

JERRY K. BRAYTON

My Circumcision Story
As Told to J. Steven Svoboda

IT IS A GREAT RELIEF to be able to talk about my circumcision. No other single event in my life has so strongly affected me as this mutilation of my body that occurred in the first days of my life. And there is no other event about which I am anywhere near as angry, sad, and depressed as my circumcision. Nevertheless, I have never until today sat down and actually recounted all the different emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical effects it has had on my life.

I was born in 1960. Unfortunately for me, while my circumcision was not what my doctor would have called a “botch” (although all circumcisions are, by definition, botches), my circumcision was quite tight and extensive. My frenulum was entirely removed.

I was relatively ‘lucky’ with my circumcision. My penis was not inadvertently amputated, as happens to some boys. Nor was the operation performed so unskillfully that my penis points to the side when erect, as is true of some men I know. I was not overly lucky, though, since a relatively large amount of skin was removed.

Like most men, I do not consciously remember my circumcision. However, in August 1994, I did do a particular powerful form of breathwork in a workshop, during which I accessed body memories of the event. I felt the pain and concretely re-experienced what it was like to be circumcised, although with dramatically less vivid feelings of pain than I must have suffered as an infant.

In early adolescence, I learned about sexuality mostly through some well-written books, such as Wardell Pomeroy’s *Boys and Sex*. My family was quite

repressed about sexuality. I do not remember my parents ever being physically affectionate beyond goodnight kisses, nor were they very affectionate with us. Their only attempt to discuss sexuality with me was quite pathetic. When I was seventeen and already had a girlfriend, my father came into my room and made some incredibly lame and embarrassing attempts to discuss the subject. I felt sorry for my dad and grief at my own lack of sexual initiation.

As a child, I believe I heard about circumcision from time to time. I grew up in the suburbs, where nearly all my fellow boys were also circumcised. Like many boys of my era, I assumed that I had not been circumcised; my penis looked like everyone else's and it seemed that everything that was supposed to be there was there. I remember feeling glad that this mysterious, horrible thing had not happened to me.

As I got older and became a young adult, however, I began to learn some information that suggested to me that I was in fact circumcised. I don't remember the exact sequence of events, but sometime around 1985 I must have realized that I actually had been surgically cut in my genital area.

I spent several years in denial about the pain and loss this represented. I attempted many rationalizations; this seemed easier than accepting that I had lost something so integral to my own identity and self. In 1987, I began attending men's events that focused on support and personal growth. Some of these events even included workshops on circumcision. In 1989, I began more consciously to acknowledge my unhappiness and anger that this had been done to me. The following summer, I attended a support meeting organized by the National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) (then known as RECAP) to provide emotional support for men involved in non-surgical foreskin restoration.

Foreskin restoration is a technique that entails slow stretching of the skin that remains on the penis, in order eventually to create enough skin to cover the glans as the foreskin does on intact men. The lost nerve-endings from the foreskin can never be regained, of course. But restoration is still reported by most men who have the perseverance to see it through as a very valuable process that significantly enhances sexual sensation.

Since that 1990 encounter with restoration, I have made several attempts at foreskin restoration. NORM founder Wayne Griffiths generously and kindly kept in touch with me for several years after I returned to Boston, where I was then living. More recently, other restoring men have helped me to attempt to restore.

However, I have not had much success with restoration. I find the use of various devices to stretch my skin emotionally very draining, as it serves to remind me graphically of the extent of my loss. I also encountered practical

difficulties involving urination, soreness from taping, etc. Owing to my relatively tight circumcision, I also have more work to do to achieve a given degree of restoration than do men who were left more skin by their circumcisers. My longest period of attempting restoration was probably two to three months in 1994. Currently, I am not restoring. I would like to do so, but am not sure when I will have the resolve and determination I will need to be able to carry through on this emotionally and at times physically demanding course.

And I would rather not think about my loss. My inability to restore feels like another form of projecting my fears onto women, another form of holding back. I am shell-shocked and a post-traumatic-stress survivor. I am proud that I survived. But I hurt. I have always been careful not to talk to my lovers about why intact men are better lovers, for fear they would leave me to experience the other side.

