

Interview Code: RJ201325A
Interviewer: Surat Knan
Interviewee: Lazlo Pearlman
Transcriber: Jacob Engelberg

01:03:25 minutes in total

Personal profile, childhood and family [00:00:00 – 00:10:49]

Lazlo Pearlman was born in Bradenton, Florida in 1962. Lazlo had four other siblings who were all around twenty years older than him and ran businesses of their own across the US while he was growing up. His mother gave birth to him at the age of forty-eight and his father died when he was three years old. At the age of ten, his mother began a career in sex therapy and they moved to California where Lazlo says his mother lived a 'hippie' lifestyle.

Lazlo says of his mother at this time (“...sex therapy for some reason became her last career and...finding her non-Hadassah wife in the seventies, so, second-wave feminist sex-positive self. And I grew up with the benefits and the curses, I would say, of that.” [00:03:15]) He recalls his mother creating a project for her Doctor of Arts degree in which she set up a telephone hotline in California called Sonoma County Sex Information where she ran trainings which included showing volunteers pornography to desensitise them to sex. Lazlo views his discovery these materials as a blessing. Lazlo’s example of the curse side was sessions in which the volunteers would spend time naked in the family’s sauna before jumping into the creek nearby, something which he was encouraged to participate in but never did. He recalls that his mother was usually naked, even when his friends came round, which was a source of embarrassment for him. She also had a large mirror in her room surrounded by cut-outs from Tee Corinne’s *Cunt Coloring Book*.

Lazlo says: “*The plus side I suppose is that she was never fazed by anything about me when I came out as a lesbian at eighteen, she was nonplussed, it was...a feather in her cap for her clients, she could say that she had a queer daughter...And that continued when I came out to her as trans...she never had a problem, she did announce to me at one point ‘It’s a good thing I became a sex therapist because otherwise this would probably be very difficult for me’, I was like, ‘Yeah, OK, thanks mom!’*” [00:08:33]

Lazlo’s mother died five years prior to the interview.

Jewishness [00:10:50]

Before Lazlo was born his family was a ‘typical Reform Jewish liberal New York family’ and his four siblings all went to yeshiva. He describes his family as cultural Jews living in an observant community. He says that he was always aware he was Jewish but in a ‘very American way’. As a child he went to a Jewish Saturday school and to temple occasionally but he remembers more so the cultural aspects of Jewishness in the house including his mother and grandmother’s gefilte fish and chopped liver. When he was thirteen, bat-mitzvot were not widely practiced and those who decided to have them were considered tomboyish or masculine, he reflects that the ‘becoming a man’ aspect of it was somewhat appealing to him at the time.

In terms of religious Judaism, Lazlo was put off by the idea of a ‘father-figured God’ which led him to develop an interest in Buddhism which was a kind of spirituality which made more sense to him. He found himself unable to get into Buddhist practice, which now feels was because of his Jewishness. After having visited Tel Aviv he felt ‘bizarrely at home’ which he found strange and made him question if there was some part of spiritual Judaism which he could embrace. It was from there that he discovered Reconstructionist Judaism which chimed with him much more than other forms of Judaism. He then found himself in and out of Reconstructionist Jewish observance negotiating the space in-between his Jewishness and his agnosticism.

Coming out as a lesbian, coming out as trans [00:25:25]

Lazlo came out as a lesbian at the age of eighteen, at a time when he was becoming interested in second-wave feminism and reading classic texts of the movement including Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*. For ten years, he identified as a butch, became immersed in lesbian feminism and considered the idea of lesbian separatism for a year. *'One of the things that was really interesting about being a butch for me was it never felt like an identity, it felt like a costume.'* [00:27:09] Lazlo considered his butchness at the time to be a fun role but never the intrinsic identity that many other butches felt it was.

After ten years, he decided to stop denying to himself that he was attracted to men and stopped believing in political lesbianism. He began identifying as a biddyke and another title which Lazlo couldn't remember, but included the term fag.

