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Supporting and Defending the Rights of Others

My Oath of Enlistment

By

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When I was inducted into the U.S. Navy, I raised my right hand and swore to, "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic". As a young 18 year old, the true meaning of that oath did not develop in my moral compass until many years later. A prison sentence, the "thank you" from a beautiful person, and maturity, set me on the path to advocate the "Right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness", for all people.

The social structure of the prison yard is comparable to high school cliques. People will form groups based on race, sexuality, area code, religion, or gang affiliation. After being at this institution for five years, I knew a lot of people but identified mostly with a group of combat veterans. I never initiated conversations with people I did not know and mostly kept to myself. However, an afternoon walk on the track propelled me to take an internal review of exactly what I was defending during my military service.

Fancy identified as a gay male and a professional female impersonator. He was popular in the city he originated from and was a hit at the drag queen shows. Standing at six foot, slender frame, neatly trimmed brown hair, perfect skin, and along with model-like facial features, I could envision Fancy as an attractive female. Since I knew other offenders veterans who identified with the LGBTQ community in the prison, I was called over to a small group of people and there I met Fancy.

While many offenders are more concerned with status, perceptions, or just plain ignorance of other lifestyles, I walked right up to the group when Tony, who was prior military, called out to me. Tony was asking me about some veteran's benefits that he was interested in when Fancy turned towards me, looked me in the eye, and asked if I had served in the military. I replied, "Yes, I served for fourteen years". Fancy stuck out his right hand and said, "I want to thank you for your service". I was caught off guard with this show of appreciation. I mean

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seriously, another inmate had never thanked me for my service. I lost friends in Iraq as we performed our call to duty. I was confused so I asked, "Why are you thanking me?", as I stuck out my hand to accept his gratitude. After the heartwarming handshake, Fancy used both of his hands to outline his face that had hints of make-up, and continued the silhouette down the rest of his body until he ended in a curtsey. During this display, Fancy answered my question with, "Because I can be this". At that very moment in time, everything in my life was on pause. I remembered the oppressive societies that I had witnessed in the other parts of the world. Places where gay, transgender, or even men with long hair, were ridiculed, chastised, or even stoned to death for violating a religious law. I looked deep into my values as a soldier, and a veteran. The first one of my peers to thank me for my service in the seven years of my incarceration was someone different from myself. It dawned on me at that moment that I swore to defend *ALL* people's rights--even those whose lifestyle I knew nothing about. Then, a new door in my life was opened to a new group of people who I had overlooked in the past and now I wanted to embrace them. I wanted to learn how I could better assist in their struggles.

The gift that Fancy gave me that summer afternoon in the prison yard, I will never forget. That gift is respect, understanding, but most important—love. While the germinal seed that Fancy planted in my soul continues to grow, I have made some awesome new friends along the way. The main message for all active duty military, reserves, National Guard, and veterans, is to remember the Oath of Enlistment and what we stand for as a people.