



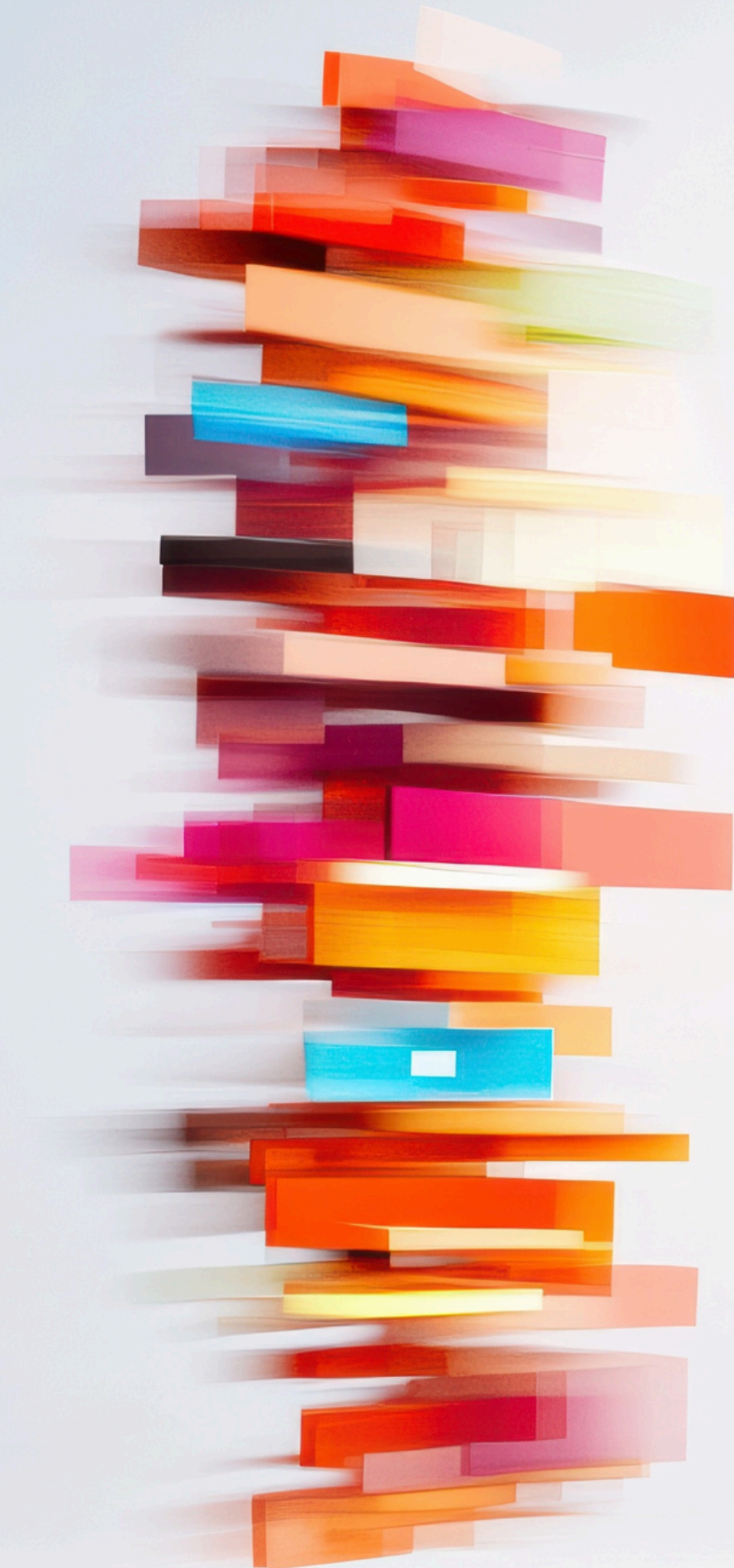
SUMMER

2025



RAIN TRAINING

RAIN provides trainings to Washington state agencies and institutions of higher learning to promote 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusivity and best practices in the workplace. For more information you can view our upcoming trainings at [Trainings | Washington State LGBTQ Commission](#) or by searching “RAIN” in the Washington State Learning Center.



