



Circles

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Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn....
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “CIRCLES”

I was living alone in Chicago when my teenage daughter called to tell me she was a boy. I'd moved to the north side that winter to start a new job while my wife and two kids stayed in Queens to close out the school year and gear up for the move. February in the windy city had knocked me flat—stressful days followed by sleepless nights buried under blankets listening to the furnace do battle with quarter-inch drywall and cracked, leaky windows. For convenience I'd rented a converted garage (dank but livable) just blocks from the college where I'd been hired to teach developmental reading and writing. Every day I slogged to and from campus, sometimes stopping at Jewel on the way home to buy cheap vegetables and off-brand coffee. Days when the snow wasn't too deep, I looped around to the public library to check email and scan the latest DVDs. To save even more money I'd decided against cable and internet, so my cell phone was a lifeline, my tether to family and friends back in NYC.

When the phone buzzed, I stepped outside into the dusky alley and watched two rats scurry in and out of a neighbor's trashcan as my fourteen-year-old struggled to make sense of things. A northern breeze, damp and hostile, reminded me that winter had not yet yielded. Shivering, I asked one dumb question after another: *Why now? What is this?*

Who are you? When the young person on the other end broke down, when they said, “I hate myself” and started sobbing, that’s when I really felt the distance. He didn’t mean it, or maybe she did. With eight hundred miles between us, I couldn’t tell.

The week before, without warning, my wife had cut her long hair and bleached the surviving spikes platinum. This “transition color” would bridge the dark brown I’d known for fifteen years and the natural gray she refused to hide any longer. I loved the idea (in theory at least) and told her so. But when the selfies started landing in my phone’s inbox, I panicked. *Why now? What is this? Who are you?* My questions were misguided, unreasonable. This wasn’t about me and I knew it. Then my daughter called two days later to tell me he was a boy. The next morning, grading student essays, I paused over pronoun agreement errors and realized nothing would be the same.



There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.



The closest corollary for me, I guess, is the year I tried to starve myself, but even then my objective going in was not radical change so much as the cultivation of a lean, intelligent asceticism, a sinewy branching physique to match my evolving writing style. I was twenty-five, three years into my first marriage, and newly credentialed in the fine art of poetry. I had no job and no burning desire to find one. As luck would have it, the vacant family farmhouse in Illinois needed repairs and a fresh coat of paint. My wife and I needed busy work and a place to unload, unwind, regroup. “Just pay the gas and electric,” my father said. “And cut your own firewood. You’ll need it.”

The night we arrived, the temperature inside the house was a gripping eight degrees Fahrenheit. I lit a fire in the woodstove and fed the hungry flames through the night as we huddled in sleeping bags on the icy pinewood floor. By morning the thermostat had climbed to a tolerable fifty-five. I know these details because someone had gifted me a journal—twelve tiny volumes, one for

each month of the coming year, encased in a cardboard box not much bigger than a deck of cards. It was the perfect note-taking device given my minimalist project: to live simply and unironically in nature, squatting in a house in the woods overlooking a river. There were other goals: learn guitar and practice tai chi, lose weight, read and write lots of poems, plant a big garden to fuel my macrobiotic diet. Eventually, after filling every page in my mini-journal, I'd pivot back to the real world with its workaday cares and compulsions.

By midsummer I'd dropped from 180 to 130 pounds. After one five-day rice fast, I got sick and lost five more. By year's end my young marriage had fallen apart. I was penniless and rooming with my sister five states away, routing delivery trucks for a commercial greenhouse in the Blue Ridge foothills. The way my journal tells it, I had moved to the family farm looking for home and new beginnings, but it's clear to me now I was after something else entirely: self-obliteration and a clean getaway, for starters.



Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no past at my back.



The male body is a space-eating organism, the white male body especially. Land and buildings, rooms and caves, subway cars, stadium bleachers, offices—these spaces are metabolic processes for the space-eating white man, and what he eats he shits in loud, brassy claims to ownership, preeminence, inevitability. As Richard Dyer wrote in *White*, “a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies. A sense of separation and boundedness is important to the white male ego.” The space-eating white man lives a merge-averse life, so any sign of encroachment is a true emergency and must be taken seriously.

