

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 6: Natalie and Noah

One of the things I've been asking people about kind of the elephant in the room so to speak is the author, J.K. Rowling.

Has your relationship to J.K. Rowling changed since the early days?

I don't really care for J.K. Rowling, unfortunately, because the comments that she's made, I don't agree with.

It's really sad, actually, because she seemed so progressive.

The Harry Potter books, like when we were kids, they seemed progressive.

I think to have the author of these beautiful, loving, accepting stories hurting marginalized communities, it sucks.

Yeah, she's super transphobic.

She's a turf.

She's pretty terrible.

I really wish this was not the hill she chose to die on.

Someone like her, she really is just truly at the heart.

They get it hiding in this sheep's costume pretending that she is an ally.

As I have been working on this series, the accusation that's come up over and over again is that J.K. Rowling is a transphobe and a bigot.

In fact, last year at LeakyCon, a Harry Potter fan convention, staff took the accusation so seriously that at one point, they announced that attendees should report anyone who was vocally supporting Rowling in any way, saying, quote, we have zero tolerance for transphobia and bigotry of any kind.

For many people who support Rowling, they say that these accusations are so off base that they can be dismissed out of hand.

But for me, bigotry is not an accusation that I can take lightly.

And that's because for a long time, I was a notorious bigot.

The Westboro Baptist Church is known for picketing the funerals of U.S. soldiers and Marines in protest over what the church sees as the ills of American society.

The Westboro Baptist Church is one of America's most notorious religious aid groups.

From the time I was five years old, I could be found almost every day protesting alongside my family as proud members of the Westboro Baptist Church.

God's wisdom has been crying to this evil nation.

Listen to these lying politicians, letting your children be taught it's okay to be gay.

We became infamous for picketing events, like the funerals of soldiers and celebrities, with signs that said unspeakably cruel things.

God hates fags, fags doom nations.

Fags are worthy of death.

And I know it's hard for some people to believe this, but we truly didn't see these words as cruel and bigoted.

We thought that what we were doing was right, as you can hear me try to argue here at one of our protests 12 years ago.

We saw ourselves like the biblical prophets, warning people that they needed to obey God, or else suffer his curses in this life, and hell in the next.

And we proudly defended our views, like in this clip of my mom and me on the Tyra Banks

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show back when I was 20 years old.

You said, why are you so angry?

Well, we're not angry.

What we're trying to do is get the point across to people who hate our message, who hate us, who hate God, who hate his judgments.

That's why we have to get defiant, because we have to make sure if you're going to hear us that we talk loud enough to be heard, because you cut us off before we say the words, because you don't like the words.

And it's not just you, it's everybody we talk to.

From the outside, I understand how this all sounds absurd, but we actually saw ourselves as living out meaningful values and virtues, like courage.

When we protested, we knew people would hate us for it.

We knew there would be people who would even attack us for it.

So I understand that there's some people that don't like what you have to stand for, and they've taken some strong actions about that.

Why don't you tell me about that?

Yeah.

We've had so many crimes committed against us, vandalism.

We've had cars driven at us.

We've been shot at.

And I thought this was the do your own thing generation, tolerance, loving.

Where is that?

There were people who bombed my house, set our church on fire, regularly vandalized our homes, doxxed us, and sent us death threats and rape threats in enormous numbers.

And these attacks only furthered our feelings that we were being persecuted for telling a hard truth to the world, to a society that would rather hurl insults at us or violently attack us than listen to us.

After I left the Westboro Baptist Church at age 26, I had to wrestle for a long time with some truly terrifying questions.

How was it that I could be so certain that I was right and still be so wrong for so long?

How was it that my critics, even the ones who would threaten and attack us, had seen reality more clearly than I had, and most terrifying of all, how could I ever trust my own mind again?

When I go back and watch these videos of myself on the Tyra Banks show or me picketing these funerals, there's a part of me that wants to say, that was a different person.

But the truth is, I am still that person.

It was me who held those beliefs.

It was me who shouted those cruel words at grieving families.

Ever since I left, I've been cautious, just so careful when trying to discern what is true, what is right, what is good.

I try to stay away from certainty, to remember that at any given moment, I am only seeing a tiny fraction of the world.

I tell myself to embrace humility, and one of the ways that I do this is by listening, listening to people and where they're coming from.

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I try to understand them and their experiences and their values, and how they've come to the positions that they have.

So after speaking with Rowling and trying to really understand her experiences and how they shaped her views, I left Scotland and did the same thing with many of her critics, including many who are transgender.

Now of course, trans people, like all people, are not a monolith.

In working on this project, I met trans people who agreed with Rowling and admired her for speaking up, and others who viewed her as such a menace that they didn't want to be on a podcast that included her voice, and many more in between.

But for today, I want to share two conversations with two different critics, who not only were thoughtful in their critique of Rowling, but were also really frank with me about the difficult experiences that inform their views.

I'm Megan Phelps-Roper, and this is Chapter 6, Natalie and Noah.

So I want to understand your critique of JK Rowling's recent comments over the past few years, but before we do, I would love to know what you think the two of you have in common on these issues of trans identity, feminism.

I think that we both in some broad sense believe in women's liberation and equality.

I think that we both support gay marriage, for example, as the sort of very basic 2010 level activism.

I think that we both recognize that far-right movements like Donald Trump politics, for example, are dangerous.

I think those are kind of the foundations, and then things quickly start to split.

This is Natalie Nguyen, a popular YouTuber better known as ContraPoints.

She makes artful and insightful videos about politics, culture, the internet, and about being transgender.

A lot of people have the sense that being trans is this kind of fad, people go online, and then they get sort of transed by exposure to the social contagion in these trans communities.