IN THIS EDITION

- 3** GLITTER, GRATITUDE, AND GOOD VIBES IN SPOKANE
- 4** PROUD TO BE PART OF PRIDE
- 5** LIBERATION BY NEUROQUEERING: AT WORK, IN LIFE
- 9** LANGUAGE IS CULTURE—WHAT ARE YOU CULTIVATING?
- 13** THE LITTLE MERMAID AS NEUROQUEER ALLEGORY



Photo courtesy of Sam Fennell, LGBTQ Commission

GLITTER, GRATITUDE, AND GOOD VIBES IN SPOKANE

by **Miranda Brownlee** (they/she), DSHS

Pride in Perry is Spokane's radiant celebration of 2SLGBTQIA+ joy, creativity, and solidarity—held annually in the heart of the South Perry District. Organized by Odyssey Youth Movement, this community-powered event transforms Perry Street into a kaleidoscope of color and camaraderie, where everyone is welcome.

In 2025, Pride in Perry pulsed with life from the very start. The sun shone brightly as people arrived decked out in their finest rainbow gear, bringing with them laughter, love, and a contagious energy. Volunteering at a table with the LGBTQ+ Commission, you were at the center of it all—greeting waves of smiling visitors, handing out freebies and resources faster than you could count, and soaking up the vibrant atmosphere. There were dogs to pet, mouthwatering food smells drifting through the air, and music that blasted joyfully down the street.

With artists like Elaine's Gun, Spectrum Singers, and Duck E Loveless lighting up the makeshift stage in front of The Shop, the event welcomed people of every age and background. From booths hosted by Perry Street Brewing and Wishing Tree Books to sun-soaked conversations with fellow advocates, this celebration was more than just a party—it was an affirmation of community, resilience, and pride.

by **Cami Feek** (she/her, they/them), ESD

PROUD TO BE PART OF PRIDE

Article originally published in ESD NewsNet



From left: Montse Walker My, Gina Buelow, Laura Grace Tarpley, Daniel Jones, Sam Campeau, me, Matt Buelow, Jared Nilsen, John My, Matt and Gina's son, Vinny, RAIN members Alison Mielke from the Department of Children, Families & Youth, Mark Metzger from the Office of Financial Management, his partner Aiden Moore and their dog, Aura. Photo courtesy of Adam Rudnick, ESD

I had the honor to help carry Employment Security's banner in the Capital City Pride Parade and marched with ESD employees and family members. Our Pride employee resource group (ERG) hit it out of the park this year. It planned and worked to have a presence at Pride events across the state. A special shoutout to Montse Walker My, who designed the cool banner and swag for the event. I know many others were involved in this too.

The event was a phenomenal opportunity to connect with community and each other. We were the only state agency represented in the parade, but we were not the only state employees.

Special credit goes to Mark Metzger and the Rainbow Inclusion Network (RAIN), who joined ESD to march. It was a total family affair with ESD employees Stacy and Caleb Baldwin joining Matt Buelow; his wife, Gina, and their son, Vinny. Thomas Cooper and his family were also there, as well as several other ESD employees and Pride ERG members.

What was neat about this experience was the reaction we got from the crowd. Many people recognized our agency and cheered us on. Some were ESD employees. Next time you should consider joining us in the parade! I even hear our very own Adam Rudnick's mom took a video of us!

I'm proud of the work that our agency does every day. I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop by our amazing booth, where our staff let people know about the great work we do and the programs that are available for them. Thanks to Sam Virgil and Alison Eldridge for curating special Paid Leave brochures and swag at the table and to those who volunteered to staff our booth. We shared about a Thurston County job fair, encouraged people to look for work, and helped with resumes and mock interviews. We also spread the word about Paid Leave and so much more. We gave out over 800 pieces of swag, so you can imagine the number of people we talked to. Our presence was powerful and impactful.

