

Oral History Interview: Erin Swenson

Interviewee: Erin Swenson

Interviewer: David Weekley

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David W. All right, here we go. And I'm just going to put this so you can be heard easily. Okay, Erin, whatever you would like to share about your life.

Erin S. So at lunch we were talking about that we were breaking up into decades and talking about significant things, and they were pointing out that I was a '90s person because I came out as transgender in the '90s. And I said well, no, actually I'm a 1950s person, right?

David W. [*Laughs.*]

Erin S. Because it was it was in 1956 that I first realized that I wanted to grow up different than I was growing up. I was announced male at birth, and I was celebrated as the firstborn of a fairly large family, and enjoyed the privilege of being a firstborn son in a white family in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. The problem was I didn't want to be a boy. And this happened in, I think, the fifth grade, fourth or fifth grade.

When I finally realized what was going on inside my head, it was crazy because I thought that there was something inside me that was broken, because that idea just never had been discussed by anyone. One just was what one was, and little boys wanted to grow up to be grown up men. And

I had never heard of a little boy wanting to grow up to be a grown up woman. And it's like oh, my god. So I kept it quite secret, very secret. And it was a painful secret to keep because I really did think that my life was kind of screwed, that there was something really wrong.

At the same time we started going to a Presbyterian church just down the street. And being a good Presbyterian church, they taught that God is omniscient. That's where I first learned that word. God is omniscient, so God sees it all. God knows everything about you, even the things that you can't see. And of course that could have been a very threatening thing to me, except that it was always accompanied with "and God loves you," and God loves all of you, even seeing all the things, all that you are. So from the very beginning my gender journey and my spiritual journey got mixed up together.

David W. Okay.

Erin S. I quickly found that the church was a comfortable place for me to be. I believed in it. It was home for me. And my comfort there was visible to other people. When I was in 11th grade I was asked to be the superintendent of the vacation church school.

David W. Wow. At a young age.

Erin S. So I was...that was pretty cool for an 11th grader. And so I took leadership positions, like in the youth group, and then became involved in the presbytery youth group, which was kind of—

David W. What was a larger...?

Erin S. Yeah, it's kind of like the diocese.

David W. Oh, okay, yeah.

Erin S. Sort of like. It's around 100 churches in the Atlanta area. And I excelled at being a church leader. I was good at talking in front of groups, even though my native shyness would seem to indicate that I wouldn't be comfortable doing that. But somehow I learned that early on. Because I'm really a very shy person, actually.

David W. But you were able to overcome.

Erin S. I did. And the church was a really, you know, the church claimed me and supported me. They made sure that I got to visit the local seminary before I graduated from high school so that I might be cognizant of the options available to me if I should choose professional ministry as an avenue.

And of course like most people, my life turned into a mess for like two or three years. I went to engineering school instead of, and engineering school was not the right choice for me. And it took me a long time to figure that out, and I had to get depressed. And almost enlisted in the Army during Vietnam.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. It was quite an experience for me. But I emerged from that experience about two years later married to a woman I hadn't even known, a woman I

had met in church camp, and who I loved, and still love deeply. And we were married, and before I knew it we had a child and I was in seminary, and it seemed to go well. I was good in seminary. I made good grades. I was appreciated by both my classmates and the faculty.

And for me it always kind of went up against this thing that I knew about myself inside of me that was kind of like the other side of me, like the dark side, or the dark side of the Force. It never felt foreign to me because it was clearly part of me, but I struggled with it all the time. I was all the time thinking about what it would be like if I was a woman here. And then the opposite thing that would go on would be what would it be like if people discovered what I really wanted.

And that began a kind of period in my life where I started thinking about well, you know, the shame of being exposed would be so incredibly great that I wouldn't be able to survive, and that I needed, whenever I was in a group—and I ultimately graduated from seminary and went to graduate school and became a therapist, so my ordination as a Presbyterian minister was so that I could do counseling and psychotherapy with people, which is—

David W. And not local church.

Erin S. Yeah, which is what my life has been. I've preached in churches and been supply pastor, interim supply and done that kind of work, but I've never been an installed pastor of a church. I was ordained for graduate work.

And actually, I was a chaplain at the time, so I think they... And I did some chaplaincy work for a few years.

David W. How did the message that you heard as a child in the church, that God's omniscient and God loves you, and then later you're saying you felt like your secret feelings about being a woman were the dark side, so how did that come to be the message?

Erin S. Well, I think it was part of the energy that made me into a counselor. It was my awareness that people can live with hidden pain and how important it is for people to feel loved and appreciated, understood, even, although I had never had anyone understand me, and I didn't want anyone to understand me. [*Laughs.*] I was real clear about that. It was a secret and it was going to stay a secret.

As far as I was concerned, I was going to... You know, I got married and it was this wonderful kind of vacation from my gender feelings because I fell in love with Sigrid, is her name, and I fell so hard for her. I was 20 years old and she was three years older than I was, and she had just graduated from Agnes Scott. And when she grabbed my hand—we met at church camp and we were walking down a path together and she took my hand—I could hardly believe it. It was like oh, my god, this woman, I think she likes me! And so I spent the next year just in love and getting married and starting life.

And it was the next spring that I found myself...I took her to work and dropped her off and went back home. I was in school. I worked in the evenings. So I dropped her off for work in the morning and I went back home to study because I didn't have any classes that day. And I got into her clothes. And it was like...it was devastating. It was this awareness that I certainly was not cured. Having married hadn't fixed it for me, which I think I, in sort of denial, wanted to have happen. And now I was married to this person I loved, really. I didn't just love her. I loved her and admired her. In many ways she was probably the woman that I wanted to be.

So I decided that I was going to make the best of it and find some way to just not deal with it, and so I did. *[Laughs.]* I decided that by overwork I could be so tired that I wouldn't have to worry about it, and I would always be engaged in something so that I wouldn't have idle time for my mind to wander onto topics where I thought it should not go. And so I really did, I learned to put in what were just unreasonable hours. I worked full-time, I went to school full-time. I was on the dean's list at school. And then went straight into seminary. I was in seminary full-time, worked full-time and had a child.

