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In discussing my career in libraries, there is a specific phrase I regularly employ, one meant to obscure, and make light of, the conditions that result in feeling as though a place isn't meant for you. The phrase is this: "A lot of my career is fueled by spite." I've said it hundreds of times, but right after the words make their transition from private thought to public discourse, I register the unease that admission causes, and I quickly say, "Spite isn't exactly the right word." But isn't it? Upon seeing the call for proposals for this book, I knew that I wanted to participate. The parameters were broad and I'd been searching for a project that would allow me the opportunity to explore how spite, anger, exhaustion, and exasperation came to be emotions I associate with my time in academia. In the proposal I submitted, I asked for a space to be unapologetically indignant and angry; over time, I've learned to embrace these emotions because their impact in my life is one of movement. I hadn't predicted that by the time I actually sat down to write, I'd be unable to channel anger, bitterness, or any of the emotions that usually propel me into some kind of action. I'm exhausted, and for me, exhaustion doesn't manifest as a rallying cry. It manifests as getting by. This isn't the chapter I'd intended to write, or wanted to write, but I'm done fighting it; even though I can't seem to summon that familiar frustration, I still have things to say.

How We Get By

In early 2021 a friend reached out via Twitter to share an observation about a panel I'd participated in; they were the moderator, and they'd asked a question relevant to the panel's topic, which was all about logistics work. I'd answered, moved on, and thought nothing more of it. Months later, they were rewatching the recording and the way that I spoke about a recurring incident struck them. Though I couldn't remember the specifics of my answer, when they told me what it was about, I immediately knew what they were referring to. In answering a question about providing library services and forming relationships with people we never meet, I'd illustrated that point by recalling the overwhelming number of times that I'd been referred to as "Mr. Bowman." In my answer, I said, "A lot of it was helping people all day long that we never saw, as I can attest to being called Mr. Bowman [insert laughter] so many times, no one ever knew who we were..."[1]

I am intimately familiar with how my affect changes when I'm describing incidents that have caused me some discomfort—I laugh in an attempt to make sure everyone else is at ease. This downplaying of my own emotions to ensure the relative comfort of others is a technique I've perfected because it's self-preservation. Unless you've spent years trying to hide or diminish your own discomfort for the sake of others, the distress is nearly invisible. Even though the event I'm describing was over in an instant, my friend and colleague, who also identifies as non-binary trans, recognized my discomfort because, as they put it, "you laughed in this funny-not-funny way that I am very familiar with, and I turned the recording off there 'cause I had to sit with that for a Real Long Time."

This conversation between my friend and I occurred nearly a year ago, but even now, I can remember every part of it. I can remember

1. Max Bowman et al. "Logistics: The technologies and people that manage our stuff," panel talk at the Access 2020 Annual Conference, streamed live on October 19, 2020, YouTube video, 4:09:10, https://youtube/Asqx7-iRlE4?t=11087s.

what I was doing, where I was sitting, how it made me feel, and that's of note because these days, after a seemingly minor head injury earlier this year, I've struggled with both long- and short-term memory. But for conversations and events that evoke strong emotions, for better or worse, I can recall every detail. This exchange also happened to be especially relevant in those moments because I was grappling with complex emotions related to a series of recurring incidents that took place on the campus where I work.

In 2019 I accepted a position at a small private liberal arts college. I began my career in a similar setting and after years of working at much larger institutions, I was relieved to return to a campus setting where I would be able to go to the dining hall and actually put faces to names; I'd missed the familiarity that comes with working on a small residential campus. My start date was close to the start of the fall semester, so there wasn't much time to acclimate to campus before students arrived. When I began that semester, I was genuinely excited to make connections with students, faculty, and staff. I'd moved 800 miles from my home and my family, and aside from my wife, I didn't know anyone.

For the most part, everything in those first few weeks went well. I was making strides at work and getting to know my colleagues, but I was incredibly busy and I struggled to find time to leave the library. One day, despite the pile of work on my desk, I made the decision to take time to explore the campus; I wanted to meet people, and anyone who knows me knows that I can begin a conversation with anyone, anywhere. Talking to strangers is a skillset I come by honestly, and I was ready to practice it. I remember leaving the library that day and feeling encouraged. It was a beautiful fall day, the campus was gorgeous and so much of what I was experiencing—the cool weather, the early fall, the smell—was new to me. I'd only been walking around for a few minutes when I sensed that there was a commotion behind me. Someone was yelling a name, not mine, and it seemed like the person they were calling out to wasn't responding, because the person doing the calling out was getting progressively louder and their tone was growing more insistent.

