

*‘What I don’t understand is that urge to condemn people to hell or a place of pain. It amazes me how many Christians do this.’*

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My given name was Nick. I was assigned male at birth and I grew up as a boy. In many respects I had a very ordinary upbringing, yet from a very early age I was extremely uncomfortable in my own body. From age four I felt I should have been a girl. My clothes, the way I was seen and the pronouns used to describe me just didn’t make sense. I was too young to articulate it, but the sensation never went away as I grew up. It became worse in my teens as my body developed.

Running alongside that were all the teenage confusions that we all experience. In terms of my sexuality, I was mostly attracted to girls, and on the whole I appeared like a pretty ordinary young man – although many people have since said my behaviour was almost hyper-masculine; I always had to go further than any other guy, to prove how much of a man I was.

Our family home was pretty typical of 1970s Britain. We didn’t go to church every Sunday, but we did for big festivals. As a child, I prayed every night for one thing: that I would wake up as a girl. It seems so pathetic now. As a teenager, I rejected God definitively because I thought, ‘Either God doesn’t exist or God is a sadist for making people like me.’ I went off to university with this raging discomfort and reached a crisis point in my early 20s, because I knew if I didn’t deal with it I was going to kill myself. By that time I had some pretty serious alcohol and drug issues, and was self-medicating just to cope. At 22 I finally came out as trans and began the process of transitioning.

At that time I didn’t really believe in God, but nonetheless it was like God wouldn’t let me go. And I felt there had to be something more to this world, that there was possibility. As a teenager, I’d been struck by the film ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’, in which Jesus says, ‘God loves me. I know He loves me. I wish He’d stop.’ I deeply related to that feeling of God almost putting His claws in me and not letting me go, but it wasn’t until my mid-20s that I could even think about faith. Many people don’t understand how we as LGBT people have to fight to find our own identity, and I had to work so hard to figure out ‘What does it mean for me to see myself as a woman, and become a woman, and then what does that mean for me as a sexual being?’.

It wasn’t until I was 26 that I had enough sense of who I was to offer myself to God, to this God who wouldn’t let me go, who was always present. And it was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life to reach the point where I could not resist praying anymore. What I prayed was, ‘God, if you are there then I am yours.’ I was so scared, because what if God said to me, either in words or in a feeling: ‘You’re wrong, stop being a woman and find a way back to being the man you were born as’ or ‘You’ve got to be conventional in your sexuality as a

woman’? To my utter surprise, the God who encountered me – and God did encounter me – said: ‘Actually, I love you, Rachel, in your deepest being and I accept you completely.’ That itself was frightening in an unexpected way; I thought that I could never be accepted by God, and yet I was. Which led to the question: ‘So what next?’

I returned to the Church of England of my upbringing. I needed others around me and I couldn’t be a Christian alone. I was open about being trans and found quite an affirming home in an evangelical church. I think it helped that it was a young congregation and as a rock musician I could play in the band. They accepted me.

As my confidence as a woman grew, I started addressing my sexual identity. I was still attracted to women and my church wasn’t pleased about that. Their view was, ‘Rachel, yes you’re a woman, but that means that you must conform to our very narrow idea about what being a woman means.’

I remember hearing a sermon that said gay people were sinful, and I simply couldn’t reconcile that with my understanding of God. God wasn’t going to say, ‘I accept one bit of you,’ God accepted the whole of my being and there was no sin in the fact I found other particular individuals attractive. So that led me to leave that church and explore a broader approach to theology.

I understand God as a force of energy and love; a personal, rather than impersonal God, who calls us into partnership, rather than us being kept as little children in the dark who get given nice things if we’re obedient. It’s about being called into what the Bible says is the ‘full stature of Christ’, and that as God’s children we are grown-ups and called to take responsibility.

God is not a comfort blanket for me. That has to be true, otherwise I’m just using God for my own purpose. When we talk about the God of love, we sometimes turn that into a sentimental picture, don’t we? Jesus told us, ‘God doesn’t promise everything’s going to be OK, only that He will be with us in all things’. God for me is much scarier than we sometimes make Him. He makes demands on us and expects us to stand up for the hard things, for the persecuted and the lonely, and that’s a difficult path in a world that wants comfort.

What I don’t understand is that urge to condemn people to hell or a place of pain. It amazes me how many Christians do this; to me it’s the opposite of what Jesus was about. In Christ there is no condemnation. It’s no-one’s job to be going round judging people. Our job is to love people.

In my hardest times, the God I’ve experienced is one who is there with me in the dark, sharing my suffering. Not a ‘nice’ God or a ‘safe’ God, but sometimes a God who’s in even more pain than I am and who’s holding and sharing my pain.

Looking back, if I’d repressed my gender dysphoria it would’ve led to a life of doubt and self-loathing, and it would’ve been impossible for me to accept myself. Only in coming face-to-face with this fissure in myself could I truly encounter God.