It was like, you know, I was like a glutton for punishment. I mean, there were times when I had two jobs. Like I worked at a local department store, Rich's, as a sales clerk, and then in the evenings I would work at a radio station as an engineer. *[Laughs.]* And I wouldn't get home until like 1:00

in the morning. I'd have to get up at 6:00 to get to my 8:00 class and there just wasn't time to do much of anything. And I carried that for years.

I was a really good parent to two daughters. Our second daughter was born prematurely and encountered a lot of physical and intellectual challenges as a result of her being early, permanent. And so I was a good dad for her and I was a good dad for her older sister who we didn't want to ignore, because it was real easy to put all the family's resources into the fragile child. And I did that while I was working a full-time psychotherapy practice, while I was the interim pastor of a suburban Presbyterian church, while I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation. [*Laughs.*] And you do know what writing a Ph.D. dissertation is like, and it was like, you know, I didn't sleep much, and I didn't do much else, either, except for those three things.

And it worked. It worked fine. I excelled. My practice took off. This church just loved me. They were almost reluctant to install their new pastor because that meant that they would have to lose me. But we parted ways. I got the Ph.D., so that was done. And I started pondering the idea, possibly, of going to medical school. [*Laughs.*]

David W. Well, that would keep you busy.

Erin S. So I went to Emory because we have this really great medical school in Atlanta. Because I was like in my early 40s and I thought, you know, it's way too old to go to medical school. That's what I thought. And I was

kind of sure that they were going to tell me thank you, but no thank you. And I went there and they just went crazy, said you have a Ph.D., you're a counselor? You have a career? Oh, we would love to have you in the medical school. I was like oh, my god!

So I went home to Sigrid. I said Sigrid, they think they would really be excited about my being in medical school. And she looked at me and she said, well you can go to medical school, but it won't be with me. [*Laughs.*] So it was like, ah. It got real clear that I had pushed a little too far.

So I just kind of started eking through life and started getting more and more depressed, and as I got into my 40s started taking antidepressants. And my biweekly psychiatrist visits became weekly psychiatrist visits, and I joined a group. I was a great therapist. I was a wonderful therapist myself because I was such an experienced patient. [*Laughs.*]

David W. That makes sense.

Erin S. I knew what it was like. And so my practice just flourished like crazy. I was making money. I was making lots of money. I was earning way more than most ministers my age earned unless you were like a tall steeple pastor in an urban church. I was making big bucks. And getting more and more depressed. And finally one day Sigrid told me that when our daughters left home that she would be leaving home, too, she would be leaving me, and that it wasn't because she didn't love me, it was because she couldn't handle my depression anymore, that I had tired her out.

And it was one of those things where you hate to agree, but I agreed totally with what she felt, and hated what she had just told me. And I describe the experience as like having the sun set on my future. The sun went down and it got dark and there was no horizon anymore. There was no place to go. I didn't want to go anywhere. I was bitter. I was a smart ass. I learned how to use my intellect as a weapon and I used it effectively. And just became more and more miserable.

I'd come home at night and I'd cook dinner. I was the cook, mostly. And I would get Lara, our fragile daughter, to bed because she required physical assistance in getting dressed and getting into bed and all that sort of stuff. So I'd get her into bed and then I would leave the house. I would just leave the house, get in my car and drive for hours. And I would leave the house angry and upset, and Sigrid would wonder if I was going to come home or if she would get a call from the police. And I did that to them like night after night after night. It was just awful. It was just terrible.

One morning in 1994 I was getting Lara, our fragile daughter, ready for school, which always involved getting up—we got up at 4:50 in the morning because her bus came at 6:20. So Lara had to be dressed. She was wearing braces at the time, so we had to get her braces on, and get her teeth brushed, and her hair combed, and breakfast done, and all that sort of stuff, so that was my job, was to take care of her, so I did that.

And while I was working with her in the bathroom Sigrid came in. She had one of these brown bottles of pills, you know, the small one, and she said to me that she had just gotten a new doctor, that her old doctor had prescribed these pills for her premenopausal problems, and that they didn't work a flip, and she was taking these new pills that were just fabulous, so she was sharing this good news with me. She left the bathroom and I looked at the bottle of pills, and it was Premarin. And I knew what Premarin was. I knew what it was for, and it was like manna had fallen from heaven. *[Laughs.]* It was like oh, my god.

And I was very restrained. I finished getting Lara ready for school and got her off on the bus and came back in. And we were alone in the house, and Sigrid went and took a shower in the other bathroom, and there I was alone. I went in and I stole one of her pills and I took it. I put it in my mouth and I swallowed it. And it's probably the most powerful antidepressant in the world. *[Laughs.]* It was amazing! I just...I took this—and it was a very small dose. It was one of the tinier doses of Premarin that you can take.

And I took that little pill and it was like...it was like suddenly the world turned from dull pastels to bright colors. Things had sharp edges on them again. I could see again. I cared about people again. And my business—I was in a group practice at the time and I was pretty famous for my depression. *[Laughs.]* In all those years, I had already...I blamed Lara for

my depression because I had this daughter who was severely disabled, multiply severely disabled permanently.

David W. So you weren't even thinking it was related to—

Erin S. Oh, no, I knew what it was related to.

David W. Oh, okay, you did.

Erin S. I just...I very wantonly and willingly let people believe. I never told them that, but I would always make sure that they knew that I had this challenge in my life and that I was depressed. And I never said I was depressed because of the challenge in my life, I just let them sort of put that together, and they did. It's a big enough challenge. I mean, having a severely disabled kid is a tough row to hoe for a parent.

But I got to work and I was, you know—*[laughs]*—I was cheerful and happy, and I was smiling. And I don't think it was that day, but I think it was the next afternoon I started stealing her pills one a day. And the next afternoon my partners held an intervention for me. *[Laughs.]* They said at lunchtime we had to go into the group room and they wanted me to come in and talk to them. And they had been concerned because I had seemed so upbeat and happy the last two days that they were concerned that I had decided to end my life, which would be what a therapist would be concerned about in a situation like that.