Thank you to the entire team who represented 2SLGBTQIA+ community and allies. You not only made our presence known, but you also had a positive impact and helped people know ESD is here for everyone!



LIBERATION BY NEUROQUEERING: AT WORK, IN LIFE

by **Nicoli Dominn** (they/them), DSHS

With 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride Month and Disability Pride Month occurring back to back, it seemed appropriate to consider the intersections of 2SLGBTQIA+ and disability communities – as well as those who, while having disabilities and aligning with 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, experience exclusion from one or both communities. Exclusion isn’t always intentional. However, there are just as many instances in which people purposely gatekeep their communities, deciding who is or isn’t legitimate enough, and whom we consider when building community. We don’t always like to admit that marginalized people oppress others, but those of us who have experienced it firsthand can’t deny that it happens.

As I thought about the overlap of the 2SLGBTQIA+ and disability communities, I remembered a term, neuroqueer, that I heard from a friend on Facebook around 2015. At the time, I didn’t research it further, but it certainly seemed to describe me, as well as my friend. They explained that their neurocognitive style influenced their relationship to gender and sexuality because of how their brain processes information, social cues, and sensory input. While contemplating neuroqueer over the past month, I decided to further research the term.



It turns out that neuroqueer is both an adjective and a verb: it can be something you are and something you do. Although [Dr. Nick Walker's 8-point definition](#)[1] focuses on how one neuroqueers, writers like [Justine E. Egner](#) and [Allyson White](#) also use neuroqueer as a descriptive term that doesn't require intentional action. At the heart of both uses of neuroqueer is the concept of intersectional subversion, disruption, and disidentification: a person who is neuroqueer, or who neuroqueers, subverts neuronormativity and cis/heteronormativity simultaneously. Someone who is neuroqueer can also be someone whose neurodivergence cannot be separated from how they relate to and embody gender and/or sexuality. Having introduced a few more heady terms, here are their definitions:

- **Neuronormative** (adj.): Describing the neurological and cognitive styles and patterns the dominant culture expects and deems socially acceptable. Neuronormativity is the noun form of the word.
- **Neurodivergent** (adj.): Describing a person whose neurocognitive style differs from what their dominant culture considers to be typical. A person can be multiply neurodivergent if they have two or more co-occurring neurocognitive styles meeting this description. Neurodivergence is the noun form of the word.
 - It's important to note that while most research and discussions about neurodivergence center on autism and/or ADHD diagnoses, neurodivergence can cover any neurocognitive style that differs from the norms of dominant culture. In this piece, I refrain from referring to diagnoses to de-stigmatize neurodivergence.
- **Cisnormative** (adj.): Describing the belief or attitude that people whose gender matches their assigned gender at birth are "right" and "normal" and other people are not. Cisnormativity is the noun form of the word.
- **Heteronormative** (adj.): Describing the belief or attitude that heterosexuality is the only natural and "normal" expression of sexuality. Heteronormativity is the noun form of the word.
- **Disidentification** (n.): A psychological term describing the process of conscious detachment from an identity or group with which a person previously identified.

So, what does neuroqueer have to do with gatekeeping (or exclusion), and what exclusion am I even talking about?

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Within all cultures and subcultures, there are behavioral norms to which the most powerful people and/or most people within those cultures expect all members of the culture will assimilate to be accepted, included, and respected. The norms may even turn into formal rules, codes, and laws, written or unwritten. Many norms can also be implied and unspoken. Even when no one voices norms aloud or makes them clear and obvious, enforcement of norms can lead to the exclusion and othering of people who don't adhere to them.

