

2.4 The Long and Winding Road to Self-Acceptance

Luis (interview), Iberia & Scotland

Identity

I'm officially British but I did not grow up here. I was born in Iberia and lived there until I was 18. I lived in London for nine months and went to university. It didn't work out, so I went back home but then came back to the UK – to Edinburgh – for university again in 2005, when I was 21. I have been here ever since. I just love it and never wanted to leave and it feels like home. In truth, it feels like I have two homes. I have a cultural home in Iberia and then I have where I want to spend the rest of my life, in Edinburgh.

In terms of ethnicity, I usually say I am white British, because being Iberian versus British – you're still white you know? And because I have a British passport. But I'll say white European, if there's a choice.

With regard to sexual orientation, I'd say I'm bisexual currently. But it's taken my whole life, from kind of early teens to now, to accept that, I suppose. I've been through every other label in the meanwhile! But it's only been bisexual in the last few years, since being on testosterone actually. It's started to settle down; it's more about feeling comfortable in my own body. And therefore comfortable and free enough to be myself. That said, I'm still not open about it with family and other people, and I really only tell people if it comes up. And I would say I actually avoid mentioning it back home in Iberia because it's not really understood or accepted.

With reference to gender, I'm a trans man. I always use pronouns he/him. Sometimes I will say male on things, if I just want things to be simple. It's contextual, I suppose, but in reality I think that there's a difference between being trans and cis – not so much in terms of our innate gender identity, but in terms of life experience, how it colours that, affects that, how it manifests in your day to day life. Now that I am comfortable in myself and everything, I no longer feel that I have to fit the kind of alpha male type expectations, particularly of my culture, because I just feel more comfortable with myself and my gender. Being brought up and socialized as a female until I was finally able to come out at 25, colours everything and I no longer try to alter the way that I speak or my body language or anything because I don't think it really matters. It matters to other people and it does affect how people see you. But I think, since having my son particularly, I will talk to him, how it comes out. Other people in general look at you differently, but do I care really? As long as it doesn't affect him, I really don't care.

My Faith & my Grandmother

In terms of my faith, it's been very up and down over my life. I obviously grew up in a Catholic country. I would say when I was growing up, probably 90–95% of people were Catholic. Whether they were practising or not, obviously it's variable. So through school, I went through first Holy Communion, Confirmation, all of that. I had a very, very religious paternal grandmother and she was the most important person in the world to me growing up and, you know, really probably until she died.

Did I think about faith a lot? I had a lot of doubts, largely around how strict things were, how a lot was very condemnatory. For example, I remember when I was about 7 coming home from school crying and really scared, telling my mum, because the priest – all schools had priests in them, as well as teachers and stuff – had told me she was going to go to hell, because she was Church of England, and there's nothing I can do about it. I had a lot of confused feelings about my faith. I saw my grandmother and even though she was extremely strict and everything, [her

faith] brought her so much peace. [I saw it] in the way that she treated people, and the way that she loved so strongly. But she was very strict to the letter and what the Vatican said. And she grew up at a convent school and all of that. And I've read some of her old books, because when she died, I inherited them. There's a lot about how women should be and what sort of books [they should read] kind of comments. One of them was a convent's guide to how young women should grow up and how women should be as wives, very prescribed stuff about how you dressed, how you talked, about the prayers that you have to say and all of that. She obviously took all of that on board as exactly how things were. The books were in Spanish and actually they're quite interesting. I've got a few of her prayer books and stuff as well. A lot of them are very good, actually, if you remained fluent in Spanish. But I don't speak it

I was bullied a lot in my childhood for having an English mother and Iberian father. We can trace our family – we've done family tree going back 300 plus years. The only other blood has been from other parts of Iberia, though I think there were a couple of Italian women as well. So that's very pure, but I've never had any kind of emotional or even much practical connection with the English side of my family.

