

Evolving Relationships with Nonhumanity and Humanity: Shifts over the Years

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I do not identify as human. I consider myself fully nonhuman, and I have felt this way for as long as I can remember. I learned of therianthropy and otherkinity when I was about 14, but I have seen myself as animal since my earliest memories. Learning there was a word for my experiences and others like me was a profound moment in my life. It created a sense of self-understanding and belonging that I had never previously known. It also allowed myself to more fully articulate my nonhuman identity and experiences, including the fact that I do not consider myself or identify as human on any level. However, my nonhuman identity and relationship to humanity have both fluctuated significantly over the course of my life.

I have two distinct memories from high school in which I put my nonhuman identity “to the test.” Early on in my time in the nonhuman communities and accepting myself as a therian, I experienced a lot of doubt and what I now recognize as shame stemming from internalized negativity. It was commonplace in the therian communities back then to question one another and to question oneself often, and it was seen as a positive thing to maintain a degree of doubt or skepticism about one’s identity. It is beyond the scope of this particular reflection to comment on that practice, but suffice to say that challenging my identity was something that made sense at the time both in terms of where I was at personally and the messages I saw in and received from the community at large.

So, on at least two distinct occasions I can recall in high school, I tried to tell myself I was human. It was a mixture of trying on the label to see how it felt in comparison to calling myself a dingo or a therian and trying to actively convince myself I was just a human with an overactive, self-indulgent imagination (there’s that shame/internalized negativity again). I remember that on one of these occasions I was standing in my kitchen one late afternoon after school, and on the other occasion I was standing in the hallway outside the gym, after having changed back into my regular clothes and waiting for the bell to ring to go to the next class. In both cases I was reflecting on my therianthropy, the accuracy and legitimacy of my identity as a dingo. In both cases I actively said to myself, “I am human.” And in both cases, uttering those words, just to myself, gave me a visceral reaction of nausea. To call myself human made me feel literally sick to my stomach. I took this as pretty strong evidence that I was not human, and after both of these experiences, I stopped doubting my nonhumanity so much. With my newfound confidence, I was able to lean more into my nonhuman identity, and I felt stable in both that identification and my participation in therian and otherkin communities for the next few years.

However, something shifted in college. I found that the more science-based courses I took, the more skeptical I felt of spirituality as a whole, as well as of my dingo identity, which I had viewed as spiritual up to that point. It got to the point where I lost my spirituality altogether, becoming an aspiritual atheist. I say “lost” because it was never a conscious decision or something I really had any control over. In fact, it was rather distressing to lose my spirituality, and I wished I could believe in it again. However, no matter how I willed myself to believe, the skepticism won out, and I could not believe in it. I consequently shifted to considering my therianthropy to be likely psychological in origin, and this brought a host of new doubts to the forefront, most notably concerns that this made my identity “less real.”

More concerning, however, was that as time went on, my nonhuman identity itself also faded. Not only did I not believe in a spiritual explanation for it anymore, but I also didn’t feel particularly connected to

myself as a nonhuman being. I didn't experience shifts the way I used to, and even calling myself a dingo or a therian didn't feel as resonant as it once had. To further test these experiences and better understand if I could still consider myself a therian or not, I once again said to myself, "I am human." To my dismay, I did not have the visceral reaction I had had when I was younger. It didn't feel great to call myself human, but it didn't feel terrible or necessarily inaccurate either. This brought significant anxiety over me, as it was a strong narrative within the therian communities that this was a lifelong identity, and specifically, that if you ever realized you were not a therian, then you never actually were.

But that didn't fit my experiences at all. I knew I had genuinely identified as a dingo, genuinely experienced shifts, had genuinely presented myself and my nonhuman experiences in my interactions with the community. For some reason, completely outside of my control, those experiences had just...stopped. I didn't feel brave enough to talk about this within the communities. I was too afraid of being told I was never really a therian and being chased out. I'd seen the way some people were treated for deviating from the accepted norms of therianthropy and nonhumanity overall, and I didn't want to expose myself to that. So instead, I became less active in the communities. I continued to follow people on social media and would occasionally log onto forums, but I didn't really participate myself for a couple of years.

