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Prison Writer William Blake, Who Has Lived in Isolation Cells in New York State Since 1987, Awaits His Promised Release from Solitary

by Voices from Solitary | March 29, 2021

In 2013, Solitary Watch published an essay called A Sentence Worse Than Death by William Blake, who wrote about his experience of living in solitary confinement for what was at that time more than 25 years.Itreceived more than half a million hits on this site alone, and has been widely reprinted and translated into several languages. It is also the lead essay in the 2016 book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement.

Since we first read his essay, we have visited Billy Blake in prison and published several additional pieces by him. We have also documented the increasing pressure placed on the use ofprolonged solitary confinement in New York by growing public awareness, numerous legal challenges, and, most of all, the campaign for the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which finally passed both houses of the New York State Legislature on March 18 and currently awaits Governor Cuomos signature. Until very recently, however, we never expected to publish an essay like the followingabout Billy Blakes anticipated release into general population after more than three decades in the box. Jean Casella

I have been in solitary confinement in New Yorks prison system for thirty-four years.

Prisoners rights advocates call it extreme isolation. Prison authorities have euphemistically dubbed it SHU (pronounced *shoe*), for Special Housing Unit. Prisoners more aptly call it the box. To folks in society these prison units are known as solitary confinement. They are rows of cages where prisoners are segregated from the general population, locked down for months, years, or even decades alone in a cell with very little personal property and few to no privileges to speak of.

In various SHUs in several different prisons, this is where I have lived since 1987. I am today fifty-seven years old, and for well over half of my life I have been isolated from people, even from other prisoners. Soon, corrections officials have told me, I am to be released to the general population of one of the states maximum security prisons. I dont know which prison it will be, but to me that doesnt matter at all.

So I am on the cusp of returning to humanity, you might say. To my mind, it seems like I am about to become a human being once again, after more than three decades of being treated like something less, and sometimes feeling as if I actually were.

On February 10, 1987, I was taken from the county jail to a court hearing in the Town of Dewitt, just outside of Syracuse, New York. After the court proceedings had concluded, while still in the courthouse, I took the service revolver from one of the two sheriffs deputies who were escorting me and, after a brief struggle, shot both deputies. One deputy died.

On that day in Dewitt, I lived the worst moment of my life, made my greatest mistake, and committed my most terrible wrong, by far. And although I have wished it countless times, that moment will never be undone.

Five months after the shooting, on July 10, I had been tried and convicted, was sentenced to serve life, and was sent off to state prison. On that day New Yorks prison authorities placed me in the Special Housing Unit at Shawangunk Correctional Facility. They had quickly decided that I was a threat to the security of any prison they might put me in and so should be segregated, isolated. Somehow, I was more dangerous than the other cop killers, sundry murderers, and escape artists walking around in the general populations of New Yorks many maximum security prisons, so they said.

So for more than thirty years I lived in SHU, waking to the screams of madmen in the middle of the night, and smelling their shit when they decided to throw it. I got disciplinary tickets for doing things I should not have done, for doing other things that I would never regret, and for doing things I never did, when a guard decided I needed to be punished more than I already was anyway. I discovered that hopelessness and despair could mean far more than I had ever known before, and learned that loneliness could still sting deep even when a man is sleeping in a row of other men separated by only a few feet and a steel or concrete wall. I experienced a different sort of pain than anything I have felt before, the kind where the bleeding is done all on the inside, in the mind and the soul, and goes on and on through days into years. A number of times I watched as gloom settled over the unit when another SHU prisoner had ended his life with

his neck in a bedsheet tied to the grate covering the light in the ceiling, rather than do another day in the box; and I wondered if that would be my own end.

In the box you have time to think, because there is dead time aplenty. How well you manage your thoughts is all on you. I have watched as the minds of some of my neighbors regressed and were broken, as I went all in to keep my own intact. I lived in this dark space for decades, but I kept dreaming a light.

I learned meditation and mindfulness, yoga too, and practice them all religiously. With the help of God and good luck added to my own efforts, I remain sane. I kept myself out of the prison mental health units that people end up in when they have died inside and struggle to be resurrected. I grew older and grew up in this place that prison keepers built to cause prisoners pain. I lived when it would have been so easy to quit.

At last, now, the prison operators tell me that I am soon to be in population, released from this torturous place I hate. Upon getting the news initially, I had the thought fire loudly in my mind: Yes, I made it! The excitement inside me was strong; it felt good, very much like a prisoner being told that hes just been granted parole and is soon to be home, free at last. But then I considered what is to come, and not for the first time. I had always believed I would one day be released from SHU, even when plenty of people were telling me I would die here. I know well what a prison population is like; this is not my first prison bid. However, I do not know what its like to walk into a world full of people separated by nothing after being isolated from everything and everyone for more than thirty years.