When my youngest child—I'll call him E—transitioned from girl to boy, the daughter I knew disappeared and my son started eating up space in large doses.

Early on, in the cold confines of that alley apartment, I felt the change as a kind of abandonment, a rejection of the young self we'd nurtured since infancy. To him, though, the transition was more about calibration and (re)alignment, not a conscious wish or desire to exit the life he'd known before. "In an ideal world, I can't say I would have actively wanted to be a boy," E said recently. "But to live whole and happy, without friction, to be myself in a world of rigid binaries, I had no other choice." Then for the first time he told his mother and me about a dream he'd had when he was very young. In the dream he's a male undercover FBI agent running away from some faceless evil who wants him dead. "I remember feeling so natural, so at home in that body," he confided. "Even if they killed me, it didn't matter because I was so happy, I felt so good."

The actual transition from female to male was both *fluid* and *volatile*. Fluid because our daughter had always been "boyish" in behavior and dress. In the elementary years, E wore khakis and short-sleeved checkered shirts (Dad's casual work attire, basically) while sneering at the dresses and frilly shirts his sister sometimes wore. Spotting a "tomboy," kids at school responded with predictable cruelty. One group of girls accosted our short-haired daughter in the bathroom, wanted to know if "he" had failed to understand the sign on the door. One day the class bully marched up to him on the playground: "So what are you," he demanded, "a girl or a boy?" In our benevolent ignorance my wife and I assumed E was gay. With our love, guidance, and protection she would grow up to be a very happy lesbian. As liberal parents with abundant grad school training, we were eager to run defense while embracing everything our daughter was and would later be. After all, *there are no fixtures in nature*, not in our enlightened household at least.

Unfortunately, we'd failed to spot one of the biggest, baddest fixtures of all: the assumption that while our daughter was free to love one or the other or both, the one doing that loving would always be one and not the other. For a while we blamed ourselves for not recognizing earlier that what our child needed, in addition to unconditional love and support, was a timely and targeted intervention. An unfixing, as much as possible, of a female identity assigned at birth. He'd never shared his FBI dream—out of fear or embarrassment, we don't know. But we were there for the daily pain and frustration, the squirminess and malcontent. How could we miss, back then, what seems so obvious now?

Years later—after E and the rest of my family had joined me in Chicago,

after top surgery and the official name change, after testosterone, chest hair, and a hardening jaw—I looked at my son one day and realized E had always been there, just like this, only different. What may have appeared like an abrupt change of personhood was actually a deepening into the person we'd always known. Feedback from friends and family confirmed this. “He seems so much more comfortable and confident, more self-contained,” my father said on the phone one day. By then my parents, E’s grandparents, had more or less mastered the name and pronoun shift, but, like others in my extended family, they were prone to awkward lapses and slippages, their willingness to “accept” E’s transition always hitched to an impulse to doubt and challenge, to merely tolerate and, sometimes, to judge.

As for me, once I’d navigated the painful turn (looking back, it seems like overnight), there was suddenly so much to celebrate. So much *to do*. The panicked, middle-aged husband got over his fear of change and embraced his wife’s long, curly gray. The misguided father retired his mindless, age-old pursuit of false and true. As a parent I’d loved having two daughters, never actively pined for a boy, but what a boon to now have one before me—fully formed, no less! When the oldest went off to college, I shed all the requisite tears then got busy bonding with the son I’d always had but never knew I wanted. It helped a lot that E and I shared a passion for home improvements and amateur carpentry. By then we were spending our summers in the country, on the family farm. With so much maintenance work to do, inside and out, the socially fraught time known as “post-transition” blossomed (for both of us, I think) into a frolicsome father-son joy ride packed with yard work, minor plumbing repairs, deck building, a chicken coop, some house painting, and occasional eventide road trips to the local convenience store for beer and pretzels, our mutual reward for jobs well done.