Well, in my case, I will say that I experienced gender dysphoria and experienced these kinds of subjective personal things long before that, but the internet makes it possible to form communities out of people who would otherwise be very geographically isolated.

I think less than 1% of people are transgender, so I don't think I've actually met someone who I knew was transgender until I was in my 20s.

If the only experience that you really have with trans people is whatever media you saw about trans people from the 90s and 2000s, you've seen portrayals that are monstrous, that are alien, that are mocking.

It's always a punchline or it's like a horror story, you don't want anything to do with it.

For me to sort of conceptualize myself as, oh, I am a transgender person, I had to actually see trans people who seemed like people, right?

And YouTube was great for that.

Natalie transitioned in 2017, and she says that YouTube was revelatory.

There's trans people sharing their transitions, and that was really helpful to me to recognize, oh, this is something that I want to do.

She says it not only helped her on her path to self-discovery, but it also inspired her

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to share aspects of her own transition on her channel.

There's something about YouTube that it makes it easy to kind of share private things about yourself with a big audience because you are talking to a camera alone in your room.

There's a kind of false intimacy of that.

I feel that there's a lot of things that I said to a YouTube audience that I had never said to my own friends and family even.

It just felt easier to say to anonymous people on the internet.

And that experience of sharing these intimate parts of her life with so many people online, she says it was really significant.

The early transition era of my life online was a kind of mix of the rush of this Disney let it go moment, where you've broken all the rules of your upbringing and done something that you're very drastically not supposed to do.

As a person who has assigned male birth, you're really not supposed to be a woman.

And so if over the course of years, this kind of need, this longing has been building up, it does feel good at first to finally let it go.

My guest today is self-described YouTuber and ex-philosopher Natalie Wynn, better known as ContraPoints.

The Verge has called her an elegant, whip-smart middle finger to the side.

Her videos, including the ones following her transition, ended up becoming really popular.

Today we are very lucky to have Natalie Wynn, aka ContraPoints, an ex-philosopher.

Wynn's impact on YouTube culture is so notable that the Library of Congress recently said it was archiving her entire channel.

She was featured in the New York Times, Vice, NPR, BuzzFeed, and pretty quickly, she became a very well-known trans person.

I was suddenly very prominent, I was very visible.

And all this attention, it ultimately led her to getting over 1.5 million subscribers to her channel.

And it also attracted a lot of transphobic hate.

I've been doxxed, I've been swatted, I've received death threats, mutilation threats, anger, shaming, mockery, any kind of terrible online behavior you can imagine I've been the target of.

I would say that at first it was primarily from anti-trans people, but when you become sort of a very prominent person from a marginalized community, you sort of inevitably are going to attract a lot of aggression from that community itself.

In 2019, Natalie posted a tweet indicating that she didn't like how sharing pronouns and what she called hyperwoke spaces made her feel.

And that, along with the fact that she briefly worked with a controversial trans man, inspired a really vicious backlash where she was called a Nazi, a grifter, and a traitor to the trans community.

People online not only targeted her, but demanded that her friends and people she'd worked with publicly denounce her.

When I was being Twitter mobbed where I, to the trans community, kind of really turned on me, I remember walking around Baltimore with a hoodie over my head and sunglasses and headphones in because I was actually almost delusional about how total my ostracism was.

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I sort of thought I would be hated on the street, which is crazy in retrospect, but that's how it felt at the time, it's overwhelming.

And that honestly got worse than the transphobia.

Because coming from people that you would see as your allies.

Yeah.

It's kind of easier to dismiss hateful bigots because it's like, well, whatever, like they're gonna hate me regardless, but when it's from people who's like political side that you're supposedly aligned with, and from people who share your identity, and they're the ones who are really coming at you the hardest, like, yeah, it's painful, you know, being trans is a pretty socially isolating experience in general.

And a lot of trans people rely pretty heavily on other trans people for support.

So when you are an outcast from the trans community, you feel very alone.

And this experience that Natalie had, which she used to make one of my favorite of her videos called cancel culture, gave her a deeper insight into why it is that speaking about trans identity and gender issues online so often leads to these vicious public shamings even towards allies to the trans rights movement.

I think that a lot of trans people are living with intense shame.

And there's a lot of bitterness because people feel excluded from society.

A lot of times thrown out by their families, humiliated by their families.

And when you have unresolved anger and bitterness and humiliation, that's aggression in search of a target.

And when you feel downtrodden and you feel abused and you feel humiliated, there's a vindictive impulse.

You want revenge, not just justice, but often the person that we take revenge against is not really the person who's responsible, but rather they are a symbol of all the pain that we feel.

You need a scapegoat.

A scapegoat, yeah.

In January 2021, Natalie released a video essay.

So you've probably heard by now about Joanne Rowling's transphobic tweets, unless you've been living under a rock in which case get back under that rock, sweetie.

There is nothing good going on up here.

And in it, she unpacked her thoughts about JK Rowling.

Or maybe you heard that all Joanne did was say biological sex is real.

And now crazy gender ideologues and trans activists are trying to silence her.

This is cancel culture gone too far.

This is a witch hunt.

Celebrities are under attack.

This is the new Salem.

This is Orwell's nightmare.

And one of the reasons that I really wanted to talk to her was that as a transgender fan of Harry Potter, who was also a critic of cancel culture, she was critiquing Rowling from the point of view of someone who has been deeply interested in the very same dynamics in our society that I had been investigating myself.

