Oral History Interview: Levi Alter

Interviewee: Levi Alter

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

Date: February 4, 2018

Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It is February 4, 2018. I'm here in Pasadena, California with Rabbi Levi Alter. That's pronounced correctly?

Levi A. Yes.

Mark B. For an oral history interview. And Rabbi, if you'd begin perhaps just saying your name and spelling it for the transcriber.

Levi A. Yes. Rabbi Dr. Levi Ethan Alter. L-E-V-I E-T-H-A-N A-L-T-E-R.

Mark B. A little spelling test. Thank you so much for taking this time. As I said, we're recording an oral history interview, and so I'll ask you just to go back to your origins, tell about where you came into the world, the family situation, and just the beginnings of your life. So wherever you would like to start is wonderful.

Levi A. Well, all of us are located in a time and place. We grow up in a family. And I was the fourth of five generations of intersex individuals in my family. In each generation there was at least one person who was intersex. And this comes out in different ways, and it might be hormonal—in our case it was—anatomical—in our case it was. It could be different gender expression, different gender identity. And even though each person in my

family had a similar physical condition, the way that they felt their gender to be and expressed their gender was diverse.

And I think this is unusual both in the gender community and in the wider LGBT community. So many people grow up all alone. They think they're the only one. Whereas in my case, I grew up with family members who preceded me in earlier generations who were intersex. The intersex community is a little different, though, than the trans community and the LGBT community in that being physically based, it may involve doctors. And there has been a great deal of lying, and secrecy, and shame which, some very brave doctors have kind of resisted that, but many have gone along with it.

So in my family, even though I was part of a very loving family that had other intersex people in it, it wasn't something that I had a vocabulary word for, and it wasn't something we ever really talked about. And I didn't really notice it, even, until one day I was helping my grandmother to change the pillowcase in my grandfather's bed, and I said why are we putting two pillowcases on his bed. And she said, oh, you know, because he had polio, and half of his face, he is paralyzed. His eye makes tears. So that's why we put it there. And I had never really even noticed that half of my grandfather's face was paralyzed until that moment. It was perfectly normal to me that one half of his face always stayed still and never moved when he talked or smiled or anything else.

And the same thing. We went then into the bathroom and we were taking some towels, and I said why does granddad have two shavers? And she said, silly, nobody has two shavers. That's his, that's mine. And I said no, no, you should have one that's pink. And she said, come here. And she took my hand and she rubbed it down on her cheek, and she said how does that feel? And I said it feels soft. And then she rubbed it up on her cheek, and she said, and how does that feel? And I said oh, that feels like sandpaper. And she said, well, that's because I have to shave twice a day. First I shave in the morning and then I shave again around 3:00 in the afternoon because my beard comes in very heavy.

And I had never noticed that my grandmother shaved. I also hadn't noticed she wore my grandfather's clothes in the house and had a short haircut. But when she went out, she only went out to family funerals, weddings, things like that, and at that time she would very awkwardly put on a dress, and it totally didn't fit her. And in any pictures we have of these occasions she's never smiling. So, you know, it's just…

We got stuck one time on a subway. It got broken. And we went past her 3:00 afternoon shave, and I could see her starting to sweat, and I could see tears coming down her face with the sweat. And then she finally had an idea. She took the *Wall Street Journal* and she just put it up in front of her face and then put her hand in my waistband, and I guided her out of the car that way so no one could see. And when we got to the top we were waiting on a park bench for a taxi to come rescue us, and she was still

crying and she said, I didn't want them to say I was the bearded lady escaped from the circus freak show. And that's when I realized that my grandmother was afraid people would call her a freak.

When people don't conform to gender expectations, we can be called all sorts of derogatory names, as if God makes any mistakes in creation. Isn't every baby that's born perfect, and beautiful, and exactly the way it's supposed to be?

When I was born, you have to have one inch to be classified as male, and if not, the default will be female. So I had an "F" on my birth certificate. And later, when I went to kindergarten, my parents had to show the school my birth certificate to prove my birth date, so I was written down that way, and I had to go to school that way. And my parents sat me down and explained, well, we know you're a boy, but you have to go to school wearing a dress. And that's it. And I just unquestioningly, obediently obeyed my parents.

And thank God nowadays we do have wonderful organizations in place helping trans youth. We have some enlightened protocols in place helping intersex youth to not have to be a boy that goes to school wearing a dress. And I wish that I could tell the politicians and the clergy and the other people who are preaching about this the story of my life so that they would realize that God created a diverse world, I'm part of that world, God loves me, I'm a child of God, and he wanted to make me this way. Just like he

wanted to make all the other members of my family who are intersex this way.

And when we impose these artificial slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female categories onto people, those are not God's categories. God does not create anybody born a slave. And when we are created in God's image, there's no specific color that God is, no specific gender that God is. And we're taking away the good gifts that God has given us. It's almost like we're disrespectfully rejecting what God has given us.

And to me being a part of the gender community, it's such an honor because the gender community is the bravest people that I know, because each person has had to deeply reflect about the gift of the totality of who they are, decide who am I, how do I reflect the creator in my life. And God's name is truth. So to be authentic, to be truthful about who we are, it's the opposite of how sometimes people accuse us of deceit, when nothing could be further from the truth.

And I'm very grateful for everything about my life. I'm grateful for the body I was given. I'm grateful for my opportunity to be a part of the gender community.

Mark B. Just to clarify, geographical location. It was Los Angeles where you were born and raised?

Levi A. Oh, no. My family are all immigrants, and all but seven were lost in the Holocaust. The Alexander Hassidic movement was founded in Poland in

1880 in Alexandrov. It was the second largest Hasidic group in Poland after Ger. And the *shtiebel* of the Alexander Hasidim in Ostrolenka was at the house of Lewtan the baker. And my grandparents are from Ostroleka or Ostrolenka.

Mark B. That's your grandparents.

Levi A. And my great-grandparents, who emigrated first and then brought their children over. But of the ones that were left in Europe, all but seven of the entire extended family were—

Mark B. So they emigrated after World War II?

Levi A. No, before.

Mark B. Oh, before, okay.

Levi A. Nobody could get out once the war started. No, they came here.

Mark B. They came to New York?

Levi A. Well, originally yes, but they ended up settling in Connecticut. And my parents were both born in the United States in Connecticut. My great-grandmother on my mother's side, my mother's mother's mother, and her mother, five generations, were alive when I was born. And my great-great-grandmother passed away when I was a baby, so I never knew her.

But my great-grandmother I knew till I was a teenager. She made all my clothes. She was a professional seamstress. That's how she supported her family. And she basically looked like a linebacker wearing a dress. She was very tall and had big, broad shoulders, very muscular, covered with

body hair, a deep, booming bass voice. My grandfather, when his mother-in-law would say something, you know, she would say jump and on the way up he would say how high. [*Laughs.*] She was a very dominant, very strong person. But she had a very feminine gender identity, and very feminine gender expression. She made all her own clothes. They had little flowers on them, and little lace, and she baked her own bread and raised her children.

And one of her children, my grandmother, the one I mentioned, she basically raised me most of the time, up until I started school, and then I still spent summers, usually, with her until I went away to school. And then on my father's side, his father and mother, I knew them and their parents. I would stay sometimes with them when my grandmother wasn't feeling well or something. Again up until I started school. And then I would usually visit them on the holidays during the school year. And my father was in the service, and we moved around a lot in—

Mark B. He was in the Army or…?