And it was the first time I'd thought about it. I thought, well, you know, in a way maybe you're right. Maybe I am thinking of ending this life, but I'm not thinking of ending my life. And I didn't tell them that. I said don't worry, I'm okay. No suicides in my future any time. And I had been suicidal before. So we were good.

And I kept taking the... And this worked like a charm until I started realizing that the supply of pills was dwindling and I was going to face a crisis, because I would run out of pills, and then what was I going to do. And what if Sigrid were to go in there and look and see that I had stolen all her pills? It's just like, ah! [*Laughs.*] What would she say? And so I cooked up this scheme to forge a prescription.

David W. Whoo.

Erin S. Yeah, right. I had practiced with psychiatrists before as co-therapists and so I had access to prescription pads. And so I got some prescription forms and I started practicing how to write illegibly but still legibly. And I had this plan. I had picked out a drug—it was back when drug stores were just starting to get connected to each other through the Internet, and so I picked one that was a proprietary Mom and Pop drug store because I didn't want them communicating with anybody. So I picked the place out and I picked the day out and it was a Tuesday. It was a Tuesday in July of 1994. And this was going to be the day that I was going to put the plan into motion

and take a deep breath and become a felon. [*Laughs.*] Which is what it was in Georgia, it was a felony.

David W. Yeah, sure.

Erin S. And I woke up and I had this just sick feeling in my stomach, and it was like I had been fed up with myself. Because I had lied my whole life about me. I'd lied to everybody. I'd lied to the church, I'd lied to Sigrid. You know, whenever you go to seminary, they give you all these psychological exams and they ask you a bunch of gender related questions. And I made sure that I answered them the right way because I have a good intellect and I could figure out. You know, I'm like...yeah, like other people. I'm very smart. I have a good brain. But I knew how to game the...and I did.

And of course becoming a therapist you have to write your life story, your biography, and you have to talk about your inner life and your inner struggles. And I'd been in therapy for a kajillion years and never talked to my therapist about it, never said anything to anybody about it, because I didn't, you know, this was dangerous stuff. This was going to kill me if someone found out about it. I was going to die by my own hand, probably pretty much immediately.

I would sit in meetings in rooms in buildings and try to decide if, if at this moment someone were to say, and Erin, by the way, I heard that you like to dress up in women's clothes and you really want to be a woman, how quickly could I kill myself from that very point. So I would think about,

you know, how easy it would be to get in front of a bus crossing a street, or high up could I get out a window to, you know. And I would occupy myself with all of these things.

And I woke up that—it was a Tuesday morning because I was going to play tennis with...I played tennis with a bunch of shrinks, and I was going to play tennis that day. And I just had this awful feeling. It was like being fed up. It was kind of like my stomach was turning. I realized I had spent most all of my life with a big lie about me. I had been lying.

You know, I encouraged people to live authentically every day of my life professionally. Authentic living was for me the way, the truth and the life. Jesus asked us to live as who we are, not as who people thought we should be. And I said all the right words, and I didn't live any of them, and I just, I got fed up. And so I wrote a letter to John Money—I don't know if you know who John Money is. John was one of the people that started the gender clinic back in the 1970s at Johns Hopkins.

David W. Oh, okay, all right.

Erin S. And so I had been reading John's, you know, of course I read everything. I read everything in the library. I didn't read all the cross dressing books and all the really good stuff, I read all the clinical stuff, so I knew all the clinical stuff cold. But I knew John was knowledgeable, so I wrote him a letter. [*Laughs.*]

I wrote him a letter. It's like five pages long. I said every secret in my life that I was afraid to say to any other human being I wrote in this letter. I went to the library and found his address in a professional association directory and put his address on the envelope. And I had done things kind of like that at times during my life, but this time I went to the post office. And I remember the experience of letting go of the letter and letting it drop in.

David W. Hoo.

Erin S. Yeah, and it was, it was like that. It was like *phew*. Oh, my god, you know, what have I done? And all during the rest of that week my anxiety just went out the ceiling. I lost like 35 pounds. And by the end of the week I was having nightmares. Because I put my name and I wrote that I was a psychotherapist, a Presbyterian minister. I identified myself all over the letter. And I thought, you know, what if that was an old directory? What if that's the wrong address? What if somebody gets that letter and decides they want to blackmail me? They could. It would be awful.

So I went to my office on Saturday morning, because I usually saw people on Saturday mornings, but I went to my office early. And I still had the copy of the page out of the directory that I had made at the library, and it had his number on it. And so I decided I would call and leave a message for him to get in touch with me, that I had written a letter and I wanted to

make sure that he got it. So, you know, I casually dial the telephone thinking I was going to leave a message.

And after the first ring the phone answered and the person said John Money. [*Laughs.*] And I said Dr. Money? He said yes, this is Dr. John Money, may I help you? And I said oh my—all I can think of is oh my god, what have I gotten myself into? And so I started fumbling, and I couldn't talk straight. My tongue got tied and I started saying things like, you know, a letter and not sure that you would get it, and I was scared. And he stopped me because I was really struggling. He said, hold on just a minute. Are you from Atlanta, Georgia? And I said yes I am. He said I got your letter.

And so another human being in the world knew about me. And I didn't know what was going to happen. I thought he might call the sheriff to have me committed. I was so naïve about it. And I said I've got a problem. He said, yeah, you've got a problem. [*Laughs.*] Because I wrote this letter saying, you know, please tell me I'm a cross dresser. Tell me there's some new treatment that I haven't read about. Because I knew, you know, I knew...I knew what being transgender meant. I knew the implications. I knew what the treatment was. I mean, it was like I just didn't want that. I wanted something else.

