

# Trash fish: Navigating the shoals of gender, species, and meaning in an oppressive world

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My pronouns are they/them and she/her.

I live and work on the unceded land of the Kaurna people.

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## Introduction

In one of the queer-affirming spiritual communities to which I belong, we begin every meeting with an ice-breaker. For those who choose to participate, the ice-breaker involves expressing one's mood or emotional state with metaphor. The metaphor need not make sense to others, but it is a creative and low-stakes invitation to get in touch with one's body and mind in the moment.

Right now, I am a golden sunset. For some reason, the orange glow of the evening sky often fills me with a sense of deep longing. This might be because sunset, as a time of day situated between the two extremes of day and night, signals the end of one thing and the beginning of something else.

Likewise, I hold many identities that are situated between two poles.

I am a transgender woman and I am non-binary, though I am frequently perceived by others as masculine and I receive the privileges that this erroneous impression entails. I am autistic, and I succeed at masking this identity unintentionally but so successfully that it is rarely noticed by others. I am able-bodied—a temporary state of affairs (1)—though I live with mental illness.

I am a Christian and a Buddhist. I feel at home in neither community, and I don't feel comfortable expressing either identity in my social and professional circles. I pray and I meditate every day, despite my restless mind.

I am alive for a comically brief moment in a frighteningly vast universe. I am a lover of silence and emptiness, though my day job requires me to fill documents with words. I am living in a constant state of unbearable grief and a constant state of unparalleled joy. I am a human, though I am most at home in the company of my dogs. I am an athlete, though I came to sport comparatively late.

Professionally, I am a policy analyst and advocate for the rights and welfare of non-human animals. Compared to mainstream society, this concern for the lives of non-humans makes me an extreme political radical. Compared to my professional community, my positions and my goals are almost intolerably incremental—in the words of the great statesman T. G. Masaryk, I paint “practical utopias” (2). I am young, yet I occupy a position of comparative authority within the animal advocacy community.

I am a white Australian, which is to say that I am a European descendant living on Aboriginal land under a Commonwealth whose legitimacy remains questioned (3,4). For a reason that remains entirely mysterious to me, I speak with an English accent and so am often read as British. I am firmly middle class, which makes me average by Australian standards and dripping with wealth by global standards.

One of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of oppression is the ability to make us feel like we’re the only ones, like we’re different and therefore crazy. The feeling of being alone hides from us the very fact that oppressive systems pervade all of our lives, like the nitrogen gas that makes up 78% of the air around us yet usually goes unnoticed.

I wrote this book so people like me—trans people, political reformers, animal lovers, autistic people, people living with depression and with anxiety, marginalised people and people living at the margins, people with big hearts who are made to feel small—might see themselves reflected in these pages.

## **What this collection is**

This short collection contains twelve essays. Together, these essays are a snapshot of my thoughts at the current moment in time—that is, early 2025. Tomorrow, I might think differently, but this is what I’m feeling and thinking now.

This book only represents my perspective. When it comes to topics such as gender identity and expression and neurodivergence, everybody’s experience is different. I can only speak for myself, and I am not speaking for the broader transgender communities or autistic communities. Other members of these communities likely have different perspectives to the one that you will encounter in this book.

This book does not introduce the reader to basic concepts relating to the topics that I discuss, such as the definition of gender identity or a systematic examination of animal rights and welfare. There are plenty of other books that serve this purpose.

Rather, I’m giving myself permission to record and share these thoughts without needing to ensure that everything I write is beyond reproach. As a research scientist, my training has impressed upon me the idea that one cannot say “water is wet” without giving a systematic review of the concept of “water” and the definition of “wet” through history! I have not done so here. If I were to give

such a thorough provenance for topics so many central to human existence—from sexuality to suffering, and from religion to alienation—this book would have to be delivered using a tow truck. So, it should go without saying that all of these concepts have been discussed at length in other places; what follows is a single data point, not a systematic summary of all data points that exist on every topic that I mention.

I do, however, list some further resources at the end of each essay for further exploration on the relevant topic. Also, despite my best efforts, specific sources that I reference within each essay are listed at the end of the book.

## **Content warnings**

**This book is written for a mature audience.**

These essays contain a lot of heavy topics, including:

- Gender dysphoria, transphobia and the fear of genocide
- Animal abuse
- The death of loved ones
- Sex and drugs (but not rock and roll)
- Religion (including both supportive and critical attitudes)
- Suicide and suicidal ideation
- Sexual abuse and rape
- Suffocation, torture, and murder

It is commonly said Zen is a life-or-death struggle (5). Grappling with these topics—sex and genocide, lost childhoods and the agony of innocent beings—challenging, but for me, this is the whole point of what it means to live and to participate in the world.

That said, please be mindful when consuming these thoughts of mine. Reading this book might be constructive for you, but it might not be what you need right now.

## 1. Cloud of smoke: The fear of trans persecution

I have a recurring nightmare. In these dreams, the details vary, but I'm trapped by an all-powerful force in a reality I don't understand. One night, I dreamt that I was trapped in an old mansion with somebody who could manipulate the laws of physics to keep me perpetually trapped. Another time, I dreamt that I was stuck in Heathrow Airport with no way to get out.

Not long ago, I met up with another trans woman from a dating app. After we had sex, I was lying in her bed while she vaped cannabis. We watched the clouds of vapour and smoke rise towards the ceiling, and I thought that these clouds were quite beautiful.

I don't know how she and I got onto the topic of oppression against trans people. Perhaps this is a topic that is always under the surface when trans people come together. She told me that it would be only 10 or 15 years before the trans community in Australia experiences extreme violence and even genocide.

I don't know if I agree with this prediction or not. I guess I'm a bit more optimistic, at least for those of us who have the good fortune to live in a mostly safe and democratically responsive country like Australia.

I find that looking at data tends to give me a more optimistic read of the situation than reacting to the latest headline or internet controversy. For example, the number of countries where transgender people have access to essential healthcare and legal services has increased significantly, though of course this progress has still only touched a minority of countries (6). Recently, my sister and I conducted an analysis of user interactions with transgender literature on the website Goodreads. The results of this study indicated that users were several hundred times more likely to engage with positive, supportive books about transgender people than they were with negative or critical books (7).

Despite positive signs like these, it only takes a cursory glance at any history book to realise how quickly societies can descend into extreme violence. Germany in the 1930s was, in many ways, a pretty progressive place to live (8). While we can debate the likelihood of a prediction like this, the fact is that many trans people right now, even in comparatively privileged countries like Australia, are living with this uncertainty and fear.

The classic 1957 novel *On the Beach* depicts the lives of a group of people living in Melbourne during the aftermath of a nuclear war. There is an enormous cloud of radioactive material spreading from the equator towards the poles. Nobody can survive this cloud. Town-by-town, all life is simply destroyed, progressing in a steady southward direction. It's inevitable, and Melbourne is one of the very few towns left. The characters are in radio contact with the handful of more southern cities, Christchurch and Hobart, and those cities also begin to see signs of radiation poisoning during the novel. The novel depicts how different people respond to living in a situation like this: a secretary takes a class in typing; a couple continues caring for their garden; a soldier continues simply following his

orders; a scientist buys a sports car and enters a race (which itself kills many of its participants!).

## Is genocide in our future?

Every year, we read the tragic news that more trans and non-binary people—usually children—have been violently killed. There are websites dedicated to tracking and analysing the death toll, such as the Trans Murder Monitoring project (<https://tgeu.org/trans-murder-monitoring/>).

I can list the names of trans and non-binary murder victims as readily as I can the rosters of my favourite soccer teams. These events simply break our hearts. It's unbearable.

The fact that many trans people share the belief that genocide is in our future is revealing about our day-to-day experience. This insight into our inner minds is enlightening for its own sake, whether we agree or disagree about the empirical prediction that the trans community is likely to encounter genocide in the future.

I've used the metaphor of nuclear winter. In *On the Beach*, the nuclear winter is seen as inevitable and all-encompassing; there is a cloud of deadly radiation slowly spreading, and all life will eventually succumb. There is no escape.

However, this is not an accurate depiction of the actual science of nuclear warfare and radiation. Firstly, all-out nuclear war is not a likely outcome in the 21st century. The American political scientist Vipin Narang convincingly demonstrates that this picture of “inevitable doom” is implicitly based on the experience of superpower conflict during the Cold War (9). Mutually assured destruction may have been scientists' best guess in the 1950s, when literature like *On the Beach* was written and when the public's perception of nuclear warfare was formed, but it does not accurately depict the consequences of a nuclear war in the 21st century. There is general agreement that the threat of all-out nuclear war has decreased, even as the probability that nuclear weapons will be used in a more limited capacity has increased (10). Moreover, conventional weapons are now comparable in power to nuclear weapons, which should make us question any inherent distinction between the two (10). Secondly, even if a nuclear bomb is detonated nearby, there are many ways that well-educated individuals can increase their own (and their communities') chances of survival (11).

I use this example because it illustrates an important point: a risk that seems frightening and all-encompassing does not necessarily mean that we are all doomed. A fear like this may be worth taking seriously; in many cases, we can take reasonable steps both in our own lives and in government policy to look after ourselves and those around us.

## How can we respond to violence?

During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and his community worked tirelessly—even in the face of incomprehensible violence and devastation—to protect those around them. In a journal entry dated 20 March 1964, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote (12): “[...] even though the electricity has been shut off, the moon still shines in my window.”

There is beauty in reading that passage literally: if we keep our needs minimal and attachments few, we can meet challenging times—including a war of incomprehensible devastation—with strength and resilience.

There is also a deeper reading. The moon is used in many Buddhist writers as one metaphor for enlightenment. The 13th century master Dōgen writes that enlightenment is like the moon. The moon cannot get wet, and the water does not hinder the moon (13).

It is not until the electricity is shut off that the moon shines through the window. In other words, it is being in the presence of those who suffer, and working to serve them effectively with a sound understanding of the situation, that does the enlightening.

In a later journal entry (12 July 1965), Thich Nhat Hanh echoes this view (12): “Buddhas are to be found in places of suffering.” I’m reminded of the passage in the introduction to the translation of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* by the Padmakara Translation Group, which describes the monk Shantideva as somebody willing to confront suffering head-on and to be present with those who are suffering (14).

Under this reading, we cannot become enlightened until we are in the presence of extreme pain and suffering.

Okay, that’s all well and good for violence against other people in my community. But how can I respond to violence against myself?

From Christianity, we have the Sermon on the Mount: “I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (Matthew 5:38-42 NRSV)

There are parallels in the Buddhist tradition. In the *Majjhima Nikaya* from the Pāli canon, we have the Discourse on the Saw. Here, the Buddha concludes by telling his disciples that even if they were torn limb-from-limb by bandits wielding a saw, then the correct response is to have compassion and love towards the bandits. The Buddha, like Jesus, frequently spoke in this type of hyperbolic imagery!

Turning the other cheek is not about accepting oppression or resigning yourself to a beating. The scholar Amy-Jill Levine offers an interpretation (15). Jesus was

part of the first-century Jewish community living under the Roman Empire—an oppressed people by any measure. The Jewish community would experience violence and humiliation on a routine basis. The community faced a dilemma: to resign themselves to oppression would not offer a way out, but to fight back would invite swift and brutal retribution by the authorities. Passively accepting a beating would result in lost personal dignity; fighting back against the powerful oppressor would result in swift and brutal reprisal. By offering the other cheek to be slapped, the victim displays agency and, by doing so, shames the oppressor.

Trans readers of this book might have difficulty with the suggestion that Christianity could offer some value on this topic, especially as queer folk are frequently excluded from religious communities and religion (or what passes for religion) is used as an excuse to harm queer people. I think this is a completely valid view, and I discuss this point in a later essay in this book (see essay “Reclaiming Faith”). But this view of Jesus as a member of an oppressed community also gives us the symbol of Jesus as an ethnic minority whose death was, essentially, an act of judicial lynching. Robert E. Shore-Goss refers to the crucifixion as a “lynch mob” (16). The events leading up to the crucifixion, in which Jesus is mocked, beaten and humiliated, make for difficult reading even 2,000 years after the events. The parallels with the lives of trans people today should be self-evident.

Right now, I’m not subject to violent oppression. In the future, this might or might not happen to me. I don’t know. But right now, it is not happening to me. I have privilege (especially as a white, wealthy, academically qualified person who is often though incorrectly read as masculine) that I can use to protect myself and others. This might be taken away tomorrow—but today, this privilege puts me in a position of power.

One need not be in a position of weakness for Jesus’s teaching on turning the other cheek to have value. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we see Atticus Finch standing quietly while Bob Ewell spits on him and threatens to kill him. Atticus’s only response is to take out his handkerchief and wipe his face. Later, Atticus explains to Jem that if taking a beating from Bob Ewell saves Ewell’s daughter Mayella from another beating, then that is certainly a worthy sacrifice.

In the situation of the Sermon on the Mount as interpreted by Levine, you have somebody in a position of weakness (i.e. a member the first-century Jewish community living under Roman rule) taking a beating as a way to shame the oppressors. In the situation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you have somebody in a position of power (i.e. Atticus Finch, obviously a very privileged guy in the context of the novel) taking a beating as a way to shame himself.

However, in neither case is taking a beating an act of succumbing. In both cases the act is the same—refusing to fight back. The goal is the same—to raise up the person who is in a position of weakness (whether that person is being beaten or doing the beating), as a means to prevent further oppression and violence against the weak. And in both cases, the person doing the beating has a deep



understanding of the context of the situation; they have educated themselves and thought deeply about how they can navigate the situation in which they find themselves in order to overcome the oppression of others.

I don't know what the future holds for the trans community. I don't know if the cloud of smoke will kill us all; it might, or it might not. But this is not a given, and there are actions we can take now to educate ourselves and develop a deeper understanding of the situation to put ourselves in the best position to keep each other safe.

Further reading:

- Sarah McBride 2018, *Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss, and the Fight for Trans Equality*, Crown Archetype.

## 2. Trash fish: When living, breathing animals are treated as rubbish

In fisheries and aquaculture, there is a term: “trash fish”. This refers to fish who are deemed to have little economic value. This term is most common in industrial trawl fisheries. Trawlers usually target specific types of fish with high economic value. But trawls are non-selective, and they end up catching other creatures who live in the ocean. Sometimes, over half of the weight of the creatures captured by a trawl might be “trash fish”.

In a recent commentary on Minnesota’s governance and regulations around wild fish, the author writes<sup>1</sup> (19): “[...] fish tournament advertisements routinely stated, ‘Fish disposal is provided.’ Note the use of the word ‘disposal,’ perpetuating the idea that these native fish are trash, without value or use.”

I find the term “trash fish”, which is an industry term, so jarring. It’s a similar feeling to when I read scientific papers that discuss the best mix of gases with which to slaughter farmed pigs or farmed chickens. In these cases, it is clear that something is wrong with the way that humans are acting towards these sentient beings.

If you watch a video of aquaculture harvest (that is, the harvest of fish who are farmed rather than wild-caught), you will feel what I mean. These are difficult and intensive working conditions for the employees of the fish farm—we might have a small group of people harvesting hundreds of kilograms of fish at a time. An illustrative process might involve the farm crowding the fish together using a net, then carrying the fish in buckets (which may or may not contain water) to be weighed and slaughtered. “Slaughtered” is a generous term. The care used to carry the fish is appropriate for hauling rocks, not for interacting with sentient creatures.

In many cases, it can be tricky to figure out what the actual cause of death for the fish is. Answering this question occupies a great deal of time in my day job (20). Fish might die, in agony, from the suffocation caused by their removal from the water. Or they might die, in agony, from being crushed under the weight of other fish. Some fish fall onto the gravel or dirt (for outdoor ponds) or the factory floor (for indoor aquaculture systems) and suffocate to death there. I can’t imagine what that feeling would be like—their gills would be filled with grit and dust and gravel, and they would simply lie there and suffocate to death.

Some nights, I can’t sleep because my mind is filled with images of the way that humans mistreat these innocent and beautiful creatures. I’m not the only one who experiences these symptoms, either; one colleague of mine experienced serious problems feeling his emotions and interacting with his friends due to

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<sup>1</sup>Winter appears to be writing from a conservation perspective, which explains their primary concern with native fish. I think this focus on nativeness is a shame and that the distinction between native and non-native organisms lacks validity. Some sources to explore the “nativeness” debate are the essay by Chew and Hamilton (17) and the book by Pearce (18).

the suffering that he witnessed at work. This isn't even what you'd think of as "animal abuse"; I'm talking about routine industrial production methods. There are only a handful of countries that extend any legal protections to fish, and the rare protections that exist are rudimentary at best. What happens on fish farms and in wild-capture fisheries is nothing short of horrific.

What the fuck?

To paraphrase a poem by the Chinese nun Daoyuan (Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasty, 1600-1750), this is brings heartbreak and dark red tears<sup>2</sup> (21).

Why are we allowing this torture and slaughter against innocent sentient creatures to be carried out in our name?

## Non-succumbing

These fish bring me close to God in a way that I cannot describe. Recall the interpretation of Jesus as a member of the Jewish community, an ethnic minority, living under Roman rule (see essay "Cloud of Smoke"). In Jesus, we have a being who was nailed to a tree by the Roman political and economic system. In fish, we have beings who suffocate to death, crushed under fish or forgotten in the dirt, by the industrialised 21st-century political and economic system.

This suffering cannot be part of some larger plan. There is agony, there is extreme suffering, and even positive consequences cannot begin to compensate for how horrific and unjust this suffering is.

The biblical book of Job has this moving passage (6:8-10, NJPS 1985):

Would that my request were granted, That God gave me what I wished for;

Would that God consented to crush me, Loosed His hand and cut me off.

Then this would be my consolation, As I writhed in unsparing pains: That I did not suppress my words against the Holy One.

The rabbi Harold Kushner gives a commentary on the book of Job, titled *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*. I think this is a beautiful commentary—among other things, it explains how a genuine relationship with God is not simply accepting what happens. Rather, it can be an act of faith to challenge God and ask what the hell is going on. Kushner's son died at age 14, which appears to inform much of Kushner's theology. (I think this is a sound indication of whether somebody's spiritual and religious teachings are worth listening to—Kushner has walked the walk.)

This is why N. J. Andrews calls the book of Job a "text of protest" (22). Regardless of what we think about the existence of God or the existence of some

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<sup>2</sup>Translation my own.

ultimate plan, it is obvious that the current state of affairs simply is not good enough.

I would give my life, in a heartbeat, to stop a single fish from dying in agony, their gills caked with grit and mud on the factory floor.

But I cannot. Why am I here, living peacefully in my safe and air-conditioned house, while those beautiful creatures are being tortured and suffocating on gravel and air in a factory where they do not belong?

This is my answer: there is no deeper explanation. There is no redemption. There is no reason for this extreme torture and suffering to exist. The question “What the fuck?” expresses the heart of the matter.

So, my practice has been non-succumbing. Non-succumbing is the mission of a lifetime. It would be easier to give my life in some heroic sacrifice, but that won’t solve the problem of the torture and murder of sentient creatures. It is more challenging to take the time to educate myself about this problem and to equip myself with the skills necessary to, if not solve the problem, then at least make a dent.

This is why I work full-time as a researcher and policy analyst in fish welfare. It is *hard work*; some days, I can’t bear witnessing the suffering, and I need to step away from work. But if I succeed in non-succumbing—if I spend my career working both hard and skilfully on this problem—then I will have done everything in my power to help society bring an end to this abhorrent treatment of our fellow creatures.

As a result of my efforts, a small number of these creatures, my friends, might avoid the fate of being bred, tortured, and killed. The number of these beautiful creatures being killed every year might decrease, due to the efforts of me and my colleagues, by maybe 0.00001%. The 99.99999% of these beautiful creatures who are not directly affected by the policy advocacy from me and my colleagues are still tortured and killed. There is no way to demolish the industry with a single, well-timed blow. But I have to keep working, so eventually—in decades or, more likely, centuries—we might be able to dismantle the industry, plank by plank.

This is also why Christmas does not feel accessible to me. The main tradition that my family has always associated with Christmas is eating fish. This actually began as purchasing and taking home a live fish, a practice that is still very common—though increasingly criticised—today in Central Europe. Mercifully, the fish at my family dinners are not purchased live.

