

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2021/11/17/voices-from-solitary-what-my-mother-doesnt-know/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | November 17, 2021

Juan Diaz, 40, has been incarcerated in New York State for over 20 years and has spent most of that time in solitary confinement. In correspondence with Solitary Watch staff, Diaz described how after his very first stint in solitary his behavior became progressively violent and self-destructive. Prison officials eventually placed him in isolation indefinitely, a status known in New York as administrative segregation (Ad-Seg).

Diaz spent the next eight years confined to solitary until he was released last July. The following piece was written during that time, while he was in the Special Housing Unit (SHU). When asked about his motivations for the piece Diaz stated: I had originally written [this letter] to the universe (U). I wrote it while I was in the SHU, a very chaotic and dysfunctional, and destructive environment. I was sad and heartbroken when I wrote it. Some kid tried to kill himself in the very cell I was in and I could feel all that pain and deep hopelessness he left behind. It combined with my own feelings and I felt overwhelmed and in dire need of catharsis. So I started writing to release those feelings. (Warning: The piece includes a graphic description of a suicide attempt.)

He continued: I hope when people read what I wrote it changes what they think about the use of solitary confinement and how it affects people, even those who are seemingly irredeemable and deserve to be punished. I also hope they can see that theres so much more to the men and women locked in special housing units than what their criminal and institutional histories suggest. Some of us are sensitive, feeling human beings struggling to figure out what it even means to be a human being while undergoing a horrendous dehumanization process. Some of us are just learning to come to terms with the low deeds of our past and trying to elevate ourselves above them. many of us have deep reserves of compassion for our fellow SHU inmates.

Diaz asked to dedicate this piece to his friend Sunny, who helped him begin writing. Sara Rain Tree

Readers who wish to contact the author about his piece can write to him at the following address:

Juan Diaz #04A3325, Attica Correctional Facility, 639 Exchange St., Attica NY, 14011-014

Dear U,

Circumstances on my end have improved a degree or two since I last wrote. Ive been moved to the upper-level tiers and have a gorgeous view of the sky and distant horizon. I love to watch the sunrise, which has been so rare an opportunity since my imprisonment. Sunrises always call on me to contemplate the mysteries of the universe, of existence, and of human love and connectionthe mysteries that are beyond us and within us. I also love watching the colorful transformations the sky goes through as the sun rises. I like to believe this cosmic kaleidoscope is a strayed particle of Gods consciousness.

I have a lovely view of the heavily wooded landscape that surrounds the prison complex Im confined in, as well. Theres a road that meanders through these woods. Metaphorically, it illustrates in my mind mans complicated urge to alter the nature of things and create a smoother passage through the challenging, beautiful, wild terrains of human life.

Ive begun my behavior therapy sessions and find them enjoyable and enlightening. Its nice to get out of the cell and have meaningful conversations. I spoke to my mom the other night over the phone. She was very happy to hear my voice and complimented me for my ability to not only survive DOCCSs most severe punishment practices but also for refining and strengthening myself in spite of them.

What my mom doesnt know, and could never know, is that this mental and spiritual refinement is simply me compensating for the other areas of my mind and soul that have been deeply injured by eight years of solitary confinement. My mom cannot see the way Ive become socially withdrawn. It isnt possible for her to observe me pacing back and forth in a cold and brutal space with manic thoughts racing, colliding, descending, crashing, and burning into an inconclusive mental dead end. She cannot conceive an image of me gradually absorbing into my entire being the coldness and brutality of my living, dying space. Shell never have visions of me looking into my eyes in the mirror and seeing an empty and neglected graveyard reflected back. She does not know that on my countenance I wear the look of the haunted and trapped look that seems to intimidate and repel everyone who sees it, deepening my socially isolated existence.

She cannot imagine the insomnia, the waking up constantly through the night and each time realizing Im in the darkest, saddest, loneliest place on Earth. Shes unable to hear my muffled, asphyxiated screams for her. My begging and pleading that she returns me to my essences. Pleading that she returns me to the safe, secure, warm, nourishing, and fear-free environment of her womb. What my mom knows is only what Im willing to reveal to her, which is that somehow (and somewhat involuntarily and miraculously) Im surviving this horrendous ordeal. But my survival is not guaranteed. No human living under these conditions can offer that guarantee.

A young man in his early twenties attempted to commit suicide in the cell Im currently occupying shortly before I was shoved into it. He made a noose out of ripped-up bed sheets and weaved the top end of the noose through the numerous circular holes in the perforated steel plate covering the ceiling vent. He stood on a stack of books, placed the noose around his neck, and stepped off the stack of books. He hung there for what mustve felt like an eternity. But the bedsheet rope could not or would not hold his weight for long. Perhaps his soul was too heavy with pain. The rope snapped. A CO [correctional officer] making rounds found him crumpled on the cold concrete surrounded by a felled stack of books. Part of the bedsheet rope burned into the tender skin of his neck, leaving a scarlet reminder of his fall. His body was totally devoid of consciousness but not of life. On his bed was a note intended as a postmortem communication to his mom. It simply said, with devastating sorrow and finality, perdona me madre (forgive me, mother). All the suffering, regret, heartbreak, and love in the world are contained in those three words.

Many men of Latino descent in prison have those exact words tatted across their backs. It is the burden they, we, carry. It expresses concisely the deepest and most religious yearning to reverse the pain we gave to others and ourselves. Unbeknownst to many, even those who wear this sacred message on their skin, is that these words are also expressive of the highest need to forgive others for the pain theyve brought upon us.

The busted bed-sheet noose still hangs in my cell. I leave it there as a reminder of the destructive, all-encompassing pain forced social isolation inflicts on the human mind, body, and soul. Humans need each other. More so the most troubled among us. That should be obvious by now. Were one of the most social creatures on the planet. Everything from how our brains are structured to how weve structured our society is influenced by that fact.

Every day I look at the busted bed-sheet noose, this horrifying apparatus of self-caused death. Its not hard to see how someone can come to believe that this is an escape hatch, a fantastical pathway to spiritual and mental freedom from suffering.

I wish there was a way to apply the illogical concept of alternative facts to the experience of a human life in solitary confinement, but there isnt. Torture warps the mind and can cause it to seek the destruction of self. Solitary confinement is torture. Thats a factthe one and only fact.

Sincerely,

Juan Diaz

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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Solitary Watch

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