And so he said I'm not seeing people now anymore, I've retired, and I've thought about it, and I would like to refer you to one of my colleagues

here in Baltimore if that's okay. And he got my permission to share with her, share the letter with her. I said okay. And so he called me back on Monday and said that he had talked to Margaret Lamacz, who was a...she coauthored several of his books, and that she said that she would be glad to talk with me about seeing me. So I hung the phone up and called her, thinking again I was going get an answering—you know, you always think, when you call a therapist, you're going to get answering machines.

And she answered the phone. [*Laughs.*] And she said yes, she had read the letter and that she would be delighted to work with me. And I couldn't understand how she would say that. And we talked about how expensive it would be for me to get to Baltimore. And so we made an appointment three weeks down the line so that I could have a chance to buy a cheap airline ticket, because it was when it really mattered how far in advance you bought airline tickets. It was in the '90s.

David W. Oh, right, yeah.

Erin S. And if you waited even a week before the price like doubled, tripled. So we made an appointment for Friday three weeks and hung up the phone. And I immediately got plane reservations for early that Friday to go to Baltimore. And my anxiety, which was already high, just multiplied. It just skyrocketed. I went from 165 to 135 pounds. [*Laughs.*] It was so dramatic that it scared people. They thought that I was sick.

I started writing—I couldn't wait for three weeks so I started writing Margaret letters. It turned out that I wrote a letter to Margaret every day for three weeks. They were at least two single spaced pages.

David W. You had a lot to say.

Erin S. And they dealt with all the stuff in my life, the memories, the dreams, the fears, the experiences and all the stuff that I was just afraid that if I got and sat down in her office that I would not say. I was just terrified that I would get in front of her and I would say you know, this just isn't such a big problem. I just knew myself. I knew what I could do. So I wrote it all down. I documented everything. I got to her office and...they were just dripping with pain and drama. [*Laughs.*] I was very dramatic.

David W. And had you mailed them?

Erin S. Oh, yeah, I mailed each one of them. Every day I mailed one. I practiced dropping the letter. I'd let go of the letter, *tch*. It almost got addictive, you know, just sort of, you know, I'm going to let go of this little piece and that little piece. And when I finally got to see her, she had my life history down pat. She showed me the stack of papers. She said I got these letters from you so I think I've got an idea of what you're talking about.

But I spent the first hour with her telling her my story again, crying like crazy and telling her how confused I was and that I seemed like I had lived with low self-esteem my whole life, and how that was a painful thing to deal with. And we took a break because we went for an hour. We took a

break and were going to go for two hours. Came back from the break and sat down and she said I have to tell you a couple of things before we get into the hour that you really need to hear.

She said number one, you don't have low self-esteem. You know what low self-esteem is. You're a therapist. People with low self-esteem don't have good jobs. They don't have good people in their lives that love them and support them. They generally surround themselves with pain and anguish. And you don't have that. You have other things, but it isn't low self-esteem. And, you know, that was...I could accept that. I said sure, you know, I understand that. It probably was a good idea to figure out what I was hiding.

And then she said and the other thing is you keep talking in all your letters and in your stuff about being confused about your gender. And she said in looking at all your stuff and meeting you, you're not confused about your gender. You've never been confused about your gender. You've always known what gender you are. You just are afraid that the people in your life that you love aren't going to be able to accept it. And no one had—I mean, it was like oh my god. And so my gender transition started that day, the 19th of August in 1994.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. And I went home and talked to Sigrid and told her. It wasn't a big surprise because she knew I'd been struggling with gender stuff for a few years.

She caught me cross dressing and stuff like that. It was kind of painful, but I just told her I just like to cross dress. Lie, lie, lie.

David W. So she didn't hook up your depression with your gender.

Erin S. No. No, she didn't. And so, I mean, that just began six months of having to... We came out to family and to our daughters, and then to my business partners. I was pretty well known. I had been successful. I'm a marriage and family therapist, and I was on the Marriage and Family Therapy board for Georgia.

And I had been... there were like three discipline leaders that had pushed through a licensing bill in the state legislature because our licensing bill had been declared unconstitutional. The court had struck it down. Because it was a title bill. It said that you could not use the title counselor or therapist, marriage and family therapist, social worker unless you had a license. And the court said it was an abridgement of free speech and trade, that you can't abridge people's speech. If they want to say that they're a counselor, they have the right to say they're a counselor.

So we had to change our licensing law to actually say you can't practice the discipline of therapy without having a license. And it was a big change because it got mixed up with the medical association. It was a six month huge project, but we got it passed, and the governor signed it, and it was incredible. And of course then I went on the road to go around Georgia to all the Marriage and Family Therapy meetings for the therapists and

explain to them what the new law meant, and why they needed to get licensed, and how they would go about doing that. And so everybody across the whole state knew me, they knew who I was. [*Laughs.*]

And it was very hard. There are things about that time that I still don't remember, and I think it was just because it was traumatic. It was just difficult to do. And I told my partners. I hired a supervisor for my professional transition. And he and I went over my clients and started working with them. About a year later I had like two clients. My practice just sort of went totally away.

And Sigrid and I divorced. We had an amicable divorce. And the divorce never worked. We still see each other several times a week and call each other all the time, and hug and kiss and do all that sort of stuff that old married couples do. And we're going to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary in December. [*Laughs.*]

David W. An early congratulations.

Erin S. Oh, well thank you. Thank you, thank you. One really painful thing remained, and that is that as a Presbyterian minister my retirement and my family's health insurance came through what's called the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church and was hooked to my being ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Ironically, I probably, I didn't really probably...financially, economically, I didn't need to be a minister. I was fully licensed as a therapist and I could have done the work that I did

without being ordained without any problem. But I couldn't give up my ordination.

And so I started the process with the church and told them I needed to have my name changed on the rolls. And they asked why. They asked what name I wanted, and I said Erin Katrina, and they said why do you want that name? I said well, because I'm changing my gender expression to something a little more feminine. I had not lost the ability to minimize things. I was really good at it. And I thought this would be a better name for me. [*Laughs.*] And so that started a process.