However, every Christmas family dinner has a main course of barbecued fish. It is unbearable to spend my days fighting hard to stop these beautiful creatures from being tortured and killed and then, in the name of celebration and family, to see a fish lying dead on a plate staring up at me with its glassy eye. It breaks my heart not to see my human relatives for Christmas, but it would break my heart even more to attend. I was taught from a young age that these fish, my

friends, have to be killed otherwise everyone in the room will miss out on thirty minutes of pleasure.

In fact, even at mundane and ostensibly non-political gatherings, one is frequently reminded not to rock the boat. I once attended a lunch hosted by the family of a friend of mine. The hosts did an excellent job of catering to my vegan diet. However, when the topic of veganism came up—as, I’ve learned, it always does at meals like these—I was told: “I don’t mind vegans, just as long as you aren’t one of those political vegans.” When I asked what a “political vegan” was, the speaker replied, “Oh, you know, one of those angry lesbian feminists.” Since this conversation, I’ve secured a job as a professional policy analyst in the animal advocacy movement, run for elected office on an animal advocacy platform, and come out as a transgender woman. I wonder how this person would respond, now that I’m both a political vegan and a lesbian feminist!

In 1842, the German writer Otto Ludwig wrote (23):

Das Höchste, wozu er sich erheben konnte, war, für etwas rühmlich zu sterben; jetzt erhebt er sich zu dem Größern, für etwas ruhmlos zu leben.

A rough translation into English might be:

The highest thing to which he could rise was to die gloriously for something; now, he rises to the greater thing, to live humbly for something.

This quote was also paraphrased by J. D. Salinger in the climax of *The Catcher in the Rye* which is, of course, a book about a young adult’s struggle to accept and fit into a baffling modern society.

The best we can do is to stand up and help, to tirelessly—but steadily and with a deep understanding of the context of the situation—work to reduce as much suffering in the world as we possibly can.

Further reading:

- Jonathan Balcombe 2016, *What a Fish Knows: The Inner Lives of Our Underwater Cousins*, Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- J. Feliz Brueck & Z. McNeill 2020, *Queer + Trans Voices: Achieving Liberation Through Consistent Anti-Oppression*, Sanctuary Publishers.
- The Animal Advocacy Careers website at <https://animaladvocacycareers.org>

### 3. Meeting my new body

I've been on feminising hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for over a year now. For me, feminising HRT consists of two medications. One medication is estradiol, which I take in the form of small sachets (currently, three 1-gram sachets containing 0.1% estradiol) that I rub into my thighs each morning. I once took estradiol via patches instead, which was much more convenient, but supply shortages have meant that many people are struggling to obtain a steady supply of patches. The other medication is spironolactone (currently, one and a half pills each containing 100 milligrams of spironolactone). The estradiol is the feminising hormone, which fulfils the same feminising function in my body as estrogen does in people whose body naturally produces estrogen. The spironolactone is a testosterone blocker, which suppresses the testosterone that my body naturally produces.

I'm grateful for being able to access feminising hormone replacement therapy. I'm grateful for the many people who, for no reward, work to ensure that everyone who needs HRT has access to it—I've seen this tireless work in endocrinologists taking video appointments after hours and in therapists working, outside of their normal hours, to transform health policies and systems of health government. We have allies in the transgender community and the cisgender community, and I've learned that these are not always the people I think. I think of the widespread boycotting by corporations, conventions, and governments against North Carolina after the passage of the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (24)—a piece of legislation that is, thankfully, now repealed. Still, I'm impatient with the progress. There are people all over the world, of all ages, who would benefit from HRT and other forms of affirming care but are stopped from accessing it.

Part of the reason, though certainly not the whole reason, is that health systems are frequently risk-averse. When faced with a child who would like to be prescribed HRT, why do we agonise over the risks of HRT but ignore the risks of *not* prescribing this child with HRT? Consider a young girl who was presumed male at birth. Why do we consider the risks of prescribing this child estrogen and a testosterone blocker, when allowing that child to proceed with a testosterone-fuelled puberty, against their consent, would also expose that child a variety of emotional risks (e.g. suicidal ideation) and physical risks (e.g. prostate cancer)? These debates are centred on an implicit status quo bias that is, in fact, transphobia.

We have a long way to go. I am an unapologetic estrogen enjoyer, but not all potential estrogen enjoyers and testosterone connoisseurs have the freedom and privilege to be proud and unapologetic. Of course, not every trans or gender non-conforming person wants HRT or feels that HRT is important for them. But the people who *do* feel this way should have the right to make this decision about their own body.

## Gender euphoria

I *love* what HRT does to my body. I have been feeling *so much better*. Life as a whole has become so much easier.

My butt is bigger. My thighs are thicker. My chest has grown. My skin is softer. My face looks totally different.

It's amazing how many aspects of my behaviour and how many emotional challenges have been completely resolved by HRT. Before HRT, seeing a photo of myself would fill me with a deep discomfort. Now, I'm very comfortable posing and seeing photos of myself.

I used to feel dirty after having sex. I would have this deep-seated sense of discomfort, like something was wrong with me. This happened regardless of whether I was having sex with a woman or a man. I think the expectation that I would fulfil a male role exacerbated this struggle; I would dissociate like crazy. Sex was something that I needed to talk myself into. As you can imagine, this caused a lot of conflict in my romantic relationships!

For a period of time, before I discovered that I am transgender, the best explanation that I could think of was that I was asexual. During my PhD days, I wrote a queer short story about a romance between two asexual academics. This short romance, told entirely in the postscript section of an email chain, even won a local writing competition. While I no longer identify as asexual, the validation and support offered by this community will always stay with me.

Today, after coming out as transgender and having been on HRT for a couple of years, sex just feels good and even uncomplicated. It feels good to be in my body and to engage with the physical sensations that my body now brings me. It also helps that my sexual partners now see me for who I am: non-binary and transfeminine. And, of course, arousal feels very different! Arousal and orgasms fuelled by estrogen feel very different to those fuelled by testosterone. For me, arousal brings an intense emotional and vulnerable aspect that I had not experienced before HRT. Many trans women refer to the feeling of estrogen-fuelled arousal as "melly butterflies", which expresses it well.

For the life of me, I can't remember where I read this quote, but it captures something important and honest: "I like girls. I like their boobs, their skin, their hair." This feeling, for me, is not quite sexual attraction. In fact, I find myself attracted to people of all genders and to people with all sorts of characteristics. I am physically attracted to soft chests and hard chests, slender arms and strong arms. But girls *glow*. When I think about boys in this way, despite the fact that I am also physically attracted to boys, I feel as though my brain is wrapped in sandpaper. It feels wrong. I had to live in that sandpaper for my first 25 years.

## Body fat and disordered eating

Sometimes, when I see women whose bodies look the way I'd like my body to look, I feel weird. This can be quite debilitating. Sometimes, I feel like I want to shoot myself in the head. As I have been growing into my new, estrogen-fuelled body and expressing my own femininity in both non-sexual and sexual ways, this feeling has been occurring less frequently over time.

I think this envy of other women's bodies is exacerbated by the very specific beauty standards that, to this day, remain embedded in the popular imagination as what a woman ought to look like: a skinny, moderately athletic white woman. I'm exposed to this image frequently through my enjoyment of professional soccer on TV and even my own participation of recreational soccer (see essay "Soccer and Womanhood").

This standard is unattainable for many cis women, and it's likewise unattainable for many trans women. For me, this standard interacts with my status as a transgender individual in a few different ways. I'm tall (6 feet 1 inch or 185 cm); women are not supposed to be tall. I'm not skinny; women are supposed to be skinny.

The relationship between energy intake, food, weight gain, and this narrow social standard has been particularly tricky for me to navigate. For the first few years of HRT, the body essentially goes through puberty (as though I didn't have enough fun the first time). The many rapid physical changes requires a lot of fuel. I need to eat lots. In fact, I frequently underestimate how much I need to eat. This, in part, can be attributed to the very narrow dietary guidelines that are currently recommended even by government and health organisations. These guidelines, even setting aside momentarily the question of whether dietary guidelines ought to exist in the first place, do not take into account the specific needs of trans people. At the same time, I feel like I need to eat less if I am going to fit into the social mould of a skinny white woman.

Due to HRT, some parts of my body are getting bigger and others are getting smaller. In many cases, I perceive this as enjoyable and desirable; I *want* my butt and my boobs to get bigger! The equation is simple: curves = adipose tissue.

However, for the parts of my body that happen to get bigger, this leads to specific physical signals noticed by the brain. My chest is growing, and this causes my shirt to feel tighter. Since my body composition was relatively steady between my young adulthood and my first foray into HRT, new physical sensations trigger my brain's subconscious belief: "Ahh help, I'm gaining weight, and this is bad!"

For these reasons, I have been struggling with disordered eating. I experience frequent symptoms like light-headedness, nausea, terrible sleeps, feeling cold, and so on. It recently dawned on me that these are suggestive of insufficient energy intake. The nausea in particular is the most difficult part; in most cases, the idea of *food* makes me feel nauseated, so it's not simply a matter of eating



more food. I have been working with a trans-affirming dietitian about this, and we are beginning to find ways to overcome these problems.

It has also helped to accept that I, like teenagers undergoing a natural puberty, need to buy new clothes every six or eight weeks! I do not need to expect myself to fit into the same clothes that I have always fit into; given how quickly and drastically my body is changing due to HRT, this would be an incoherent expectation.

Moreover, it has surprised me to learn that an implicit assumption underlying many of these feelings—that being overweight is bad for one’s health—does not appear to be supported by the evidence. Amy Erdman Farrell (25) expresses this by writing that ideas of beauty and fatness “masquerade as pure aesthetic judgments or as health values when they actually function fundamentally as tools in the oppressive discourse of race and gender science.”

As it happens, the scientific evidence for any health effects (whether positive or negative) of overweight seems surprisingly sparse, heterogeneous, and not particularly clinically meaningful (26). Doctors systematically overstate both the health effects of overweight and the strength of the empirical evidence supporting these effects (27). Even if negative health effects of overweight were statistically demonstrated—which they, so far, have not been—this would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that losing weight would reverse this negative health effects. This is a further assumption that would also require rigorous statistical testing.

In particular, being transgender and on HRT, even the sparse and limited evidence that does exist does not include participants who are like me. There are a few studies on dietary science that involve trans people, but these tend to be the exception. This leads me to question whether the empirical evidence that exists is even representative of people with my particular biological and physiological characteristics.

When reading scientific studies about body fat, I can’t shake the feeling that the level of rigour used to support claims like “fat = bad” is quite poor compared to the level of rigour expected in other areas of science. In particular, there seems to be a double standard that assumes that “normal” and “underweight” BMI values are innocent until proven guilty, while “overweight” and “obese” BMI values are guilty until proven innocent. (The concept of BMI itself has, of course, been criticised in detail elsewhere.) That is to say, there seems to be a value judgement being made somewhere along the way, meaning that it’s hard to disentangle the empirical evidence from doctors’ and researchers’ pre-existing views on a topic. This, in turn, should shed serious doubt on the general public’s views on this topic, which are obviously highly politicised.

## Muscle and fatigue

Another effect of HRT that I am experiencing is a different set of physical abilities.

I have noticed very obvious decreases in strength, speed, and endurance when exercising. Before HRT, I would hop on the exercise bike for an hour or head out for an intense run, and this would be an energising start to the day. I would usually be about as fast as, or slightly faster than, my male friends. Now, 20 minutes on the exercise bike or a lower-intensity jog is enough to knock me out for the afternoon, and I certainly cannot keep up with my male friends!

This is related to fatigue and moodiness, which I frequently experience. My body is working hard, and I am careful to remind myself that my body and mind needs rest. I have developed a strong sense of empathy for what teenagers are going through!

Cis people, of course, are usually oblivious to these specific challenges. In some situations, this is an important factor in my personal safety; I don't always need or want people to know that I'm trans, as this can expose me to social and physical danger. But when I'm around people I love and trust, it can feel frustrating when cis people assume that my body functions in a similar way to theirs. Karl Deutsch wrote that power can bring the freedom to not have to learn (28).

## Patience and liberation

I think many trans readers will resonate with my impatience. I would like the physical changes from HRT to keep happening, and to happen faster.

How can I engage with my body, despite my impatience? Here are some practices that I have found to be constructive.

The first is to find different ways to express myself through my physical appearance. In particular, getting tattoos feels intensely liberating. Since trans people are often oppressed due to their physical appearance, the freedom to express control over one's appearance can be liberating. I have also had the good fortune to meet many queer and queer-affirming tattoo artists.

Here are some of my favourite tattoos.

1. Shrimp by Maury Decay (any pronouns; London, UK; maurydecay\_tattoos).
2. Astronaut and pigeon by Josh Darkly (they/them; Adelaide, Australia; joshdarkly).
3. Pride by Chiara (she/her; Adelaide, Australia; feelin.blue.tattoo).

Chiara is my most frequented artist. She has given me many wonderful tattoos. These are not pictured here, but Chiara has given me the chemical symbol



Figure 1: The author's tattoos. Clockwise from top-left: a greyscale tattoo depicting an astronaut sitting on a planet with a ring in a meditation posture on the author's back (Josh Darkly); a violet and electric blue watercolour tattoo with a line art shrimp on the author's shoulder (Maury Decay); a greyscale rock dove (pigeon) on the author's calf (Josh Darkly); the word "pride", coloured in rainbow colours, on the author's leg (Chiara).

for estradiol on my right arm and my hand tattoos. These make me feel particularly happy. My right hand also has a number of references, including “Sine intermissione orate” (“Pray without ceasing”, from the Latin Vulgate Bible); “Listen, listen” (a line from a Buddhist poem); a waveform showing the sound of a meditation bell; and, on and above my knuckles, the years of publication of three seminal books in the animal advocacy movement (Jeremy Bentham’s 1780 book *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Ruth Harrison’s 1964 book *Animal Machines*, and Peter Singer’s 1975 book *Animal Liberation*).

Beyond my physical appearance, I can also work to develop skills that are important to me. I can train to improve my running speed, my passing accuracy in soccer, or my endurance when cycling.

Caring for my body can take other forms—especially as exercise and tattoos can be tough on the body. Physical exertion is a part of many constructive experiences, but sometimes my body just needs to be carefully and gently looked after. The sound of rain. The scent of my dogs’ fur. The sensation of hot water on my skin. A nourishing meal of fried rice or a mug of hot chocolate. A heatpack. Booking in for a professional massage, or asking my partner for a not-professional but still deeply comforting massage. Lying in bed under the soft blanket and cuddling my dog.

## Sex, BDSM, and liberation

In my interactions with others, I often notice that I have a subconscious (and occasionally conscious) belief that I am not worthy of attention or effort. I bend over backwards to meet the needs of others; like the fight, flight or freeze responses, this is called a “fawn” response (29). I wonder if I default to the fawn response due to having been compelled, while growing up, to cater to neurotypical and cisnormative standards of behaviour. I have learned that I must not make a fuss. This belief may also have something to do with a few particular relationships during my early adolescence, where my needs were not met and I was made to feel unsafe.

This belief may be part of why I find BDSM sexual activity so liberating (30). For me, BDSM is a space where I can submit to the control of somebody else without the need to defend myself or control the situation. I identify as a bottom, one who submits and receives and obeys (in contrast to a top, who dominates and controls). But while BDSM practice can involve pushing me to my limits, this is always consensual and safe. Non-consensual and unsafe sex cannot be BDSM. Specific practices are always negotiated beforehand, and the top constantly expresses care and checks in to make sure I’m okay. As a top once expressed it to me, “It’s for me, but really it’s for you.”

The role that BDSM can play in safety, healing, and transforming trauma is explored in a study by Cascalheira et al (31). The study’s participants note how BDSM sex can empower practitioners and how, counter-intuitively, being at the

mercy of a respectful and experienced top is one way to reclaim control and agency<sup>3</sup>. Tellingly, one participant highlighted specific BDSM-related practices (safewords, aftercare, and so on) as the “cornerstone of consent”. In my anecdotal experience, it is unusual for people to use language like this to describe vanilla sexual experiences.

Of course, BDSM spaces have their share of microaggressions and outright abuse, as does any space with humans in it. But when done well, BDSM practices require a great amount of skill, education and expertise in both physical health and emotional regulation and well-being. When I experience BDSM practices at the hands of a skilled top, there is more consent and bodily autonomy than I experience even in non-sexual situations. These skills are usually not part of the repertoire of people who engage only in non-BDSM sex, despite the fact that they are valuable even in non-BDSM and non-sexual situations. In fact, I have felt safer being dominated by an experienced top than in non-BDSM sexual situations or even in non-sexual situations. I find this juxtaposition very funny. A massage therapist once told me, mindbogglingly, “You’re new to massages, so you don’t know what you like.” Contrast this with the top who, fucking me quite vigorously for much of the morning, would frequently check in to ask if I’m okay, if I need to slow down or take a break or try something different, or even just have a glass of water.

Trans and queer bodies are, so frequently, the site of violence and suffering and oppression. Things *do* get better. My body is in fact changing, and health legislation might in fact be reformed. In the mean time, I can offer my body gentle love and care. Rather than succumb to impatience and grief, I can be aware and grateful for the queer and non-queer allies in my life and for their work as we hold space for each other.

Further reading:

- Amy Erdman Farrell (ed) 2023, *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies*, Routledge, freely available online.
- Eleanor Clark 2023, *Body Neutrality: Finding Acceptance and Liberation in a Body-Focused Culture*, Routledge.
- Chris William Martin 2020, *The Social Semiotics of Tattoos: Skin and Self*, Bloomsbury.
- Lucie Fielding 2021, *Trans sex: Clinical approaches to trans sexualities and erotic embodiments*, Routledge. (Especially see the book section *Using BDSM as Trans Embodiment* by Jaxx Alutalica.)

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<sup>3</sup>I find it immensely interesting that some theologians have drawn parallels, both positive and negative, between BDSM and themes in Christianity and monasticism such as physical pain and surrendering oneself completely to a higher power (32). Also see the essays in the present book, “Rediscovering faith” and “Solitude, silence, and liberation”.

## 4. Internalised transphobia

My journey towards accepting myself as non-binary and transfeminine has involved gradually unpeeling the layers of internalised transphobia and cisnormativity that are imposed on all of us by our society and culture.

Early in 2024, I was chatting with another trans woman on a dating app. We were talking about physical attraction. I was naturally apprehensive about this aspect of dating, since it was the first time I had participated in dating and casual sex since coming out as transgender. There were (and, today, there still are) many parts of my body around which I feel uncomfortable and dysphoric.

The woman on the dating app told me: “In terms of attraction, I’m usually 50/50 with trans girls.” It wasn’t until after we had met up and had sex that the transphobia hidden in this comment became clear to me. I realised, with hindsight, that this comment had put me on the back foot and made me feel subtly uncomfortable in my body. This was made more hurtful by the fact that, during the sex, I was put in some quite vulnerable positions both physically and emotionally. The literal meaning of the comment isn’t the issue. I’ve heard much, much more vicious comments about trans people from genuinely transphobic people, including on dating apps. Moreover, “50/50” may very well be accurate; regardless of one’s sexual orientation, one is rarely attracted to a full 50% of any group of people. However, the comment expressed this trans woman’s internalised and subconscious transphobia. She was giving herself an out in case I wasn’t sufficiently feminine or did not sufficiently “pass” as femme.

Another example of internalised transphobia, which I have noticed in my own mind, is a subtle preference for being around cisgender women rather than trans women. For some reason, receiving social attention from cisgender women makes me feel validated in my gender identity in a way that being around other trans women does not. I think there a small part of me believes that if I don’t secure the acceptance and attention of cis women, then I’m not a true woman. Obviously, I do not consciously endorse this belief, but its existence in even a subtle form in my mind speaks to the transphobia that still exists inside me.

I suspect that internalised transphobia may sometimes be involved in discussions around “passing” (being recognised as one’s true gender by others), especially when cisgender people speak on this topic. The concept of “passing” has been the subject of much debate in trans circles. In fact, some trans people who “pass” express grief at no longer being easily recognised as queer and therefore feeling disconnected from the trans community. On one hand, it’s okay to want to be perceived in a certain way by others. Furthermore, “passing” as cisgender can also be an important aspect of physical safety that protects trans people from violence, especially in new and unfamiliar environments. On the other hand, and particularly when cisgender people make comments about trans people, “passing” can help to recreate harmful gender binaries and gendered expectations for how one ought to look in public.