Levi A. The Air Force.

Mark B. Air Force, okay.

Levi A. Yeah. And among other places where I lived during the school year, I lived at times on military bases and things like that. I only had the opportunity to go to day school for first grade. All the rest of the time I went to afternoon Talmud Torahs, evening Talmud Torahs, weekend

Talmud Torahs. And I was really interested in learning, learning more Torah. But the opportunities were very limited to be able to do that.

And I've known some Orthodox Jewish rabbis who are F to M, who did go to study in yeshiva, but when they did that, they did not disclose their private, confidential medical information. They saw no reason to do that. Really isn't relevant. If you're living your life as a man, then what business is it of somebody else's what your unique situation is? So the problem with doing something like that is you go to, say, like a Bais Yaakov girls school, it's an all girls school, what are you going to say when you go to yeshiva and they ask you what mesivta did you go to, what yeshiva ketana did you go to?

So you need to generally say something along the lines of well, I went to public school, or I'm a *ba'al-teshuva* or something like that. And then they say okay, we'll put you in the introductory class. And you stay there like a week and then you move out into the regular curriculum. So one of my sons had the opportunity to learn that way, and several of my friends and colleagues had the opportunity to learn that way. I had the opportunity to learn that way. And I'm, like them, ordained Orthodox. And it's more of an issue when you go to do things like, say, have a family. So my rebbetzin is Rebbetzin Dr. Yona Ruth Alter. She's a physician.

Mark B. Would you mind spelling that name just so the transcriber gets that?

Levi A. Y-O-N-A R-U-T-H A-L-T-E-R

Mark B. Thank you.

Levi A. So yeah, I actually know how to spell my own last name. And between us we have nine children. So Rabbi Royi Israel is the oldest. There's Michael David. He's a social worker. Gavriel Aiden passed away of a congenital lung disease when he was 27. Chaplain Alexander [Dimitri], Chaplain Alexander Shalom, Bernard, Rabbi Shamai Meir. He's Hassidic. He's a rabbi in Jerusalem. And our daughters Elizabeth and Sarah.

Mark B. Just a little bit about your parents' religious identity. So they identified as Orthodox? I don't exactly understand if Hasidic is part of Orthodox. What kind of community did they relate to?

Levi A. That's actually a good question. A lot of people outside the Jewish community, you say Jewish and you think everybody's all the same, but there's Renewal, and Reconstructionist, and Reform, and Conservative. And then there's Orthodox, and within Orthodox there's the Sephardic community that speak Ladino, and they have a Spanish Jewish heritage. There's the Ashkenazi community that I'm a part of that comes from Europe. Some of us look like we're white, and we speak Yiddish.

And then there's the much larger Middle Eastern community, or Mizrahi community, in which a fair number of people speak Arabic. And then there's a sizeable Jewish community from Ethiopia, black, northern African, and they have a sacred language called Ge'ez. And there's also a very large Indian, from India community, two different ones. And we also had, at one point, a fairly substantial community in China, but that's

basically no longer there. People have mostly gone to Israel. But a lot of the European Jewish community came here, like my grandparents came here to the United States.

Mark B. I'm just curious. I'm trying to match your talking about moving around a lot to different military bases, and I'm wondering how your parents were able to do that moving and still maintain community. Was that difficult? I'm trying to get a picture of it.

Levi A. That's an interesting thing. My grandparents provided the stability when I was growing up. They were part of the Orthodox community. Here in the United States—

Mark B. And they were in Connecticut?

Levi A. Yeah. The Alexandrov community didn't really survive Europe, so when they came here they were part of a landsmanshaft from Ostroleka. They knew other people from there. But they weren't able to be Hasidic here. There just wasn't enough of an infrastructure. So yes, they were Orthodox. And there's a shul, let me think of the name of it, Ahavath Chesed so they went to Ahavath Chesed in New London. So they were there.

And then the thing was, is my mother's parents could speak English relatively well. My father's parents could barely. And he didn't know any English when he started school. So my parents would say to my grandparents no Yiddish, only English with the *ayniklakh,* with the grandchildren. So English was actually not my first language. Yiddish was

my first language. But if my parents had anything to say about it, it wouldn't have been that way.

And it's unfortunate because to keep one's heritage is a beautiful thing. And part of the deracination and assimilation of Jewish life in the exile is that it's a struggle for us to do that, and you sort of are a little uneasy in both worlds, in a way. You're kind of like a fish out of water, in a way.

And so going to public school and living on military bases was a good thing for me because I had a chance to experience a lot of diversity, and that's helped me in my career. I think a lot of people, they'll never meet an Orthodox person who is right wing Orthodox, or an Orthodox person who is Hasidic Orthodox because the community tends to be sort of by itself, and that way we preserve our communal values and our communal relationships.

Mark B. Could you expand on that just a bit? What are the communal values? What are the identifying marks that go with the tradition?

Levi A. Well, if somebody was just looking from the outside, you can't really tell a non-Orthodox Jew, a Reconstructionist, a Renewal, or Reform, or Conservative Jew from anybody else, and even if it's a rabbi, about the only difference might be they would wear, perhaps, a yarmulke or a hat.

However, you can right away tell an Orthodox Jewish person just by how we look. Our standards of modesty in dress for both men and women mean that a man is going to cover his head at all times and a woman is

going to wear, whatever the current fashion is, it's going to be a modest version of that fashion. So she'll wear a dress or skirt, she won't wear pants. She'll have it below the knees or down to the floor. The same thing with long sleeves, high collar. And she'll cover her hair if she's married. So she might wear a wig, which you may or may not be able to tell is a wig. She might wear a scarf or a snood or a hat or something like that.

And there are a lot of family values that it's hard to even explain it outside of the community. For example, we have a value called family purity. And this is an opportunity for men and women to deepen their relationship outside of marital relations on a monthly basis. And there will always be separate twin beds in any Orthodox couple's bedroom in order to facilitate this chance to deepen the marital relationship outside of intimacy. And to try to explain that to other people is very difficult. But what it means is that there is no touching during certain periods of time.

So in order to preserve the modesty of the couple there's just no touching in public at all. So you will see a very loving Orthodox family walking down the street, but you won't see the husband touching his wife's arm or something like that.

And we have traditions that separate the sexes from a very early age. I referenced a moment ago that our schools typically, Orthodox schools are usually completely separate for boys and girls. They're not even in the same building or on the same block. And it's a very separated kind of a world. There's a somewhat similar curriculum, but as you get older, the

boys go into learning Talmud. Typically the girls do not. So the girls might have a little more background in Bible, but might not have much in Talmud.

One of the Orthodox rabbis that I know, she's out, M to F, Abby, she was originally Yisroel, in her Hasidic community nobody went past tenth grade. That way nobody could go to college, because you don't want your kids to go to college, because they're going to get non-Jewish values and meet non-Jewish people, so you prevent that by stopping school as soon as you reach the legal age to stop going to school, which is 16.

And the other thing was she didn't know one word of English because at her school they cheated a little bit. They're supposed to have Jewish studies in the morning and English studies in the afternoon, and for the girls they did. For the boys they just kept doing the Jewish subjects full-time. And as a result, she's a whiz at Talmud. It's wonderful. She really knows her Jewish law very well.

