

ON WHOLENESS AND DEVOTION: THE PROGRESSIVE STEP

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This article is a continuation of an ongoing *currere* project the authors began in “On Wholeness and Devotion” (Parker & Dawe, 2023). In the progressive step of *currere* (Pinar, 1994), we turn to the imagined future. We look to what is not yet the case, what is not yet present. By way of introduction the authors share insight into their present as they turn to what someday may be. Ren Dawe’s imagined futures as a trans person wrestle with identity, humor, and hope. Wholeness in the queer experience shows the necessity, through a progressive lens, of both learning how to *cope* and learning how to *hope*. Parker’s Progressive Devotions build on an understanding of devotion as an intense and deep commitment or love that is expressed through action and ongoing practices. These devotions engage with facts, words, and imagination as concepts in imagined futures. We share notes from our present to ground our future-focused writing.

REN: THE NECESSITY OF OPTIMISM

As I read our *currere* piece “On Wholeness and Devotion,” which centered the past as a means of understanding one’s present, I am actively sitting at the precipice of a future I never imagined would be possible. In that article, I analyzed wholeness as it related to transness, as it related to my life as a queer academic, and as it related to the collective queer experience.

Imagining a future as a trans person requires a holistic understanding of three things we are taught to suppress: a solid sense of identity, a good sense of humor, and a firm grasp of hope. Wholeness as transness has shown itself to me as a lesson in discovering identity; wholeness as a queer academic has made me into a student of joy and shown me its inner workings through humor; wholeness in the queer experience is now woven into a larger narrative I hold about how our human experience is not just in learning how to *cope*, but also learning how to *hope*.

After finishing my graduate studies, publishing my first academic paper, nearly ruining all of my relationships, and facing multiple daunting medical procedures, I jumped into a passion that has since taken over my life—performing. I am about to embark on my first national tour as a comedian, which is a statement I didn’t think I would ever get to say. A month from now I’ll be in a car, then on a bus, then on a plane, then on a train, and on many, many stages ranging from grandiose wooden thrusts to splintering pallets shoved in the corner of cigarette-stained pubs. My contributions to this article speculate on the concepts of wholeness through the imagined frames of desired futures—ones that follow a path of discovering identity, humor, and hope.

BRUCE: AND THE PLANETS OF THE UNIVERSE GO THEIR WAY - SEPTEMBER 2023

On August 30, 2023, there was a Blue Supermoon. Blue Supermoons are rare. There won’t be another until 2037. If the full moon is understood as a sign of birth, death, rebirth, and transition then the Blue Supermoon should be understood as a more powerful sign of those concepts. If one believes that the planets influence our lives and interactions with one another, then this is a moment of significance and meaning. Believers of astrology might claim that even the planets understand that change is imminent and pause, as they go their way, to send us that message. The days are still

uncomfortably hot in Boulder, Colorado, with temperatures often reaching into the 90s, but the nights have started to cool down. The season is changing from summer to fall. In Colorado, winter is never far behind fall.

Just like the change of seasons is inevitable, so are the changes I am facing in my personal, professional, and intellectual lives. We began this *currere* project on Winter's Solstice 2022. We found our way to the reflexive step needing to better understand where and who we had been. I needed then, and need now, to put myself in context and, however tentatively, situate myself in time. Now with things feeling increasingly uncertain and people and commitments that have been foundational in my life for more than a decade coming into question, I find myself needing to ground myself in the present and my future, imagined or otherwise.

Ren and I have had many late-night discussions about our difficulty imagining futures when for much of our lives we have been taught that futures are for other people. With the current political and cultural climate in much of the United States and around the world, it is hard not to see the presence of the pervasive belief that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) people aren't meant to survive. The only offense greater than people like us surviving is for us to thrive. Growing up working class in Southeastern Kentucky taught me at a young age that the lives of people who live in poverty and in regions of the country thought of as undesirable are just worth less to the majority of society than the lives of the affluent and well-educated. For me the progressive step of *currere* is an act of survival and resistance.

REN: 1 - WHOLENESS IN IDENTITY - NOVEMBER 2027

I start to my alarm, blaring at the absolutely disrespectful time of 10:30 a.m., which should signal to most people that they are abhorrently late for the day. For me, it's only six hours after calling it a night. I am in a hotel in New York, the morning after a show. It's rare I'm in a city that sleeps as little as I do. But now I need to quickly pack all of my entropic entrails into a suitcase to make a 2 p.m. flight.

