

National

When no gender fits: A quest to be seen as just a person

By **Monica Hesse** September 20, 2014

Kelsey scans the wall of T-shirts in Five Below, one of the few stores to qualify as “quirky” in this conservative part of western Michigan. “Let’s Have a Party,” a shirt reads, near displays of body glitter and \$5 leggings. “Warning: Prone to Shenanigans,” reads another, and after less than a minute, it’s clear the store doesn’t have what Kelsey is looking for, because no place ever does, at least not around here.

“I think I might have to *make* you a gay shirt,” Kelsey’s friend Kahri offers as they walk out of the store. “Or not a gay shirt, but — you know.”

“Yeah.”

What Kelsey Beckham really wants is a shirt that communicates something very specific about its wearer. Not about gayness, or anything to do with sexual orientation, but about gender. A shirt that says the wearer is something many people aren’t familiar with: Not a he. Not a she. Not a male transitioning to a female, or a female transitioning to a male. A shirt explaining that Kelsey, 18, doesn’t identify with any gender at all.

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Kelsey's gender identity is "non-binary." Or, "agender." It's what Kelsey feels comfortable with, even though the world keeps insisting, in a million little ways, that Kelsey has to choose. Like the OkCupid profile some friends are always suggesting Kelsey create online. When Kelsey looked at the matchmaking site's opening screen, it presented an immediate problem: "I am a [male/female]."

Which box do you check when you don't belong in any box? How do you navigate the world when the world is built on identifying with one group or another group, male or female, and the place that feels most right to you is neither?

A few months earlier, someone started a petition on the White House Web site asking the government to recognize non-binary genders, and Kelsey signed it, petitioner number 22,711 out of an eventual 103,000.

A month before that, Facebook started allowing users to customize their gender settings, and Kelsey customized them, selecting "Agender," "Non-binary" and "Transgender" from a list of more than 40 choices.

The country was having discussions about gender, but they were happening abstractly, far away from where Kelsey lives — where Bible study groups meet in the Panera and a deli advertises outdoor movies by offering half-price admission to anyone who drives in on a tractor. In Kelsey's school, where there are no gay-straight organizations, people whisperingly speculate that Kelsey and Kahri might be dating because they both have short hair. They aren't, but how do you explain "non-binary" to a school where one class included a segment on "gendered spending" and the teacher joked that girls would have to budget for all the shoes they like to buy?

For now, Kelsey rides the blurry edge of gender in bow ties and Forever 21 leggings, in feminine scarves but a snug-fitting chest binder that presses a slim build even flatter. Most people around here know Kelsey as a "she," and Kelsey still answers to that pronoun even though it grates.

But it's the middle of May, and only a few days of school are left. Summer will come, and by the time Kelsey leaves for college this fall, Kelsey doesn't want to be a "she." Kelsey wants to use the pronoun that feels right:

They.

They will go to college. They will study engineering. They will get a job. They will find a partner and make a home. They will begin with finding a T-shirt.

"I just want something subtle, but where people know what I'm talking about," Kelsey says, as the friends arrive at a coffee shop.

"I really just want something that makes it clear I'm not a girl."

“Kelsey, nobody here is going to know what you’re talking about,” Kahri says.

Kelsey laughs and sighs. “I know.”

“Seat belt?”

Nancy Beckham makes sure Kelsey has clicked the buckle before backing away from the two-story brick house where Kelsey was raised. Nancy tries to juggle the papers in her lap, finally handing them to her youngest child.

Kelsey glances at the first page and looks up, surprised.

“I read it,” Nancy responds. Kelsey e-mailed it to her, so Nancy read it, and highlighted it. Now she’s bringing it along so she can refer to it during the conversation they’re about to have with Kelsey’s therapist. “Hormones: A Guide.”

For Nancy, a 55-year-old mother of three, the notion of a child who wants to be gender-neutral has been difficult to understand. She knew about individuals who were born in female bodies but felt male inside. She’d never heard of someone who wanted to be neither and had asked Kelsey more than once, “Are you sure? Are you sure that maybe you’re not just a boyish girl?”