My grandmother was the one who was very influential on me. I felt like the way she behaved and stuff, ignoring all the strict bits, was led by her love for Jesus and sort of taught me a lot about who Jesus was really. I came out a few months after she died. I felt I couldn't come out when she was alive. I did attempt to come out as trans, sort of about every three years roughly throughout my life, but they were really much smaller attempts to come out. Usually I'd say something to my mum or a friend or something and then get everything just kind of thrown at me, like no you're not, blah. And I'd just have to kind of stick everything back in the box.

There were phases where I moved away from my faith because it was too difficult. In early childhood, I wrestled with it a lot, because of all the very prescriptive things and not feeling like I was truly accepted and all of that, but still believing and seeing something in it. So I did go through with my first Holy Communion and confirmation at age eight and twelve. So that was that. I mean, you don't really get a choice, but

I went through with it with the belief that you only go through your confirmation if you really mean it. So, after wrestling with it a bit, I did really believe it. I would say I stopped practicing somewhere in my teens, stopped feeling like I belonged and all of that.

My grandmother was the person in my family that understood my mental health issues and didn't judge me for them. She had something to do with a convent or a monastery, focusing on Saint Jude, and she would kind of give financial donations in exchange for them praying for her – and for me, too, which is a very strange thing – but she really strongly believed in the intercession of saints, and priests, nuns and all of that. So, she continued to have an influence on my faith. She is probably the reason I didn't step away from it, completely.

Because I always felt that I couldn't come out as trans [while she was alive], I had come out as a lesbian. She was capable of such unconditional love – it didn't change the way she loved me, thought about me. But it made her so, so sad, and have so much pain, because she genuinely worried for my soul. And that was a horrible thing for her, as well. I just thought, if I told her about the gender stuff, that would be even more incomprehensible to her. I was just so worried about the impact it would have on her. So I didn't tell my grandmother why I left my husband. Because I saw how she was when my female cousin came out. She's in her 90s; she's not going to be here forever.

Mental Breakdown & Exorcisms

At the age of 18, around the time of my A Levels, I had a suicide attempt. I have struggled with my mental health for as long as I can remember. So I had the suicide attempt and then three days out hospital, I started trying to get ready for my A Levels.

I was obviously very distressed. I spoke to someone I didn't know really very well at school, who took me to her church. It was a kind of non-denominational evangelical church, which was even more strict, as they're very full-on. My friends in general used to refer to this church as a cult, because it was happy, because it was evangelical in the extreme, lots

of dancing, and kind of crying out in prayer through the services and at other points, speaking in tongues laying on of hands and stuff. At a later point, I went through exorcism because of my sexuality. They had quite a hold on me for a few years. I think a lot of it was that I desperately wanted to belong and believe in something and I saw little pieces that were so good, like the reliance on Jesus and I suppose like the unconditional love for everyone. But it was conditional, because you had to conform and behave as they wanted. It was less stuffy and very much more emotionally expressive and all of that, than what I used to. And I liked the whole thing of having a personal relationship with Jesus, rather than it all being very removed through prayer to the saints.

They tried to exorcise same-sex attraction out of me; I wasn't identifying as trans at that point. This was when I was 19. After joining this church, I moved to London for university and I attended a very similar church. When I got back home, after a few months I met somebody. I went through a lot with this partner. She was my first kind of relationship, that kind of fitted the lesbian criteria, and we just ended up having this tremendous, passionate, but very all over the place, chaotic relationship. It was chaotic, largely because of the reaction we had to it (from others).

She was Iberian and she didn't have English connections – her parents were Iberian. It was really not normal to do kinds of things like holding hands in the street, which we did, or all of that stuff like being open about being in that sort of relationship. As a result, we had a lot of kind of conflicts with family, and with my church, which she did attend a little bit, even though she held on very strongly to her Catholic faith. She was a practising Catholic and she did come with me to my church, but mostly she went to Catholic churches. She had a lot of emotional conversations with priests and stuff about her own sexuality but ultimately they didn't try anything like that (conversion therapy) with her, which I think shows you something about this whole evangelical side of it being extra, strong love, but the extreme judgement, too. The emotions don't seem to be so open on either side of that in the Catholic church. I mean, she had people praying for her and stuff – mostly the priest in the Catholic church – but I think it's that whole thing of being more removed from things.