When I was younger, big cities terrified me. Growing up as a small-town queer in West Virginia, metropolitan beasts such as public transit were foreign to me. Now, I could juggle a convoluted bus schedule with my eyes closed—which I may have done this morning, as I multitask recovering from a hangover and not missing my flight.

Though it feels like I'm just going through the motions, it is not lost on me that I seamlessly progress through airport security in a way I never could as a younger man. "What are they even looking for? I'm literally missing parts." I would wonder when I would routinely be pulled aside, patted down, and scrutinized before anxiously making my way to the sweaty seat in economy with my name on it. All my documents have a happy (albeit expensive) "M" seated in the middle, and nobody pays it any attention as they scan it and wish me a good flight. Such an insignificant letter on such an overlooked piece of plastic, and yet I know it is the culmination of countless lawsuits fought, protests organized, riots started, and papers filed. It's funny, spending several decades in the closet, just to make being queer a career, I laugh to myself. My "niche" is queer comedy—specifically, trans comedy—and yet I now identify more as a comic than a trans man. Transness has been a gateway to that identity, a market, a means. My identity now feels chaotically embedded into neon-soaked rooms, blackout curtains, and tangled aux cords—a caricature birthed out of something between a gay club and a comedy club.

The wholeness that comes with my identity isn't in a firmness or solidness; it is in its fluidity. Forever traveling to the next gig, forever finding enjoyment in things devoid

of gender and brimming over with it—the color pink, regional accents, alliteration, lighting. The wholeness of my identity comes from familiarity with who I am now and not the person I’ve been. In deciding to become familiar with the man I wanted to be, I found the thing I wanted to do. And in doing so, conveniently got over my fear of flying.

BRUCE: 1ST PROGRESSIVE DEVOTION - FACTS - JANUARY 2027

I have no one but myself to blame for this 7:30 a.m. meeting to review proposed legislation for Colorado’s upcoming legislative session with Michal. We are sitting quietly at their desk reading over bills to ensure we don’t miss any positive legislation we might be able to help become law or any harmful legislation that might move forward under the radar. I brought coffee for us both, and they brought bagels. We have done this together for a few years now. At this point, I have been doing some version of this process with colleagues before a state legislative session starts for more than 15 years. I am still not sure how good I am at it, but I know that my skills have improved over the years. I learned to seek the facts underneath the words in the proposed legislation because I had no choice. In those early years in Louisiana, no one else was looking for intended or unintended impacts on LGBTQ people. Sometimes education and activism are not glamorous or fun, but a necessary act of trying to survive and protect the people and communities you love. For me this work has always been about survival and feeling free to find joy.

My time in the Louisiana Governor’s Office taught me that to understand possible impacts you should read proposed legislation in the context of current law. “Line by line,” was Tina’s comment when we would read proposed statutory language. Tina, the Governor’s lead policy attorney, was a great teacher of legislative analysis and a patient friend. My time with Rocky Mountain Equality reading legislation with Michal has helped me learn to read creatively, seeking possible holes in the legislation that might allow hateful policies to be considered legal. We try to read all introduced legislation because bills related to housing, education, the environment, transportation, healthcare, and any other issue also impact LGBTQ people.

At 9 a.m., Michal suggests we take a walk to clear our heads. I listen to them talk a bit about the bill they just finished reading about tax rebates for solar powered car owners. Always insightful, Michal can tell that I am distracted. They ask me where my head is, and I start rambling at them, “Policy, legislation, and the law being subjects that I am more than conversant with, but not quite an expert in, is difficult for me.” We end up having an in-depth conversation about what each of us considers ourselves experts in and how that expertise has evolved throughout our academic and professional lives. I tell them,

My elementary and high school educations were more focused on gaining discrete facts about who wrote what famous novel or who wrote what classical symphony. I thought that cultural knowledge learned through hours and hours of flipping hundreds of index cards from front to back to memorize facts was the key to being smart.

I pause for a moment and then with sarcasm in my voice I tell them, “As you see, I use that information every single day of my life.” I learned those facts without context. As we turn to walk back to the office, I feel content walking beside a trusted friend and colleague and let my mind wonder if Tamora had made it to the office yet and found the Yerba Mate that I left her.

