Cyan Banister always thought there was something wrong with her. She never felt entirely like a girl. Five years ago, she finally figured out why.

**THE VENTURE CAPITALIST WHO IS BOTH A MAN AND A WOMAN**

Cyan Banister is an accomplished angel investor who, along with her husband, won TechCrunch’s Angel of the Year award last spring for prescient bets on SpaceX, Uber, and DeepMind Technologies. Earlier this year, Banister joined Founders Fund as its first female investing partner.
She’s a self-taught engineer who held several management roles at IronPort, the security startup that sold to Cisco for $850 million in 2007. Later that year, she started a photography platform company called Zivity. Banister is also genderqueer.

October 11 is National Coming Out Day, a day first observed 28 years ago on the anniversary of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The world has become a safer, more open place for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people and queers largely because people have found the courage to be public about their identities. Politicians have realized they have constituents they must represent. People who are just coming out to themselves realize they have role models—they can see people who look like them in every field, from professional athletes to Hollywood stars to, yes, Silicon Valley power players.

Banister has never spoken openly about her gender identity. Today, I talked to her about coming out.

What does it mean to you to be genderqueer?

To me, being genderqueer means that you don’t have a strong gender identity on either side of man or woman. I am biologically female; I have no plans currently to change that. I say currently because I really don’t know. I think that when I look in the mirror, I don’t see a woman. I don’t see a man. I see myself. I see a genderless being. As a matter of fact, I would be perfectly comfortable being an entity in a machine without a body. It’s that disassociated from gender. That’s how far it goes for me, in particular. I can’t speak for what others’ experiences are with this, I only know my own, but I am also queer, or what people would call bisexual.

When did you realize you were genderqueer?

As long as I can remember, from being a little girl to present day, I have never felt like I belonged to either gender. It’s always been very complicated for me, especially when I was younger. It became even more
complicated when I became a teenager. I just felt that maybe there was something wrong with me. I’d gone in all sorts of different directions, thinking about what it could be. There was a period of my life where I thought maybe I was just the wrong gender.

**What do you remember about that period of your life?**

I played with Barbie dolls and Cabbage Patch Kids and things that are pink, but I also liked Tonka Trucks and Transformers and things that were marketed to me as being very gender specific. I remember that my mom got me ready for church and she would roll my hair and put me in this dress. I felt like I was wearing a costume. I felt really uncomfortable and didn’t feel like me. I remember looking in the mirror, thinking that I just want to chop my hair off. I wanted to wear shorts. I didn’t want to wear the things that my mom expected of me, my family expected of me, and society expected of me. Everybody would call me a tomboy.

**I know that term. It sounds familiar.**

Yes. I didn’t *feel* like I was a tomboy. But I embraced it. I would tell people “I’m just a tomboy,” but that wasn’t true either. None of the things were true.

About five years ago, I was sitting in the car with a friend. He was explaining to my husband that basically gender and sexuality exist on a spectrum. Up until that point, I had considered everything somewhat of a binary. I listened to the words and tucked them away, but they stayed with me. It was one of these things that I thought about when I was going to sleep, and I thought about when I woke up. He was absolutely right and it was true.
At that moment in your life, what was going on for you?

I was married. I’d just had a child. I really started having lots of dysphoria. Childbirth causes you to think of childhood, and it causes you to think about your upbringing and your parents and what kind of parent you’re going to be. I started thinking about my childhood, and how I still felt like I didn’t belong. I’d gone through this process of having a child, a very female thing to do, and I still didn’t feel like a woman. It’s one of these things where it was very bizarre to me that I’d be breastfeeding and I’d feel so disassociated from my body. Then of course, there’s mother circles. There’s all these things that you get involved with where there’s other women around. A lot of things that they would talk about seemed very foreign to me.

It sounds like your friend inadvertently had a big impact on you.

After talking to my friend, I started looking for people who were like me. It was a slow process. Basically, I would listen to what other people were saying and how they were talking about themselves. I would start paying
attention to how people were presenting around me, the language that they used. I went online, started looking at peoples’ profiles on Facebook. Now that I had this new language, it opened a lot of doors for me.

I started having conversations with people. I started coming out to my friends first and telling them that this is what I experience; I experience gender dysphoria; here are some points in my life where I’ve felt uncomfortable. I just want to tell you that this is how I feel and this is who I am and try to get thoughts from you.

What was really interesting was that especially my male friends, who identify as male publicly, came out to me. As a matter of fact this happened yesterday. I was telling a friend yesterday that I was going to talk to you today and he came out as genderqueer and queer in the conversation. There are so many people that I’ve talked to that remain silent and have not opened up about their lives out of fear. To be honest with you, it’s been predominately men.

**What was it like to come out to yourself?**

When you hear the word and then you hear what it means, suddenly you’re a puzzle piece that fits in the universe. That’s the feeling, like you are a puzzle piece floating around without a home and you fit into the world and you plug in and this light just shines. You’re like, “ah ha, that’s who I am. There’s nothing wrong with me.” Which is a phenomenal realization. There’s nothing wrong with me. There’s nothing wrong with any of us in that regard.

**Why have you waited to come out to others?**

Mostly just because in the past, I haven’t wanted people to judge...For example, I started a company called Zivity. I didn’t want people to think I started that company for the wrong reason.

**What is Zivity?**

Zivity is a pin-up photography site that celebrates basically the art of the
nude body. It’s predominately female. That was a big thing for me. The other thing is that I didn’t want my family to feel ashamed.

The biggest reason is I didn’t want to close off business opportunities for myself. It’s very difficult to be gender fluid and sexually fluid and fit into the business world, because you get excluded from a lot of things. For women who are cisgendered women, I’m sure that they experience this as well.