We liked to work out together, too. E wanted a body more like mine—more muscular, more contoured—and I, at fifty-two, was happy to demonstrate the techniques I’d picked up during my early weight-training days. Home base in the city was now a sunny two-bedroom apartment farther from campus but closer to downtown. Our building featured a makeshift fitness room loaded with donated equipment, and everyday after school we took advantage. On the wobbly bench press we spotted each other. For bi- and triceps curls, I coached and coaxed him, careful to keep the competition light and friendly. Most days

we had those dumbbells all to ourselves, so as our bodies hardened, our egos may have clashed at times, but we never ran the risk of merging into other bodies. As with many men, a sense of separation and boundedness informed our bonding, but for him there was no pretense, no friction in his new sense of self. He had come full circle, with no threatening past at his back.



The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle.



For one whole year the farm was my private Walden, complete with shaded pathways, abundant wildlife, even a scummy pond down the hill behind the sagging farmhouse. To make the most of it, I would live productively if not always deliberately, my days a righteous regimen of writing and outdoor chores, my nights steeped in deep reading and fireside meditations on topics like happiness, purpose, intuition, and the “difference between habit and discipline,” as I wrote in one journal entry. I wanted this year to last forever—an infinitely unfolding *now* extending securely into the future—but by early spring I was already mourning a fast-approaching end. “Start of the fifth month,” I penned on May 1, “and god this eternity passes so utterly *vivement*.” I was brushing up on my French, too, but I can’t remember why.

My winter reading list tells its own story—*Beloved*, *Diet for a New America*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Goethe’s *Faust*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—but in the background I was reading Emerson, always Emerson. On fretful, moody days, in particular, I would return to one of my favorite essays, “Circles,” to reboot my senses with a healthy dose of that mystical sublime. My first wife and I were living off savings, our bank account shrinking so *utterly vivent*, but what a relief to learn from the wise Bostonian that “around every circle another can be drawn,” that “there is no end in nature,” that “every end is a beginning,” and so forth. Emerson’s words were a balm and a battle cry, a much-needed directive whenever I lost my way.

Later I came to understand Emerson better as the “philosopher king of American white race theory,” as Nell Irvin Painter writes in *The History of White People*. But on the farm Ralph Waldo was, to me (as he had been to my English-major grandfather), the “Yankee genius” whose heady emphasis on an “indwelling god” gave me hope for a future sustained by everything the good philosopher promised: truth, spirit, culture, individualism, conviction. At times, yes, I bristled at the Anglophile’s adoration of “English traits,” what Painter refers to as Emerson’s “heroic figuration” of the “Saxon race,” his fondness for “ferocious manhood” and “gorgeous male energy.” Of course I recognized (intuited at least) that Emerson’s obsession with Old Norse virility and beauty had laid the groundwork for American-style white racial identity. I understood (didn’t I?) that whenever Emerson used the word “American” he meant “male white people of a certain socioeconomic standing—his.” All this and more I gleaned, I think, from his gorgeous, ferocious *Essays*.

But that’s not why I was reading Emerson. I read Emerson because essays like “Circles” held the key, I believed, to my own personal reinvention, my heroic (recon)figuration as a developing poet. The year before I’d gone vegetarian, then hardcore vegan. Herman Aihara’s *Basic Macrobiotics* had taught me that the human vascular system rejuvenates on a seven-year clock. With good diet and exercise I could literally replace my old blood with new blood and *begin again*. I was living on a farm five miles from the small town of Norway, Illinois, the oldest permanent Norwegian settlement in the United States. Like my Norwegian forebears (mother’s side) I had a thing for “vigor” and “blood-thirstiness,” but it was my own blood I was after, no one else’s. With my twenty-eighth birthday a full two years away, I had ample time to get the formula just right. I’m still not sure what I wanted, what *figure* I had in mind for myself, but I looked to the future and wondered what kind of man would emerge on the far side of that fourth set of sevens.

To keep fit, I spent a lot of time outdoors chopping wood. I used an axe, a sledgehammer, and a five-pound iron wedge. One day in early spring, halfway through a week-long rice fast, I ignored my groaning gut and floated outside to the woodpile. I wanted to see how far I could push myself while maintaining the work efficiency standards I’d established that winter. “He who cuts his own wood is twice warmed,” my dad always said, echoing an adage framed on the kitchen wall. Warming up, I split one log in two, then into quarters, the quarters into

eighths. I loved the hard clang of sledge smacking wedge, oak fibers crackling as the log yielded and splayed. Positioning the wedge on a second log I swung hard and missed, swung hard again and missed again. Out of breath, I went back inside and collapsed on the living room couch. I fell asleep and dreamed of grilled cheese sandwiches and banana cream pies. “Skinny starts today,” I’d written in my journal a few days before.

