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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | October 1, 2011

Written in the weeks leading up to the current California prison hunger strike, the following essay by San Quentin death row inmate George Hernandez describes his experiences in isolation. Having been in and out of prison since 1995, including various experiences in Administrative Segregation and Security Housing Units, Hernandez wrote this essay as a way of bringing attention to the practice of long-term solitary confinement.

My first experience with isolation was when I was in juvenile hall. I always had a problem with authority figures, and I'd fight with rival gang members as well, so this combination would always result in me being dragged into an isolation cell in a hallway. These cells were small and did not have sinks or toilets. I had to bang on the door to get water or use the restroom, sometimes these bangs went ignored for hours by guards. While in this isolated cell, it was the first time I was really alone with my thoughts. I used to daydream a lot, usually thinking back about life. I'd pick everything apart and how I could have done things better or differently. When I wasn't daydreaming I was reading. Luckily, the one thing I could have there was books. I'd get lost in the stories and they became my escape from loneliness. These stints in isolation in juvenile hall were short-lived though, not enough to get the full experience, only a small taste of what was to come in the future.

From 1995 to 2003 I went in and out of the prison (mostly in) and I always ended up in ad-seg or the SHU. These forms of isolation were not as severe, as I always had a cellmate to converse with and other inmates in adjacent cells. It wasn't until March of 2005 that I was placed in a true isolation cell again. I was in the Riverside County jail facing capital murder and I had picked up several more serious cases including a grand jury indictment involving a female sheriff's deputy who was accused of assisting me in ordering hits of alleged potential witnesses to the capital murder amongst other crimes.

This new isolation cell was literally isolated from other inmates. I was alone with no cell mate and even had my own shower in my cell so they would never have to let me out. I was denied recreation for 3 out of 5 years I spent in this cell. This isolation was the most difficult period of my life, I had several very serious ongoing issues and I was unable to communicate with most people or even use the phone. I had to resist the temptation to slip into depression. I forced myself to wake up early every single day and roll up my mattress so that I would not be tempted to stay in bed. I felt it was crucial for my mental state to continue life as I normally would have. It would have been easy to just sleep the time away, but I had never taken the easy road. I chose to fight!

Every morning as soon as my eyes first opened, I immediately jumped out of bed without allowing myself the time to think about it. Eventually it became a habit. As soon as I washed up and drank my cup of coffee I performed physical exercise. In my experience, physical exercise is one of the most important things to do when one is isolated. Solitary confinement affects everything from your energy level, to the way you feel and think. I found physical exercise has a great influence on the way you feel in general. I remember thinking to myself that if I was going to be isolated; I was going to use the time to better myself. I would dispel the bad habits and that which was useless to me and strengthen the rest. I worked on everything, from the way I wrote, to the way I spoke especially when communicating with the guards.

I felt like this form of isolation was the rawest human state. It gives one the rare opportunity to recondition oneself. It forces you to face yourself, perhaps flaws you've avoided in the past. It's a test of your mental and psychological strength, but most of all your will. You have to dig deep within yourself to find that strength to maintain a positive attitude.

I found that happiness did not come from an environment, it came from within. Once my internal peace was found, nothing or no one could disturb it. It no longer mattered how harsh my environment became. I always found reasons to smile, and it was the simple things that brought me peace.

The hardest part for me was the torment by the guards. They had taken the criminal allegations against me personally and formed a vendetta, from the sheriff, to the police department, all the way down to the deputies. My cell was searched and trashed 7 days a week. My mail was tampered with, stolen and delayed. They even kept my window covered up from the outside. People who communicated with me through correspondence were raided by the police department. Those who visited me were harassed and often times searched.

It became so bad that one day I finally gave in. I was being escorted by 2 deputies and a sergeant when they physically attacked me. I

quickly reacted by assaulting all three of them with punches and kicks to those who fell. In retrospect, I feel this event was necessary to re-establish the respect and even fear. They began to back off after the altercation took place. I don't believe violence is necessarily the solution to these situations, I was only defending myself. The fact that I got the better of them did however work in my favor by improving my relationship with the guards. They knew I wouldn't tolerate certain things although it DID get worse before it got better.

For 30 days after the incident I was placed in a tiny isolation cell in the middle of a desolate hallway by itself. It was the only cell in the entire hallway. The cell was only large enough to accommodate a bunk, sink and toilet. There was only room to take about two steps. I couldn't even flush the toilet myself; I had to wait for an officer to pass by so I could ask them to push the bottom outside my cell to flush it. It was humiliating. I was not allowed any personal property, not even writing, reading or hygiene products. I couldn't even receive my mail. The only items I was allowed to possess were a blanket, sheets, a t-shirt, boxers, socks and toilet paper (if I was lucky). I was fed a brick diet twice a day which consisted of different foods smashed together in a ball.

I viewed this as another challenge and dedicated the time to yoga and meditation. I'd go days without speaking. I mentally scrolled through my entire life and retrieved memories long forgotten.

After the 30 days were over, I was moved back to my original isolation cell. I had a greater appreciation for my possessions, food, shower, and all things of this nature that we usually take for granted. I now knew that things could be much worse.

It was a strange feeling not being able to share my experience with another human being. This suppression of thoughts and ideas really bothered me, especially considering my social nature, but I couldn't focus on that. I read hundreds of non-fiction books, studying everything I could get my hands on and writing about some of the things I read.

I remember reading somewhere how the English language has two words to describe isolation: loneliness and solitude. To me, the loneliness illustrates the negative approach of isolation and solitude describes the strength of being alone. For me, it is a perfect example of turning a negative situation into a positive one. I feel like I'm a better person now for having experienced all the years of isolation, although I'm glad to be around people again. It took a while to regain my social skills, and I think they've suffered in some ways, but for the most part, I'll always look back at that time in isolation as my rebirth.

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Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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September 30, 2022

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September 19, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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hi. i found you on line because i read a magazine article written by your girlfriend lyn hagen. good luck to you both

you forget a nuther word in are speech for solitary is secluson that what schools call solitary lol you speek of meny things i lerned from my time as well you say short time is not a nuff to realy get what it is like but thats not true for all of us me what was over 7months of my 8th grade i did a nuff hours in secluson to be = to 35 days in the hole but i tell you it was a nuff for me to get the hole feeling of solitary odd thing is you speek like i do of it in some ways i lerned so much bout me and the world over that short time i lerned to be strong and not give in to it like you did but i will say i did do a bit sleeping at times lol what was sad for me is i did not know any the effects of solitary till after it was over for me but i did when they let me read as much as i could read the dichairey a lot lol it dose inpackt everything mental and body i lerned that to like you siad it can do a nuber on you if you do not know how to deal with it it was like a trial of will and of mind body and soul it was as well a time of inlightenment on my self and the world oddly i not sher meny are reeady for that sort of inlightment lol you said you found reasons to be happy still you know odd thing is i wish i never had ben made to go thoow it but in a way it made me who i am oddly as much as i disliked my run in with solitary it is what made me become me it is odd to have rage for those who made you go thoow it yet know you as well want to thank them as well it odd but i still do not recmend ever forcing someone in to solitary lol man some effects never go away lol as i allways say it is one thing to seek solitary it is a nuther to be forced in to solitary may there be light in the darknes of justice

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