Earlier, I mentioned that I'd experienced gatekeeping. Some of it has been indirect, such as when I lived in Nashville, and the only 2SLGBTQIA+ meetup groups I could find were specific to gay and/or lesbian people (I was neither) and limited participation to only those of a given binary gender (again, I was neither). On top of that, the communities met in affluent areas that were difficult to access by public transportation and too far to ride to by bike. Some gatekeeping has been overt, such as people telling me I don't belong in disability community spaces because my neurocognitive styles and chronic conditions haven't totally debilitated me, or because I don't have a formal diagnosis for some of my neurocognitive styles.

I am neuroqueering by defying people's assumptions of what a neurodivergent, agender, bisexual, gray-sexual person looks, acts, and talks like and challenging them to broaden their perspectives, and I am neuroqueer because my very existence disrupts neuronormativity, cishnormativity and heteronormativity – even when other people can't see it. The beauty of it is that I don't always have to tell everyone who and what I am because they're not entitled to every part of me. But even just by behaving unexpectedly, by pointing out systemic barriers and injustices created by neuronormativity, cishnormativity, and heteronormativity and suggesting alternatives and solutions, I can neuroqueer my own sphere of influence a little bit at a time.

You can neuroqueer, too – all of you. Multiple writers and artists discussing neuroqueering agree that you don't have to be neurodivergent, have a gender different than your assigned gender at birth, or have sexual attraction to people of the same and/or other genders to neuroqueer. Neuroqueering is in the act, not necessarily in the person. We can all find ways to disrupt social expectations around how people are “supposed” to communicate and emote and how people “should” behave for others to read their gender or sexuality – we can even do away with the idea that visibility and performance are mandatory for someone to be validated.

When we talk about 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride and Disability Pride, and when we bring that pride to the workplace, I challenge people to talk about what the world would look like if we weren't so focused on marginalized people having the same things as people in power. Everyone's wants and needs are different. Achieving equivalency with those in power often requires assimilation – in other words, adhering to many of the social norms that lead to the marginalization of our communities.

As we embark on our own neuroqueering journeys, here are a few questions to ask ourselves:

- When we plan projects, meetings, focus groups, and events, who do we or don't we involve in the planning process?
 - Do planning teams attempt to meet the broad array of participants' needs based on differing neurocognitive styles?
 - What barriers may prevent planning teams from involving neurodivergent and/or 2SLGBTQIA+ persons in the planning process, or prevent planning teams from meeting the variety of participant needs, and can those barriers be removed?
- What neuronormative, cishnormative, and/or heteronormative behaviors and standards have we observed at work that may intentionally or unintentionally exclude and erase colleagues and customers, and how can we challenge those norms?

The questions certainly don't stop there, and I encourage you to be curious and question the standards of your cultures – whether at work, at home, or in your communities. There's a wealth of information about the term and concept of neuroqueer, and I hope this piece makes you want to explore it and start conversations about disrupting the power structures we take for granted.

[1] It's important to note that Dr. Nick Walker's "Neuroqueer: An Introduction" has been revised many times and now has citation issues regarding the origins of the term. For more information, please see: [Re-Citing the Origins of Neuroqueer](#).

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Blog Posts & Interviews:

- [NeuroQueer](#): This blog was active from 2013-2016, hosted by Elizabeth (lbby) Grace. Grace contributed her work and solicited and posted essays and works by many authors on all things neuroqueer. This collection of works helped further define and expand the term and concept, paving the way for ongoing research and writing.
- [Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions](#)
- [An Introduction to Neuroqueer Theory](#)
- [Gendervague: At the Intersection of Autistic and Trans Experiences](#): This post discusses an adjacent term, 'gendervague,' that relates to the author's intersecting neurodivergence and queerness.
- [Neuroqueer: Gender Identity and Autistic Embodiment - Emergent Divergence](#)
- [Neuroqueer: Dismantling our internalised ableism - Emergent Divergence](#)
- [Trans and Autistic: A girl in name only](#)
- [Toward a Neuroqueer Future: An Interview with Nick Walker](#)
- [What Queer Individuals with Marginalized Identities Hope You Recall After Pride](#)
- [Intersectionality: Neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ Identities](#)
- [Neuroqueer Folks on Intersection of LGBTQ, ADHD: Ableism, Homophobia](#)

