Nail Polish Epiphany

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Peep Scented Nail Polish 5 Pack!

Do they really smell of marshmallow Peeps? I nervously sniffed my brightly polished fingernails as I walked to my on-campus video interview, where I would talk about what it was like being a gender non-conforming person at my workplace. My university wanted individuals’ experiences, mine included, to create a webpage full of written and video stories of a group of employees to show how inclusive we were. But back to my nails. My pink, purple, yellow, green, and blue nails should smell of Peeps, those super sugary marshmallow chick-shaped Easter treats. Do they smell like sugar? I inhaled deeply, almost dizzy from trying to figure it out. Why is this so important to me right now?

Walking faster now, up some stairs, and past some undergrads. Am I doing the right thing? Not about painting my nails Peep colors, but did I really want to be interviewed, on video, about being gender non-conforming at the university I worked for? No one was forcing me to do this. I chose this. To be public about myself, and not in a small way. Am I ready to come out to everyone I work with? The campus community? Was I just doing this so our marketing department could show how inclusive my university was? Why am I doing this to myself? Wasn’t it enough to just
be, at that point, gender non-conforming? To not shout it out to anyone with an internet connection and a willingness to watch a video about me?

Yes! I had decided to go to the interview, so I was going. When I commit, I commit. So, with my Peep-smelling candy-colored nails, each a different color and impossible to ignore, I went to spill out a new part of my life online, publicly, and in bright, living color: my new, gender-non-conforming life out in public.

By performing my non-binary gender, do I become that gender? When I was a man, I learned to perform my boy/man gender from babyhood. I had a script and a costume. Although I struggled with traditional male behaviors such as “boys don’t cry” and “men are stoic,” I still knew the parameters of my gender even as I pushed to expand those parameters in different ways.

As a non-binary person, the performative aspect of gender seems even more apparent to me. I feel as if I’m making up my non-binary gender as I go along. I have some external, living models of non-binary people whom I watch to see how they act, speak, write, and dress. However, there is no overarching archetype, no standard model for being non-binary, no societal norms for non-binary intelligibility. If “identity is a slippery theoretical construct” as Maureen Goggin states, then living the theory is slippery as well.

How did I get to a place where my nails were bright, my necklace was a long strand of pearls, and my blazer was a coat of many colors?

I was surprised as anyone to realize my new, non-binary gender in my mid-fifties. I always wondered how some people didn’t know they were until much later in life, especially queer people who would come out in middle age. For me, I knew I liked men early on in life, and I benefited in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I was coming out, from access to books and a more information-rich world about gay men. But in my reading there was practically nothing about gender. I rarely even thought

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of my gender, other than in relation to my sexuality. In fact, my gender was there, giving me a privileged status that I benefited from. Once I accepted that I wasn’t a man, but was non-binary, I was able to see more clearly how I tried on, literally and figuratively, garments and ideas about being something other than man or woman throughout my whole life.

I’m still working out how to be non-binary and what exactly my gender is. What I do know is that my gender isn’t female, and my gender isn’t male—my gender is something else. I’m a gender maximalist. It feels right to be more. It is all the material stuff we add to our bodies which interests me: the clothes, the jewelry, accessories, fragrances. The things that customize us. I also want the freedom to act like I want, outside of our society’s gender expectations.

One reason for my late-in-life realization was a lack of role models early on, a lack of seeing non-binary ways of living and of being. Of course, non-binary people were always about, living their non-binary lives, being and presenting themselves if they could. But I didn’t see them, or if I saw them, I didn’t see what they were as a viable option for me. I didn’t have a good way of describing what I was, what I am, until recently.

The new narratives and the new gender identity tales being told allow for complexity, and at the same time, make a wide variety of experiences valid. Once I read some of those personal narratives, I realized there are more options for me to live a truer life. I’m on a different path, one that has a story arc but not an end point. Well, we all have an endpoint. In a way I’m already at my destination, in that I’ve embraced my new gender privately and publicly.

Mid-Day Bliss Out: A Nail Polish Epiphany

Is nail polish going to be the theme of this essay? Maybe.

An epiphany is a sudden insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by something simple, homey, or commonplace. My epiphany was caused by a bottle of dark purple Essie nail polish with the wonderful name of “Winning Streak.”
It was early in September 2018, a few days before our library’s spa day: The Mid-Day Bliss Out. To improve morale at our library, the administration started doing fun events, and our Mid-Day Bliss Out aimed to do exactly that. During the two-hour Bliss-Out, you could get a chair massage, sip on some fancy water with a raspberry in it, have your chakras read, and, most importantly for me, get your polished nails stamped. (Stamping is when you get a design applied to each polished nail.)

