

Looking into Burn Out

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Burn out within the therian, otherkin, and fictionkin communities is a pretty well-known phenomena. Younger members barrel into the community, excited and terrified at the prospect of having finally met people who understand, relate, and even potentially share some of the experiences and thoughts they thought were unique to them alone, but become gradually more and more horrified and jaded as the years go by. As the community moves on away from the terminology and ideas they were originally introduced to and evolves in new and unexpected directions, it causes friction between the now-aging nonhuman and the community they call home. It only gets worse when you rip away the curtain from behind uglier parts of the community: missing stairs that are defended by previously well-loved or well-respected older members, groups that defend transphobic and homophobic or otherwise bigoted rhetoric and use their nonhumanity to deflect criticisms, the infamous overtly religious physical shifters and the bestialists that lurk at the edges and exhaust everyone by constantly trying to assert their Legitimacy and Validity and how you can't be a Tr00 Were unless you're one of them. Really, when you put things into that perspective, some may think it's a frank wonder we have any older members at all.

The communities as a whole sometimes appear as cycles of rot and wank that seem to never end and that may well poison you if you don't limit your exposure. We're not bound together by codes or morals or anything truly mutually shared beyond the words we share about our alterhumanity, and that can often make it difficult not to feel both alienated and disappointed: alienated in the fact that even among so many others similar to you, there's still no one who precisely understands your experience—and when you've been around for ten or so years, this gradually shifts worse and worse as people talk about their identities in functionally different ways as time goes on. Disappointed in the fact that so many people, so many times, will let you down in the ways you least expect. The saying “never meet your heroes” is just as alive and well within otherkin, therian, and fictionkin spaces as it is anywhere else, and for good reason. We're all flawed beings, but sometimes our shared sense of experience and

nonhuman identity can stretch into a convincing visage of likeness that doesn't exist and hurts to have ripped away. Racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic alterhumans all exist. Alterhumans who will devalue you and criticize your usage of certain labels—therian, otherkin, fictionkin—based purely on entirely superficial things or their own inflated sense of superiority in their personal belief system, all exist. Alterhumans who encourage others to act inappropriately towards minors and animals (often sexually, though not always), and those who defend such, exist. These are all the minority of the communities, but it can't be denied or ignored: they exist alive and well all the same.

It can be suffocating staying in spaces in these communities for too long. We're small enough that after a certain period within these spaces, maybe six or seven years at most, you realize that everyone knows everyone else: anywhere you go, you'll likely be met with familiar faces, both the good and bad variety. There's the guy who told you your kintype was impossible because "no one can be reborn as *that*," there's the girl who accused you of being a zoophile that one time you retweeted a leather wolf mask you thought was cool, there's the singlet of indeterminate gender who you saw publicly disavow nonhuman systemmates as all being fake. The list goes on and on.

At a certain point, it's hard not to leave. You usually end up carving out your hole in the wall with a set group of friends over the course of time spent in the communities, and some people find it so much less annoying or hostile overall that they just straight-up abandon larger community spaces in favor of them and are never heard from again. Other times, some people feel like they've shared all they're willing to share and peace out there. Still others look around the glorified user-hostile pit trap the Internet has become in the last decade and just limit their time in community spaces until they vanish forever, keeping their nonhumanity to purely physical spaces. There's a million and one reasons to get gone, and we've seen it happen time and time again. Even the people some would say have had the most influential effects on the nonhuman communities have vanished this way—Orion Scribner vanished so thoroughly from the communities ten years ago that "pulling a Scribner" is an actual phrase I've heard used to reference when a well-respected greymuzzle finally reaches their tipping point and just vanishes into the metaphorical woods one day out of nowhere, and they're never heard from again. (Has anyone informed the illustrious, recently returned Scribner that

their name is part of a phrase, and if not, please dear gods don't let them find out through this essay of all things.)

You might ask, with so many reasons to leave, why stay? What's the point? Out of habit, out of concern, out of responsibility? But that's not a question I can answer for you—and honestly, it's the wrong question to be asking at all. Nothing here that I've described is wholly unique to the otherkin, therian, or fictionkin communities, nor any other alterhuman spaces: in fact, you could arguably say it's just the price we pay for relying almost wholly on digital spaces to host our communities and a majority of their both separate and shared history. There are bad people in every community, every small community suffers the fate of everyone knowing everyone else, and discourse is just going to be found everywhere you go. These things seem overwhelmingly hopeless at first when they stand alone, with nothing else in comparison to themselves—like they stood at the beginning of this essay—but put into perspective, it's easy to understand as just another eternal fault of being a part of almost any group.

The real question we should be asking is, how do we fight against the burn out that's common to the alterhuman communities and ends up driving so many away? Especially for those of us who have been here long enough to see the same kinds of discourse be recycled for the twentieth time over, or who have had to distance ourselves from previously-loved portions of the community, digital places and real people that we once considered akin to home?

The most obvious thing to do, first and foremost, is to remember that it's okay to take breaks, and even to start encouraging breaks community-wide. This is something that I saw more present in the mid-2010's when I first arrived, though it was at the tail-end of its popularity even then: now, instead, there's the perspective that people always have to have their paws shoved into every possible thing possible and relevant to them within the communities, that they always have to be up-to-date on the latest drama, that they need to be aware and understanding and active in everything at all times. We've seen the consequences of this at play in the last few years alone, when “zoophile” drama popped up Twitter last year and into this year—when people, who had no idea that Therian Guide forum owner Lycantheory was a bestialist and bestiality advocate, were targeted as “zoophiles” because they hadn't made public statements regarding the

tornado of discourse that was going on. While it's one thing to inform your community about a missing stair and advocate that something be done about it, what we saw happening was an entirely separate beast that was spawned from the unwritten rule and expectation that Thou Must Always Know What Is Going On And Must Be A Part Of It In Some Way.