Kelsey was sure.

For Kelsey, identifying as agender wasn’t an immediate realization but a gradual awakening, a recognition that what applied to other girls didn’t seem to apply to Kelsey. People would say Kelsey was pretty, and it made Kelsey squirm — not because Kelsey felt unattractive but because other people’s definitions of pretty, or handsome for that matter, didn’t work. Dresses and makeup only made Kelsey feel uglier, but boy clothes weren’t right either. It wasn’t about being a tomboy. It wasn’t a personality trait. It wasn’t even about the clothes, although those were an immediate shorthand for Kelsey’s discomfort. It was something different and deeper.

Kelsey went searching online for ways to understand these feelings, eventually stumbling upon resources on gender identity. Here, on blogs containing photographs of smooth-bodied androgynous individuals, Kelsey first learned the term “non-binary” and felt relief. These were other people who knew Kelsey’s experiences, who lived with them and named them. They’d developed lexicons — instead of the pronouns “he” and “she,” there were others to choose from, representing neutrality: Ze. Xe. Ou. Ey. And, “They,” which Kelsey liked because it already existed in the dictionary.

Eventually, last year, Kelsey wrote Nancy a letter, after a shopping trip where Nancy noticed Kelsey browsing the men’s department in every store they visited:

“I don’t want to be a girl wearing boy’s clothes, nor do I want to be a girl who presents as a boy,” Kelsey wrote. “I just want to be a person who is recognized as a person. That’s how I’m most comfortable. I’m just a person wearing people clothes, who likes to look like myself and have others see me how I see me.”

In Kelsey’s mind, the body that would feel right wasn’t the body Kelsey had now. Kelsey wanted a redistribution of muscle, less on the hips and more in the upper body. A lower voice, though not too much — not to where it would sound like a man’s.

Neutral.

And so now here Kelsey and Nancy were, driving to a therapy session to discuss the possibility of Kelsey’s starting a low dose of hormones.

“I don’t want to be insensitive,” Nancy says, opening a line of conversation the two have had several times. “But we all have things about us that are different than what we’d like. Ways we look in the mirror . . . ”

When Nancy looks in the mirror, she tells Kelsey, she’s sometimes shocked to see she’s become a middle-aged woman carrying 50 pounds more than she’d like. In hopeful moments, she thinks losing weight would make life better. Other times, she realizes that weight is just weight — it’s not who she is, and shedding it might not result in instant happiness. So she wonders: Are Kelsey’s hormone desires like Nancy’s weight? A solution that Kelsey thinks will make everything perfect, but won’t? The hormones worry Nancy. Kelsey is young. What if Kelsey got to college and decided they’d been a mistake?

“I’m not saying it would solve everything,” Kelsey says. “I’m just saying —”

“You’d be happier,” Nancy fills in.

Sometimes it’s hard for Nancy to explain to her teenager everything she’s learned about the unpredictability of happiness. Nancy’s life hasn’t gone exactly as planned. She didn’t plan on becoming a young widow, after her husband developed a fast, brutal cancer and died nearly four years ago. She didn’t anticipate quitting graduate school to care for him. Now, after sifting through possible explanations for Kelsey’s gender exploration — was it a latent grief reaction to Mark’s death? An adolescent phase? — Nancy is adapting again, accepting that her child’s decision about gender identity is valid, and that her job is to make sure Kelsey thinks about the realities of the world.

“When people don’t know what gender you are, it’s confusing,” Nancy tries now. “What would you say if someone asked you?”

“I would say I’m neither. Both.” Kelsey reminds Nancy that a young cousin recently asked whether Kelsey was a boy or a girl. Kelsey asked what he thought, and the child shrugged, as if he guessed it didn’t matter either way.

“But what if an older person asked?”

“They’re not going to ask.”

They pull into a small parking lot, where a sign advertises the counseling practice.