For some reason, I really wanted to get my nails done and stamped. I didn’t question that want, I just sort of went with it. My coworker offered to polish my nails a day or so before the event.

What did it mean to have my nails done? I wasn’t really looking at the meaning of it, but rather, how it felt. When I looked at my purple “Winning Streak” nails, it just felt right and glorious—like I had been missing something and my nails were a puzzle piece that moved in perfectly. Click. I felt whole.

In *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women’s Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth Century America*, Carol Mattingly writes that “gender, inscribed on and around women’s bodies, was constructed largely in the visual impact created by their clothing and appearance. Second, gender aligned women by their location, a specifically assigned ‘sphere.’”

As a speaker and instructor in classrooms, I consciously choose my clothing, jewelry, nail polish, and fragrance, all to construct a gender that is unique to me. In working to manipulate my presentation, I also threaten the gender binary. This threatening leads to tension and the question of whether that tension should be addressed or mitigated. Or should it be ignored? I’m breaking cultural norms by my dress, or at least bending them quite a bit. Mattingly notes that challenges to gender norms in terms of dress engender fear, and also reprisals. In the 18th century, women’s dress, at least for certain strata and races, was very codified, and “a rhetoric of dress was in place.”

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work worlds, including higher education, there is often an unspoken dress code, even if the organization doesn’t have a written one. There are certain conventions and societal expectations for men and women, including how they express themselves through their clothing at work. Although the dress codes for women in the 18th century (and beyond) were restrictive, women worked within that regimented system to “construct the image they would project.”

Within the confines of the work world, I, too, am working to construct an image I want to project: an image that confounds, confuses, and forces people to consider their own gender expression against mine. Trying to project the correct gender expression for myself forces me to work to understand how attire affects not only myself, but others. At the same time, I realize that their reaction, be it positive, negative, or neutral, is beyond my control. There is no real guidance for non-binary trans people on how to dress, how to act, how to “be professional.” I want to look right in my non-binary gender, but how does that fit into my gender journey?

Everyone has a gender journey, no matter what your gender. I first heard about a gender journey from writer and actor Jacob Tobia, a non-binary person. They note that everyone, including cisgender people, has their own unique gender journey in life. How we react to our gender, what we do with it, how we experience it, is specific to each of us. This essay covers a bit of my gender journey, with digressions.

Once I came out as non-binary, I started to look back at my life to see if there were any clues to my non-binary gender. Turns out there were:

- Kindergarten-8th grade: Colorful striped pants with matching socks, hung out with girls, roller-skating, wrote and directed backyard plays. Never wore blue jeans to school, but wore pants.
- High school: Came out as gay to a few, wore the brightest yellow pants ever for my senior photos, completely jealous of a pleated skirt worn by a student in chemistry class.

• My Roaring 20s: Lots of brooches worn on blazers, wore a skirt to a gay bar, dyed my hair platinum blond, changed name to Marq for a bit.
• The Last Ten Years: Academia, expanding, remembering, more perfumes, nail polishes, and pendants. New pronouns and a new honorific, Mx.
• Present and Future: Hand sewing clothes and someday wearing the skirts I sew. More jewelry, louder scents, and yes, capes.

Coming Out, Again, But in a New and Slightly Rocky Way

Coming out to my forty or so colleagues in the library as non-binary wasn’t a quiet, one-on-one affair. I had to do it big, broad, and with slides. I’ve worked at my current job since 2011—as a man. My gender was never in question. Nobody commented on my gender at all. So, it was with a big dollop of naiveté that I decided to come out at work, in a big way, as non-binary. Almost at the same time, my nails were Peep colored and I was being interviewed on campus about being gender non-conforming.

I’m all about doing a “two for one.” I had an upcoming conference where I was presenting on how to create a more welcoming place for your non-binary coworkers. I decided, unwisely, to practice the talk for my coworkers at an all-library staff meeting. I wanted them to be welcoming to me and any other non-binary trans employees at the library or on our campus. So, it was a win/win: me practicing, them learning, and everything glorious. Until it wasn’t.

I was very nervous before the talk, which wasn’t a good indicator of my readiness. Also, I assumed a degree of prior knowledge about gender in my peers that I shouldn’t have. Prior to the presentation, I was deep in reading about gender, non-binary employees, and work organizations.
I broke my cardinal rule of presenting: assume no prior knowledge. I assumed a heck of a lot, and that wasn’t fair to my colleagues.

