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Body positivity whilst trans



Tattie · [Follow](#)

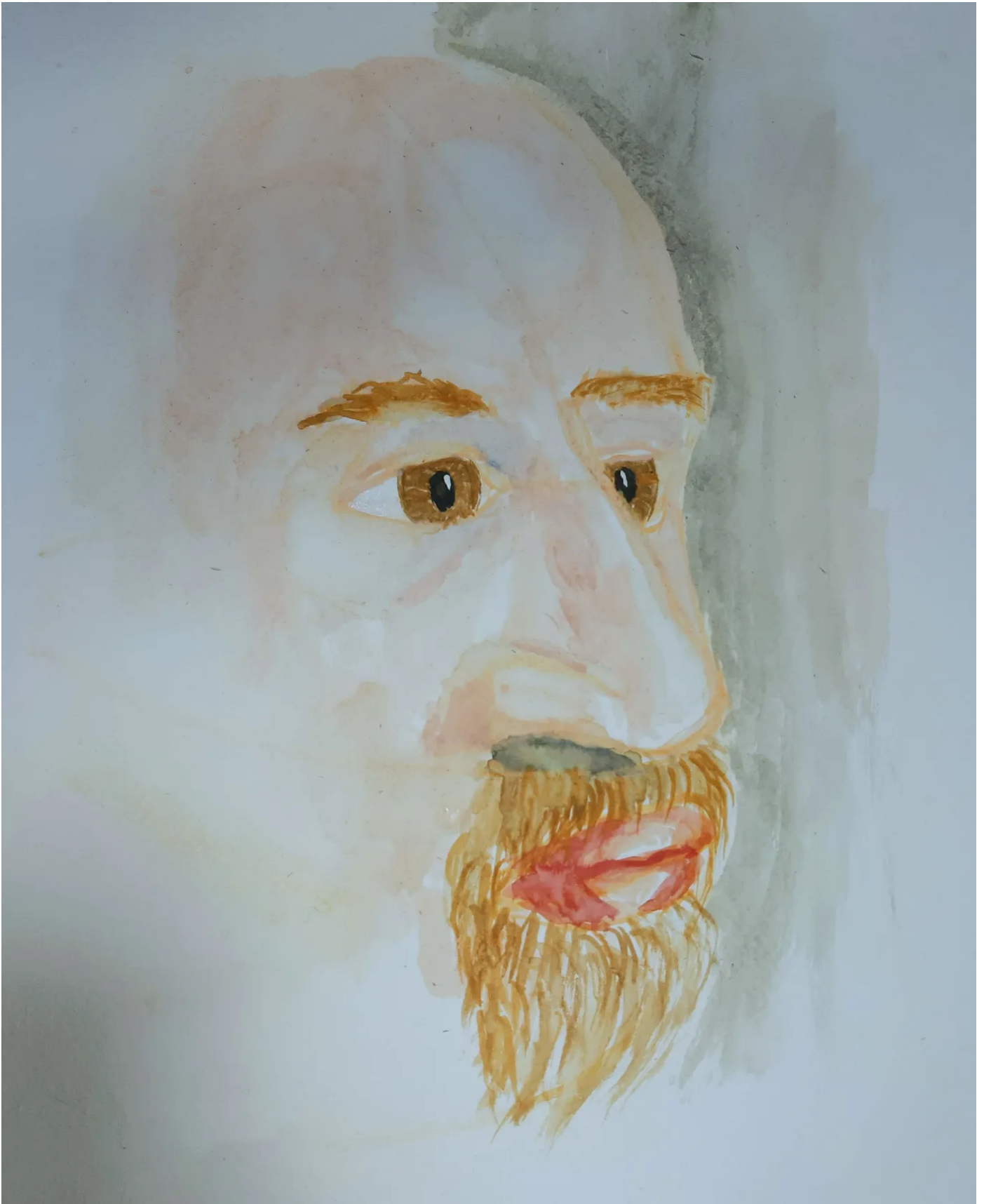
8 min read · May 30



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Self portrait, watercolours, April 2021

Sometime around April 2021, I did something very brave: I looked in the mirror.