Sarah McBride, the first openly trans person elected to the United States Congress, notes this latter phenomenon in her memoir (24). McBride took a selfie of herself in a North Carolina bathroom and posted the photo on social media to express her frustration at North Carolina's transphobic bill that barred trans people from using the public bathroom associated with their true gender. McBride's selfie went viral. There were many hurtful and overtly transphobic comments. But there were also lots of comments along the lines of "Of course you belong in a woman's bathroom; look at you!" The implication here is that trans people only belong in the bathroom associated with their true gender—and thus can only feel comfortable in public life—if they "pass" by recreating gendered standards of beauty. In fact, this emphasis on physical appearance reveals a subtle and subconscious oppression. Everyone should have the right to feel safe in all aspects of public life, and appearance should not come into it.

## **The stained cloth**

Many trans people have an experience where a supportive cis person has told them something like "I'm not transphobic." The above discussion should make it clear why statements like these are incorrect.

We all live in a society and culture that imposes upon us, from a very young age, cisnormative and transphobic messages. This is true for trans people, and it's true for cis people; it is true for people who oppose fundamental rights for trans people, and it is true for people who support those rights.

We can and should work to recognise the subtle, internalised transphobia in our worldview and transform these attitudes into acceptance and unconditional love. But to imagine that a person does not have any transphobia whatsoever is misguided.

In Buddhism, there is an analogy where our mental states are described as a stained cloth. A cloth that is totally stained simply looks black; you cannot see the stains. As you begin to clean the cloth, the cloth in fact becomes cleaner; however, as some stains are removed, other stains become more obvious against the otherwise clean fabric. As you begin to clean the cloth, you notice just how dirty it originally was, and the fact that there are still some stains remaining becomes very clear.

## **We are not the first**

A powerful way to overcome internalised transphobia is to engage with images and stories of a diverse array of trans people.

This can look like a number of things, such as:

- Joining online queer communities
- Reading novels or playing video games with healthy and accurate depictions of trans people

- Following trans musicians on social media
- Reading autobiographies written by trans people
- Learning about the history of the queer and trans pride movements

History is particularly powerful. Politicians know that framing a policy in terms of historical precedent is a compelling way to secure support. Likewise, understanding the history of trans and queer communities is a compelling way to feel less isolated and more accepted.

I recognised this in a recent conversation with my mother. Over a glass of wine, my mother was opening up about some aspects of her early adulthood that I had not previously been aware of. One of these involved a friend who was dating (in my mother’s words) “a crossdresser”. This was around the year 1990, before I was born.

This was a revelation for me. Coming out to my family had been astonishingly difficult. I felt that I was the first gender non-conforming person associated with my family and that the burden was on me to justify my own identity. I was surprised at how vulnerable and physically fatigued I felt in the hours immediately after coming out. But, it turns out, my mother had known a gender non-conforming person years before I was born! Suddenly, I felt less alone, and more importantly I felt less crazy for wanting to be myself and to be treated with respect.

In archaeology, few discoveries are as moving and resonant as fossilised or preserved human footprints. There are some astonishing examples of these human footprints, such as the footprints in modern-day Australia from 20,000 years ago (33) and the footprints in modern-day Tanzania from 3.6 million years ago (34). These are a concrete record from our ancestors, who walked and lived and loved and fought and died tens of thousands thousands or even millions of years before we were born. But only a vanishingly tiny fraction of humans from history leave physical traces like this; the physical conditions, including temperature, soil moisture, sun exposure, tides, and so on, all need to be just right. So, if we see a single track of preserved human footprints, we can know that this does not represent one person, but rather countless others who walked before us.

Further reading (non-fiction):

- Sarah McBride 2018, *Tomorrow will be different: Love, loss, and the fight for trans equality*, Crown Publishing Group.
- Kit Heyam 2022, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*, Seal Press.
- Susan Stryker 2008/2018, *Transgender History*, Seal Press.

Further reading (fiction):

- *Euphoria Kids* by Alison Evans (2020, Echo Publishing) (trans femme, trans masc, and non-binary central characters)



- *The Chromatic Fantasy* by H.A. (2023, Silver Sprocket) (trans masc main characters)
- *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki (2021, Tor Books) (trans femme main character)
- *Too Bright to See* by Kyle Lukoff (2021, Dial Books) (trans masc main character)

## 5. Soccer and womanhood

For the first 25 years of my life, I was staunchly anti-sport. The thing that changed my mind? A global pandemic, of course.

### The revelation

During my childhood, sport was presented as a loud, rough-and-tumble activity associated with sensory overload and physical discomfort. In retrospect, most of my siblings were successful athletes during high school, and I was encouraged to participate in extracurricular soccer activities. In fact, I recently found my certificate of participation from a children’s soccer training clinic—one of the skills listed on my certificate is heading the ball, which is certainly discouraged for children today! Despite this early participation, I quickly lost interest and cultivated an anti-sport attitude that I maintained during my adolescence and early adulthood.

My attitude changed in 2021. My partner has played soccer at the community level for her entire life. During the Tokyo Olympics, held in 2021, my partner asked if we could watch the Matildas (the Australian women’s national soccer team) compete in the Olympics soccer tournament. Having no interest in any sport, I figured that watching a 90-minute match of soccer would be a zero-stakes form of meditation where I could simply focus on my breathing!

I was, of course, quickly engrossed by the game. The first aspects of soccer that caught my attention were the overt feminist activism—the Matildas had recently secured a collective bargaining agreement that brought an increase in pay and better treatment, much-needed due to the disproportionate focus afforded to the Australian men’s team (35)—and the geopolitical scandals involving Russia and Belarus. Of course, it helped immensely that the soccer matches were being played in empty stadiums, so I did not experience the discomfort of having to watch and listen to large crowds; I could simply focus on enjoying the game and the commentary.

This was a revelation! Nobody had told me that soccer was an expression of womanhood and the fight for equal pay and geopolitics. Soon, my partner and I were following not only the Matildas, but several club leagues around the world.

It is unfortunate that in the culture of the men’s game, homophobia persists (36). Homophobic abuse is a frequent reality for queer players even in the women’s game, of course (37). However, in the women’s game, numerous professional players—including many of the world’s best—are openly queer and even in committed relationships with other professional players (38). Most broadcasts of professional games will have a progress pride flag somewhere on the pitch or in the stadium, and the NWSL games in the United States frequently feature trans pride flags.

## Soccer and gender euphoria

Naturally, this interest manifested as a desire within me to play in a soccer team myself. I hadn't touched a soccer ball since I was a young child.

It was obvious to me that I could not play in a men's team. The idea of being around men and being perceived as a man filled me with extreme discomfort, like the thought of peeling my skin from my bones.

I tried a couple of informal initiatives to begin with. I played two games of a mixed-gender five-a-side tournament with a few members of my partner's team. For some reason, I found that these games filled me with dread and anxiety. There was also a major difference in skill between our team and the other teams in the tournaments, and we lost by large margins.

I discovered a more relaxed atmosphere in the Bad Gurls community (39). This is an informal and grassroots group of soccer fans, mostly women and gender non-conforming people, who would meet up in the evenings to play pickup games in my local area. As it happens, I encountered this community when chatting with a friend of a friend during some ecology fieldwork.

Eventually, due to the experience and rudimentary skills I developed in these informal initiatives, I had built the confidence to formally join a club team. After my partner made some discreet enquiries about whether trans people were welcome in her soccer club—yes, they were—I was excited to join the club team. This team was another revelation; it was the first time in my life when I had been made to feel welcome in a primarily women's space. I was also glad to see that another member of the team identified as non-binary, and I learned over time that a number of other teams in our tournament had at least one trans player.

Playing on this team and being a part of this group of women and non-binary people is, for me, a source of wonderful gender euphoria. It feels good to be seen as the woman I am and to be accepted in this community of women and non-binary people. It feels good to engage with my body and to develop physical skills in this space; soccer makes me feel like my body is doing something meaningful and exerting strength rather than simply being something to look at, which is a feeling also as documented in a recent ethnographic study of women rugby players (40). Women rugby players often notice the strength and confidence developed on the rugby pitch translating to other areas of life (40); this has certainly been the case for me, and I have grown confident navigating the world in my body because of the strength and assertiveness I have developed on the soccer pitch. My team captain in particular has gone to great lengths to make me feel welcome and safe.

It helps that soccer is usually played in the winter and with a uniform that consists of a shirt, typically without a collar, and shorts and shin pads. If anything, the tight socks add to the comfort! For the same reason, I would probably feel quite comfortable playing basketball or even Australian rules

football, though the latter's appeal is somewhat tarnished by the fact that I was surrounded Australian rules football on all sides while growing up. Contrast soccer's physical comfort with the Australian religion, cricket; this sport involves standing around in the heat of the summer sun, wearing sunscreen, a collared shirt, and occasionally a helmet or bulky leg padding. Even thinking about this sensory overload makes me shiver with physical discomfort.

## Soccer and anxiety

Perhaps my biggest struggle with soccer remains anxiety. When playing soccer, my anxiety comes from three triggers.

One is gendered microaggressions. I have been misgendered on multiple occasions when playing and training. After one particularly physical game, in which I was cautioned with a yellow card by the referee, one spectator told me that I was a "brute" and parts of my play looked "silly". I believe that these comments came from social awkwardness on the part of the spectator rather than any malice, but these are the same terms frequently used to marginalise trans athletes and exclude trans women in particular from sport. I am the tallest player in the league, and I still feel significant discomfort around my voice; in soccer, it is frequently necessary to use one's height (e.g. to header the ball) and to use one's voice (e.g. to communicate rapidly and clearly with teammates). It is a challenging process to develop a voice that sounds pleasant and euphoric rather than unpleasant and dysphoric, and maintaining this euphoric voice is especially hard in a context that requires me to both exercise vigorously and to shout loudly.

A more hurtful instance was in a game when I kept tackling an opposing player off the ball (an entirely normal and legal part of the game). Compared to other players, my height and weight mean that I'm slower to chase down balls but more successful when making physical challenges. This opponent got very upset and had some choice words for me; she also refused to shake my hand after the game. My gut feeling, given the disgust and contempt in this player's face that I haven't seen anywhere else during soccer matches, is that there was some covert transphobia underlying this exchange. It's also possible that she was simply in a difficult emotional place and was taking this out on the soccer pitch, which certainly does happen!

Another source of anxiety is the competitive nature of the game. For me, this is not unique to soccer. I've played card games competitively since I was a young child. Especially during my young adulthood, I struggled with many difficult emotions even at very low-stakes and casual tournaments. I recall one evening during a tournament, with absolutely no stakes, and I felt the numb hands and blurred visions that signalled a panic attack.

Part of the issue may be conflict and people (both myself and others) behaving in rude and unhealthy ways. In both card games and soccer, I've seen people make unnecessarily hostile and hurtful choices. I've made a few of these choices myself;

of course, I try not to, but sometimes the heat of the moment wins out. Especially in soccer, I find myself reflexively thinking thoughts that, upon reflection, I certainly do not endorse. This is why I think the setting of competition does something to human psychology. If you took me and any opponent, whether from soccer or from card games, and put us in a doctor's waiting room or a conference networking hall, we'd probably get along very well. We would even have a shared hobby that we could bond over.

So, what is it about the setting of competitive games that causes conflict and even a violent attitude between people who would otherwise probably get along great?

I'm reminded of the famous psychology studies where researchers can trigger in-group/out-group dynamics just by arbitrarily assigning participants to "the red team" and "the blue team", even when the participants know that this assignment is entirely arbitrary (41)!

Currently, my best solution to this dilemma is to simply be mindful of the fact that competitive games and my mind interact in this unconstructive way—in short, to not be a dick. I am also working to cultivate the understanding that other people seem to have this issue too, and to use this as an opportunity to practice resolving conflict.

The third major source of anxiety is a challenge unique to trans and gender-expansive people. Most soccer grounds have women's bathrooms and men's bathrooms. I identify as a woman and, at least consciously, believe that I have every right to use the women's bathroom. I'm also quite confident that, were I to use the women's bathroom and encounter any criticism or transphobia, the more belligerent members of the soccer team would not hesitate to support me fiercely and loudly. Nevertheless, I feel a deep impostor syndrome. I simply do not feel comfortable or welcome, at this stage of my life, using the women's bathroom. A handful of soccer grounds have gender-neutral bathrooms, but these tend to be the most wealthy clubs only. This means that the bathrooms at most soccer grounds are simply not accessible to me. To adjust, I drink less fluids in the hours leading up to the game to avoid having to use the bathroom. This adds the physical sensation of thirst and dehydration, which contributes to my physical discomfort and anxiety.

A more nuanced emotional challenge I'm facing is a subtle but strange fear that the friends I've made on the soccer team are going to disappear. This feeling is most noticeable during nighttime games and towards the end of the season. I suspect it may be related to my generalised anxiety, though Branchu notes that when women rugby are unable to participate in the game for a period of time, they often feel like they are "slipping away from the team" (40).

## Debates on trans people in sport are poisonous

Currently, there are many people working to exclude trans people—trans women in particular—from sport. In some sports and some countries, these transphobic initiatives are even seeing success.

I don't want to give air time to these transphobic initiatives. But this is currently part of the social and political landscape of sport, and as a trans person playing on a women's soccer team, this poisonous discourse affects me personally.

There are a few pieces of information that help to place this toxic attitude into context.

Firstly, sport is an entirely arbitrary endeavour. The arbitrary and even ridiculous nature of sport—in the case of soccer, kicking a ball into a net while following a series of arbitrary constraints on one's physical movement and one's interaction with the ball—is part of what makes sport such an appealing and constructive endeavour. Gendered sport is doubly arbitrary. Obviously, if a society says “People with some characteristic A can play in one league, while people with some characteristic B can play in the other league”, then this will marginalise and exclude the many people who have both A and B, or neither A nor B, or who have A but are incorrectly perceived by society to have B. Not every sport divides its competitions along purely gendered lines; wrestling uses body weight categories, for instance. Even soccer doesn't entirely use gender, as most community leagues are divided into divisions according to the average skill level of a team.

Moreover, even professional sport is not the purely meritocratic “level playing field” as transphobic commentators frequently imply. Professional athletes tend to come from families with other professional athletes and from families who can provide the encouragement and material resources for a young athlete to develop their skills (42). In some sports, one important factor in whether an athlete succeeds in pursuing a competitive career is the month of the year in which that athlete was born (43).

Since sport and the categorisation of people into competitions are both entirely arbitrary and socially constructed, and since professional success strongly depends on an athlete's socioeconomic context, the the focus on “unnatural advantages” or “a level playing field” should be seen for the transphobic rhetoric that it is. A team of women soccer players is equally entitled to play in a women's soccer league and to enjoy their successes in that league, regardless of whether that team has zero trans players or eleven trans players.

Trans people in sport are subjected to double standards. To compete in even relatively progressive and accepting professional sport leagues, trans athletes are often required to undergo intrusive medical scrutiny such as regular blood tests to measure hormone levels. Hormone tests are conducted on the assumption that women must meet a particular arbitrary definition for what a woman's physiology should be like. Many trans women and many cis women do not fit

into this arbitrary definition. Moreover, many trans women have no interest in accessing hormone replacement therapy, either because it is not a meaningful part of their identity and/or because they cannot access hormones for social and economic reasons. Hormone testing thus excludes these trans women from competitive sport. The same level of scrutiny is not imposed upon cisgender athletes, even though not every cisgender athlete would meet the physiological criteria that trans people are required to meet.

That said, women athletes have often been subjected to intrusive “sex tests” throughout history (44). This unwanted scrutiny is most common when women succeed and perform well (40). There is an obvious parallel here with the transphobic articles that regularly appear, usually on the more sensationalist current affairs websites, whenever a soccer team with a trans woman or trans women actually succeeds in a tournament. Of course, when a team with only cisgender women wins a tournament, this is not worthy of note.

It is also informative to note how much of the rhetoric used to exclude trans women from sport today is identical to the rhetoric used to exclude women from sport historically. There are three examples of rhetoric that, implicitly or explicitly, underlie the poisonous debates on the inclusion of trans women in sport:

- Protecting the physical safety and morality of women. Today, where trans athletes have been excluded from sport, the physical safety of women (usually equated with the physical safety of cis women) is typically given as a justification (40). Historically, in England, the FA banned women from playing soccer on FA grounds for the astonishingly long 50 years between 1921 and 1971. On 5 December 1921, the FA Council released a statement announcing this ban that included the language: “[...] the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged” (45,46). In 1969, the French minister for sport stated (40): “rugby is inappropriate for girls or women for obvious psychological reasons. It is dangerous, both physically and morally.” Of course, especially in the case of the FA’s ban on women’s soccer, the authorities may have also felt threatened by the popular and financial success of the women’s game.
- Questioning the gender of athletes. Today, the gender and sex of trans women are questioned and subject to intense scrutiny. Historically, newspaper articles on women’s soccer would make comments like (47): “They run like men. They leap like men. They even kick like men.”
- Invasion rhetoric. Today, transphobic commentators refer to women’s sport as a “woman-only space” that requires protection from invaders. Historically, many news articles and even sport and government officials speaking on both soccer and other sports would use terms like “invade” to suggest that women were illegitimately occupying a space reserved for men [(48); Eudes2024-st].

This rhetoric is hurtful and oppressive, but it has nevertheless seeped into my

bones (see essay “Internalised Transphobia”). My soccer team has a women’s changing room that we use during practices. We play in a “senior” (adult) league, but the league is open to players of age 15 and over. There are two young teenagers in the other women’s team that belongs to my club. Since of the club’s two women’s teams train together, this means that I share a changing room with children. When I occupy this space, the rhetoric of the “sexual predator” plays through my mind; this is a transphobic slur that is used to exclude trans women in particular from public life. I experience this internalised transphobia despite the fact that our coaches—who, at least for last season, were adult men—are frequently coming in and out of the changing room to store gear and deliver team talks!

There are indeed sexual predators in soccer—people in positions of power in the women’s game who take advantage of this power dynamic to emotionally abuse, physically abuse, sexually abuse, and rape players (49,50). This abuse includes abuse targeted at children (49). This systemic issue is heartbreaking—especially in a community of people who mostly just want to kick a ball around a muddy pitch—and requires widespread and systematic action to address. For some reason, people who seek to exclude trans athletes tend not to show much concern about the insidious and sickening issue of bona fide sexual predators in the women’s game.

Compared to transgender women, it is less common for cisgender women to be dubbed sexual predators for being in women’s changing rooms (and especially to internalise this rhetoric), though the “sexual predator” rhetoric is indeed used to attack and devalue cisgender women athletes in some contexts (40).

Of course, as the abuse cases in particular show, misogynistic attitudes are not restricted to history. Even today, many football supporters echo this rhetoric (51). And it is important to remember that many women around the world, such as Afghan women, are still banned by their government or discouraged by their community from participating in sport (52).

### **“Unfair advantage” rhetoric is incoherent and harmful**

The rhetoric of an “unfair advantage” hinges on transphobic and incoherent assumptions. To suggest that trans women have some “unfair advantage”, one must first single out trans women for special scrutiny. We wouldn’t accuse women of being born in the first quartile of a particular age group of having an unfair advantage despite the fact that women born in January are more likely to play at a professional level in soccer, basketball, volleyball, handball, swimming, tennis, track and field, and ice-hockey (53). We wouldn’t accuse women who happen to be tall of having an unfair advantage in basketball despite the fact that taller women exhibit stronger personal performance (54) and tend to belong to higher-ranking teams in international tournaments (55)—an advantage, certainly, but by no means an “unfair” advantage in the sense of an advantage obtained through dishonesty. We wouldn’t accuse women born into an economically



privileged background of having an unfair advantage in basketball or soccer despite the fact that women with such a background are more likely to become professional players (56,57). Of course, we should take actions to reduce barriers to athletes from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. But we certainly wouldn't subject women to intrusive testing to ensure that they have lived in a particular socio-economic status for the past two years, or reduce their height to a "typical" level, or reduce their birth month to a "typical" month, before permitting them to compete in sport. Like gender identity, these are part of a woman's personal and socio-economic characteristics, which interact in complex ways to determine whether an athlete succeeds at pursuing a professional career.

