

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Three Stories of Holding on to Humanity in the Face of Extreme Isolation

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 17, 2019

In our overly busy, hyper-connected world, the idea of alone time holds a powerful appeal. Solitude and silence are seen as things that create space for relaxation and self-awareness things to be sought out and savored.

But in the ten years since we started Solitary Watch, we've learned about another kind of alone that, when you even try to imagine it, shakes you to the core. It's a state of being that tens of thousands of Americans experience every day not by choice, but by force. It may last a few weeks, several years, or a lifetime. And there is nothing else like it. Because when you're in solitary confinement, you are, really and truly, alone.

One person who wrote to us from his cell described life in solitary confinement as a soul-crushing loneliness that never ends. Another called it a destroyer of humanity. Solitary is a level of isolation so unnatural to human beings that in just a few weeks, it begins to change the structure and chemistry of the brain and so painful that, as suicide rates in solitary confinement show, some people would rather die than continue to endure it.

In the past decade, Solitary Watch has become a beacon that thousands of men and women in solitary confinement have reached out to because they know we'll always reach back. Our series *Voices from Solitary* is a commitment to telling stories *about* solitary, written by people *in* solitary. We share just a few of them with you below.

Against the worst odds, these stories have made their way to us and out into the world, becoming unlikely sources of inspiration messages from people locked in concrete closets, stripped of the basic tenets of humanity, who are somehow able to maintain their grasp on beauty and kindness, strength and grace. That they exist at all feels like a minor miracle. Some writers in solitary have told us that just knowing people on the outside are reading their words makes them feel a little less alone.

Our ability to connect with these people and continue sharing their stories depends entirely on 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. Through December 31st, every donation you make will be doubled, up to up to \$1,000 each, through the NewsMatch program, funded by the Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation, among others.

[su_button url=https://www.newsmatch.org/organizations/solitary-watch target=blank style=flat background=#f6900b 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 help us continue this vital work[/su_button]

As you read these stories, share them if you're inspired, and please donate whatever you can to help us continue this work. Because there are still far too many stories out there from far too many people who know what it means to be really, truly alone.

In [Thin Comfort](#), Joseph Stanwick, who spent half his life in solitary confinement, recalls a holiday season on lockdown when the unexpected gift of jam sandwiches connected him to another incarcerated man that he had never met.

In [A Mouse and a Murderer](#), William Blake, who has been in solitary for 35 years, relates the story of the being who briefly shared his cell.

In [Loneliness Is a Destroyer of Humanity](#), Jesse Wilson, held at the notorious federal supermax prison ADX Florence, tells how a narrow slit of window saves him from complete despair.

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Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

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.

Help Expose the Hidden World 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.

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