

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/11/27/three-unforgettable-stories-from-inside-solitary-confinement/>

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On #GivingTuesday, Please Consider a Gift to Solitary Watch and Your Donation Will Be Doubled by NewsMatch

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 27, 2018

Over the years, we've often thought about something we heard from a man who had served more than 20 years, many of them in solitary confinement. He believed that most of the public held a common misconception about prisons. People looked at the wall around the perimeter of a prison, he said, and believed its purpose was to keep the incarcerated from escaping. But the wall isn't there to keep prisoners in, he told us. It's to keep the rest of you out.

This has nowhere been more true than in solitary confinement units, the prisons within prisons that are kept strictly off limits to the public and the press, where tens of thousands of people have suffered in silence for years or even decades. That silence has been broken only by individuals with the fortitude to reach out and to risk retaliation from prison staff to show us the world that exists behind those walls.

In the last nine years, we have been privileged to receive more and more of these stories, most of them sent to us by handwritten letter and to develop relationships with hundreds of people in solitary confinement. Their writing has informed our reporting, and has 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*](#). Today, we feature excerpts from three of the stories selected for that book.

The work we do shining a light on one of the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal justice system, and connecting with the people who experience it first-hand 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 perhaps today, on #GivingTuesday. Through December 31st, every donation you make up to \$1,000 will be doubled through the [NewsMatch](#) program.

So please, read these stories, share them and donate what you can to ensure that they keep coming across the prison walls.

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1. [LIVING IN THE SHU](#) by C.F. Villa

Cesar Villa wrote this version of his essay in 2015 while in his fourteenth year of solitary confinement in the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU). Along with many others, Villa had been placed in indefinite solitary confinement after being validated as a gang member based on questionable evidence. After a series of prison hunger strikes, journalism (including ours) exposing the torture at Pelican Bay, and years of legal and advocacy work, several thousand people Villa included were transitioned back into the general prison population. All of those with whom we are in contact believe that they will bear the psychic scars of solitary for the rest of their lives.

The first week, I tell myself: It isn't that bad; I can do this. The second week, I stand in the dog run in my underwear shivering as impelled with hail and rain. By the third week, I find myself squatting in a corner of the yard, filing my fingernails down over coarse concrete walls. My sense of human decency dissipates with each day. At the end of the first year, my feet and hands begin to split open from the cold. I bleed over my clothes, in my food, between my sheets. Band-Aids are not allowed, even confiscated when found.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, the unraveling must've begun. My psyche had changed. The ability to hold a single good thought left me, as easily as if it was a simple shift of wind sifting overtired, battered bones.

Fourteen years have passed since I entered the SHU on gang validation. This year I'll be fifty-five years old. When I first arrived I was attentive and, if you'll excuse the expression, bright-eyed. I thought I could beat this thing, whatever this thing was. I confess I was ignorant. Today, I can be found at my cell front, my fingers stuffed through the perforated metal door. I hang my limp head angled in a daze. My mind is lost in a dense fog of nothingness. I'm withering away. I know it and I no longer care.

Hopelessness is a virus I hide under my tongue like a magic pebble.

2. [ON THE VERGE OF HELL](#) by Judith Vazquez

While most individuals in solitary are men, women are not immune from being placed in long-term isolation. Some, [as we have reported](#), are sent to solitary in retaliation for exposing abuse and sexual assault by prison staff. And because incarcerated women are even more likely than incarcerated men to have a history of trauma and underlying mental illness, they often break down in solitary. Judith Vazquez, who was placed in solitary for years at a time in both a local jail awaiting trial and in New Jersey state prisons, describes experiencing all of these things, including rape by staff and moments of terrifying mental breakdown. She is now in her sixties and in a minimum security facility.

