

A TRANSFORMATIVE ROAD TO PERSONAL HEALING AND HEALING OTHERS

by
Dortell Williams

Despondent.

With this one word, I could easily describe my mental state on the weary, anxiety-ridden bus ride to prison. The warped, violent and selfish thinking, that was the result of my initial arrest, raged on within like a foreign invader that had consumed my childhood innocence.

The horror stories of prison mentally prepared me for gladiator school. I was more than ready to kill or be killed. Twenty-seven long years ago, I was sent to the notorious Pelican Bay State Prison, just shy of the Oregon border. I was met on the yard by a threatening series of mean-mugs and hardened faces. Threatening voices behind the gangster and Nazi masks barked a steady flow of ominous admonitions: “Don’t cross this line or you’ll get wacked”; or “don’t cross that line or you’ll get stabbed.” This was the tone of the recreation yard. There was also life guidance and academic advice. It was these latter two that I clung to, and with the choice, the beginning of my turning point.

Thanks to volunteers from Arts & Corrections, a writing class revealed to me, and the world beyond, the latent potential that was within me all along. The manifestations of my writing offered the effect of looking in the mirror for the first time, and being delightfully surprised.

Not every step toward transformation is made in a continuous, unbroken stride. One cold, mildly rainy day, all hell broke loose on the yard. With a shout in Spanish, “Ya va!”

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the calm activity of weight lifting, running revolutions around the track, and playing handball turned into flying fists, and kicking and stabbing gestures. Subsequent shouts were from the guards: “Get down ... geeet doooown!”

Boom! One warning shot. Boom! A direct shot. One live round into the jaw of a young man twenty feet away. He didn’t even look old enough to be sentenced as an adult. Everyone scattered as the young man lay there bleeding profusely. He didn’t move; he didn’t writhe or turn. He never, ever moved again. The yard went deafly quiet, except for the echo of chatter on the guards’ radios and an occasional squelch.

For the next three months we sat trapped in our cells, on lockdown. I made it my mission to learn Spanish – for “security reasons.” But over the years learning the language meant becoming acquainted with the dialects, which led to an enriching exposure to the culture. While I initially learned the language for the wrong reasons, the love became pure and Latinos are now my beloved brothers. The lessons were many and deep at Pelican Bay.

The reformation of my thinking and perspective continued at the State prison in Lancaster. Déjà vu: I began with creative writing, improving such that I was eventually encouraged to teach my own class. The Catalyst class, which was instructed by volunteers from Creating a Healing Society, taught me how childhood trauma leads to

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trauma re-enactment. In short, hurt people hurt others. Catalyst aroused my curiosity in victimization, trauma and trauma cycles.

I decided to write the Insight Project at San Quentin for the Victim Offender Education Group curriculum. It was VOEG that had the most profound effect in my transformation. VOEG distinguishes between physical and emotional trauma. It explains victim cycles and defined domestic violence, giving me new insights into expressing empathy and compassion.

My proposal for a classroom was approved. As I began teaching Victim Sensitivity Awareness my peers and I cried openly in class. For the first time a safe space was created for openness and honesty. We studied victim impact, the seven stages of grief and the facets of trauma: fear, hopelessness, depression, anger and dissociation. We learned the value of making amends.

About a year ago, people on the outside began reaching out to me seeking guidance and healing from their trauma. My success in this area has given me a new lease on life. I have found purpose and ability on my road to transformation, on my road to healing, and healing others. Nothing could be more satisfying.

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