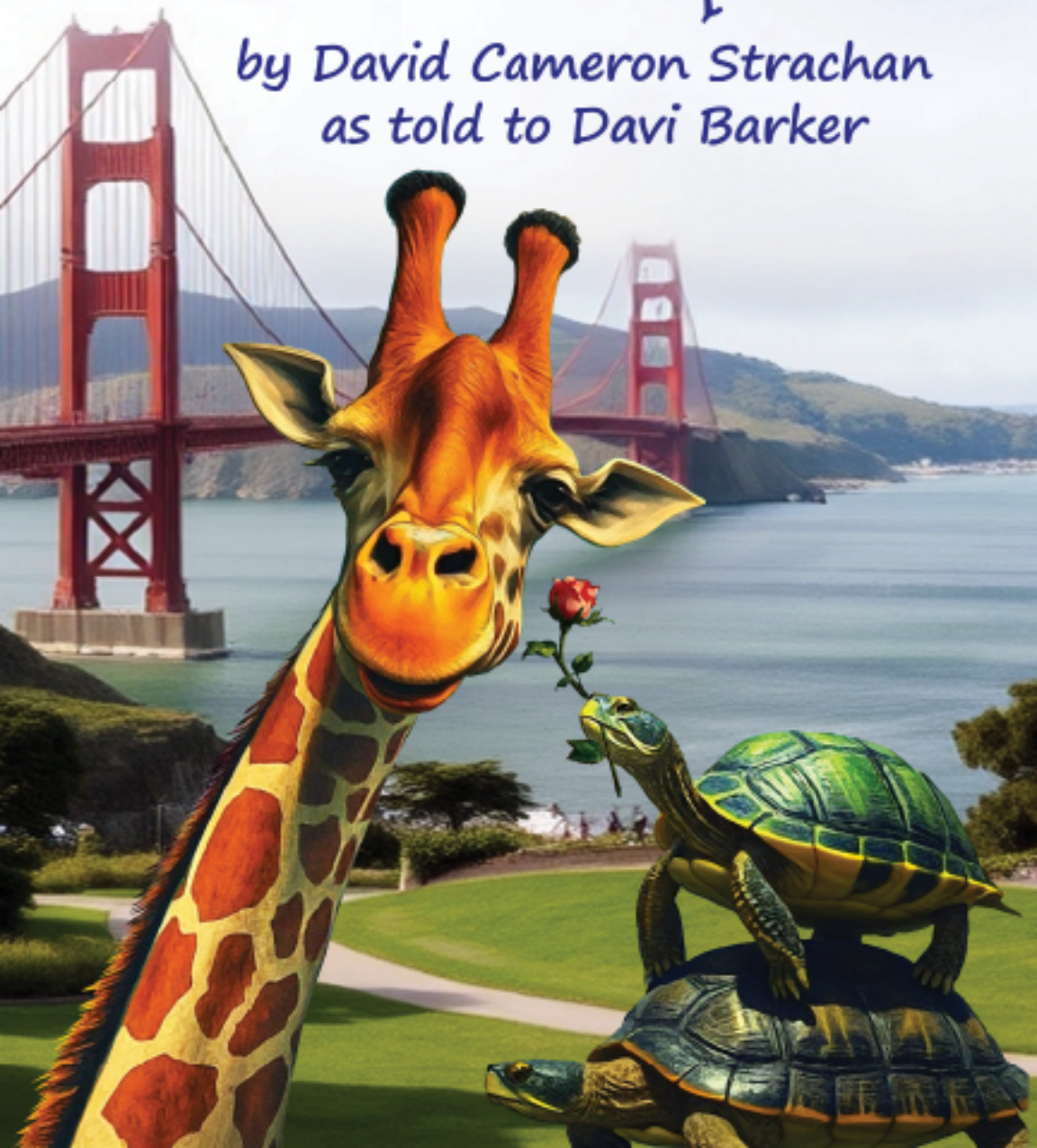


Memoir of a Reluctant Giant

*by David Cameron Strachan
as told to Davi Barker*



Introduction: Think of Goliath

I was once a tiny seed but looks can be deceiving. From the moment I sprouted into the world I was destined for something greater. As I grew taller, I soon towered over everyone around me. I saw the world and everything in it from an extraordinarily different perspective.