However, she had a very hard time to be trans, to transition, because first she had to learn to speak English. Then she had to go to a special community program called Footsteps that helps Hasidic people. She had to get a GED diploma because she didn't have a high school diploma. Then she went to City College of New York, and I think she's going to Columbia now. So it can be a difficult world, particularly for boys, to ever have more of that diversity.

Mark B. Just to clarify for the record, how much of your younger education was in Orthodox schools and how much was in public schools?

Levi A. Well, unfortunately, in my case, as I said, I had a wonderful experience in day school in first grade, but after that—

Mark B. After that.

Levi A. I went to public schools. The good part about that was the diversity. And I appreciate diversity. The negative part is that I had some catching up to do. And also, even if I had been in day school, because I was a boy who had to go to school wearing a dress, I would have been stuck in the Bais Yaakov girls schools, and I would have had a wonderful background in Bible, but I wouldn't have had any background in Talmud. And what do you study in rabbinical school? You study Talmud. So I did study Talmud, but I had to do a little bit of catching up in order to do that, so I did a preparatory program and I caught up.

Mark B. I want to just ask a little bit about your public school experience, and both the issues of gender diversity, but also religious diversity in terms of you being different in both of those contexts. And don't know whether you took a lot in terms of relationships with other children in school, and how that might have formed you. You mentioned being aware of diversity, of other folks. How did you feel like you were treated and you were taken in or not taken in? Was that part of a formative experience for you?

Levi A. I didn't think too much about how other people saw me. I was very athletic, so I was good at sports, and I would be the captain of the team or be the first one chosen. Whenever I went to a new neighborhood the bigger, older boys, they would gang up on me because I was small and wore glasses and old fashioned clothes.

And the thing I learned is that when they come at you as a group, they don't really like each other, the bullies, and so they don't really fight as a team, actually. You just figure out which one is making the most noise. That's the leader. And you strike the first blow when you know you can't run away and you know you can't hide. The only third thing you can do is wait for them to hit you, and I would be down, and that would be the end of that, so I have to hit first.

So I would smack and his nose would start bleeding, and then I would knock the wind out of him, and then I would go back again, and I would just go back and forth, back and forth, and pretty soon he'd be on the ground crying for Mommy, and I would be the playground hero. So all the underdogs of the school would tag along with me because they would be safe from the bully as long as they were with me.

So I was actually very popular among the boys for that reason. But because I wore a dress, the girls would talk to me as well, which they typically wouldn't do to the other boys. So I ended up having one kind of a life there at school, where somehow or other it just wasn't that much of a problem.

Mark B. Good.

Levi A. But at home, the minute I got home I would change out of those clothes. My older cousins, they would always drop off the clothes of my older cousins for my brother, and he was too little to fit into them for a few years, so I would just confiscate them, wear them myself, and then he would get his turn. So I would take my cousin's clothes, dress up like a normal boy, finally, and go running outside.

And then I would take my little jaunt several blocks away, where nobody went to the same school, and they wouldn't ever see me get on and off the school bus wearing a dress, and there I had a normal boyhood. So I had this dual life where I had a completely normal boyhood, and I had a sort of an interesting boyhood at school with the dress thing.

So with the other boys, we would ride all over on our bikes being wild, and we would build forts, and we would climb up the trees, throw water balloons at the girls and say they couldn't come in our fort, and play catch and all of that. And I continued to live that sort of a double life until basically well into my 20s.

The only problem was that my great-grandmother, my grandmother and my aunt, my mother's sister, they all had a double puberty. So they grew breasts and they grew a beard. They had a deep voice and big muscles and they had periods. And so something was going on. Nature was just doing an interesting thing. And my great-grandmother had her female gender identity. My grandmother had her male gender identity.

My mother's sister, my aunt, had a very fierce female identity, where she was very masculine, but loudly would proclaim to anyone listening that women could be like that. And this was the era where we were coming up to Stonewall, coming up to women's liberation and all those kinds of things.

And with me, though, when I was nine years old I was out on the school playground, I ended up being rushed to the hospital, and they did an operation. When I was nine they removed my right testicle, which we didn't know I had. It was way up high in the abdomen, not low where it usually would be. And it was a lifesaving surgery. It was not about changing my gender or something.

And then the doctors lied, told my mother to lie to me. They told her to tell me that I had my appendix out. This is getting into the whole thing with shame. It's also getting into the whole thing with telling parents to lie to their children. This kind of medicine is not good for anyone.

Then, when I was ten, the same thing happened on the left side. And because no one explained to me what was going to happen, I assumed I would have the same double puberty that everybody else did. That's not what happened. What happened was the doctors sat me down, and my parents, who had no say in this. They didn't consult me as a child that this affected. They didn't consult my family, either.

And they said don't worry, and they patted me on the head, you can be a real woman, a real woman, because we're going to give you shots. When

you turn 16 we're going to give you female hormone shots and you can turn into a real woman. And then, when you're 21, you won't even need to take the shots anymore, you'll just take a pill every day, and for the rest of your life you'll be a real woman. And you can marry a man, and you can be a mother. You know, you can adopt children, and you can be a housewife. Isn't that wonderful?

And I just sat there staring at the tops of my shoes. And my parents just sat there staring at the tops of their shoes. And nobody understood. I mean, when you're an Orthodox Jew you respect authority, and nobody understood how to say to these authority figures—excuse me, that's not what we're going to do. And then the other problem was they said they needed to make sure that nothing else was going to happen.

And in those days they had no kinds of imagery studies. I'm in my 60s now. I was born in the '50s. So the medical technology in the '60s was not what it is today. So I had to go every three months to the Philadelphia Naval Medical Center. It was an all day drive for my family, very exhausting.

And then the torture would start. They would take me in a room, strip me naked. I would stand there in front of a growth chart. Because I stopped growing when I was ten, after the second surgery. They could never figure out why. But it was of great interest to them. So I would stand next to this growth chart and they would take my picture without my clothes on, as if somehow that had anything to do with my height.

And then I would be told to lie down on a steel table and the invasive exams would start. And after the first doctor got done the second doctor would do the same thing all over again. And then, if there were any residents, fellows, interns, they would come in. There would be a line and they would just come in one after the other and do the same exact exam again.

Mark B. And you were in the room by yourself?

Levi A. Well, they would be in there.

Mark B. But your parents were not with you. It was just you.

Levi A. Oh, no. Oh, no. No. They had no idea this went on. And I had no vocabulary to tell them. To this day I…

Mark B. Shudder, yes.

Levi A. So this, you know, you're just being abused over and over and over and over again. You know, this is not for your benefit. Once they do the first exam, what are all the rest for? They're for their benefit, not yours. And you're being treated like a piece of exotica.

And when I was doing my internship and residency at UCLA Medical Center, and I had the opportunity to research a case I was working on, I was in the pediatric endocrinology section. I opened up a book, an older book, and I was looking through it, and then I saw this picture. I recognized that room. I recognized the pattern of the linoleum squares on the floor. I recognized that growth chart in the doorway. I recognized the

ceiling. Okay, who is this child in this picture? I recognized those scars. I recognized my hands.