Social Media – People with Lived Experience:

- [@neuroqueercoach](#): Pasha Marlowe, MFT, [Neurodivergent/Neuroqueer Coach](#)
- [@neurodivergentrebel](#): [Neurodivergent Rebel](#)

Research:

- [Exploring the Experiences of Autistic Transgender and Non-Binary Adults in Seeking Gender Identity Health Care](#)
- [Neuroqueer in/and social work: A scoping review of theory and practice](#)
- [Neurodivergence Is Also an LGBTQ+ Topic: Making Space for 'Neuroqueering' in the Outdoors](#)
- [Neuroqueer Intimacies in Online Dating Apps](#)

LANGUAGE IS CULTURE— WHAT ARE YOU CULTIVATING?

by **Miranda Brownlee** (they/she), DSHS



Language is like a shared garden: every phrase we choose either nurtures inclusion or lets weeds of bias spread. What kind of linguistic environment are you tending? Are you sowing openness? Are you unintentionally fencing people out? Each conversation is soil. Are you planting connection, or leaving the ground untouched?

Many of us have been taught to believe that neutral language is universal, but in practice, it serves as the monoculture of language. [Neutral language is dominated by norms that exclude marginalized voices](#). Like planting only one crop year after year, it depletes cultural richness. Many people have likely taken training wherein they learned that using gender-neutral language is inclusive. By definition, neutral is “[not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument](#),” which stands in direct opposition of the definition of inclusion, “[the act of including someone or something as part of a group](#).” [Power is inherent in communication](#), and neutral terms often reinforce dominant perspectives. When our language clings to neutrality alone, it may mask power imbalances, reinforce dominant narratives, and reduce vibrant identities to bland commonalities. It’s like telling someone you grow tomatoes, but omitting that your garden bursts with Brandywines, Camparis, Garden Peaches, and Beefsteaks; each variety uniquely flavorful and worth naming.

To truly honor this diversity, inclusive language must be cultivated with care. It is like practicing crop rotation in a well-tended field—diverse linguistic inputs enrich the soil of communication, allowing it to remain fertile, vibrant, and resilient. Rather than relying on one dominant “crop” of expression, rotating in gender-inclusive pronouns (like they/them) nurtures a space where all identities can grow freely. These pronouns act like compost-rich nutrients, sustaining a language ecosystem that honors individuality rather than depleting it through monoculture. Just as farmers choose their seeds with care, selecting inclusive terms is a deliberate act of respect—one that cultivates visibility and uproots linguistic discrimination and erasure at its source. Inclusive language isn’t just a semantic upgrade—it’s a regenerative act. When we speak with intention and empathy, we do more than swap out words. We cultivate fields of connection, color, and belonging.

Language doesn’t always grow in bold, sweeping gestures. More often, it flourishes through subtle shifts—tiny edits that gently reshape how we connect. Swapping “guys” for “friends,” or choosing “partner” instead of “husband” or “wife,” might seem like small changes, but they carry tremendous weight. These micro-adjustments are like scattering wildflower seeds between the hedges: unexpected bursts of color that soften rigid boundaries and make the landscape more welcoming.



Research from the [American Psychological Association](#) emphasizes that inclusive language fosters psychological safety and belonging, especially in diverse environments. Even seemingly minor changes in phrasing can signal respect and recognition, which in turn improves interpersonal trust and team cohesion. According to [Psychology Today](#), inclusive language can increase objectivity and reduce bias in decision-making, making it a powerful tool for equity and empathy.