Had Dutch national darts players quit the team because one of their teammates was born in the first quartile of the year rather than because the teammate was transgender (58), this protest would have been revealed for the self-serving action that it was. Had Rugby Football Union banned the participation of women born into privileged socio-economic classes rather than the participation of trans women (40), this action would have been revealed for the arbitrary and incoherent action that it was.

Moreover, a woman's transgender status may hinder a woman's athletic development. This was certainly the case in my own life; with the benefit of hindsight, I can recognise my rejection of sport during my adolescence as a stemming from the profound discomfort from being forced to play with boys rather than with girls or in mixed teams. The fact that I began playing soccer comparatively late in life, once I was more comfortable in my trans identity and as being part of a group of women, means that many of my technical skills—ball control, passing, tackling, on-field communication, and so on—are severely underdeveloped compared to my cisgender teammates of a similar age. For some reason, these additional barriers faced by trans athletes are rarely considered in the harmful discourse on whether trans athletes should be "allowed" to participate.

You can single out any number of characteristics that influence an athlete's physical and mental abilities; to focus on an athlete's status as transgender places unreasonable emphasis and scrutiny on transgender women, which renders the suggestion of an "unfair advantage" a circular argument. Such arguments are based on the transphobic and violent underlying assumptions that cisgender women are "real" women and transgender women are not and, therefore, that cisgender women require physical protection from transgender women; if these assumptions are rejected, as they ought to be, then there is no reason to single out a woman's transgender status rather than the hundreds of other characteristics that influence every woman's physical and mental makeup.

Clearly, the underlying issue here is not any empirical difference between the performance of cisgender women and that of transgender women. If you look closely enough at any particular subset of women distinguished by a specific physiological or socio-economic characteristic, you are likely to find some difference in athletic performance between that subset of women and all other women. There are empirical differences in athletic performance between tall women

and not-tall women, and there are athletic empirical differences in performance between women born in the first quartile of a year and women born in the rest of the year—however, nobody is trying to exclude all tall women from sport or trying to protect the safety of women born in February by excluding all women born in August.

The underlying issue here is an *a priori* assumption that trans women are not “real” women, which is obviously a transphobic and incorrect assumption that renders this line of reasoning entirely circular.

## Matildas feminism has a long way to go

Branchu writes (40) that sport is a “terrain of political struggle” where women are sexualised, reduced to motherhood, reduced to (hetero)sexual partners, and denied their womanhood.

The success of the Matildas, Australia’s national women’s soccer team, has been remarkable and inspiring. “Matildas fever” peaked in 2023, when Australia hosted the FIFA Women’s World Cup that saw Australia advance to the semi-finals. The semi-final match between Australia and England was the most-watched TV program in Australia’s recorded history, enjoyed by over 7 million viewers in a country of 26 million people (59). Every Matildas home game since the World Cup has sold out (60).

Matildas fever speaks to the partial success of Australia in cultivating a respect for women in sport. But Matildas feminism has not brought equal progress for all woman and non-binary soccer players.

In the A-League Women, 60% of players competing in the 2022-23 season also worked or studied part-time to supplement their income from soccer. Of women who worked, 68% worked more than 10 hours per week. Compare this to the 15% of A-League Men players who worked, and of the men who worked, only 7% worked more than 10 hours per week (61). Adelaide United’s star striker, Fiona Worts, worked at McDonald’s during the 2021-22 season (61). Perth Glory captain Natasha Rigby and Wellington Phoenix vice-captain Chloe Knott are among the many women’s soccer players who have forced to retire due to, partially or entirely, the disadvantaged financial position of the women’s game (62,63). In amateur and community soccer—which, after all, is where the majority of players are found—the material resources and disrespect shown to the women’s game are often just as noticeable. Most women soccer players can tell you stories about the unacceptable quality (or even a total lack) of women’s changing rooms, or about the blasé attitude often expressed by club, league, and government decision-makers towards the women’s game (64). In fact, watching the coverage of women’s leagues, one frequently notices that women soccer players seem to be validated through their proximity to men<sup>4</sup>. News

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<sup>4</sup>My partner and I have developed a drinking game for watching women’s soccer. The rules are simple: whenever the camera focuses on a man—not a coach, but some random famous dude or a men’s soccer player in the stands whom we are expected to recognise—take a drink.

articles about soccer usually focus on the men's game, and if the women's game is mentioned, it is typically as an afterthought.

Black athletes and athletes of colour often face particular difficulties, with these athletes frequently experiencing both structural and overt racism (65). This racism can even come from the governing body itself, as with FIFA's ban of the Iranian women's soccer team from the 2012 Olympics over head covers (65).

It is interesting that the exclusion of trans women from sport is usually presented as necessary to protect women's sports when women's sport is operating at such a profound financial and social disadvantage. The people who seek to exclude trans women from sport rarely concern themselves with these genuine and insidious disadvantages facing women athletes.

In rugby, the physical risk to women is caused in large part by the fact that women aren't encouraged to become strong and train from a young age (40). In soccer, knee injuries can be particularly devastating, and they are much more common for women than men (66). By one count, 37 players were forced to sit out of the 2023 Women's World Cup due to ACL injuries (66). Many women experience multiple ACL injuries during their career. It is not yet known why women are disproportionately affected by knee injuries, but the evidence has generally pointed to social factors as being a large part of the cause (67). Women also seem to experience poorer recovery rates and outcomes after injury compared to men (66). Beyond the obvious costs that injury imposes upon a professional player's career and finances, injury can also threaten or even put an end to a player's ability to play sport in any form—sometimes catastrophic for a player's personal identity (66).

The Paramatildas, who compete in cerebral palsy soccer, brought home the gold medal for Australia in the IFCPF World Cup in November 2024. Australia won the gold medal match with a 6-2 score over the United States (68). When the able-bodied Matildas competed in the FIFA World Cup, newspapers included physical posters and fold-out guides to the tournament. When the Paramatildas *won* the IFCPF World Cup, there were a handful of online articles published in the premium sections of news websites. Today, a search of the Adelaide newspaper *The Advertiser* gives 3,561 results for the term "Matildas". A search for "Paramatildas" gives zero results. The Melbourne-based newspaper gives, since 2018, 60 results for "Matildas". Again, "Paramatildas" returns no results.

A promising sign is that some soccer players have felt comfortable making public their gender identity. Quinn, a midfielder who plays for the Canadian national team and Seattle Reign, and Grace Wilson, a goalkeeper who recently moved from Adelaide United to the University of Maine, are two players who have recently come out as non-binary (70). Unfortunately, Quinn is frequently misgendered by the official game commentators who are paid to share their detailed knowledge of the players!

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Bonus if the camera lingers on the man for *slightly* longer than is comfortable.

“Matildas fever” is a step in the right direction, but there is a long way to go until all athletes—women athletes, trans athletes, disabled athletes, and athletes living under repressive political regimes—are treasured and empowered.

Further reading:

- Fiona Crawford & Lee McGowan 2019, *Never Say Die: The Hundred-Year Overnight Success of Australian Women’s Football*, NewSouth (UNSW Press).
- Charlotte Branchu 2023, *Tackling Stereotype: Corporeal Reflexivity and Politics of Play in Women’s Rugby*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jean Williams 2021/2022, *The History of Women’s Football*, Pen & Sword Books Ltd.

## 6. Rediscovering faith

People are sometimes surprised to learn that I'm religious<sup>5</sup>. I'm a blue-haired, transgender scientist with a kinky streak; these are traits that people tend to associate with rejection of religion, not a crucifix pendant and a profound faith in God. This is certainly understandable. Institutionalised religion has been responsible for immense persecution and hatred of trans and queer people. Part of my religious journey has been to come to terms with this troubling legacy.

While religion can and does oppress, it can and does empower (32). A surface-level understanding of theology and the Christian life, an understanding that is in the interest of many religious institutions to perpetuate, hides the depth and beauty in queer theologies, feminist theologies, gay and lesbian theologies, sexual theologies, and postcolonial theologies that have emerged and flourished especially since the 1970s (32). These theologies challenge the oppression and power dynamics too often perpetuated by Christian-identifying institutions and centre the experience of people—especially queer-identifying—too often excluded from and marginalised in such spaces (32).

### Dual belonging

I am versed in the practices, texts, and community of both Christianity and Buddhism. In academic circles, this is called “dual religious belonging” (71).

Christianity is the religion of ancestors. My maternal grandfather was a mathematician, known for his work in applied mathematics, functional analysis, operator theory, and vector-valued integration. He was also a deeply religious Catholic. The fact that I was born in Australia is, in part, attributable to the fact that my grandfather—a religious academic—was persecuted and mistreated by the communist regime in then-Czechoslovakia. After my grandfather retired as a mathematician, he even began training as a priest—but he did not finish his training, as he had philosophical objections to how the seminary was run! Clearly, I'm not the first nerd-turned-reformist in our family.

I was raised as a Catholic and attended a Catholic high school. Perhaps this is why I rejected this faith during my adolescence. As a sciencey kid, I rejected what I saw as arbitrary superstition. In retrospect, I think it's a shame that I threw the religious baby out with the Catholic bathwater. Catholicism is one branch of the many within Christianity, and Christianity is one branch of the many within religious life; moreover, any single denomination of religion can be expressed in a variety of ways.

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<sup>5</sup>I was hesitant to include an essay on religion in this book. Religion is one of those topics on which it is impossible to write anything that has never been said before; even the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, says that there is nothing new under the sun! That said, my faith is an important part of my life and my identity as non-binary and transfeminine. I hope you can forgive me for generalising about this deeply complex topic and for treading the same ground that others have already visited.

Today, Catholicism doesn't resonate with me, but I respect that it is the religion of my ancestors and, in particular, a religion that my grandfather fought for. I'm also grateful for my Christian upbringing, now that I've had the opportunity as an adult to re-engage with Christian practices and literature on my own terms.

My first steps back into religion didn't come from Christianity, but from Buddhism. My introduction to Buddhism was through one of Thich Nhat Hanh's many excellent books, which I encountered in early 2020. This motivated me to reach out to a local Buddhist sangha (community). The facilitator of the sangha has been a loving mentor to me and remains my dear friend.

Without the baggage of being raised in this religion, I was able to learn about Buddhism and participate in its practices on my own terms. I've met many wonderful people in the community, and the community has been a source of strength and belonging during some of my darker moments.

Nevertheless, I soon felt a call to explore Christianity. There is something about the Christian Bible and the life of Jesus that resonates with me in a way that Buddhism does not. In fact, Thich Nhat Hanh explicitly encouraged his followers to connect with their own roots!

## **The authority to re-interpret Christian scripture**

As queer people, we have the freedom and authority to reject institutional interpretations of the Bible (32). There are many books within the Bible whose layers of rich meaning and wisdom resonate with me deeply: Job's expression of anger against God; Ecclesiastes's coming to terms with a baffling world; Micah's promise of justice and peace; and, of course, the counter-cultural message of social justice advocated by Jesus in the gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew. In contrast, I find less value in books like the Pauline epistles.

As Marcus J. Borg points out, even people who claim to take the Bible literally do not and cannot take the Bible literally (72). The Bible is not that sort of text. It is not an engineering textbook or a how-to manual, like the pamphlet that comes with a coffee maker. It's a series of books, which have evolved over time and as part of a cultural and political process, that record community experiences and wisdom in the form of myths, parables, and allegories. It's a record of collective wisdom, like family lore shared in the evening over a glass of red wine—with all the nuance, fallibility, and space for critique and reinterpretation that this implies.

The freedom to critique and challenge is even endorsed in many places within the Bible itself. Genesis 32 contains a story about the origin of the name Israel. In this story, we see Jacob wrestling an angel who is often interpreted to be God; under this interpretation, this is a myth about literally wrestling with God. Likewise, the book of Job is a record of a person who was having a *very* bad day and complains against God in no uncertain terms. Jesus himself re-frames scripture, as in the antitheses (Matthew 5:38-39 NRSV): "You have heard that

it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...” In a powerful episode in Mark 7, we see Jesus being chewed out by the Syrophoenician woman. Jesus essentially begins this encounter with a racial slur and only helps when the woman shames him. Avery Arden made this passage the subject of an excellent sermon called “Jesus Gets Schooled” (73).

The historical-critical paradigm for studying and understanding the Bible has given us a nuanced understanding of the Bible’s contents and, especially, how these contents have been influenced by specific cultural and political contexts (72,74). This mindset can also shine light on specific religious practices today and can enable a certain freedom. For example, the weekly church gathering is considered the cornerstone of religious practice by many Christians; for people like me, who do not find this practice to be meaningful or important, it can help to understand that the weekly church gathering originated in the Greco-Roman symposium and was heavily influenced by this existing, non-Christian cultural tradition (75). The Last Supper—a practice that *is* very important to me—seems to have been put in Jesus’s mouth retrospectively as a means to justify a pre-existing community tradition (75). Similarly, few historians actually believe that Jesus considered himself the son of God (72).

My point here is not that every part of religious practice is silly. Far from it. My point is that Christianity, like other religions, evolves over time, influencing and being influenced by the living community of practitioners. This perspective can empower religious practitioners to adopt the practices that are meaningful to them.

In fact, historical critical study can reveal deeper layers of meaning in the Bible that are not present at face value. Amy-Jill Levine points out how the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew (and Luke’s equivalent, the Sermon on the Plain) can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, we have phrases especially in Matthew like like “hungry for righteousness”. On the other hand, we have the gospel of Luke (6:21) reporting Jesus saying “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled”—not “hungry for righteousness”, as reported in Matthew, but simply *hungry*, materially poor (15). This emphasis on financial poverty and the material element of social justice is easily missed, but strikes me as a more powerful reading of Jesus’s teachings than an emphasis on holiness *per se*.

## What does God mean to me?

I have no interest in proving the existence of God. This isn’t important to me and seems like it’s missing the point. In a biography on Francis of Assisi, G. K. Chesterton wrote: “his religion was not a thing like a theory but a thing like a love affair.”

I have tattooed on my wrist the phrase “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). What does this mean to me?

I follow the view, detailed in Vincent Brümmer’s classic work *What are we doing when we pray? On prayer and the nature of faith* that prayer is not asking a powerful guy in the sky for specific favours. Rather, prayer is a participatory process in which I draw upon the wisdom of religious tradition and religious communities while I work towards the liberation of all sentient beings. The early theologian Origen wrote that to “pray without ceasing” does not mean to always be reciting prayers addressed at God; rather, it means to fit one’s action to prayer throughout one’s life. Serving God is a synonym for serving others.

Why Christianity? In the 21st century, we can no longer uphold the pretence that one religion is inherently better or more special than another. With the immense amount of historical and critical Bible scholarship, we cannot pretend that the stories documented in the Bible are a consistently accurate record of events. I’m not a Christian because I believe that Christianity is more “valid” or “correct” than other religions in the empirical sense. The progressive Christian writer Marcus J. Borg contends that to be Christian is to feel that Jesus is the clearest representation or exemplar of God (72). Borg argues that if we found that we resonated more strongly with the Torah or the Quran, then we would be Jews or Muslims.

Moreover, the living tradition of Christianity—the way that the community and its beliefs evolve over time—is part of the beauty. The Christian God originated as the God of Israel. This does not mean that this God is only for Jews; it means that Jews and Christians have a shared and evolving history (74). Even some of the most central features of Christian life—such as the weekly church gathering and the Lord’s Supper—evolved within the Christian community after the life and death of Jesus (75). I think it’s beautiful that we can entertain a healthy scepticism about religious doctrine and use historical and critical methods to understand our tradition more deeply; at the same time, we can appreciate that the shared wisdom of the Christian community is passed down through history as part of this evolving tradition.

## God is a political radical

Today, mainstream theology excludes the poor and the marginalised; a quick glance at the life of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that such theology misses the mark. Jesus the radical liberator has been replaced by Jesus the oppressor (32). I think this is a genuine shame.

The anchoress Julian of Norwich emphasised love as a reciprocal relationship between the religious person and God (76). Love is not a one-way path; rather, the religious life means accepting God’s love and expressing love towards God. For me, both of these necessarily lead to a commitment to work towards the liberation of all sentient beings. This process and ongoing work is the love. Sometimes, this can be totally opaque towards outsiders; for the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, faith involves obedience to God even when this is not easily understood by others (77).



Borg emphasises the theme of “two lordships” as central to understanding the life of Jesus (72). The theme of two lordships is most memorably captured in Jesus’s response when asked about whether it is lawful to pay taxes (Mark 12:17 NRSV): “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” The political lord—in the Bible, represented Herod and Caesar, though obviously the identity of this lord is different—may have wealth and power. But to follow Jesus means to affirm that I will not obey the political lord and the domination that political lordship entails; rather, I will follow the example of Jesus, a peasant who preached love and liberation.

Adherence to a particular religion, Christianity or otherwise, is certainly not necessary to do the work of liberation. I believe that if there is a just and all-loving God, then the actions and work that best serve this God must necessarily be the same actions and work that can be independently derived from a purely secular but rigorous moral philosophy. Scripture might indeed be a source of moral wisdom and guidance to live a life in line with God’s will, but it is certainly not the only source of this wisdom and guidance. And thus, if you arrive at a truly strong and defensible system of moral philosophy without even giving God or the Bible a second thought, then this system should be equally as acceptable to God—and thus equally as moral, since God is morally perfect—as doing your best to live your life in line with God’s will. And in the same way, if you begin with scripture and end up with a hypothesis for the morally ideal plan of life, then this plan—if it is indeed a valid one—should survive the strictest scrutiny from secular moral philosophy.

Sure, you can get the details of moral philosophy wrong and end up doing no good or even doing harm. Moral philosophy is very difficult! But I think the same consideration applies to interpreting scripture too, as history shows.

So both approaches—faith-centred liberation and secular moral philosophy—basically reduce to figuring out the consequences of what it means to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). This statement appears to me to be the deepest encapsulation of both Christianity and secular moral philosophy. When it comes to interpreting “your neighbour”, I admire the approach of William Wilberforce and others who refer to the story of the Good Samaritan (78). That is, “your neighbour” means “literally everybody, without exception”.

Once you arrive at “Love your neighbour as yourself”, there are many different paths you can take in terms of practical application. But this is the criterion by which all resulting paths are judged, regardless of how you arrived at this statement.

No matter where I begin, whether a secular or religious position, I end up with “Love your neighbour as yourself.” And no matter which path I follow subsequently in terms of practical actions, the only way that I can measure my progress is by returning to “Love your neighbour as yourself”. It’s a singularity, like the Big Bang from physics; no matter where you begin, you find that this

is the ultimate frame of reference, and you can only measure progress with reference to it.

And to emphasise: I mean “Love your neighbour *as yourself*”. I think the final two words in that sentence are the most important ones. I do not mean the truncated but oft-quoted “love your neighbour”; anyone can do that. “As yourself” is the hard part.

In essence, my decision to follow Jesus means to commit myself to the difficult but indispensable task of working towards the liberation of others and the abolition of systems of oppression (79).

## God is gay

Faith can be a fire in the belly for justice. Many of the most profound and moving religious texts express this desire and yearning for justice. The book of Job from Judaism and Christianity essentially tells the story of a protest against injustice (80). I mentioned above the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount (and the Sermon on the Plain) as not being about hungry for righteousness, but simply *hungry* (15). The second of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, the core practice from the Plum Village tradition of Buddhism, includes the phrase: “Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting.”

Faith can also be a soothing balm in an oppressive and difficult world. God loves me and accepts me even when people, including God’s self-proclaimed representatives, do not (32). My mentor once told me, in the context of Buddhist communities, “People are people, no matter where you go.” There are a number of beautiful queer religious communities where people come together and interpret their religious traditions in the context of their own life and queer identities. For example, the website Plumline lists online practice communities in the Plum Village tradition of Buddhism around the world, and many of these are designated as safe spaces for queer practitioners. Transmission Ministry Collective is an online community, featuring discussion spaces, support groups, and Bible studies, dedicated to transgender and gender-expansive Christians. The poet and minister Avery Arden likewise offers many resources for trans and queer Christians on their website, Binary Breaking Worship.

The importance of these spaces to my own well-being to my self-acceptance as transgender cannot be overstated. These are some of the few spaces in the world where the experiences of trans and queer people are centred and treasured. These spaces are a refuge, helping me to feel validated and accepted and even treasured in a society that too often sends messages that trans people are not accepted and should not be visible. When I participate in these communities, I also see how simply being a proud and unapologetic trans person in the world can send a signal to others in the world that they are not alone with their struggles; for

people with the necessary privilege, safety and freedom to be themselves, this is a powerful way to be a good ancestor.