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This is a painful topic for me all around because as a transgender woman, I am honestly hurt by a lot of the things Joanne has said in the last year.
But I also know what it's like to be the target of a Twitter mob.
And I realized that to most people, complaining about being canceled, it sounds incredibly whiny and self-absorbed.
Like you'd especially think that rich and famous people like JK Rowling would be above staying up alone at night reading mean things people say online.
But you'd think wrong.
And when I see her getting trashed on the TL, there's a traumatized part of me that's unironically triggered by watching people cancel her.
But there's also part of me that wants to join the trashing.
How could you do this to me, Joanne?
I did not come out of the cupboard under the stairs for this.
So in that video, I distinguish between what I'm calling sort of two rhetorical styles of bigotry, which I call direct and indirect.
That usually involves framing the target as vermin, invaders, parasites, right?
This sort of dangerous, foreign, infiltrating menace.
The idea that bigotry is simply hate, I call the Westboro Baptist Church theory of bigotry.
It's the idea that bigots are people who outright say, we hate you, God hates you.
And we're all marching around with signs about how much we hate you.
I think in the video, you used my family as an example of direct bigotry.
Yeah, the Westboro Baptist Church, God hates fags, pretty direct, right?
And I think that in some ways, it can render it less dangerous.
It's not insidious.
Yeah, because I don't think that it's as influential, protesting at funerals, that puts people off.
People don't want to be associated with that.
It has the opposite of the effect of getting people on their side, it alienates people and pushes people away.
Yes, but remember that the political talking points that were used 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago, when the Bush era conservatives made opposition to gay marriage a major point of their platform, it was not about God hates fags, it was about defending marriage.
We have to protect this institution, that's the foundation of the family, that's here to protect children.
There was this kind of fear that if we allow for ambiguity, if we allow for the strict rule about one man and one woman, and we include two men or two women, then order falls apart.
Slippery slope.
It's a slippery slope, and then anything could happen, right?
Indirect bigotry manifests as concern or debate about a host of proxy issues.
It's often defensive in tone rather than offensive.
Frequently the claim is that a once-needed liberation movement has now gone too far, but it's now the activists who are the...
There's a kind of parallel, right, between where people are afraid that if we allow trans people to participate in society, then the gender order will collapse, and then it'll be anything goes, and men can invade any women's space, and the protections such as they are

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that exist for women will fall apart because of the collapse of the gender order.
And when it comes to those ideas of direct and indirect bigotry, when it comes to rolling,
and her views about prisons or childhood transition, is your claim that rolling is being transphobic
indirectly and maybe even unknowingly?
I mean, I think that I am willing to engage with someone who is skeptical, for example,
about, is it fair for trans women to be in sports?
Because I don't know.
That's honestly a question I have myself.
But I feel like that I'm not, my willingness to engage with that is going to decrease if
it's with someone who I think doesn't really believe in trans acceptance at a much more
fundamental level, which is kind of the feeling that I get from Joe Rowling.
So J.K.
Rowling frames her position as, I am just saying the fact that sex is real.
It's not hateful to say a fact, why is everyone so mad at me?
A fact can't be bigoted.
And I agree that a fact cannot be bigoted, but a fact on its own doesn't mean very much.
Usually when we discuss facts, we're using those facts to tell a story.
And facts can be used to tell bigoted stories.
You know, suppose someone...
This was, I think, one of the hardest parts of your critique to consume because of just
my own understanding of how important doubts are and how important open dialogue is, obviously
because of that being the most transformative thing I've ever experienced in my life.
And I just wanted to ask you to help me understand where you're coming from.
So one critique you made clear in the video, seeing it as the coded language of indirect
bigotry, is the danger of people who say that they're just asking questions.
And I totally see what you're talking about because there are for sure bad actors and
also just people with really bad ideas and all these people online who make their whole
careers out of using the just asking questions idea as a smoke screen, essentially, right?
But there are a lot of people and I've met many of them while working on this project
who just genuinely have a lot of questions and sometimes they're afraid to ask them.
And I think asking tough questions and pulling apart arguments is, it's obviously a cornerstone
of reasoning and it's actually a thing that you do so well on your YouTube channel.
So I just wonder, why is it that you see Rowling and other people in this debate?
Why do you see that as if they're just clearly trying to disguise bad intentions?
I don't necessarily see it as just trying to disguise bad intentions.
I think I'm less concerned with the intentions than I have with the consequences.
And when you have someone who is as influential as JK Rowling posing ignorant loaded questions
on Twitter, this is not the acceptable forum for that level of discourse, right?
So okay, yes, there's very complicated questions that are legitimate to be asked, but I feel
like I don't know if you're going to be someone with a huge platform who wants to pose
these questions.
You kind of have to be responsible for the way that you go about doing that.
If you do it in a way that's harmful to trans people as I consider it beyond any question
that the way JK Rowling has done it has been harmful, then I think it's valid for people

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to be upset with you and to criticize that.

Is it that you believe that it's dangerous to ask the questions or just that you don't trust that she's actually engaging in good faith?

It's primarily that I don't trust that she's engaging in good faith.

I've never really gotten the impression that she wants to know more about the experiences of trans people or from the way that these questions are posed.

It's all about, isn't this dangerous to all of the rest of us, right?

Aren't these people posing a threat to us?

Isn't this dangerous to children?

Like I see that as a very loaded question.

Right, so you're saying it's not the text but the subtext in other words?

Yeah, completely.

Do you think there's any validity to the concerns that she's raised about the possibility of rushed care?

There is a small minority of trans people who detransition and many of these people do kind of say that trans identity for them was some kind of shelter from other issues going on in their life.