I ended it multiple times, but I just ended up going back to her many times. One of those times was when I'd been in London. Some things happened which actually meant the end of my studies, a traumatic event where I was raped by a partner, a male partner. It brought up a lot of childhood trauma. So when I got back to Iberia, my relationship with my ex was based on the fact that we could relate on those issues of childhood trauma and stuff. So in addition to lots of other stuff, that was a big help, but I was still all over the place. I was not dealing with it, and she was the only person I told about the childhood stuff apart from church.

So I think after I was back for about nine months, I ended up in hospital and was back and forth out of hospital for quite a lot of time afterwards. Because things were not happening, not working well, I was visited fairly early on by people from my church. We went off the ward but still on the hospital grounds and that's where the exorcism happened. They were talking about demons and Satan and all of that – they felt that it was demons getting into me because I was weak due to my mental health and trauma and all of that.

There was a lot happening within quite a short space of time. I started attending the church at 18 in Iberia then went off to London. I carried on attending a similar church and went back to the original one during the holiday. I carried on going to that church even when I was in hospital. I met my partner when I came back at 19 and I carried on going to that church until I was 20 or 21 – I'm really not sure – when I was subjected to the equivalent of ex-communication. I was expelled from the church and no longer welcome because I wouldn't repent of my relationship and be fixed, basically. I didn't know the whole time that this was going on. There was a lot of stuff about gender roles and stuff as well, because gender roles were very strong for them. Yeah. And one of the ways I attempted to fix everything for myself when I was 18 and joined the church was to become increasingly more feminine, like hyper feminine and kind of go the opposite way. Just to just try and get over it, I suppose. You know, like, *I'm not really trans, I'm really not trans. I can do this.*

So after kind of being expelled from the church, I had no connection to any church for quite some time. I tried to forget about faith. Obviously it was still there in moments in my head. You can't get away from that, if

you've ever believed, I don't think, but certainly I had more doubts than I ever had before.

Metropolitan Community Church & Transitioning

I moved here [to Scotland] at 21. Nine months into that, so probably not until I was about 22, I discovered MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). I'd attempted to go to a few different evangelical or maybe Baptist or whatever churches, initially, because I'd joined the University Christian Union. I was still looking for something, and about six months to nine months in, maybe a little before I was 2, I somehow read about or heard about MCC – whilst I was at Uni, I'm not sure – and the fact that the site is so close to the university.

So I started going to MCC and I was completely and utterly confused with the acceptance of sexuality and gender – though what I was mostly hearing at that time was about sexuality – and that was just completely revolutionary to me. Overwhelmingly this was in a good way. I finally settled down with my now ex-partner, whom I met when I was 19. We were together for twelve and a half years. She moved here to be with me. It took a year for her to settle everything back there, because moving away was a big deal. It's not something they do, unless they're going to university and coming back there, really. So she moved here and we lived together. And she came to MCC with me and she had much more of an *Oh my God, what do you think you're doing with the Bible* type reaction. She had some conversations with a lesbian couple that she talked to a bit, but in the end she felt completely uncomfortable with everything. And around this time, she started hiding her sexuality. When she started work here and stuff, she talked to absolutely no-one about it. She referred to me, or allowed people to think, I was her flat mate. You know, all of that stuff – my cousin, my bestie.

