Belonging to Your Identity: A Trans Man’s Story

What does it mean to belong? One can describe the concept or feeling as a commonality of beliefs or value systems. Perhaps it could comprise shared experiences amongst a group working together to achieve a common goal. “Belonging” sits directly in the middle of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and is described as the feeling of being loved and accepted by others which in turn helps us as humans feel whole. However, in this generation when fluidity and transience of career, relationships and lifestyles take precedence over stability and security, we must reassess what it really means to belong in this modern world.

Kenny Ethan Jones is a trans advocate and consultant primarily focused on body politics, menstruation, mental health and intimacy. He has fronted Pink Parcel’s I’M ON Period Campaign which encouraged people to empathise with the trans experience through education on the fact men can still menstruate. Kenny’s own trans journey has been considerably multi-layered and non-linear. Kenny was assigned female at birth and began identifying as trans at only eleven years old. However, as trans terminology did not exist in the early 2000s, Kenny simply expressed to his mother, “I’m a boy and no one else gets it.” His mother automatically replied, “Let’s go to a doctor and talk to somebody who understands this better than us.” Her compassion for Kenny’s journey laid the groundwork for his feelings of acceptance and self-belief as time progressed.

Kenny’s deep voice and evident level of emotional maturity would lead one to believe he is significantly older than his 27 years. He opens up about the rollercoaster of schooling and juxtaposition of acceptance and disparagement: “With the way my mum raised me and the primary school I went to, gender was never a big thing and no one associated me with being a girl. Nobody bothered me, as far as everyone was concerned that was just who I was, Kenny. Not many people saw a problem with it.”

It wasn’t until Kenny went to a Catholic all-girls secondary school at eleven years old when he faced gender norms. When Kenny outwardly expressed his gender, his teachers were unaccommodating and lacked the necessary empathy to support a child’s personal journey. Whenever Kenny tried to stand up for himself, his teachers would entirely dismiss him. Kenny highlights the importance of empathy even when the other person’s experience is not fully understood. “I think the approach that needs to be taken is ‘I can’t relate to how you’re feeling in terms of feeling disorientated, or not feeling like yourself, but I want to help you feel more like yourself.” The transition from attending a school where Kenny felt he naturally belonged to one where he felt quite the opposite allowed Kenny to understand the importance of feeling truly integrated and accepted even when others experience vastly different journeys.

After a year, Kenny communicated to his mother how he did not feel he fit in as others did not see him as a boy. She enrolled him in the Catholic school due to its high-ranking education and wanted him to be in an environment where he would excel. Later, she apologised to Kenny when looking back she understood it was not the ideal school to support his personal journey. However, Kenny confides that it was due to this very experience that he found out who he was earlier than most people since he was confronted with gender norms in such an acute manner. Kenny set his mother’s mind at ease: “If it wasn’t for this experience, I don’t know how long it would have taken me to come out. So as far as I’m concerned, you’ve given me more years to live as me and that’s not a bad thing.”

Kenny stayed at the school for two years. His mother then developed cancer which meant he began spending most of his time at the hospital. His truancy coupled with behavioural issues at school eventuated in his expulsion. Once liberated from school at 16, he legally changed his name to Kenny to create a fresh identity and one year later began the steps to medically transition. In the beginning of this process, he did not have other trans people to speak with who he could gain advice from in the way of a support group as trans groups were not publicly promoted. The only trans people he knew were those he met in the waiting room during clinic visits. Kenny explains how in the beginning, support groups are not readily offered as the focus is on fully understanding if you are indeed trans and then subsequently navigating the experience and family dynamics in a more personal way. Kenny divulges, “It always felt like a very intimate journey and the support of my immediate family was enough for me. So, the lack of group support at that time would not have necessarily mattered.” In this way, Kenny had to fully belong to himself first prior to belonging to the trans community.

In special instances down the line, such as when Kenny began experiencing menstruation after five years on testosterone, a support group would have been welcomed. Kenny explains, “Trans bodies are so under-researched so doctors didn't know what was happening. I know other trans people would understand from their own experiences. When I started posting about it on social media, many trans men replied that it was also happening to them.” Until then, Kenny thought he was the only one going through the predicament as it simply wasn’t discussed and doctors did not have the answer. He believes that in situations such as these, it is important for trans people to know so they can understand what is normal or can happen with their bodies.

Kenny was fortunate to have felt a kinship and belonging with three boys he knew from childhood. He reminisces, “When I transitioned, they fully accepted me; I was always Kenny in their eyes. I played football, I was into girls, we liked the same things and so it wasn’t a shock for them. They felt it was simply a step towards becoming who I truly was so it never felt like a coming out situation.” Despite having difficulties with teachers at the Catholic school, Kenny explains he had a regular “squad” of girls who accepted him as Kenny. Though not undergoing the same experiences as him, his friends’ empathy and open-mindedness helped Kenny be the person he felt he was inside and therefore more readily integrated into the various groups he would later find himself immersed in.