Not as I usually do, giving myself the briefest glance to check that my face was clean before letting my eyes slide off, but I really, really *looked*.

I looked at my large nose, my wide face, my bush of a beard and half-grown stubble on my cheeks. My oily skin, scraggly eyebrows, my long hair retreating year by year further back on my head.

My face did an optical illusion thing where it kept switching between a face that I recognised and vaguely identified with, and an abstract set of shapes and angles.

I let my eyes travel further downwards, taking in my wide shoulders, hairy chest, and rounded belly; all in all an unremarkable lumpy rectangle of a figure, as I judged it.

“This is my body”, I said aloud, as I looked into my own eyes. “I accept that, but I don’t have to like it.”

I was raised by a wonderful woman, a well-educated bohemian feminist who shaped a lot of what I was to become in my own life. She was always very big on body positivity. She would tell her children proudly that she did not care about what society deemed flaws in her body— the body hair, wrinkles, varicose veins, and cellulite. People come in all shapes and sizes, and bodies are what they are.

This sort of body positivity is valuable, but it does tend to center cis women’s bodies. Naturally so, because this is the main societal fight around bodies: capitalism constantly dangling this ideal, airbrushed female beauty standard in front of us to get us to spend, spend, spend, and women desperately trying to claw back self-esteem in the face of that psychological manipulation. Very much a battle worth fighting!

But it’s just not quite the same for trans people.

My mum realised that I struggled with my body growing up. How could she not? Where my brothers were boisterous and sporty, I was shy, withdrawn, seemingly allergic to any sort of physical activity. Things got far worse with puberty. I developed a stoop to

try to make myself smaller, I would go for days without washing, and I would complain about being ugly.

She tried to reassure me that I was not, in fact, ugly. That all the teasing about being unmanly wasn't true, that I would just grow up to be "a different sort of man" to my charismatic and muscular older brother.

She saw what the world was doing to me, but she didn't see how much of this was coming from inside myself.

Gender dysphoria. That affliction which is such a common trans experience that it is sometimes (wrongly) equated to transness itself. That thing I said earlier about struggling to recognise my own being in the mirror? I imagine a lot of trans readers will be nodding their heads at that. Every image we see of ourselves pre-transition is a reminder of something subtly *wrong*, alien, out of synch with what we feel we are inside, or what we want to be. So we dissociate away from these images.

When first learning about trans people I misunderstood dysphoria. It's not like I used to look in the mirror and consciously think "that isn't me", so I supposed that I didn't have gender dysphoria. (And, in my ignorance, concluded that I wasn't trans. But you do not need dysphoria to be trans!) All I felt about my reflection was that it was ugly and not worth dwelling on.

It took an outside perspective to recognise the extent to which dysphoria had affected my self-perception. A short time before I looked in the mirror that day, I attended a beginners' painting class with my wife. I drew and painted what I thought was a decent self-portrait of myself given it was the first attempt in several decades, but when I showed it to her, a look of faint horror came over her.

"Why have you made your nose so big? And your forehead?"

"Uh, I just drew myself as accurately as I could," I explained, confused. "You know, 'warts and all'."

“But it’s not right. You don’t look like that.”

“Well, that’s what *I* see when I look at myself,” I defended. The look on her face turned to concern and dismay, but she bit her tongue.

Before accepting myself as trans, before I acknowledged my own dysphoria, I tried to emulate my mother’s body positivity. I told myself that if I just applied enough positive thinking, I could learn to be proud of my body. My balding scalp? It gave me a distinguished look. My pudgy waist? Fat acceptance, baby! The shape of my face? I was simply “not conventionally attractive”.

What I understand now is that if your body positivity does not allow for people to hate their bodies, your body positivity is toxic.

That’s not just true of trans people. You might hate your body because it doesn’t work in the way you want it to, it causes you pain, it draws attention you don’t like, or it simply isn’t what it once was. We don’t do ourselves any favours by not allowing ourselves to process negative feelings.