The [Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership at UC Berkeley](#) also highlights that inclusive language is not about memorizing a list of “correct” terms, but about cultivating a mindset of continual growth and compassion. These small linguistic shifts—like choosing “they” as a singular pronoun or avoiding ableist expressions—are part of a broader effort to dismantle exclusionary norms and build inclusive cultures. Such choices don’t overhaul the entire garden—they enrich it. They signal care, inclusion, and a sensitivity to diversity, transforming everyday conversation into a blooming pathway toward belonging.

[Even minor changes in language](#)—like trading “I need this done” for “Would you be able to take care of this?”—are the linguistic equivalent of daily tending. These shifts, like the gentle trimming of branches or watering of seedlings, help team relationships flourish. They reduce defensiveness, foster psychological safety, and encourage shared ownership, much like how consistent care leads to a thriving garden. Trust, collaboration, and cultural awareness are the sunlight, water, and soil of effective communication. Just as plants need different conditions to grow, people bring varied communication styles, values, and social norms shaped by their cultural ecosystems. Some teams thrive in full sun, others under the shade of quiet contemplation—but all need intentional nurturing.

When we attend to language with cultural awareness, we’re not just pruning for aesthetics; we’re cultivating deeper roots of empathy and respect. Language can either fertilize connection or drain its nutrients—making the difference between open sharing and isolated silos. These microshifts are like seasonal gardening rituals: regular, gentle, transformative acts that shape an environment where collaboration can truly bloom.

Curiosity is the compost of growth—a rich, organic process that transforms uncertainty into fertile ground for insight. Far from being a threat, [uncertainty activates our brain’s reward system](#), making us more receptive to learning and connection. [Neuroscientific research shows that curiosity stimulates the hippocampus and dopaminergic circuits, enhancing memory and motivation](#). In other words, when we lean into the unknown, our minds prepare to grow.

Asking open and respectful questions—like “How do you describe your identity?”—is a form of [interpersonal curiosity \(IPC\)](#), which fosters psychological safety and deeper relational bonds. A 2024 narrative literature review in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that IPC is a powerful tool for building safer relational spaces, increasing trust, empathy, and resilience. These gentle inquiries are the linguistic equivalent of tending someone else’s garden with care—not to prune or reshape, but to understand what blooms there naturally.

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Moreover, curiosity-driven communication has been linked to improved collaboration, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. [Forbes](#) highlights that curiosity helps individuals overcome fear and assumptions, leading to more authentic dialogue and inclusive environments. When we ask questions with genuine interest, we signal that others are valued—a key ingredient in cultivating belonging. So yes, uncertainty isn't something to fear—it's the mulch that nourishes new ideas, perspectives, and relationships. And curiosity? It's the gardener's hand, turning over the soil so understanding can take root.

Getting feedback can feel like discovering aphids on your roses. There might be an initial panic, but it can ultimately lead to vital and robust growth. But just as aphids signal an imbalance in the garden, feedback reveals areas in our communication that need attention. The initial panic is natural; [neuroscience shows that receiving critical feedback can activate the amygdala](#), triggering a fight-or-flight response known as amygdala hijacking. This reaction can make us feel emotionally flooded, even when the feedback is constructive. Yet, when we respond with humility, we shift from reaction to reflection. Humility is the gardener's mindset—it allows us to pause, assess, and prune with care. According to [EuroMaTech](#) and [The Humphrey Group](#), humility enhances our ability to learn from feedback by reducing ego-driven defensiveness and increasing openness to growth. It helps us separate identity from performance, making space for improvement without shame. In the practice of cultural humility, accepting feedback is not just a skill—it's a core competency. As Intrinsic Change explains, feedback helps uncover our “blind spots,” especially around bias and exclusionary language. Without it, we risk letting harmful assumptions take root unnoticed—like weeds choking out the diversity of a thriving linguistic garden.

Responding with grace means: [Listening actively and without interruption](#); [Acknowledging the feedback, even if it stings](#); [Reflecting before reacting, and asking clarifying questions](#); and [Committing to change, not just in words but in action](#). When we treat feedback as compost—rich with nutrients from others' perspectives—we cultivate a more inclusive, resilient communication landscape. Imperfection is not a flaw; it's a sign that growth is underway.

