I’d like to talk to you about walls, and in this way I’d like to invite you to imagine the metaphor I plan to utilize. I don’t like walls – and here’s why. I will admit that walls are important in that they can be considered structurally necessary. They provide us support and the ability to lean on something stable and practically unmoving. They grant us the ability to make castles of ourselves, complex mansions and palaces of flesh to ward off attack and protect ourselves from harm. But, walls can also separate us, isolate us, and make boxes out of kingdoms. They are not flexible and they are not easy to change or alter. That is the thing about walls – it’s not always us that build the walls we find around us. We do not consciously put every brick in the wall. I think that we have been tricked into making homes in the walls that society has built for us; that we have been tricked into thinking that we can make these walls our own, but I think that we cannot truly make them ours until we learn how to dismantle them and rebuild them ourselves from the wreckage. I don’t know if you’ve ever knocked down a wall, but it takes a lot of work, especially when the wall isn’t tangible – when it’s not real. I don’t know if you’ve ever *built* a wall, but it’s messy and it takes a lot of time – more-so when the wall is a metaphor.

But, let me explain something – when I say boxes, I mean the roles and expectations that society arbitrarily places on categories of identity, and when I say walls, I mean the roles and expectations that you “make for yourself”. Though, this is an ideal circumstance, more often than not they are constructed as if we were given an instruction manual on how to do it “right”. We are constantly influenced by social idealism and socially constructed definitions of what it means to be a “man” or “black” or “disabled”. I wish it was as simple as looking at a wall and labeling each brick, stone, panel, or slat as a different piece of yourself, but it’s not. If I were to ask you who you are, you aren’t necessarily going to look at me and say, “I’m a white, cisgendered, heterosexual, middle-class, able bodied, woman” as if those things all inhabit different pieces that make up the same proverbial wall. Instead, imagine that each piece of your identity is a room, a room with walls, and the combination of all of these rooms makes a residence and that residence is you. If we think of these rooms as pieces of identities, then we wind up with a place made up of many rooms – perhaps more than we realize. So, what’s in each room?

If we stick to the metaphor, then we all have rooms designated to things like: racialized group, nationality, gender, sex, class, ability, sexual and romantic orientation, age, religion, and so much more. But if we examine this concept from a theoretical point of view, that’s when rooms turn into boxes. Now, the concept of “The Man Box” is one that is utilized by people like Keith Edwards and Mark Greene to try to explain the ways in which we attempt to conform to social pressures and perceptions in order to “pass” as the identity that we inhabit. For this example, I challenge you to imagine a square on the floor – the foundation to our room, so to speak. If I stand in this box and say, “I am a man” the box replies by saying, “a man is only *really* a man if he is strong, rugged, emotionally unavailable, in control, athletic, muscular, sexually aggressive, and the breadwinner of the household”. These are the ideals that are in the box, these are the things that we are “told” we must strive to be, the things we adhere to in order to “be a man”. Should a man step outside of these boundaries there are consequences and they come in the form of social rejection or lash-back and even verbal and physical violence. If you’re a man and you cry: you’re a wuss, you’re a mama’s boy. If you’re a man and you aren’t very physically capable: you’re weak, you’re a girl. If you don’t make inappropriate comments or advances towards women: you’re gay. You may become socially isolated, you might get beaten up, and in the most extreme cases you might be killed. These are the ways in which society builds our walls for us – they pressure us into fitting into our boxes. But, don’t get me wrong, not all of these attributes are a bad thing – there is such a thing as a positive stereotype. There is nothing wrong with being physically strong or having competent leadership skills – so these may be bricks you place in your own walls because it’s how you define that piece of your identity, it’s what you *want* to be and not necessarily how you’re supposed to be.

The same basic theory is applicable across all identity categories, but the theory doesn’t really account for the complex intersectionality of identity. Just as a house is not usually made up entirely of a single room, neither are you. You are not just “Finnish” or just “Christian” or just a “woman” – you are the combination of these things. Just as your identity is vastly interwoven, a place with many rooms also has many hallways and doors that connect everything making them inseparable.

I don’t know if you’ve ever built a home, but it requires a lot of planning, a lot of effort and attention to detail, and a lot of renovations and subsequent maintenance even when you think it’s finally complete. So, how does a home get built – or, a better question, how does a home get built when that home is you? For a long time in the field of Psychology there has been talk about Nature vs Nurture; this being the argument of whether you are genetically predisposed to be and act a certain way or if you are a product of your environment and the way you are brought up. The truth of the matter is that these two ideas work together in incredible ways to shape the beings that we are – to shape our identities and build our homes. The combination of Nature and Nurture manifests in the form of Epigenetics. Epigenetics is the study of the ways in which your genes express themselves as a result of both internal and external factors.

To put this in perspective, your genetics have similar codes to your ancestors from up to about four generations ago – homes passed down through the ages in desperate need of a new coat of paint. In spite of this, the workings of our homes are offset and disrupted by the external world be it the plumber that comes to fix your broken sink or the comforting words of a friend, spoken long ago but never quite forgotten. What studies find is that regardless of your predisposition to develop something like depression, the enrichment of your environment and the proximity of your social support network effectively counter your genetics and better your chances of being neurotypical in that regard – or on the flip-side, your exposure to trauma or chronic stress can compound with your genetics and in turn increase your chances to develop something like mental illness. This much is true throughout our lives because we are constant products of how our genes are being expressed.

Epigenetics has everything to do with the melanin concentration in your skin, the shape of your body, and the development of your brain. It helps to shape the way we perceive and experience the world. I am not here to tell you that the way your genes are expressed makes you a marble castle among cottages, but we are not cookie cutter houses. We are so much more than the boxes we find ourselves placed in, unique products of the way our genes and social pressures have reared us to be. We are the complicated combinations of every room in our houses and how the hallways are lined with old pictures of our prior selves. Our foundations date back to our great-great-great grandparents, but much has changed over time – from additions to downsizing to rearranging to complete changes.

So, I will leave you with this – I challenge you to take a look at the walls in the house that is your body. Take a look beyond the posters and the paint job and the piles of clothes that block that weird hole in the corner. Take a look at the bricks, at the pieces that build your walls and try to recognize which ones you put there of your own volition. Thank you.