The extra distressing part about all this was that it happened around the time I was doing my thesis. By the time I was in my final year of college, my doubt in my therianthropy was strong, and while I still wanted to do my thesis because doing therian-focused research had been my dream that had literally saved my life back in high school, I also worried that I was no longer suitable to be the one to do it given that I was no longer sure if I could call myself a therian. I obviously went ahead with doing the thesis (which was the greatest decision I have probably ever made). Just going through that process helped connect me with my therianthropy and the community again. To an extent. When I graduated college, I experienced severe depression and uncertainty about my future. Even when I eventually got a job and made a plan for applying to grad school, my disconnect from my therianthropy remained strong. It was during these few years between college and grad school that my lack of therianthropy was strongest and my presence in the communities weakest. I begrudgingly tried to accept that for whatever reason, I had been a therian and had stopped being one, even though that pained me because of what the identity and community meant to me. And again, I dared not say any of this in the therian community itself for fears of being told this meant I was never a therian in the first place.

Shortly after starting grad school, I began to have therianthropic experiences again. I had shifts, and I started thinking of myself as a dingo more and more often. At first I worried I was forcing it because of how badly I wanted to be able to think of myself as a therian again. So I was intentional about my process, taking things slow, introspecting, and keeping my distance from the community to allow my experiences to unfold naturally, without external influence. And the feelings only became stronger and more consistent. I continued to have moments of doubt or some fluctuation between degrees of connection with my nonhumanity, but it got to the point where I felt confident enough in my therianthropy again to go back on forums. I realized that my identity may never be as static as I'd like and that I was longing for connection with other therians, so it was worth it to reach out and participate in the community again. I have been active in the community consistently since then, and my confidence in my dingo identity has only continued to grow. Over the last year and a half, I've also found myself feeling spiritual again. I've engaged in more consistent spiritual practice, and it's been a really positive aspect of my life. I don't always believe in it in a literal spiritual sense – I've found my levels of belief and skepticism continue to fluctuate, but I've gotten comfortable with that. After all, what does it matter if my witchy practices work because of spiritual energies or my own mind? What matters is they are helpful to me and bring me peace and joy. Similarly, what does it matter if my dingo

identity is spiritual or psychological, or if it fluctuates in intensity? What matters is being authentic to myself, moment-to-moment, in a way that brings me meaning and comfort.

So that's where I've landed now – accepting the malleability of identity and experience the best that I can. I attribute my growth in that regard to my experiences learning and working as a therapist with a strong emphasis in mindfulness and radical acceptance. I am very grateful for the ways in which my growth as a therapist has also facilitated so much personal growth.

I also made a connection regarding the timing of my lack of spirituality and lack of therianthropy that I find very fascinating and helps me feel grounded in where I'm at now. One night, I was taking a bath and talking over my rekindled therian feelings with my partner, specifically outlining the timeline of my loss and resurgence of my therianthropy much like I did in this reflection. I realized that the timing coincided perfectly with another aspect of my life. Without saying the realization, I asked my partner if he noticed that it coincided with something, too; he said he did. Then we both independently shared that we realized it coincided with the time that I was taking hormonal birth control, which was also a time in which my anxiety was severely heightened. I had stopped taking birth control in the latter half of my first year of grad school because my anxiety was so bad, and I had read that anxiety could be a side effect. Sure enough, stopping birth control significantly reduced my anxiety such that I could functionally talk to people again, and it was also after that time that my therianthropy most clearly and consistently returned. My explanation for this is not that the birth control itself stifled my therianthropy, but rather that the birth control heightened my anxiety to such a degree that the anxiety stifled my therianthropy (and spirituality). I obviously have no idea the mechanisms behind all this, but it's what makes the most sense to me given the way that my atheism and lack of therian identity started in college shortly after I began taking birth control and my spirituality and therianthropy returned in grad school shortly after I stopped taking birth control and my anxiety decreased. My confidence in this is further strengthened by my partner independently noticing the same pattern.