REN: 2 - WHOLENESS IN HUMOR - MARCH 2024

Today is my first time headlining at a comedy club, and I am nervous. In some sort of futile effort to not feel alone—or, god forbid, lonely—I call in the troops.

“Cara,” I say before she even answers. “Cara, I’m cashing in a friendship coupon.”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! We’re in friendship coupon territory? Alright, get Tara on the call.”

We three-way-dial in Tara, like some early 2000s teen sitcom, and she answers right away. They both know I never call unless it’s important.

“Tara, Ren’s cashing in a friendship coupon.” Cara declares.

“Oh, so it’s serious then. Ok hold on, I’m getting in my car, Ren babe, what do I need to do? Do we need a pep talk? Or do I need to unleash my precariously bottled Floridian mania onto someone’s car?” I know Tara is both kidding and stone-cold serious.

“No y’all, I just need you to tell me I’m funny.”

“You called all the way from New York just because you needed us—”

“—the two people who you literally started doing comedy with—”

“—the two people who have literally workshopped your worst jokes with you—”

“—to tell you that you’re funny?”

They both laugh, barely able to let the other finish a sentence, and their laughter soothes the tension building under my collar.

“Babe, you have celery content—and it kills. Nobody can make celery funny but you.” Tara chides.

“That’s not true,” I say, “John Mulaney has an entire bit about tuna that kills.”

“Yeah, but that’s John Mulaney—” Cara starts.

“—and tuna salad is low-hanging fruit.” Tara finishes.

“I don’t know where this self-pitying, low confidence little ass bitch came from, but could you put my friend *Ren* back on the phone? I’d like to hear something funny.” Cara has a way of roasting people as a form of affection that I’m quite fond of. She is a reformed school bully turned special ed teacher and probably the most compassionate person I know. “You’re telling me that you’ve been in New York for a week and not a single funny thing has happened to you?”

“No nightmarish hookups?”

“Creepy old men?”

“Scary young lesbians?”

“Not even a judgmental fashion statement?”

My friends always know the right thing to say when I’m feeling low. More importantly, they know how to make me laugh. More than a pep talk, more than an ego boost, more than even being kind—they know how to make me laugh, and that always breaks the tension.

Still not quite satisfied after our call, though, I punch in one more number as I start the shower and lay out my clothes for the night.

“Well, if it isn’t the magnificent Ren Darius.”

“Hi Cricket,” I smile.

“Hi handsome man.” I hear him smile too. “What’s up? What’re you doing?”

“Not much. Over-rehearsing this setlist, trying to not have a panic attack.”

“Is tonight your gig in Greenwich Village?” He asks.

“Bingo.” I answer.

“Are you excited?”

“Yeah,” I lie.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yeah,” I don’t lie.

“You’re going to do great.” He says warmly.

“Thanks. Can you just . . . can you just please tell me I can do this, please?” I cringe immediately after letting the words leave my mouth, knowing I sound dreadfully needy.

“Babe, not only can you do this, you’re going to do it really well. And even if you don’t,

it’s going to be good. Remember when you were opening for Mo Alexander and then you laughed so hard that you fell out of your chair?”

“Best and worst moment of my entire life,” I laugh.

“Right, and it was exactly as it was supposed to be. Because sometimes the worst things that happen . . . ”

“ . . . are the best things to happen.”

“That’s right.”

Sometimes the worst things that happen are the best things that can happen.

The same night I fell out of my chair in front of Mo Alexander, I also bought him tequila shots and tried to convince him to be my friend. Mo Alexander was big in the Denver scene, absolutely hilarious, and highly intimidating. I wasted no time in asking him why he started doing comedy, to which he told me that it was easy to make kids in school laugh—but the real power was in being able to make the teachers laugh, too.