But the idea that trans care is rushed is something that probably is pretty grating to most trans people to hear because most trans people have this experience of sometimes years-long waiting lists to get care, of having to jump through all these hoops, of having to answer sort of invasive questions about why you're transitioning and so on, have to have to really fight in other words for care.

So the idea that, oh, we're just throwing any teenager who plays with the wrong type of toys into the transition pipeline, that's just not happening.

Probably some people are getting sloppy care because that's generally a problem with healthcare in the US and the UK.

The medical infrastructure is actually not that great.

But I feel that this is being presented as a bigger problem than it in fact is, which is not to minimize that.

Obviously, it's very painful if you transition and then realize that you've made a mistake, but it just doesn't happen that often.

So is your issue on the possibility of trans children transitioning being rushed in some cases, is that you and Rowling don't necessarily have a totally different point of view, but more about what she's choosing to focus on?

Well, no one wants to rush teenagers into transitioning if that's not what's going to be the best outcome for them, right?

I just feel that a lot of the kind of moral panic over this is overstated.

It sounds like you think that she's exaggerating the risks and that adds to a climate of fear around something that society still seems hesitant to embrace.

Yeah.

When I was talking to Natalie about this idea of exaggerating real risks in a way that might distort them, I asked her if she felt the same way about Rowling's concerns around self-id and gender recognition certificates and what they could mean for single-sex basis.

I mean, first of all, she says, you know, there's this fear, oh, men are just going

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to be able to come barging into bathrooms with those certificates.

Do you need a certificate to enter a bathroom now?

That's not how bathrooms work.

To me, this is a sort of imagined fear-generated scenario that doesn't really line up with the actual experience of people in bathrooms, right?

People identify your gender based on how you look.

I mean, I've been using women's bathrooms for five years.

No one has ever approached me about it, right?

So generating a paranoia about men in women's bathrooms is sort of this purely imaginative scenario where, you know, there's going to be perverts in bathrooms who will face no consequences because of, like, I don't know, sexual assault is still illegal.

It's not really clear to me how much protection a certificate gives someone.

When you talk about the danger of the, like, asking questions idea or seeing it as indirect bigotry, an interesting aspect of this part of it is that, you know, in the first chapter of the first Terry Potter book, Uncle Vernon keeps yelling at Harry over and over again, stop asking questions.

And when I asked Rowling about why she started the book this way, she said that from the start the book was anti-authoritarian.

And that she understood starts when people are discouraged from voicing their doubts.

And you are someone who's been vocal about the ways that the internet has become a place where authoritarian behavior is on the rise.

Do you see what she's worried about?

I think that to be authoritarian, you have to be able to leverage authority.

And trans people are in a weak position, right?

I don't see this trans big brother that you can't question.

Like, that's a very melodramatic and self-pitying way of framing this that I understand why to people it feels like, oh, the mob is attacking me.

Well, I don't know, is that the mob can be vicious and unreasonable and unsympathetic and un-nuanced?

Absolutely.

But to me, that's fundamentally different from Big Brother.

In her JK Rowling video, Natalie talks about the way that some trans people wield power online, including why that power is sometimes wielded so fiercely.

A lot of extremely online trans people really don't have a strong sense of conviction and their own identity, which is why they need constant external validation to prop them up.

They will constantly be told that they're valid, that they really are the gender that they say they are.

And if someone even obliquely threatens or questions their fragile self-concept, they lash out.

And for some of those trans people, cancelling celebrities on Twitter is the one kind of power they have.

You know, have people been abusive, disproportionate, out of line and reacting against JK Rowling? Of course.

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How did I endorse people saying violent or abusive, cruel things?

No.

I've been the target of a lot of that myself, but I also kind of understand what people are mad about.

I definitely hear you.

As I'm thinking back, of course, I was in whisper when the discussion about...

At the end of our conversation, I told Natalie a bit more about my own story.

How it was people willing to engage with me, even when I was saying really cruel things that was so transformative.

And how I wonder, as uncomfortable as those conversations can be, if they're really the best path to progress that we have.

Over the last decade, when it comes to things like opposition to same-sex marriage, so many people have been persuaded and now supported.

And I asked her whether one of the reasons she was willing to speak publicly about these issues was because in a pluralistic society, actually having the conversation is how effective change is made.

They serve a purpose that is ultimately good, even though we wish there was a more ideal round.

Well, I think that realistically, that is how acceptance...

That is the trajectory.

I'm not under any illusions about what it's going to take for trans people to be accepted.

I think that we're probably 20 years away.

And I think that what it is going to take is people simply habituating to a world that includes trans people.

And my guess is that once that happens, once that habituation happens, it becomes much less of this hypothetical, new, scary, invasive thing.

And it becomes something that's sort of accepted in life.

And that will happen with trans people.

Trans people are not going anywhere, you're not going to be able to get rid of us.

I think that once this becomes normal, it will become to most people a bit more of an embarrassment that they behaved in this way during these years.

And I certainly do believe in having the conversation.

I mean, if I consider myself, I think I'm having the conversation right now.

And thank you for that.

Again, I just want you to know how much I appreciate that because...

Well, I think I'm willing to have the conversation because I feel that I often have no choice.

But I also hope that people sort of understand the reason why a lot of trans people might not be super eager to politely answer every question they have about, isn't giving you health care dangerous for children, isn't allowing you into bathrooms, going to leave women vulnerable to rape.

It takes patients to answer these questions and to not feel insulted or attacked.

I am willing to do it to a certain extent because I know that I have to, right?

Because unfortunately, the progress of trans people is in its still fairly early stages.

And I hope you understand how deeply I know this in my bones because when I think about

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the people who engaged me on Twitter back in the day, the ones who were patient and showed me grace when I displayed the kind of absolutely horrible, cruel behavior that I did, it honestly shocks me.

