

Introduction: The Life of Po (Why a book like this is necessary)

It was Clara's first trip to the cinema. She was going with her older brother and sister, and me. Thankfully, in our house going to the cinema is still a big deal, so there was lots of excitement beforehand. We bought the requisite popcorn, coke and sweets and settled down to watch the latest offering from Kung Fu Panda. I've enjoyed the previous two instalments and like Jack Black as an actor in general, so all my defences were down.

I'll not spoil the story for anyone who has yet to find a spare ninety-five minutes. Needless to say it did what so many 'children's movies' do so well today. It provided all the graphics, action and child-friendly humour that one has come to expect from Pixar and DreamWorks and yet combined it with enough subtleties suitable for adults to knowingly chuckle along with too. I have to admit I was lost in the moment.

It was only after, when I started reflecting on exactly what had happened to Po (the Dragon Warrior, Kung Fu Panda, star of the show) that my radar as a father and

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also as a Christian began to flash 'alert'. Setting aside the fact that there was an obvious Far Eastern spiritual push going on in the movie, as Po sacrificed himself to save his tribe, only to find that, in the spiritual world, he needed their help as much as they needed his. Even forgetting the fact that the whole story is carried along by the reality that Po now has two dads to look after him. Having been raised all his life by his adoptive father, Mr. Ping (a noodle cooking Swan Goose), Po's real father, Li Shan (a panda) makes an appearance, and they all have to navigate these new family dynamics. Right at the centre of all the action, however, is a less than thinly veiled appeal to the most sacred tenet of enlightened Western ideology today. Put simply this most sacred tenet insists that if we do nothing else in this life we must all 'be true to ourselves', whatever that means and whatever form that may take.

Now apart from having to leave the cinema once, occasioned by my eldest daughter Abigail's overconsumption of recently acquired Easter Eggs, we all had a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. Caleb (my eldest son) did admit that he was slightly sad at Po's death, but overall, we had mindlessly, once again, drunk in a world view that at one point would have been completely foreign to the vast number of people.

Today, escaping into a spiritual netherworld; flexible, non-traditional family arrangements; and the constant drumbeat of achieving your true potential as decided by you, are nothing out of the ordinary. Indeed, identity itself today seems to be so mysterious and fluid that not even our physical bodies seem to be a sufficient pointer as to what or who we are. I don't want to sound like a

crank so early on, but this has, of course, a very serious side to it. The blurred lines in the public square between freedom of speech, political correctness and intolerance make even the most informed person nervous when saying anything. In fact it especially makes the most informed person nervous to say anything. Specifically, in relation to the title of this book, the meteoric rise of the LGBT agenda can reduce the most ardent fundamentalist into silence.

This is part of the reason why (foolishly ... obviously) I thought that it might be a good idea to sit down and start writing. I've never written a book before. I'm not even sure that I want to write a book, especially a book on such a subject as transgenderism (and especially transgenderism in relation to children). I'd far rather be sitting zoning out with my wife watching more mindless TV, than set out on a venture that could possibly end in the loss of some friends. But then, I think about my children and the 'brave new world' they are growing up in. It is a world totally different to anything I ever knew. I suppose that is part of the reason why I am writing this book; to try and understand that world a little better. However, the main reason I think it needs writing is to try and give us all some handles and signposts as our children grow into teenagers and then set out themselves as adults (and prayerfully as Christians) into this ever evolving mix of flexible family arrangements and DIY gender.

Let me issue the customary disclaimer at this point and tell you what this book is not. It is not seeking to provide you with a bang-up-to-date survey and analysis of all that the scientific community are saying about

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transgenderism. This, I know, has already gone through some evolutions and I am not totally certain exactly how different regulatory bodies are classifying it at present. Neither is it a book that will give you a detailed textual analysis on all the relevant scriptural passages. I do have Bible references included at the end of each chapter, but this is for your own personal reflection and further reading. What the book tries to do is to follow the overarching storyline of the Bible in an attempt to make it clear that transgenderism is a symptom of a far deeper problem that only Jesus can heal. He alone is loving enough not only to get involved in our lives, but to give Himself for us, and He alone is powerful enough not simply to change our own self-estimation, but our very nature itself. Each chapter is a letter written to one of my children and seeks therefore to think through the issue from their point of view.

