

I found comfort in my body in a place I didn't expect: The boxing gym

Perspective by Jireh Deng

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Each week in June, we are publishing an essay by an LGBTQ writer that answers this question: Where do you find pride, joy and/or comfort in your own life, particularly amid a rise in anti-LGBTQ legislation? Check back [here](#) each Monday this month to read a new installment of the series.

In fall of 2021, it had all become too much. I was taking 16 units of college classes and working full time, all while trying to navigate friendships and my identity. After several months, the stress started affecting my motor skills — and led me to get into three minor car collisions.

I remember one night dreaming that I had careened off the edge of a highway — my stomach dropped out and my body was thrown into midair suspension. When I jolted awake, I was hyperventilating. The nightmare had felt so real: The other times I had nearly died in real life, I'd dozed off while driving because of pure exhaustion.

After the third collision, I immediately dropped one of my classes. Amid all the other stresses at the time, something about these collisions had unmoored my sense of reality; I no longer trusted myself. I decided more in my life needed to change

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So I finally picked up boxing as a hobby, a goal I had put off for months. When I walked into a small gym in Long Beach, Calif., I wasn't sure what to expect outside of the usual stereotypes of ultramasculine boxing gyms. All I knew is that I wanted to learn a new skill and implement a regular exercise schedule for my own health.

As an East Asian person who is visibly gender nonconforming, my subconscious often runs through a checklist of safety clues whenever I enter a new space. Am I the only person of color? Are there other people who dress expansively in a queer-friendly way?

The same happened when I stepped into that boxing gym for the first time. I looked around: The walls of faded news clippings and posters of famous boxers exuded the type of self-aggrandizing machismo energy I expected to find there. But there was also the trainer at the front desk, an Asian American woman who was wearing a Pride hat, and a handful of women already warming up for the class. The tension in my shoulders relaxed a bit.

Still, it took some time for me to open up. Like everyone else, returning to in-person work, in-person school and in-person relationships last fall meant renegotiating space and boundaries. I had always been the “yes person” who wanted to show up for everyone and everything, but I was overextended. At that point, even the thought of sustaining conversation filled me with dread.

But I kept going back to the gym. And showing up anyplace consistently means that you have to talk to people eventually. Slowly, I began forming friendships with the women at the gym. I admired many of them because they were serious, there to put in the work like me. I saw them come in consistently — learning the combinations and hitting with more precise technique than many of the men who were boxing alongside us.

I soon learned that we all came from very different backgrounds. There were doctors, social workers, software programmers, actors, teachers, students or writers like me. It's what made the gym so special; it was a hodgepodge of people from all walks of life and age groups coming together to learn how to box. And perhaps that's why, amid this amazing, strong, random mix of people, this gym felt quintessentially like mine.

In the past eight months, it's become a ritual. Five times a week, I'll log off my computer at around 5:30 p.m., change into my workout clothes, drive to the boxing gym, try to find street parking and wrap my hands before I hit the bag.

In front of the bag, the problems and anxieties I face throughout the day suddenly seem so small. I can take a step away from the dread and doom on my Twitter timeline — as a journalist, I'm forced to witness and process all the terrible things in the world — and I can focus on the variables and outcomes I can control. Jab, cross, slip left, slip right, right hook, uppercut. My feet are steady and balanced as I throw repeated combinations.

What's more, after sparring (gently) with 6-foot-tall men who are at least 100 pounds heavier than me, I feel like I can face almost anything. With the rise in anti-Asian violence and the dangers of my visibility as a gender nonconforming individual, I don't want to walk into foreign spaces already afraid. In this way, learning

to protect myself is also a political act of defiance: I refuse to play the role of a victim, or to rely on the police for my personal safety.

It's not just my health and strength that have improved since I joined, either — but also my relationship to my body and gender identity. I've long harbored complicated feelings about my weight and appearance, but learning how to box has made me grateful for the ways I am able-bodied.

Whenever I step into the boxing gym and see all the other bodies, so many different shapes and sizes, I, too, am just a body that's learning how to throw a proper punch. My limbs aren't gendered boy or girl; I'm allowed to simply exist.

In fact, my gym friends became the first people I started consistently using they and them pronouns to describe myself with. Before, I'd been in denial about my gender and my body dysmorphia, but boxing every day forced me to be more physically present than ever. At the gym, it's useless to try to keep up appearances, to pretend to be something you're not when you're sweating profusely and wheezing from the exercise. We're all just trying our best and supporting others to do the same. I've never felt so safe showing up as my fullest self.

There's the camaraderie when we all suffer through an especially grueling workout, and the choir of groans that rise when we hold a plank at the end of class. I've spent as long as two hours there, going to multiple classes; I've gossiped with the gym manager until everyone else has gone home; I've grabbed drinks with friends after jujitsu. These are the people who've seen me — even when I didn't recognize myself when I first walked in.

The agility I've gained isn't just about my reaction speed as a fighter, but about my ability and resilience to adapt in stressful situations. I feel like I'm finally behind the wheel of my own life, replete with the energy to show up for my friends and family. For myself.

Indeed, for the first time in my life, I'm giving back to my authentic self — one hour a day at the boxing gym at a time.

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