

Jerel Matthews
2/6/24

What is a position I've taken that I've changed my mind about? What am I proud of?

As I stood in the small hallway of my Grandmother's home, I heard two people inside one of the bedroom shouting at each other, exchanging obscenities. I recognized the voices as my mother and my aunt, so I continued to eavesdrop and suddenly I heard my mom call my aunt a "dyke bitch." I couldn't believe what I had just heard, why would my mom call her that? Was this true? I spent the rest of the night trying to process what my 16 year old ears had just heard my mom say.

While I pondered my thoughts, it dawned on me that my aunt lived with her female friend ever since I could remember, they slept in the same bedroom but so did a lot of my family, at this time funds were low and space was limited. Her friend was like my aunt too and my family seemed to treat her and her daughter like part of our family. That was another thing, they both had a kid of their own plus I never saw them show any PDA or any form of sexual intimacy toward each other. So they couldn't be "dykes." I was confused! This required further investigation so I went to the one person besides Allah (God) I felt knew everything and saw everything. My Grandmother. She held everyone's secrets but often shared parts of them with me in stories when she was trying to deter me from doing something, teach me a lesson, or comfort me. I confronted her with what I heard and simply asked her was it true. Her first response was, "what." Then she responded in her West Indian accent, "Boy stay out of grown folks business." That response confirmed my fear that my aunt who showered me with love and helped everybody in our family was indeed a lesbian. I did not know how to feel, my body became overwhelmed with many different emotions. I still loved my aunt but this was considered Haram (unlawful/forbidden) in every aspect of my life.

Within the intersectionalities of growing up in a West Indian household, being Muslim and part of a powerful street organization, heteropatriarchy was the norm. I was deaf, dumb, and blind to any issues of gender equality because of the representations of Islam I was exposed to, and the laws and policies of the organization I was dedicated to. The way things operated within these spaces, it was standard for men to dictate the pace and any type of associations with LGBTQI+ community was forbidden.

My Aunt and those who knew in my family kept her sexuality a secret. No one ever talked about it, so from the day I found out the truth I acted as if I knew nothing, just as everyone else did. Socially, I was always on alert. I thought if other Muslims or those I called my brothers who were active members in our street organization found out I would become the object of ridicule and our family which was respected in our community would become outcasts. So I found comfort in the fact my aunt lived outside our Auburn Gresham neighborhood.

By the time I reached my early twenties, I had already become a ranking member of the street organization I was part of, which landed me in Menard state penitentiary with a fifty year

sentence. In prison organization/tribe/gang culture intersect with the culture of toxic masculinity that permeates the environment, meaning different gangs center their identities, beliefs, and codes of conduct around certain religions. This in turn makes the environment extremely divisive and territorial. This also heightens the enforcement of laws, policies and codes of conduct some which are misinterpreted out of religious text. I am Muslim, the organization I was a member of, was based more on education, economics, and political development but there were laws and policies that required us to govern ourselves in a particular way. If those laws and policies were violated, discipline would be administered with overwhelming brute force. Inside the penal system some men participate in homosexual relationships and activities. I was part of a group that if it was proven our law of not engaging in homosexual activity was violated by any member we immediately sought the aforementioned discipline of the violator, he was ex-communicated from our organization forever and forced to leave general population by checking into protective custody.

I recall in Cook County Jail when I caught one of our members whom we were already investigating for homosexual activity and drug use allowing a male corrections officer to perform oral sex on him through the bars of his cell in exchange for drugs. Because I personally beared witness to this there was hearing, he was guilty as charged. The next morning, four people entered the cell he occupied. One secured the door and the other three carried out the violation that would eradicate him from the organization. He was put in what is called a full nelson by a large human being, another held his legs, with his arms and legs restrained he was held up with his face exposed and no ability to cover it. He received blow after blow to his face until both his eyes were swollen shut and his entire face and head was distended causing him to be the recipient of what we coined a "Pumpkin head." Before the four members exited the cell, the drugs he received as well as anything else deemed to hold value were confiscated, the violators mattress was set ablaze and he was left clinging to consciousness in the corridor of the housing unit for everyone to see.