They have a Committee on Ministry, which is kind of like the Personnel Committee for the presbytery. I met with them and they consulted some local experts, and read books, and we had this long afternoon's interview where they grilled me for like four hours. And they decided okay, no problem. We're going to approve the name change. And we're just going to put it in what's called the Consent Agenda.

The Consent Agenda is a way—presbyteries have to meet. The Presbyterian Church, unlike the Methodist Church, we don't have bishops that make decisions. It's really nice to have a bishop to decide things. The bishop does that, and it's very clean and efficient, and things get decided. Our things are decided by a presbytery, which is made up of ministers and ruling elders from all the churches in the presbytery, and important questions like that have to be passed by the presbytery, not by the bishop.

And presbytery meetings tend to be long and very involved, so they're always started out with what's called the Consent Agenda. And the Consent Agenda includes things like the official approval of the minutes from the last meeting.

David W. Okay, so things that...

Erin S. Things that are routine go through the Consent Agenda. And they said they were going to put it on the Consent Agenda and hope that it would go through. It was Pride Sunday 1995—Pride Saturday. Sunday was the march, but Saturday I spent at the park, at Piedmont Park in Atlanta with Pride. It was a presbytery meeting and I was asked not to go by the presbyter. He said that it would be crazy and that I wouldn't want to be there, and I agreed with him.

And the chair of the Committee on Ministry called me about 4:00 in the afternoon and he said things didn't go well. And my heart just sort of sank. He said the committee—someone stood up and said that he had done some research and that no one in the Presbyterian Church or even in a Protestant denomination had done such a thing before and that what they were doing was going to set precedent, perhaps for Christendom, for the world.

[Laughs.]

You know, I only wanted my name changed because I thought I could then change my insurance policy and everything would be copacetic. I would quietly transition, I would quietly continue my practice, and if

anyone said I thought you were a man, I would say, well, what do you mean? Not really. You know, I just thought someday it would be old history. And it did not. I mean, it got into the newspaper and it got pulled out of the Consent Agenda and sent back to the committee for study.

And the editor of the religion section of the Atlanta daily papers was at the meeting, and she called me the next day to tell me that they were going to do one of these pro and con articles, full page, with me on one side and the guy who led the opposition on the other page facing each other like we're opposition. She wanted to interview me for this article. Her name was Billie. I had known her because we'd been in a Sunday School class together. So I said Billie, I don't want an article on myself. I'm going to refuse.

And she laughed and she said I'm really sorry. I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but this was a public event and this happened in public, and therefore it's in the public domain, and we have decided to write a story about it because it's news. And you can decide whether to cooperate with the story and be interviewed for it or not. If you're not, then we'll just get the information, as much information as we can from the people who know you. Talk about a bad choice. That's a tough choice.

And so it went forward. The story went forward. Fortunately, it didn't show up for six weeks. It showed up on Labor Day weekend, which I thought of as a piece of grace because it was buried in the Sunday paper

on Labor Day weekend, so, you know, people don't read the Sunday paper on Labor Day weekend. And it was not a pro and con story. It was all about me. And the title was "Seeking Acceptance." And it was really great. The guy who wrote it did an excellent job of writing the story, and he captured it fairly, from both perspectives. And at the bottom there was this thing about other ministers who were transgender currently, and they weren't all named. Only a couple of them actually had names. But I hadn't even heard of that, so I learned a bunch of stuff, so it was kind of cool. And it was wonderful, but it changed my life.

Meanwhile, the committee is working very hard to figure out something to do. And every month they're having—they had monthly meetings and they're taking a straw vote every month. After the newspaper article came out I got a phone call—I got lots of phone calls, actually, after the newspaper article came out. I got dozens of phone calls. But one in particular from an old woman. She left a voice message for me to call her back. And she said she had read the article and she wanted to talk to me. And of course by then I was a starving therapist because I had nobody to see in my therapy practice, so I was returning every call, no matter how... You know, I knew it was probably going to be painful. I was going to get another lecture on how I was subverting God's will for my life.

And she introduced herself on the phone and she asked me if I knew John Money. And I said well, as a matter of fact John had been helpful to me in terms of my process, that I had talked to him, and he was helpful to me.

And she said, oh how nice, that he was her doctor when she transitioned back in the 1970s, and so she wondered if perhaps we had the same doctor. And I said, well, I'm seeing a different person, but John was very kind and very helpful. And so she said she was in Atlanta. And I couldn't resist. I said, well, how about breakfast? So like the next week, I think it was a Monday morning, we had breakfast scheduled at a greasy spoon on Ponce de Leon in Atlanta, a real Atlanta place.

And she showed up there. She's this tiny, she looked like she was five foot two. She was, you know, the image of the classical transgender person from the '60s and '70s, people who weren't successful as men, people who couldn't make it as men and they knew, and so they turned them into women because they wanted to be women. They didn't turn people like me into women because I was successful as a man and I was five eight, and besides that I had no intention of becoming a secretary and so, you know, things changed along the way. But there she was, this handsome little woman. She was 78 years old.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. And we had breakfast and I heard about her life. She told me all about going to—she went to Baltimore and lived there for three or four years while she went through her gender transition and got her treatment through the clinic there. And then after she was finished she came back and decided—she was from south Georgia—she came back to Atlanta and

she met a man and they got married, and he never knew that she was not born female. He had no idea. They had lived 20 years together and he had died, and she was living alone in this retirement community across the street from the greasy spoon.

And she said, you know, and by the way, I'm active at the Presbyterian church, that big Presbyterian church next door. And I perked up and said, really? She said oh yeah, I'm a musician. I said what about that? I am a musician, too. I play the piano and I sing. And she said I'm a pianist. She said I'm in the church all the time. I go there practically every day, and I have been for years. And I don't play at worship service on Sunday morning, but all the other music in the church comes from my fingers.

And I said, wow, that's really fabulous.

