Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by Jean Casella and James Ridgeway | December 31, 2020

Dear Donors, Readers, and Friends:

We founded Solitary Watch more than a decade ago with the belief that accurate information and authentic storytelling could serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice, and help bring change even to a powerful and secretive institution like prisons.

We started out as a small, shoestring operationwhich to a large extent, we still are. But were also scrappy and dogged, and have had an outsized impact in bringing public awareness and attention to an issue that no one paid much attention to just ten years ago, despite the tens of thousands of people being subjected, here on American soil, to a practice that has been widely denounced as torture.

We are proud of the breakthrough reporting we have been able to do over the years, and the real, if tenuous, change it has helped to achieve. But we are even more proudand gratefulto have been able to bring you first-hand accounts from inside solitary confinement cells, written by individuals who have risked retaliation in order to share their stories of life in solitary.

These stories have inspired and informed our own investigations, and have been published on our site in the series we call Voices from Solitary. In 2016, some of them were compiled in the first anthology of writing from solitary, *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*.

But we didnt stop there. In 2019, we began supporting a group of incarcerated writers through our Solitary Confinement Reporting Project, and assisted them in placing their work in a variety of publications. In the past year, we welcomed prison journalist Juan Moreno Haines as our first Contributing Writer working from behind barsin his case, from an isolation cell in COVID-ravaged San Quentin. This coming year, with your help, we will develop a nationwide group of incarcerated correspondents who are supported by our staff with research and editing and paid for their work.

Please support our work this year, and your donation will be matched.

All of this is made possible only through the support of our readers. If you believe this work is important, we hope you will consider making a gift to Solitary Watch this year before the year ends. **For the rest of today only, every donation you make up to $5,000 will be doubled** through matching funds provided by the NewsMatch program and now supplemented by a generous anonymous donor.

Give before midnight tonight to double the impact of your donation.

Finally, to finish a year filled with turmoil and isolationand ending with a glimmer of hopewe are offering one of the most powerful stories of life in solitary that we have ever read. It was written by Arthur Longworth, who has been incarcerated for 35 years. This work received support from our Solitary Confinement Reporting Project, and published by the New Republic.

So take a moment to read this account, share itand please give what you can to ensure that stories like this keep coming across the prison walls.

With gratitude, as always, and warm wishes for the new year,

Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

Inside the Hell of Solitary Confinement

By Arthur Longworth

As a prisoner, you can find yourself in a supermaxa facility built for the specific purpose of holding a large number of prisoners in long-term solitary confinementfor a number of reasons.

If you commit a serious rule violation; if you seek protection or are considered too young for a general prison population; if you refuse to work; if you write or contribute to an article, literary work, or media report that runs counter to the institutional narrative; if you complain about, or in any other way anger, a prison official; or if you participate in a work strike, food strike, yard sit-down, or any other type of group demonstration (and these infractions will land you in solitary for a very long time), you can end up in a concrete cell the size of a closet.

You dont know when, or if, youll be released. Theres no time constraint on how long you can be held (unless its for a serious rule violation or a new crime altogether, because they generally have more-or-less standardized tours in supermax attached to them). Prison officials can keep you there forever if they want, and some prisoners are in precisely that predicament. Even if youre not one of them, youre conscious that youre parked. No administrative process, other than the guards use-of-force authority against prisoners, is carried out expeditiously in a supermax.

Every 30 days, a pair of guards appear at the door of the cell to take you to a review. They click handcuffs onto your wrists and attach a leash to you through a narrow hatch in the door called a cuffport. They order you to kneel on the concrete floor of the cell, facing away from the door. And when the door opens, they cinch leg shackles around your ankles and pull you to your feet.

The guards escort you through two heavy steel security gates and down a wide corridor lined with white tile. One guard grips your cuffed wrists and your shoulder. The other holds the leash. They direct you into a hearing room; it is austere, but still a disorienting contrast to the even starker environment in which you otherwise exist. Chairs, windows, people.

Several prison administrators sit in comfortable office chairs, laptops open in front of them, at a conference table larger than the cell you just left. The carpet makes it difficult to shuffle your feet, which is the only way you can walk in plastic slippers and leg shackles. You feel as though you might trip and fall on your face.

The guards lead you to a steel stool riveted into the floor, at the end of the table furthest from the administrators. They latch your cuffed wrists to a bolt behind the stool, and the length of chain running between your ankles to a bolt in the floor. You cant move.

If at any point in the hearing you hear the word Retainwhich is what almost every prisoner hears at nearly every hearingit means youre staying. You may feel a compulsion to try to talk the people around the table into changing their minds. Dont bother. The decision they announced was made long before you entered the room. They wont take it back.