Menard prison had no educational opportunities and to the racial, religious, and organizational/tribal/gang segregations that existed, I only surrounded myself with a certain group of people who I trusted and bonded with. We organically formed community and created spaces in which we educated ourselves and one another by reading and discussing different publications we were able to get our hands on. I remember being introduced to Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow" by Antwon Tyler who until this day is like an older brother to me, who always tried to teach me balance through his words as well as his deeds. At the time I couldn't quite grasp the concept, it seemed at every turn my foundation was crumbling. I lost my grandmother, father, and then mother in a five year period. These losses caused familial bonds that were already loose due to me being incarcerated 5 hours from Chicago to sever. Besides Antwon a lot of the other individuals I associated with only exchanged information with me concerning ways to continue to perpetuate male domination, such as how to manipulate, control, obtain funds in prison and inflict pain on others for the advancement of our collective and individual endeavors, which is a way of thinking and living that landed me in prison in the first place. My knowledge on gender equality and the LGBTQI+ community remained dormant.

The ten years I spent in Menard prison caused my growth as a human being to become stagnant. This was a very dark time for me, filled with violent incidents that I was either part of or witnessed that I still have physical and mental scars from. The threat of violence always existed and you never knew who posed that threat. On any given day, it could've been the state (Menard is notorious for racism and abusive corrections officers, it seemed as if every year a black man was severely beaten or killed by CO's) that threat could've also been your own brothers from your particular organization planning your demise or your rivals. It was truly a mental battle that one had to condition himself to engage in on a daily basis whether you wanted to or not.

I relied heavily on my Islamic faith for protection, escape, and peace, mentally as well as spiritually from the sub-human conditions that were my reality. I was a man in what Muslims call jihad, I was divided against myself. I had endured and performed so many acts of injustice for so long, I had no idea how to have justice more than the biological ascribed trait of manhood patriarchy nurtured and socialized me to understand as righteous.

I received a blessing from the most high in 2017 to be shipped from one deplorable prison to another which was Stateville. The blessing that existed behind the new set of walls was the education opportunities and the people who provided them, PNAP. When I took advantage of certain courses that were being offered the first thing I noticed was that the people who were teaching and facilitating actually cared and treated us on the inside as humans regardless of our circumstances and how we showed up. Johari Jabir, Dave Stovall, Timmy Chau and Indigo Wright taught the first three classes I took. They opened my eyes to things like Afrofuturism, Afro Pessimism, and alternative justice systems, these were all subjects that in some way were interconnected to me, my life, and those I cared about. These learning experiences forced me to think critically about the position I'm in, the way I lived, my behavior, the activities I normalized and the effect that I had on others in my community.

After a couple of semesters of taking different PNAP classes, I was accepted into the university without walls bachelors degree program. This was shocking to me and some of the students who were already enrolled also. A majority of them were balkanized due to years of being involved with academic programs inside prison. My demeanor, the crowd I surrounded myself with, things I indulged in and inmate gossip they listened to may have only allowed them to view me in a certain light. I must admit I was initially uncomfortable in some settings and unsure of myself but there were a few older guys I was familiar with and respected like Reginald BoClair and Darnell Lane who were in the previous cohort that were about to graduate that inspired me and put me at ease as time went by in those spaces.

Once I started my journey with UWW and the rest of the PNAP community, I organically received an education on gender equality and LGBTQI+ community. People such as my mentor Dr. Erica Meiners, Meredith Nnaka, Eliza Gonring, and my beautiful Muslim sister Shireen Hamzah are those who educated me and introduced me to a different lens through which I view the world and Islam through.

My introduction to Islamic feminist Eman Abdelhadi whom I had the chance to interview during a PNAP lecture series was pivotal. Between her and Shireen, two highly intelligent independent Muslim women, I was able to obtain from a woman's perspective a better understanding of self, identity, inequality and gender in Islam. This was a point of view I never had the opportunity to receive in my life.

