



A Letter to my Younger Self

By Niklas Gerner

A single purple dot is positioned centrally below the author's name.

Dear Younger Me,

I know what you're thinking. I know what you're trying to push away, to bury so deep that not even you can see it. You know you're different. You always have. And yet, you refuse to let yourself say it, even in the silence of your own mind. Because if you say it – if you even think it – it becomes real. And if it's real, what then?

You watch your friends fall into the kind of relationships that make sense. The kind your parents and the world expect. And you keep hoping that maybe, somehow, you'll wake up one day and it'll all make sense for you, too. That maybe this part of you will disappear. That maybe you'll get to live without the fear of standing out, of being "other."

But that's not going to happen. And one day, Niklas, you'll be so damn grateful for that.

I won't lie to you. There will be years where you hide, where you tiptoe around the truth. You'll overthink every conversation, every casual question at work – *"How was your weekend?"* Seems simple, right? But to you, it won't be. You'll hesitate, feeling the weight of every possible response. *"Do I tell them I spent the weekend with my boyfriend? Do I say 'my partner'? Do I just say 'a friend'?"* You'll dance around it, trying to blend in, trying not to make anyone uncomfortable. Because deep down, you're terrified of making yourself a topic of conversation.

You'll hear things – little comments here and there. The kind that makes you second-guess whether you can be your full self at work. No one will ever openly tell you that you don't belong, but sometimes, silence is just as loud. You'll wonder if being honest about who you are will change

the way people see you, if it will cost you opportunities, if it will make things harder than they already are.

And it will be exhausting. Carrying a secret, even one that's not really a secret, takes energy. The constant calculations, the quiet erasures, the way you'll twist the truth just enough to keep the peace. It will weigh on you more than you realize.

But here's what you don't see yet: you are not the problem. Your existence isn't something that needs to be carefully worded or edited to make other people more comfortable. You are allowed to take up space.

There will be a moment – a shift. Some friends will remind you that you don't have to hide, that you don't have to live life as a watered-down version of yourself. And for the first time, you'll start to believe it. You'll stop holding back. You'll say "my boyfriend" without swallowing the words. You'll realize that the world doesn't stop turning when you take up space in it.

And at work? You'll learn that the people who matter won't treat you differently. You'll find allies. And more importantly, you'll become one.

Because one day, someone else will be in your shoes. They will sit in a meeting, hesitating before answering that same simple -: *"How was your weekend?"* And this time, it will be easier for them. Because by then, you will have already taken advantage of something that didn't exist when you started: a network, a space where people like you don't have to wonder if they belong.

You will have founded and led Sanofi's PRIDE+ ERG in Austria – a group dedicated to making it easier for future versions of you. You will have worked to create visibility, to open conversations, to ensure that no one in that company ever feels like they need to hold back a part of themselves to be professional. And because of that, when someone like you walks through those doors, they will already see a path.

And none of that would have happened if it weren't for one person – Jake Prodoehl. Jake was the one who started it all. The one who created the first-ever global PRIDE+ ERG at Sanofi. The one who set the foundation that allowed you to find your voice, to take action, to step up and make change in Austria. But most of all, Jake was the one who unknowingly reached through time and spoke directly to you.

In 2021, you will read his letter to his younger self. And you will cry. Because for the first time, you will see yourself in someone else's words. His letter will hit you in a way nothing else ever has. It will shake something loose inside you, make you realize that your story, your struggles, your fears – they are not just yours. They belong to so many others who have walked this path before you. And because of that, you will find the courage to stand in for yourself. To take up space. To build something that makes it easier for the next person who comes after you.

So, Jake, if you're reading this – thank you. Thank you for your courage, for your leadership, for your honesty. Thank you for reminding me that I was never alone.

But the most important part? One day, you will wake up and realize that you are no longer afraid. That the weight you've carried for so long has lifted. That you can walk into a room – whether it's

a boardroom, a family gathering, or a new city – and stand fully in who you are. No hesitation. No hiding.

And when it comes to your family? That fear – the one that’s paralyzed you for years, the one that’s convinced you that telling them will change everything? It’s wrong. The moment you finally say the words to them; you will feel an overwhelming sense of relief. It will feel so easy, almost shockingly so. Because they love you. Because they never needed you to be anything other than who you are.

You will realize that all those sleepless nights, all that anxiety, all the ways you twisted yourself into knots trying to predict how they would react – none of it made sense. Because the moment you say it, life will feel lighter. More fun. Just right.

And your parents? Your siblings? Your friends? They will be there. Not just in words, but in actions. Supporting you, standing by you, reminding you that you were never alone. And you will be thankful – truly, deeply thankful – that they never let you doubt their love for you.

You will learn to love yourself, not despite the fact that you are different, but because of it. You will stop measuring your worth by how much you blend in and start valuing yourself for everything that makes you unique. And the best part? You will still push yourself, still strive for more – but not because you’re trying to prove anything to anyone. You will do it because you know you deserve it.

So here’s what I want you to know: You will be okay. No, more than okay. You will be proud. You will build a life that isn’t about fitting in but about belonging – exactly as you are.

And trust me, one day, when someone asks about your weekend, you won’t even flinch before saying, *"I had an amazing time with my boyfriend."*

With love,
Your Future Self