## **Barriers to participation in faith communities**

As a transgender and autistic person, participation in trans- and queer-specific communities can be both soothing and empowering. However, participation in more general communities can be challenging.

There is a difference between being tolerated, being accepted, being valued, and being treasured. Faith communities ought to work towards the latter categories in that list. I've participated in a couple of religious communities where I have felt valued and treasured. However, in other religious communities—especially in communities that are aimed at mainstream audiences, rather than being designed as queer safe spaces—the attitude has been one of tolerance. When a person is merely tolerated, they are unlikely to feel truly welcome.

As a trans person, I have been misgendered by participants and even facilitators of religious communities. One time, when helping to set up a meditation hall for a one-day Buddhist retreat, I was told: “You can help me carry the tables, since you’re a strong man.” In a community explicitly centred on cultivating deep understanding, looking beneath surface appearances, and acting with compassion towards others, the ubiquity of comments like these is puzzling. One of the facilitators told me that she would take my well-being and protection very seriously, and I appreciate this facilitator’s deep practice and compassion, but there is only so much that a single member of a community can do.

As an autistic person, I find that many of the practices at in-person events are not designed with people like me in mind. At meditation retreats, people often say things like: “It’s so nice to connect with the community rather than practising on my own.” This doesn’t resonate with me at all.

Plum Village retreats tend to include practices like mindful walking (walking in silence in a circle around the room) and mindful eating (eating in silence in a circle in the room). These practices are not accessible for me; when I participate in these practices with a group of people, my energy is drained rather than restored. I spend so much energy on masking (= pretending to be neurotypical). It’s not a matter of just switching off the masking—this tendency is so deeply ingrained in me from learning to survive in this society. In fact, for me, “not masking” usually means “sitting by myself”—this is a deeply enjoyable activity and certainly a practice in itself.

Other reasons are more mundane; it can be difficult to find an in-person religious community that is nearby, in a physical location that feels safe, and held at a time of the week that does not conflict with other meaningful pursuits. If only you had told me ten years ago, when I identified as an anti-sport atheist, that one of my big problems would be finding a church service that didn’t clash with my soccer games!

Of course, beyond the challenges faced by participants of religious communities, harm can be perpetuated when religious doctrine or beliefs are uncritically repeated. Consider these two examples from foundational religious texts:

- The Buddha said: “It’s impossible for a woman to be a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha. But it is possible for a man to be a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha.” (*Bahudhātukasutta*, Majjhima Nikāya 115, translation from Bhante Sujato at SuttaCentral)
- When Jesus was approached by a Canaanite woman who asked for his help, Jesus said: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us. [...] It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” It is only after the woman shamed Jesus that he complied with her request for help. (Matthew 15:23-26 NRSV)

Negotiating with troubling legacies, including these examples and many others, is part of my process of exploring my faith as a transgender person.

### From temple to church to cave

The Buddha and Jesus were both religious reformers who, unsatisfied with the state of religious life, sought their own path based on what their deep practice and faith revealed to be the essence of a spiritual life. They were unsatisfied with the offerings of their day, and they developed a new way (81).

God did not make a mistake in creating me and people like me. Society made a mistake in discriminating against me and people like me. I was meant to be a trans woman, perhaps to help shine a light on society’s mistake.

The deeper the faith becomes, and the more deeply I understand the historical and political origins of specific religious practices and texts, the more comfortable I become with foregoing formal religious community and instead seeking my own path. I began my adult religious journey with Buddhism, which soon gave way to a passionate love affair with Christianity. Now, familiar with both bodies of tradition, literature, and wisdom, I am seeking my own practice and faith on my own terms.

Further reading:

- Kevin Manders & Elizabeth Marston (eds) 2019, *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*, North Atlantic Books.
- Austen Harke 2018, *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Westminster John Knox Press.
- Christena Cleveland 2022, *God Is a Black Woman*, HarperOne.
- Mona West & Robert E Shore-Goss (eds) 2022, *The Queer Bible Commentary* (2nd ed), SCM Press.
- Chris Greenough 2020, *Queer Theologies: The Basics*, Routledge.

## 7. My adventures with autism

When it first dawned on me that I might be autistic, at least during my adult life, I gently raised this idea with my partner. My partner works as a health professional and so, mercifully, was understanding and supportive. My conversation with her went like this.

Me: I've been thinking about something that I wanted to get your thoughts on. Do you think there could be a chance that I might be, um, autistic?

My partner: Oh yeah, one hundred percent. It was a bit of a giveaway when we first started dating and the only shirts you owned were three identical grey t-shirts with the tags removed.

I wanted to include a brief essay on my autism in this collection because this is a core part of my identity that touches so many aspects of my life. This is not a systematic look at autism or even my own autism; rather, I'm taking this opportunity to highlight some ways in which autism and my autistic traits influence the themes relevant to this book.

### Empathy and sensitivity

Perhaps the personality trait that I identify with most strongly is a strong and even overwhelming sense of justice. My sense of justice preoccupies me, provides me with meaningful work, and occasionally keeps me up at night.

I think my sense of justice originates in two mutually reinforcing characteristics: empathy and a rejection of logical incoherence. It is often said that autistic people are, if anything, too empathetic (82). I certainly share this deep empathy; when I witness or even imagine another human or a non-human animal in a situation of suffering, I physically feel the suffering from that individual's perspective. I can feel the terror of the pig in the industrial slaughterhouse, and I can feel the suffocation and panic of fish during slaughter by asphyxiation (see essay "Trash Fish").

Likewise, I cannot stand logical incoherence. There is no logical reason why one group of sentient creatures ought to be oppressed or mistreated for the benefit of others (83). I find it simply unbearable that this is the case.

I like to say that I have a midlife crisis every fortnight or so. There is truth to this. I constantly seek consistency between my life and my values. I cannot comprehend participating in activities that do not further my values (84). Many people are blessed with the ability to simply work for an income to feed their family; this is wonderful, but it is not an ability that I have.

Beyond my professional work (see below), my empathy and sensitivity manifests itself in many constructive ways that help others. I've developed a non-violent method for removing flies from the house, a situation where many people default

to violence (the secret is to fully encapsulate the fly in a plastic container while they are stationary, but to be very slow in doing so). On a meditation retreat, I noticed three goldfish in a pond outside, and I returned later with the permission of the temple caretakers to conduct a welfare assessment on the goldfish.

The major risk of this intense empathy and sensitivity is “secondary traumatic stress”. Secondary traumatic stress, often associated with the term “compassion fatigue”, essentially occurs when somebody takes on too much of the trauma or suffering of the people they are trying to help.

Secondary traumatic stress has been researched in human caring professions like nursing and social work. There is emerging understanding of this phenomenon in veterinary care (85–87), social justice activism (88), and, in a more limited way, animal advocacy more generally (89,90).

Secondary traumatic stress has been a common theme in my mental state for several years. Often, I experience symptoms similar to those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (dissociation, nightmares and visual recollections, and the fight-or-flight response). Secondary traumatic stress is certainly exacerbated by my day-to-day work, as I frequently witness images and read descriptions of innocent animals being tortured and experiencing immense suffering as part of routine industrial practices. However, the fact that my work contributes, in a small way, towards addressing and resolving some of these causes of suffering feels empowering; while my work is a source of trauma, the ability to work towards ending this unbearable suffering is a source of strength and meaning. I have the immense fortune to work in an animal advocacy organisation that understands this mental health challenge and actively encourages its employees to take time off of work as soon as they notice symptoms appearing, which is sadly the exception rather than the norm for animal advocacy organisations (91,92).

## Writing

I’m being cautious here, as I don’t want to position autism as a “profitable” or “marketable” trait in the context of capitalist work culture. That said, many of my autistic traits are indispensable for my work towards dismantling the oppression and persecution of animals.

At work, I have developed a bit of a reputation as somebody who can ingest very large amounts of information and data and produce research and policy recommendations very quickly. I researched, wrote, and published a paper on broiler chicken welfare in around four total days of work; recently, as part of a systematic literature review on the economics of fish aquaculture in Europe, I scanned 17,000 published papers in about a week.

Part of this ability comes from the fact that, for whatever reason, writing detailed content is usually just not a challenge for me. Clem Bastow, an autistic adult who works as a professional writer, reports that they have the ability to create

huge volumes of content (82).

This ability also comes from the fact that I enjoy ingesting and mentally arranging large bodies of information on topics that are, as I learn when I talk to friends and family about my work, quite stuffy and boring topics to most people! To give just a few recent examples, I have conducted extremely fine-scale research on egg food safety practices in the United States (relevant for interventions to improve the lives of egg-laying hens), the structure of the retail industry in Denmark and Germany (both relevant for interventions that improve the lives of rainbow trout farmed in Denmark), and the shrimp fishing practices of coastal communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia (relevant for interventions that improve the lives of wild-caught shrimp, who are both farmed and caught in astonishingly high numbers around the world).

I read academic papers for fun, and I have *heaps* of ideas—I think this comes from seeing connections between concepts where other people may not. In fact, the amount of ideas I have becomes overwhelming, so I frequently remind myself that I do not have to act on even every good idea that I have; it’s okay to write my ideas down and return to them later. But this penchant for seeing connections has led to multiple pieces of research on topics from my analysis of political parties in the animal advocacy movement (93), to the role of modern Stoic philosophy in overcoming grief (94), to the use of ultraviolet radiation data in understanding soil management in grassland restoration (95), to what Goodreads data can tell us about transgender literature (7). It’s particularly enjoyable to see the different attitudes of academics in wildly varied disciplines, like when a peer reviewer told my coauthor and me that we needed to make some changes to the discussion section of the paper to “meet the standards of an international soils journal.” And I thought I was a nerd.

## Intense special interests

Many or most autistic people experience having intense interests in certain topics. This has historically been called “special interests”, though I’m told that the word “spin” is coming into vogue as a less condescending term for this phenomenon.

Since young adulthood, I have had a conscious awareness that I engage in interests in a way that is different to my peers. It was not until it dawned on me that I was autistic that I had language for this.

A sample of my special interests, in roughly chronological order from my early childhood to the present day, is as follows:

- Primates.
- The Bermuda Triangle.
- Space (in primary school, I would carry around a *bona fide* suitcase full of photocopied pages from library books on space).
- Beyblades.

- Lightsabers.
- *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (including the original radio series, the book series, the BBC TV series, the 2005 film which I once watched 14 times in a single weekend, the text-based video game, and even a rare promotional towel that I bought online).
- Birds (especially pigeons).
- Flags.
- Pre-*Homo sapiens* hominids such as neanderthals.
- Czech history.
- Chinese history.
- *Winnie-the-Pooh* (including my 2018 visit to England's Ashdown Forest, the original inspiration for the Forest which is erroneously referred to in popular media as the Hundred-Acre Wood).
- The musical *Hamilton* (which I listened to several times a day for about a year and, a true highlight, saw live in London in 2018 and a few years later in Melbourne).
- Hermits.
- The Amish.
- Religious scriptures.
- The proto-language Proto-Indo-European.
- Tattoos (see essay "Meeting my new body").
- Women's soccer (see essay "Soccer and womanhood").
- Nuclear warfare.
- Death and social attitudes towards the dead.

Some of my special interests are evergreen and seem to stick with me over time (Proto-Indo-European, neanderthals). Others tend to change over time, with one interest giving way to another (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *Hamilton*).

In fact, the structure of my PhD thesis strikes me, now that I have the benefit of hindsight, as quite autistic. Typically, a PhD thesis contains several chapters of research on a single unifying theme; my thesis contained research on several unrelated themes, including fisheries management, the psychology of science writing, and moral philosophy. Writing my thesis introduction and conclusion, components necessary to convince examiners that the thesis is a complete work worthy of a doctoral degree, was a unique challenge!

## Sensory and social challenges

I struggle in bright, loud, and/or crowded spaces. My manager will often gently tease me when we have our regular meeting via video call and I'm sitting in a completely dark room. We joke that I'm Emperor Palpatine from Star Wars, pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

When I need to spend time in an overstimulating space, it helps to listen to rain noise on my noise-cancelling headphones, holding specific objects like a smooth stone, my wooden rosary beads, or my beautiful metal yo-yo.



Computer notifications, such as text message notifications and notifications from social media, are unbearable both because of the noise and visual stimulation and because I cannot bear the demand on my attention. This is a large part of the reason why I stay well away from computers running Windows operating systems and why I do not participate in any social media.

In most cases, social situations feel like swallowing sand. Early in my life, I developed social anxiety, which I now understand as a necessary survival response in a world that is not designed for people like me (96). To perform in a social setting, I need to watch other people perform in the same setting exactly three times before I can do it myself.

I'm very good at expressing myself in writing, but I struggle to accurately and clearly express my thoughts in speaking. There is too much going on, both external (overstimulation) and internal (masking and performing as neurotypical). Despite this challenge, or perhaps because of this challenge, I have become adept at navigating social situations. My partner recently told me: "For somebody who doesn't like social situations, you're very good at social situations."

However, when I become comfortable in a social situation, the prospect of leaving the situation feels me with grief and panic. I experience this attachment issue in small-scale settings, such as at the end of an evening's social gathering, and in large-scale settings, such as changing schools.

I've had serious challenges adjusting to essentially every major social transition in my life. For the first two weeks of primary school, I did not enter the classroom. I would sit outside while my mother, bless her patience, sat with me. For the first few months of high school, whenever I gave myself a moment to think or to sit with my emotions, I would tear up with grief and longing for my much smaller and more comfortable primary school. For the first few months of university, I experienced similar grief and longing for high school. In 2018, I was awarded a scholarship by the government of Germany to attend the University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, and pursue a Masters degree in agricultural economics. This transition, where I was completely alone in an unfamiliar and German-speaking world, was much too much for me, and I soon left the country and returned home. I even experienced deep grief when my local tabletop gaming stores—a small shop called Ajays in a shopping centre and subsequently a slightly larger store called Gamers Guild on the main road near my house—closed down.

Perhaps the memory that most neatly summarises my attachment issues is as follows. When I was a young child, I received a gift voucher for Australian Geographic for my birthday—for a nerdy kid like me, the opportunity of a lifetime. My mother drove me to the nearest Australian Geographic store and I picked out some things to buy. I remember choosing a tube of touchable bubbles, among a couple of other toys that I've now forgotten. But after we completed the purchase and walked out of the store, I began to tear up. My mother sat me down and asked what was going on. I missed the gift voucher and wanted it back! My dear mother, in a recurring theme, showed immense patience with me

and asked the store clerk whether we could have the gift voucher back. We could not have the original voucher, but the clerk kindly photocopied the voucher and handed me the photocopy to keep.

## **Language I wish I had when growing up**

Over time, as I learn how to navigate this bizarre world, I have developed conscious awareness of many of my autistic traits. However, I was not aware that these traits were indeed autistic. In particular, I developed my own language as I struggled to make sense of my rich inner world and the confusing outside world. I would intuit many ways in which I was different from my peers and develop my own mental terminology for this. This is part of why learning that I was autistic has been so helpful and validating for me; finally, I have a dictionary for a language that I was struggling to understand.

There are three pieces of language in particular that would have been helpful and validating, had I been aware of them when I was younger.

1. Demand avoidance, a term that is also re-framed more positively as “personal drive for autonomy”. For me, demand avoidance is best described as a discomfort performing in the ways demanded of me by others (97). I struggle to participate in small talk. Sitting at a table and eating a meal makes me want to tear my eyes out. Soccer practice, essentially participating in specific drills in a group setting, is a nightmare. I have especially experienced issues when this demand avoidance is not understood by my in-laws; this lack of understanding has triggered issues in multiple relationships, when in-laws have specific expectations to which they demand my adherence and performance.
2. Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD). RSD is a particularly visceral and debilitating sensitivity to rejection and criticism (98,99). It is “extreme” and “unbearable”, a physical pain often described as being stabbed in the chest (98). Particularly since entering university, RSD has been an ongoing challenge. For me, RSD has manifested as a strong anxiety around, and aversion to, receiving emails. I also often struggle with receiving criticism; harsh criticism makes me feel small and stupid. Mercifully, as I progress in my career and reinforce that I am in a stable and safe position, my mind has relaxed a bit and RSD does not rear its head so frequently. I have also spent lots of time developing ways to seek and receive feedback at work in ways that does not trigger my RSD. It also helps that, for the most part, I’m surrounded by people who will not take advantage of my trust.
3. Fear of information overload (FOIL). I made this term up! It’s a working title, as this is not a phenomenon that I have seen represented elsewhere. I suspect that this is because, like other phenomena, I’m simply not aware of the language that other people are already using for this phenomenon. I have this feeling of hesitation or fear when I think of reading or watching or talking about something that is important to me. The fear relates to not

wanting to get information overload or to be faced with too much emotive or action-relevant content. The feeling isn't the information overwhelm itself, but the fear of information overwhelm that makes me disengage from reading, watching, or talking about stuff that is highly relevant to my work or life. This can manifest in, for example, not wanting to talk about a favourite book genre with a stranger, or feeling scared of beginning a literature review on a topic that I'm researching for work.

## Finding my voice

I have several immense privileges that have significantly eased my journey and development as an autistic person living in a world designed for neurotypical person. I have a supportive partner and an affirming therapist. I have material security, including control over my living environment and professional respect at work. Bastow reports a particular appreciation for freelance work as this allows them greater control over their physical work environment (82). This resonates strongly with me; while I'm not a freelancer, I do work in a fully remote organisation and have complete control over my living and working space.

This has provided me with the safety and privilege for what I need, such as asking for communication at work to happen via written communication rather than video call meetings. In fact, the more comfortable I become saying what I need in my professional and social lives, even when this interferes with others' desires, the more time I spend in my dark bedroom with the air conditioning on and rain sounds playing through my noise-cancelling headphones. Many autistic people around the world do not have these privileges.

I am gradually unpeeling the layers of the beliefs that I have internalised without my conscious assent. I am learning to distinguish between what I want and what is a performance expected of me by others.

Further reading:

- Nick Walker 2021, *Neuroqueer heresies: Notes on the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic empowerment, and postnormal possibilities*, Autonomous Press.
- Clem Bastow, 2021, *Late bloomer: How an autism diagnosis changed my life*, Hardie Grant Books. (Note: I don't resonate with the pathology language like "diagnosis" used in Bastow's book, but I recognise that the author clearly feels that this is something that helps them.)

## 8. Solitude, silence, and liberation

I have found that the most liberating way to spend my time is in solitude.

From the classic Chinese work *Chuang Tzŭ* (100):

Shun offered to resign the empire to Shan Chuan. Shan Chuan said, “I am a unit in the sum of the universe. In winter I wear fur clothes. In summer I wear grass-cloth. In spring I plough and sow, toiling with my body. In autumn I gather in the harvest, and devote myself to rest and enjoyment. At dawn I go to work; at sunset I leave off. Contented with my lot I pass through life with a light heart. Why then should I trouble myself with the empire? Ah, Sir, you do not know me.”

So he declined, and subsequently hid himself among the mountains, nobody knew where.

### Modern hermits

To begin with a rather intense example, consider the example of religious hermits.

We often associate hermits and eremitism (the practice of being a hermit) with bearded men in caves, like Obi-Wan Kenobi in the original Star Wars film. There was a point in history when this was a mostly accurate representation of hermits. The archetypal example comes from the Desert Mothers and Desert Fathers, who lived as Christian hermits in the deserts of the Middle-East during the first millennium CE.

In the 21st century, eremitism might seem like an anachronism. In fact, the hermit tradition is alive and well. Of course, hermits do not advertise themselves! Since hermits’ whole enterprise is to sit quietly, it is unusually difficult to study their history, sociology, and inner religious lives (101).

One excellent source is the 2011 book by Paul and Karen Fredette, *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life* (102). This book draws on the authors’ own experience as hermits and their experiences from cultivating a network of hermits in the United States and around the world. The hermits discussed in this book live in a diverse array of locations, often in plain sight; some hermits appreciate the tranquillity of remote locations, while others live their quiet lives in cities and urban centres.

