



A LETTER TO MY TEENAGE SELF

BY JEY EHRENHALT

DEAR ME, I know you're having a rough time of it. It's not easy being trans at a time when few people believe trans individuals exist.

I know of your sadness in being told not to get too close to the other boys, your shame in the incessant reminders to act more like a girl. I remember your pain in the other boys growing taller around you, dwarfing your five-foot frame; when they sprouted muscles and stopped giving you the time of day.

I know as a trans person you think you should bury your feelings, stay quiet and try not to bother anyone with your unnatural thoughts. With no glaring injustices, or substantial abuse, this is a confusing kind of pain. As the school administration frowns upon bullying, the ghost of discrimination haunts you. You bear no battle scars as visible proof. Yet I recall bigotry's sharp scrape against your insides, its coldcocking heartbeat, its strangled sips of shallow breath.

A few stories arose worth retelling; those kids who yelled "faggot," or those football players who tried to run you over as you crossed the street. But it didn't seem to matter much. Mostly life at school hummed along quietly.

When you heard "no homo" for the thousandth time, what was there to say? Yet those scenes stacked up steadily, and you were left with shaky ground on which to stand. There was that sideways gaze as you held a girl's hand; no big deal, just push it down. Another whisper, another stare. No big deal, all over again. Until a creeping suspicion whispered in your ear: This is all happening because of who I am.

Your confidence learned to tremble, shaking your basic sense of safety in the world.

I want to call out these confusing phenomena to you, once and for all, as microaggressions. Microaggressions enact commonplace indignities, targeting any member of a marginalized group. Often they are subtle. The perpetrator may or may not be aware of them.

That classmate chuckling at a transgender person on TV? Microaggression. Your best friend offering you \$10 to come to school dressed like a girl? Microaggression. Misusing

pronouns; family forgetting to say the right name; peers dodging you in the locker room; friends asking, “Have you always been like that?” Microaggressions. The list rattles on, infinite.

These jarring moments are easy enough to shrug off, to bury somewhere deep down. But the cumulative effect of attending school in this environment is humiliating and all too real.

It’s true your school did not condone violence or open hostility. Most schools don’t. But more than 90 percent of LGBT students hear homophobic slurs like *faggot*, *dyke* and *queer* at school. This type of verbal abuse correlates with peer rejection, harassment and poor relationships with family members. It elevates the risk for depression, anxiety and suicidality. Afraid to come to school, many of your gender-nonconforming peers drop out and suffer from a marred sense of their own self-worth.

You got out, but it could have been better. More could have been done. Your teachers could have considered the complexities of privilege and oppression, or their own experiences of gender. Your kindergarten teacher could have asked the class, “Why is it that Prince Charming easily takes care of himself and others, but Cinderella seems to need so much help?” or “How come all of Cinderella’s sisters have long hair and want to marry a man?” Although, as a teacher now myself, I know sometimes there’s just enough time in the day for a lesson plan like this.

Your school could have accessed books like *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools*, with its research-based strategies, anecdotes and authors who are trans. But reading takes time, dedication and patience, and the resulting changes happen slowly. You needed change immediately, when walking to school every morning felt like tunneling through mineshafts of worthlessness and shame.

Do not give up. You are strong enough to live in the present. You haven’t learned this yet, but running away from your feelings will only heighten the intensity of the pain. Believe it or not, at the heart of your trauma lies the effort to control or change your experiences. The present may feel painful, overwhelming or numb, but ultimately, reality is the securest place to be. Stay here for a change. Safe is not always so far away.

Love,
Me

Ehrenhalt has taught English and special education in Portland, Oregon, and currently works and practices at San Francisco Zen Center.

Peace of Mind

As an adult, Ehrenhalt found hope in mindfulness and meditation. Meditation has been shown to increase resilience and help individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder to manage their symptoms and deny the unpleasant thoughts that interfere with their lives.

Even very young children can practice meditation; it can be as simple as counting one’s breaths.

A meditation practice encourages focusing on one’s body and emotions “right now, right here.” Becoming grounded in the moment reveals that thoughts and feelings are always changing. What seems unbearable in the moment will inevitably pass.

With practice, negative memories and feelings—like the ones Ehrenhalt carried from their childhood—become less overwhelming and easier to accept.

Meditation cannot end suffering, but it offers a way to meet the challenges in one’s life and face difficulties instead of suppressing feelings or running away. It offers a tool for replacing the painful inner chaos of being different with knowing this: It’s OK to be who you are.