Granted, my children are not likely to pick this up and read it in the next five to ten years. Caleb is currently 9, Abigail is 7, Clara is 5 and Daniel is 3. I'd be very surprised if they ever want to read something I've written, given they never want to listen to a word I usually say at present. So, therefore, I am actually writing for parents, and especially parents with young children. I'm trying to imagine our children's questions and seek to answer them with words and language that they will be able to grasp.

Almost nothing is as it was, and therefore the more we realise this as Christians the better equipped we will be at engaging our family and friends and wider culture with the only news that will, in the end, bring about real, lasting life transformation.

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A Scary Dream

Dear Caleb,

I've just read another story today in a magazine that I found very difficult. It was not difficult in the sense that I couldn't understand it. It was difficult because it talked about people, very young people about your age, who see themselves very differently from the little babies they were born. There was one story of a boy who did not want to grow up to be a man, and a girl who did not want to grow up to be a woman. Instead this boy wanted to become a girl and grow up as a woman, and the girl wanted to become a boy and grow up to be a man.

Now the first thing I want to say is that if this sounds strange, don't be alarmed. Many of the doctors who are trying to help these boys and girls are themselves not sure what is the best thing to do for them. There are some things that even grown-ups are confused about. (I'm going to write to you about being a mummy and daddy and a doctor, even though I am not one myself, in another letter soon.)

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Secondly, since you may sometimes have to think about these things in your classroom and with your friends, please never be afraid of asking me your biggest and toughest questions. If I don't know the answer, I will do my best to find one; one that comes as close to the truth as possible. Remember what I've always said? If we lie to one another, we cannot trust one another, and if we cannot trust one another then we cannot be friends. That would just be awful. You should never be afraid of asking questions and I love to hear what you are discovering as you grow up. Life is such a great adventure, with many surprises along the way.

Thirdly, and this is very important, as confusing and as difficult as you may find these ideas about boys and girls, always remember that behind these ideas are real people. We are talking about boys and girls, many of whom are very scared themselves. I think at times it must feel like they and their families are living in a scary dream, only in reverse. They live it when they are awake and go to sleep to try and escape it, but it is right there when they wake up each morning again. So never ever make fun of them or join with the crowd who might be bullying them. You may even need to tell some people who say hurtful things to be quiet.

And lastly for now, and this is the most important thing, never forget that God made the world and that no matter what He loves it. Like every most important thing, I'm going to have to say more about this than I can put into one letter right now. But remember that God does not want to see anyone get hurt or indeed see people hurting one another. God loves this world so much, in fact, that He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world

to show us exactly what He is like. So as we live in His world, try and see them and treat them in the same way that Jesus has treated you. That way you will show everyone that you know what God is like. He loves to treat us with love. That love can be tough love at times and we may not always like what He says or does in our lives, but we know that He knows best. Be patient, be kind, try to forget your own wants and desires and put others first, and remember that Jesus has promised to be always with you. Stick close to Him. Copy Him. And don't worry if people sometimes laugh or even reject you as you try to follow Him.

Lots of love,
Dad

~ **Psalm 16; Matthew 11:28-30; John 3:16, 15:18-16:4;**
Philippians 4:8-9 ~



Your children are going to have to learn how to live with people who are totally unlike them. How they live with them is the subject of this book. Given the considerable push in the media at present to advocate for a fluidity in gender, this is going to mean that they will have questions about themselves and others they meet. The natural 'child-ish' reaction is to stereotype and then treat others with disdain. The burden of this first letter is to help Caleb (9) see that whilst a Christian cannot accept the cultural affirmation of transgenderism, we cannot either, as Christians, simply treat others who are different to us with contempt, condemnation or condescension. Our first approach must

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be as those who have been shown divine compassion, to extend similar compassion to others.

How to begin a conversation:

- *The letter begins by talking about something I read in a newspaper to do with transgenderism. If you watch TV at all with your children the likelihood is that something around gender is going to flash across the screen. Think how you might respond to this beforehand.*
- *When talking about class friends in school listen carefully to how your son/daughter speaks about them, and try and help them to see that other children might be struggling with questions about identity and being part of the crowd. Perhaps as you read stories together highlight how lonely some children can feel at times.*
- *Get a chalkboard and put some of the verses at the end of this letter up for your whole family to see. Talk about how this should shape the way we see ourselves and the world around us today.*

Prayer ideas:

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that because of Jesus we get to be part of your family. This is such a great privilege. Help us each day to see more and more that we do not belong to the world, our friends, or even to ourselves, but that we belong to you. Amen.