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Imperfection is normal! I'll say it again—imperfection is normal! In all things, especially communication. Language is a living system, and like any garden, it thrives not through perfection but through ongoing care, pruning, and renewal. When we accept feedback with humility, we're not admitting failure—we're engaging in the essential act of tending to our linguistic landscape.

Research from Dr. Brené Brown in *The Gifts of Imperfection* reminds us that embracing flaws is a cornerstone of authenticity and connection. Brown argues that wholehearted living requires courage, compassion, and the willingness to be vulnerable—all of which are vital in communication. Similarly, Dr. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion shows that accepting imperfection reduces defensiveness and fosters openness to growth.

In the realm of inclusive language, [*Intrinsic Change*](#) emphasizes that feedback is a core skill in practicing cultural humility. It helps us uncover blind spots and uproot exclusionary habits that may have taken root unnoticed. By responding to feedback with curiosity rather than shame, we create space for new expressions to flourish—ones that reflect respect, empathy, and inclusion.

So yes, imperfection is not just acceptable—it's fertile. It's the compost that nourishes better conversations, deeper understanding, and more vibrant relationships. Every time we revise a phrase, ask a question, or receive a gentle correction, we're cultivating a more inclusive and resilient garden of language.

Language shapes not only what we say—it shapes who feels seen, heard, and welcomed. With each phrase, each question, each moment of feedback, we are either watering seeds of empathy or letting weeds of exclusion grow unchecked. Inclusive communication isn't a checklist—it's a practice of mindfulness and care. It asks us to listen deeply, revise bravely, and remain open to change. Like any flourishing garden, the language we cultivate requires seasonal tending. It thrives on curiosity, humility, and imperfection. It grows with our willingness to pause and ask, "What might bloom here if I spoke with more intention? So let's keep planting. Let's keep growing. And let's ensure that the conversations we nurture today become vibrant ecosystems of belonging for tomorrow.

by **Kellyn Westra** (she/her), DSHS

THE LITTLE MERMAID AS NEUROQUEER ALLEGORY

As a kid, I was obsessed with The Little Mermaid Disney movie. I watched it nine times in a row once (I also had the stomach flu, so I wasn't busy). I thought it was just a childhood thing, maybe a musical thing, but I never really dug a lot deeper.

Then the new live action version came out.

I saw it so many times in theaters my child said they would revolt if I dragged them to see it one more time. At one point, while in my hometown, I brought my dad to see it with us in 3D. He glanced sideways at me as I teared up in the theater at the final reconciliation scene between Ariel and her father, King Tritan. I imagined my dad was wondering if his strict, religious Tritan-stye parenting choices might require some additional apologies to me. When the film was over, my dad asked me why I connected to this story so deeply. I told him that memories of that upbringing could be part of it, but I wasn't actually sure why. This wasn't quite true. I had some ideas, but I wasn't ready to talk to him about any of them, and maybe never would be. Unlike Ariel and Tritan, we may never fully reconcile our relationship due to his feelings about the LGBTQIA+ community of which I and other family members are a part. And yeah, it's true that it does make me cry.

But I knew there were more layers to my attachment to this story than fathers and daughters. I came home from my latest viewing in the theater determined to figure out 'the why' behind this interest in this story.

At the age of 30, I had been diagnosed with ADHD myself only 2 years or so prior (late diagnosed ADHD women of the 80's unite!). I was watching The Little Mermaid Disney cartoon with my toddler, and something occurred to me that only seemed obvious in hindsight.





Ariel obviously has a combined-type ADHD. Duh.