Being more mature, having a broader political and social education made it easier for me to step outside myself and view from a woman's vantage point not only issues that pervade Islam but society as a whole. These conversations also enabled me to recognize and dissect how people take aspects of Qur'anic statements and disregard Qur'anic intent with regard to justice and equality. Both Muslim sisters correctly pointed out to me in a way I could clearly interpret, that men and women are equal in the Qur'an, there is no spiritual difference. I've also been awakened through publications and interactions with people from broader Muslim communities that Muslim sexuality is diverse and gender variant. In a reading group led by Eliza and Shireen I discovered there are individuals in Islam whose selfhoods transgress the heteronormative codes of human subjectivity. I learned of a young Muslimah in Pakistan who leads an underground collective of queer people.

I also became informed on the the Khwajasara many of whom are Muslim. In the US they would be considered hermaphrodites, in Pakistan they've been given third sex gender status and are considered as having a gender disorder in their bodies. In the distant past before the partition of India and Pakistan, the Khwajasara were highly respected and valued in their community, they held high positions in the court and lived in palaces. They were considered to be closer to God because they were a mixture of both genders. Once India was colonized by the British, the population was forced to take the customs of the white man and receive orders from them. With these social changes, the Khwajasara became less valued and respected. Today they face societal oppression and are compelled to live immoral lives due to lack of jobs for those with their gender status which forces a majority of them into sex work to survive.

Human well being and human dignity are two issues that Muslims and society as a whole grapple with. I know now that these societal barriers can and should be fought in the company of community; who may or may not share ones gender or sexual diversity. Sexuality and gender are neither irrelevant nor exclusively relevant for communal alliance inside or outside Islam.

At this point in my life, the times when I'm divided against myself are rare because positive human interaction, literacy, and literature have worked in conjunction to unlock my mind. This has started a healing process within me that enables me to obtain a form of balance within my thoughts which in turn has a positive effect on my actions. Emotions have been provoked inside me that move me to self reflect on my role in the aforementioned issues of gender equality and the LGBTQI+ community. I've acquired the insight and strength to know exactly what justice is and th ability to stand for justice over any social construct of manhood; Today I choose to stand for all oppressed people.

The process of metamorphosis caused me a great deal of grief when I contemplated my previous actions and ignorance. I thought of my aunt not being able to ever be her authentic self in the presence of her own family, suppressing her sexuality and being called homophobic slurs by her own sister. I can only imagine what she went through in her workplace and the world she navigated in the 80's and 90's as a queer Black woman. I envisaged how alienated she must have felt and saw myself as complicit in everything because I did nothing except worry about being embarrassed and severed from people who were not family. I remained silent when I should've been standing up for her. These feelings moved me to write a very personal apology letter to my aunt, who is now in her seventies. I poured my heart out to her, asked for forgiveness and I let her know I understood those were different times in which she sacrificed herself, her feelings and comfort for the sake of salvaging family unity amongst a family that had plenty of problems, fought many battles, and inherited trauma from past generations. I told her how strong and courageous she had been throughout her life, thanked her and let her know how much I love her.

My thoughts also took me to the young Muslimahs whom I saw at the mosque when I was younger who came there to worship and be in community with other black muslim youth, but eventually saw the mosque as a place of anxiety and intensity because of the gender segregating, policing of their dress and the behavior of men who used gender and sexuality as tools of dominance. I wondered, is this what made my older sister Aisha move to Atlanta and stop practicing Islam? Is this why today we have a form of disconnection? I still think of those I caused harm and exiled inside the prison industrial complex because of their sexuality and I feel terrible. These were people being subjected to the same daily rituals of institutionalized dehumanization as I was, oppressed just the same or maybe worse and there I was adopting the ways of the oppressor and their agents (those in this place who promote violence). I was assisting them in creating broken people by taking away dignity and sociality when I had not right to.

Those on top of societies' pyramid depend on deception, ignorance, and our exhaustion which is created through social constructs to keep us trapped in a perpetual state of subordination. All people should be allowed to live with dignity. I'm gratified for my willingness to be open to different forms of education that have allowed me to grow socially and theo-politically. This has enabled me to shed many negative ideologies I was nurtured from birth to accept as normative. The ability to remain open has empowered me to begin the process and practice of healing, unlearning, learning and relearning that has led me to understand a person is a person through other people. All humanity is interconnected and interdependent, the only way we can all be free is together.