Another useful source is Bill Porter’s book, originally published in 1993, called *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (103). This book details Porter’s journey through the mountains of China seeking hermits and recluses. I find this book insightful for a few reasons. One is that the book repeatedly touches on how China’s religious communities, and hermits specifically, have been discouraged and even persecuted by the Chinese government; while many of the hermits encountered by Porter have carved out a hidden corner of the

world for themselves, other would-be hermits cannot escape this political reality. Another is that the book does not glorify the hermit lifestyle. In the section on Porter's encounter with the hermit nun Ch'uan-fu, Porter reports that the nun was lonely, her roof leaked, and she was close to tears.

Eremitism is one of the two major forms under the umbrella of the monastic life. The other form is coenobitism, which refers to monastics who live in a structured community. It's important to keep in mind the diversity of this form of religious or solitary life. Greg Peters (104) gives a thorough overview of different forms of monasticism, illustrating the surprising diversity of this way of life. Beyond the classic images of hermits and coenobitic monastics, some intriguing forms of monasticism are as follows (104):

- Family monasticism, in which a monastic community also contains married people and families. This includes the Cistercian abbey of Loccum in modern-day Germany after its adoption of Protestantism in 1593.
- Interior monasticism, in which a "cloister" is constructed in one's soul. The classic example is the 14th century text *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*. It is easy to see the value of this form of religious life for people who do not have access to a traditional, formal community.
- Making a commitment before God only, with no formal recognition. An especially inspiring example is the group of young women living under the Nazi regime who came together to promise fidelity to Jesus on Easter of 1942.
- Monastic communities that place an emphasis on serving others in the world. The anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer worked towards a vision, while living under the Nazi regime, of a community living their lives according to the Sermon on the Mount. More recently, this example has been followed by New Monasticism.
- "Oblate" and "associate" programs, in which laypeople (non-monastics) are formally associated with a monastery and adopt some practices while continuing to live in the world.

It is striking to see both the flexibility in these methods of life and the frequent commitment to social justice and helping others.

## Silence and healing

One need not go so far as to become a hermit or a coenobite (unless one wants to!). Silence and solitude need not involve a remote cave or a private island. Many modern hermits live in plain sight in the cities or the suburbs, which bring the important benefits of logistical practicality and greater personal safety (102). It is easier to spend one's time in meditation, reflection, or prayer when one does not need to work from sunrise to sunset to cater to the body's immediate needs (101).

Some of my most peaceful experiences of solitude have been in a hotel room in the middle of the central business district of Sydney or Melbourne. In fact, one

of my earliest experiences with meditation—though I did not have language for it at the time—was a few hours spent in a suburb of Sydney sitting in the shade and watching a river. There are even forms of media that offer a short-lived but meaningful escape into silence and healing, such as the 2016 video game *Firewatch* that has the player living alone and navigating an isolated forest while the narrative unfolds.

There are also unique practical and moral challenges related to living in remote areas. Remote places, at least in temperate southern Australia where I live, host an astonishing abundance of insects. This bothers me not so much for the physical discomfort, but because travelling to any remote places require the use of a car; it is therefore a serious challenge to pick up the groceries or visit a friend without killing these beautiful, innocent insects (105). This problem does exist in suburban areas, but the abundance of insects tends to be much lower on paved roads in densely built-up areas (105).

For many practitioners, escaping to a remote area or a quiet physical location is beside the point. It can be more important to let go of undesirable mental states (internal renunciation) than worldly possessions or living conditions (external renunciation) (106).

A practice that I have found to be powerful in my own life is to reflect on the fractal nature on reality. A neat fact about coastlines is that one cannot really come up with a definitive measure of how long a country's coastline is. When you measure in more detail, you find that there are inevitably more nooks and crannies that inflate the measurement, and at a finer scale of measurement has more nooks and crannies still.

The historian John Lewis Gaddis makes an analogy between this fractal property of coastlines and a similar property of history (107). The more detail in which you study something (in this case a historical event, but I think this applies to everything), the more you will find. You cannot know everything there is to know about a topic. I think of academic scholarship on the Christian Bible—this is ostensibly a collection of ~66 fairly short books, but as Hans Küng points out, the amount of extremely fine-scaled research that has been conducted on these books would fill many enormous libraries (74).

It's not just history; I think this fractal phenomenon can be observed in every day life. In the Plum Village tradition of modern Buddhism, there is an emphasis on meditations like "eating meditation" and "walking meditation". You focus in detail on one seemingly mundane aspect of your surroundings—then, once you start looking, there is no end to the things you can find. The popular practice of gratitude journaling appears to follow a similar pattern. Perhaps this is part of the skill or mindset that enables monastics to find deep enjoyment in what appears to the casual observer as a spartan lifestyle with very minimal surroundings. In essence, paying attention to the fractal nature of the world around us is a way to build psychological self-sufficiency.

Spending time in solitude can be deeply healing. In solitude, I am in control.

I need not compromise my desires to satisfy somebody else's standards or expectations of me. Particularly as a trans person, being out in the world can be just plain hard. Solitude allows me to focus on the needs of my body and mind.

For me, this frequently looks like sensory comforts: comforting rain sounds, the scent of a candle, the tactile sensation of baking bread, the feel of hot water on my skin, the mental engagement of working on a programming project, and calming visuals like nighttime cityscapes and crumbling ruins (108).

In the book *Four Thousand Weeks*, Oliver Burkeman mentions the concept of “the joy of missing out”—as opposed to the fear of missing out! The very fact that you have to choose between two (often equally) good options bestows value upon your choice. Giving up something means you're choosing something else on which to spend a portion of finite and limited time. To make this more concrete, I find that if I'm already have some high-quality, comforting activities ready to go, then I'm more likely to feel the joy of missing out on some other activity.

This concept is also similar to the “explore/exploit” paradigm that has been developed in the academic literature. Early in life, you might explore what types of activities that bring you joy and peace and happiness. Over time, you might gradually shift to exploiting those activities more frequently. Some amount of exploring is still valuable, but less so over time. Academic work on this topic tends to focus on one's professional life and even organisations as a whole, but I think this insight applies equally well to one's personal life.

## Unlearning, unmasking, and connecting

Solitude helps to liberate me from the many subtle and not-so-subtle social expectations that are often imposed upon me. I can wear a pretty dress and put glitter on my face, or I can wear my comfortable soccer shorts, or I can wear my pajamas all day. I can watch 12 hours of consecutive soccer matches or I can sit outside while the shadows slowly shift across the backyard or I can read a sociology textbook until my eyes go fuzzy, with no need to justify my desires to anybody else.

Dr Karin L Arndt (109) presented a study of women in solitude, writing that the choice to be alone can empower women to say “no” and to contest the cultural expectations of what womanhood means.

For autistic people, this is often referred to as unmasking: unlearning and letting go of the the many performances that autistic people are compelled to uphold in order to survive in a world designed for neurotypical people.

Most people have the human need to socialise at some level. Some writers have drawn a comparison with food and hunger: under this conceptualisation, loneliness is nothing more complicated than your body telling you that you need to get more of this particular resource (social connection) (110).

But social connection doesn't need to be social. In the field of autism and

neurodivergent studies, there is an understanding that neurodivergent people often derive deep enjoyment and satisfaction from connecting with things that aren't necessarily other people (111). Therefore, for these people, "loneliness" can be the body's expression of a desire to connect with whatever is deeply meaningful for you. You can get the satisfaction of connection without having to actually spend time with another person.

Of course, I do enjoy spending time with the animals and non-human animals I like! Solitude need not be constant aloneness. My dogs are always around me, and my partner is usually around me; none of these beautiful beings misgender me or expect more of me than I can give (see the later essays on my relationship with my dogs). But human connection isn't always necessary for exploring these deep connections, which gives me many more options and immense freedom in when and how I choose to use these options.

### **Safeguarding attention for the hard work of liberation**

Solitude does not come at the expense of helping others and doing meaningful work in the world. On the contrary, solitude can often be a crucial source of energy and even power.

The Russian mathematician Grigori Perelman is a modern example. Perelman has made such important advances to the field of geometry that the Clay Mathematics Institute *tried* to award him the Millenium Prize, which comes with the hefty reward of one million dollars (USD). Perelman declined this prize and many others; in fact, he now lives a life of quiet solitude. A journalist who managed to place a phone call to him was told (112): "You are disturbing me. I am picking mushrooms."

Writers on monasticism and solitude frequently emphasise that these practices go hand-in-hand with working to help others. The Christian church as depicted in the New Testament was countercultural and often focused on meeting the immediate material needs of the community, though this attitude has not always been preserved (72,104). Many modern monastics emphasise this service mindset; Sister Amanda Marie Detry, FSP, writes that the world needs people who are prepared to give more than others may understand (113).

The history of Taoism in China has seen a continuous dialogue between seclusion and a life of public service (103). Porter gives the example of the classic anthology *Chu Ci*. The poem *The Fisherman* contains a passage in which the fisherman, smiling and rowing away, sings:

When the river is clean I rinse my hat

When the river is dirty I rinse my feet

In other words: there is no need to complain about the world. Rather, one can adapt to circumstances as they come.



In fact, solitude helps to empower me to engage in activism. One key aspect of solitude is that it safeguards one of my most limited and valuable resources: my attention.

Picture a paramedic on call. When there is an emergency, their attention must be diverted to that emergency. If the paramedic fails to be contacted, there will be unnecessary suffering.

In contrast, picture a knowledge worker focusing on some long-term goal, such as advocating for animal rights or working to reduce poverty. Their attention must not be diverted away from that goal. If the knowledge worker becomes distracted, there will be unnecessary suffering. Of course, human minds work the way that human minds work, not the way that computer programs work. There is a positive level of distraction (also called “everyday life”) that needs to be built into a worthy and constructive existence.

But if you fall, as I do, into the description of the knowledge worker rather than the description of the paramedic, then it really is okay—indeed, it is best—to tune out as much as you can other than your most essential projects. Here, when I say “essential projects”, I mean both high-impact work and things that are essential for one’s human existence, like connections, self-care, and so on.

If you are serving a community, such as farmed animals or people living in poverty, then tuning out external information to a degree that might seem excessive to the average person is really just giving the community that you are serving what they deserve: your sole focus. The exception, of course, is when somebody is trying to communicate genuinely essential information to you. I think that people systematically overestimate how frequently this happens, and this is the role of well-designed email filters and the like.

Therefore, every bounced email or unanswered phone call is evidence that you are correctly prioritising the community that you are working to serve.

## Who is holding space for you?

The ability to enjoy solitude is an immense privilege that not everybody has access to. In fact, enjoying solitude often means that somebody else is working hard to facilitate your solitude.

Arndt (109) writes that solitude tends to require the material and non-material support of other people. Arndt gives the examples of famous solitary men from history: Henry David Thoreau could only write *Walden* because Ralph Waldo Emerson owned the land in which Thoreau enjoyed his solitude. Thomas Merton could only write his many classic works on religion and monasticism because of the support of his monastery and the monks with whom he lived. In both cases, of course, one must ask how white Americans obtained this land in the first place.

One of the modern advocates for solitude is Cal Newport, author of the 2016

productivity guide *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (114). For me, the most interesting aspect of this publication is not the book itself, but the intriguing and nuanced discussions about the book by its readers. For example, users on Goodreads have pointed out that Newport does not mention the wife who provides the time and labour necessary for Newport pursue his deep work (115).

I find this to be a wonderful invitation to reflect on who is holding space for me in my life. Of course, a natural extension of this idea is that not everyone has a safe and comfortable home in which they can enjoy solitude on their own terms. This is one of many inequalities that motivates me to work towards equality and liberation.

Further reading:

- Zenju Earthlyn Manuel 2020, *The Deepest Peace: Contemplations from a Season of Stillness*, Parallax Press.
- Kate H. Rademacher 2021, *Reclaiming Rest: The Promise of Sabbath, Solitude, and Stillness in a Restless World*, Broadleaf Books.
- Hannah Louise Belcher 2022, *Taking Off the Mask: Practical Exercises to Help Understand and Minimise the Effects of Autistic Camouflaging*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

## 9. Max: Living with trauma

Perhaps my deepest personal relationship, other than my relationship with my partner, is with my dogs.

Our third dog, chronologically, is named Max. Max is a delightfully happy and affectionate boy—for the most part!

My partner and I first met Max at about 10 pm on a winter night in June of 2024. June in Australia is “winter” by Australian standards, which is to say that the weather is quite refreshing and comfortable. I was hoping to spend my birthday relaxing and, for once, not experiencing any life-altering events.

### How we met Max

I’m not a social media user, but my partner is. She was browsing the vegan groups for our local area on Facebook when she noticed the drama of the day: a non-profit desperately needed to find a temporary home for one of their rescue dogs.

Like many dogs in this situation, Max had a mysterious upbringing. When we saw him on Facebook, he seemed to be about a year old. He was classified as an “American staffy cross”, which seems to be a euphemism for “a scraggly, beautiful mutt of mysterious heritage”. The non-profit couldn’t tell us much, other than that Max had been found for sale on Gumtree. As far as we could tell, the non-profit had acquired Max from the Gumtree seller and placed him in a foster home.

The problem was that Max had some serious behaviour challenges. He chased his tail and tried to bite it—a *lot*. At this stage, he was certainly not in a place where he could trust any human, so interventions to try to prevent this tail-chasing usually ended up with Max either growling or biting. For this reason, Max had been passed around to several foster homes over the course of about a week. There was no foster carer who had the capacity to understand and work on Max’s challenging behaviour.

This all came to a head on Facebook; Max’s current foster carer was living in a rental house, without permission from his landlord or his housemate to have a dog. Leaving Max at home all day resulted in barking and further emotional damage to Max, which was obviously not an option. But this foster carer had a full-time job and, having only recently moved to Australia from overseas, did not have any family upon whom he could fall back.

Tayla, having read all of this on Facebook, walked up to me. “Can we go pick up a dog?”

I thought for a moment. “Yep.”

Tayla got in touch with the current foster carer on the phone. The situation was more urgent than we had originally thought. Max had reopened a tail wound,

which he had apparently acquired in the preceding weeks when he had, at some point, injured his tail against the bars of a cage in which he was being kept. Moreover, the foster carer, out of options, had already called the RSPCA to surrender the dog. The RSPCA's handling of rescue animals has been criticised at length elsewhere; as with critiques of the RSPCA's role in farmed animal welfare policy, I do think that these criticisms have some merit. Here, it is sufficient to say that the RSPCA would certainly euthanize Max.

We live in a society that is unenlightened in providing non-human animals with the love and care that they deserve. From a global perspective, Australia is relatively progressive; there are high-quality vet clinics, and there is legislation that makes it illegal to cause animals "unnecessary" suffering. Likewise, dogs are in an almost unique position among non-human animals in having the love, affection, and understanding of many humans; this differs from animals like chickens, pigs, and fish, who are bred, tortured, and slaughtered at an industrial scale to produce food for the transient enjoyment of humans. Despite this privileged position, dogs in Australia are legally classified as property. Dogs can be legally bought and sold; they can be easily kept out-of-sight and mistreated; and they can even be legally killed if they cause an inconvenience to their "owner" or injury to other humans, as long as they are killed "humanely". Most humans in Australia have access to subsidised or free healthcare, but there is no Medicare for dogs; vet bills need to be paid out-of-pocket, and they can be very expensive.

At the same time, some specific breeds are privileged over others. Most people prefer to buy a puppy from a breeder rather than risk taking on a dog with an unknown background and usually an unknown mix of breeds. For these reasons, breeders of speciality dog breeds have long wait-lists filled with customers, while dogs who are less genetically fortunate are kept in cages and killed to make room in space- and funding-limited shelters.

This is the economic and legal system that produced a traumatised dog like Max and, through no fault of his own, placed him in the position of very nearly being killed. The way that dogs and animals are treated is not good enough, and we need to demand better from our elected leaders.

We hopped in the car. My partner drove the 45 minutes to the other side of the city, while I furiously texted the foster carer to hold off on the RSPCA surrender. To our relief, the foster carer reported that he had cancelled the surrender, and the RSPCA saw no need for further involvement.

The pick-up went smoothly. The foster carer was a lovely young man who spoke gently in his wonderful Irish accent. Clearly a compassionate guy, the foster carer was sorry to see Max go.

Max was relatively calm as we encouraged him up into the back seat of the car and drove him to the 24/7 vet clinic. We also used this time to arrange the pick-up of a plastic cone from a generous community member; while we could not immediately solve the tail-chasing behaviour, we hoped a plastic cone would at least put a physical barrier between Max's jaws and his tail.

The vet clinic prescribed him a couple of medications—most notably an antibiotic to prevent infection of the tail wound—and sent us on our way.

## **The challenging early days**

The next few days were extremely challenging and among the most difficult times I've experienced in several years.

Max was not desexed and, according to reports from the foster carers, had shown signs of aggression. Max had also, for all intents and purposes, a completely mysterious background. Until we understood Max's behaviour better and had him treated for any possible diseases, we could not introduce him to our other dog, Shiloh.

In those first couple of days, our solution was for Max to stay in the garage. Tayla and I have the immense privilege of owning our home, so we can be flexible with making modifications to the house. We set up our doggy camera in the garage so we could keep an eye on him during the night. We also erected a small barrier in the back garden from chicken wire, so Max could go outside, sniff around, and attend to his business without causing any problems for Shiloh. We booked Max in with a local vet clinic and took the earliest opportunity to have him vaccinated.

However, Shiloh could sense that something was up. Max continued to chase his tail and bark, and Shiloh began smacking her lips and panting—clear signs of anxiety and stress. I also struggled with anxiety in this period; between coordinating vet visits, the noise of Max's barking, and my fear that a neighbour would complain about the noise (especially as the garage shares a wall with our neighbour's garage), I was in a very difficult place.

One of the mental signals that I have learned to identify in myself is suicidal ideation. For me, this is a red flag that signals an unsustainable situation. In these early couple of days with Max, I found myself experiencing mental images of taking my own life. One evening, lying in a hot bath with the bathroom lights off, I had an image of me slitting my wrists and filling the bath with blood. I found some solace in the verse from the gospel of Mark: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" But I saw no way to calm the storm while my anxiety was feeling so intense.

Tayla and I decided that it would help nobody for me to continue spiralling like this. Instead, I took Shiloh for a two-night stay at my mother's house, which is the home in which I grew up. The solid sleep and the time spent relaxing in Mum's large garden was an enormous help, and my immensely generous mother—who is a big fan of Shiloh—didn't even mind when Shiloh did a poop on the carpet! If you needed further evidence that I lucked out in the mother department, this is it.

In a clearer state of mind, the situation appeared different. No longer was the situation with Max an insurmountable catastrophe; it was a challenge, yes, but a

challenge that came with options and, should luck have it, permanent solutions.

## **The wall**

I reflected on the most immediate and urgent short-term challenges. To me, the biggest problem was Shiloh's anxiety about having an unknown presence in her house. It occurred to me that if there were a barrier between Shiloh and Max, we could introduce them. This way, Max would be unlikely to harm Shiloh in any way, and Shiloh could get a good look at the interloper and understand what is going on in her territory.

I hopped online and ordered, with same-day delivery, three outdoor temporary fences and two indoor baby gates. Shiloh stayed at Mum's while I erected the wall.

By the time my handiwork was complete, and we had swapped a couple of rooms around, we had a hastily erected but sturdy barrier transecting the house. A history nut, I dubbed it the "Berlin wall" (my partner rolled her eyes at that one). One part of the house—with the laundry, the bathroom, and my office—was separated from the remainder of the house. Each side of the house had a door through which the dogs could access outside. Best of all, the backyard was also divided into two halves using the temporary outdoor fencing. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to keep two dogs from hurting each other, should they be so inclined.

The wall worked! Shiloh and Max were cautious and alert, of course, but Shiloh seemed to calm down and display fewer signs of anxiety once she understood who this strange creature was.