I opened up to him right away about why I started doing comedy: my favorite comedian told a bad trans joke on national television. Upon hearing his joke, I was heartbroken. It was bad enough to hear it on the news that people thought I was more than an outcast—that I was a social deformity, a defect in society, a nuisance that should be eradicated. It brought a whole new level of pain when I heard it in a space that is supposed to elicit joy and explore misconception. I was sad, angry, indignant, and frustrated that my life—something that I knew to be amusingly ludicrous and illuminating—would be the subject of so much hatred following such a bad joke. And, suddenly, I became very determined to prove to the world otherwise. I decided I wanted to tell trans jokes that were funny for everyone, not because they weren’t dark or dirty or downright crass, but because they were true in illuminating the absurdity I’d experienced in our binary-obsessed society. I set my sights on an open mic at a smoky pub in Atlanta, Georgia, and I went.

“Good bad jokes save lives,” I said.

Mo laughed, but not in the ha-ha-funny kind of way, in the way we laugh when something feels so true that we can’t just sit in silence as it lands in our psyche.

“Good bad jokes save lives,” he said back to me, smiling.

We toasted to that sentiment over three rounds of tequila shots, and I fell out of my chair—laughing like a maniac—approximately 45 minutes later. The wholeness I experienced in that moment—elation, embarrassment, a sore tailbone—was fairly unparalleled in its intensity, since an entire room of eyes was on me as it happened. Something about being witnessed in such a moment of hilarity and shame made that ripple effect on my life feel bigger, more impactful, and more seen. The beauty of humor is that it exposes this wholeness—the rottenness and the perfection—of our lives. Jokes crack open parts of our society, our routines, our expectations or lack thereof, and it makes it accessible through the addition of curiosity. This lens of curiosity changed my entire world and my entire being, because getting curious about my world allowed me to get present in it. And the present is the only place where joy can live.

“I miss you,” I sniffle into the phone. “Promise you’ll still like me when I get home?”

“I promise,” he says.

And I almost believe him.

BRUCE: 2ND PROGRESSIVE DEVOTION - WORDS - AUGUST 2033

The sound of my voice reading and rereading the same two sentences aloud as I make small changes to the document is the only sound in the room. Eventually I am satisfied, for now, and believe that I have gotten those two sentences right. I take off my gray framed glasses and set them aside and rub my eyes. I am sitting in my home office on a quiet Sunday morning writing and waiting for Ren's arrival.

The sun streams through the open window that is partially blocked by the top two shelves of a wooden bookshelf that I have had for almost three decades. While forcing myself to pause and enjoy the warmth of the sun on my skin, I notice that the plants on the top shelf are reaching toward the light and make a mental note to myself, that I will likely forget, to turn the pots around so they won't end up leaning too far on one side because of reaching for the sunlight. The four shelves below it are full of essay collections and books about writing that I have read more than once. The walls are white except one deep blue accent wall that my desk faces, which Ren painted to make my office feel more like me.

I have the same desk that I have had since before I moved to Colorado. It is too big, but when I saw it in the furniture store in Baton Rouge during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it just felt right. Aside from my blue Apple desktop, a letter from Rhonda, and a handful of books including Ren's most recent poetry collection that he asked me to write a brief foreword to, *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson, and a recently published book that collects the lyrics of Stevie Nicks, the desk is empty. I am trying to improve my focus while writing and have convinced myself that the contents of my mind are directly connected to the contents of my desk. If the past is any predictor, I will pivot from minimalism to embracing my natural proclivity for clutter in the coming weeks.

I rise from my simple wooden chair to stretch, refill my large water jar, and observe to myself that after sitting for an hour my back is less stiff than it would have been before Ren bought a navy blue cushion and tied it to the chair without talking to me. I know that the color was selected with care and intention in an effort to ensure I liked it enough to not just remove it. It worked. Until recently I have preferred desk chairs to be flat, firm wood with no padding or a cushion. These last few years my lower back would be extra sore after spending hours writing. I laugh to myself under my breath about how, almost 12 years later, he still manages to make me feel special and worthy of love in big and small ways. He will be home late tonight from a six stop comedy tour through Appalachia. He has won the audiences over the same way he won me over, his larger than life presence and his carefully selected and well delivered words.

I feel a bit guilty that in a couple days we will turn around and leave on the long drive to Portland to be with Carrie, Dave, and Blake for the weekend of Blake's 16th birthday. I know Ren will be tired but won't let it slow him down. I walk to the kitchen and stir the chili in the slow cooker and feel proud of myself for cooking. A small thing, but one I am still not confident in doing. I push insecurities about my cooking skills from my mind and focus on how he will be happy I tried. He has only been gone 2 weeks, but I know we won't get much sleep tonight after being apart. I have two letters in envelopes waiting for him on the kitchen table. No matter how many years I spend focusing on words and how convinced I become that sometimes less is more I always find myself with far too much to say to be brief.