Now my face, they had taken a little black rectangle and they had put it where you would normally see eye glasses, and just by blocking out only your eyes—you could see the whole rest of your face—and I'm standing there naked, and I'm a child, and… [*Sighs.*] So I guess generations of pediatric endocrinologists have seen that photograph, but when I saw it and I realized it was me, it was almost as if my knees disappeared, and the floor disappeared. I don't know how I stayed standing. It just brought that all back.

So because they said when I was 16 they were going to do this, I had no choice. I left home when I was 15. And that's how I handled that. My parents weren't going to be able to say no. They didn't know how to say no. And I don't blame them. To these authority figures. So I went to college on a National Merit Scholarship and a Regent's Scholarship, on academic scholarships. And I went to rabbinical school, and I went and I did a doctorate at UCLA.

Mark B. Go back to the school. So the earlier schoolwork was where?

Levi A. The State University of New York.

Mark B. And you studied what subject there?

Levi A. I actually had a quadruple major. I studied computer science, I studied philosophy with a specialization in comparative religion. I studied social

work, a bachelor's in social work, and I studied sociology. I also was an exchange student to Germany. I was an exchange student to Russia. And I studied martial arts. I was a black belt in Kung Fu and judo. And I was briefly on the United States Olympic judo team. I just didn't stay there because I had an injury, a very serious injury, and I never did judo again after that.

Mark B. Did you adopt a gender identity when you left home? How did you decide to present yourself and identify?

Levi A. The main thing I did was I used my initials as my legal name.

Mark B. Okay.

Levi A. And by using my initials as my legal name I was able to… And there's no gender on this card. Military IDs don't have—

Mark B. So you have to describe the card since we're doing audio tapes.

Levi A. I just showed you my United States Uniform Services ID card. And I travel on that. And it doesn't have a gender listed on it. I'm mentioning that because it's an option for intersex people. You can have a name that's a name that could be used either for men or women, boys or girls. There's names like Dale and Dana and other names like that in English, and in Hebrew there's names like Leor, Simcha, Yona, a few others that you could use either for a boy or a girl. And you can do other things with documents and so forth.

But ultimately we're still living, at this point in history—and it's rapidly changing, so maybe just in a few years this will be out of date—but right now we're living at a point in history where you get assigned either one or the other. You often have nothing to say about it. And right now there's not really a test to figure out what gender a person is because the way that they do it now does not take into consideration what's going to happen later in a person's hormonal makeup. It's just looking at visible anatomy, but it's not looking at anatomy that you don't see.

Usually genetics are not a part of it because genetics tests are expensive. The genetics tests, though, there are people who are not XX or XY. There are some people who are XXY and there are some people who, depending on which, you know, in each part one reading will be XX and the other reading will be XY. Those people are called chromosomal mosaic.

But you also have people who are XX, but they have an SRY factor, they're male. You have people who are XY, but they don't have an SRY factor, they're female. You've also got people who are XY, but they have complete androgen insensitivity syndrome. You can never change them into men. Nothing you can do will make them male because their body does not respond to any amount of testosterone.

Mark B. So Rabbi, you talked about your work at SUNY and then continuing on in your education.

Levi A. Well, I did work at rabbinic seminary and I was ordained.

Mark B. The rabbinic seminary was where?

Levi A. I will not disclose that.

Mark B. Okay, that's fine.

Levi A. At the moment the only option for us is to maintain our medical confidential information as confidential.

Mark B. Fine.

Levi A. So when I went to UCLA I did a double Ph.D. in ancient Near Eastern civilization and Semitic linguistics. I then went on and I worked briefly as a department chairman and professor at a university in the Judaic Studies Department, but I was very interested in technology. I mentioned I was a computer science major. And I also had an opportunity to learn broadcast television.

So I thought to myself, well, you know, I can go out and I can dun major donors, but why don't I just start a television station and I'll go ahead and I'll do educational media for academics, but I'll also do commercial media to raise money for the education part of it. And that's how I got into television production. And I had a corporation that did that. And I—

Mark B. This is late '70s, early '80s?

Levi A. Yeah. And I also was doing basically kind of troubleshooting of troubled congregations when a rabbi would get sick or pass away and they needed an interim person to tide them over. So I did that. And one of the situations was very interesting because I had a co-rabbi along with me. We

were splitting the duties because it was a large congregation. And he said, you know, you would really like chaplaincy. You would like hospital chaplaincy.

And I said oh, you know, when I've been in the hospital I've really enjoyed having the chaplain and the rabbi who work for the hospital come see me because I wanted to learn Talmud on a daily basis. That's my usual practice. But I couldn't focus my eyes because of the medicines I was on. So he came in every day for an hour and a half. We would learn orally. And it really helped me to get through a hospital experience. So that would be something I would be interested in. But I don't know very much about it. And he said, well, it hasn't been something a lot of Jews have gotten into, but I do hear that there is a program at UCLA.

So I went back to UCLA, only this time I went as an intern and resident there in the medical center, and I did clinical pastoral education. I was on the faculty then of the medical school doing a class in bedside manner, doctoring, and I was on the bioethics committee. Now when I was on the bioethics committee, about once a week-ish we had a baby that nobody could figure out should it be a boy or should it be a girl.

So when it comes to ethics, we don't want to impose what works for us on other people. Nobody has an ethical problem. They know what their values are. They know they're not going to steal, they know they're not going to lie. But what do you do when you have two ethical values that are both important to you, and now you have a paradox? Your wife comes up

and says does this dress make me look fat? Well, dear—do you want to lie, and that's going to impact your relationship with your wife, or do you want to say yes it does and then you hurt her feelings? So you have two values here that appear to be in conflict. On the one hand you want truth in relationships. On the other hand, you want compassion in relationships.

It's like in the Psalms. You would think that the word emet for truth, there would be a synonym for truth for that because it's always parallelism in biblical poetry. And for love, *hesed*, loving-kindness, you would think maybe *ahava* or some other word that means love would go with that. No, *hesed* and emet are always the two parallels. Really? Because truth and love don't seem like they would be two sides of the same coin.

But this example I'm giving, where do you want to do the loving thing or do you want to do the truthful thing, we have these kinds of ethical conundrums. And the answer there is not for me to tell you which one you should do. As a member of the ethics committee on the team my job is to help another person when you can't think straight. It's like when you're transitioning or like when you're coming out. You can't think straight. You're so emotional. Everything gets all mixed up. Your brain just is on overload. So it's really helpful to have a mentor or to have a community, to have a counselor, to have someone you can talk to about it.

And that was the advantage that I had that so many trans people and so many LGBT people and intersex people don't have, was I had family members who had a similar experience. And I always knew I was not the

only one. All I had to do was open my eyes and look around in my own home.

But to come beside a person at a time when they have conflicting values. For example, you love your parents. You don't want to upset their world. They think you're a girl when really you're a boy, or they think you're a boy when really you're a girl. Or they think you're straight when really you're something else. And you don't want to hurt them. But at the same time, how can you be inauthentic and truly love them? Their love for you is a false self. They don't love the real you because you're not telling them the real you.

So this kind of conflict, in ethics, where we're coming beside a parent making a difficult decision of how to assign the sex of the child. And it's not what I want to tell them they should do. It's about clarifying their values. Yes, you want your child to grow up without having to think twice about things like this. You don't want them to be visibly different than the other children. On the other hand, who looks in their diaper? Nobody looks in their diaper.