I even made some bullet points arguments as to why Ariel was absolutely ADHD coded:

- Late to events, time blind.
- A penchant for breaking out into song at the slightest provocation.
- Loves to collect stuff nobody else cares about.
- People would say her collection is complete, but she knows there is always more to collect.
- She has a cluttered place where she keeps her treasures, but she knows where every whozit and whatzit and thingamabob is, thank you very much (she has 20)!
- Dives deep into research on what interests her (literally).
- Daydreamer.
- Creative.
- Curious. She likes to learn, especially when it's something she is interested in.
- Impulsive/Spontaneous.
- Forgets words in the middle of her sentences (What's that word again...Streeeet).
- Only wants to talk about special interests even if friends are uninterested

The live action version of the movie doubled down on her ADHD tendencies, and she even finds herself in love with another person who also liked to collect stuff. Relatable. The neurodivergent kids found each other, how sweet.

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I googled 'Ariel + ADHD' to find out if I was alone in my thinking and found not only did ADHD folks identify with Ariel, but there were endless posts from the Autistic community also claiming Ariel as one of their own as well. Either way, this mermaid was deemed by internet communities as neurodivergent. As a kid who had no words for why I felt so different, Ariel had helped me feel seen. And... I also thought she was pretty.

While my friends were obsessed with Eric, and frankly, same, Ariel had a special place in my heart. In my household, I couldn't share that with anyone. I didn't even quite admit it to myself. I told myself everyone had those same thoughts I'm sure (they didn't). I mean, look at her cool red hair and her voice! When I got older and realized that not everyone was attracted to possibly anyone, I eventually stuffed those types of feelings super deep down. Then one day in my 40's I ran into a person who finally gave me descriptions for the words that seemed to match my feelings, bisexual. Queer. As a teen my religious parents didn't show me this 1995 Newsweek article that declared Bisexuality the new emerging sexuality. However, being attracted to more than one gender isn't anything new at all.

My next step was to google 'Ariel + Queer' and see what popped up. That is when I was embarrassed to find out that Hans Christian Andersen, the author of The Little Mermaid, if born today maybe would have likely identified similarly to myself. I had no idea. He is even listed as a Bicon (Bi icon) on bi.org. But regardless of modern labels and identities, his life was undisputably queer. He wrote love letters to men and women in his lifetime. As a teen, he wrote The Little Mermaid soon after the man he loved, Edvard Collin, got married to a woman. Yes, the Little Mermaid fairy tale is queer allegory. Sadly, both he and his mermaid did not have a happy ending to their love story (in the original fairy tale, not the Disney version). Their love remained unrequited. It now made sense to me why Howard Ashman, a gay man dying of AIDS in a very prejudiced time, was probably drawn to writing the lyrics for Disney iteration of this mermaid. Why the director of the live action, Rob Marshall also a gay man, was so eager to take on this project [Director Rob Marshall Talks 'The Little Mermaid's Gay Magic'](#). Many trans people have also expressed that they also identify with Ariel's feelings and experiences. I wasn't the first LGBTQIA+ person to feel a connection to the source material.

So, I also made some bullet points as to why Ariel is LGBTQIA+coded:

- Feels stifled by the environment she grew up in.
- Dreams of living in a world where she is free to be who she really is and loved for who she really is.
- Wants to be free to love who she loves.
- Wants to ask questions and get some answers.
- Must hide what she wants from her family out of fear of rejection and misunderstanding.
- Her friends don't quite understand why she isn't happy being a mermaid.
- Her sisters assume she is in love with a merman as is expected of her.
- Knows she is meant to be a human, even if she was born a mermaid.
- A runaway from a family that doesn't accept her (initially) after her secret is found out.

In the Disney version of the Little Mermaid, Ariel sings her famous 'I wish' song, Part of Your World, claiming she is sick of swimming and ready to stand. Ariel inspires me to neuroqueer. To neuroqueer is to actively subvert neuronormativity, heteronormativity and the gender binary. It is to accept and explore my intertwined nature of being queer and neurodivergent and to ask the world to do the same.

Photo: Ryzkov / Adobe
Photo (next page): Grapy Media / Adobe



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