She did not feel comfortable at the time to go to MCC, so I carried on going for a couple of months on and off. But eventually I left it completely. And at the same time, I was going through things with the CU at University, towards the end of my first year. There was something that

came up called the Pure Course, which was eventually allowed to be held on university grounds. There was a lot of back and forth, but eventually they did hold it in people's homes, but kind of recruited from university and stuff. And the whole thing about sexuality and stuff evolved to gender roles as well. So eventually I stopped going to CU. I stopped going to MCC, which were very different things, but I stopped going to them roughly at the same time. After we stopped going to MCC, she convinced me to try and go to a Catholic church. The closest one to us was where we first worked. All the women were wearing veils and the Mass was in Latin with no English translation. Eventually I told her that I did not feel comfortable going, so we started going to the Catholic Cathedral, which was much better.

But we still couldn't be open about *the biggie*, the relationship. I did go to prayers and I used to say the rosary. I have quite a few different feelings about the rosary, but overwhelmingly, I don't have an issue with it and I felt it was helping me. With the prayer scenario, I don't pray to the Saints and all of that, but it's the whole thing of thinking about multiple things whilst you're saying the words. It gives you an ability to focus on a particular thing that you're praying for. In this case, it was always for my grandmother. She went through quite a lot of things in the years before she died with her health. So there were a lot of prayers for her. But ultimately I had no church, going forwards, until she died, nearly fifteen years ago.

After my grandmother died, a few months later, I had a massive breakdown in my mental health, so I ended up in hospital on a Section, for quite a while. I got to know the hospital chaplain there, who happened to have been at MCC when I was there. I hadn't seen him for a very long time, obviously, but he remembered me. He met with me a few times. Throughout this stay in hospital, I was doing things I had been doing for years. So in my spare time, I used to bind, for example. By the end of this hospital stay, I had made the decision to come out. It's a very awkward thing to do on a mental health ward, because I was being constantly observed, as well. I think talking to the chaplain had a huge impact on my feeling able to come out, and kind of made the decision

that I was going to come out, even make the decision that I was going to come out, even if it wasn't what everyone else wanted for me.

So I did start going to the MCC again, though by now it had merged with the URC. It took a couple of months before I did properly. A lot of [the reason] why I still wasn't going regularly, was because I was still with my ex and she was very much *not* accepting any of this. I think I took about seven years to move from social transition to medical transition. It was a long time, and a lot of it – no, all of it – was based on other people and acceptance. In those times, waiting times were quite different. Quite soon after hospital, I came out to my GP. She was very accepting, but because times were different, obviously 15 years ago nearly, she was sort of like, “Oh, I’ve never had a trans patient, but I’ll go and find out about all of that.” And she did; she was brilliant.

So she referred me to the Sandyford Clinic. Because she said I should go on both waiting lists because that was an option in those days. So I self-referred to Sandyford but she said, really, I should just refer you to the one close [to you], but see if you can get on that one and get there quicker. Now, the Sandyford waiting list was definitely quicker; it was six months at that point. This is the NHS; in those days there weren't any private clinics, though I think there was one in England. So that was not an option. But waiting times were very different. They've gone up and down over the years. Six months later, I had an appointment at the gender clinic in Glasgow.

That was difficult, because in those days, you had to do what was called the ‘Real-Life Experience,’ and I had met the two year's criteria. But they didn't count it, because my family and my then partner were still referring to me by my birth name. My choices were to cut everybody out [of my life] then. So that went nowhere. And then I moved down South in 2014 to start a PhD in England, which also went nowhere. But I went down [south] for that and came off all the gender waiting lists and everything. It was when I came back that I could start moving towards a medical transition; I had no prospects of medically transitioning [in England] because the waiting list in that city for that gender clinic was four and a half years. I would have been there for four years, if my mental health hadn't gone [downhill].

In science, everything's very strictly time controlled. I took three months off then had to start again with everything. When I got back [to Edinburgh], I went back on the waiting lists after about nine months, because I was still with my ex. There was still all of that stuff going on – lack of acceptance and everything. When I was in England, I wasn't completely free, but people treated me differently. It was a mixed bag, but within university, everybody treated me really well in terms of the gender stuff. Within the city itself – that was really awful actually – but I think that's a difference between English and Scottish culture.