When I said “I accept my body, but I don’t have to like it”, I was accepting full ownership of my body, rather than just custodianship of it. That let me for the first time honestly appraise the state of it. And I decided that while it was definitely a bit of a fixer-upper, as they might sing in *Frozen*, it was something I could work with. And whatever changes I felt I needed, I was within my rights to pursue them, and in a place to do so.

(If your body positivity discourages people from changing their body to their liking, your body positivity is toxic.)

And so after decades of denial, I finally began the project of transition. I went on a diet, and began to exercise daily. My body hair I attacked variously with razors, wax,

epilators, IPL, and laser, until I managed to tame the onetime forest into something more to my liking. The biggest thing I did for myself was to get myself a hairpiece. It took several anxious months to get used to, but it turned my hair from my worst source of dysphoria to my greatest source of joy. I began to collect a feminine wardrobe, and I learnt the dark art of flattering one's figure with clothing to make it look narrower and more curvy.

After an eight-month wait, I went on HRT. My body began to change, fat migrating ever so slowly from my waist to my thighs, breasts growing into sharp peaks that later softened into small mounds. The effect on my skin was amazing; something I consistently got compliments on before I even told people what I was doing. My body scent changed, and only in hindsight did I realise how much dysphoria that had been causing me. Even my feet shrunk half a size, meaning that I could, very occasionally, find shoes that fit in the women's section of stores.

But HRT can only do so much. The height that prompted me to slouch so much as a teen, that wasn't going to change much if at all. Similarly the breadth of my shoulders or the width of my face. And certain aspects of my body that read as "masculine" are simply my genetics. My strong nose is a fact of my Mediterranean ancestry, my naturally muscular physique is something I share with my sister.

I knew this before I began transition, obviously, which is why at that point I resolved myself to the belief that I would always dislike much of my body. But that didn't prove quite true.

As transition changed my body, so my mental state changed. Instead of always just sort of being there as a background noise, gender dysphoria was beginning to come and go like the tides. Sometimes I would look in the mirror and see everything I disliked. And sometimes I would see something wonderful: myself. A version of myself that I had always hoped for, beautiful and confident and feminine. I remember bursting into happy tears the first time I noticed a gentle curve to my waist that I had never remembered seeing before. That joyful feeling of correctness that we call gender *euphoria*.

This shift in how I see myself has had totally unexpected effects on how I perceive my body. About half a year into transition, I was working out in front of the TV, when I happened to look in the mirror. I saw the shape of my flexed arm, dumbbell in hand, and thought to myself: “wow! What an Amazon!”

At some point my muscles had turned from something inherently masculine to something which I could interpret in a feminine context. An aspect of my body that had previously caused dismay, I now saw as a positive, and it hadn't even changed that much. No amount of positive thinking had done that, only that contextual shift in how I saw myself.

Similarly, when I bought myself of knee-high boots with a heel, part of me was asking “what am I doing here? I'm already tall enough.” But I put on the boots and I felt powerful. My height had an *intentionality* to it that it had never had before. I stand up straight these days, telling myself that I have a model's height; nothing to be ashamed of.

My lips, which used to draw teasing at school because of their “fatness”, I now recognise as being the same shape that people pay hundreds of pounds to achieve. And my shoulders, whilst still wide, are much harder to see as masculine now that they sit above the slope of my bust.

The class of things I dislike about my body is ending up much smaller than I at first thought.

Almost sixteen months into transition, the early swings of dysphoria and euphoria have adjusted into more of a gentle sway. Mostly I look at myself and just think “yeah, that's me again”. And that, in and of itself, is wonderful.

I'm sitting here as I write this in a pair of summer shorts, showing off the legs which were always my favourite part of myself. Hormones, IPL and epilation have done a lot; I haven't shaved in several weeks, but the hair I see is mostly invisible— apart from on my knees for some reason, where patches of darker hairs stubbornly remain. I have

bruises from climbing, and a cat scratch or two. I have slightly varicose veins, a scar above one knee from who knows what childhood injury, and stretch marks.