And breaks are also healthy for understanding yourself and your own experiences, too. Sometimes everyone else's opinions and snide side comments can get in the way: breaks work to remind us that it's not what other people think about our identity or experiences that are important, it's what we think about them that are. That's just an all-around benefit, given that we never really stop learning about ourselves, and is something that could probably benefit both older and newer otherkin, therians, and fictionkin, I feel like. At the end of the day, it's perfectly acceptable to step away from the community or parts of the community as you need and come back when you're ready—it's just that sometimes the attitudes abound don't make that readily apparent.

In connection to that idea is the recognition that just because life outside the nebulous, digital realms of the community is important doesn't mean that it supersedes existing within community spaces. I see this in farewell letters often and I know for a fact I'm not the only one who notices it—there seems to sometimes be an over-prioritization or under-prioritization of actually, physically going out and experiencing the parts of your identity in connection to the other complex parts of your life. With under-prioritization you see people who have opinions that are clearly based on zero real life experience, but which they try to force on everyone else as factual, and with over-prioritization you see people whose heads are stuck so far up their own asses it's amazing they can appreciate offline life at all. It's a battle of the "if you wear a collar you're into real animal abuse, and too many people do that here that I can't stand it so now that I'm leaving, you're all #zoos" versus the "if you're on the internet you're a CHILD who needs to grow up and appreciate the REAL WORLD and stop CHASING CLOUT AND MEMES, one day you'll grow up and realize that I, Mother Wolfqueen1984, was right in saying this. Goodbye forever youngin youngster children kid babies" types, and it's just not productive at all. Either extreme is draining and it's not healthy to be so stubborn as to lose balance entirely: maybe a more online or offline lifestyle works for one person, but that isn't a basis for everyone and shouldn't be

treated as such. Both offline personal and online collective experiences are valuable, and both are functionally healthy to participate in on some level, to some extent.

I'm also going to put a perspective out there on the importance of curating your spaces and how you interact with the larger alterhuman community or the overarching otherkin, therian, and fictionkin communities at large. It can be exhausting to force yourself into forums, groups, and communities that feel wholly hostile or at odds with you, and I mean that in application to wider networks too, like entire swathes of social media websites and tags. Pushing yourself to be a part of a space just because you know a significant amount of people who identify similarly to you, or who use the same labels as you, are on there is something I see happen frequently within nonhuman communities, especially in regards to fictionkin, with canonmates and sourcemates, and therians, with packs and the dwindling amount of therian-specific communities out there.

But if someplace sucks and is draining to be a part of: if you're always butting heads, if things the other people say upset you, if you feel like you can't relax and be wholly open on there without getting potentially attacked...leave! Walk away! You don't have to be there. Have you ever heard the phrase "no D&D is better than bad D&D"? It's the same rule here: no community is better than bad community. Bad community drives people away, embitters them, and even in worst-case scenarios outright traumatizes them. No community just means that you keep an eye out and maybe float from space to space for a while, which is entirely preferable.

Finding spaces filled with people you enjoy and conversation or discussion that engages and interests you is a major step to avoiding burnout from happening, and it shouldn't be overlooked or dismissed as underwhelming. Community is what someone makes of it: the otherkin, therian, and fictionkin communities at large don't exist without the people in them, and while a singular person doesn't have the power to change large segments of the community in massive, mind-boggling ways, a single person *can* change how they participate in the community in ways that positively effect themselves and the people around them. No one is required to be around people or in places that make them miserable, uncomfortable, tired—no one is owed anyone else's

presence. People are always allowed to step away or avoid such when they need to, in whatever capacity that means for them personally.

And in the same vein, do things that you love and enjoy in these community spaces. Don't want to write essays? Then don't write them! A way to avoid mental exhaustion is to refuse to drive yourself to do things that you dislike or find unrewarding, whether that's new projects or old continuations. It sounds simple, but I see people frequently stress that they won't be able to contribute to larger community spaces if they don't do it the 'right way,' because they don't enjoy writing, or don't have fun drawing, or any number of factors. Prioritize yourself over what you "owe" the community, because at the end of the day, no one owes any section of the therian, otherkin, or fictionkin communities anything by just inherently being a part of them.

Burn out isn't an inevitable part of these communities, and it should never be treated like it is. While the otherkin, therian, and fictionkin communities have their flaws and problems, these aren't wholly unique to them: they're problems we can see net-wide. Getting burnt out, frustrated, and disappearing without a word to anyone (or with a bitter goodbye letter) shouldn't be considered the natural end to the cycle of being a part of these groups. Mental exhaustion and frustration to the point of leaving and never returning shouldn't be the normal or standard for long time community members. What I've suggested here is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of things to keep in mind to avoid burn out or reverse it when it's already in action: this isn't the end-all be-all to things people can do. But if people feel like the suggestions I've made here are useful, I implore them to take it before they commit to just leaving the therian, otherkin, and fictionkin communities entirely and never looking back.