My height has posed numerous challenges for me throughout my life. It didn't take long for me to realize that I stood out from the crowd. In kindergarten, the laughter of my peers echoed in the halls as they mocked me. Kids called me "retarded" because they assumed I'd been held back. I was taller than all of my peers, and before long many of my teachers. It was a lonely and vulnerable existence, one that left a lasting impact on my emotional development.

Because of my rapid growth, adults frequently asked me for favors. My mother used this distinctive pitch in her voice when she needed my help. Just by calling my name I could tell that she needed something off of a high shelf or from the back of a cupboard. It must have been humbling for her to watch me surpass her five-foot, eight-inch frame. My parents were stunned and wondered whether I would ever stop growing. I admit, I felt sort of special in some ways, but it wasn't what I wanted. Inside, I really felt like a five-foot two blonde.

As the years went by, my height continued to soar. I hit six feet tall by sixth grade. When I sang in my elementary school choir, I stood head and shoulders above the other kids. They stood in tiers on the bleachers, but I was relegated to the back, standing on the gym floor, just so I appeared eye level with the kids in the back row.

By seventh grade, I stood six feet, three inches. Bullies saw me as an easy target, attempting to trip me for fun, just to watch me fall, or challenging me to fights after school to prove their grit. But I wasn't a fighter. I was filled with insecurities. I was frightened of being hurt, so I told them fighting was against my religion.

Adults too, had unreasonable expectations of me. They mistakenly assumed that being extra tall meant I was extra mature and needed extra responsibility. Acquaintances, church leaders, teachers and even my older brother expected me to act like an adult before my time. But deep down I wasn't an adult. I was just a child with a tall body. I resented the burden of the expectations they dumped on me, and I longed for a sense of normalcy in a world where I felt out of place.

By ninth grade I was six feet, nine inches tall. High school brought a barrage of questions, day after day: "How's the weather up there?" or "Do you play basketball?" Despite their well-intentioned curiosity, I didn't want the extra attention. I just wanted to blend in. To this day, I hear these types of questions almost daily. But now I have an answer, "No! Do you play miniature golf?"

In an attempt to fit in, I reluctantly joined the basketball team, only to discover that it wasn't right for me. I never seemed to have enough energy to run up and down

the court for an entire game. I played for three years but I did not appreciate the competitive atmosphere. I yearned to escape the spotlight.

I went to a school assembly in the gym. Someone had damaged the basketball hoop by bending it back against the backboard, and written a large sign that read, "Strachan Was Here!" I was mortified, not only because people believed that I would vandalize the school, but also even that my name was the center of attention.

In other aspects of school life, I faced the pressure of being the center of attention. On one occasion the football cheerleaders suggested I dress up like "Little Bo Peep" with a shepherd's crook to lead a VW beetle decorated like a sheep at the homecoming game. No way! The thought of becoming a towering spectacle made my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I craved anonymity.

The school marching band instructor approached me and asked if I would be their drum major, since I'd be so easy for everyone in formation to see. No thanks! I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself. I just wanted to hide; to disappear into the crowd like everyone else. I was a shy and sensitive teenager but remaining inconspicuous was never an option.

As I delved into my studies, I came upon a passage about giants in my sophomore biology textbook. I'd never thought of myself as a giant, but I was the tallest person around. It had a picture of a giant with the caption, "giants are usually sterile." I wondered if that applied to me. The realization that my physical stature might have implications beyond the visible left me contemplating my place in the world.

Being a giant does have some advantages. As my eighteenth birthday approached, the looming draft registration weighed heavily on me. But I was six feet, ten inches tall, and the draft board had only raised their height limit from 6'6" to 6'8". I guess that uniforms are only so long – and foxholes are only so deep. I was thankful that I didn't have to face the hell that awaited young men fighting in the Vietnam War.

But the disadvantages are hard to overlook – mainly low door jambs. Standard door jambs are six feet, eight inches. I've hit my head too many times to remember and have had a few near concussions. To this day I am constantly stared at and asked for directions (as if I can see where they want to go from up here). All the attention can feel suffocating. There is no place to hide. I can only appear short when I sit down.