I love them. I don't care what society deems as flaws; they're my legs.

I finally understand my mum's body positivity. Turns out she did raise me right.

Body positivity is sometimes contrasted with "body acceptance" or "body neutrality". Those philosophies are worth reading up on; you'll see much of the themes of this article reflected there.

But however you label the relationship you have with your body, I would urge the following:

Love what you love, without embarrassment. Change what you want, without even a hint of apology. Re-examine your feelings about yourself as your body changes. And always be honest about what you dislike. Your body is yours, you don't owe anyone any feelings about it but your own.

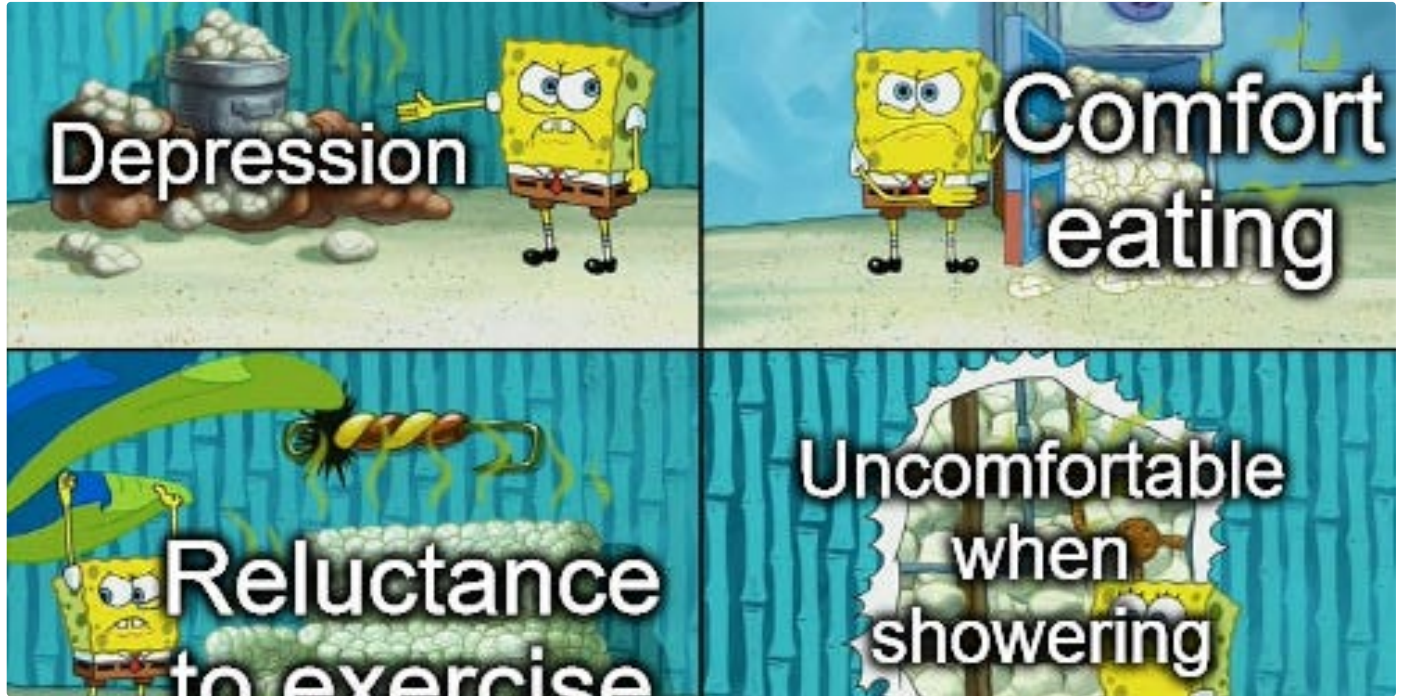
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

 



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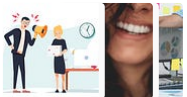
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