Getting Naked

As I prepared for my one-man show, it led me to unveil who I was as a gay black man.

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Getting “naked.”

In 2001, I was able to get naked, literally and figuratively, as it was the premiere of my one-man show called naked. It opened for two weekends that summer, and I was fortunate to have several sold-out shows. naked was about my life, looking at the trilogy of what it meant to be black, what it meant to be gay and what it meant to be a man. Writing this was a journey during which I discovered that in order for me to shift to a positive space in my life, I had to get naked.

When I began the play I was angry. At a young age, I was homeless and soon after that I was living on my own in a studio I couldn’t afford. Because of my sexuality, my family had disowned me as they couldn’t understand having a gay son. Also, I was struggling with various issues such as my HIV status and my addiction to sex. I was trying to determine what my purpose in life was. It seemed I was going through the motions while others my age were moving ahead.

I was also coming to grips with the sexual abuse I endured when I was kid. When I was around the age of 10, two different men abused me; one over a years’ time and the other during the summer. It was something I had blocked out of my memory and hid behind a wall never to mentioned again. Yet, the memory of what happened started to re-appear. First as stills and soon details I had thought I’d buried. The rush of these new/old memories only made everything worse, and the world around me seemed crazier. It felt like my only remedy from being abused was to take part in more sex with random guys. I was using sex to heal myself from the sex that stole my childhood. Crazy right? Many men, but I blanked out their names. I knew I had a problem when even during work, I would skip out to jump online to get laid. And after my sexual release, I would fall into a guilt trip and tell myself I would never again do such behavior. Yet later that day I would be back looking for sex.

I was a mess.

As a young man, I used to write all the time. It was usually poetry and short stories. I dabbled with plays but never to the point of being serious. People always said I wrote like an old man. How did I know about older experiences? I could never tell them I was forced to grow up fast.

When I started to jot my life in the form of a play, something funny happened. The more I regurgitated my life, the more I started to see the connections. I was hiding my true self. I was

living someone else's life and not my own. I never stopped to see what my own worth and value were.

My words exposed the truth. I didn't realize I was dealing with the three main points of my life, one of which included being black in a racist society. It was a realization that my race caused fear in others. That I suppressed my connection to race to make others comfortable. Safe. Meanwhile, it was me who was not feeling safe.

And my struggle with race included my struggle with being gay. A word I didn't attach to myself as I knew what history it evoked. It was yet another part of myself I hid to make others happy. And I knew I could never attend a formal class on what it meant to be gay. Like other young gay men and women, my knowledge came from non-traditional places. For some that meant the streets. Or pages of an adult magazine or video. Or predators who saw young boys as fresh meat. As I soon discovered. Yet I embraced it as it was the only teaching I had about what being gay meant.

Having HIV added to my confusion. This disease, floating inside my body as a deadly weapon, made me feel like the "other." I felt I was denied touch or knowing what true love was. To know that, I'd have to share my secret. A secret that when I did share, caused people to no longer see me as worthy. Rejection in my life was normal.

And as a man, what did it mean to be the Y chromosome? I knew it meant more than the penis between my legs. As I struggled with my identity of being a gay man, was my gender the tool I needed to hide my sexuality. A door to hide behind in which I could deepen my voice, walk with a broad shoulder and erase any doubt that I was ever into guys. As I never knew my father, my understanding of my manhood came from the inundation of mass media and the proven lie that I was king of the jungle.

So I started to write.

My life was now on full display as I typed my story out on the blank paper. Sometimes it seemed like a rushing train with no brakes as my fingers couldn't catch up to my memories that were spilling out.

Soon scene one turned into scene two and soon scene ten until I finally came to the closing sentence of "Lights fade." And as I stepped back I looked down to see my play. My new birth that took 24 years to conceive. It screamed at me asking, What was I doing? Did I know I was exposing myself? Baring naked my truths?

And that's exactly what I was doing. I was getting naked with my truth. As I understood the only way for me to grow as a person was to strip away from myself all the bullshit that society placed on me. And in my nakedness, redefine who I wanted to be.

Lights up.

As I rehearsed my show for public viewing, I had many doubts. I knew that not only was I exposing

my vulnerabilities to strangers but that those who knew me would be learning for the first time what pain I was experiencing. Yet I pushed on, no longer letting the fear dictate my life. I had a great director who encouraged me and held my hand through the process.

During the first show as the curtain rose, I knew there was no turning back. Had I finally conquered my demons? Was I ready to strip myself bare? Those thoughts were erased when my final words were made on the stage and people stood up to applause.

It was a moment when I couldn't hold back my tears. It was a long time, and I felt so much love, especially from those who didn't know me. Although my family never saw the show, I was content as the show was not for them. It was for me. A showcase to let me know that I can do it. That it was okay to release myself from the bondage that others, unknowingly, held me down with.

And by getting naked, I encouraged others to do so as well. I learned that sharing your pain is not only a sign of healing but also a motivation for others to heal as well.

My truth provided the answers I was seeking. It was there all the time, but the distraction of life and expectations hid it away. So by stripping away all semblances of external pressures, I discovered myself.

That self was gay and black and a man but also had other layers besides the categories I was being boxed in. My play helped me see that there was no easy answer and my struggles were not that I was inadequate, but that I was ordinary. Or that I was trying to be ordinary. A realization I was trying to blend in when all this time I should have been working to stand out.

I had to find the beauty in being black. Find the beauty in being a man, and as hard as it may seem, even find the beauty of being HIV positive.

When I started to place those labels on myself, I became empowered because now it was me defining my identity and not the emptiness of society.

And my play helped me not to place more coverings on my body but from this day forth, to always stand naked. And not only to dare myself to be different but most important to celebrate my differences.

And that is my naked truth.

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