

CBC News, Canada

[Unreserved](#)

with Rosanna Deerchild

Sunday February 04, 2018

'Peeling bark off a birch tree': Indigenous teaching helps Gwen Benaway through her sex reassignment surgery

[\[Audio\]](#): Listen (9:41)]

[\[Photo\]](#): Gwen Benaway recently had vaginoplasty surgery, and is recovering at her apartment in Toronto.]



Anishinaabe and Métis poet Gwen Benaway always knew something about the body she was born into wasn't right.

"I really felt like the first 28 years of my life I was living a lie," said Benaway. "I was living in the wrong gender."

Still, she was hesitant about starting to transition from male to female.

"I was terrified of being that woman on the street that everyone stared at," she said. "Because I had seen other trans women and I saw the way they were looked [at] and I wasn't sure if I could live with that. So I thought that for 28 years and then one day just decided

living this way is worse than being the woman that everyone stares at."

Benaway decided to undergo sex reassignment surgery. She recently went in for vaginoplasty, a surgery which changed her male genitalia into female genitalia.

But before heading into surgery, Benaway had a few concerns.

"I'm worried about dying, which is rare but possible," she said. "I'm worried about complications, I'm worried it won't look good in the end, I'm worried that it won't work properly at the end, I'm worried about a lot."

Benaway's surgery was completed without complications, but she has several months of recovery time ahead of her. Despite the long recovery, Benaway is elated she went through with the surgery.

"I remember waking up in my hospital bed after surgery ... and realizing that that part of me was gone and changed, and feeling such a joy throughout my entire body," she said.

"It's very surreal to be in the new body — I'm happy, I love it, it feels like a weight's been lifted off me that I've carried my whole life."

Bringing culture into her transition

For Benaway, incorporating her Anishinaabe and Métis teachings into her transition was really important.

She recalls spending time with an elder, learning about the importance of birch bark, and she saw parallels between her transition and the careful task of removing birch bark from a tree.

"He talked a lot about the process of removing bark from a birch tree without killing it — how complicated it is and what an important skill it is to master," said Benaway.

"For some reason that image stuck with me around a transition, because you're peeling off layers that you've accumulated your whole life to sort of hide who you are, and as you strip away those layers, you have to somehow keep yourself alive.

"I like to think of my transition through my culture — through my worldview — and that image of peeling bark off a birch tree conjures the idea of what transitioning feels like."

Before going into surgery, Benaway says that at every stage of her transition she has felt a strong connection to her kookum — her grandmother.

"When I first told the world that I was a trans woman, I remember that day. It was so hard. I came home and I was sitting in my living room balling," said Benaway.

"I just had the strongest sense of my kookum ... that I'd ever had in my life. At every hard and

difficult moment of my transition, I've felt that presence again and again."

Now a few weeks out of her surgery, Benaway said that connection is what continues to help her in her recovery.

"I think my kookum and my ancestors took really good care of me, I've healed really well and I've healed really fast, and I'm surprised by how much love and support I've had around me," she said.

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/the-power-of-transformation-1.4508882/peeling-bark-off-a-birch-tree-indigenous-teaching-helps-gwen-benaway-through-her-sex-reassignment-surgery-1.4515495>