So anyway, I completely understand that and I appreciate it.

I do sometimes worry that I'm like somewhat losing my ability to be, to have that kind of tranquil, forgiving quality because you can get worn down doing this for too long. Sometimes I worry that I guess I sort of usually avoid these conversations lately because I honestly kind of have gotten a bit burnt out on it, but I do still feel this kind of...

Why am I here?

I think JK Rowling, like, you know, she...

I read all those books when I was a kid, like they're so lingering, emotional, like there's a part of me that actually still cares, sorry, there's a part of me that still cares what she thinks, you know?

What would you want to say to JK Rowling?

I just kind of hope she could try to see why so many trans people are angry and hurt by this and I realize that that means asking for a second to, like, leave her own position of feeling hurt and threatened.

That's what she says that she wants to do and to me what doing that would look like would be understanding why people who are sort of being constantly rejected and humiliated by our families, by the government, who are losing our access to healthcare or being threatened with it, who are kind of just fighting for a basic ability to participate in society, like why we might feel hurt and betrayed by her sort of contributing to, like, fear about us, that's, I guess, what I would say.

We'll be right back.

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Hi there, listener.

My name is Nellie Bowles.

I'm a writer for the Free Press.

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Every Friday, I publish a column I call TGIF where I run down the big and small news stories of the week while cracking jokes at my own and others' expense, mostly my own.

Anyways, it's fun, but it's also informative and, dare I say, occasionally provocative.

At the Free Press, we publish investigative stories, provocative opinion pieces, and podcasts like this one.

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So first of all, thank you so much for doing this.

Can you start by just telling me your name and how old you are?

Yeah.

My name is Noah, and I'm 17 as of like two weeks ago.

Oh, amazing.

Happy birthday.

Thank you.

A while back, our team got an email from a father in California.

He'd written to say that he was confused and upset about JK Rowling and why she was speaking out about young people medically transitioning.

He said that if we wanted to understand what that experience is like, we should talk to his teenage kid, Noah, who is trans.

And when we sat down for the interview, I was surprised to hear that Noah already knew who I was.

It's exciting to meet you because part of my whole gender journey was, you know, finding resources on the internet.

And I watched every TED Talk about every remotely queer subject that there was, so I saw years more than once.

On YouTube, he'd seen a TED Talk I gave back in 2017.

In my home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle between good and evil.

The good was my church and its members, and the evil was everyone else, explaining how and why I'd left the Westboro Baptist Church.

My friends on Twitter didn't abandon their beliefs or their principles, only their scorn.

They channeled their infinitely justifiable offense and came to me with pointed questions tempered with kindness and humor.

They approached me as a human being.

I watched it, and I appreciate that it was sort of a resource for developing critical thinking.

I guess I like to think of myself as someone who tries my hardest to second-guess myself in a positive way, and I like to think maybe you helped with that.

Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiters of divine truth, but flawed human beings, I couldn't pretend otherwise.

I couldn't justify our actions.

So nice to meet you.

Oh man, nice to meet you too.

That's amazing.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 6: Natalie and Noah

It felt serendipitous to meet Noah because he not only shares my commitment to investigating our beliefs, but also he is in many ways the embodiment of one of Rowling's concerns.

A young person, born female, who showed no signs of gender dysphoria growing up but was overwhelmed with dysphoria at puberty, and within a few years had medically transitioned, including getting surgery as a minor.

Can you tell me how long have you gone by Noah?

I've gone by Noah since the summer of 2018.

I tried out the name Blake for like a month, but I've been going by a name that was not the one I was assigned a birth since March of 2018.

March of 2018.

And so how old were you at that point then?

I think I was 13.

And how do you describe yourself and your gender?

I think the simplest way to describe myself is trans male, a trans masculine person, which is a term for anyone whose gender transition has led them to a more masculine place than when they started.

And when did that start for you?

When did you start to feel different?

My therapist has said that it's very common for trans people to only come to the realization that they're trans in puberty, which was the case for me.

For a lot of my childhood, it just didn't come up, which my parents had a really hard time with because the portrayal of transgender people, the extent of what they had encountered is it's like a four year old who is a girl and then says, I want to play with trucks.

I hate trucks.

I won't wear one, et cetera.

And then they get older and they have the words to articulate their feelings.

And everyone realizes, oh, you were transgender and we all knew all along and nobody's caught off guard.

But that wasn't my story.

I have feminine interests and I had feminine interests growing up.

And it wasn't until I was 10 or 11 that I started being uncomfortable with my body.

When I started developing a more feminine body, I knew I was uncomfortable.

And then when I was in middle school, I started discovering portions of the internet where people would talk about queer identity issues.

What specifically were you looking at?

My sort of gateway was BuzzFeed because they have a ton of viral content.

Dear BuzzFeed, when I was four, I just thought I was like any other boy.

As I grew a little older, I started realizing I was different.

Jamie Dodger, whose video, it was titled Dear BuzzFeed or something similar.

I tried to fit in as female during my early teens.

I could never find clothes I liked for uncomfortable in anything I wore and disliked my hair being long.

I must have watched that 20 times.

The day I started Testosterone was incredibly exciting.

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My dad picked up my prescription for me and it was sitting waiting for me when I got home from college.

From BuzzFeed, I started doing my own research.

When I was 11, I used to just rewatch videos over and over of trans men documenting their journeys online.

And even before I understood why, I was fascinated with that content.

That's just all I would do is just rewatch videos like that.

Hey, what's up everybody?

Welcome back to my channel.