A few seconds later, the person who was calling out caught up to me, and it was only then that I realized that they'd been trying to get my attention. They weren't calling my name, but they'd mistaken me for someone else. When they realized that I was not the person they thought I was, they were embarrassed and apologized. I, of course, said that it was okay, and we moved on. As I mentioned, I can usually begin a conversation with anyone, and I'd considered striking up a conversation right then, but I could tell the person was feeling self-conscious about our interaction and wanted it to end, which I understood. I continued walking through campus, visiting all the spots I'd spent the last few weeks directing students to and feeling relieved that I'd managed to give out the correct directions to places that I'd never been. I was deep in thought and staring at a campus map without really paying attention to the people around me when, again, I thought I heard a person yelling out a familiar name, though still not my name. For the second time in less than half an hour, I'd been mistaken for someone else. This time I turned around well before the person approached, and they, realizing their mistake right away, shouted a quick, "Sorry," and ran off.

At this point, I thought I recognized the name they were calling out. I'm hard of hearing, so I wasn't certain that I'd heard it correctly, but I took a chance and, eventually, asked a colleague if they knew of a person by that name. As it turns out, I'd heard the name correctly. I learned that this person was a staff member at another office on campus. In their role they had significant interactions with students, and though they'd only worked at the college for a little over a year, their position on campus was one of visibility.

I'm going to fast forward to the present day—I would love to tell you that those two incidents were isolated, but I can't. For the six months that I was on campus (before we transitioned to remote learning due to the pandemic), I would go on to experience similar incidents at least a couple of times per week. After the first few times, I tried ignoring it. I thought that if I kept walking and didn't slow my pace, people would realize that I wasn't the person they were looking for, but that didn't happen either. Sometimes when people are embarrassed because

they've made a mistake, they become defensive, and that's something that I experienced. It's hard to explain, even to myself, because it doesn't seem logical that simply saying to a person, "I am not ___, my name is Max," would be cause for defensiveness, but time and again, it was. If it wasn't defensiveness, it was embarrassment, and in an effort to soothe the other person's embarrassment, I would often tell folks that I was regularly mistaken for this person, as in, "Don't worry, lots of people do it, you're not the only one," but never once did the other person offer reassurance. Just once it would have been helpful to hear, "It's frustrating that this happens to you so often."

This is the point in my story where I tell you that I don't look anything like the person I was so often mistaken for. In fact, I've never met them. I know a few things about them—they wear glasses, they use they/them pronouns, and it could be said that we dress similarly, at least that's what people told me as they backed away after realizing I'm not the person they thought I was. In the plainest of language: people saw a fat, gender nonconforming, visibly (to them) queer person and that was all they saw, and so, in an instant, I became someone else. The truth is, I hadn't allowed myself to acknowledge the impact that this was having until I had the conversation with my friend where they mentioned their familiarity with self-deprecating laughter as a coping mechanism. But this person, my not-so-lookalike, had been on my mind lately because I'd just found out that they'd left the college, and when I heard that information, all I felt was a sense of uncomplicated relief. It wouldn't last. As it turns out, that feeling of relief was emotionally costly; it wasn't the kind you celebrate, it was more the kind that accompanies you after you've outrun something.

Let me explain. I came of age in the nineties, so this is going to be a particularly nineties reference, but it's important—do you remember the Blind Melon video for their song, "No Rain?"[2] It's the one that opens with a small girl in a shiny bee costume, gold pipe cleaners for antennae,

2. Blind Melon, "No Rain," September 1, 2021 YouTube Video, 4:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qVPNONdF58.

striped fabric on her head and arms, and she's wearing tap shoes, a thing you realize when she begins a short tap dance routine. In that opening scene she looks unencumbered—not exactly joyful, but, and please forgive this cliché, she's dancing like no one is watching. When the routine ends, there's silence, until someone in the audience, just out of view, begins laughing. The little girl bows her head, wipes her eyes, runs off stage and begins running and dancing through the streets of L.A. Throughout the video, you can tell she's trying to make connections, and though it's not going particularly well, she's undeterred. Finally, there's this scene—it's at minute 2:20 if you're following along by watching the video—she approaches these gates that are in fields of green grass best described as the Windows XP fields—she looks through the gates, and her mouth opens wide in pure joy and astonishment. What she's just seen in those green fields, with nothing but blue skies as the backdrop, is a group of people in bee costumes joyfully dancing together. The song lyrics evoke this togetherness, a promise of someone to always be there, and encouraging the listener to stay with them.[3]

For the majority of my life, I've been that bee. The middle of three daughters, the only one who didn't "act right," the only one who was fat, the only one who changed their name, their body, and the only one who silently craved acceptance from the people around them but refused to do all the things required to achieve it. So much of my adulthood can best be described as what I've come to call "the unraveling." I don't know who I am without all of the adjustments I make every day so that I can fit. I digress—what I want you to know is that I'm accustomed to being the only, and I've spent so much of my life saying silent prayers before I enter restaurants, bathrooms, classrooms, workplaces, parks, beaches, locker rooms, doctor's offices—you name it, and I can guarantee that I've made it holy, with all the prayers I've said: "Please, please let there be someone who looks like me in this place." So, when I say that the relief I felt didn't come without consequences, this is what I mean.