## **We're keeping him!**

Over these first few weeks, there were a few developments gradually taking place in the background. Firstly, Shiloh had also calmed down considerably. We also got the all-clear from the vet to allow Max and Shiloh to have some physical contact. The vet could see no sign of disease or infection, and his behaviour had calmed down. The wall, true to its name, was soon dismantled. Secondly, my partner was posting all over social media, seeking a permanent home for Max. But with Max's history of aggressive behaviour and clear, ongoing behaviour challenges, this was a hard sell. Thirdly, the non-profit organisation who had initially coordinated Max's care showed their true face; the owner of the organisation, having seen many of these posts by my partner on Facebook, began threatening my partner. The organisation itself actually turned out to be a shady one-person operation, owned and run by a woman who lived several hours away. When Max's case was originally posted on Facebook, the owner had been happy to collect donations; now, with my partner giving a more complete story of Max's history and seeking a permanent home, the owner had apparently become worried that this might pose some reputational damage to this small and

shady organisation. We just wanted to give Max a loving home, but we weren't about to accept threats; once we had obtained all of the information we needed about Max, my partner happily blocked the owner. There were threats of getting the law involved, but these have since evaporated (and, in fact, I suspect that any legal proceedings would have confirmed the shady nature of this non-profit beyond any doubt). I must also point out that this problem was caused by the individual owner; in contrast, a volunteer associated with the charity has been generous and helpful, and recently she even dropped off a bag of treats and toys for both Max and Shiloh.

Eventually, my partner and I thought: why don't we try to keep him? With Max and Shiloh having settled noticeably since those early days, this seemed like a more plausible option. Besides, it wasn't like we had any other options; understandably, a permanent home for Max was not otherwise forthcoming.

In those chaotic early days, I had prayed for a compassionate and caring dog guardian to come forward and take on responsibility for Max. It is often said that God doesn't always give you what you ask for, but God does give you what you need.

Like with Shiloh (see the next essay), we had the naive idea that we would be able to prevent Max from sleeping in our bed during the night. As it turns out, Max is a stubborn character. So, we made our peace with the four of us piling into bed together, despite the occasional need for physical contortion at bedtime.

## **Steady progress**

In Adelaide, there is a vet clinic that specialises in behavioural challenges. To say that I have been impressed by this clinic's work with Max would be an understatement.

Max has regular appointments with a veterinarian and a trainer at the clinic. Once we had taken Max for an MRI scan to rule out nerve damage, the staff of this clinic began working with us on finding the right balance of home modifications, routines, and medication to help address Max's behaviour issues. The staff at this clinic are both competent at their work and considerate at interacting with their clients; this is one of many pockets of compassionate, talented people working to help animals within an economic and legal system that holds us back.

Currently, Max is on a mix of four medications, which provide him with mental repose while he learns that he is in a safe and loving home. We have gradually identified his triggers and made modifications to our home to address them. We minimise the use of the gas stove to avoid the high-pitched clicking noise of the gas stove ignition; we have switched from having parcels delivered to using a post office parcel locker to avoid having people knock on the door; and, to my immense pleasure, I designed and built a new mechanical keyboard for my home office that is almost silent.

The success in reducing Max's tail-chasing behaviour has been remarkable. I

work professionally as a researcher and a data analyst, so naturally I have been recording how his behaviour has been progressing. Here are two graphs.

The first graph has two panels. Each panel shows one of two days—the top panel corresponds to Max’s tail-chasing behaviour on 17 July 2024, while the bottom panel corresponds to 20 October 2024. Each column represents a one-hour period, and the height of the column shows the number of times that Max chased his tail during that one-hour period on that day. I’ve also coloured in the columns to show how many of the tail-chasing events were high-intensity, medium-intensity, or low-intensity.

Clearly, there is a major decrease in the total number of tail-chasing events between July and October. It is also quite startling to see that there are far fewer high-intensity events in particular. This is major progress.

The second graph shows a longer period of time—from July to December 2024. Rather than splitting down the tail-chasing events by the time of day and by intensity, I’ve simply counted the total number of tail-chasing events on each day. This takes some effort to keep track of, which is why I’ve only recorded data for a handful of days over time!

Clearly, there is a major decline in the total number of tail-chasing events. In July, Max chased his tail 125 times in one day. By December, this had declined to just 28 times in one day. There is a blip at the end of October, when Max’s progress reversed; this was because we were experimenting with a new mix of anti-anxiety medications. Obviously, this cocktail didn’t work, so we tried yet another blend! Currently, Max is on gabapentin (600 mg morning and night), meloxicam (2.5 mg morning), clomipramine hydrochloride (25 mg morning and night), and paracetamol (500 mg morning and night). As you can imagine, getting all of Max’s medications into him—as well as similar anti-anxiety cocktails into Shiloh, my partner, and myself—requires some serious organisation and project management skills.

## **A happy and affectionate boy**

Beyond the clear picture painted by the data, it is obvious to my partner and me that Max has made astonishing progress. Max, like myself and many members of my family, is anxious and an overachiever—but unlike me and my siblings, Max’s anxiety has lessened considerably over time! The plastic cone was replaced with a more comfortable fabric cone, but after a few months Max could spend days at a time without his cone, and soon he no longer needed it at all. Now, he spends his mornings relaxing in the sun, rather than pacing about anxiously. When we watch a show in bed, Max almost immediately finds a comfortable spot and plops down, rather than taking several long minutes to relax. He has even learned, when we say the word “relax”, to drop down on his belly and wiggle his butt to the side until he’s in a relaxing posture.

In fact, it’s clear to me that Max just loves being a part of our family. He is



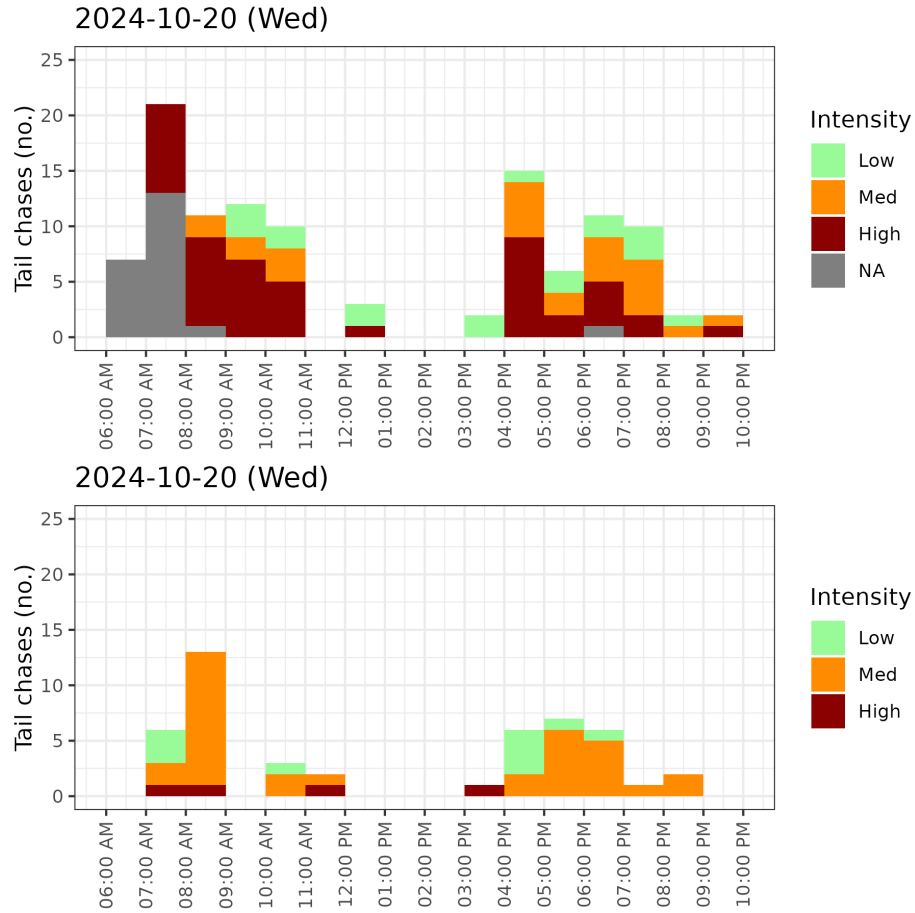


Figure 2: A two-panelled bar graph, with each panel illustrating tail spins throughout the course of a day. The top graph (2024-07-17) shows more instances of tail spinning, and higher-intense spinning, than the bottom graph (2024-10-20).

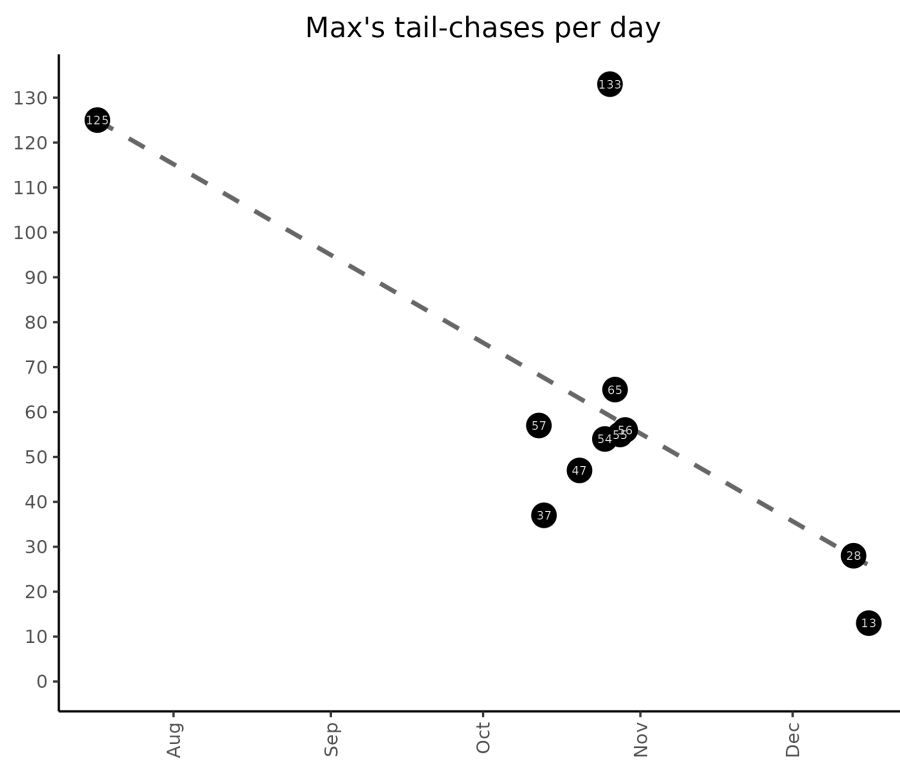


Figure 3: A line graph showing the decreasing number of tail-chases from 125 in July to 13 in December.

very affectionate and especially loves cuddles in the morning. He loves to do big stretches after his nap in the afternoon, and sometimes these stretches precedes a big howl: “Awoooo!”. He loves his peanut butter and his kibble, and he loves playing with his rope. He loves to hop into bed and snuggle up with me or my partner, and the physical sensation is reminiscent of a hot water bottle. Max, like my other dogs, is a miracle; I’m convinced that if God exists anywhere, it is here.

To help Max overcome his challenges, I have had to rearrange many aspects of my own life. I already had the good fortune to work in a fully remote job for a small animal welfare research organisation, so my work is uniquely flexible and my colleagues are uniquely understanding about this situation. It should go without saying that I’m in an unusually fortunate position with both this specific job at and having been equipped with the tools early in life that enable me to obtain and hold a job that offers this level of freedom and understanding.

However, we have had to limit our social visits from friends and family; during an early visit from my partner’s parents, Max became overwhelmed and bit the hand of my partner’s father. My poor father-in-law needed stitches, and we are fortunate that my partner comes from a supportive and compassionate family. But this did make us much more cautious with introducing Max to humans. Since that incident, Max has made good friends with my mother and with my close friend, also called Max, without any issue.

Having to live a more quiet and reserved lifestyle has helped me to slow down. I’m the type of introvert who considers the idea of living as a cave hermit to be quite appealing. I’m proud to be autistic, though it takes me a lot of energy to socialise with other humans. This has been exacerbated recently, as I have come out as transgender and begun hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Society imposes heavy emotional and political baggage on both trans people and autistic people. For me, this baggage has manifested in a few different ways: I have grown to feel less safe around other humans, I feel physically exhausted from undergoing a second puberty (as though the first puberty didn’t give me enough trouble!), and I have recently experienced some issues related to my body image, including disordered eating (see essay “Meeting my new body”).

Max is affectionate and loves being around me. When I’m lying in bed, he loves pinning me down and licking my face. Having a best friend like this has been liberating; Max doesn’t care about my gender, or whether I can perform neurotypical behaviours, or what my body looks like. He just wants peanut butter and belly rubs.

Further reading:

- Erin Jones 2024, *Constructing canine consent: Conceptualising and adopting a consent-focused relationship with dogs*, CRC Press.

## 10. Shiloh: Learning to trust

Shiloh is perhaps the most stubborn of our dogs—just try getting her inside the house in a hurry when she'd rather sit under her comfortable bush—but also the most food-motivated. Whenever we get takeaway, Shiloh's snout appears without fail, sniffing the interesting meal.

However, when Shiloh first came to us, she was an excited but extremely timid dog.

Shiloh had lived in the shelter for 450 days. In fact, when we decided that we would like to adopt another dog, our first step was to open the website of the Animal Welfare League and pick the dog who had been at the shelter the longest. Like Max, Shiloh was listed as an “American staffy cross”, meaning a mutt of ambiguous origin. Both Max and Shiloh have a similar appearance of white fur with black splodges, and our friends often comment that they could be siblings.

Part of the reason she had been in the shelter for so long was that she did not trust people. Shiloh had originally been found as a stray, wandering the streets. This explains much of the street smarts and self-defence skills that we would observe in her later on! When we visited the shelter and asked to be introduced to Shiloh, it was a slow process. First, the shelter attendant retrieved Shiloh from her cage and spend some time with her on a bench. Then, the shelter attendant asked my partner and me to sit on a bench, one at a time, while Shiloh comes and checks us out. The shelter attendant bribed Shiloh with many morsels! After about half an hour, we walked with Shiloh over to a fenced play area, where Shiloh could run loose while we sat and interacted with her.

All together, it took about an hour and a half for Shiloh to become somewhat comfortable with being next to me. I would offer her a scrap of fabric from the toy box, and she would play tug for a few seconds before wandering off to be in her own space and eye us suspiciously.

The shelter attendant asked us a couple of times whether we would be interested in meeting a different dog; naturally, the attendant was concerned that we would find Shiloh too much work and therefore forget the entire enterprise of adopting a dog. As it turns out, they need not have worried! My partner and I had already fallen in love with this timid but enthusiastic dog.

We agreed to take Shiloh home on the spot. The shelter attendant retrieved her walkie-talkie from her belt and announced the news to the rest of the shelter team: “Shiloh's getting adopted!” One of the shelter staff began to tear up as we led Shiloh towards our car. This story even made the feel-good section of the local evening news!

### Building trust

For the first couple of hours at her new home, Shiloh appeared terrified. She would sit next to our front door and refuse to come into the house at all. Tayla

and I decided to leave her be and let her explore when she decided that she was ready.

Fortunately, by the time evening came around, Shiloh was trotting around the house. She was particularly excited by our queen-sized bed and enjoyed doing zoomies around the bedroom. For the first night, we kept her in the living room, but since then she has always been welcome in our bed. To this day, Shiloh remains a massive bed hog; she will stubbornly seek out the most warm and comfortable spot she can find and refuse to budge.

Shiloh's timidity remained evident over the first few weeks of living with us. She warmed up to Tayla and me fairly quickly, perhaps because we were the bearers of kibble and peanut butter. However, when friends and family came over to visit, Shiloh would remain several metres away. She would usually watch our interactions with our friends from the hallway or from another room, close enough to keep an eye on proceedings but not entering into the immediate proximity of these new and strange humans. It took several visits from several friends and family members for Shiloh to overcome her timidity. Soon, she was accepting food from our visitors, and before long she was more excited to see the visitors than she is to see my partner and me! Her favourite humans are my friend Max, who often visits our house to co-work and is consistently mobbed by Shiloh's demands for belly rubs, and my mother, whose house and big backyard Shiloh loves to visit.

Shiloh also displays resource-guarding behaviour. Specifically, she protects any food source from any perceived threat, even if this means growling or snapping at me, my partner, or our dog Max. This may well be another natural consequence of Shiloh's time as a stray, where food would have been a scarce and fiercely protected resource. It breaks my heart that Shiloh feels that she needs to protect her food in this way—we have an entire shelf of the fridge full of food for her!—but we do our best to provide her with space when she needs it.

## **The role of the physical environment**

One thing that Shiloh has taught me is the important role of physical environments in setting up both non-human animals and humans for success.

Consider Shiloh's regular vet clinic. This building is poorly designed for its purpose. There is a single front door, and the waiting area is positioned between the door and the front desk; for dogs who are frightened of other dogs or humans, this introduces unnecessary interactions with others. Often, mail carriers will enter the clinic and hand their packages to the front desk, occupying the same physical space used by dogs and their guardians. The vet clinic is by a main road; this may be unavoidable, but no steps have been taken to dampen the sound or sights associated with the busy road. A parrot is kept in a cage by the front door—now, I love parrots as much as the next Australian ecology graduate, and I've even been involved in caring for several rescue parrots myself. But parrots, especially talkative parrots, can be a trigger for many dogs' anxious or aggressive

behaviour. The decision to position a parrot cage such that dogs are required to walk past the parrot to access the vet clinic is a genuine head-scratcher.

From the perception of an anxious dog, this building is a very frightening environment. Rather than helping dogs to succeed and recover from trauma, this sets up dogs to fail.

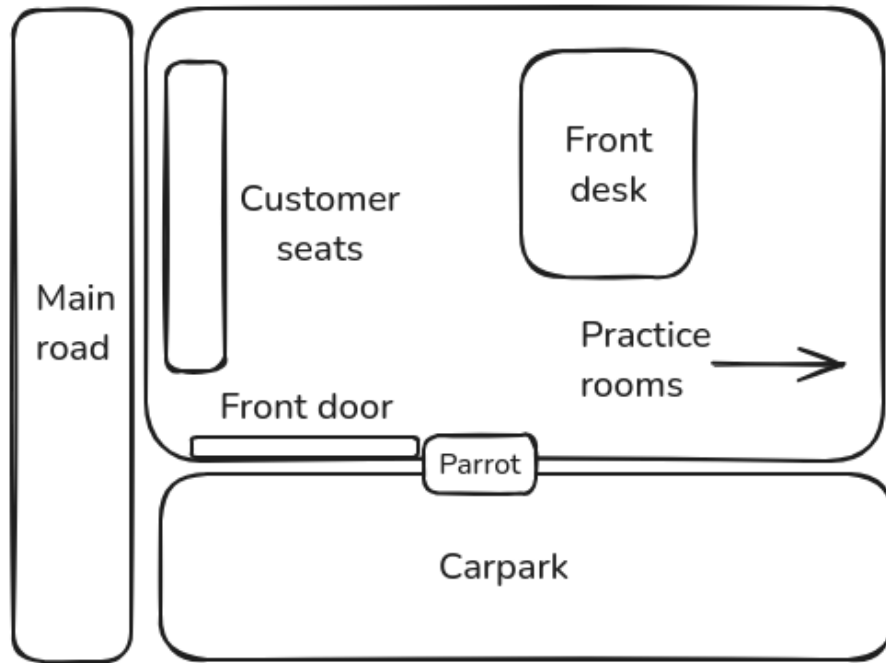


Figure 4: A sketch of the rough layout of Shiloh's vet clinic, which contains many unnecessary triggers such as a poorly positioned waiting room and a caged parrot.

Compare this to Max's behavioural specialist clinic. This clinic is also situated on a main road, but there is a large fence between the car park and the road to minimise the sensory consequences of this location. Most significantly, each car park has a large sign that explains to guardians to phone the vet clinic first to ensure that nobody is using the waiting room. This minimises unnecessary contact. From the perception of an anxious dog, this is a relatively stress-free environment where triggers are minimised.