Today, I'm going to be giving y'all some of my most effective dysphoria hacks, tips to get over dysphoria.

I'd like to recommend that everybody document their transition.

Having before pictures and videos and recordings of your voice that you can look back on later in your transition will end up being so meaningful.

It's made a big difference in my experience.

A lot of my exploration, none of it was you should be trans.

It was just this is my journey.

I really liked it when people called me a tomboy.

I liked it when I fit in with the boys more than the girls around me.

This is what I want to tell the world about my journey and about the community at large.

Today, I'm going to be going over my one month post-op top surgery, kind of a general overview.

And I took all of that information in and I came to the conclusion I should allow myself to explore who I am and try and use that as an avenue to find happiness.

And something that had a really, really significant impact on me was people who portrayed a trans body in whatever forms it came in as beautiful or normal, which taught me that there is hope for me to be happy and that I can allow myself to feel joy or find some joy in how I look.

And were you seeing a therapist or a counselor at that time, like when all of this started?

I had a lot of mental issues, maybe that's not the most delicate way to say that, but

I was dealing with a lot of mental struggles once puberty began.

You mean aside from your issues with gender?

Yeah, and I couldn't really identify that I had issues with gender.

I just had all of these abstract feelings that didn't coalesce into gender dysphoria until I understood with that tremendously, which was later on in my life.

And so I was dealing with very severe anxiety disorder, an oppressive disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and attention deficit, hyperactive disorder.

And so my mom got me a therapist who I've been with ever since.

And when she picked out that therapist, she picked out someone who specialized in anxiety and gender issues in adolescence, which I find interesting to look back on.

And I had a psychiatrist as well.

And around eighth grade, I went into this really severe depressive episode.

And I ended up telling my psychiatrist that I was debating suicide.

And so everyone decided that we were going to have to keep an eye on me.

And so I just kept going to therapy.

And like I said, the core issue, which we couldn't figure out was never resolved.

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And I believe within a year, I joined a support group for transgender youths. And my therapist helped me identify that a lot of what I had been expressing to her for a really long time could be identified as feelings of gender dysphoria. And after at least a year and a half or two years of those issues being present, she referred me to a gender clinician and talking to my parents was the first big step that was taken. We identified what I wanted from the gender clinic, which was to go on testosterone and to get top surgery. But that couldn't happen partially because I was too young. I believe the limit was 16 for surgery and they just weren't comfortable at 14. So our task that we got was for me to discuss my gender with my parents. And so once or twice a week for a long time, at least a year, my parents would sit down with me and we would have a long talk about how I was feeling because it had to become very clear that not only was my gender dysphoria spawning all of the other mental issues I was having, but that the solution was medical intervention. And that was seemingly the only thing that could help me because we had tried pretty much every other option at that point. And how did your parents react when you first told them that you wanted to transition? They had both been watching me struggle for a really long time. And my dad in particular just really wanted to help me improve and help me do better and help me become healthy, but it was very intense for them. It was very intimidating. They were pretty caught off guard. Like they raised me, there wasn't any very intense masculine leanings. And when I brought it up, they were really surprised. So it took a lot for them to even be on board with me not being a girl. And I think they're still struggling with that to an extent, which is understandable. And I can empathize with where they're coming from on that, of course, and I've done my best to empathize with every possible point of view that this situation involves. They did not really want me medically transitioning. It took a very long time and it took like three or four or maybe even five medical professionals saying to them, we have been observing your child for a long time and we believe this is the right step for them, for my parents to be on board. And can you talk about what specifically made them uncomfortable? Like what were their concerns about? I mean, it sounds like you're saying in part that they just couldn't envision you as anything other than a girl, but were there other concerns that they had that they expressed to you? I think a lot of it was that they understandably had this certain ideas in their head of who I was going to become. Things like one day your dad will walk you down the aisle towards a bride or a groom. That didn't matter to them as much, but they pictured me in a gown and they pictured being in the operating room as I gave birth to my child and they had all these specific ideas and dreams and goals and hopes for me. So a lot of it was their expectations for me and how they saw me developing, but I would argue the majority of their concern was to quote Abigail Schreyer that I was doing irreversible

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damage to myself, that I was making a choice that was incredibly drastic, that I could not make because I was a minor and that I would regret and have to reverse later in my life, all of which are very, very valid concerns and I took them all very seriously as did all the other adults and medical professionals in that environment.

Another issue that was raised by my dad was he has transgender friends and he has encountered a lot of transgender people who don't pass or who it's clear that they're transgender and he felt that I would be discriminated against or I would never fit into the beauty standard or that I would, both my parents expressed concern that I would have a harder time living my life if I was a transgender person in terms of finding love, getting married and having children and how people would react to me and feeling like an outsider in my entire life. They had a lot of concerns with how my quality of life would decrease even if I made the right choice by transitioning.

So even with all of your parents' concerns, what made you and eventually them feel safe in moving forward with medical transition?

To me, what's important is that I had a team of medical professionals who had done this and who could help me make the right decision and help guide me and I felt convicted of things in my life, but I've never felt as convicted as I have about my identity in terms of knowing what would make me more comfortable, which was medical intervention and as convicted

as I was about that, which was 100%, I don't know if I would have let myself make that decision had I not had help from a support network who did not just blindly say yes to everything I was telling them, who asked me more questions, who guided me in a way that wasn't just everything sounds right, you've checked off all the boxes, let's move you to the next stage of your transition.

It was a very thoughtful, serious process as I believe it should be for everybody.

As you're doing all that research and thinking things through, did you read or see stories about detransitioners during that time?

Yeah, I definitely did.

I think it was a concern for me in some ways.