After my talk, one coworker asked something to the effect of, “Why is all this important? Why are pronouns important?” I honestly didn’t really have an answer ready. Now, with more experience leading non-binary workplace workshops, I’d say that pronouns validate my gender, and with so much of our society invalidating my identity, your pronoun use is profoundly helpful in making me feel seen and supported. Also, how rude not to use someone’s pronouns if you know them. At the time, I wasn’t as schooled in all things non-binary and trans as I thought I was.

Later, I thought about how, when I came out as non-binary there wasn’t really any response from my long-time coworkers. Crickets chirping. I didn’t expect a gender reveal party, but I was surprised by their lack of a reaction. Were they embarrassed by my honesty? Unsure of what to say? I don’t know.

I guess a null response is much better than a negative response. But a null or non-response really is more of a negative response. In the absence of a positive response, I often think my colleagues’ responses are negative ones. I realize that there may also be gender evasiveness as well. This is similar to race evasiveness, in that the dominant demographic doesn’t feel the need to talk about something that they don’t think affects them.\(^5\) It feels like many people are socialized to not talk about gender in society because of the privileges they have in their own gender. The dominant culture, cisgender people, evade their privileged status by not talking about gender. Also, some people seem to be uncomfortable discussing or even acknowledging gender. I know I certainly have this kind of gender evasiveness socialized in me, not to call out or comment on people’s gender. To not call attention out of what I thought was politeness. Growing up, I was taught to not comment on differences between people. That is, if I noticed something different to

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say nothing, positive or negative. As an adult, I realize that silence can often feel more like condemnation than approval.

Learning from my awkward presentation to my library colleagues, I spent a lot of time prepping for my conference talk about creating a more welcoming space for non-binary library employees. That went well, and it felt like I was ready to be a more public non-binary librarian and speaker. I started to write more on LinkedIn about being non-binary and my gender journey and being non-binary, revealing more and more about what it is like to navigate the work world, and letting my broader network know what I was up to.

All of that posting on LinkedIn led a former colleague to suggest me as a speaker for the annual Pride celebration for Mojang Studios. (This company is based in Sweden and Redmond WA, makes the game Minecraft, and is owned by Microsoft.) Terrified but happy, I said yes.

Many years ago, while still a graduate student, I worked as a research contractor for Microsoft. While there, I learned about a job function that struck me as weird and strange: technology evangelist. How could those two words function together? What did this person do? It seemed to combine the profane and the sacred. I found out that technology evangelists work to change people’s minds about technology and to convert them from using one type of software or hardware to another. They promote a certain vision of a technology landscape.

During my temporary return to Microsoft, via Mojang Studios, I was doing my own form of evangelism. Not technical evangelism, but non-binary evangelism. I was not trying to convert people’s gender to non-binary, but rather to change their minds a bit about their non-binary coworkers.

Clothing and Work: The Intersection of Being Non-binary and Being Professional

“Clothing is a social language. It is the way we make our bodies socially legible to those around us.”

As my gender journey takes me off the road of maleness/manliness and into uncharted territory, I realize that, as I add clothing, accessories, and mannerisms associated with women, I am making my gender more and more difficult to assume. When I wear necklaces, get my nails painted, or wear a long flowing caftan to the pool, I move me away from the speedy and easy highway of how other people understand who I am, or at least what my gender is. There isn’t a conventional, traditional model of being non-binary. I read of one non-binary person who dresses entirely in women’s clothes some days and entirely in men’s clothes on other days.

One view of gender expression claims that people are expressing their gender in non-traditional ways to have fun. I mean, yes, I think it is totally fun to match my handbag with my necklace to my blazer. But it is serious business making these choices to bend away from the binary. And the hot, hateful stares I get in the grocery store aren’t fun. I don’t express my gender for fun. I express my gender because it is who I am.

Heteronormative culture dismisses queer rituals as “superficial” “phases,” like “playing dress up.” There’s this enduring idea that play, that adornment, that glamor are redundant and inconsequential. That we must somehow evolve out of this presumably juvenile space toward… what exactly? Banality which masquerades itself as stability?