My cell had no open window. My window was about four inches wide and maybe three feet tall. My view consisted of just bricks and barbed wire. If I could see maybe a dime-sized piece of the sky, it was a lot. As time went by, I noticed a little plant growing from between the bricks. I would look at that plant every day. It was the only view of nature I had. Oh boy, did I love that plant! I would watch the breeze blow it from side to side and I would close my eyes and pretend that wind was blowing across my face. As time passed, I started to resent the plant. I wanted to be the one feeling that breeze. One day I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed a plastic garbage bag and sealed it around the window, covering it completely. I refused to look at the plant enjoying the breeze I craved.

Months went by and the cell was dark all day long. One day, I decided I had to tear down the plastic bag. I felt I had to find a way to get air! So I began to scrape the rubber seal that held the window to the frame. I used my fingernails to scrape and scrape for days, weeks, and months. It got to the point that my fingernails began to bleed. They hurt so bad that I would cry. But I needed some air. I believe it took about six months of scraping and bleeding before I finally made a tiny little hole. I only had room to put one nostril at a time against the hole, and I would breathe in so hard. It gave me a sense of being human again. I had a secret in that room that the officers did not know about. It was my secret air supply, which was what kept me alive. I no longer felt jealous of the plant. If anything, I sort of made the plant my friend again; it was all I had for company.

1. [A SENTENCE WORSE THAN DEATH](#) by William Blake

First published in 2013, this shattering account of 25 years spent in continuous solitary confinement in New York has received more than half a million hits on Solitary Watch alone, and was republished on dozens of other sites around the world. Thousands more have read it as the lead essay in [Hell Is a Very Small Place](#). Blake conveys, as few others have before or since, the visceral experience of living for decades in the Special Housing Unit, or SHU. Nearly six years after the essay's publication, Billy Blake is still in solitary, with little prospect of ever being released into the general population [unless state laws or policies are changed](#).

I've read of the studies done regarding the effects of long-term isolation in solitary confinement on inmates, seen how researchers say it can ruin a man's mind, and I've watched with my own eyes the slow descent of sane men into madness, sometimes not so slow. What I've never seen the experts write about, though, is what year after year of abject isolation can do to that immaterial part in our middle where hopes survive or die and the spirit resides. So please allow me to speak to you of what I've seen and felt during some of the harder times of my twenty-five-year SHU odyssey.

I've experienced times so difficult and felt boredom and loneliness to such a degree that it seemed to be a physical thing inside, so thick it felt like it was choking me, trying to squeeze the sanity from my mind, the spirit from my soul, and the life from my body. I've seen and felt hope becoming like a foggy ephemeral thing, hard to get a hold of, even harder to keep a hold of as the years and then decades disappeared while I stayed stuck in the emptiness of the SHU world.

I've seen minds slipping down the slope of sanity, descending into insanity, and I've been terrified that I would end up like the guys around me who have cracked and become nuts. It's a sad thing to watch a human being go insane before your eyes because he can't handle the pressure that the Box exerts on the mind, but it is sadder still to see the spirit shaken from a soul. And it is more disastrous. Sometimes the prison guards find them hanging and blue; sometimes their necks get broken when they jump from their beds, the sheet tied around the neck that's also wrapped around the grate covering the light in the ceiling snapping taut with a pop. I've seen the spirit leaving men in SHU, and I have witnessed the results.

[su_button url="https://www.newsmatch.org/organizations/solitary-watch" target="blank" style="flat" background="#2ed992" color="#000000" size="10" center="yes" radius="5" icon_color="#000000" class="font-family: Arial !important; font-size: 16px !important; font-weight: bold !important;"]Please Support Our Work Today. All Donations Doubled Through December 31st.[/su_button]

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Who want monsters like Chris Watts to live to ripe old age in prison same? Living alone in cell is TO GOOD for him and MANY OTHERS.

I am lost for words and in tears. I cant even imagine how that feels but as a mom whos only 22 yr old son is fighting a high profile case that they say might give him life, I hurt for my son. I see the sadness in his eyes everytime we visit him but he cant cry, so I cry for him. These human beings have hearts regardless and they need support..and of course the Lord. I pray for every inmate and their families as well cuz we all need to know theres hope in Christ.

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