At my skinniest (about 125 pounds), I jumped off the scale one day and struck a pose in front of the woman I’d met in college, the one who’d said yes to my hasty proposal, the one I’d never see again on the other side of this sad, masochistic year. “What do you think of my new self?” I asked, smile stretched taut between pointy cheekbones.

“I liked the old self just fine,” she said.

It was a solid comeback, but the “Yankee genius” in me felt the wedge go deep between us.



Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.



E is twenty-two now with soft blue-green eyes, a stubbly beard, and the cleft chin he inherited from his mother. His trans identity is not visible to others. “I’m never mis-gendered,” he says, a bit ruefully. Once he was out walking at night. Coming around a corner he felt a sinister presence behind him, like he was being followed. But it was only his shadow. “In that instant I remembered what it felt like to be a girl. I felt a fear I haven’t felt in years.” As a transman who passes as a cis man, he’s come to recognize the kind of fear he inspires in others just by moving in the world in his body. Then we talk about white fear of black bodies, about the fear people of color live with in a violent, racist society. “Most people have no clue,” he says.

His passability is both a benefit and a burden. For some trans people, he says, there’s a purity test, a hierarchy based on one’s transition story, the pain and difficulty of one’s gender dysphoria. He could put himself out there more, tell his

story more openly and honestly, and thus score more points on the purity test. But in the past, when he's come out to friends, they've responded with inane, embarrassing questions: *What do your genitals look like? How do you have sex?* E is in college, studying to be a nurse, wants to be a midwife one day. He'd be happy to have serious discussions about the biology, psychosocial dynamics, fears and dangers, joys and wonders of living as a transman. "But you should hear what comes out of my professors' mouths," he moans. "Not to mention what's in the textbooks." Then he parodies the binary thinking, lamenting the way mainstream scientific discourse defaults, even today, to static boy-girl logic. Almost all of his classmates are young white women, none of them trans as far as he knows. He's adrift on a sea of gender normativity, so it wouldn't be safe to bring it up.

Then my son introduces a new topic, and the questions rising up in me are old ones: *Why now? What is this? Who are you?* For a second I'm back in the alley, alone and unmoored, thrown off guard by my own selfish drive for stability. But I'm wiser now. I've learned that, as a parent, I need to be careful in moments like this. So when the topic of pregnancy comes up, I'm grateful that he trusts his parents enough to share, that he knows we're on his side, ready to listen and support. "I still have the functioning parts," he says with a hearty laugh. "So why not?" In fact, he's never regarded childbirth as gendered, despite the obvious historical assumption that only "women" can have babies. As strange as it may sound, he says pregnancy would not change his sense of identity because he doesn't feel connected to his body, even now, post-transition. "At least I'd have some control over the process, which wasn't true before." His only real concern is what others would think. "If something goes wrong, it will be my fault. Accusations will fly." And fists, perhaps. Or clubs. Or much worse, my wife and I fear.

We're sitting in a room warmed by firewood quartered with the help of a motorized hydraulic splitter. We feel safe, in the firelight's glow, to talk openly, to plan and dream. We also know full well that *nothing is secure* in life, especially now as E draws a new circle and gets serious about recentering his life around childbirth and family. I have questions about the physics and chemistry (no, his voice will not change; yes, the facial hair stays), but mostly I'm in awe of the young person sitting across from me—his strength and resolve, his refusal to *settle*. The universe truly is fluid and volatile, I'm tempted to say, but this isn't about me, or the universe for that matter. This is about my son and his insatiable desire to forget himself by remembering who he is and can be.