Once in a while, a prisoner is informed hell be released. Then, 30 days later, hes taken in front of the review committee again and is told that his paperwork has been lost or that the decision was rescinded. Sometimes prisoners have to be dragged back to their cells. The whole process is so traumatizing that prisoners often stop going to hearings altogether. When guards come for them, they simply refuse to leave.

When youre in a supermaxor an Intensive Management Unit, as its dubbed here in Washington stateyour field of experience contracts. It is wholly contained within your closet-size cell; the world outside prison, the prison itself, and the rest of IMU may as well not even exist. Your struggle to survive your stay in solitary is waged within the bounds of that cell.

You have to train yourself to make it through your time in IMU reasonably intact. Theres no instruction bookjust as there are no manuals on how to endure the wheel or the rack. You either develop the ability over time, or you dont. There are plenty of prisoners who dont, or cant, condition themselves to the environment. Theyre the ones you hear screaming and pounding as hard as they can on the steel door of the cell all hours of the day and night. Or theyre the ones you dont hear at all.

The pulse of IMU is the unremitting sound of madness. It pervades every part of the facility, reverberating through the concrete walls of the cell, the soles of your bare feet, your bones, your teeth. There is no time without the jarring slam of steel doors, screaming. You can hear the riot-suited guards with batons and Taser shock shields enter cells to extract prisoners. A guard passes through the block every 30 minutes with a heavy rubber mallet he uses to strike every wall, door, and cuffport to ensure the cells are all secure.

There is the blinding light thats on 24 hours a day in the cell, and the constant exposure to institutional-grade capsicum spray, known familiarly in riot-control settings as pepper spray. The cellblocks are connected by air vents, so even if it isnt you who the guards are spraying, the effect is nearly the same.

You have to dissociate yourself from the experienceto withdraw a part of yourself and keep it at a distance from the world at large. You start by deadening your senses to whats happening around you. All that you see and hear in IMU would still happen whether you were there or not. You can t change any of it, and none of it is happening because of you. So you turn your attention away.

You have to protect that part of yourself from your feelings: the helplessness, the anger, the hopelessness that washes over you in an unebbing tide. Those are the feelings that arise inside you in that place. You cant stop them. But if you stand backif you dont allow the separated part of yourself to wander out into the storm of those feelingsyou can get through it.

You regiment your day. You create and continually reinvent a routine. And you stick to it. You pace the bounds of the cell: three and a half steps in one direction, three and a half steps back. You keep moving. When the cellblock floods and the cell floor is beneath several inches of waterwhich happens regularly because its one of the few forms of protest possibleyou slog through it. When the floor isnt covered with water, you break up your pacing with pushups and sit-ups.

You ration books. You get two a weekrandom paperbacks of a guards choosing.

Sometimes theyre complete. Other times, theyre nota part is missing. You read a sentence, a paragraph, a page, a chapter at a time. Whatever keeps you from running short of words before the next week. Books are passed out Sunday nightunless guards are busy with cell extractions or flooding, or they just dont feel like passing books out. And of course, this happens often. When guards dont bring books aroundor you get ones youve already readyou read the books you have again. You recite what you memorize as you pace your cell.

If you went into IMU strong and healthy, thats not the way youre going to stay. You dont get enough vitamins and calories, fresh air, sunlight, or anything else necessary for health. You grow anemic, jittery, skeletal. Unless you stop movingin which case you become doughy, pallid, frail. You do what you can to care for your health, and you dont sweat what you cant. Its not your body thats going to get you through the experienceif, indeed, you do get through it.

You hold on to the part of yourself thats separated. That part of you doesnt do anything in that cell other than watch your body move, or not move. It is above you, outside you.

Your training manifests itself on your face as an impenetrable deadness. You wear that face like a mask to reviewsif, indeed, you go.

Like in the cell, you watch the review happen as if it were someone else there chained and on a leash. You respond only to what administrators ask. You let the deadness of your face suffuse whatever few words you use. You cant afford to be invested in any outcome because you have no control over what happens, and the people who do have control harbor not the slightest compunction.

Thats because the impersonal, passive facade of long-term solitary confinement abets their misconception of what theyre doing. The way they see it, theyre not actually doing anything to you. Theyre not breaking your bones on the wheel. Theyre not stretching or snapping your tendons and sinews on the rack. Theyve merely situated you within an architecturein this case, a sprawling two-story building in Walla Walla the same dusty color as the desert landscape around it, pinioned between two gun towers and ringed with a double perimeter fence topped with dense coils of rusting razor wire, adjacent to a cemetery picketed with graves marked only with prison numbers. What happens to you inside that cell is on you, not them.

You have to cache some kind of hope, purpose, or meaning inside yourself to bear the experience of the cell. It is so excruciating, it feels as though nothing else exists. Prison immolates life, and IMU grossly magnifies that process. You are an ant beneath a convex lens that channels the conflagrating power of the sun.