That timeline of fluctuating experiences of my nonhumanity was important to share to contextualize my relationship with humanity and because it's about time I shared the details of my experience more fully. I've talked about parts of that experience here and there, but I haven't detailed the full account. I'm grateful to the shifts in community norms that seem to allow for greater acceptance of fluidity in identity that make me feel comfortable putting this experience out there. I'm also at the point where my nonhuman identity has now been so consistent these past couple of years that I have a newfound confidence in myself – even if people do doubt my experiences or rationale, I know my own authentic truth.

So where does that leave me with my relationship to humanity? Well, calling myself human still doesn't typically give me the visceral nausea it did when I was a teenager. However, it does make me very uncomfortable. When someone refers to me as human, it gives me a jolt that feels the same as when someone misgenders me. This is unfortunate because I have gone into a profession that uses the word "human" quite liberally. It is extremely common for professors, mentors, and supervisors to talk about wanting to treat us trainees as "humans" with "human needs" (i.e., three-dimensional people with physical and emotional needs beyond our professional roles). Additionally, if I had a nickle for every time I've heard the phrase "be a human in the room" (i.e., be an empathetic person who can attune to the feelings of the other person) as the foundation of conducting therapy, I'd probably be able to pay off a decent chunk of my student loans. It is seriously very frustrating the way that the word "human" has become a synonym for "empathetic person" or "not a machine for capitalism." I consider "person" and "people" to be species-neutral terms, and I really wish people would use those more – it conveys the same thing without giving me the jolt of misidentification I get from being called human.

So, no, I still don't consider myself human. In many ways I have come full circle from my teenage self in that I do not identify as human at all. However, I have noticed a shift in my relationship to my human experience that is different now than it was back then. As a teenager, I had really severe species dysphoria, was pretty misanthropic, and loathed my human existence. I think I would have given anything to be able to physically become a dingo. My ideal probably would have been to be able to transplant my current mind into the physical body of a dingo so that I could continue living my current life but without species dysphoria. Truthfully, that's often still my ideal scenario. However, back then, I think I also would have jumped at the opportunity to live a fully dingo life – in the wild in Australia, with a dingo mind, no knowledge of my human life.

I would no longer do that. While I do not identify as human, I have found that I have become quite attached to my human life. I love the relationships I've crafted over the years, particularly the ones I have currently in my life – loving, supportive spouse; caring, accepting friends; meaningful connections to others in the nonhuman/alterhuman communities; mentors who have changed the way I view myself and the world; family I hold dear. I love the professional passions I am pursuing, particularly around research and clinical work focused on nonhuman and trans identities. I feel both pride and humility at the positive, meaningful impact that work has had and is continuing to have on these communities I hold dear. I love the self-confidence I've gained to speak up about my experiences in a variety of settings in my life, including setting up my personal website and posting essays like this. I love the place I live, astounding beauty and feelings of safety, comfort, and home that are difficult to articulate. I love my hobbies and interests I am able to pursue – nerdy indulgences of various kinds of games and media, prints and plushies lining my home, over a dozen years of anime conventions under my belt. I love being able to understand and express myself more and more authentically day-by-day.

I look around at this life I have both been gifted and forged, and I do not want to give it up. I am a dingo, and my dysphoria can still be quite strong, but the thought of giving up this life, this human life, I have, also gives me something I might call dysphoria. I wish there were an answer, a way I could maintain this life and also alleviate my dysphoria. I wish I could both fully be a dingo and live this life at the same time. The ability to shapeshift would really solve a lot of issues, but unfortunately that's not a possibility.

So this is where I'm left. My relationships to my nonhumanity and humanity have both shifted considerably over the years. I am a dingo therian. I have always been a dingo therian, although my relationship to that identity waned significantly during a period of my life. I identify as fully nonhuman, but I am attached to my human life in a way I never was when I was younger. I don't think my teenage self would have even believed it possible to be where I am now in terms of contentment with my life. I hope this can be a source of hope for young nonhumans who may be struggling with severe species dysphoria – the dysphoria may never go away, but it is possible to create a fulfilling life within this human body. Cliche as it sounds, it really does get better.