

I wonder what you first think when you see me.

Perhaps it's something about my curls - people often mention them.

Or "What a dapper little man."

In my experience, one of the first things people do is assume I'm a boy or aren't sure whether I'm a girl or a boy.

We do this to everyone. We assume what gender someone is, based on how they look, and if we can't tell, we get confused.

I say "we" because I do it too. It's ingrained. Our first decision and mostly unconscious.

But why?

Well, I'm Audrey, and if we are talking biology, I'm female. But I feel it's more complex than that.

For an entry point, let's look at my style.

As you can probably see, I have a unique style, but I wasn't born wearing suits, bow ties, and flamingo socks. My style had to evolve, and it will keep evolving, and I think it gives some insight into my changing experience of gender.

Here's a photo of me before I started school, wearing a Star Wars top, a skirt, and sneakers, demonstrating to the world that I'm a girl! It's the skirt, right? We all know that sign.

So at this age, I was just a girl who didn't care much about what I wore. It was functional and varied.

This all took a different turn when I hit the age of five and started school.

I remember one of my first days at school, and I was in the girls' toilet when two girls I knew came near me and said, "Look, there's a boy in here." I looked over my shoulder, but there was no one there. So I asked them, "Where?"

I realized they meant me. I was really shocked, as I'd only been around people who knew and understood me. I felt upset and alienated.

Eventually, this misrecognition started happening in public bathrooms as well, with adults assuming my gender. Often, I would get things like, "Why are you in here?" or "Wrong bathroom." This eventually led to me being hesitant and tentative about even going to the bathroom in public.

Mostly, people didn't actually say anything at all. They just stared at me. This felt, and feels, worse.

At school, this happened increasingly often, but while many people in that situation might have started dressing more typically female, in dresses, with long hair, or bows, I became more and more masculine presenting, wearing what we consider to be boys' clothes because in them I felt most authentically myself.

I was pretty adamant about just wearing male things. What that meant to me was no pink, or even purple, or any form of dress, skirt, or even glitter and frills.

I didn't think of myself as a boy, but anything that was identified as female felt uncomfortable to me.

I adopted the label of "tomboy," which meant a girl who wore boy clothes and played with boys' toys. To me, this avoided conflict. Tomboys are common, right? They're even considered a stage - as though we'll grow out of it.

My parents never fought my insistence on avoiding dresses. They allowed me to choose what I wore because they believed it had no bearing on who I was.

I started wearing shirts and bow ties to any slightly formal event. Here's a photo of me at six wearing a bow tie I made out of paper because Dad was wearing his fabric one.

As for my experience in bathrooms, I tried to avoid the problem by waiting until people left before I went in because otherwise, I'd feel trapped.

Until about the age of nine, when someone mistook me for a boy, I would reply comfortably that I'm a girl. But eventually, it stopped feeling right; instead of gaining confidence, the more it happened, I lost it.

"Girl" didn't feel right, but "boy" didn't feel correct either. So, what did I want? I'm not sure I really knew at the time.

My friends started getting more and more into sports, but I was never sporty, I was a bookworm. If I were a boy, people would probably have said I was a sensitive one.

They don't tend to use that term as much for girls, because it's what's expected. So I started hanging out with a group of girls. This didn't really alter my style, more my attitude to the word "tomboy," which I grew to dislike.

I started to realize I could still be a girl and wear typically male things. In my mind, I was still a girl because I didn't feel like a boy.

At the age of eight, I traveled with my parents and the cast of our film, "52 Tuesdays," to the Berlin International Film Festival. "52 Tuesdays" was partly about a mom transitioning from female to male.

I imagine some of you are thinking, "Oh, no! Audrey just got this gender confusion from her parents film making." But this gender questioning happened before they started considering it, and they say I've taught them as much about this as they've taught me.

Anyway, in Berlin, I met Bart. Bart wore drapy black materials, high heeled boots, nail polish, and eyeliner, but he wasn't dressed as a woman.

This demonstrated to me that I could be flamboyant and androgynous with my style, that my love of bow ties didn't need to exclude anything traditionally female.

That year, when the film won the Crystal Bear Youth Jury Award, I took to the red carpet in eyeliner and nail polish. Here's a photo of me that night. Note the bow tie.

