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Subject: Response to 2015.10.13 Letter

Kevin,

You are absolutely welcome to write to me! It is always a pleasure to hear from you.

I'm glad you asked about my recreation restriction last month and earlier this month. The timing was awful emotionally. The day that I started the restrictions lined up in such a way that the awful news about the fact that I'm going to have to go through another long, drawn out legal battle over something very simple and personal happened about the same time.

I felt very hurt—a lot more than I expected. To make matters much worse, my main outlet for emotional support and comfort when I'm feeling depressed, anxious, lonely, or hurt is music. I don't have access to anything that stores music whatsoever, but I do have a radio—and that was taken away on the same day. It compounded everything by making me sit alone in a quiet, empty cell. I felt really, really small and insignificant. I haven't felt that bad in years.

I was denied a formal trial regarding the charges this summer because the prison claims that the charges are "administrative" and not criminal. They argued that because they are created by a regulation and not by law, they are purely administrative. Yet, an administrative board in lieu of a court-martial outside of prison affords far more protection for personnel in the military than these boards for inmates. This is troubling because these boards for prison discipline yield far, far more power than most other administrative boards in the military, such as the "non-judicial punishment" boards under Article 15, Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

The problem with these boards, as we saw in August, is that they are basically rigged by the senior staff. You cannot win once your charges go to a more serious "three member" board, because the board must be approved by the senior staff to go ahead. So, unless you provide the senior staff of the facility with information, typically by informing on other inmates, then you are going to serve "SHU time" (pronounced "shoe")—time in the "Special Housing Unit" where inmates are normally held for months and years in conditions of solitary confinement. The way that board members see people at a "three member" board is that you must have done something to make it to such a board, so they will always dole out some kind of punishment.

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I believe that there are two reasons that I didn't receive anything beyond recreation restriction—(1) the public scrutiny and fear of pressure from the military leadership; and (2) to prevent me from being able to appeal to a higher authority within the regulation.

As to how to answer your question regarding being a "model" for other trans people in adverse situations—I have absolutely no idea. I am really only fighting a very personal battle that quickly gets dragged into the public no matter what I do. For example, when I tried to petition for a change of name in Kansas in early 2014, I tried to do it quietly—and succeeded for awhile. Then, with only a few weeks until the actual hearing, it spilled over into the news. I wanted my name change to be nothing more than a formality, but it turned into a little bit of a circus. Even the spokesperson for the Army at the time had to comment. I have since stopped trying to do things quietly anymore. I am a little more forthcoming regarding my battles now.

I wrote the statement saying that "I can't be myself" while I was still on recreation restriction so it's really raw and emotional—actually the whole letter is probably more raw. This is a reflection of just how personal these battles really are. I spend nearly an hour to an hour and a half every week in psychotherapy talking about even more than this.

Reading letters from supporters has become a personal pastime in the last few years. At first, when I was at the Marine Corps Brig in Quantico, I was not allowed to read them because I had to add people to a list of names and addresses to send and receive mail, and they were from complete strangers. I was a little perplexed and curious. Who were these people? Why are they writing to me? Why are there so many letters?

Since then, I am allowed to go through every single piece of mail—and I have made it a (sometimes challenging) policy to read through every single one. I don't have the resources to respond to everyone, and the majority of letters and cards don't have return addresses anyway—but I read every single one.

The really personal and emotionally tough letters to read are the ones from other trans people. I really relate with all of them. I try my best to reach out to them because I want them to know that I appreciate their support. I especially tear up when I get letters from queer and trans kids and teenagers. I was one of them once, and I remember those years intimately. I'm glad the world has changed a little bit—but it still worries me that these young kids are growing up with such a disadvantage. Ugh, I'm getting emotional just thinking about it.

Right now, it does not appear that there is any kind of "ban" on political books. However, I believe that the investigators and senior intended to send a message and prove a point by confiscating them. I still haven't received the books and magazines back. I have read many controversial books over the years, as well as books that are basically the backbone to any formal philosophy and political science education. It wasn't until around the last week of May of this year that friction over such books started, but I haven't seen any formal "bans."

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Yes, they did play *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* here at the prison. It's typically the movies with a lot of strong or violent sexual content that don't get played here—movies like David Fincher's version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. I was only able to watch that movie during a break in the trial. At trial guards brought portable DVD players for the long breaks and we would eat food—and popcorn—while watching movies. The scary looking guards taking me into and out of the courthouse in 2013 were great guys. I liked them a lot!

I just watched *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* this weekend! Another fun treat of a movie to just sit, watch, and enjoy—preferably with snacks (I saved a bag of Doritos from the rations order just for the occasion).

I think it's very interesting that all of the comedians and actresses that the late Christopher Hitchens cited as being "unfunny" once—like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler—are some of the ones that I find the funniest. I wonder what he would have thought about Amy Schumer!

With Warm Regards,


CHELSEA E. MANNING