Many autistic people understand this intuitively. I'm sensitive to overstimulating physical environments myself—I am most comfortable in a dark, silent room with minimal sensory stimulation, and when even a small aspect of my physical environment is wrong, I feel it in my body. So, I'm naturally attuned to how others, including animals, respond to physical environments. Famously, Temple

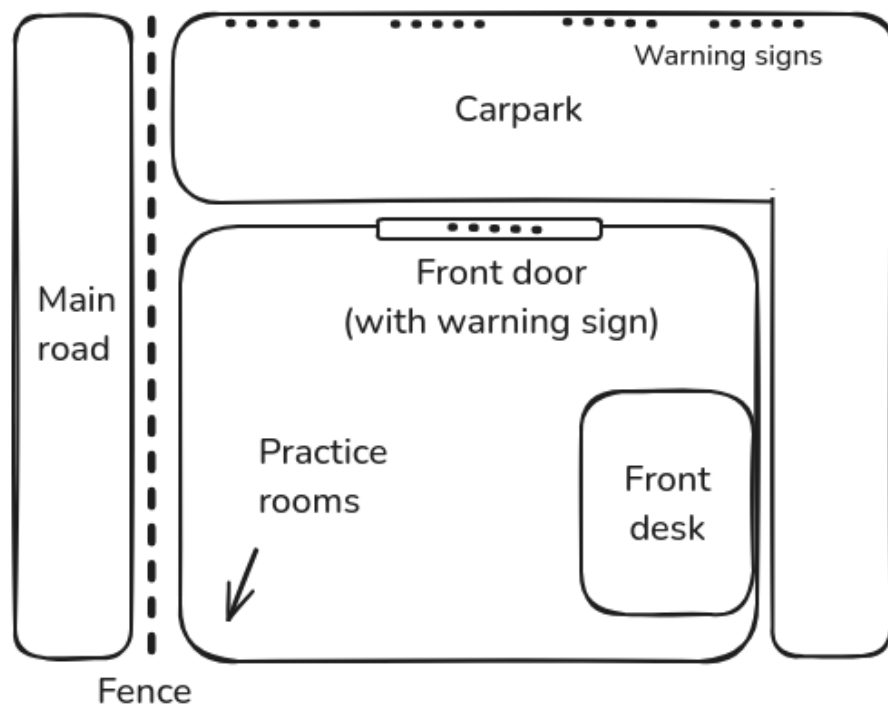


Figure 5: A sketch of the rough layout of Max's behavioural specialist vet clinic, which is well-designed to minimise unnecessary stimulation and anxiety.

Grandin partially credits her autism for her invention of a slightly less awful cattle-slaughtering facility, which is slightly less frightening for the cattle, reduces both stress and injury, and is now used in cattle slaughtering operations around the world.

I do want to emphasise that while I think physical environments are an underappreciated aspect of animal care, the physical layout of the vet clinic is my only issue with Shiloh's vet! We have been thoroughly impressed for the patience and care shown towards Shiloh by the vets, including letting Shiloh into the building through the back entrance and allowing slightly longer appointments to ensure that Shiloh does not feel rushed or pressured. In fact, my experiences with my city's veterinarians has been almost entirely positive. Once, when we took Shiloh to a vet clinic that is not her regular clinic, we even met a vet nurse who recognised Shiloh from her time in the shelter; apparently, this nurse had worked with Shiloh at the shelter. I'm deeply grateful for the expertise and care that these professionals offer to animals every day.

## **Shiloh's meltdown**

We don't walk Shiloh anymore; rather, we focus on providing her with mental stimulation and enrichment at home. The reason is a near-miss incident that occurred during a walk around the neighbourhood.

I was walking Shiloh myself, without my partner present. We were just a few houses down the road when a pedestrian walked past. Shiloh became frightened and began barking at the pedestrian, who continued walking. Shiloh would not calm down. The pedestrian got to the bus stop, which was between us and our driveway.

Shiloh seems to have interpreted this pedestrian's physical position as a threat to our home. Shiloh refused to continue walking in our original direction, and she tried to pull me back home. However, I could not walk her back home, as that would take us past the pedestrian. So, I used my strength to hold her still on the ground and make us stop walking. I was patting her, and she was lying on the floor, still agitated but not actively barking.

We were stuck. We remained in that position for a few minutes or so, and I realised that the pedestrian was waiting for the bus. I called my partner, who was at work but promised to send her dad over to rescue Shiloh and me.

A few minutes after the phone call, a man driving a station wagon pulled over and asked if we were okay. He parked on the side of the road and got out of the car, and walked around to us. I told him we were okay and that I live just a few houses down. He offered his hand to Shiloh. Shiloh sniffed his hand, but quickly growled and snapped at the man in an attempt to bite.

The man backed away, and said he got a bit of a nip on his stomach. I offered to give him my details, and he said that there was no need. While it probably wasn't the smartest move to offer his hand to Shiloh, who was clearly feeling



threatened and vulnerable, I'm grateful for this man's kindness. I noticed that a bus had come, and the pedestrian had mercifully boarded the bus.

So, picked up Shiloh and carried her home. Shiloh is a relatively heavy dog, weighing around 25 kg; I was grateful for all of the strength training I had been doing for soccer! My knees had been skinned by the cement and were covered in blood. A final hurdle was that school had just been let out, and two groups of students walked past me. Fortunately, Shiloh did not seem very bothered by the children. Hauling Shiloh in my arms, we managed to stumble home without further incident.

## Burying the bird

I am constantly reminded that we do not live in a morally perfect universe; as a dog guardian, I am a primate descendant who happens to be caring for wolf descendants. While we ought to implement policies and actions to stop sentient creatures from hurting each other, which includes reducing the opportunities for animals to hurt people and other non-human animals, there is occasionally tragic conflict.

There's a beautiful contemporary coming-of-age novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The novel addresses themes like anger, grief, and queer identity. The setting is a community of families of Mexican origin in the United States. In the scene I found most touching, the two main characters (Aristotle and Dante) encounter a group of kids shooting sparrows with BB guns. They had just killed a bird before the main characters enter onto the scene. Dante uses his anger and Aristotle uses his size and strength to scare off the kids. Then, Dante begins to cry, and asks Aristotle to help him bury the bird.

Recently, Shiloh killed a pigeon. My partner and I did not see how she got the pigeon—perhaps the bird was already injured or sick. In any case, I heard my partner calling for me from the backyard. I went outside and saw Shiloh trying to grab this pigeon. I intervened and restrained Shiloh from attacking the bird any further. I picked up the pigeon. They had several bleeding puncture wounds in their abdomen. As I held the pigeon, they began to cough. Their mouth filled with blood. Then, they died. I buried the bird.

## 11. Rizzo: Love, grief, and saying goodbye

Chronologically, Max is our third dog and Shiloh is our second dog. Right now, both live with my partner and me in our beautiful home.

The first dog who lived with my partner and me was Rizzo. Sadly, Rizzo passed away very young.

### “I’m just going to look!”

One weekend morning, not long after my partner bought us our wonderful new house, Tayla told me that she and her sister were going to visit the local RSPCA shelter. The shelter was having a “sale” on rescue dogs to clear space in the shelter. She told me that she was “just going to look”. I laced up my sneakers and went for a run, knowing full well that this would be my last opportunity to have some peace and quiet!

Rizzo was a brown Staffordshire Bull Terrier cross; unlike Max and Shiloh, this seems to be an accurate description of Rizzo’s breed. Rizzo was four years old and had come to the shelter after being surrendered by a family, who were concerned for the safety of their baby. As it turns out, Rizzo was the most gentle and careful dog I had ever met. However, as with Shiloh, we did encounter an incident where Rizzo caught and killed a pigeon in our backyard (see below). I wonder if Rizzo’s original family may have witnessed an incident like this and become concerned for their human child’s safety. Rizzo also weighted 45 kg, as the family’s time constraints meant that they were unable to provide proper care, nutrition, and exercise for her, which also contributed to their decision to surrender her to the shelter.

Rizzo was a beautiful and trusting dog from the very first day. She loved to play with squeaky toys, which is how my partner had originally made friends with her at the shelter. After Rizzo was brought home, she quietly but enthusiastically explored her new surroundings.

I quickly fell in love with this bumbly and gentle girl, and she became comfortable around us. Rizzo slept in her soft dog bed in our bedroom. One morning, after I had shed my pajama pants in the warmth of the night, I woke up to find that Rizzo had taken my pants, carried them over to her bed, and snuggled up with them. In the mornings, Rizzo would greet us with her waggly tail and, when she was particularly excited, hopping around in one place like a kangaroo. When we watched TV on the couch, Rizzo would take a long run-up, then launch her front legs onto the couch before clambering her back legs up too. Having successfully scaled the couch, she would proceed to fall asleep on top of us—all 45 kg of her—and snore loudly. Like Shiloh, Rizzo could be stubborn when she decided that she was in a comfortable position, and Rizzo’s size and strength gave her a particular advantage over my partner and me in these situations.

Rizzo loved walks. She was always excited to go on her walks and would pull us

forward so she could smell all the different smells. She especially loved the park. She would explore with her snout, often sniffing out pieces of fruit or mushrooms that she would pick up with her powerful jaws (to our regular frustration). Due to her physical size and strength, we attached two leads to her harness and carried each lead in one hand. By the end of the walk, she would become physically tired, and then we would have to be the ones dragging her to the finish line.

Like Shiloh, Rizzo also killed a pigeon. With Rizzo, this happened late on a cold and rainy night. The pigeon had been sitting in a bush in our backyard; Rizzo must have spotted them, as she simply batted them out of the tree with her paw and crushed them with her jaws. The brutality of this shocked me, and I was upset with Rizzo for a few days. It should go without saying that, for a wolf descendant, this is a perfectly ordinary and natural behaviour. But I needed to take the time to let my mind process this event.

## Seizures

When Rizzo experienced her first seizure, neither my partner or I knew what was happening. It was late in the evening and we were in bed. I was reading, and my partner was asleep already. Rizzo's grunting alerted us that something was wrong. We turned the light off and saw that her body was convulsing and she was foaming at the mouth. My partner quickly dialled the 24/7 emergency vet, who told us to bring her in. Fortunately, Rizzo recovered from this first seizure while we were in the car on the way to the vet; later, it occurred to me how disorienting this must have felt for her.

It was fortunate that Rizzo recovered from this seizure relatively quickly. If a dog remains in a seizure for longer than a few minutes, then the risk of death increases significantly. Since my partner and I wanted to keep Rizzo under constant watch for 48 hours, I had a long and sleepless night ahead of me; naturally, I used this opportunity to acquaint myself with the veterinary science literature on seizures in dogs.

Over the following weeks and months, the seizures continued to occur. Sometimes, the seizures were relatively small focal-onset seizures, in which Rizzo would often remain standing and conscious but foam and twitch at the mouth. Other times, the seizures were generalised-onset seizures that included loss of consciousness (116). We had several appointments with the vet to address Rizzo's seizures through medication.

Unfortunately, we learned that each seizure in a dog tends to reduce the dog's threshold for additional seizures in the future. We observed this in Rizzo; the seizures became more and more regular.

Rizzo also experienced a rare side-effect to one of the epilepsy medications, where her blood cell count became dangerously low and she displayed fatigue and drowsiness. It was heartbreaking to see her so unwell, and we quickly withdrew

the medication on veterinary advice. However, being forced to withdraw this medication meant that we had one fewer treatment options for Rizzo's epilepsy.

One day, when I was at home with Rizzo, she began displaying a focal-onset seizure. Her head was bobbing and her lips were flapping. I had not seen this behaviour before. I interacted with her to monitor the seizure, but it would not stop; the seizure lasted three minutes, then five minutes, then ten minutes. My partner quickly left work to pick us up and drive Rizzo to the emergency vet clinic. Rizzo was immediately admitted and sedated.

The following three days were agony. Rizzo was kept in hospital, and we were updated with her progress with occasional phone calls. The hospital tried many avenues for resolving her current seizure but could not manage to do so without keeping her sedated. Both the hospital and the neurology hospital ran out of options. Soon, we got the call that Rizzo would need to be put to sleep. We came into the hospital and paid the up-front fee for her treatment, which ended up totalling over 10,000 Australian dollars (over 6,500 United States dollars).

When we walked into the intensive care room, we saw that Rizzo was sedated and unconscious, lying on her stomach with her legs splayed outwards. The nurses had given her a mouth guard to prevent her biting her tongue and a wet towel to keep her temperature down. I told Rizzo that if her beautiful brain had had enough and if she needed to go, then it was okay and that I loved her with my entire heart. Rizzo spent her final moments unconscious but held by my partner and me.

### **Why couldn't it have been us?**

The period after Rizzo's death remains the darkest period of my life, and I am no stranger to dark moments. My partner and I could not understand why such a beautiful and gentle dog had to die so young and so soon after being adopted by her new family. It was all that we could manage to wake up in the morning. We postponed our wedding, as we did not feel like celebrating.

One of the few mercies of epilepsy is that when Rizzo had a seizure, she was generally unconscious. Likewise, when she was in hospital, she was kept sedated for almost the whole time. This means that Rizzo would not have experienced much or any suffering during her illness and death.

My partner and I wondered why Rizzo had to die when it could have been us. We would have given our lives in a heartbeat for Rizzo to have been okay (and we still would, to this day). The only consolation that I have been able to find is that while my partner and I both suffered immensely, Rizzo likely did not experience much conscious suffering.

## Animal grief falls through the cracks

Society usually invalidates grief over the death or suffering of animals. This is sometimes called “disenfranchised grief” (117). I have a tattoo of Rizzo’s paw print over my heart, and I wear a locket containing some of her ashes every day. But not everybody sees things this way.

When Rizzo passed away, the vet who was overseeing things—who was a lovely and considerate person, especially considering the emotional burden and stress that veterinarians experience as part of their day-to-day work (117)—told me, after Rizzo had just died, “Go home and have a glass of red wine.” I’m not sure if this is advice you would receive after the death of a human child.

Society also invalidates more general grief over the suffering of non-humans in the world. On a typical work day, I might work my butt off trying to make the lives of farmed fish or chickens a little bit less awful. Then to unwind, I’ll go and visit family—who are lovely and considerate people—only to have to sit there and watch them cook and eat one of the animals I was trying to help.

In both cases, the person is totally lovely and wonderful person whom I’m grateful to have in my life, and in neither case is the person deliberately trying to cause harm. Both are consequences of the way that society and its values have been built.

I’ve felt this deep sadness and grief over non-human animals for as long as I can remember. Once, during my early childhood, I became upset over a tray of meat that had been stored in the family fridge. I took the tray outside and buried it in dirt, giving the animal the burial I believed they deserved. It was a clumsy action to express this grief, certainly. Fortunately, my education has enabled me to sharpen and hone this grief into a tool that I can use to help build meaningful change in the world.

Grief about non-human suffering is receiving more attention and validation in the context of environmental grief (94). However, there is a long way to go until animals are treasured as the inherently valuable creatures that they are.

Therapists and scholars examining grief often emphasise the role of continuing bonds, maintaining and developing a connection with the one who has died (118). I still speak to Rizzo. We keep her ashes in a beautiful granite stone under the shade of a tree in the garden, next to one of her favourite balls and a log that she loved to carry around in her jaws. I visit her regularly to tell her that we miss her and that I love her.

## 12. Bright sadness

Some days, I feel like I spend my life in a constant and unremitting feeling of grief. There are countless events in our world that are just intolerably wrong. Sometimes, continuing feels like a heavy burden. I feel like I'm living in constant mourning.

I grieve for animals. I grieve for my dear Rizzo, who was taken from us far too early. I grieve for the billions of animals around the world who are tortured and slaughtered for humans' brief pleasure.

I grieve for my trans and queer siblings. It feels like not a week goes by without the news of another murder or violent death of one of our trans siblings. During one meditation retreat, I sat in the meditation hall with three slices of bread. I felt the softness of the bread and the texture of the crust under my fingers. I enjoyed the earthy scent. Why am I given this bread, through no virtue of my own, while so many of my trans siblings are dead and buried? There is no good reason for this.

It would be easy to respond with anger and violence. Especially during high school, I have previously come very close to this temptation. Had events played out differently, my life could have taken a much more violent path. Some days, I even want to die. I have graphic thoughts about suicide quite frequently—some weeks they don't come at all, while other weeks they come most days.

### Grieving for a different life

I mourn and grieve for my missed time as a girl and young woman. I first began to consciously accept my gender identity at age 25, though there were clear signs of my true gender identity well before that. I began hormone replacement therapy at age 26. That's almost one-third of my life living in a social role that does not accurately capture who I am—my entire childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

What opportunities and experiences and friendships were taken from me through society's failure to help me figure out who I actually am? I'm certainly not the only member of the trans community who feels this way.

I have learned over time that this "what-if" thinking isn't constructive. My parents did a wonderful job of raising me and my four siblings, especially with the major emotional and financial challenges that I now know they were facing. I feel the same way about the teachers and mentors from my early childhood, who were kind and compassionate almost without exception.

I've observed my inner child being oppressed by me, but also by others. Sometimes, other people feel ashamed or uncertain about an adult expressing behaviours or ideas deemed "childish". I think this sometimes parallels how we can be gendered by others. It's a subtle (and sometimes overt) violence that has its roots in other people's anxiety and fear.

Consider two of the great writers of the 20th century. A. A. Milne wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*, and J. D. Salinger wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*. The Pooh stories are literally about a child's adventures in the woods with his Pooh Bear, his Piglet, and his other friends. *The Catcher in the Rye* is about a sensitive teenager who misses his dead little brother, loves his living little sister, and feels alienated and scared about growing up. It's interesting to me that we have two celebrated writers who both fought in intensely violent wars and returned home to write about, essentially, the beauty and wonder of childhood.

I can practice to transform my grief and to heal my inner child, who is still with me. Thich Nhat Hanh taught that our inner child is still inside us, and we can sit with this child and help them to heal. Along similar lines, Tiffany Landry offers some tools for helping to reparent, care for, and support your queer, neurodivergent inner child (119). Even as adults, we can offer our inner child the resources and connection and celebration that they may never have received.

I can also practice to help children find their own path, which is part of being a good ancestor. If there is a purpose to my trans experience, then this is certainly part of it. I suspect many of these ripples are totally invisible to me. My nephew came over to my house one day. He said a grand total of five words to me, but I looked at his Pokémon cards, he looked at mine, and we made some trades. His mother texted me after he got home that he had said to her: "I want coloured hair." I think the children in our life are more influenced by our presence than we might suspect!

## Bright sadness

It's not just my own childhood that I grieve. I also feel grief that I do not have the opportunity to bear children myself. This is a strange grief; even if I were equipped with the appropriate physiology for childbearing, I would likely choose not to bear children all the same. Our world does not feel like the safe and stable place into which I want to bring new lives. At the same time, the grief over childbearing is real.

Childbearing is a topic that is surprisingly salient in my professional life. Much of my work focuses on figuring out how to spend limited resources to bring about the best improvement in the lives of animals. This involves a deep understanding of the scientific literature on pain and physical suffering. Due to modern research ethics, it is difficult to come by detailed evidence about how people and animals respond to physical pain. However, one source of pain that is recorded in abundance in the academic literature is childbirth. As such, there are studies on the physical experience of childbirth that form important pieces of evidence for the underlying philosophy of my work. While I need to understand with this evidence in order to do my best work, it is difficult to engage with this topic.

The term "bright sadness" comes from Orthodox Christianity. Often associated

with the season of Lent, bright sadness refers to a feeling that mixes both joy and grief (120). This feeling is well-known to many peace activists (121).

A mentor recently pointed out to me that I have a deeply maternal personality. While I had never thought of myself in these terms, this phrase hit me like the proverbial bolt of lightning. While my body cannot bear new children—a challenge also faced by many cisgender women—I can cultivate my maternal relationship with other beings. I can express my unconditional love towards the people, and particularly the young people, in my life. I can work hard and make sacrifices when caring for others. I can certainly feel deeply the profound suffering of the world. Bright sadness.

My practice is non-succumbing. Breathing in, I enjoy the earthy scent of the bread. Breathing out, I give thanks for the wonder of this bread. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, as recorded in the Gospels, he said (Luke 22:19 NRSV): “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

It is crystal clear that caring for my body is caring for the bodies of our siblings. Caring for my body is caring for my inner young girl. Caring for my body is caring for the fish and the chickens and the pigs and the shrimp and the beetles. Caring for my body helps to progress the cause of trans justice. Enough trans people have died violent deaths. I can keep living, in part, for them.

I can eat the bread and use it to fuel my body. Using my body, I can do a great deal of good with the skills and abilities that I have been given. I can, as much as possible given my strengths and limitations, make the world kinder to its trans inhabitants; I can stop fish and chickens and shrimp from dying in agony. I cannot die a noble death to stop even one fish from suffocating to death on the factory floor, but I can live humbly to prevent this agonising experience for *more than one fish*. Bright sadness.

Further reading:

- Christopher J. H. Wright 2023, *Hearing the message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning faith in a baffling world*, Zondervan.

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