So it was after I ended up in a toxicology ward, about nine months after returning back. At the time, the gender clinician at the Edinburgh clinic was the same psychiatrist [I saw on the ward]. She did two days at the gender clinic and two days within the hospital and so was regularly on the toxicology ward. So I spoke to her, but obviously didn't know who she was or anything. And all of this gender stuff just came out. And she was very clear. She moved me up the waiting list – obviously, that's not something that they can do anymore. But she did that, because she felt that if I didn't transition, I wasn't going to live.

Relationship & Family Breakdown

But in medically transitioning, my relationship ended. I had to leave it. I had to end things and move out, with nowhere to move to, because she wouldn't accept it. It all got very, very messy. I actually even had half a day, like a night, kind of street homeless. In the end, because I was scared, I ended up in A&E and someone convinced me to return and to just stay there until I had somewhere to stay.

I also lost contact with my dad for over a year. He was still around but we didn't speak at all. He couldn't handle it [the transition]. He couldn't accept it. My dad is not a practising Catholic; he's what my mother refers to as a 'just in case' Catholic. But it does mean that he's internalized a lot of the messages and stuff. He doesn't believe, but it's like he's taken in a lot of the social stuff.

Finding a Spiritual Home

I had only been going to the URC/MCC church on and off over the whole period. And I definitely didn't go when I was down in England. So it was very sporadic. But once I moved away from where I was living with my ex, very quickly after that, I started going to URC/MCC and have been consistently since then, I've been sort of finding my spiritual home, really. Now, particularly now, there are no longer any kind of conflicting messages coming in that I can buy into it. Church gives me a lot. It gives me a sense of community, a sense of acceptance – taking me and everyone else just as we are, with all of our differences and everything – apart from race. We have a very mixed congregation in terms of disability, age, gender and sexuality. I think it took me about two months to settle and decide that the URC/MCC was home. We were there this one day and we went on an autumn walk that used to be done every year, and I haven't seen it done since COVID at least, but it was generally just the older ones. I was the youngest person there. And we used to end up at the house of [names congregant]. I walked for a long way with [names older couple from church] and I'd always had that thing that people of a certain age or experience, of whatever, can't possibly understand, but they just taught me how wrong that was. I felt right, ok, this is it!

I love the fact that there's people of all ages, my son being so accepted, and involved and all of that, and how much he loves it – there's so many aspects to it. But it's not just the community, the teaching – particularly when [names minister] is teaching – I get so much out of that. I get so much out of every sermon, to be honest. Sometimes it's just one little thing and sometimes it's a lot, and things click into place. Some of it is difficult, but it all makes sense to me, and I don't feel any kind of personal attacks or anything. We are all moving to a better place in our faith. I just don't get the judgement. One of the things that I've always appreciated is where [names minister] says all are welcome before communion, all sexual orientations and genders. You can just be yourself. And I do. I feel like my understanding and comfort and relationship with Jesus, my faith, has just deepened and makes a lot more sense. I feel like we all try

to – not perfectly – kind of embody the sort of attitude and everything that Jesus had.

Identifying as Bi

Historically, I've had a very negative feeling about people being bi, not about other people being bi, but about myself. A sort of great wish to kind of remove myself, to distance myself from it, until very recently. I've not been willing to accept myself as bi, I think largely because of other people's lack of acceptance, both in society in general, but also specifically in my family.

I also feel like for people who know me, it would be sort of like coming out again, a kind of attention-seeking thing. A sort of like, can't you make up your mind? And also I think a lot of people, whether they say it or not, seem to think it's not a real thing. It's like anything that's a bit of both. It's like people who are non-binary get kind of invalidated – that's not a real thing – quite a lot. And I think sometimes being bi can be like that as well. People are sort of like, oh no, you're just gay and don't want to admit it. I think it's only in the last couple of years that I've started to accept for myself that I'm bi and view it as something that isn't a negative. It's not a positive either. It just is. It's just a thing. It's just reality.