I am eagerly awaiting the proofs of my second essay collection, the first to be published by a press, to arrive. I hope they come before we leave on the drive so that while we are in Portland I can convince Carrie and Ren to read through them with me to catch any mistakes. My tendency to reread the same section of text over and over

making small changes until the last possible moment remains, and I need their help to not fall into that trap and slow this process down.

REN: 3 - WHOLENESS IN HOPE - JANUARY 2024

It is hard to imagine a hopeful future as a trans man. It is hard to imagine a future at all. When I first came out and went on testosterone, I was told by my peers that I would regret it. I was told by my parents that I would suffer because of it. I was even told by my doctors that we didn't know all the risks involved, that it could come with a heavy price.

"I'd rather die a happy young man than a suicidal young woman," I would joke, but it wasn't a joke. It was a real decision, and one I still make every time I inject myself with this little syringe filled with oil and sex hormones. I imagine this was a similar but different line of thinking other queers had before I ever came along. Hormones used to be exclusively a black market commodity, and queer lovemaking in and of itself was deemed a dangerous and sometimes lethal act. And to top it off, the oldest trans person I knew until this past year was 35. My perception of rainbow elders is skewed, and heartbreakingly so.

A trans friend posted a picture of a fairly average-looking old man with a long beard, smile lines, and a short caption. They were a 75-year-old trans man, had been on hormone replacement therapy for 20 years, and seemingly, were thriving. "We get old!" I exclaimed, both in sarcasm and in relief. It's hard to believe you have a future when you know no one like you that has one.

Hope is something I pushed away for a long time. The hope of ever becoming a boy, the hope of ever being loved, the hope of ever allowing myself to be loved, the hope of becoming a performer, hoping for success, hoping for health, hoping for peace, hoping for rest, hoping for time. It doesn't take much tragedy for hope to feel like a cruel taunt in the face of grief. Hope then feels heavy to carry around if it is always accompanied by disappointment, or worse.

But I found hope in comedy, in always being able to find a way to laugh at something horrid or mundane. I found hope in the arms of my lover, in his compassion, forgiveness, and devotion. I found hope in my masculinity, in a body that seemed impossible to attain, much less inhabit. And now, I'm practicing having hope for the future. It is hard to have hope for something completely unknown. It is hard to have hope for something predicted to be particularly difficult for our planet as a whole. But it is also necessary.

My future—our future—is completely dependent on optimism; it is our duty to dare to dream of what it might be.

BRUCE: 3RD PROGRESSIVE DEVOTION - IMAGINATION - JUNE 2043

The sound of dice rolling on the large wooden table I have had for more than 20 years is one thing that feels like home. A handful of my gaming friends from the past three decades have descended on my house as a surprise to spend the week with me celebrating my 63rd birthday. The house is full of laughter and geeky jokes and has been all week. Ren's cooking has made the house smell amazing. This whole week has been full of warmth and was a well-orchestrated surprise.

The eight friends who made the trip came with a mission. They are making me run the final battle of the megadungeon D&D 5th edition dungeon crawl that each of them played through some part of with me dungeon mastering during our years gaming together. We are five hours into the final battle of the campaign and all of us

are wondering if it will ever end. No one seems to be in a hurry. This activity that has always been about collaboration and connection for me has also always been an exercise in imagination. I always understood myself as not creative, but having this experience today with these friends who I spent so many hours rolling dice, telling stories, poorly imitating accents, and drawing hard to understand maps with, I feel lucky that for around 50 years of my life I have gotten to slay dragons with my friends.

I started playing cooperative roleplaying games when I was a kid because the real world was lonely. I made friends through gaming with other queers and nerds who also felt like outcasts in school. Throughout my life, gaming has always been a chance to build strong bonds with people who I have things in common with and given us a shared purpose. I look back over my life and don't regret a single hour I spent at a gaming table with friends. I am a better friend, writer, and person because of stretching my imagination with my friends. Maybe, after this week ends, we will start a weekly game online together.

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