Looking back, I can see that living in my sizable body opened many doors to unique experiences that shaped my identity in ways I couldn't have anticipated. It led me on a journey of self-discovery, teaching me resilience and the importance of embracing my individuality. There's more to me than meets the eye, and within this towering figure lies a person yearning to be understood on a deeper level. I've learned to respond with humor. Now, when I'm asked my height, I sometimes respond with, "five feet, twenty-two inches." It's amazing how many people don't get it. Maybe they have trouble doing the math. And, when I want someone to remember my name I say, "Think of 'Goliath' and you will remember 'David'."

Chapter 21: Caught Between

As resolute as I'd been coming out to my parents as bisexual, I still wasn't done dating tall women.

In the fall of 1975, I started dating Blair who visited the Skills Center as a future occupational therapist. She was six feet tall, with fiery red hair and a captivating smile. After several fun dates over the next six months, our relationship took a turn when she raised a question that echoed from my past. She asked me, "Do you think we'll ever get married and have children?"

Suddenly I was enmeshed in the same vortex of emotions again. I knew I was sterile, but I still didn't know why.

At the time, I had a job doing art therapy for people with chronic schizophrenia at the Skills Center. It was a treatment facility, under the umbrella of Catholic Charities of San Jose. As a result, I had health insurance for the first time in my life, so I thought, "It's time to get to the bottom of this."

In June 1976, I ventured to the Kaiser Infertility Clinic in Santa Clara, CA, to see what they could determine. I was examined by a team of five doctors, who poked and prodded my naked body. They took mouth scrapings, ran several blood tests, and then sent me away without any results.

By then, Blair had already moved on to a new Iranian boyfriend. Plus, she was sleeping with a variety of other men. So, it was no great loss. But we stayed in touch for a few years.

Three months later I went back to Kaiser for an unrelated appointment. The nurse practitioner asked, "Has Dr. Jones contacted you about your test results yet?"

I replied, "No, not a word. Still waiting." She was visibly irritated on my behalf.

The very next day, Dr. Jones, my endocrinologist, called and asked me to come in. He said he'd run a karyotype test, which is a genetic analysis, and the results confirmed that I had Klinefelter syndrome. He said I was born with an extra 'X' sex chromosome, so that instead of the usual XX (female) or XY (male), I had XXY. Klinefelter syndrome is a random genetic variation that occurs entirely by chance, but it finally gave me an explanation for my physical and emotional differences.

Klinefelter syndrome was the reason I produced no sperm, and never would. It also meant my body only naturally produced about 10% of what was considered normal testosterone level for an adult male.

Klinefelter syndrome explained why my undescended pea-sized testicles hid inside my abdomen, my empty and small scrotum and my small phallus. The doctor called it hypogonadism. It explained why I developed breast buds at twelve years old, and

why I've had large nipples and small breasts since my twenties. I learned this was called gynecomastia. The diagnosis even explained my towering figure. Hormones are needed to signal the long bones in the arms and legs to stop growing. So, mine just kept growing, although they did stop eventually.

I was in shock. A tempest of conflicting emotions raged inside me. All my life, I was taught that God only made two kinds of people: male and female. But apparently, He made me something in between. How was that even possible? Why had God chosen me to be sterile, and what was the purpose of my creation if I could not "go forth and multiply?" This news was a huge turning point in my life. It was like a missing piece of the puzzle finally falling into place.

My only complaint at the time was a low sex drive. I was content with the body God gave me, but apparently my endocrinologist was not. He ordered immediate testosterone replacement therapy, prescribing 300mg of synthetic testosterone to be injected into my glutes, alternating cheeks every two weeks, for the rest of my life. On October 6th, the nurse gave me my first dose.

I was raised to regard doctors as practically infallible. I didn't think I could question his medical opinion, and not having any personal knowledge on the subject, I faithfully came in for the shots.

This was not informed consent, since I was never informed of the range of consequences that I was about to experience. All that the endocrinologist told me was that my sex drive would increase, that I would gain weight, and that my shoulders would broaden. He said, "If you want more information, go down to the medical library and read about it yourself." He didn't explain to me that the injections would cause phenomenal physical and psychological changes in me. He offered me no counseling for the resulting emotional turmoil and left me to deal with this metamorphosis alone.