And I just felt so enthusiastic, and I reached across this old Formica table that we were sitting at and grabbed her hands and said how wonderful it was to meet a fellow transgender Presbyterian. And I smiled big time. And her face grew dark. And she said oh, but I'm not a Presbyterian. And I said okay, I'm confused. You're confusing me because you just finished—you know, she had spent ten minutes telling me about her relationship with this Presbyterian church. They were her family. And what do you mean you're not a Presbyterian? I sort of braced myself that, you know, she was a Roman Catholic and she thought that she would go to hell if she left, some sort of hocus pocus story like that.

She said oh no, she had not joined the church because she didn't think that God wanted her to join the church. And I said why in the world would God not want you to join the church? And she said, you know, because of who I am, what I am. And she said that's why, when I read a newspaper article about a Presbyterian minister who's like me, I just had to meet you.

And that happened to me—it was several months before the committee finally figured out with the Board of Pensions, because this was going to be a major crisis for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. They were going to, you know, dozens of churches were going to leave, and they were going to go bankrupt. The presbytery was already in financial problems and they were going to go bankrupt, so they had to figure out some way to quietly settle this. And so they worked out something with the Board of Pensions so that my daughter and I could have lifetime insurance benefits through the Board of Pensions. Of course they didn't say anything about how much it was going to cost. But I would have it, it would be available to me. So now will you let go of your ordination?

And this thing had happened to me, and I'd had breakfast with Jesus one morning at a greasy spoon in Atlanta, and Jesus told me what I needed to be doing, and I said no. Which was a huge risk because, I mean, you know, if they took my ordination away from me I would lose the insurance, I would lose it, gone. Oh, my god. But I couldn't do it anymore. I would have done it in a heartbeat six months before. And she turned me,

you know, Jesus was an old transsexual woman. I mean, who would have thought?

And that's where I got started. I started going back to church again and started visiting churches around Atlanta, and I was very forward about introducing myself to the minister there and letting him know that I'm that person in the presbytery, the one that they're all talking about, the one in the newspaper. And I'd get all kinds of responses, from frozen to hot, like crazy, but I would always get response. It was never like cordial.

And then I found this little church that...it was a little...More Light Presbyterian Church. There were only two More Light Presbyterian churches in Atlanta, and this was one of them. And they just thought that I was the cat's pajamas. And so I started going there. My daughter Lara and I, in her wheelchair, we'd go there together. And I became parish associate there. But that's why it went to a vote in the presbytery, because—

David W. Because of Jesus.

Erin S. Because of Jesus. Because Jesus made me do that. They even sent a, they sent a committee. They sent two people from the committee to say that they were kind of offended because I had turned down their offer. And they came to meet me in my office and they said that it's customary for Presbyterian ministers who are convicted of major felonies and otherwise do bad things to resign their ordination, and that they had come from the Committee on Ministry to respectfully request that I resign my ordination.

They were sitting there in my office saying that to my face. And I said sorry, I'm not going to do that. I can't. Can't do it. Just can't.

And so it wasn't long before I met Janie Spahr, and then Michael Adee, and soon I got asked by Michael to be on the board of More Light Presbyterians because even though they said they were an LGBT organization, they didn't know from Adam's housecat about T. And he said I don't want you to be a token on the board, I want you to help our board get on board with the transgender stuff. So I had lots of encouragement to go and be active as a transgender member of the board. And that started my life as an activist.

The presbytery met on—well, the committee meetings started getting worse and worse and worse. The executive of the presbytery called me up one day and said, Erin, I am sorry to have to tell you, but we've been taking straw votes at every meeting. In the meantime the committee had changed. It had gone through one year to the next and the committee had become more conservative, which you would have expected for something like that. And he said that the votes are going against you big time, and I just want to prepare you so that you know.

And I took that and it was a blow, I have to admit. It was a huge blow. And I prayed, in my own kind of way, with tears. And usually yelling, sometimes involving epithets. And I decided that the only way that I could really accept it would be if I was satisfied that the people on the committee

really knew what they were doing. I wasn't going to accept it if they were doing it out of ignorance or fear of finding out that they just didn't want to know any more, they just...you know, I was tired of this "just because it's not right" business. That's not a reason. That's just not a reason. You have to tell me why it's not right.

And so I called up every member of this committee. There were 16 people on the committee. I met with all but two of them in their offices, one-on-one—in their offices, in their kitchens, in restaurants. Probably averaged three hours a meeting. And we sat down and we prayed over food, and I said okay, so here I am, I am yours, tell me what's going on with this with you. Where are you going to vote, why are you going to vote, what do you need to know? And I turned it around.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. It turned into a—with two, there were two abstentions. The two people that hadn't met with me abstained and all the rest of them voted for my ordination. So the presbytery got a unanimous committee decision. And then on the 22nd of October, 1996, I was enacting what probably had been my worst nightmare most of my life, and I was delighted. It was just amazing.

Here I was standing in front of this big group of church people, in the front, by myself, in front of a lectern, facing all these, you know, 500 people. There were more than 500 people in the meeting. And I was

dressed in a green jumper and heels and an ivory blouse. And there I was explaining to them why I had changed my gender. And to me that would have been the stuff of real nightmares. I mean, real nightmares for most of my life. And there I was doing that.

And the vote was very close, but it was 186 to 161, so there were seven votes. If seven votes had gone the other way, my life would have been different. And of course then—I had contacted *Newsweek* before the meeting because I was really scared that the story would show up in the *Enquirer* or the *Star*. And I had a friend who was a photojournalist who worked for the magazines, and she said the best way to not get a tabloid story is to get a legitimate story. You get a story in a good place and the tabloids won't touch it then. And that made sense to me. And the idea of being in the *Enquirer* just sort of made my skin crawl.

So I had called and had breakfast with the bureau chief for *Newsweek*. We had a nice breakfast and he explained that my story was interesting and all that stuff, and said if I was a Roman Catholic priest that they would be all over the story like white on rice. [*Laughs.*] But *Newsweek* was an international magazine, that their constituency was mostly Roman Catholic, that Protestants were a small part of their readership, and so this would be small potatoes story for *Newsweek*. And of course he expected that my ordination was going to be taken away, which is what everybody expected. So he said thanks but no thanks.