In December 1992, I had my first conversation about circumcision with my mother. I had a second conversation with her a month later, in January 1993. Before both discussions, I was quite terrified to raise the issue with her. I was sure that she would shame me or refuse to discuss the matter.

However, my mother has grown in a lot of ways over the past thirty years, particularly since the death of my father. She was able to listen to what I had to say and even to acknowledge that she understood that I was in pain and why I was in pain. Although she did not say so, it was clear that she regretted that she had allowed me and my brother to be circumcised. She told me, as I expected, that at the time she had devoted virtually no thought to the matter. The doctor had advised her that it was "cleaner" to do the circumcision, and that information satisfied her and my father.

I learned in a third discussion I had with my mother, in October 1996, that my father had been circumcised. This surprised me, since he was born in the 1920s in Nebraska, which I do not believe was a hotbed of circumcision at that time. Nevertheless, it no doubt provided additional justification in my parents' minds for performing the procedure on me and my brother. I learned in August 1995, the last time I saw my grandfather alive, that he had not been circumcised. This information did not surprise me, since he was born in Oklahoma in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, I must admit I felt sadness and also envy of him for his genital integrity.

One paradoxical feature of my 'circumcision experience' is my questioning whether my knowledge of the damage I endured hasn't decreased my enjoyment of life. To this day, I must admit that I often wonder if I wouldn't be a much happier man if I had never realized the extent of my loss. Of course, this wish is somewhat like asking oneself what it would be like to be a

fish. That is, it's irrelevant; I did in fact come to understand that my circumcision had removed significant, irreplaceable sexual pleasure from my life and placed it forever beyond my grasp.

For me, this is really the core of my upset about circumcision. I don't have huge issues about the appearance of my circumcised penis. I do know that I have lost a tremendous amount of sexual enjoyment because of the amputation of functional, integral portions of my genital anatomy.

I happen to have a sexual history that in some ways has played into my turmoil over this issue. I was a very 'late bloomer' in my mid-twenties before I developed enough self-confidence and worked through the sexuality issues I had from my childhood sufficiently to begin enjoying a fairly normal, healthy sexual life. So my grief at losing the great pleasure a foreskin and frenulum can provide is compounded for me by my loss of roughly a decade of potential sexual activity and enjoyment.

Before I learned that there were other men who felt unhappy about being circumcised and had started a movement to stop the procedure, in my own mind I had already analogized the procedure with rape. I concluded that rape was clearly the less serious offence. My thinking was that rape occurs once and while significant work has to be done to process the feelings of shame and rage and live an ordinary life again, circumcision creates a loss that I re-experience many times every day of my life. I am not so sure any more that this reasoning can withstand scrutiny, since, after all, circumcision only happens once, too. But such was my emotional distress about my circumcision that this was my thinking.

One critical element of my 'circumcision experience' is my constant re-exposure to this torturous event. Every time I urinate, or am sexual, or dress, or undress, or take a shower, or even walk down the street, I am reminded of my circumcision. Many times every day, I am reminded through the painful, irritating physical contact of my glans with my clothing that I lack a foreskin. Bicycling is the worst, because my glans often touches my pants on each cycle of my legs. I also remember that since childhood I wondered why it was that the head of my penis was the first place I felt pain due to the cold.

Like many men thirty years or older, every day I rediscover firsthand the horror of this procedure. I have noticed a dramatic and heartbreaking loss of sensitivity over the last few years. This is, of course, owing to the continual buildup of layers of keratin over the mucous-membrane tissue that remains on our penises after the foreskin is removed.

My 'circumcision experience', by its very omnipresence in my life, has fuelled my commitment to the struggle for true gender equality in our society. My circumcision always serves as a reminder that I am not crazy in thinking

that men are also oppressed by society. This is not yet the conventional belief, and may not be for a long time. However, circumcision more generally reminds me that many of our ideas come from cultural prejudices and blindnesses, and reconfirms the importance of thinking for oneself and not trusting received ideas.

If they can do this to us with impunity, they can do anything, and they do. Taking a knife to a baby's genitals, with no rational medical reason, without anaesthetic, and deafening ourselves to the baby's screams. What a powerful metaphor for our blindness in general to men's suffering – our shorter life-spans, our dramatically higher suicide rates, the lack of educational attention being paid (before the last few years) to boys' needs, even as boys fall further behind girls academically. I feel that circumcision is the primal wound for males; it was for many of us our first sexual experience. For men, pain and pleasure can have a complicated relationship in the sexual arena.

