



Introduction to Pride Month

Ruby Johnson © 1 February 2026

Introduction

Today's service marks the first day of Auckland Pride month for 2026. I talked at some length during last year's Pride service about the politics of Pride, and while I will not repeat that message here, I will touch upon the wider social context in which the queer community of Aotearoa finds itself at present. Last year it was clear that a reactionary political backlash was coming, and that has materialised in the last few months in the form of the coalition government's attempt to curtail healthcare for trans youth. We don't know yet what the result of this will be as the decision is currently undergoing judicial review. However, I think there are reasons to be hopeful about the resilience of Aotearoa's queer community. Organisations advocating for access to reproductive healthcare such as contraception and abortion, have recognised that this assault on trans rights sets a dangerous precedent for bodily autonomy more broadly, and are being vocal in their opposition to the government's agenda here.

I recently found myself travelling around the country and was reasonably impressed by the visibility of queer activism throughout Aotearoa. I have to admit, I am a quintessential Jafa, and as such view my country through a somewhat Tāmaki chauvinist perspective. I had never set foot in the South Island until a little over a fortnight ago, but I'd always heard that things down there were a little more old fashioned. I thought I might feel unwelcome, but this wasn't the case. Admittedly, I didn't stray much from the beaten path, sticking mostly to cities and the intervening tourist attractions. But still, I felt remarkably at home everywhere I went. And while nothing quite compares to the level of queer visibility in Auckland and Wellington, there were still signs of life down there! I was struck by the fact that the side of my hostel in Invercargill was plastered with pro trans posters identical to the ones put up along Karangahape Road. While I do worry about creeping social polarisation and the influence of international lobbyists, I also don't think that Kiwis at large have much of an appetite for what groups like Destiny Church are trying to sell. We should never be naive by assuming that bad things can't happen here, but there's also no point being fatalistic.

With all of that out of the way, I'm hoping to provide a service that tackles queerness somewhat differently. Queer stories are so often about a search for meaning, belonging, and hope. Rather than looking again at my community through the lens of a struggling minority, I want to be able to show that these elements of queer life are universal. To that end I've included a reading by author John Green that does not address queerness directly, but which speaks deeply to a lot of the feelings I have about what it means to find hope and meaning when life seems to be set

against you. Today's main talk will be a series of musings about journeys, travelling, and the difficulties of finding ourselves on life's path.

Today's selected reading is from ["The Anthropocene Reviewed" by John Green](#)

That was an excerpt from a chapter that I've had to cut short for time, but I think I've ended it in a fairly poignant place. It's hard to succinctly capture how I feel about this passage and how it relates to queerness. I think it has to do with the idea of looking inwards and asking why you are the way that you are. It can be hard to own the way you feel about yourself, and about what your values are, deep down. It's easier to keep asking "why", to keep rationalising ourselves in a way that ultimately keeps us from living in the present. When we look at life as having a clear reason or end goal, we lose sight of how much the journey matters. Likewise, when we rush to put ourselves into a box, to discover and define a finished version of ourselves, we lose sight of the fact that we are never really finished. Finding clear answers is always uncertain - sometimes all we can do is keep asking better questions.

Queer Journeys.

Two days ago, I got back from a trip around Aotearoa. I'd been to a friend's wedding in New Plymouth the week before, and somewhere in the airport on the way back, the travel bug bit me. My family never travelled much - my parents were not particularly worldly people - and so I'd never been handed down an inclination to do so either. Yes, I've been to a few places in the North Island and Australia, but I've always viewed these as luxury excursions, rather than as an itch that needs to be scratched regularly. In short, I've always thought of holidays as bothersome, expensive, and ultimately fleeting. Of course, this changed when I went to Rome about a year ago to cap off my degree. That trip broadened my horizons, got me out into the world, and gave me a lot of confidence. I had been planning a trip to go see a friend of mine who had moved down to Christchurch - by planning, I mean sitting around not getting anything done, and watching the summer slip by with no actual travel plans in place. I'm starting a new job at the end of February, an opportunity that's both exciting and scary. I thought "Great, I'm going to be sitting there on day one wondering where the hell my summer went, and why they bothered to hire a person who can't organise a damn thing in their life". So sitting there a few days after returning from New Plymouth, I decided to stop thinking about thinking about planning, and just leave. I packed my bag, booked an intercity bus to Taupō, and a flight from Invercargill back to Tāmaki for three weeks later. Hell or high water, I was doing this.