Lazlo recalls visiting a café in Washington three times with around six months in-between his visits. The first time he remembers registering someone who worked there as a butch woman he found attractive, the second time he saw a person whose gender he couldn't determine who he found attractive, and the third time he saw a man who he found attractive. Through mutual friends he realised that this was in fact the same person, a transgender man at different points during his transition. Also at this time, Lazlo remembers reading Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*. At the age of thirty-one or two, Lazlo befriended a twenty-four-year-old transgender man called Miles (*"...and I kept saying to people 'If I was twenty-four, that'd be me...someone, I can't remember who, finally said to me 'Why can't that be you now?' And then my world just went kaboom...And all of the boyishness, the masculine identities, whether they were butch or wanting a bar mitzvah or all those other things kind of coalesced into trans."* [00:31:46])

Before this point Lazlo had only come into contact with transgenderism with the focus being on tragic stories, botched surgeries and people who believed they were in 'the wrong body'. He spent two years figuring out whether he wanted to transition, initially thinking by himself and then seeking advice from a therapist. It was after this period that he came to the conclusion that *'...this body belonged to me and I was allowed to do whatever I wanted to do with it.'* [00:35:22] He then grew a beard, had surgery to remove his breasts, and started hormone replacement therapy. Even before the surgery and HRT, Lazlo found himself passing regularly as male. He found his transition a relatively easy and comfortable time, something that he believes was assisted by his height, his mother's attitude towards the situation, and also his whiteness. He found this made issues like changing the gender on one's ID easier for him than for some other trans people.

One of the things Lazlo is now interested in is the controversial subject of narratives of choice around gender and sexual identity. *"I now see this completely as a choice. Now, choices can be imperative, can be that it would be really bloody difficult to make any other choice, even possibly life-threatening to make any other choice. But to take away the element of choice from our bodies...well, first of all I'm a Foucauldian, and I think it's a regime of power against us... [I]f we say 'I can't help it. I was born this way.' Just that 'I can't help it' – yes, you can. But helping it doesn't mean not doing it...This body is the one thing that I own completely."* [00:40:23]

Lazlo expresses that this is a dangerous position to take when considering the sociopolitical realities trans people live within as the discourse of choice is often used within transphobic politics. He then suggests that one may appease those holding sociopolitical power with the more commonly accepted discourse of gendered innateness, while maintaining an 'underground narrative of choice'. Lazlo is working through some of these questions in the next research project he is conducting within his PhD.

Time in the UK [00:45:50]

Lazlo has been in the UK for ten years and he initially came to enrol in a Masters degree in Physical Theatre that didn't exist in the US. He was only meant to stay in the UK for a year and after staying for this amount of time, he met a woman who he later married, thus allowing

him to get British citizenship. He describes them as starting off as friends, then lovers, and now friends again. After the Masters degree he worked in performances and a few years after, he started a PhD at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

He describes having had a romance with the idea of Europe from an early age and a feeling that he was more European than American. Lazlo says that the more that he's been in the UK, the more American he's felt. This has also enabled him to understand some of the good aspects of being American, including what he says is a quintessentially American enthusiasm and positivity.

Final Thoughts [00:50:46]

In the interview Lazlo hesitantly describes himself as a 'queer, Jewish, Californian, expatriate, trans man in Britain', but questions whether that is the correct hierarchy for him. He feels the least connected to the idea of being British and thus, finds it difficult to understand British Jewish experience. He humorously reflects that initially the idea of Jews with British accents did not make sense to him.

Lazlo does not know many trans Jews in the UK aside from social media friendships. He sees more Jewish trans visibility in the US, including trans rabbis and groups for trans Jews. Lazlo's experience of London is that trans and Jewish spaces are kept quite separate. He feels like people in London are generally as ignorant about being Jewish as being trans, unless people personally know someone from either group.

In one of the performances Lazlo does, he talks about his story then strips and confronts an audience with his trans body. Usually the audiences he performs this for are non-Jewish, non-trans and straight, and he reflects that when he gave a talk at JW3, a Jewish cultural centre in London, he decided to tell his story without stripping as doing so in a Jewish setting would have made him nervous.

Lazlo then reflects on the interview saying that he believes archives like this to be theoretically important but not something he would have suggested himself. He believes these interviews are good because while delivering the interviews is not important for him, it could be for someone listening to it at a later date. Rather, he hopes the legacy he leaves will be theorisations of narratives of choice that enlighten and liberate people in the here and now.

END OF INTERVIEW