It was a concern for me because the idea of detransitioning was scary to me because I know I feel this way now, if other people have also felt this way and transitioned, they must have just woken up one day and felt a completely different way.

I don't want to dismiss detransition as an issue because not exploring it is risky and it's important to talk about because just as much as I feel transition is liberating, I don't want it to become limiting for anybody.

You don't want someone to do it who won't really benefit from it?

Exactly.

I want everyone who will benefit from it to do it, everyone who won't to not, which is a hot take, I think.

I'm a revolutionary in that way.

Thank you for laughing at that.

You're right though.

This topic obviously elicits a lot of really strong feelings and people have sometimes a really hard time talking about it with nuance because the stakes feel extremely high.

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Yeah, I completely agree.

I think one of the reasons I'm excited to be talking about this is I think it's so important to emphasize that everybody comes into this issue with a core belief that people should be happy and a lot of the people who are anti-trans, not all of them, for sure a lot of them are grifting, but a lot of them come at it from the perspective of not wanting other people to make an irreversible mistake and do irreversible damage.

I think it's really important to note that I take all that really seriously and I'm coming from the exact same place of wanting to mitigate irreversible damage.

Part of what JK Rowling says in her essay, she lists all of these things that are common among people my age who transition from female to male and it's like anxiety, dissociation, all of these different things that are very common in transgender people, but she is interpreting those real facts as these children are misinterpreting their difficult feelings as being on account of gender dysphoria.

I think what's crucial is that I was not the only person making these decisions for myself.

I expressed how I was feeling to adults and to professionals and they came to medical conclusions the same way you would about undergoing any medical procedure.

A lot of people like to break with social norms like women who shave their heads or guys who wear eyeliner and I just want to understand what was different about what you were experiencing.

Can you talk about that a little bit more?

That's a good question.

That's a question my parents had too.

For me, what was different between my experience and maybe just a masculine woman's experience is that I didn't feel I could continue living happily or living sustainably at all unless

I was living the life of a man as opposed to a masculine person.

When I was being perceived as a woman, it was incredibly distressing to me.

It just became incredibly important and a sort of psychological need that I be seen and referred to and live my life the way that a man would.

It was also so severe for me that medical intervention had to be taken for my own well-being.

I just want to stick here for one more minute because I really want to understand your experience and to help other people understand it.

I think one way to do that is to compare it to an experience that's I think pretty common.

And then to see where yours diverges from that.

So I remember being seven years old and there was a girl in my class who was experiencing what I now know is called precocious puberty.

So she started her period and I didn't know what that meant.

So I went home and asked my mom and she pulls out this book.

I'd seen the book before.

She starts showing me illustrations of uteruses and ovaries and fallopian tubes.

I last about 90 seconds before I was just so disgusted that I was just put it away.

And she laughed at me and we went on.

But as a kid, I just remember being angry and offended and upset when I found out that childbirth was painful.

I was disgusted and embarrassed by bras and breasts and periods and basically anything

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that distinguished me from boys.

It just seemed to me that boys had it easy and I just wanted nothing to do with femaleness. And I guess my question is, you know, is that disgust and discomfort that I felt, that kind of alienation from my body and from the role that I understood I was supposed to occupy in life?

Is that similar to what you felt?

And do you think that maybe the magnitude of it was just more extreme in your case?

Or what do you think are the biggest differences between what I described and what you went through?

That's interesting.

I think my experience was different in ways that I hadn't thought about because I hadn't had someone, you know, express to me that question formatted that way.

But I think for me, I sort of was excited for puberty and then I thought it would be an escape where I would finally get to a place where I was comfortable and I could fit into a role.

Like I always didn't really feel like I fit in places.

And so I thought, well, puberty, I can't wait to turn into a woman.

I can't wait to grow breasts and begin my period and everything because then I'll finally feel like I am belonging to the female gender for the first time and then everything will click into place.

And I was really excited and then, you know, things started developing and I remember telling my mom, I don't like it, but I'm sure I will.

Like it's just because I don't like that they're small.

When my breasts are bigger, then I'll be happy.

And then they got bigger and I was less happy.

And so I guess I really was looking forward to puberty because I thought it would be a gateway to feeling acceptance and finally feeling at home in my body.

And then the opposite happened.

And part of me leaned in and part of me was leaning out and it took a lot of daily discomfort and a certain amount of self-loathing to get to a place where I understood that what I wanted was to be a masculine person.

And then I think it didn't click until I had experimented with masculinity.

At the start of my gender journey, you could say, when I was just using different pronouns and a different name, it made a huge impact to how I felt.

And I was finally feeling more like myself.

So I guess the difference between me and maybe another person going through feminine puberty who was leaning in a masculine direction is that I leaned so far into that masculine direction and only found that I was finally happy and secure once I had gone all the way from female to male.

And any in between zone, any masculine womanhood or anything like that was unsatisfying and I was still unhappy.

Does that make sense?

Yeah, it does.

Can I ask how old were you when you got top surgery?

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I got top surgery three months ago tomorrow.

And so you were 16?

I was.

And what do you think would have happened if you'd had to wait until you were at least 18 to make these decisions?

I've thought about that a lot and I think if I hadn't, and again, this is very severe language, if I hadn't killed myself, I would have at least tried.

And I have dealt with self harm and stuff like that.

And it's just, I was dealing with emotional problems, but not being, I'm dealing with a lot of them now.

Like transitioning didn't cure any of my disorders, but it made everything so much easier.

And it was just sort of this pit that dragged me down into a place where I felt so hopeless and so miserable.

And part of my journey with self mutilation was that I hated my body and I wanted to punish my body because it was causing me so much pain.

