

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/09/01/voices-from-solitary-a-spark-in-the-dark/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | September 1, 2012

The following comes from Joseph Stanwick, who has been in solitary confinement for 17 years. From Texass Gib Lewis Unit, he writes, I've seen men cut on themselves with razor blades, go on hunger strikes for the most absurd reasons, beat on the walls and doors because solitary confinement/isolation can drive you loony. One of the few sources of relief, he writes, are books. A book is a great companion in such situations. In this piece, he writes about a particular time he received books from the volunteer organization Books to Prisoners, and includes addresses where people may send books to organizations that distribute them to incarcerated people. (Check their websites to find out what books they need and accept.) This piece comes to Solitary Watch from the [Real Cost of Prisons Project](#), which maintains an outstanding collection of [Writing from Prison](#). Sal Rodriguez

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A year set-off from the parole board came in the mail this week. And it was my only mail. A filling that was laboriously installed in a lower molar by the prison dentist five years ago has crumbled away bit by bit this week, the only pencil that I own broke in half in the midst of writing a letter, and it has rained just enough every day this week to cancel my allotted hour of fresh air and exercise outside. In all, it has been one of those kinds of weeks when nothing goes right, and so on this day, the last day of the week, I lay up inside my cell determined to do nothing at all, passing the hours of the day away aimlessly and mindlessly listening to the sounds of falling rain and the resonant rumbling of thunder.

Time crept slowly by, and at some point in that endless stretch of afternoon between lunch and supper I succumbed to the tedium of idleness and was lulled into sleep by the mesmerizing beat of raindrops, tap, tap, tapping and soothing me into a snooze. I was far far away in dreamland when the steel plate covering the food slot in the cell door dropped open with a colossal bang of steel striking steel, and I leaped out of bed startled and half asleep, assuming it was chow time. I am not one to miss a meal, I tell you, and so I stood at the cell door waiting expectantly for a tray to come sliding through the opened food slot, as I have and it has hundreds of times before. But no tray came sliding in, and it took me a minute or so in my muddled and drowsy state to come to the understanding that it was not chow time at all, but the mailman at the door instead. And after examining the mug shot on my prisoner identification card long enough to be convinced that the burr headed and glaring visage was myself, he pushed a brown paper wrapped package inside through the opened slot, addressed to me.

It had been a while since I got a package in the mail from Books to Prisoners, and I tore into it in unabashed haste and hope and discovered, to my great joy, one book in the lot that looked irresistible, a paperback travel log with a cover image so intriguing that I opened it at once, intending to scan the introduction only. But once I began reading in it, I could not pull my eyes away, and continued on fully absorbed in the travels until the sounds of the food cart rolling into the cell block roused me from it. But now that the chow cart has come and gone and left me feeling sated and sociable with an ample portion of tuna casserole slowly and deliciously winding its way through my inner self, let me tell you about this irresistible book that has a photograph of an old locomotive engine on the front cover. It is an accounting of a long journey by train that begins in Boston and goes all the way down to the bottom of South America. The author, a great wit and entertainer, dispenses oodles of absurd anecdotes along with fascinating historical and geographical data en route from page one to four hundred, and he is someticulously attentive in his descriptions of all he sees and those he meets along the way that you come to feel like you are there, too, sitting one seat over with your face pressed up against the window pane and don't you know, I wish I was. Oh man oh man, I wish I was!

With no television, no radio, no windows, and no company, a book is a momentous event in my 8 x 12 universe, a spark in the dark. And not long after the food cart departed, three quick raps on the cell wall preceded a note tied onto a string that came sliding in under the door, both from my neighbor, eager to know if I got some books in the mail.

Books to Prisoners is a group of volunteers that mails books free of cost to any prisoner requesting something to read. They operate solely on donations of books and postage, tape and packaging, time and love. Books are great companions and the only relief for many prisoners locked away in solitary confinement, isolated from others for years. Before I sat down to write this, I tied a book onto my neighbor's string, and when he gets some books in the mail I will shoot my string/note over to him. Thank you, Books to Prisoners. Below I have listed some addresses for those who would like to send a spark in the dark and for those who need a spark:

D.C. Area Books to Prisoners, P.O. Box 34190, Washington, D.C. 20043-4190

Books to Prisoners, c/o Left Bank Bookstore, 92 Pike Street #B Seattle, WA 98101

Inside Books Project, c/o 12th Street Books, 827 W 12th Street, Austin, TX 78701

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I think Joseph Stanwick is my half-brother; we were separated from each other (our family of 5 children was split up when our parents marriage ended in 1959). I have tried locating him with the links provided, but I am not finding him. Can you tell me how I can locate him and let him know that his little sister (Linda) is looking for him?

Hi* This is a neat article* Thanks for sharing it with us & for all you do for the inmates. God Bless You & Yours gelly

You can read his profile here:

<http://www.texastribune.org/library/data/texas-prisons/inmates/joseph-edward-stanwick/1423/>

At 57 and 137lbs this 61 year old convicted burglar is most likely held in solitary for his own protection.

If you ever did time before you would understand that sometimes it is kill or be killed or be exploited and abused. You cannot just avoid people in prison.

I doubt that Ted Kacyznski is much of a risk in general population but he probably prefers the isolation because he never leaves his cell even when given a chance.

And the convicted child molester Warren Jeffs controls a large religious sec from prison and if anyone should be in a CMU he should be.

Google Warren Jeffs Texas Observer No Refuge for an excellent article that came out on August 1, 2012 on how the state screwed up. Seems if you got money you can still control your empire outside.

Like you Im conflicted on some of these cases and many if not most people change over time.

I think the point is this site sees it as inhuman no matter what their crime was.

With a little effort you can research these inmates like I do.

It would be easier if they did it themselves like when they profiled Silverstein.

Why was his rap sheet profiled more than others?

Whenever I read a post on this site by someone in solitary confinement, & this info is not in the post, I always wonder why hes where he is/how he got there, & why his stretch there has been so long, if/when it has. Id be the 1st to agree that there can be little doubt that the use of solitary confinement is abused, that it can take little provocation to get there, but for those who believe it should be abolished, I disagree. There are some violent & very dangerous people in prison populations, who have taken a life (or more) or otherwise shown themselves to be incorrigible, & for me, solitary is the only place for them, along w/the likes of Eric Rudolf & Ted Kacyznski. If a prisoner is put in solitary who has not threatened anyones life, tried to escape, or initiated/planned a riot/serious infractions, I mean & the point can be made by a relatively brief stint in solitary that what hes doing is completely unacceptable, will not be tolerated, & can be given a 2nd chance @ life in the population, I think that that should be done. From all that Ive read here & on other blog/websites, I dont think that thats being done enough. It doesnt seem to me that people are not being given definite release dates from solitary that are predicated on good behavior, such that the person has any hope of his situation changing anytime soon, if ever. I am glad that this man is able to get books that can help pass the time in what must be one lonely existence.

Have copied address and will donate

I have some personal experience of the importance of books inside
Great writing my friend x

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