Wouldn't you like to give them the chance to grow a little older and then you kind of watch how they play, you sort of listen to the things they tell you. Are they being a superhero or are they being a ballerina? What is your child's real nature? And later, when they're even older, you can come back to the medical center, before they start junior high school, and we can start talking about options. Because if legal, if medical support for

them to be who they really are is going to help your family at that point, how do you deal with the school system, it can be very helpful to have a doctor on your side.

So that's the kind of thing that we were dealing with, that and many other ethical issues. But diversity just seems to be something that we kind of want to legislate away or we sort of want to, in religion, just dictate away, or we want to, in medicine, surgery away, and make it all fit the narrow models that we have. And when we do that, we're limiting the power of God, we're limiting the truth of God, we're limiting the love of God.

And I think what our entire community, the gender community and also the LGBT community, can offer to our communities of faith, to our families of faith, is that there is a whole, and there is a diversity in creation, because it's reflecting something about God, that creation declares the glory of the creator. And for any of us to be silent or to be hiding is robbing our communities of faith of that opportunity to grapple with that diversity and break out into the clear sunshine of celebrating that diversity.

And it goes in steps. First there's the unawareness, then there's the confusion, then there's the doubt and the resistance, and the denial, and all these other things. But eventually perhaps there's tolerance. Love the sinner, hate the sin. Which is another way of saying hate the sinner. But then comes acceptance and resignation. Well, you did the only thing you could. You were suicidal. Over 40%—that's almost half—of all trans

people have attempted or seriously planned suicide. What a dismal statistic for a parent to be confronted with. Or a pastor or a rabbi to be confronted with. Do you really want to lose almost half of your children?

So, well, you were suicidal, so you had no choice. It's resignation. To finally move from all of those things into the next step of celebration, of we're so glad you're you. We've learned so much from you. We can accept things about ourselves because of you. And hear all the voices, hear every different instrument, each one part of a beautiful orchestra, part of a beautiful chorus, everything praising God. Let everything that has breath praise God.

So this kind of diversity is what we were trying to deal with on the team because it's one thing for me to work with the parent, but that's not the only person involved. What about the doctor who just wants to chop off whatever's there and solve the problem?

Mark B. So this work with the UCLA medical thing started in the '80s, and that's continued on, so you have stayed in this capacity?

Levi A. No. What I did later, I was a Jewish chaplain at UCLA Medical Center. I also was a chaplain across the street at the largest Veterans Administration hospital. I moved on to other hospitals in the area, including faith-based hospitals such as the Catholic hospitals. And then I was recruited away into hospice, and I did hospice. And then I was diagnosed with terminal illness and became a hospice patient, after having done hospice professionally for a while.

And when I started out in hospice I think I was maybe a week on the job as a chaplain and then I became the supervisor of all the chaplains and the social workers, and did the supervised training and so forth. And then I think maybe a month after that I was the team leader for the whole team. And the next thing I knew I was recruited away to a startup hospice to be the head of the hospice. So I got that hospice through initial certifications, and then—

Mark B. Can you say the name of that hospice?

Levi A. No. I am out and yet not. In the Orthodox community nobody's going to ever see your website. Nobody's going to bother to go on the Internet. We have rules against that. So unless you have some professional reason to be on it, you're not going to be on it, and then you're going to search with all kind of filters. And the minute you have something like the word "gay," that's going to trip the filter, and so there you go.

Mark B. That's okay.

Levi A. So even though I am out on the Internet, I don't really see what my medical background as an intersex person has to do with my professional functioning. I like to have it integrated in my personal life. It's a wonderful thing to belong to the trans community, and it's a particularly wonderful thing to belong to the clergy community. We had the first and last conference of LGBT Jewish rabbis and cantors a year or two ago. It was wonderful to go into a synagogue and every single person there was a

member of the community. I really enjoyed that. And what was so wonderful about it—

Mark B. Where was that?

Levi A. That was in San Francisco at Sha'ar Zahav, sponsored by Nehirim, but then it wasn't followed up on. I really liked that. I also really liked the transgender and multifaith summit that's been going on at CLGS at the Pacific School of Religion, because having an opportunity to meet other ordained people in the gender community similarly does the same thing.

So on the one hand, when I was with the rabbinic conference, all of us were rabbis and cantors, and when I was with the trans conference we were all different religions, but all of us were trans or part of the gender community. And I consider myself to be both because as an intersex person you may or may not be a trans person. As a trans person you might or might not be an intersex person, or, for that matter, a gay or lesbian person.

There are trans people who transition and they're members of the gay community or the lesbian community as well as the trans community, or prior to their transition they spent many years, happy years with beloved friends in the gay community or the lesbian community before they finally realized no, the word for me is actually trans, and I'm going to transition. So what I like about that is I appreciated our religious diversity, and I also appreciated that we had a shared experience of a gender journey that each of us had been on.

And the defining thing for me about being in the trans community is you have an assigned gender, and it isn't necessarily either accurate or the whole story. And so you have to either modify it or transition it to the other box if you think it will fit better. There are also nonbinary people who go you know, I don't like the pink box, but I don't like the blue box, so I'm going to go over there in the green box or the yellow one, or the purple one.

And society, at the moment, isn't really set up for that. But I think we're seeing, in our upcoming generation, a much more widespread acceptance of the diversity of God's world and that we don't all have to fit a blue or a pink box, and that even all the people in the blue box, there's not just one way to be masculine.

And even all the people in the pink box, there's so many different ways to be feminine. So even just within those, just to expand the categories to the point that they're almost irrelevant, that seems to be happening. And it's a good thing because why were we created, each of us, to be the way we are if it was so that then we couldn't express it?

Mark B. Right. Do you want to talk a bit about your own identity, intersex and/or trans? Are there some settings that you resonate with one identity more than the other? I don't think they're interchangeable. I don't know if you have some sense of how you define that in your own life in terms of your own identity.

Levi A. Right. I didn't know words, and I began to have a yearning for community. And I didn't know where to start, because I didn't have the vocabulary. But I was on a bulletin board—so I'm dating myself here. This was back like ARPANET and all that, before the Internet came up, and I was one of the pioneers of a lot of that technology. So I was on this bulletin board, Jewish bulletin board, and there was a guy on the bulletin board called Little Shevy.

And I went to a bookstore and I said excuse me, can you direct me to the alternate lifestyles section? "The gay books are over there!" And so what am I going to do with my yarmulke? I mean, here I am, I'm going over to this forbidden section of the bookstore and everybody's staring at me. But I saw Loren Cameron's book "Body Alchemy" there. And he had photographs in there of before and after, and he showed pictures of several religious F to Ms in this book wearing clerical collars and holding Bibles. And one of them was a man named Jeffrey Shevlowitz. And Jeffrey was wearing a yarmulke and he was wearing a tallit. That's a ritual prayer shawl, prayer mantel that we wear when we pray as Jewish males.

And I thought Shevlowitz, Little Shevy, hm. I can't really email this guy and say hey, are you a transsexual? But what I could do is email him and say, you know, the other day I saw a book, and there was a name of a character in the book a little like your name; have you ever been in a book? And he would just write back no if it wasn't the case. So Jeff writes

back to me oh yeah, I'm in a book called "Body Alchemy." And I said I would like to meet you.