An hour later, they pull out again, Nancy behind the wheel and Kelsey leaning against the passenger side window. They’re both exhausted.

Back on a main road, Nancy asks whether Kelsey wants to talk anymore.

“I’m just numbed to this topic,” Kelsey says.

“But I’m trying to understand it.”

“It just makes me feel separated from society, when we have to keep talking about it. It’s like — am I even human?” Kelsey says.

“I mean, I *know* I’m not normal.”

Nancy’s hands freeze on the steering wheel and she quickly shakes her head. “Oh, honey. You’re not *not* normal.”

“I’m still literally the same person.”

“I know. You’re still Kelsey. Right?” Nancy’s trying not to cry here on the county road, tears clumping in her eyelashes as the two whiz past all the churches and fields. “This is big progress,” she says, after a while. She knows it doesn’t seem that way to Kelsey, she says, but all of these discussions have to represent progress.

Kelsey apologizes for sounding frustrated. “I feel bad for acting like this.”

“Are you hungry? Let’s go get ice cream,” Nancy offers, forcing brightness into her tone.

She suggests one parlor, and Kelsey makes a face. The clerks there wear booty shorts and always seem more interested in horsing around than serving customers.

“The other place?” Nancy says. “Sundae something?”

“Country Sundae.”

Nancy nods, definitively. “Ice cream.”

A therapist, rather than Nancy, was the first person with whom Kelsey discussed gender. Kelsey had been seeing her about managing anxiety, and at the end of a regular session, she asked whether there was anything else to talk about that day. Kelsey said there was one other thing, and, in the confidential space of the therapist’s office, said the word “agender” out loud.

Kahri came next, and Kahri was easy. She already knew Kelsey preferred more masculine clothes, and she’d always told Kelsey to do whatever felt most right. Kelsey ended up explaining non-binary gender in casual text messages, and all Kahri said in response was, Kelsey remembers, “That makes sense.”

But other people weren’t so easy. Being agender, Kelsey learned, sometimes meant hiding in plain sight. Nobody could judge

Kelsey for being non-binary if nobody recognized what it was, and the average person in suburban Michigan didn't. It just wasn't the conclusion people jumped to. Kelsey was "sporty," or "artsy." Kelsey's hairdresser cheerfully commented that the style Kelsey had requested was "unisex," not realizing that was exactly why Kelsey wanted it.

So Kelsey would try guiding conversations toward hypothetical gender issues, gauging friends' reactions. For a while, Kelsey wondered whether it might be emotionally easier to keep silent, but it came down to this: Kelsey wanted to be a "they." How could that happen if nobody else knew it?

The most recent person Kelsey told was Kristen, a childhood friend. Kristen was religious, from a conservative family, but she'd nodded along when Kelsey said their Advanced Placement psychology textbook should define gender on a spectrum rather than as a binary.

"I want to ask questions, but I don't want to say things that are offensive," Kristen worries, as she and Kelsey drive to lunch one day in June.

"You won't say things that are offensive. You should ask things! If you do offend me, I'll politely correct you."

Being agender, Kelsey explains to Kristen, is like living on an island apart from the rest of the world. Kelsey has learned to think of people in terms of how close they are to reaching this island.

"Kahri and Erick are guarding me," Kelsey says. Those are the friends who are nearest to understanding Kelsey. "You and my mom are in boats on your way."

"I want to guard you!"

"You're getting there. In your kayak."

They keep searching for a restaurant.

So many conversations in this place seem to happen in cars, not at one location or another but in between. The land is horizontal, the roads are wide. Life itself feels like a way station to be endured before a bigger life waiting at a nearby university, where Kelsey will be soon, and where Kelsey's gender identity won't be a secret. In the meantime, summer crawls by: "The Legend of Zelda" on Nintendo, "Parks and Recreation" on Netflix, and a hundred nervous choices related to gender. Kelsey orders a swim binder, specially designed for transgender individuals, and wears it instead of a traditional girl's suit to a pool party. Kelsey finds a dorm mate through a university social network, a cool-seeming girl who says she's never heard of "non-binary" but will do her best to understand it.

