. He also lacked an affirmative father figure; his father was distant and often harsh. On top of that, his mother was an alcoholic. My dad had a lot of issues that might have been resolved through talking with a good therapist.

Elle should understand this, since she spoke of attending therapy with her parents. So, yes, I do believe in some cases therapy can be helpful. Not only for the gender-confused person, but also for the person's family. I favor therapy that digs into the truth, for sake of the entire family.

Experiences With a Transgender Parent Aren't All Good

I want Elle and her parents—and anyone else who is interested—to know I did not hate my transgender father. Quite the contrary, I loved him, and my heart ached for the emotional pain he endured. But I also ached over the pain he caused my mother, my siblings, and me.

I am by no means the only one who has had a negative experience with a parent who identifies as transgender. Sadly, I have heard from many other adult children who had struggles with a transgender parent. Most children of transgenders won't speak out about their family situation, usually because they don't want to cause conflict within their family. I understand that; I kept quiet on the issue until my father passed away.

It seems Elle loves and respects her parents—both of them. I applaud her for that. It's a good thing. Perhaps her experience with a transgender parent was different from mine. Perhaps her transitioning father never snuck into her

bedroom while she was away and tried on her underwear. Perhaps her father never drilled holes into the bathroom wall to spy on her in the bathtub. Perhaps her father never fondled her because he desired to have a body like hers. I pray Honey Badger had—and always will have—a loving and respectful home life. I didn't.

I Want Good for You and Everyone Else

Had Honey Badger's father dared to try doing to her any of those things my father did to me, I suspect she would have torn into him with all the ferocity of one of those fearless little creatures for whom she is nicknamed. But perhaps she didn't need to be fierce, because her father was more respectful of her than mine was of me. Perhaps that's why the photo of her family that accompanies her father's letter has such a wholesome appearance. Perhaps they really are a happy, loving, and respectful family.

I really hope and pray that's the case. I hope they're not just pretending to keep a semblance of peace in the household. I often tried that when I was Elle's age. I was willing to do almost anything to avert my angry father's bullying and the fights that followed when my mother tried to protect us. My attempts at peace through acquiescence sometimes worked, but only for a while. I hope that's not what Elle is going through. I really do hope and pray that she and her younger siblings have a peaceful family life that helps them mature into happy, well-adjusted adults.

My siblings and I eventually adjusted and became happy, fulfilled adults—but it wasn't easy. We struggled through a lot of emotional pain. Now, having worked for many years with others whose lives were similarly disrupted by a transitioning parent, child, or other loved one, I know my struggles were not isolated. Every week I meet or hear from people whose lives have been turned upside down by a gender-confused loved one.

So, I'm glad to hear Elle—Honey Badger—is beating the odds, that family life is good for her. And I'll continue to minister comfort to transgender people's family members and their loved ones.