And we met, and Jeff had started a group called Under Construction in 1983. In 1986 Lou Sullivan started a group modeled on Under Construction. It was called FTM, for female to male, in San Francisco. And Jeff drove all the way up the coast every three months faithfully to support Lou Sullivan's F to M group. And Under Construction went on for over 25 years, and FTMI, Female to Male International, I'm the current president of Female to Male International. That was the next phase of Lou's group.

At the time it was quite rare. He was a gay F to M. We did a survey of our members and we found approximately 80% identified as straight men and the other 20% identified as male, but not a straight man. Some of them identified as bi gendered, some of them identified as bisexual, some of them identified as gay male and so forth, or nonbinary in some way. So two out of every ten is actually pretty high.

And at the time that Lou was trying to get his final surgeries done, he was having a very hard time because the doctors were saying oh, you know, we'll do a surgery to make you conform. You're male, so we'll do a surgery for you to be more male because you're going to marry a woman like all straight men are supposed to do. But we're not going to do a surgery on you if you're going to go fornicate with another male as a sinful gay man, this minority. We don't like that and we're not going to

support that. It was so hurtful and so prejudiced, and so patriarchal or domineering, really, for that kind of imposition of conformity. What does that have to do with medical help for a person who comes to you for help? But that's what he faced.

So unfortunately, Lou said well, I finally had my brief chance to live as a gay man and now I'm going to die as a gay man, because he had AIDS. And he passed away and the mantle of leadership of the group went to James Green.

Mark B. And that's early '90s?

Levi A. Yeah. And then it became F to M, Female to Male International as an incorporated nonprofit educational nonprofit. And we're still headquartered in San Francisco. We're on our 32nd year right now.

Mark B. Give a bit of your history. When did you engage and how have you been working with the group? When did you start?

Levi A. When I met Jeff I attended Under Construction, and he said to me for our next meeting you're going to lead the meeting, and I want you to talk about spirituality, and I want you to talk about trans spirituality. So that's how I got my Internet name of trans spirituality. And I talked about my gender journey and I talked about my spiritual journey.

My spiritual journey was I was a terrible, shameful worm. I was this awful, sinful thing. And yet God was loving, so I would just beg God to somehow accept me, even though I was falling so far short of our Torah's

standards of perfection. And that changed when children came into my life because with a child, oh, they're perfect. They're just perfect.

For example, when I was in a house and I was painting, my little daughter saw me painting. In her three-year-old mind she took a jar of mustard, went into the bathroom, took a paintbrush, put it in the jar of mustard, and quite happily started painting the wallpaper with yellow mustard, which stains the wallpaper. Brand new wallpaper just put up. So I went in there and I didn't think oh my god, now I have all this extra work to do. I went in there and I thought oh, isn't that sweet? She wants to help. Isn't that adorable? Okay, honey, give me the mustard and the paintbrush, sweetheart. [*Laughs.*] And do not do that anymore.

And it was just so eye-opening to me that if, as a human father, I could have nothing but compassion and love and approval for my children, how could God, who is limitless and not a limited human like us, be any less? And I suddenly had no religious identity anymore because I could no longer do my familiar praying from the perspective of I'll never measure up, I'll never be good enough. And what it became instead of trying to measure up was I wish to integrate and express who I'm created to be in this world. It's no accident I was created as me, and put in this place, and put in this time.

And it says in the Torah let us make man. Why is it plural there? And one rabbinic commentary says the reason it's plural is because God is asking each one of us, when we read that passage, let us, you, the reader, and I,

God, together co-create you. I'm going to give you what I've given you and you're going to, decision by decision, mold that and fashion that into the life that you are going to create. And each one of us is tasked let us make this particular human.

So my goal is not to be a man. I already am a man. I was created as one. I just had to transition. But what my goal is, is to be Levi. And who is Levi? And yes, I'm an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, but there's lots of Orthodox Jewish rabbis. Yes, I'm a member of the gender community. There are other intersex people. There are other trans people. But who am I in this? And that's something that we discover, that I discover, on a moment by moment basis. I'm always learning.

In fact I think my children have been the best teachers of all that I've ever had. I have learned more about the nature of God from the sweet, innocent things that they would say when they barely could talk right on up to today. My youngest is in their 30s. The same thing with each person I meet. Every time somebody tells me their story, it enriches me, and I see new insights into the things that they're saying. And I'm not the same person when I leave the conversation as I was when I came into it.

And that's what we have as a gift to give to the overall community of faith. When we share our stories and people hear how we uniquely, each of us, express the creator—and the same thing is true. Like in the trans community you can't go out there, as the president of FTMI I can't go out there and be a spokesman for the gender community. I'm not black, or

Asian, or Hispanic, or any other culture or language or color. FTMI has members from throughout the world. We're in every country. We're in every province. We're in every state. Some of us are rural, some of us are urban. Some of us are in blue collar jobs, some of us are professors and elected officials, and all sorts of things. So my story is just one story among many. And I cannot, in telling my story, begin to show what the true diversity of creation is, but I can be a small part of it.

The next part of it is to encourage other people in the LGBT community. One of my friends who's a Catholic priest in a diocese one parish over, he's in a predominantly gay area, he was saying to me, when he was telling me how he finally got this pastorate very late in his career—he was a problem child—he was telling me I'm never sure if I'm doing God's will, and every time I pray for a sign I always see the same poster. It's a flower in a flower pot and the words above it say "bloom where you are planted."

So for each of us to be in our unique religious communities as people of faith, as spiritual people, for us within our communities to share, and to be vulnerable, and to open up, and get personal, and share what our faith journey is, what our gender journey is, in that way we're part of the celebration of the journey of discovery that all of us, every person on the face of the earth, is on.

Mark B. You mentioned just a bit ago talking about what it means to live as Levi. This is a chosen name. Do you want to say a bit more about how and why you chose the name in terms of expressing your identity?

Levi A. Okay. I was given a female name to match the female birth certificate. And I used the same starting initials because the first way I found to transition was to use my initials when I was still a teenager. I was 15 and I was at university. That was my opportunity to begin to learn outside of the world of my parents and my family. I'm in college now, and part of this is thinking independently and challenging authority. Can I at least get articles that I write published without having to deal with bias against women. So I'm going to use my initials.

And conveniently, it happens to be the first step also in a long process of transition. There's medical hurdles, there's legal hurdles, there's many, one piece at a time. It's not that you're a feminine woman, you're straight, you're Suzy Q, you're Doris Day, you're Suzie Homemaker, and you magically go into the hospital and two days later you come out and you're Rock, you're Rambo, and you're a he-man, macho, straight male. Excuse me? First of all, you're not going in that way, and second of all, you're not coming out that way, and it isn't one thing that you do.

I think a lot of people in the public, they just think oh, you know, Bruce Jenner is a male Olympian, goes in, has one little surgery, and comes out gorgeous, pinup, Vogue model, Caitlin. No. It took many years for that person to figure out who she was and do all the steps. And the same thing

is true for each one of us. So when I did that, I left behind that name and that identity.

And the names of the people who passed away in my family, we commemorate the martyrs of the Holocaust by naming our children after them. So my children are named after people that we lost. I also am named after people that we lost. So I had an uncle Levi. I had an uncle Ethan. So Levi Ethan, it just felt like it fit. And it's turned out to be a good choice.