Soon after that, Kelsey and Kahri fly to San Francisco to visit Kelsey's oldest brother. They walk through Japantown and watch sea lions at a pier. They order brownies at a bakery that sells naughty-shaped pastries, and buy rainbow souvenirs in a well-known gay neighborhood. They ride a city bus one afternoon, and another passenger points to the knee brace Kahri is wearing.

“What happened there?” Kahri later remembers him joking. He cocked his head toward Kelsey, teasing, “Did he do that to you?”

He. It wasn't the gender pronoun that Kelsey was looking for, and it was kind of a weird thing to say. But it was a friendly stranger who was staring straight at Kelsey and seeing something different. Who recognized that whoever Kelsey was, they weren't a girl.

It was nice.

“I guess I could go to Costco now,” Nancy muses out loud. The house is clean. Schoolwork, for the program she enrolled in last year, is finished. The dog has been fed.

Early this morning, Kelsey tossed an overnight bag in the car and left for a midsummer orientation, to register for classes and take placement exams. Nancy's younger son, who moved back home after college graduation, is out with a friend.

The kitchen now has a strange noon stillness to it, television off, appliances quietly humming. This is what it will be like in a month, Nancy supposes, when her youngest child leaves home. She sits down at the table to plan out her day.

The summer has gone by fast and fitful. Sometimes Kelsey went days without mentioning gender at all. But then something would happen similar to what happened the other day, when they were both in a public restroom. Kelsey looked in the mirror, turned to Nancy, and said, “Mom, I just don't feel like I look like myself.”

Nancy wondered privately whether they were going to have another discussion about hormones, but she didn't say anything — just as she hasn't asked whether Kelsey expects her to use the “they” and “them” pronouns. She wonders whether bringing these things up is the equivalent of encouraging them, and she plays out scenarios in her mind: What if Kelsey, who is sometimes shy on the phone, asked Nancy to call for the appointment with the hormone doctor? If it were anything else medical — the dentist or optometrist — she would do it without question.

Nancy has decided that she would sit right next to Kelsey while Kelsey made the phone call, to offer support. But she wouldn't dial the number herself.

Is that enough?

Is it enough of a compromise between acceptance and encouragement, between the child she loves and the conservative town she lives in where residents speak in hushed tones about divorce and “gay issues”?

Upstairs, Nancy has a closet with dresses and skirts. In her makeup bag, she has plum-hued lipsticks that she applies carefully and worries are “too pink.” Online, she has an eHarmony profile she almost never remembers to check, but which identifies her, clearly, as a woman seeking a man.

Nancy had never cared whether Kelsey was a “foofy” girl. She didn’t care whether Kelsey wore makeup or became a cheerleader.

Still, there were expectations that so many mothers seemed to have about their relationships with their daughters, and Nancy did, too. Like maybe one day Kelsey would have a child, and Nancy would be invited into the delivery room.

Those were the sorts of things that some mothers and daughters did.

Kelsey had always been independent, less emotional even than Nancy’s sons. While Nancy was warm and chatty, a quintessential extrovert, Kelsey was reserved and introspective. Was that gender, or was that just Kelsey? And if it was just Kelsey, did it matter?

Sometimes Kelsey and Nancy seemed so close: A few days ago, when Nancy remarked that her jaw hurt, Kelsey said, “Mine, too!” and pointed to the very same spot.

Sometimes Nancy thought about how, when she was pregnant, she had this baby-name book, which showed a name’s popularity and how often it was used for girls vs. boys. “Kelsey” was, at the time, 75 percent female. But 25 percent male.

She read an article recently about a family with a young transgender child, a biological boy who wanted to be a girl. Nancy wondered whether it would have been easier to go through all of this years ago, when Kelsey was small. Ultimately, she decided it wouldn’t have been.

“I guess I’m glad I got to have the experience of having a daughter for as long as I did,” Nancy says. She thinks for a moment. “Whatever that really means, anyway.”

