

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/07/04/voices-from-solitary-what-prisoners-have/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | July 4, 2010

For Independence Day, we are posting a poem that won second prize in the most recent writing contest sponsored by the [PEN American Centers Prison Writing Project](#). (To donate to this program, which brings an opportunity for freedom of expression to human beings who have so few other freedoms, [click here](#).)

This poem is by prisoner [Christian J. Weaver](#), whose personal statement reads: I am currently serving a life sentence for murder. While in jail, I became a Christian and pled guilty to my crime. My life changed drastically. Weaver writes that while in prison he developed a passion for social justice and studied the history of the U.S. prison system and found an interesting progression: from slavery to sharecropping/convict leasing to prison. Weaver also comments on the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1865, which says: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States. Weaver writes that he also found that the 13th Amendment didn't end slavery. Now convicts instead would be slaves of the state. This explained the abuses listed in rehabilitation, as well as the state's lack of interest in a self-reformed prisoner.

What prisoners are

Despised. Rejected. Feared. Abhorred. Forgotten. Hated. Ridiculed. Scorned. Humiliated. Cursed. Berated. Shamed. Divided. Crushed. Shackled. Maimed.

What prisoners have

No sky. No grass. No trees. No travel. No children. No wife. No man's best friend. No trust. No suffrage. No income. No autonomy. No power to do good. No scent of a woman. No gurgling infant. No freedom of speech. No freedom of press. No freedom of self-expression. No dignity. No self-respect. No right to self-defense. No sympathy. No credibility. No honor. No acknowledgement of goodness. No acknowledgement of progress. No acknowledgement of remorse. No acknowledgement of existence. No image of God.

What prisoners endure

Malnourishment. Beatings. Murder. Medical neglect. Torture. Humiliation. Forced labor. Sexual abuse. Broken families. Parentless children. Cursing. Threats. Social stigmas. Extortion. Self-hatred. Collaboration. Violence. Betrayal. Insanity. Suicide.

What I've achieved

Wisdom. Sobriety. A profound respect for moral law. A deep religious faith. Self-respect. Physical discipline. Mental discipline. Intense scholarship. The writing of poetry, novels, and essays. Honesty. Empathy. Self-sacrificing love. Self-control. The ability to endure hatred without hating back. Reconciliation with family. Reconciliation with friends. An inclination toward charity. Fortitude. Joy amid despair. Peace amid violence. Stability amid madness. Hope for a future that's fifty years away. Illumination.

What I am

Despised. Rejected. Feared. Abhorred. Forgotten. Hated. Ridiculed. Scorned. Humiliated. Cursed. Berated. Shamed. Divided. Crushed. Shackled. Maimed.

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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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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such a true pome sadly it is indeed what you gain but at such a cost that should not be needed at all i understand this pome well it speaks to me he has found the light in justice i speak of so much if only those not in justice would find it as well sadly meny have not still seen it meny do not make it to see the light i speak of wich is why i fight to bring it to them every day even if that mens going undercover in the doc i will do it for them as they say keep your frends close enmeys closer what better way to lern study and find the weeknes of them all then to make them thinkg your one of them on thare side one day i will vointear to work in thare prisons i will go undercover make them thinkg i for the doc and all they stand for it is they who will let in the light and when i ready i will let thare be light lol ny doc hear i come your best frend looking out to make your mison the way of my life lol till i stike lol let us see what you thinkg of your work now lol in deed this shall be fun

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Solitary Watch

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