And I wanted to like crawl out of my skin, but I couldn't do that.

And it was at times genuinely agonizing.

And it was difficult having to square my reality of living what was sometimes an agonizing life experience with also understanding that I am 16, 15, 14 when I'm going through all this.

And so many of the teenagers have felt miserable and then grown up and they've been fine.

But for me, it was just a deep need that I just felt so miserable in my body that I couldn't bear to be alive in the body I was in.

I personally believe that I, if I had had to wait longer, would have attempted suicide and I might have been successful.

And I was experiencing all that while I had friends who were calling me the right name.

And it was sort of a constant state of crisis.

And that was sort of the hardest part was I understood the reality and I understood that I, it was not as much as I know what I'm feeling is real.

I also know I can't expect my parents to hear that and go, great, let's just, let's just have you undergo surgery right away.

It had to be a long process because that's how you do everything safely.

That it was agonizing to get to that point.

And so I think there needs to be a balance.

I don't think that a teenager, I think there are a lot of teenagers who commit, who attempt suicide or commit suicide, who maybe think that transitioning is the answer for them and it isn't.

And if they had said to their parents, I have to transition or I'll commit suicide.

They might have made the wrong decision.

But for me, it was the right decision.

And I knew that and doctors knew that.

And it was just, it was what I needed to feel like I could stand to wake up in the mornings.

Thank you so much for sharing that with me.

Before you go, I did want to make sure to ask you about JK Rowling and Harry Potter and

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how you feel about all of that now.

Let me share with you some of my accolades.

I've read the books four times.

I know what house I'm in.

I know what wand I have.

I brought my Harry Potter wand that I made out of hot glue and a chopstick to prove that

I have steak in this conversation.

I made that when I was like seven.

I'm a Gryffindor.

I have a Gryffindor Letterman's jacket in my closet that I wore even way past when it was remotely cool or interesting for me to do that.

I have my golden snitch right here.

I'm such a big Harry Potter fan or I was such a big Harry Potter fan.

Especially because it was so hard to be in the real world.

I can't even state how important it was to me.

JK Rowling, I stole her biography from my third-grade classroom and I kept it for a long time because I just loved reading it because I just admired her so much.

Some part of her has shaped who I am and gotten me through so much.

Her work is so important to me now in so many ways.

She just really taught me to believe in beauty.

I'm really going on about JK Rowling and Harry Potter, but it just dominated my life for a really long time.

And so what do you think now about JK Rowling?

How do you understand the things that she's been saying about sex and gender and I guess where do you think you agree and disagree, do you think?

That's a very, very good question.

I am almost positive and maybe this is a childlike thing for me to say that if I sat down with JK Rowling, we would have a great time talking and we would get along and she would say things that I would cherish for the rest of my life coming from my childhood hero who was one of the youngest billionaires of all time and then lost that title because she gave so much of it away.

Oh God, I just, I've adored her for so much of my life and I'm sure I would cry if I ever met her.

And I believe she believes a lot of the same things that I do and I think a lot of what the issue has become is that a lot of what she has said is not bigotry in the way that bigotry is portrayed sometimes in that to my knowledge, I strongly believe she has never said anything like, I'm better than trans people, trans people are this negative thing, this negative thing, this negative thing.

But I think that there was bigotry veiled in what she was saying or that thing that she was saying were reminiscent of bigoted ideas and she expressed what are very reasonable emotions to a platform where they became interpreted as fact or used to support opinions that are bigoted or untrue or harmful.

And I guess the issue is, I feel that she came from a reasonable place, but I think she is contributing to the idea that trans people and trans activists are irrational

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or they're harming children because she is overstating.

A lot of what she has said is a very real account of what she's gone through and what has been said to her and what she's encountered, but because she's sharing the story of a cisgender woman who experienced a predominant amount of backlash from trans people, the story that gets shared to an unfathomably large audience is one where trans people are the bad guys because in her story, I guess it's fair to say that they were.

And that's dangerous, I think.

So it's more like, it's not what she said, it's what some people can interpret or take away from what she said.

Yes.

Is there anything that you would like to say to JK Rowling?

I don't know, definitely thank you for changing my life.

I have a lot of hope for her and maybe naively a lot of faith in her and I just, what I would like to see is just, I want, I want to look back on this in 10 years and be like, remember when everyone thought that JK Rowling was transphobic and then there was that big dialogue where she like, I don't know, something, something said something and didn't abandon her original concerns, but, and I don't know how possible that is, but I guess I want to say I hope that this is a blip on her legacy and a point in the timeline of trans liberation that sort of coincided.

And I guess I just, I want people to be able to identify her as having good intentions.

I want that to be what we come away with, but that's just my hope is that we look at her as a well-meaning positive figure and not evil or, or Voldemort or Voldemort.

Noah, thank you so much for your time.

You have been so generous and, and I'm just incredibly impressed with the kind of thoughtful nuanced position that you have, you have taken.

So thank you again for sharing that with us.

Thank you very much.

Thank you for having me.

As a fan who's been there from the beginning, like, what is it you'd like to say to her on this?

Wow, that's a really powerful question.

I would say to her that she's just wrong.

What would you want to say to her?

I would say I know you have a lot of strongly held beliefs and I just, I just would like you to listen to us a little more and hear, hear what we're saying.

What would you say to her if she were listening?

Just.

God.

Why?

On my second trip to Scotland, to again sit down and talk with JK Rowling, I wanted to give her the chance to answer some of the hard questions posed by her critics to hear what she makes of them and to ask her essentially the same question I am always asking myself.

What if you're wrong?

More next time.

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 6: Natalie and Noah

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