I haven't specifically talked to family about being bisexual. It's more sort of general attitudes in other people that I've just sort of picked up from others, how they, they view things. But also when I was in my teens and dating – that was kind of perfectly acceptable – but being in a relationship with a woman is not acceptable. I've had the very distinct feeling from relatives, my mum in particular, that you can't go back. You can't swing between relationships with both. It's the idea that you're just confused, them needing you to be settled one way or the other. I think people like to put concepts, feelings, whatever, in boxes. And if you can't put someone in a box, that does make a lot of people quite unsettled.

I no longer see it [being bi] as a good thing or a bad thing. Some people are just straight, some people are gay and some people are bi and some people are neither. My brother is ace and again, that doesn't get

spoken about. It's easier for my family that he's ace rather than bi. Because he's a romantic asexual, all he has to do to get by it just not talk about it, and the family can just be like, oh well, he prefers to be on his own. He likes living on his own. People will still ask him whether he has a girlfriend, but decades down the line, they ask less and less. And my brother is not the sort of person who feels like he is ever going to be able to do that, so it's not so much of a problem for him. My mum does worry that he's going to be alone forever and be very sad and miserable in old age with no one around him kind of thing. It's all very dramatic and I'm kind of like, I understand where he's coming from. He doesn't need a romantic partner to feel connected to others. He doesn't need to live with other people to feel connected. I get that friends can do that just fine. I think one of the problems with me is that I am somebody who typically wants to talk about feelings and stuff like that. And obviously in many ways, I can't do that with family. Looking at my parents' generation, they're in their mid to late 60s. And I think the way people grew up or were brought up in those times was very different. It's sort of very practical and there was no real space to have feelings. I think that at least with my parents, they do have those feelings and they come out in different ways. But it's not always healthy and they definitely can't understand why they do certain things. It's not necessarily their fault but it does make life difficult, both for them and for others around them.

Thoughts on the Future

Mainly when I'm thinking about the future, I think about my relationship with my son – I call him my son because it's easier and because he likes and affirms being called a boy. Beyond that, I'm thinking about trying for another child. It's a complicated thing, with being trans and on hormones. There are all the practical aspects, plus the fact I had hypertension with [names child]. Then there's family attitudes again. And there's medical hoops to jump through, and it might not even work. But I feel like I want to give it a chance. If it doesn't work, that would be fine, but I'll regret it if I don't. I've got two frozen embryos and age is not a

factor any more than it was with [names child], because I was 35. Therefore, the embryos came from a 35-year-old person, so that's not an issue. The immediate plans for the future are to try [for a baby] but by the time [names child] is in school. He's at nursery now. People have questions, but he's not going to get bullied for it for the rest of his primary education, because none of those kids will be going to the same school as him. But there's an awful lot you have to factor in. I think being single as well is difficult. Being single and knowing that you're almost certainly going to have a debilitating pregnancy related condition as well. With [names child], I spent the majority of the time in bed or in hospital. So there's that, as well having a four-year-old.

When I think about the future, I think about family – as in me and [names child]. And possibly another. I think about career quite a lot as well because I haven't worked since the pandemic due to having a child and a disability, and just not having the capacity. But I massively miss having something that is purely mine, and something to do that I feel is giving back to society in a way, and something that I see has value. So when I think about work, I'm not thinking about any old job, I'm thinking about doing something that I'm passionate about, but it will be tricky to find, because it has to be part-time. It has to fit around childcare. I want something in the sciences, using my academic background.

I don't think much about romantic relationships because my focus is on [names child] and will be for some time. And everything else is secondary. My general feeling is that if someone came along, that would be fantastic, but if they didn't, that would be ok as well. I'm not actively looking for it. When [names child] is old enough to leave home and all of that, then I'll be thinking about it a lot more, I suspect.

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.