It hurts and angers me that society has such great compassion for women and children and so little relative concern for the struggles of men. The signs of this are all around us, if only we will open our eyes and see: the passage of a Violence Against Women Act in a society where three-fourths of all victims of violence are male. Domestic violence occurs roughly equally between the sexes, and yet the disparities in available support are shocking. Men around the world are systematically compelled to give their bodies and their lives in armed conflict. We are also economically compelled to give our bodies and our lives in the workplace; 94 percent of all American workplace deaths occur to men.

I have come to believe that the numbness in our penises resulting from circumcision here in the USA parallels the emotional numbness which those in power need for us to have so we will continue to fulfil our roles as producers. As men, we are encouraged to be emotionally and physically numb.

I would probably give everything I own to have my foreskin back, how it was meant to be, pre-operation, so that my body would be natural and healthy and whole.

Circumcision without the consent of the circumcised, irrespective of the parents' wishes or alleged religious reasons, should definitely be outlawed.

I feel much more anger toward my circumciser than I do toward my parents. In the demographic, geographical, and temporal niche where I was born, my parents would have had to be unusual people who questioned authority in order to have saved my body from the knife. Actually, they were very typical people for that place and time, who yearned to fit in by doing as their neighbours and friends did and would never have resisted a doctor's instruction that

circumcision was good for the baby. Given the kind of people they were, I had no hope of avoiding being cut.

I am somewhat angry at them for not having questioned this terrible violation of their firstborn child's bodily integrity, but I feel significantly more angry with the physician who should have, and perhaps did on some unconscious level, know better. It is criminal that he was advising thousands of parents to take the knife to their newborn, perfect baby boys.

I definitely believe that my would-be circumciser should have been stopped by force. I am aware that numerous babies have died as a result of their foreskin amputation, and numerous other babies have suffered the entire loss of their penis and been further genitally altered so that society can pretend that they are girls and treat them as such. This strikes me as utterly outrageous.

One unfortunate effect of my circumcision is the anger I have at society for our refusal to recognize male pain and male suffering. These feelings have spilled over into my personal friendships and romantic relationships and have definitely at times made it more difficult for me to sustain certain connections. When a potential friend or lover does not recognize or acknowledge the horrors of circumcision and/or the other forms of oppression and pain which men must endure in our society, I can at times become quite emotional, sometimes to the detriment of the friendship or relationship. Once I became conscious of the full effects of my circumcision, this result was in a sense inevitable. And yet it marks another form of harm and damage caused to me by the procedure, albeit indirectly.

Once I had a discussion about circumcision with a friend of mine who is a Jewish mother of a boy who was, as most Jewish boys are, circumcised. She was surprisingly open-minded about the subject, for which I was very grateful. I am sure that due to my own storm of feelings surrounding this issue, I did not present my point of view as effectively and calmly as I might have.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned to her, I do feel extremely frustrated that even today, in a developed country, we have to spend time and energy even discussing this issue. Do we spend time discussing why babies' arms and legs should not be cut off? Do we spend time weighing the medical advantages and disadvantages of amputating women's breasts? It is only because of our peculiar cultural history of practising circumcision for a century that the ghastly procedure is even an issue. In a truly civilized world such discussions would not even be necessary.

Over a decade has passed since I wrote most of these words. As I get older, I notice the loss of sensation more and more. Yet, paradoxically, I could never have written this story today, as so much of this has receded into memory and faded in vividness. As most powerful feelings do eventually, my turmoil over

this barbaric procedure has ebbed. I have self-medicated, in a sense, smoothing out the former upset. I feel much less anger over my circumcision and have reached a level of resignation to the situation. Now I am married (to a Jewish woman) and have children. My wife and I have talked openly about my feelings about circumcision. Although she is Jewish, she is supportive of my sentiments. Our son was left intact and we had no problems with her side of the family protesting our decision.

But my commitment to educating people about circumcision continues. And so it is that I decided to share my story with all of you. Thank you for going along for the ride.



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Fearful Symmetries



Essays and Testimonies Around Excision and Circumcision

Edited by
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