You were already married at this point. Is this something you told your husband?

Scott has always known that I’m queer. He’s been incredibly supportive of that. He didn’t know about my gender dysphoria.

What’s the difference between queer and genderqueer?

Queer to me is more about your sexual identity, not your gender identity. Genderqueer and queer are different. I am sexually fluid. I’ve even learned
a new term in the last couple of weeks called pansexual, which might actually be more my identity now that I’m looking into it. It basically means that I am attracted to pretty much a person who identifies as anything. Whether it be male, female, whatever. That’s basically how I describe it. Again, there’s a lot that I’m still learning about and as I explore this world, I’m not right about everything.

**How do you decide about your pronouns? There’s a whole sea of pronouns like ze and zir that were designed for people who want to steer away from the binary.**

I wish I lived in a world in which there was a pronoun that was widely accepted, and didn’t make everyone feel uncomfortable. Yes, there’s an argument to be made that I shouldn’t care about people’s discomfort, but I do. I guess I prefer people to call me whatever it is I’m sort of projecting to them. Whatever they perceive. If I look more masculine that day, call me dude. Say “he.” I really don’t care, it all makes me feel good. I’m comfortable with “she.” I don’t want to make people feel uncomfortable with who I am; that’s not my goal. People should feel free to play around with things with me. It’s delightful. I absolutely thoroughly enjoy being called just about anything when it comes to pronouns.

**Let’s go back to your coming out to Scott as genderqueer.**

I started out asking him the most extreme question I could. “Would you love me if were a man?” He said, “Of course. I would love you if you were anything.” I said, “Really? If I became a man tomorrow, you would still love me?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Would you still be attracted to me?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Okay, well what if I told you I’m not a woman.” He said, “Well, are you a man?” I said, “No, I don’t think I’m a man either.”

He explored it with me and we sat there and talked about it. He said, “I love you. I’m going to be with you no matter what.” It was profound. I picked the perfect partner. I’m very, very happy with that. Now he did admit that had he met me and I had a different body and different anatomy, he might not have been attracted to me. But we are married;
we’ve been together 11 years now. I think he knows who I am on the inside and he loves me.

**You are an investing partner for a prominent venture capital firm in Silicon Valley. How does your identity impact your work?**

We have a very diverse group of people here at Founders Fund. I think they’re incredibly supportive and forward thinking and open minded and inclusive. I’m hoping that by coming out, more people will approach me and talk to me about their experiences. I might actually meet new people, or existing people in a new way. If anything, I think it will open up a dialogue with entrepreneurs and with fellow investors that hasn’t existed before. I think it’s going to be positive.

**You know I am gay. One thing I noticed is that when I came out, my work got better. I didn’t have to go through the emotional confusion and distraction of feeling smaller than who I really was, or hiding a piece of myself. I’m curious if that resonates for you.**

Yeah. I used to try to conform, especially in various work places, to what people thought I should look like so that I would fit it in. I no longer care about that. That is freeing. It’s incredibly freeing. Now, when I get into conversations with people, when they talk about things in a binary way, I do bring up this different point of view. I say, hey, I think gender is a construct and I think it’s not binary. My whole world has changed.

**Why do you think this might be coming up now?**

I think pop culture has a huge part to play in this. We have Miley Cyrus. We have shows like *Orange Is the New Black*. I was watching *Halt and Catch Fire* last night. One of the main characters is bisexual and the other is definitely a female character who is more masculine. They definitely challenge your gender assumptions and the roles that masculine and feminine can play. I think pop culture is starting to reflect what reality
really is for a lot of people. My hero is a woman on the show *Halt and Catch Fire* named Cameron Howe. She’s the first character I’ve ever seen that when I’m watching her, I feel like I’m watching myself.

The other thing is that there’s this discussion going on around diversity and diversity in the workplace, diversity in tech—pretty much every sector you look at, the question of diversity comes up. When the topic comes up, it’s positioned as a binary question: we need more women in the workplace. We need more this, et cetera, in the workplace. Which is true. At the same time, it excludes an entire group of people who feel completely left out because maybe they’re thinking about transitioning or they’re thinking that they don’t fit into either side of that.

*How do you think then about gender itself? When, say, the IRS asks, do you feel confident writing F down in the box?*

No. No, I don’t. After this interview becomes public, I want to update my Facebook profile as well. That’s something I’ve been waiting for. I just discovered that you can write in whatever you want, and that was really cool. I think that’s incredible that Facebook has thought about that. I would hope that more institutions, companies, et cetera, think about this—when they build these structured data collection methodologies, that they think about being inclusive to people who don’t fit into either/or. But no, it doesn’t make me feel comfortable. I think the only thing that’s going to help is for people like me to speak up and for more people to come out and eventually change the discussion so that these forms change.
Does being genderqueer impact how you parent?

I went to Target today and I was going through the Halloween aisle. There’s the sexy witch, or the superhero. The sexy witch has a typical person that you would imagine is the sexy witch, and the superhero has the typical person you would imagine being the superhero. I went down the toy aisle just to see what it looked like today, and it’s still very gender divided.

But one cool thing is that you’re starting to see more Star Wars superhero stuff in the typically female section that you wouldn’t have seen in the past because of Rey. You’re also starting to see Rey appear in the boys section and crossing over. It’s okay for boys to play with a girl doll, as it turns out. It’s very subtle, but I actually think it’s the start of something big. I hope that entrepreneurs out there start thinking about this and I want to see a whole new wave of stores and opportunities and experiences that celebrate diversity in that way. I’m looking forward to it.
Creative Art Direction by: Redindhi Studio
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