Testosterone replacement therapy changed me in ways I never thought were possible. My entire body began to masculinize. It was like going through puberty in my thirties. What a shock!

My smooth body sprouted dark hair everywhere, much to my disgust. I called it my gorilla suit. I had to shave my face for the first time, and eventually I gave up and just grew a beard. Then I started losing my beautiful auburn hair and going bald. My voice dropped from a first tenor to a baritone. I lost my curvaceous feminine-looking physique and began developing musculature like typical men.

None of this was what I wanted.

My small phallus began to grow. My erections felt fuller than ever before and lasted much longer. At least that part I appreciated. I experienced a radically increased sexual appetite. I never experienced feeling "horny" as a teenager, but suddenly I had this enormous sex drive, although my sexual orientation didn't change. I was

still primarily attracted to men.

My body soon appeared very masculine, but to further "improve the effect," my doctor recommended breast reduction surgery. A lot of Klinefelter patients have mastectomies like transgender men. He also thought I should get testicular implants. I refused both surgeries. I had made peace with my androgynous body, and I came to treasure my differences. I didn't see anything wrong with my body the way it was. I felt whole with all my unique parts. Why hadn't he started me on a much lower dose to see if my sex drive improved without all the physical changes?

While my physical being was becoming more masculine, emotionally and spiritually, I had always felt more feminine. The testosterone made me feel like my feminine side was dying. It was like I was finally finding out what being "male" actually felt like. During the years of my transition, I often wished I had stayed my original self. Wasn't that testosterone level normal for me?

It was a time of overwhelming confusion. When I started reading the medical journals, terms like "hermaphrodite," "feminized male," and "eunuchoid body" made me feel like a freak. I learned that this genetic variation occurs in 1 in 500 "male" births and exists within various creatures in the animal kingdom. So, I was rare, but at least I was not alone.

When I shared my diagnosis with my parents, I'd hoped this explanation would foster some acceptance from them. However, their reactions were a reminder of their insular perspective. My father's response was, "Oh, you're a eunuch." I think he just couldn't comprehend what I was saying without using a word from his Biblical worldview. My mother was scandalized and wanted me to keep my diagnosis a secret.

Not having any positive medical information and being expected to keep this a family secret was very unsettling to me. I knew that being caught between the sexes would become my life's challenge, and I wanted to share my experience, not only to find support for myself, but potentially to find others like me.

I often wondered how my life would have been different if I had grown up knowing my emotional, intellectual and physical differences had a medical explanation. It must have been evident at my birth, since I had undescended and tiny testes, but I was assigned "male," raised as a boy, and saddled with male expectations. I had always felt out of place without really knowing why. Maybe it was the Klinefelter's syndrome (or my gender variation) that made me attracted to boys growing up. I knew I was developing differently for some reason. I felt inferior in many ways. Maybe other boys were the "opposite sex" for me, in some sense. I was attracted to their differences from me, not their similarity. What if I had grown up knowing I was a mix of male and female on the chromosomal level?

Chapter 47: Identity Recognition

In 2011 my passport and driver's license were both due for renewal, and I decided to try to change the sex designation from "male" to "intersex" on all my identity documents. It turned out to be quite an ordeal to be legally recognized as my authentic self.

Toby Adams was an intern I'd met through Advocates for Informed Choice (AIC). She was in law school, and I leaned on her expertise to guide me through the legal complexities. We spent two years strategizing, and once she passed the California Bar Exam, we co-founded the Intersex and Genderqueer Recognition Project, which was the first organization in America, along with Equality California, to petition for a third gender option on government documents. I called Senator Mark Leno's office to discuss adding an "other" category on California identity documents. Toby created a template she sent to Assemblyman Tom Ammiano. Our pleas fell on deaf ears when neither of them would help our cause. They were too busy, and their legislative dockets were already full for the year.

Government documents use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably, but there's a crucial distinction. In essence, "sex" refers to objective anatomical attributes, while "gender" describes the internal experience, and the outward performance of that identity. As they say, "sex" is between your legs, while "gender" is between your ears. So, my sex is "intersex" while my gender is "non-binary." Not all intersex people are non-binary, and not all non-binary people are intersex. In strategy sessions we decided it was actually gender, not sex, we wanted reflected on identity documents.