Listening to him talk, I think I understand better what Alexis Shotwell means when she writes about the “torqueing, friction, discomfort, and disfiguration” gender-variant people experience “just by living,” even when they’re not assaulted or murdered outright. My son has a healthy uterus, a strong body, and a passion for taking care of people. He wants to have a child biologically. But to flourish in this way without suffering friction (or worse) requires, as Shotwell writes, nothing short of a “transformation of the world.” As parents, we can’t give him that world, but we can work, with him and others, to help shape it. We can live in apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn, that “under every deep a lower deep opens.” When the time comes, we can be there for him. And we can be good grandparents.



In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred.



There was a kind of foolish “absenteeism” in my effort to self-annihilate and start over. As a young man I thought I was coming home, I thought I’d arrived, but time and experience left me feeling empty, out of touch and off-center. I’d moved to Illinois in search of an infinite present, but my future lay elsewhere, in a different place, with a different person, in a totally different body, perhaps. But what about the body I came with? Where did that go and/or what did I make of it? The white male ego seeks separation and boundedness—a hard, contoured body set apart from all others . . . including my own? Having stepped in to occupy that old farmhouse, I was desperate to vacate and move on. Having appeared, I wanted to disappear. The space-eating white man hits a serious snag when the space he wants to eat is his own, when his hunger turns inward, when he seeks a *new moment* to eclipse his hollow past.

I’d swallowed way too much Emerson, in other words. And I flattered myself by thinking that my anxious striving was worth it, profoundly interesting, and fully justified because my orientation was self-directed and aspirational, the birthright of any good white American with cash in the bank and time

on his hands. Emerson ends his essay “Circles” with a tasty wisdom nugget: “The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.” The wonderful thing about abandonment, of course, is that those who can abandon enjoy the added benefit of leaving it all behind. There’s freedom in the ever-expanding circle. It allows one to be ever-present, and thus all-powerful, in one’s expansive absenteeism. Emerson is the grand wizard of American white race theory because he gave us white people (men in particular) the perfect alibi for being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. “Whiteness as an ideal can never be attained,” Dyer writes, “because ideally white is absence: to be really absolutely white is to be nothing.” Nonetheless, there’s a strong appeal, a striving after *something*: the best in human beauty and virtue, a preternatural affection for the vigor and primeval virility of old (but always renewable) Saxon blood. If I chose to starve myself, it’s only because I hungered for more, because I knew there was plenty more out there for me to consume.

So why would you ever want to be a “man”? I asked E once after a grueling workout. *Why inhabit this bloody paradox?* It was a short-sighted question rooted in the assumption that *being a man* was something he wanted, something he could or would choose to “inhabit.” Really it’s me who wants to vacate the contradictions, to do and be something else, to check in by checking out. I return, once again, to the dangerous habit of thinking there are no fixtures in nature, that permanence in a fluid universe is but a “word of degrees.” I catch myself wondering what it would be like, really and truly, to live by abandonment, then I realize I’ve never lived any other way.

But every moment is new, and if I could, I would do it differently—first by driving a wedge into that smooth, perplexing Emersonian geometry. It helps to recognize that most of my life has been informed by a racist, sexist philosophy of exclusion, appropriation, and ruin, that in my pursuit of personal reconfiguration I never looked beyond my own circle to see that what needed changing was not just me but the world around me. Emerson was a terrible guide, in other words, but no sooner do I utter this claim than I privilege the one making it, drawing yet another circle with an elusive, fickle me at its center.

Clearly neither Emerson nor a deconstructed Emerson can show the way. But maybe my son the aspiring midwife can. All that torqueing, dis-figuration, and trans-formation yields a young body bursting with an energizing spirit: open, inclusive, experimental, productive, circle-averse, merge-friendly. These are the

new contours and metabolic processes that shape the future by unsettling the past. It's a lot to ask, I suppose—a proud papa's unapologetic wish to see the son outshine and outwit the failures of the father, to come out from behind those long dark shadows. In so wishing I dispense with the old questions (*why? what? who?*), questions I never should have asked in the first place, questions only a space-eating white man thinks he has the right to ask. Moving into my next set of sevens, I don't know, don't have to know, what the new questions will be, but I do know that a world in desperate need of transformation desperately needs new questions. I know that my son, just by living, begins to voice his own answers.