

Six months before my release on my last prison term in 2012, my mother died of brain and lung cancer at 59. Her name was Karen and she gave birth to me, her only child, at the age of 16. I found out about the cancer diagnosis about 8 months before her death during one of the bi-monthly calls I made home to her and my son, whom she had custody of due my incarceration and his mother's struggles with addiction. Except the call was answered by my aunt, who had the unenviable job of relating to me that my mother and her little sister was hospitalized with cancer and it didn't look promising. It was, needless to say, difficult to communicate all the heartbreak and devastation losing this person would mean to my aunt & my son & myself & everyone who loved my mom into a 15 minute phone call that had a recording repeat "this is a call from a California state prison pop up every 5 minutes. My aunt and I got through it but when I hung the phone up, I was still in prison. It is not a place where it is acceptable to show anything but strength in the face of adversity. Even among people who become friends

during stretches inside, heartbreak, loss, fear, the prospect of years, decades or even life terms are supposed to be met with the same "I DON'T GIVE A FUCK" attitude that you meet all of prisons little frustrations with. At that point, my 4th multi-year term inside, I had been through so many lost relationships, the birth of my son, the loss of friends, that I thought I could absorb anything while locked up & not communicate to anyone how gut-wrenching all these things (all these important life events) were to me. Well, this time, when I was visibly shaken by some news from home, I was lucky enough to have a friend, Red, pull me aside and ask me what happened. Like a brother, he gave me a hug, walked me to my bunk area and kept everyone away while I cried and went through those rough first moments. This was 9 years ago and is as vivid in my mind as if it happened yesterday. What also remains as vivid is the genuine kindness & empathy conveyed by the rest of my dorm mates & acquaintances when I let them know what my mom was going through & how frustrating it was that I couldn't be there to comfort her or take care of my son. It

is so easy to throw people away once they have done something that society finds unacceptable and dehumanizing them with labels like drug dealer, thief, killer, gang member... Labels that might very well apply but it should not be forgotten that we are also human beings capable of the worst, yes, but also the best human nature is capable of. I witnessed that with statements like "Fuck Brother, I'm sorry. Tell me about your mom" and stories about similar situations.

Because of California's 3 strike law, I received a 4 year sentence, of which I'd had to serve 36 months, for possessing 50 methadone pills without a prescription. I had been validated as a gang member, had done time for robbery and drug sales, and had been inside so many times that I guess California decided I was a career criminal when I called home and heard about my mom. That's the only way I can understand the heartlessness and robotic reaction the Prison administration displayed to both my family and myself when we tried to have

me moved closer to the Los Angeles area so my mother and I could at least see each other a few times in her final months. I was in an institution 5 hours away in Central California and asked to be moved to one 40 minutes by car away from my family in what's called a HARDSHIP TRANSFER. If this did not qualify, with letters from her oncologist and calls from my Aunt & Uncles, cousins, dad & step mom, to my correctional counselor, I don't know what would. My mom did chemo & everyone remained hopeful but reality dictated that we try to make my mom as comfortable and happy as possible and visiting her son is what she wanted the most. I wanted it too; this lady raised me by herself from the time she was a teenager & as I slowly started getting in trouble and getting into hard drugs, had my back but never enabled me or pulled any punches. She could be brutally honest with how disappointing I was but always let me know I was loved unconditionally. She traveled to every prison I ever ended up in to visit me, scold me, laugh with me but most importantly, to let me know I mattered to someone. Now, as I tried,

as my family tried to make the transfers happen, we were stonewalled by the administration. I was treated like I was trying to game the system because of my record (I guess?) to this day, the indifference of the staff is mind boggling. I harbor no ill will toward anyone... people are in prison because of their own actions, sometimes their family members get sick and pass away, its no ones fault. I think its worth mentioning that I experienced more human connectivity & compassion from my fellow gang bangers, killers, robbers and junkies than any of the professionally trained correction and rehabilitative staff, though.

I was eventually transferred. It took 6 months of appeals and pressure from my family but I was moved to a prison closer to L.A. Except my mom was too sick by then to leave her bed much less go through the whole process of a prison visit. I am truly blessed to have a father and step mother who not only took care of my mom during her final months but also rented a van, took time off of work and

traveled the 5 hours to the prison I was trying to get transferred out of so her & I could visit. They are Buddhists as was my mom and as am I and I believe this is what brought us all together in that visiting room, in that moment, for the truly painful but also loving and ultimately cathartic goodbye my mother & I were able to experience. She deserved a better son and I used the memory of that last visit with my mom to try to live a life she could celebrate post prison. The memory of losing her though, proved to be a hard one to shake & I again was drawn to heroin addiction & am in prison again for drugs 7 years after her passing.

But but but... I did get off parole with no violations after 3 years. Stayed clean and sober the whole time, got an entry level job and became assistant manager after 2 years (THANK YOU [REDACTED] [REDACTED])

[REDACTED] PLEASE GOOGLE THEM) and became an important part of my sons life. I relapsed, yes, but I am not a toxic person because the child my mom was when I was born still knew how to pass along the basics of how to be a decent human being to the man I

have become. I practice the Buddhism my mom and step mom and father practice and I know it put me in the right frame of mind to take a trip to OAHU and let Karens ashes wash out to sea 4 years after her passing & 3 1/2 years after my release. Yes, I stumbled, yes, I am reincarcerated, but "hope springs eternal" and its never too late or too difficult to live a life the ones who love and loved you unconditionally will be proud of.

Respect & Solidarity
Shaye

"I always knew the deep lion in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity."
"When you are young and strong, you can stay alive on your hatred and I did for many years... I realized they could take everything away from me but my mind and my heart. They could not take those things... Those things I still had control over and I decided not to give them away."

NELSON MANDELA
"A LONG WALK TO FREEDOM"