In 2016 with Toby's help, I joined a married couple, Xin and Char, filing petitions with the Superior Court of California seeking official recognition of our "non-binary" gender on identity documents. I even had my psychiatrist and medical doctor write letters supporting my non-binary status. Our argument was simple. Every government form requires us to sign under penalty of perjury that the information submitted is complete and accurate. If the government won't give us an accurate gender option, they leave us no choice but to commit perjury. A non-binary person forced to declare themselves "male" or "female" is being coerced into testifying that their gender identity doesn't exist. In a world where "male" and "female" legally exist, we just wanted our gender to legally exist, too.

Our court date was set for New Year's Eve. I spent weeks sifting through thrift stores for the perfect androgynous ensemble for the hearing. I decided on red corduroy pants, a loose-fitting green blouse, and my rainbow suspenders. We even contacted three newspapers and two TV stations in hopes of generating some interest in our cause. Ultimately, our court date was unexpectedly canceled, and our petition was granted without a hearing. In February 2017 our non-binary decrees came through, and I became one of the first legally recognized non-binary people in California. The next day our story was covered by NBC News.

I also contacted the Canadian consulate about amending my birth certificate. They said they were working on adding a third gender option. With Toby's help, I was able to amend my birth certificate from "M" to "X," which is Canada's non-binary designation. It may seem like a minor victory but having my identity documents finally reflect my genuine identity was highly significant to me. Then in 2019 my sex on my American passport was changed to "X" instead of "M."

It's alienating when society's perception of me is so profoundly different from my internal experience. I know people see me as a man, with masculine features, at least with clothes on. When I hold hands with Peter, they assume we're a same-sex couple, instead of looking beneath the surface. People can't see my ambiguous sex chromosomes or anatomy. They don't know that my gender experience transcends the binary. Most people don't even know what their own sex chromosomes are. They assume that they are either female or male, but they haven't actually had a karyotype test. Humans are peculiar in that way. They make hasty assumptions based on appearance to put other people in neat boxes. Well, some of us don't fit in those boxes, but we're still humans who need to be respected.

When I spend the day writing in a cafe or tavern, and I see people bustling about, I don't assume anything. A couple may look straight, but maybe one or both of them is bisexual, or transgender. They could both be intersex for all I know! I look around and I don't have a clue who is male or female, gay or straight, or anything else. And I don't really care. They're all human. I wonder what their stories are. I wonder about their hopes and dreams. You can never judge a book by its cover!

Living in this tall body often feels like being an extraterrestrial. I always stand head and shoulders above the crowd, which always puts me on the outside of culture looking in. Throughout my life, I've experienced four major transitions in my physical anatomy. I was born with an androgynous body, which quickly towered over all my peers. Suddenly, just when I was beginning to explore my gender and sexuality, that body was taken from me by medical intervention, giving me a new masculine body that I've never really adjusted to. Third, my HIV diagnosis led to years of drug therapies that dramatically altered my relationship with my body. Finally, as I've journeyed into an older age, I'm coping with my physical decline.

Yet, through all those transformations, my internal essence has been immutable. I've often wished I could go back to my androgynous body, to see who I would have become. There were times in my life when I was closeted, and times I was out. But, in all circumstances I have remained an androgyne on the inside. As I get older, Bearded Iris has come out more and more. My life has been a testament to the fact that our bodies are just vessels. What truly defines us is a deeper essence that transcends our physical form – an energy, a vibration, or maybe a soul. Despite setbacks and doubts, my life as an androgyne has been a fight for recognition and understanding of that non-binary essence.

Maybe that's my legacy. Trying to understand all these organizations and legal challenges. The lives of the people I've touched. It's all been a humanizing mission.

I'm still struggling with terminology. I'm a queer of sorts, but no label truly encapsulates all that I am. I'm a gray-bearded non-binary intersex giant who enjoys wild colored beard dye and Muslim clothing. I am multitudes, and I think, if we're honest with ourselves, we are all multitudes.

