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After-Wards*

by
DAPHNE SCHOLINSKI

My name is Daphne. I am 29 years old and currently live as an artist/writer in San Francisco, California. I am here today to give a living testimonial to the damage that can result from homophobic psychiatric abuse and to give voice to the experience of thousands of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (“LGBT”) youth and young people who do not conform to traditional gender roles. Thousands of us continue to be stripped of dignity and brutalized by psychiatric abuse in institutions or struggle to survive after psychiatric incarceration. I must stress *living*, because many never make it this far due to high suicide rates resulting from this abuse or the internalized fear and shame of their experiences.

Most of my childhood I was mistaken for a boy. Constantly in need of self-expression, I spent a lot of time hiding. I was asked, “Why don’t you try to look more like a girl?” I couldn’t even if I tried. Throughout grammar school and into junior high school, I was continually abused, both verbally and physically, for being too masculine. In order to defend myself, I frequently needed to fight with people and eventually was forced out of social activities or refused to go to events because of the stress it created for me. I became angry and rebellious. Resulting from a background of abusive and not supportive family members, teachers, counselors and peers, I eventually gave in to depression, and at the urging of doctors and teachers, my parents had me institutionalized.

So in 1981, at the age of 14, I was labeled “mentally ill” and confined to the psychiatric ward of Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. I was later transferred to Forest Hospital in Des Plaines, Illinois, and then to the Constance Bultman Wilson Center in Faribault, Minnesota, losing four entire years of my youth. I was admitted for depression, not adjusting well to adolescence, not attending school, suicidal thoughts and gestures, and most specifically, as they put it, for lacking signs of being a “sexual female.” The initial comment made to my parents was, “People in your daughter’s condition usually spend the rest of their lives in mental institutions.”

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My primary diagnosis was "gender identity disorder." Although the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders in 1973, the United State's mental health system remains an extremely hostile environment for LGBT youth, who are routinely viewed by child and adolescent psychiatrists as being "emotionally disturbed" and in need of aggressive psychiatric treatment "to prevent adult homosexuality."

The doctors attempted to "cure" me of "pre-homosexuality" and of any wish they thought I had of being a boy. They based their diagnosis on assumptions due to my "choice of clothing, friendship patterns, and career goals." Much of my so-called "treatment" consisted of pressure to conform to norms of heterosexuality and femininity. I was forced to try to be more feminine. I was supposed to become more concerned with my appearance, and more "obsessive about impressing boys." The goals set for me were: "learn about make-up; dress more like a girl; curl and style hair; spend quality time learning about girl things with male peers; and, learn to like what boys like."

These attempts to force me to be what they thought I should be were unsuccessful. They saw me as a failure because I was never going to be a "normal female." I was on a "point system" and received points for "good behavior" and lost points for "bad behavior." I needed these points to receive "privileges" like being able to walk to meals unescorted, watch a movie, make a phone call, leave my room, or even to shower without someone watching me. Having no privileges was not only embarrassing but it was torturous. I had no escape. I spent months never leaving my unit, never going to the bathroom without someone staring at me (which I must add was not always by female attendants). Stretches of solitary confinement, heavy medication, physical restraint and horror stories from staff were routine. Although I don't remember if I ever received shock treatment, I witnessed it and it was one of the most terrifying things I have ever seen. I lived with people who claimed to be Jesus and who would angrily accuse me of "stealing their bones." The woman who lived next door to me screamed over and over again, "I want to die, let me die!" And I was supposed to be maintaining my sanity? I was growing up in a mental hospital. Beginning at the age of 14 and continuing until I was 18, I lived in three different hospitals. I was subjected to abuse from all around me. I felt that my family had deserted me and left me in a mental hospital with extremely "disturbed" adults who yelled at me, teased me, and abused me. One of the first statements ever made to me by another patient was while I was in seclusion; a woman walked up to the little window in the door, looked in, and said, "I think I'm going to have to kill you." I was sexually molested by a male in his late twenties while I was restrained and helplessly strapped to my bed. There were also many times when patients masturbated around me. I was

physically assaulted countless times by "out of control" patients. Staff were sometimes equally violent. Restraint was often painful. If I got a little angry, maybe just called someone a "name," I would be thrown to the floor with my arm twisted so far behind my back that I feared it would be broken. This was usually followed up by a shot of Thorazine, a powerful tranquilizer that put me to sleep for the rest of the day, and I would awaken in seclusion, often without any memory of how I got there. A staff person once held his foot on top of my head while he said, "Shut up you fucking crazy-ass queer," and then yelled for help to calm me down because he felt I was "out of control." None of this was ever dealt with in my treatment. Instead, I was continually accused of being insane because of my actions while I believed I was responding very sanely to a very insane situation.