Beneath the mask of your face are the stifled screams and internal writhing that commenced, and havent for one second abated, since the moment they sealed you in that cell. But regardless of whether the people running the prison bother to acknowledge it, you are locked in a relationship with torture thats intimate. Deadening your senses and separating a part of yourself doesnt in any way lessen the painrather, it merely creates a gap inside that allows you to develop, if you can, the ability not to react.

But you cannot endure the experience without a reason. No human being can live without a reason, and, despite what the prison is doing to you, that is still what you are: a human being.

Whatever hope, purpose, or meaning you hold close beneath your mask, you cant hedge it on something that might not happenlike a specific year or month you think theyll let you out of that cell. You know the prisoners in IMU who do that. You know that they kill themselves. The suicide rate in the prisons general population isnt good. In supermax the rate is five to 10 times higher.

When a prisoner kills himself in a cell near yours, you watch through the narrow window slat of the cell door as guards pull the body out and cart it away. Whatever reason you have to go onyou grip it tighter. For you and everyone else in that place, confinement is unbroken. And the dead prisoners cell doesnt stay empty long.

You use anger to keep yourself from slipping into the abyss of suicidal thoughts. And you may as well, because anger rises of its own accordits inescapable in IMU. Anger is there because youre conscious that every facet of the facility had to have taken an unfathomable level of ill will and malicious forethought to develop.

At least, thats how you feel, because every aspect of the experience is weaponized. Down to the smallest, seemingly insignificant detail, like guards restricting your book privileges when they catch you attempting to communicate with another prisoner. Or the fact that the used and ragged underwear youre issued is dyed pink. Or the icy air thats blasted through vents, making the cell cold enough to double as a cooler. The meanness of it steals your breath.

Anger turns your mind outward. Its a bulwark against which you can prop yourself. Its an anchor, an unflagging determination to persist. But you cant let anger become the sole reason you continue on. When everything else inside you is exhausted, and anger is all you have left, it grows beyond your ability to mitigate or control. And what happens to you is worse than if you were to kill yourself.

You know those prisoners when they show up in general population. They dont last long. They return to IMU for senseless, and usually unprompted, acts of violence that are as over-the-top as they are inexplicable to anyone who hasnt experienced long-term solitary confinement in a supermax.

Still worse prospects for recidivism are the prisoners whom administrators release from IMU directly to the streets. Theyre the ones who almost immediately commit a violent crime that doesnt make sense to society. Take the prisoner released from a Colorado supermax who drove to the director of corrections home and killed him. You know what that prisoner hid behind his mask in order to survive supermax. And so does every other prisoner in this country whos made it through solitary.

If you ever do emerge from supermax, natural light will feel like a shank stabbing into your skull. You can t stop squinting. You experience vertigo in open spaces. You have to concentrate on whats immediately in front of you because looking across any distance makes you feel as though youll topple over. Your body is brittle and racked with ceaseless shaking, tremors, bouts of violent retching.

You have the haunted, sunken-eyed look of someone whos been in a concentration camp.

These are all physical effects you get over. However, theres a part of youa part of whatever it is we are as human beingsthat doesnt get to leave IMU. It doesnt recover with your body. It is an empty space that returns you to supermax when you sleep. You awaken in the night, heart in your throat, certain youre still in the strangling grasp of the cell.

When youre not asleep, the empty space shows up in behaviors prompted by psychological triggers you cant control. When youre crowded by others, you become overwhelmed with anxiety. Your impulse is to extricate yourself, to retreat from everyone, to self-isolate. And when you find youre unable to do so, you do whatever it takes to get your back against the wall.

When someone touches you unexpectedly, without permission, or without excusing himself, you flash with anger, recoil or lash out without thinking. The experience takes you back to IMUwhen the only touch you experienced was to be chained, leashed; pushed, prodded, pulled; dragged in the direction that the guards wanted you to proceed.

There are sights, sounds, and smells that constantly evoke IMU in you. When it happens, you cant stop yourself from shutting downyou disengage the part of yourself that got you through IMU. You stare with a dead face, your eyes vacant and glassed over.

Other people dont understand why you act the way you do, why you go dead. They dont know the experience of a supermax. They dont understand that what happened to you in that place still happens every day.

Arthur Longworth is a 20192020 PEN America Writing for Justice Fellow and 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee whose essays have been published by the Marshall Project, VICE News, Medium, and Yes! Magazine. He is the author of Zek: An American Prison Story *(Gabalfa Press, 2016), which was nominated for the Washington State Book Award. He has been incarcerated for 35 years.*

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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 Jean Casella

December 29, 2021

by Jean Casella

December 23, 2021

by Events and Announcements

December 3, 2021

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