

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/12/20/voices-solitary-thin-comfort/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | December 20, 2013



The following comes from Joseph Stanwick, who has spent nearly two decades in solitary confinement in Texas. In this letter to Solitary Watch, he describes his last holiday season, which was spent under lockdown status. In supermax prisons and solitary confinement units, where people rarely leave their cells to begin with, lockdown often entails further deprivations of things like regular meals, showers, and exercise periods. During this time, Stanwick developed a relationship of sorts with the man in the cell across the corridor, and received from him a gift that was physically welcome but psychologically and morally unsettling. The author welcomes mail at: Joseph Stanwick#636416, 777 FM 3497, Lewis Unit, Woodville, TX 75990. Jean Casella

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We are on lockdown status again as every inch of the prison compound is searched for contraband and living on thin sandwiches again, jam sandwiches we call them, made of two pieces of stale bread and a spot of peanut butter jammed together. This time around they are the worst ever and I am hungry day and night or was until another con began giving me his food

Across the wide expanse of cellblock directly in front of my cell on the opposite side lives an elderly Mexican American who is confined to a wheelchair. The day after Christmas he began refusing his meals. I didn't think it unusual at the time because some people fast around the holidays, you know? But then I recalled that up to Christmas Eve he had been getting law books delivered to him every other day or so for months from the prisons legal library, an activity that suggested he was diligently working on the appeal of his conviction or perhaps a law suit, but then abruptly after Christmas no more law books came and he quit eating.

The guards took no notice of this because they work a different cellblock every day and too there is always a con or two skipping a meal. No one seemed aware that the old man had stopped eating, but me. When we went on lockdown status on January eleven he had not eaten in sixteen days. I do not know his name or even if he speaks English. I stand at my cell door window panels and smile and nod across to him on the other side of the corridor and he does the same. That is the extent of our communications to each other, nods and smiles. I began informing the guards that the old man had quit eating.

I once read an article long ago in some magazine about the I.R.A. (Irish Republican Army) prisoners inside English prisons that went on hunger strikes to force England to recognize them as prisoners of war instead of common criminals. Many Irishmen starved themselves to death and the horrid publicity of it all compelled the English to agree to the strikers demands. I remember well reading about the I.R.A. prisoner who celebrated the victory from a hospital bed where in spite of his jubilation and desire to live he was doomed to die because after seventy five days or so of eating no food he had caused fatal and irreversible damage to his vital organs. He had passed the point of no return. I wonder what kind of damage the old man is doing to his organs and how much nearer his point of no return must be because of his age.

Not long after we began getting bag meals he started asking the guards feeding to give his bag to me. At every meal. It is no inconvenience to do so since we live right across from each other and so I began eating his jam sandwiches and my jam sandwiches too. He sits at his door at meal times and as soon as he sees that his bag has been given to me he shoots me a thumb up sign then disappears into the depths of his cell. I have asked a Sgt. of the guards and a Lt. and a Captain to stop at his cell and talk to him when they each came walking through the cellblock on their inspection rounds and they each did, but still he refuses to eat. I eat his food instead and am grateful for it too because eight pieces of bread at each meal instead of four keeps the pang of hunger away.

Today is the twenty third of January and it has been twenty nine days since the old man last ate. I woke up in the middle of last night to discover his cell door opened and he gone and I was startled by the sight of it. But then a few minute later guards brought him back to his cell. I think they must be taking him to the medical department to weigh him ever so often and monitor his weight loss. That seems logical and I can think of no other reason for taking him out of his cell at night. There are horror stories floating around inside this super segregated high security prison about force feeding conis who try to escape their sentence by starving themselves to ruin. Strapped down to a gurney, a rubber tube is pushed up their nose and down their throat to drip life preserving nutrients into their emaciated bodies. Ghastly tales.

I was able to get a guard to slide a National Geographic magazine and a religious magazine under his cell door. A minute later he appeared and shot me a thumb up. He is looking gaunt. I live in solitary confinement same as he and cannot leave my cell and so I have done all that I can possibly do to help him. I do not want him to give up on life. I care and yet at the same time hunger compels me to eat his food, a paradox I struggle with daily, reasoning with myself that if I refuse to accept his food the guard will just give it to someone else, but even so that rationalization provide thin comfort and I think that I am agonizing as much for eating his food as he must be for not eating it. Prison is hell I tell you.

On January twenty five the old man began eating again and on February one we were taken off lock down status and jam sandwiches.

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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is this what is in the budget, the gov. know that the funding is mostly covering for peanut butter and jelly. like how many sandwiches per jar of peanut butter, and per jelly, and what is paid per jar, per year etc..? do records show days they receive this, and when they actually receive a tray of what they may consider real meal? is anyone tracking this? new e-mail d_ibanez120753@yahoo.com, yes please notify me of follow-up comments via email. the one above. i think the word solitary confinements, and what it does to a person after years, should be talked about to the point it is a household conversation, needs to be on t.v shows, etc..

A heart wrenching story of compassion and human spirit at a time when most of us are looking forward to a festive holiday season. It reminds us to spare a thought for those in prison, especially those in solitary confinement and consider what is being allowed to happen in our name and to ensure our safety. I hope 2014 is the year that solitary confinement becomes unacceptable rather than the norm for so many prisoners.

It is a weird conundrum that they put people already in solitary confinement, on lockdown. They put the prisons on lockdown when the guards want to have a party.

The information and letters Solitary Watch provide activists, alerts us to the injustices of the criminal justice system and after being involved for two years with an advocacy group and going back to college at age 74 majoring in criminal justice I am beginning to come to the conclusion the importance of changing the culture in prisons and jails by a better understanding of correction officers, the stress they work under, not only from their basic job functions but their failure to communicate with supervisors and administration. Stress leads to health problems, an unsatisfactory home life and a reduction in life expectancy for officers. As some, like myself who advocates for the humanity and human rights of incarcerated people I find a lack of understanding and a failure to communicate with individual officers and a failure to reach out to colleges where students study criminal justice in order to encourage them to enter corrections as a well paying career. We all are familiar with law suits involving sadistic officers, excessive unprovoked force employed by officers. Being willing to speak to and work with those who do not embrace us is faulty strategy and I would hope in 2014 we could expand our efforts to include correction officers in our effort to change the system. I write to over 25 inmates in California prisons, Wisconsin and Texas, and each speaks about decent officers and it is those officers, we have to direct our appeals to and reach out to them in order to encourage their resisting the code of silence and the culture of brutality.

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