“Should I change?” Kelsey gestures at the pineapple-print swim trunks. At mid-thigh, they’re shorter than anything Kelsey would normally wear. “These are the gayest shorts I own.”

Kelsey’s friends Kristen and Mackenzie fold their arms across their bikini’d chests and assess the attire.

“No,” Kristen finally decides. “The littler clothes the better on the first date.”

“It’s not a date,” Kelsey says. It’s just a first meeting.

“Mmm-hmm.”

Late August, now. The three childhood friends are spending one of the last days of summer at Michigan’s Adventure, an amusement park with wave pools and pump-your-own snow cones. Kelsey leaves for college in four days; suitcases and laundry baskets have begun to fill the foyer at home.

Still dripping from a water ride, Kelsey pulls at the pineapple shorts and swim binder, trying to decide whether this outfit says the right thing for a first non-date.

A few weeks ago, after college orientation, Kelsey succumbed to friends' pressure and set up an OkCupid profile. Kelsey reluctantly clicked the box for "female" but made sure to use the first few lines of the self-summary to elaborate:

"I'm non-binary, agender, and use they/them/their pronouns. I'm on here to hopefully see that there are queer people who like me back, and like me for me."

Almost immediately responses came in, more than Kelsey had anticipated, many from people Kelsey wasn't particularly interested in. It left Kelsey feeling a fizzy mixture of excited and anxious, not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings and wondering whether it even made sense to meet someone so close to the start of college.

Then Avalon wrote. Avalon also used they/them/their pronouns, also played "The Legend of Zelda," also did marching band. Avalon — who would be visiting Michigan's Adventure the same afternoon Kelsey was there and had asked whether Kelsey wanted to meet, in person, in front of a roller coaster called Shivering Timbers.

"What other clothes did you bring?" Mackenzie now asks.

"I brought that one shirt," Kelsey says.

"Yes! That shirt."

Kelsey pulls on a shirt printed with Albert Einstein's face.

"Kelsey's new and improved friend doesn't want to meet us," Mackenzie sighs dramatically.

"No, they do!" Kelsey insists, trying to explain why the first meeting with Avalon will be just the two of them. "It's just we're both really awkward."

"Are you going to go on the Ferris wheel with Avalon?" Kristen asks. "Are you going to have a Nicholas Sparks moment?"

"Gross."

Shivering Timbers is an old wooden roller coaster where people ride two-by-two, pressed close on hairpin curves. Kelsey stands by the entrance, then decides to sit on a nearby bench, then stands again.

From behind a booth selling jewelry and shot glasses, a figure appears: slender, pale, short black hair, wearing girly floral shorts but masculine combat boots.

The two of them spot each other, both raising their fingers in a matching, fluttery wave, pausing before speaking, giving the other

a chance to talk first. This is the first time Kelsey has met another female-born agender person in real life.

“Hey,” Avalon says.

“Hey.”

Nancy doesn't know about Avalon yet, and Kelsey sees no reason to tell her. There are only two days left before Kelsey heads to school, and they've been planned out for weeks: Kelsey and Nancy will drive most of the way to campus on Saturday, stop at an LGBT pride festival that Kelsey had heard about, and then move into the dorms Sunday morning.

But on Friday, Avalon texts with a last-minute invitation to a Saturday party in Avalon's hometown. Kelsey decides to ask Nancy whether they can alter the itinerary, proposing a stop for Avalon. Nancy, surprised Kelsey has formed a bond with someone so quickly, agrees — and on Saturday afternoon, in a Hyundai packed to the gills with college supplies, Nancy pulls into a playground parking lot and watches Kelsey disappear across the clearing to a shelter decorated with balloons.

Nancy means to go find a coffee shop but doesn't know this area very well. Instead she ends up waiting in the car, wondering about Kelsey's new friend. She hadn't asked Kelsey whether Avalon was a romantic interest. She had asked whether Avalon was born female or male. She had appreciated that, when she and Kelsey arrived, Avalon smiled and waved at Nancy from a distance.