3. Winggo2382, "Blind Melon - No Rain – Lyrics," YouTube, September 23, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Miec205fvnE.

Along with the relief came guilt, isolation, and this nagging feeling that it wouldn't change anything. I am resilient, not by choice, but out of necessity. But even with so much rehearsed resilience at the ready, what I'd realized was that even if my not-so-lookalike's departure somehow miraculously changed my lot on campus and I managed to be seen as more than fat and queer, the events that took place over the last year and a half—all the offers of reassurance I'd given, all the awkward hellos and goodbyes they'd given, all the apologies I'd offered, all the backing away, all the relief that a person feels when they exit an embarrassing situation—had taken a permanent toll. I no longer wanted to meet people in those informal ways that usually fill me up. More than that, the sum of all those interactions is that they took from me the one thing I always understood to be a constant in my life: the reassurance that I felt from being in a space with people who looked like me.

I wanted to tell you this was the end. I desperately wanted this section to effortlessly swell and meet some grand conclusion and when it did, I'd tell you that I'd learned so much about myself through this process and that what I'd learned was far more valuable than what was taken from me. I wanted that. I needed that. About a month ago, I was standing in some random line on campus (could've been any line), in some random building (could've been any building), when a person brushed past me and said, "Good to see you..." and then they said a name that wasn't mine. It's only happened one other time since then—that's something.

What Do You Need from Us?

I'm glad you asked.

I've been asked some variation of this question, both personally and professionally, by a number of folks, and what I've realized is that when someone asks this kind of open-ended question, what they're really asking is, "When will my part be over?" For better or worse, transitions aren't a solo act; they require the participation of partners, friends, family, colleagues, and even strangers. When I change my name, my pronouns, my appearance, I am constructing a home for myself, carefully, quietly

at first, but for it to be complete, I have to let you in. I hold my breath. I wring my hands. I hate that I need you to sign the papers, approve the changes. But this is the way it is—I need you.

Your participation doesn't end when you call me by my name or use my pronouns. It doesn't end when I stop correcting you, either because I don't want to, or I don't need to. It doesn't end when previous versions of my digital self finally merge with the tangible one I built from the ground up. I let you in; act like that means something.

I know that people make mistakes. I make mistakes. I can be gracious, just as I am grateful for the grace that has been extended to me. But some mistakes are more costly than others. Some mistakes come at points when I am already on the ground, having not had time to right myself since the last blow. What I need from you, from myself, our families, our neighbors, our collective workplaces is for us to *see* one another, to care for each other.

Where We Go from Here

The introduction for this chapter is based on the proposal that I submitted nearly a year ago. I expected this to be an opportunity to engage with anger, but it's turned out to be a chapter about the consequences of using deflection and self-depreciation as a coping mechanism. I have absolutely no idea how I didn't initially make that connection—a portion of the first line of this chapter reads, "there is a specific phrase I regularly employ, one meant to obscure, and make light of, the conditions that result in feeling as though a place isn't meant for you"—it's right there. As a trans person who works in academic libraries, on campuses where we are quick to tell everyone that they're welcome without knowing if that's actually true, without having asked anyone, and usually without having done much preparation, I want to be able to express anger and frustration, but I don't think there's room for that. And so, I get by. I hope that if I make you feel better, I'll feel better—instead, I just feel empty.

I wrote this chapter during an active pandemic—we're still in it, and I don't have any idea when or if this will ever be over. Throughout this time, I've seen a particular quote shared widely that is regularly attributed to Dr. Fauci, the Chief Medical Advisor to the President. The quote is, "I don't know how to explain to you why you should care about other people." Those aren't the words of Dr. Fauci, they're the words of Lauren Morrill who tweeted them in January, 2017 to express frustration about debates over the Affordable Care Act.[4] It's easy to understand why Morrill's words were applied to our current situation—from masking to vaccinations, all that's required of us to get through this pandemic is for us to consider one another, and yet I've never, ever felt more doubt about our willingness to do that.

I can't tell you where we go from here.

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About the Author

Max Bowman has worked in academic libraries for over twenty years. They have a fondness for resource sharing, logistics work, peer support, and celebrating their colleagues.

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