And when the presbytery voted in my favor, one of my colleagues, in fact one of my good friend clergy colleagues, I didn't know had been a stringer for *Newsweek*. You know what a stringer is?

David W. Yes.

Erin S. I had never learned what. I said a stringer? What do you mean? She was a stringer for *Newsweek*. And she called the bureau chief up and said you need to know that the presbytery just approved Erin's ordination. And so he showed up in my office the next day with a photographer and it got into *Newsweek*, and that did the trick, it worked. Except that then all the tabloid television shows, Jerry Springer and all those places called me up and wanted me to be on their show. And that was really easy to say no to.

And so I've been working for trans people trying to help folks understand that they really are children of God, and they really, honestly are beautiful as they are. And even though their parents kick them out of the house, they're still worthy people, and we're going to make a family for them. So I've been doing that for the last 20 years. I don't know that the... I guess my work as an activist was national for a while after that. Because of the *Newsweek* article I was traveling to Massachusetts, and Chicago, and Minneapolis, and San Francisco, and preaching and speaking at conferences. But that didn't last very long.

A couple years later it was kind of quiet, so my activism really became kind of a street ministry almost, to where my being a reverend and being

transgender at the same time was an important thing for people to know about me. So I worked that for a long time, and still do, actually. I'm as likely as not to tell the waitress—you know, the waitress will know who I am and what I am by the end of the time she serves the meal, whether she wants to or not. *[Laughs.]*

Anyway, what's really important to me right now, and I think for the future, because I think there is a dangerous movement afoot by the Religious Right to try to claim high ground on the argument about gender, and they're wanting to portray transgender people as mentally ill, and as deluded, and some of us as even predators.

And the message that I have, because I remember going through all those years in the Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church, and then North Decatur Presbyterian Church where I was ordained, and Columbia Seminary, and even all those years that I was in the closet, but I supported—Chris Glaser was in my presbytery, and we had a vote. He was part of a commission that created a statement on human sexuality in the early '90s that was absolutely stunning. It was just stunning. Jim Nelson was on the committee.

They talked about homosexuality, and they talked about the value of sexual relationships, and that marriage was one way of expressing sexual relationships, not the only way. And, I mean, it was just amazing. And of course the church just turned it down big time. But I voted in favor of it. I

was all in favor of it. And I was part of that group in the church. I knew they were supportive of people like me. I just wasn't willing to claim my place in that community.

And when I did, they claimed me, and the people in the presbytery—I mean I had many people who really were very much against my ordination, and even me, who probably would have just as soon see me shot as continue in the presbytery. But there were many people who loved me and valued my ministry. Ben [Klein] theologian; Shirley Guthrie, my professors at seminary, and they were openly, tangibly supportive.

My ex wrote this huge letter to the presbytery about—the presbytery was concerned that I was wreaking havoc on my family, and she wrote this letter to the presbytery angry because the presbytery was ignoring the fact that the presbytery was wreaking havoc on our family, not me. [*Laughs.*] And that thank you very much, our family was doing just fine. And then her father—her father, my father-in-law, wrote a letter. He was a Presbyterian minister himself. He was dean of students at Columbia Seminary.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. And so I got all this support. And it was the church that nurtured me through all of that. I'm not saying that the church would have supported me in 1956 when I joined if I had said that I was transgender and wanted to be a girl. They would have had no more idea of what to do with that

than they would have how to send a man to the moon. I mean, it just...it wasn't...we weren't there. The world wasn't there, I wasn't there. And I knew that.

I thank God I was smart enough to know that, because I know people who are my age who did tell their parents, and did talk to the church, and they've written books. They've written books that are very exciting, but I don't think I would want to live those lives. Anyway, I'm so thankful for the path that I got to walk. I consider my years as a male dad and as a husband well spent, and there are many enjoyable memories from there. I have no regrets about not transitioning when I was 19 or something like that. I adore being the parent of two wonderful kids.

And I think of myself as having—probably someday, if the world continues to go in the direction it is, the kind of transition that I've had will be a thing of the past, and maybe people will read about it as a quaint old story. Look what they did back in the 2000s. My goodness gracious, how backward they were. And hopefully that will happen.

But my goal right now, because I'm so worried about how well the Religious Right can gain the attention of people who are in the middle, they're well meaning people who are, you know, they're not ignorant, they're well meaning. And a lot of what the Religious Right can sound reasonable to people.

David W. Yes, it can.

Erin S. And it's dead wrong. It may be reasonable, but it's wrong. And so I'm writing my memoir, again. Hopefully I'll be able to get it published. Justin reviewed the first one I submitted to Vanderbilt Press and Justin wrote this beautiful, like two or three page, I mean, he worked hard. He read my book and he critiqued it, and he really understood it, and he found where I was sort of missing the... And I was so taken with his critique. And I was not a writer, and I had never read anything like that before.

And the editor said, you know, so here are these critiques, and I want you to know that I want to give you a contract. And I've learned since that writers dream of the day that an editor says they want to present a contract. And I just said well no, I'm not quite ready yet. [*Laughs.*] I had spent years falling deeper and deeper into debt. I was probably fifty or sixty thousand dollars in unsecured debt and had no savings. I was living hand to mouth. I was putting together barbecue grills at Home Depot to put food on the table just for myself. And I had just gotten a job, a 40 hour a week with a reasonable salary and benefits job, and I hadn't had one in three years. And it was like, you know, I—

David W. I can't do this?

Erin S. I can't do it. I knew that writing a book and publishing a book was going to involve time and energy, and I just...I probably should have said, you know, well I'm going to be brave and go ahead and do that, but it just didn't make any sense to me. I took the job and said I wasn't ready. When

I approached him later he said, well, I don't think we're—[laughs]—we're not there anymore. I said okay. But he was a great guy. Michael Ames. He's a wonderful guy.