I'm a huge Lord of the Rings nerd, so I took a copy of the Hobbit along with me to read on the journey. It seemed to fit the occasion, given that I was rapidly finding myself in the middle of an unexpected adventure. I was struck by how often Tolkien used the word queer. "Queer" was used as a slur throughout much of the 20th century before being reclaimed as a word with positive associations in recent decades, although there are still people here and there who don't like using it. While the word had already acquired a pejorative association with homosexual men by the end of the 19th century, Tolkien is clearly using the word in its original sense, meaning "odd" or "peculiar". He's writing from the perspective of a very sheltered character who goes out into the world and encounters all kinds of situations and people that he finds a bit weird. "Weird" is another interesting word. We use this word now to mean "strange" or "eerie", but it was originally connected to the idea of fate. The three witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth are called the "Weird Sister". The Weird Sisters are in turn based on the Moirai of Greek mythology, also known as the three fates - sisters who weave a tapestry that shows the ultimate destiny of every human life. I think that "queer" and "weird" are similar insofar as they both refer to things that are

outside of our usual understanding, or disrupt the mundane pattern of day to day life. Think about the fateful stranger that we meet on a journey, someone with whom we might share an unexpected connection, or who might change our perspective on life.

I only had a vague idea of where I was going on my trip. I knew I wanted to try to get to Bluff. My father was an English immigrant who had a huge chip on his shoulder about being moved to New Zealand as a small child. He once told me that we lived “on a boil on the arse of the world”. Of course, he never bothered going back to England as an adult, even to visit. I think he was more interested in being hard done by than he was in actually solving his problems. If I’m being honest with myself, I can relate to that. Anyway, I wanted to go to Bluff because it’s the Southernmost point of the South Island, somewhere that I’ve always imagined as a depressing, grey, frigid wasteland, only one step removed from Antarctica. If there is a boil on the arse of the world, I’ve always imagined that it was in Bluff. To be quite frank with you, my grasp of the nation’s geography has never been strong. I learned that Cape Reinga and Bluff were the northern- and southernmost points respectively of mainland New Zealand from a jingle for Tux dog food that aired on television in the 1990s. So armed with that jingle, and the desire to spite the memory of my father, I was pretty sure about where I wanted to end up.

I was excited to go on an adventure, but I was also nervous. I’ve never seen myself as a very courageous person, always neurotic and socially anxious. I like the positive attention that comes from cracking jokes, but I’ve never been comfortable with anything that would make too much of a spectacle of myself. You can imagine how hard this made it to transition. If you suddenly change sex in the middle of your 20s, people will notice. I’ve become acutely aware over the last couple of years just how much I’ve allowed being trans to limit my horizons. Coming out really threw jet fuel onto all of my insecurities - after all, you’re not being paranoid if they really are out to get you. I think I transitioned with the best intentions of living a more empowered, authentic life. But my transness also became a place for me to hide, something for me to pin all of my hangups onto and say “Look, this is why I can’t have the things I want”. Sure, sometimes that’s realistic. There are places in the world where it would be grossly unsafe or even illegal for me to travel, for example. But most of the time the stakes are so much smaller. I worry so much about what people think of me, about whether my queerness is disruptive to other people’s lives, about whether I’m a “good person”. I think that’s another excuse. I can always wring my hands and say that I’m just concerned with being an ethical human being, as a way of totally abandoning myself in order to make everyone else happy. All of this is to say that I’m terrified of mundane bullshit like booking a room in a hostel and having to deal with a bunch of strangers.

So with all of this in mind this trip was less of a relaxing holiday and more of a psychological death march. I tried to find every little bit of me that was frightened and just dig my fingers around in there. I forced myself to stay in crowded hostels even when I had the money not to. I forced myself to do the Tongariro crossing, even though I think of myself as unfit. I forced myself to go to a haunted house, even though I’m frightened of being startled. I forced myself to do a 60m freefall drop at the shotover canyon swing, twice, even though I’m utterly terrified of heights. I looked at every activity that seemed like it was too much for me, and just gave it a go. I spent a good amount of the last three weeks completely out of my comfort zone and struggling to keep my head above water. Which is not to say that I didn’t have fun. On the last day in Queenstown, I went on a Lord of the Rings location tour where they let me dress up as Gandalf at the end and take cheesy photos. And I managed to get closure about my dad as well. Early on in the trip I went to Tūrangi where he had lived, and made peace with his death. It feels “done” now. At least as done as things like that can ever be. I made it to Bluff and it was a lot nicer than I had imagined. Rather than a grey slab covered in seagull dropping, there’s actually a beautiful restaurant overlooking lush native bush.

I'm struggling to find a way to wrap this all up neatly for you. I don't want this to just be a trite story about going out and "finding yourself". I've spent a lot of time thinking about queerness by playing the "why" game, by asking why I am who I am, and offering excuses or apologies for that. I've always thought that I needed to find the perfect way to put all that into words, before I started the journey to really accepting myself. But it doesn't work that way. You don't get to have the answers before you set out. You're going to have to get out of your comfort zone, put one foot in front of the other, and deal with situations that are outside of your frame of reference. Put simply, regardless of how normative your sexuality or gender are, from time to time, life is going to get a little bit queer.