“She seemed friendly,” Nancy says, when Kelsey returns to the car an hour later. Then she catches herself. “She? They? Are you opposed to ‘ze?’ ”

Nancy has learned that some non-binary individuals use the pronoun “ze,” which feels easier to her, grammatically, than “they.” She's been thinking about pronouns a lot over the past few days. A few nights ago, while she and Kelsey were in the kitchen, she found a way to address a conversation she'd been avoiding.

“I guess, Kels, that I feel like you've never specifically asked me not to use ‘she,’ ” Nancy said that night, as Kelsey filled a glass of water at the sink. “And — I feel like you would, if it were really important.” She waited for Kelsey to say something, to signal that the pronoun mattered enough for Nancy to try it. “Is it really important to you?” she asked finally.

Kelsey faced away from Nancy, letting the tap run and wishing that Nancy could come to this realization on her own.

“I don't know,” Kelsey said.

Now, in the car, back on the country roads, Nancy articulates what bothers her about “they.”

“Using ‘they’ just seems like such an impersonal thing,” Nancy says. She explains that “they” seems like a placeholder, for when you don't know anything about the person in question.

She glances at her child, who is searching for the right words.

“But if you *know* the person,” Kelsey says finally, “Then it’s not impersonal at all.”

They keep driving, arriving in the evening at the pride festival, on a concrete lot with a performance stage, vendors and lots of same-sex couples. Kelsey and Nancy walk to the entrance and Nancy buys admission tickets. She notices Kelsey is wearing a new T-shirt, with a striped band across the chest: lavender, white and chartreuse. It’s the flag representing non-binary gender, Kelsey explains. It’s the T-shirt explaining Kelsey is not a boy or a girl. Kelsey bought it online.

“Mom, you should buy me a rainbow bow tie,” Kelsey jokes.

Nancy takes in a breath as they head inside. “That would be cute. Do they sell them?”

The next morning, early, Kelsey and Nancy check out of their hotel and drive to Kelsey’s dorm. Kelsey’s roommate has already arrived. She claimed the left side of the room, which Kelsey says is perfect, because Kelsey had been envisioning the right.

Everything about this place makes Kelsey feel hopeful. One university form Kelsey filled out had three gender options, not two: Male. Female. Other. “Other” had a blank next to it. Kelsey wrote in “Non-binary,” finally able to fit gender identity in an official box.

Now, in the dorm, Kelsey and Nancy begin to unpack. Kelsey asks for Nancy’s help with the fitted sheets on the lofted bed. Nancy asks whether Kelsey wants a ride to the credit union. Into a set of drawers, Kelsey tucks a cartoon-illustrated guide called “The Gender Book,” brought along to help explain gender variations to new friends.

And then, suddenly, there’s nothing more to do, in this place where Kelsey is just Kelsey, with no past, no gender, no preconceptions. The room is mostly organized, and though Kelsey hasn’t asked Nancy to leave, Nancy doesn’t want to be in the way.

“Missy, want to come give me a hug?” Nancy holds out her arms.

“Yeah.”

“I love you, honey.”

Kelsey leans into the hug. They hug for a long time, in the dorm room and then at the door as other students weave through the hallway.

Back downstairs in the car, Nancy makes her way off the campus, heading toward the interstate and thinking out loud. Kelsey’s roommate seems nice. She’s grateful for that. She hopes people will appreciate her 18-year-old child. She hopes Kelsey will get

this one science course sorted out, for which there was an enrollment problem. She hopes —

Nancy looks into the rearview mirror, trying to merge into a new lane.

“I think she’ll be fine,” she reassures herself.

Then, almost immediately she shakes her head, hearing the mistake.

“I keep calling her ‘she.’ I know. I do.”

She puts on her turn signal, following the signs back home. When she gets to the house, there’s a text waiting on her cellphone: a short video panning across an unpacked dorm suite, organized bookshelves, and Kelsey, smiling, in the middle of the room.

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