I started to think of gender as something more dynamic. Gender was not your genitals or even what you wore or acted like, and maybe it wasn't fixed.

I'm going to take a second to pose a question to you.

Why does it matter to you whether I am a boy or a girl?

And if you think it doesn't, I'm going to really ask you to stop and think. Have you ever come across someone whose gender you just can't place? Have you wanted to know, even if you don't care either way, have you wanted to know what they are?

For those of you who say, "No, I'm totally comfortable not knowing, I don't use 'he' or 'she' when talking about them, I just treat them as a human without any gender identifiers."

Well, that's impressive. It's hard to do.

Just try and talk about someone for a minute without using gender terms. It's really difficult.

"This is Audrey. Audrey is a ...young person who doesn't identify as any gender. Audrey writes stories and they love writing. Audrey loves writing - not the stories love writing."

Oops.

It's hard for all of us.

We want to know because of our language and, also, in my experience, it's because we treat men and boys differently to women and girls. And we want to know how to treat them.

Sometimes I'm glad that people mistake me for a boy because I get to have real conversations with people. They ask me about my future, and we talk about what I want to do.

Often, when they find out I'm not a boy, they don't know how to treat me.

My friends, who show more outward signs of being girls, often get called things like "sweetheart," or "darling," or "love." People comment on how pretty they are.

Recently, when I traveled overseas, I noticed a trend of gender neutral or all-gender public bathrooms, which makes me feel so relieved. Having that choice makes me love going to the bathroom in public, and I love I don't have to tell anyone what genitalia I own.

Here's a photo of me in my sparkle pants, as I call them. They really added flare to my style, and they also really confuse some people about whether I am a boy, or even, possibly, make them uncomfortable because I seem like a very flamboyant, or even girly, boy.

Though I don't think this is always easy, I'm so happy with the choices I made when I was younger to wear what made me feel good and that I felt expressed me because I think I would be a much unhappier kid otherwise.

I still get called a boy in public situations, but, in terms of bathrooms, I try to go to the all-gender or unisex ones, or, if I can't, I go to the disabled toilets.

Although I do still use the girls' loos (toilets) in school and sometimes in public. Using the girls' toilets, I never feel good, and I still have a tendency to go with someone else.

Though I'm not labeled as a particular gender when I go to the disabled toilets, I don't feel great still, because it just reminds me that there are mostly no toilets for people like me, who don't identify within the gender binary, and that toilets are just another way we categorize people.

My style has evolved drastically since the Star Wars t-shirts and skirts of my early childhood, and I think it has a lot to say about how I now appreciate and consider gender.

I've realized that, for me, gender is a spectrum. What my gender expression and identity is, is entirely about me and not about how other people perceive me.

I don't know how we deal with that in a world so desperate to define by gender.

I'm going to leave you with that same question: Why does it matter to you whether I am a boy or a girl? Or that I am in the wrong bathroom? Does it really matter to you which bathroom I use? Because it does matter to me.

Would it hurt you not to know someone's gender?

Because despite how uncomfortable it might make you feel, you assuming my gender makes me feel uncomfortable every day. All I'm asking is for you to just sit with that little bit of uncomfortable to make someone else feel better.

Because it does matter to me.

It matters to me when I walk with my friends and you say, "Hey, girls!" But I don't want you to make amends, I don't hold my grudges, but everytime you say that it smudges my happy thoughts into undefinable words.

It matters to me when you say I'm a handsome lad because while you may be complimenting, it makes me question my inner vision of myself.

So, strangers, sit uncomfortably while I tell you how my gender ranges from day to day, sometimes neutral, sometimes fluid, sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce.

It doesn't make me a boy, but it doesn't mean that I'm realigning, and I don't want to be redefining what it means to be a girl.

Because I'm not a girl. So it does matter to me.

(Applause)

*Toilets, Bowties, Gender and Me*  
Audrey Mason-Hyde  
TEDxAdelaide | 19 Jan 2018



Other people's ideas  
about Audrey and gender

Empty box for notes related to other people's ideas about Audrey and gender.

Audrey's thoughts and feelings about gender

Empty box for Audrey's thoughts and feelings about gender.



Changes to Audrey's self-concept and behaviors

Empty box for changes to Audrey's self-concept and behaviors.



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