There are hundreds of men in a prison mess hall, hundreds more in a prison yard. What will it feel like to be in a crowd again? What will it feel like to walk around without my hands cuffed behind my back, to work and mingle with my fellow prisoners and prison staff? What will it be like to feel like a human being again?

The answer to these questions, of course, is I dont know. This will be new to me, even as I do old things that I have done many times long ago.

Do I have any worries about whether or not I will be able to make it, whether I will be able to adjust? Fortunately, I am not a worrier. Fortunately, I am an optimist to my soul. I have wondered, though, if I have been damaged by SHU in some way that wont show itself till I find myself needing to know how to act like a normal uncaged person again. In reply to that thought I said to myself: Well, there is only one way to find out. And that is to do it. I have fears; I am not a machine. But so far, I have never met a fear that I failed to conquer. Whatever my adjustment to population after so long in SHU may entail, I fully expect to handle it. Simple stuff or supremely difficult, I expect to make it.

More than three years ago, in December 2017, prison officials first mentioned to me the prospect of release to population. For thirty years I had received monthly review reports of my administrative segregation status, and all of them were pretty much the same, most identical to the previous one. No matter how I behaved, no matter if I expressed real remorse and regret for past misdeeds, no matter what I may have accomplished against all odds in SHU, the reviews were invariably negative, painting meas a monster, and they were always the same in their conclusions: I was to stay in SHU in ad seg status.

Then, in my September 2017 review, which I received a copy of three months after it was written, the Central Office Ad Seg Review Committee wrote: It is the recommendation of this committee that inmate Blake remain in Administrative Segregation at this time based on his past history of violence, numerous disciplinary infractions and argumentative behavior, as well as his propensity for escape. However, he may be a good candidate for release from Administrative Segregation with a proper transitional program. The committee encourages Blake to continue to exhibit appropriate behavior and work to demonstrate that he would be a good candidate for transition out of Administrative Segregation. When asked if he would be interested in a step-down, or transitional program, he responded, I hope so.

When the review committee wrote those words, I had been four years without a ticket for any sort of misbehavior, and I had not had a violent incident in fourteen years. I have had just one escape attempt in my entire jail/prison life, and that was the courthouse incident. Somehow, this one attempt got turned into a propensity for escape. Also, no one had ever asked me if I was in interested in going to a transitional or step-down program. If someone had, my reply would have been *Hell, yeah!* not I hope so.

After receiving the September 2017 review, it took a year and half before I was transferred from Great Meadow Correctional Facilitys box to the step-down program in Atticas SHU. It was June 2019. At Attica I was taken out of my cell to a classroom for two hours a day. Leg shackles were applied and their chain was locked into a chair/desk combo where I was seated. Then the handcuffs I wore in transit were removed. Sometimes it was only a social worker or counselor and myself in the class together, with several corrections officers stationed outside the room, watching through the Plexiglas windows lining one entire wall. Other times one or two other prisoners were there with me, ad seg guys also trying to get out of the box after too many years being stuck there.

The social workers and counselors teaching the step-down class gave us lessons and practice in mindfulness, for one thing. At the time, I had been into mindfulness for exactly twenty years. So I could have written the basic book that they would read to us from. They taught lessons regarding managing anger without aggressionART its called: Aggression Replacement Therapy. ART was clearly created for very young individuals with issues. I knew this before a friend of mine looked it up on Wikipedia and told me it was originally produced for juvenile delinquents. We were grilled on the evils of drug use, too, when I hadnt smoked a joint or done any drug that wasnt prescribed by a prison doctor in well over a decade.

For another, much younger and less educated prisoner, I imagine the step-down program could be of real value. For a old man who is a voracious reader and has spent countless hours in meditation and self reflection over a three-decade-long stay in SHU,it wasuseless. I learned not a single thing of value through the Attica program that I did not already know well. Ditto for the nine months I have spent languishing in the step-down program at Mid-State Correctional Facility. Here, they teach the selfsame ART lessons, and in toto the programs curriculum is nearly identical to what a prisoner gets in the Attica program. But I went through it, participated, and sought to offer insight and edification to others in the program. On March 1, after a total of more than 20 months, I completed the step-down process.

I have done it. Now I am awaiting my transfer to a prison population in a maximum security prison unknown. I am ready to return to humanity.

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

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I was very moved by this testimony. If Mr Blake gets to read this comment, please tell him to look into a program called RTA, Rehabilitation Through the Arts. I lead their theater program at Fishkill Correctional for several years and I was told by many that RTA changed their lives. It may not be offered in the facility youre assigned to but if it is, it can be a real source of freedom in confinement. I wish you much luck and peace and fraternity where youre going. I also am sorry for the extreme torture and isolation youve endured.

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