So I'm hoping to get a book published. And the idea behind the book is that the mainstream church, and Christianity, has resources for this transgender thing, has had resources. Those resources have always been there. If we look at scripture there are resources. There are all kinds of places and ways that good, middle-of-the-road Christians can be supportive of transgender experience and not be ashamed of it or afraid of it at all. You know, I just want...that's the message of the book. It's not about my life as much as it is about the other thing.

And so that's what I'm doing. I hopefully will finish the book sometime soon. I think I'm over my phobia of having a book published. Publishing a memoir that is about your own life is scary. It's really frightening. And there are so many people in my life who could be hurt. Do I name my family by name? Who do I use names for? Who can be identified? It's just, oh.

David W. They're important questions.

Erin S. They're very important questions, yeah.

David W. But they are manageable.

Erin S. They are, with a lot of work. And fortunately I'm retired, mostly, so that's what I'm doing. I'm doing that and triathlon.

David W. Right, which you just completed.

Erin S. I just completed my...I did five this season, and the last one was a half iron man. And so I'm going to do...I'll probably do five next season with another half iron man. And I'm going strong. I'm in the 70 to 74 age group and I'm a young 70, so I get to race against people who are older than I am. [*Laughs.*] Not by much. And usually they're way better than I am because often they're people who are coaches and stuff like that.

So I didn't start until I was in my 60s to do this. And it takes a lot of time. Writing a book takes a lot of time. So I have a lot of time and I'm giving it to those two things. And doing things like come to this conference. What an amazing place.

David W. It is, yeah.

Erin S. Just amazing. Is there anything else? Did I leave anything out?

David W. You tell me. Is there anything else you'd...?

Erin S. I mean, there are all kinds of little stories to tell. There's the presbytery meeting that happened. It was the next presbytery meeting after the one where they voted, and we met at Central Presbyterian Church, which is one of the big Presbyterian churches in downtown Atlanta. And my name was coming up with a report of the committee this time because we were

requesting that I be assigned parish associate minister of this little Presbyterian church that I fell in love with. And of course we were all worried that it was going to, mm-mm.

David W. Just went through.

Erin S. Went through like smooth, smooth as glass.

David W. Wow.

Erin S. And so, you know, I was just delighted. The meeting was over and so we went to the parking deck behind the church, because an urban church, it had a deck. And got into the elevator and I looked around, and I was in the elevator with the four people who had formed the opposition to my ordination. It was the five of us. All four of them, of course, white men, as you might expect. And so we, you know, they realized I was in there, and what we were talking about just suddenly stopped.

And we got to the floor where I was to get off—everybody was to get off because there was only one other floor. And the bell dinged and the door opened. Well, these are four Southern men, and they were faced with a Southern man's dilemma. They had to decide whether to just jump off the elevator and be disrespectful to a lady or step back and let me get off. They stepped back and they let me get off. And if there was a victory, that was it. [*Laughs.*] That was it.

David W. That's a great story.

Erin S. It was amazing. It was like... [*Laughs.*] I got where I needed to be. That's just exactly where I needed to be. I never wanted to transition and become a gorgeous model or that kind of... I mean, my grandmother was a strong German woman with a stout body, and I admired her more than anything in my life. She was a strong woman. And I just, you know, for me women are strong people, and I wasn't aspiring to be a retiring runway model, fortunately, because it probably was not in the cards for me anyway. No, I wanted to be able to get up on Saturday morning, pull on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt and go to get my oil changed and have them say what can we do for you today, ma'am? That's what I wanted. That's all I wanted. I didn't need any recognition beyond that.

And that came within months of the time I started to transition, so I've really been blessed with everything that I really wanted. I have a wonderful family. My daughters are healthy and doing well. My ex and I are getting along marvelously. We're going to go her... Her father is 95 and living in an assisted living facility, a Presbyterian assisted living facility in Atlanta, and Sigrid and Lara, our disabled daughter, the three of us live in Atlanta, so the three of us are going to go and have lunch at the assisted living facility with Hal for Thanksgiving. That's our Thanksgiving plan.

David W. Oh, that's great. That's a good plan.

Erin S. Yeah, I had to give up a half marathon that morning to do that, but, you know, I'm willing to do that, especially for her dad and for her. Even though I live alone, people wonder if I have a family, and I do. In fact I have several families.

David W. It sounds like it. I've heard several—

Erin S. Michael Adee, and Bear Ride, and Susan Craig and I have just kind of formed this informal family which we call our sandwich family.

David W. I like that.

Erin S. Because Michael is gay and Bear Ride is lesbian—Sally Ride's sister. Did you know Bear was Sally Ride's sister?

David W.” I didn't, no.

Erin S. Sally Ride's little sister was Bear Ride. Bear is a Presbyterian minister. And Bear and Susan are married to each other. Bear identifies as bisexual.

David W. So you do have a whole sandwich.

Erin S. And I am transgender, so we have LGBT, and we call ourselves the guacamole, lettuce, tomato and bacon sandwich. [*Laughs.*] So we are the sandwich, we're the LGBT sandwich. [*Laughs.*] So we get together whenever we can. And we live different lifestyles. Bear and Susan are retired and traveling a lot and having fun, and Michael is working like crazy with Global Faith & Justice, doing incredible work with Global Faith & Justice. You know what he's doing?

David W. I follow it a little bit.

Erin S. Yeah, I mean, it's like out there working in the southern hemisphere and in places where being transgender is outright dangerous and trying to make the world safer for us. And I get to know people like you, David. Like you.

David W. We get to know one another.

Erin S. Yeah. It's like God, you know, how did I get here? [*Laughs.*] But after all those years of nightmare, I deserve a little bit of...

David W. That's right. The nightmare turned into fulfilled dream, it sounds like.

Erin S. Yeah, it really did.

David W. Wow, what a story.

Erin S. In wonderful ways. Anyway. That's my story. I have no idea what time it is or where I am. Where are we?

David W. We're still in St. Louis and it's...

Erin S. It's probably 2:00.

David W. It's 2:41.

Erin S. Oh, you're kidding!

[*End of recording.*]