Stranded in a place where you cannot win, everything you do becomes a symptom of something. If you stand or pace, you are hyperactive. If you sit you are withdrawn. If you say you need help, you are looking for attention. If you say you do not need help, you are in denial. I was supposed to explore in therapy my "feelings related to the opposite sex." The goals of my treatment at this time were stated as "elimination of depression, and for the patient to come to terms with herself as a sexual female." They described my relationship with my best friend as "an expression of a fixated level of sexuality that was being acted out." Nothing about our friendship was out of the "ordinary." But because of my "masculine manner," we were suspected of "acting gay" and our relationship was presumed to be sexual, which it never was. They never believed us. We were restricted from each other. We were not allowed to speak to each other or about each other; we could not even make eye contact without being punished.

I spent my entire "treatment" never really dealing with my depression or the symptoms that resulted from the abuse of my parents, teachers, peers, and previous psychiatric interactions. Instead, my "sexual identity" was immediately targeted as the problem and the only "thing" that needed resolution. Each and every day was a reinforcement that *I was the problem*. The silence around the issues of abuse forced me to believe that I deserved the abuse. The idea was that only if I changed, became more feminine, more "beautiful," more "acceptably heterosexual" would there no longer be any reason for anyone to treat me poorly. Then I would no longer need to be depressed and I could go on to lead a "happy normal life." I was defeated from the beginning.

I had been sentenced to an adolescence spent surrounded by white walls and lab coats—quite a punishment for a 14-year-old who was showing the typical signs of growing up gay in a heterosexist society.

It was not until two and a half years into my treatment that my parents (specifically my mother) became aware of the intent of the institution

and my doctors. When my mother said she thought I might be gay, the doctor responded, "Oh no, don't worry about that. We'll take care of that." She specifically told them not to treat me for being gay. She believed that her wishes were respected and followed. I was not aware that this conversation took place. Once you are behind those closed doors, nobody knows what is really going on. You become a prisoner of the system. I can tell you my treatment never did change.

Every hospital came with the highest of recommendations, but conditions were grossly inadequate for an adolescent. In the first institution, I was in a unit of approximately thirty people and only four other patients were under eighteen. The rest of the patients were much older, ranging from the age of my parents to older than my grandparents. Some patients had already been there for years. There is no hierarchy of sanity, everyone is treated the same, no matter how sane or insane they are or people think they are. I believed that this was not only my future, but my only future.

In the end, my parents were convinced that the hospital saved my life; after all I am alive, aren't I? While I believe it was necessary to remove me from my home, taking away my freedom, my dignity, and any ounce of self-respect I had was not the answer. I was dying in the hospitals; they killed my spirit, and no progress was made. I was ready to live and die there when, three years into my treatment, an intern looked me in the eyes and said, "What are you doing here? You are so sane—normal." Up to that point the thought that I could be sane, that they could be wrong, and that I could be free had never crossed my mind. I will never forget that moment, the spark that this woman alone created in me so that I could finally believe in myself.

I was finally released five days after my eighteenth birthday when they were unable to legally keep me, and conveniently, when my insurance ran out and would no longer cover my "treatment." In total, my treatment cost over one million dollars. One month after my million dollar insurance ran out, my father received a bill for fifty thousand dollars.

Is it not totally absurd to force someone to prove that which is not provable: the charge of insanity? No matter how hard you try, you cannot convince them that you are sane. I am afraid I will have to wear this mark on my forehead for the rest of my life. This scar follows me like a shadow, watching my every move, my every thought. Is it possible for anyone to understand what it is like to be at the mercy of people who at any moment can exercise their authority, their "expert" opinions, their "God complex" over you? To know what it is like to be controlled by people who with one swift mark of a pen can write the orders that will change your life forever?

We need to create a safe space for LGBT youth to continue breaking the silence that has allowed the issue of homophobic psychiatric abuse to be ignored for far too long and has prevented this issue from receiving the attention it urgently requires. We must clearly identify this abuse as a violation of the most basic human rights including personal dignity, bodily integrity, and individual autonomy.

I was left traumatized, damaged, silenced, and discarded by homophobic counseling and “treatments” and have emotional scars that will take a lifetime to dissolve. Being labeled and treated as mentally ill simply because of who I was has had long-term disabling effects that have prevented me from speaking out about my experiences. While some LGBT youth have remained incarcerated in the mental health system into adulthood and others have been lost to suicide or other forms of self-directed violence, there are the ones who, like me, have been silenced by shame and the overwhelming fear of being further stigmatized or discriminated against because they are former mental health patients. When you have had your sanity challenged, you always have something to prove. I have often felt overwhelmed by the tremendous difficulty of surviving and attempting to build a life in the aftermath of extreme trauma.

It is now eleven years later. I realize that I was not supposed to survive. I realize that my “treatment” was designed to leave me with only two options: either change or do not exist. Some might say change would have been easy: “act straight,” get discharged, and then go on with my life. But it would have been at the moment of “acting” that I would have surely lost my self. My identity would have disappeared and then they really would have had someone to “treat.” At the time I chose neither, and today, as an artist who has created almost 3,500 paintings, I have chosen to exist.

Ambition is the last refuge of the failure — Oscar Wilde

