

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Grayson Perry

Colourful potter, textbook dad

I was already a transvestite by the time I was 16. I took my stepmother's clothes, changed in the toilets behind the Chelmsford Museum and walked up and down the high street in make-up, a mini dress and a wig. I was just acting on an instinctual desire, this need to play a role. It was very sexually exciting, a big turn on. Adrenaline is a great aphrodisiac. I got the wig from an advert in the back of the *Daily Mail*. It was about £1.50, a shapeless, brunette, very wiggly sort of thing. I'm sure the *Daily Mail* would be happy to know they facilitated my sexual fetish.

At 16 I was a complete mess. That was probably the epicentre of my adolescent woes, my annus horribilis. My mother had a volcanic temper and when she found out I'd been in contact with my real father for the first time in eight years she erupted. Within half an hour she'd packed up all my possessions and was driving me to my father's house. She dumped me at the top of the road. He wasn't even there, he was working away. His wife took me in and I ended up sharing a room with the lodger until she found out I'd been wearing her clothes and threw me out.

Getting into contact with my dad came out of chance. A friend of mine at school was going out with a girl who said her stepfather was my dad. So my ears pricked up. And I put feelers out through her and went to visit him. It was interesting but disappointing. My male role models weren't great. My dad was an emotional coward. And my stepfather was a violent ignoramus.

I wasn't a very sophisticated teenager. At 16 I was still watching war films and wanted to be a jet pilot. My plan was to join the army. I had a very well developed interior fantasy life, I did a lot of drawing. But I didn't relate that to any wider context. I was in the cadets and I saw the army as an easy transition. And lots of transvestites overreact, try to cure themselves by doing something manly; there was a bit of that going on. Then halfway through my 16th year I got my first girlfriend, I stopped going to cadets, and my art teacher said I should go for art college. Almost overnight I changed my ideas. I thought, actually, that sounds good – doing something I like. Wow.

I wish I'd had the emotional intelligence when I was younger that I have now. Perhaps I could have said things to my mother or father that would have made their lives easier. My mother would have had a much better life if she'd left my stepfather when I was 16. But I was very fucked up then. And my relationships with my parents just got worse. I see my father about once a year. My mother died this year and only half of her children went to the funeral, and that was out of morbid duty. She was, yeah... a difficult woman. And mentally ill, and it wasn't our job to fix that.

I don't think I'd tell my 16-year-old self everything is going to turn out okay. In a way it would be lovely to put my arms around him and tell him not to worry but then he might relax and he wouldn't be driven by the demons I was driven by. Yes, confidence is the most valuable commodity on earth because it

allows people to reach their full potential. But I wouldn't be the artist I am now without all those years of self-doubt and anger. Fear and anxiety powered me through those times. Anger is a force that motivates you. I still use it now but in a much more measured way.

If I met the 16-year-old Grayson now I might tell him to be nicer to people. Some of my friends tell me they used to find me funny but scary, that after a few drinks I could be vicious to people. I had the temper from hell. And I was articulate enough to pull people to pieces. I went on to have very taut relationships with art dealers, with arguments and fall-outs. One of my mottos now is it's nice to be nice. Because people will be nice back. I think because I was so hard on myself I was hard on other people as well. I was struggling all the time and I was very negative and cynical. That's still a big part of what I do but now I think being nice is fun and it makes the world a better place.

The 16-year-old set to join the army would just not get it if I told him his future was in ceramics. It's so random. I didn't go to college to do ceramics, I took an evening class in it because it sounded fun. I wasn't overly blessed with self-awareness as an artist, I just got on with things. I think that was helpful when I was young, and I'd tell my younger self to go with his instincts. That would be a lovely thing to say, because you're not sure of anything when you're young, your mind is just plastic. To be guided by your intuition, that's an asset.

I felt relieved to have a daughter, that I wouldn't inflict my own problems about masculinity on to her. I was so aware of the dysfunction I'd grown up with, it had been a worry regarding becoming a parent. I was a textbook dad in her early years. My wife would read me out passages from parenting manuals and I'd say right, this is how we have to do it. I took everything on board. One thing I'm good at is playing, so I taught Flo to play. I think being good at playing is an under-celebrated part of life. I felt quite sad when she became less huggy as she got older.

The thing I find most poignant is the idea of doing things for the last time. And you often don't know you're doing something for the last time, perhaps because it's the last time you're physically able to do it. Or it could be the last time your child sits on your lap. Most of the things I enjoy doing I can still do. But I do miss anonymity. Fame means that as a transvestite, I can no longer be this anonymous man in a frock walking down the street. I'm now Grayson Perry, public property, and I will be very nicely accosted by my mainly middle-class fans. I didn't realise how much I would lose when I became famous. I miss that thrill of being that weird bloke in a dress who is slightly dangerous and ridiculous.



Grayson Perry built A House for Essex with FAT Architecture – a shrine to fictional local woman Julie; with wife Philippa and daughter Flo

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The Descent of Man is out from October 20 (Allen Lane, £16.99). Grayson Perry's *Typical Man in a Dress* tour begins on November 2, with dates in Bristol, London, Salford, Worthing and Sheffield. Interview: Jane Graham @Janeannie