Mark B. Okay, good. It mentions that you're a rabbi of a synagogue of Holocaust survivors. Want to talk a bit about that? And I can't pronounce it in Hebrew, so you might.

Levi A. Well, the congregation, [Ateres Zekenim], *zekenim* are elders, and *atares* is a crown, an *atarah*. So it's the crowning jewel of the aged. And these are all survivors of the Holocaust. They mostly have the tattoo on their arms. A few of them were hidden, so they didn't go to the camps. They managed to escape the ghetto, maybe, or they managed to join the partisans, or they managed to remain hidden throughout the war with a false identity.

And they share in common deep trauma. I understand that. And they also, as they get older, it's just more comfortable for them to speak Yiddish. So as a Yiddish speaking person, I kind of slipped into that, and have been doing it ever since. And I thoroughly enjoy it. My full-time job is I'm the corporate CEO of multiple medical corporations. But I really like having

this part-time congregation. I do it on Friday afternoons, do the services, and I get paid a dollar a year. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. Good.

Mark B. It's clear that you are an incredibly knowledgeable person around intersex and gender and identity. And we talked a bit about the fact that there's not a program in which you could learn that. So how have you informed yourself and educated yourself, and how has that been useful?

Levi A. Well, I think that the real experts on anything are the people who live it. And as the president of FTMI, Female to Male International, we get phone calls, we get emails, we get letters. And when I go to conferences, trans health conferences, people come up to me and they say what their medical history is. I don't think I've had an F to M yet tell me a normal medical history.

So to me, maybe I'm just looking at it through my lens, but I see being trans as a type of being intersex. It might not have readily obvious physical components to it, and so it tends to be looked at more as a mental thing, but the brain is a physical organ, and it is hardwired into one's physiology what one's orientation is, what one's gender is, just as much as it is whether you're right or left-handed.

One of my daughters is left-handed, my brother is left-handed, my father was left-handed. But left-handed people don't necessarily do everything with their left hand. A lot of times left-handed people will do some things

with their right hand. And there's nothing wrong with their right hand. It's a perfectly good hand. But it's how your brain is organized, where you have a natural preference towards using one hand as opposed to the other.

When you tell a child who is expressing wanting to be feminine that no, they have to play with trucks and go out and play football, what you're saying is, like what they used to say to my left-handed brother, they would slap his hand with a ruler and force him to write using his right hand. And that never turned him into a right-handed person, of course. All it did was it forced him to use the weaker hand to constantly go against his own nature. And that was such a strain he developed a stuttering problem. It wasn't there before, but it developed because of that.

My mother has one green eye and one gray eye. Now how are they supposed to write down on a binary driver's license are her eyes green or are her eyes gray? And you're not going to make her wear a colored contact lens so that they both look the same. Why are you taking a child with a female birth certificate and trying to force them to go to school wearing a dress like I did?

I was very unusual in having my own intersex family, so I had the example of people who all had the same physical condition, but one person who had this double puberty, they had a female gender identity, my great-grandmother, another person who had this double puberty had a male gender identity, my grandmother. Another person who had this had

an atypical female gender identity that was extremely masculine, and that was my mother's sister, my aunt.

Then there was me. I had a clearly male gender identity, but because I had the surgeries where they removed my testicles, I did not have a double puberty. I didn't have puberty, period. I looked like I was nine when I was in my late 20s. So I had never grown in height. I have not really changed much from when I was a child. And just to get the respect of an adult was difficult, let alone as an adult man. Where's your facial hair? Where's your deep voice? Where's your big muscles? Where's your height? Where's all this other stuff?

Well, it turns out you don't need any of that. I was accepted just fine as a male without having a stereotypically male presentation simply because I had stereotypical behavior patterns. And unfortunately, stereotypical attitudes. You would think that having gone to school as a boy wearing a dress I would have been sensitized to female issues, and in a way I was, because I heard them telling the girls growing up—I mean, we're talking about the '50s and the early '60s here, which basically was the '50s redux—that they couldn't be anything. They couldn't be scientists, they couldn't be doctors, they couldn't be engineers.

We just recently lost a wonderful F to M, Ben Barres, and he was a great advocate of women's rights. He took on the president of Harvard University in a major national publication and could have torpedoed his career, and did it anyway. So there's an F to M who I really have to

respect a lot for what he did for women's rights in making that very public stand that he did.

I've realized that women were told that they couldn't be leaders and things like that. Well, I was a leader. I've been a leader in every context I've ever been in. I stay a follower for five minutes and then I end up getting elected the leader. So to have respect for women, like for the rebbetzin, for my wife, who's a physician. We have a very traditional old school style relationship because it fits us.

But as a Jewish man my masculinity is a little different than mainstream masculinity. Our wives basically run everything. [*Laughs.*] It just looks like we do. So technically I'm the head of the house, but the reality is, you know. [*Laughs.*] My vocabulary, most of the time, with her consists of two words. She'll even say that. She'll say, "Two words." And I say, "Yes, dear." [section deleted per request.]

And with intersex conditions there's, depending on who you ask, at least 80 different separate conditions, but let's just talk about one of them. Let's talk about non-classical congenital adrenal hyperplasia, NC-CAH. If I were to ask you did you ever heard of something called cleft palate, would you say yes? You would. And at medical school they know what cleft palate is. That's a much rarer condition than what NC-CAH is.

Non-classical means that it's not immediately evident as soon as the baby's born. Classical is you see it immediately, at least in the females.

[section deleted per request.]

So you find out later, maybe when you're school age and you suddenly start growing a beard, and you have a female gender assignment, and you're seven. You may find out when you're a teenager and periods, what periods? You're not getting any. Or you go into a fertility clinic to find out why you and your spouse, either you're assigned male or you're assigned female, and you find out the reason that you and your spouse are not having success having a child is because chromosomally you're the other thing, and you had no idea. And now what do you do?

So NC-CAH, in the general population it's roughly one in 200 people, but in the Hispanic population it's approximately one in 40. You go to the Ashkenazi Jewish population and it's one in 27. Okay, so in every single classroom of 30 students, we've got one kid in there with non-classical congenital adrenal hyperplasia. Well, then we really do, as a community, need to find a way to support every precious Jewish child. And they don't even know, and their parents don't even know, and their doctors don't even know. Because in medical school nobody talks about intersex conditions. There's no mention of this, even though it's far more common than something like cleft palate.

So I had to learn this, and I was lucky that I was at UCLA Medical Center. There are a number of world renowned experts there in genetics and in a number of other related fields, neurology, what part of the brain is involved in gender and orientation, and endocrinology. CAH is an adrenal

condition. It is not estrogen. It is not testosterone. But the adrenal glands do secrete small amounts of these hormones, not just testes and ovaries, but also the adrenal glands. So when you have a condition that involves the adrenal gland, now it's starting to get a little interesting here.

So this is just part of the panoply of the diversity of God's creation. And because I had a wide ranging undergraduate background and graduate background, you know, I've never done like one major of anything, to have this interdisciplinary approach to it, I had the opportunity to get the research and the science behind it.

But because I was the president of Female to Male International, I had the opportunity to hear the stories. Oh, my, the stories you hear. People would just share their medical histories with me, and I was flabbergasted. When an F to M has not taken any testosterone at all, nothing has been done medically to start transition yet, we have a very, very high incidence of polycystic ovarian syndrome compared to ordinary women. Why?