At the center of it all is a desire to be myself. More Mark than people are used to seeing. Not banal, business-attired Mark, but me playing dress up in new ways. What does that mean at work? How can I work at being professional in my job, but still present in a variety of ways that may seem, for some or even many, to be totally unprofessional? For example, I have a tall, hairy body. When I wear skirts, I am not planning on shaving my legs. How do unwritten dress codes fit for me and

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other non-binary people? Can we, as non-binary people, wear anything that either binary gender might typically wear? In any combination? Infinite combinations of all the appropriate work clothes? What can I wear, what non-binary finery is suitable for work? I don’t have the answer because I don’t have any role models. There isn’t any guidance or advice for those of us seeking to be taken seriously at work, but also to wear what makes us feel right.

Easing the Tensions About My Identity

I am passionate and a bit obsessive about the things I learn about and love. I bring that same passion to my newly found gender. For example, I don’t have my nails polished with a discreet color, but rather with bright colors stamped with silver designs. My favorite silver nail polish is a dull tin-like liquid, the color of the Tin Woodman, called “There’s No Place Like Chrome.” I use my passions for handbags, fragrances, polishes, and designer sewing patterns to mitigate some of the tensions around my gender presentation.

I lean into those passions to show to people that I am having serious fun with making myself look like I want to, and that my fun is harmless to them—that my fun is maybe even a little interesting. I’m always oversharing about my latest passion, and within the framework of work, this type of sharing is legitimate small talk. Not everyone is obsessed by Japanese designer Issey Miyake’s sewing patterns for Vogue, but when I make an article of clothing by them and wear it, I have a story behind it. That story, that narrative, is going to work towards someone’s understanding of my gender. It comes from a true place: a place of learning and making and being proud and happy about who I am now and where I’m going to be.

Showing up as my more authentic self means being more non-binary, being more queer, being more over the top, and being more dramatic. According to Michail D. Kokkoris and Constantine Sedikides, “authenticity is linked to positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational
commitment, and job performance.” Being myself is being vulnerable, because the work world isn’t really used to things other than straight, cisgender men and women and their concerns. I don’t need to be vulnerable in the workplace. I already am vulnerable just by being a bit of myself. Of course, I know people, my coworkers, are already silently judging me, but it gets a bit more personal when they judge my identity. I want to bring more of myself to my work, and I feel that I’m more focused and successful when I do. But, back to risk versus reward, is being more myself more rewarding than the risk of sly comments and dismissive looks when I show up looking all fabulous in hat, gloves, and a smart-looking dress and coat?

I don’t like making trouble. I like harmony, not arguing, and certainly not confrontations. This puts me at a disadvantage in my evolving gender expression. All I want to do is wear what I want to wear and swan about feeling fabulous and correct. In public spaces, I wonder how I’ll handle the trouble I cause by being my non-binary self. To dismantle cisgender, binary oppression, I’ll challenge the status quo and subsequently be, as Butler notes, “punished or maligned for its ostensible destructiveness” for doing so. It isn’t as if I’m aiming to dismantle the binary, but my very actions, my gender expression, serve to criticize it and demonstrate another way of being. Or, if not criticize, then to open up the discussion of what it means to be something other than cisgender. Trouble makes me nervous, but I don’t see how I can simply be without someone being disturbed, jealous, or angry about my existence—even though I aim for delight, frivolity, and a life full of caps, gloves, and stunning accessories.

As the saying goes, it’s the journey, not the destination. As a non-binary person, I don’t have a gender destination. Merrily, I go along. As shown in this small slice of my gender journey, I am working out the path, exploring new areas, uncovering new trails towards something.

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Towards gender euphoria, a feeling of feeling right in how I am, wearing nail polish, skirts, clever hats. My journey is my own, but I’ve been inspired by so many folx. Now go and have your own fabulous gender journey, no matter what gender you are!

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About the Author

Mark Bieraugel is white, college educated, and grew up in a middle-class household. For the past ten years, Mark has been the business librarian at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) and worked as a paid research consultant through the local Small Business Development Center. Prior to their coming to Cal Poly, they worked for two years at Tacoma Community College and Edmonds Community College as a reference and instruction librarian. For the first ten years of their library career they worked at companies doing competitive intelligence and business research. Mark is a non-binary queer person, and their gender expression is a mix of traditionally men’s and women’s clothing and accessories. Combining a vigorous business background and an understanding of organizational culture, Mark has a unique and practical take on the challenges libraries face in diversity and inclusivity issues. Outside of work, Mark enjoys hand-sewing clothes, hats, and bags, hanging out with their husband and tuxedo cat Tinky, and swanning about in one of their hand sewn caftans.