

Embracing the enigmatic truth behind my child's happiness.

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For James

Who was an animal in captivity,

Who found

The key to unlock the door of his cage,

The strength to open it,

The courage to step into freedom,

And the energy to engage in his natural habitat.

Preface

Writing 'Embracing the enigmatic truth behind my child's happiness,' has been an incredibly personal journey, as it is about my thoughts and feelings about my transgender son James and our relationship. It has been like trying to unravel a misshapen ball of knotted string. One of those annoying misshapen balls of string, that takes up a lot of room in a drawer that keeps getting things caught in it and should be thrown away, but it never does, because it will just take a 'few minutes' to sort out. But we all know that unravelling a tangled ball of string is going to require patience, determination and a lot of thinking through. As one bit of string is unravelled another tangled mess appears, with one knot leading to three or four other knots that seem to spring from nowhere. Undoing them seems impossible, but as with all puzzles there is always a solution.

Considering one of my children to be transgender is something I had never thought about, and when such an identity became clear I realised a process had begun that would be both challenging and painful. At times I feel my beliefs have been tested to the limit. There were some beliefs I didn't know I had and discovering I did both shocked and shamed me. The consequences of which left me in an uncomfortable, cold and empty place. I knew if I did not confront these beliefs I would create a barrier between my son and myself.

Knowing that it is my child's happiness and the relationship I have with my child that really matters, to confront my beliefs was unquestionably the most natural and necessary path to take, and one that I have felt constantly grounded by. However, it has not always been an easy path. Since my youngest child, born a girl, has become a transgender man, I have been on a see saw, wavering between the acceptance of gaining a son and coming to terms with the loss of a daughter and her name. All this has left me sometimes happy, relieved and reassured but at other times drained, confused and bewildered.

As a child my 'daughter' was brimming with life, mischief, energy, that over the years gradually faded, the light from her eyes dulled with pain and uncertainty, overshadowed by an overwhelming sense of being lost in a

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world that she did not fit into. I can only begin to imagine the suffering and conflict James must have experienced as a girl. Shackled to a body that does not reflect and as such impedes the gender James feels he is. I can only assume it was as if his sense of self was constantly betrayed and redefined by the persistent image of the gender his body belied.

It is at this point I am reminded of the Suffragette movement. A movement that strived for the equality of women, as a reaction to their unequal status to their male counterpart. I wonder if that is how James' gender had been regarded in his female body. His maleness being repressed, seen as inferior within the constraints of a female body and the expectations that society assumes about that gender.

Being in so much conflict sapped the life and soul away from James, who in the end I like to think looked around him and decided to free himself from the chains of discord that had wracked his very being, so that he could be himself. Such decisive action has enabled James to emerge as a happy, confident, self-assured person, who is full of fun, energy and laughter.

Thinking about the loss of my daughter Emily and James' regeneration of the wonderful, unique and vibrant person that my second child has become I am struck by the notion of bread – the staff of life.

When I was a child in the 1960s the only bread you could buy in a supermarket was mass produced white sliced bread - thin, medium or thick cut – that came pre-packaged with the manufacturers label emblazoned across it. Regardless of whether it was thin, medium or thick cut it would always be the same shape and size to fit into its pre-packaged bag.

Alternatively, you had the option to go to the bakers where there was a variety of hand crafted bread – white, brown, wholemeal, granary, all unsliced and all different shapes and sizes – small or large - sandwich, split tin, bloomer, cottage to name but a few. Each loaf had depth to its flavour and texture, each batch never quite the same as the previous one.

James is like the bread from the bakers, having his own unique character with a depth that has been created from the skill and knowledge of his own sense of being. On the other hand, I feel Emily, given the constraints of the gender she presented, was only allowed to be the mass produced white sliced bread of the 1960s, having to conform to rules that ensured she would fit into a plastic bag with a label describing her contents. She, like any of us, did not like conforming to rules she did not feel happy with, and as such ceased to exist. It is an interesting analogy that the manufacturers who produced white sliced bread on a large scale from my childhood have either ceased to exist or changed how they make and present their bread.

Once James began to believe in himself and break free from the captivity of being Emily, he was able to liberate his sense of self, enabling his self-assurance and confidence to transcend with an overwhelming sense of happiness and strength. I feel James has become empowered by the fact that he now accepts, respects and owns his sense of self. It is like he was a nobody, who became somebody, who matters.

James tremendous inner strength has nourished his presence that imbues love, happiness and compassion. I can only surmise that his exceptional ability to accept and understand others owes much to his suffering when he was deemed a girl called Emily. From suffering has evolved beauty. James' beauty created from his life's experiences makes me think of the apple tree in our garden.

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Every spring the tree is awash with pink and white blossom that is replaced with small fruits which eventually become full grown apples – some remain green whilst others turn bright red. Throughout the year the branches of the tree arc gracefully across a barn providing a sublime natural and stunning focal point to the garden, enhancing all that it surrounds. I feel James' beautiful personality stands out like the apple tree. His presence and generosity of spirit enriching the atmosphere to those around him.

During this journey of discovery, I have felt the constancy of knowing that the most important part of it is my relationship with James and his happiness. Understanding this has enabled me to accept and respect, with an open mind, James' sense of self and happiness. Not long ago I wrote a definition of acceptance, which I gave to James, and which reminds me of the importance of valuing and accepting another person's choices about him or herself.

Throughout life we are faced with infinite experiences. Our sense of self, which in turn determines the choices we make on how we encounter those experiences, inevitably affects and influences our sense of being and how we change. Some of the choices we make others may not like, understand, feel comfortable with or accept. But our choices are ours alone. They are personal, pertaining to our sense of self. How others perceive or judge them is irrelevant, because they are not their choices.

I am so glad I have taken the patience and determination to unravel that tangled ball of string, which of course still has more tangles to undo. I have learnt so much about James, about myself and about a part of society I was completely ignorant of. It has opened so many doors of understanding and acceptance for me, challenging and washing away ill-conceived ideas and prejudices. The communication between James and myself had been like listening to a radio station for a very long time. The loud buzz that signifies poor transmission coupled with the constant interference from other stations, creating fragmentation of its communication that gives rise to confusion, misunderstandings and frustration. But now we have found the right wave length to tune into. The sound is clear, unhindered and well defined without distortion or ambiguity.

Embracing the enigma that having a transgender child presents to me, has only been possible through the reciprocal process of compassion and respect that James and I have shown for each other. Having such a loving and supportive relationship I am convinced we have both been strengthened by each other, and formed a strong bond of lifelong friendship.

NB The names James and Emily are pseudonyms to keep the identity of my son anonymous.

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