If being transgender is a mental condition, then why do we have something where the numbers are not the same? You would assume if it was a mental condition that the incidence of PCOS, polycystic ovarian syndrome, would be identical between the overall female population and people who were assigned female who know that they're men. But it's not. It's way off the scale on many degrees of significance, so there's clearly something physical going on there.

Another example is if you look at body morphology, there's something called a eunuchoid shape of a body. A lot of F to Ms, not everyone, but many, have it. So there's other things that we haven't really put our fingers on. What about the F to M who doesn't have a eunuchoid body, and who doesn't have PCOS? That still doesn't mean there's not physical things make him know that he's male. It's hardwired in the brain.

And eventually we'll find out more about that. So there may come a time where the medical community places trans people as one of the intersex conditions. However, right now that would be a bad thing because if you think that trans people are treated badly, you should see how intersex people get treated. It's much worse.

Up until we had insurance reform laws, if you were intersex you couldn't get medical insurance because they would say you had a preexisting condition and then they would turn around and say that everything that happened to you was definitely related to your intersex condition, so you could go in with a sore throat and not get treatment. You could go in with a broken arm and not get treatment. Well, the reason your arm is broken is because your bone structure is affected by your intersex condition. The reason that you have a sore throat is because your vocal cords are affected by your intersex condition. So therefore, insurance won't pay for it. We'll take your premium, but we won't give you any coverage. So things like that.

Many other things. A number of people have told me that they have been refused care because of their intersex status. A doctor will say I've never had an intersex person before, I don't know anything about it. Or they'll say I've never had a trans patient before, I don't know anything about it. Well, okay, have you ever treated male patients? Have you ever treated female patients? If you've treated both, then how can you say you can't treat this person? It just doesn't make sense.

When my daughter—she needs to take female hormones. She has no ovaries. I went to 27 doctors before I found a doctor who would prescribe hormones for my daughter. Because they all said oh, well, if she was a postmenopausal woman we would give her estrogen, but because she's 17, we're not going to give her anything. And I'm like, you know, she's finished high school now. She really does need to develop and have puberty and be like other girls. We need to do this cross gender hormone thing. I mean, this gender hormone thing. And it was, with all my advocacy skills—I speak English, I have a good education, my income level is such that professionally I'm on par with the doctors that I'm talking to—it still was almost impossible.

So in my working with the intersex community, I do think myself, just my perspective—and I'm more than willing to talk about it with people who feel differently—is that trans is a physical thing and therefore it's a type of intersex thing. And it will become more obvious later when we do have

better means of understanding these conditions and structures that at the moment we don't really have a way to test.

But until the intersex community is raised up to a level of parity along with everybody else of access to medical care, compassionate care by knowledgeable physicians, we're going to have a lot of problems. And I wouldn't want to see trans people, who already have difficulties accessing care, having even more difficulties accessing care the way that the intersex community does.

And if people don't understand the trans community very well, they understand the intersex community even less. The typical thing that I hear from people is oh, that's somebody in between a man and a woman, that's what intersex means. But that's not what it means. Almost all intersex people are not nonbinary. Almost all intersex people that I've talked to feel clearly female or clearly male. It's just that they don't meet some of the physical expectations for that.

But why are we holding them to a higher standard? If a man has an injury to his male anatomy in a war, all of the phalloplasty knowledge that we have comes from surgeons trying to help people who were harmed in World War II, so with these kinds of traumatic injuries. Has anybody ever remotely suggested that any of these brave soldiers were not male? Well, they don't have male anatomy, therefore how can they be male? Well, you can't base it on that.

And the same thing. When you have a woman who's had several children, now she has a hysterectomy, maybe she has a mastectomy, who is suggesting that she suddenly is going to have to become a man? Okay, if we're not holding people to these impossible standards, why are we holding trans people or intersex people to these kinds of impossible standards? If a person knows fundamentally, in the hard wiring of the brain, who they are, why are we so reluctant to accept that?

And it's particularly true when we're talking about people who don't have a lot of power. In the United States that's poor people, people of color, things like that. But it's also children. And transgender children, and intersex children, and infants are the most vulnerable members of the overall LGBT population.

I mean, if you as a gay person or a lesbian person knew, when you were very young, that you were different from other children, if you knew maybe before you even started school that you were different than other children, now can you imagine that a transgender child or an intersex child knows that, and yet on top of it they have a bunch of powerful adult doctors pushing them around, pushing their family around, how could you possibly have coped with a power differential as big as that? It didn't even occur to me to open my mouth when the doctors were telling me, without asking me, and without asking my parents, what they were going to do.

So for the intersex and trans community one of the things that I've decided I'm here for, that this is why I'm Levi and why I'm in this place and in

this time is to go out to conduct a lot of in services for doctors. I routinely go to a number of different medical centers and I do grand rounds, and I do in-services.

Just about a month ago, last month I did four of them. Usually I do a lot more than that. I go around to the different trans health conferences, and when they have provider days I do in-services and workshops for the medical providers there. And when possible, also for the educators and school administrators, and also for clergy, and also for attorneys and lawyers, because all of those supporters are very helpful for the parents of these children.

My parents were very supportive of me. Unfortunately, they did not understand how to advocate for me to authority figures. And I don't blame them for that. They wouldn't be able to do it for themselves, either. [*Pause for noise.*] When we want to try to help these children, the best way to help them is to empower the people who love them. Empower their parents. Listen to them and the difficulties that they have.

They're often blamed by their churches and synagogues and their clergy instead of supported and helped. It's your fault that your child is trans. It's your fault that your child is intersex. It's your fault that your child is LGBT and is not conforming. It's all bad parenting or sin in your own life, and things like that. So to support them in all these different professional capacities. I'm going in and I'm doing that. And I have an entre there because I'm the president of FTMI, so I have the capability of doing this.

And then the same thing with the media. FTMI is an educational nonprofit. We're over 30 years old now and we're in every country around the world. I've been on BBC, MSNBC, the Logo channel, all the major newspapers, the major networks multiple times being asked to either comment on the story of the day, whatever sensationalistic story that may be, and try to put a human face on it, or when they're talking about topics like gender differences among men and women, something as fundamental as that.

Right now there's almost no research for any of the hard sciences where there's any kind of funding to find out are there special things we should be doing for our boys to help them, or special things we should be doing for our girls to help them to achieve better in school and in life. What can we learn about the underlying physiology of our children. Is there anything to learn there?

I see more differences between two different women than I see between a woman and a man sometimes, so there's that aspect of physiology. But then there's also specifically, in terms of trans or in terms of intersex research, there's almost no money available for it.

Levi A. So at the moment I'm one of the few people that's out there doing this kind of educating. However, there should be many more. And we need to advocate for fellowships, for research money, for postdocs to do their fellowship years in this, and at various laboratories.

One of the things Ben Barres was doing at his laboratory was he was making sure that they were able to bring in the most talented researchers to do research on neurology, on the brain. He was at Stanford University as a neurologist.

And the better we understand the brain and various other physical aspects of what makes all of us human, the better understanding we will have about how to help each and every one of our children so that we never have the tragedy again of a boy who has to go to school wearing a dress.

[*End of recording.*]