When speaking on what the trans “community” means to him, Kenny articulates, “I believe trans people are so emotionally intelligent because to understand you are trans takes you into such a place of self-awareness. It takes self-belief, confidence and resilience to deal with the discrimination we face. So, when I think of transness as a concept or community, what I think about is strength and people unapologetically being themselves.” Soon after Kenny’s own transition, others who were transitioning began seeking his support. He felt like a leader in many respects as he was three years ahead of everyone else and could translate to them what doctor’s appointments would look like while also delineating the transition timelines. Kenny also communicated what the hormonal, mental and physical changes would soon look like. Many who were reaching out to him contacted him through Myspace and Kenny was present for these men to connect and communicate. This online platform was the segue for Kenny to become a voice for his community.

Kenny discusses how it is slightly easier for trans men to blend into society and pass compared to trans women. It is for this reason that trans women often end up as advocates because they are often discriminated against while trans male advocates like Kenny are not as prevalent – he is truly one of few. Kenny expands, “Depending on your passability, your life will be easier. My life is essentially easier to navigate in many ways as I’m cis-passing. Prior to medically transitioning, it was a very different experience and I would be ‘outed’ at parties - sometimes with a level of fear around my safety.”

Kenny admits, “I wouldn’t be offered the same level of campaigns or have the same exposure if I weren’t cis-passing. My life would be a lot more difficult otherwise. I know other trans men who are less passing than me but just as educated and skilled and they are offered less jobs.” Kenny strips away yet another layer: “It is the same thing as being Black and having lighter skin - there is a privilege within that. Giving space to trans people who are less cis-passing than me and those with darker skin is a part of my role as an advocate.”

The taste for advocacy began when Kenny was a model. Sky approached him to be part of their Pride campaign which he cherished as he could truly be himself in a way which was embraced and accepted. Then, in March 2018, Kenny made history by being the first trans man on a paid campaign aiming to be inclusive of people who bleed – which encompasses trans men. Kenny details, “Many women said to me, ‘I never thought about trans men being a part of this conversation.’ They fully welcomed me and wanted to understand my experience.” This chapter in Kenny’s life opened him to feeling he belonged in groups that he would have never formerly anticipated – not only in the trans community but also women’s initiatives and queer rights. Kenny then ventured into consulting and writing when brands approached him to assist them with the language involved in their campaigns. Kenny feels a large part of his role is to dispel misinformation and bridge knowledge: “My manhood looks a little different from yours, but I’m a man too.”

The multi-layered experience Kenny has traversed was woven with yet another layer when his sexuality changed. Until 21, he felt that if he was going to be a man, he should only be attracted to women, however he later found himself also being attracted to men. Kenny explains, “I had to explore and understand my gender before I could explore and understand my sexuality.” “I was accepting all parts of myself however there was a level of difficulty as I was essentially coming out again. As trans people often have intersectional identities, I had to accept that this too was a part of me.” An important delineation is the level of social confusion commonly occurring as LGBT references sexuality while trans encompasses gender identity – two completely separate concepts. Kenny highlights, “My masculinity has changed over the years as much of it was based on trying to be as close to a cis man as possible. Now I just want to be Kenny who is a bit feminine and a bit masculine. I accept all parts of me and freely explore.” Kenny’s own trans journey has pulled him into a plethora of groups, illustrating how one can fully feel they belong amidst their own personal fluidity. Identity does not have to be a solid concept for one to be accepted – the key is to engage with the types of communities with an underlying ethos of acceptance and empathy.

During Kenny’s colourful journey, he has enjoyed the companionship of now 15-year-old long-haired Chihuahua Giacomo. Kenny says, “He’s my little old man, he simply enjoys slow walks and naps...and lots of chicken and ham!” He is quite the dynamic dog and sits patiently alongside Kenny when film crews frequent his home. Kenny describes Giacomo as a fantastic companion especially since becoming older and therefore less demanding amidst his busy schedule. Kenny often takes him to the dog park on the weekends to enjoy the energy of other people and dogs. The caveat is that Giacomo does not actually appreciate being around other dogs. While never crossing the line to biting, he can often be found barking incessantly while nearby dogs go about their business. Other small dog owners at the park understand this small dog behaviour and Kenny explains, “It’s never a conversation that needs to be had, they just get it. Giacomo thinks he is a Pitbull in his head as most chihuahuas do.” Here it is apparent there is a solidarity amongst dog owners whose dogs do not necessarily fit in. Curiously, this points to the fact belonging can also consist of the shared inability to belong to a group.

Kenny journeyed through his own personal experience of transitioning apart from necessarily feeling integrated into the community at the onset. He then was able to help others with their own journeys when support wasn’t otherwise readily available to them. His story opens space for people to realise that to feel a sense of belonging does not necessarily have to come from perfectly shared or common experiences, but rather from a place of empathy and compassion. This modern world is laden with fluidity and intersectionality which requires more openness within communities to embrace every being, even for little beings like Giacomo who don’t necessarily fit the status quo.

RIP little man, Giacomo Jones. 12.10.2021.