

Transcendence: Passing through Fire to Fly High'

- Geri Q

A twenty-five to life sentence -my fate at age twenty-six, appeals fruitless, I finally dug in and chipped away at that stark monolith of time.

My chosen name is Geri -as a Queer and gender non-conforming (GNC) persyn*, coming of age in the 70's, I'd become politically radicalized in my early teens. Becoming a captive in the Prison Industrial Complex forced me to face a fresh set of challenges and issues to overcome and advocate on. The usual administrative battles for my peers and myself, and low level publishing -work dashed off for newsletters and zines of antiauthoritarian spirit. But I was largely idling, sleepwalking in the big picture.

Hard, sharp shocks awaken us, opening our eyes -wide and clear. Seventeen years into this bid, I was jumped by three gang members, incapacitated, and ultimately, raped by the leader. An instant and intense education in the realities of sexual assault. Docs subsequent neglect and maltreatment of me realligned my worldview.

Prison authorities inexplicably and unconscionably 'ticketed' me with misbehavior reports stemming from this incident -'failure to report an injury', 'Drug use -marijuana' (post rape self-medicating), etc., and sentenced to SHU¹ time -an insult atop injury.

Enroute to SHU facility, a transport staff officer (C.O.) exposed his penis to me, and attempted to coerce oral sex from me. My raised voice, and treat of a tussle, ended that incident. But I was left horrified, I hadn't even begun to process the first sexual assault, let alone recovery -and I had been targeted again.

A critical issue at hand, was that I had been hiding my Queer (bisexual) and gender non-conforming (mostly womyn*) nature and identity, ever since entering the prison system. Queer, and especially transgender persyns* are at high risk for abuse, rape -and sometimes murder. Knowing these risks, I had chosen to compromise, slamming the closet door, and smashing down who and what I was -in effect, disconnecting myself from my feminine core -the essence of my soul. I slapped a self-imagined 'software patch' of masculinity onto myself as a public persona and endeavored to dovetail into the heteropatriarchal social model of prison life.

It hurts me to conceal my nature. It hurt me then, but I suppressed and denied that pain, more 'baggage' stored, stacked and compacted -smothering my spirit.

SHU was both a curse and a blessing. Tomb-like isolation and acute deprivation, with 'deliberate indifference' virtually inscribed on a plaque -serving as the staff motto. Yet, they couldn't effectively interfere with my access to the law library and the mail. With time, and zero daily responsibilities, I was able to research and learn about Prison Sexual Violence (PSV), PREA², and make contact with outside organizations, which were dedicated to advocacy for PSV survivors, and PSV reform efforts. Inspired by my PSV experience, I committed myself to this cause.

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Upon exit from SHU I returned to general population, where I then launched a non-profit project; 'PREA-SURE' -the stated mission, to: support, educate and advocate for PSV survivors. At the time I hadn't yet realized how sensitive this issue was for Docs, but I quickly learned. Prison authorities issued a series of retaliatory 'tickets', these administrative charges netting a total of 18 months of continuous SHU lockdown.

A virtual war ensued, waged in paper battles. Essays and articles published, submitted in my scratchy handprinting, my typewriter had been an early casualty in this fight. These initially appeared under pen name(s) -then my Docs recognized birth name. I had come to own this, and exposed myself fully as a rape survivor -complete with all the explicit details. Prison sexual assault atrocities thrive in shadows and silence. I bucked this entrenched trend by illuminating these inequities and shouting out about these chronic injustices.

Exiting SHU confinement a second time, I also re-emerged as Queer and gender non-conforming (GNC) to general population. My days, which had turned two decades, of hiding -of existential compromise, were over. Never again would I sacrifice personal liberty for security - or the dangerous delusion of safety. This abrupt re-connection, to once again live 'out'-as my true self, was fraught with emotional extremes. The legacy of that long stowed baggage, toxic sludge to be remediated. From excruciating depths of despair to exhilarating elevations of elation, I had pinballed between poles.

I then formulated and embodied a three point life program: 'WWW'-writing, working out, and working on being 'out', the last demanding time and care in managing, in claiming my lane amid the prison highways. Furthering the incidental weight loss of long term SHU confinement, I went hardcore on my diet and fitness regimen, burning off an astonishing 92 pounds -near a third of my previous bloated and sedentary body. A physical metamorphosis manifested. I was transformed and restored -once again slim, sleek and soaring.

Recalling heretofore events sparks realizations, and rather than ruing the pains and suffering weathered - I've been compelled to see an objective accounting. I have transcended from a dark period of adversity and overt punishment realizing net gains in personal growth, development, and independence. A delicious irony, that attempts and actions intended to harm and oppress me, have instead facilitated restoration -a virtual rebirth.

Still, I know the lessons of forgetting the past. While my memories of the fear, shock, pain and abject humiliation may fade, my scars lighten -their source, the gang assault and rape, and the collected maltreatment and retaliation by prison authorities, will evermore remain etched upon my mind and soul. This is a fact, regrettable, yet serving as a supporting pillar in my continuing advocacy for prison sexual violence reform (PREA), and other issues which affect, or disproportionately affect LGBTQI prisoners.

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Prison is, unfortunately, a fact of life, like death and taxes, but the systemic deliberate indifference which promotes, facilitates and allows PSV, and other chronic abuses to flourish, doesn't have to be. With PREA², and its codified companion: National standards for prisons and jails⁴, we now have an effective tool to: prevent, detect and respond to PSV.

We must exercise the will to apply these standards, and enact these long overdue reforms. The law is clear, and the words which empower my peer activists are simple: "No, no more, and never again!"

We are fighting for a system free of PSV, and we are fighting to win

- Join us.

Geri Q

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End notes:

*Gender neutral spelling, used throughout.

1) SHU - Special housing unit.

2) PREA -Prison rape elimination act (2003), P.L. 108-79,42U.S.C. 15601

3)Just Detention International -3325 Wilshire BLvd. suite 340
Los Angeles, C.A. 90010

4) National standards for prisons and jails -28 C.F.R. part 115
(May 17, 2012).