Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://solitarywatch.org/2014/06/13/voices-solitary-23-1/

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by Voices from Solitary | June 13, 2014

*The author of the following piece of memoir, **Shaka Senghor**, served nearly two decades in Michigan state prisons for a murder committed when he was 19-years old. On his website, he states: Writing about my wrongs was the first of many steps that I took to atone for taking a mans life. Through the transformative power of writing, I accepted responsibility for my decisions and have used my experience to help others avoid the path that I took in my youth. Now back in the free world, he is a speaker, mentor, and author who has published several books and given TED Talks at several venues.*

The following narrative, which describes the authors first day in solitary confinement, is excerpted from a longer piece that appears in a new volume writing,Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America. The collection is edited by Doran Larson, a professor of English at Hamilton College and founder of the American Prison Writing Archive. Currently a work in progress, it will be the first archive dedicated to prison writing, and will be a place where incarcerated people can bear witness to the conditions in which they live, to what is working and what is not inside American prisons, and where they can contribute to public debate about the American prison crisis. Jean Casella

. . . . . .

In my first year in prison, I found myself serving a one-year stint in solitary confinement for assault on an inmate, assault on staff and dangerous contraband. I split that year in the hole between the Michigan Reformatory and Standish Maximum Security Prison. It was my first foray into the abysmal subculture that was the subject of whispered conversations on prison yards and behind the closed doors of the administrations office. It was a place where a twisted game of tug of war played itself out between the humane and inhumane. It was in this cold, dark, heartless place that I came face to face with a gruesome reality: the isolation and inhumane conditions of solitary confinement were responsible for distorting the psyche of countless men and women.

My first stint in the hole was the first time I had witnessed the tearing asunder of the human soul. At nineteen years old, I was thrown head first into a subculture of despair, loneliness and deep-seeded anger. I remember when the officer placed the burning cold handcuffs on my wrists and told me I was being taken to the hole. I literally thought they were going to throw me in a dirt-covered hole in the ground until they were convinced I had changed my behavior. I twisted and jerked around in the handcuffs as everything inside me told me to fight to get free; it was a deeply entrenched defense mechanism encoded in my DNA. I was a descendant of a slave people, and I was sure that my ancestors had rebelled against their captors. It felt natural for me to resist as much as I could, even though I knew deep inside that I couldnt burst out of the handcuffs. But resist I did.

After being subdued by several officers, I was carted off to the hole and thrown into the shower where I was strip-searched. The officer conducting the strip search nearly broke my arm as he pulled it out of the slot in the cage to remove the cuffs. I had assaulted one of his co-workers and he was letting me know that he didnt appreciate it. Once the cuffs were off, I was forced to strip out of my clothes. As I stood in the middle of the shower room naked, I felt like a slave on an auction block. When the officer returned, he threw an oversized brown jumpsuit through the slot. I dressed hastily and was then escorted to a segregation cell. When I realized the hole was nothing more than another cell block, I calmed down a little. At the time, I was at a new regional facility called Carson City so the cell was modern and clean. A smirk crossed my face as I looked around. I thought to myself, if this was all they had to control me, they would be in for a surprise when I was released. It wasnt until a couple days later that I realized I was the one in for a shock.

One evening after chow, I was told to pack up all of my property; I was getting transferred in the morning back to the Michigan

Reformatory in Ionia where I would be placed on long-term segregation status. In prison vernacular, we called it lay down. When I first came to the hole, I asked one of the inmates who had been in prison for a while why they had given it that name. He responded with a laugh before saying, Because down here, all you can do is lay your ass down and read, lay your ass down and write, or lay your ass down and talk shit all day. So its up to you young blood how you do it, but all I can tell you is, dont take this shit laying down. The administration, on the other hand, chose to use the much more lofty euphemism administrative segregation. It sounded politically correct, and oh so professional, but when they werent on record, they called it the hole like the rest of us.

During the forty-minute ride back to Ionia, thoughts of what the hole would be like tumbled through my head like a gymnast. Horror stories of how inmates in the hole had been found hung in their cells, or mysteriously suffocated with their own socks, or how the officers would come into your cell with the goon squad and beat you two breaths short of death, all ran tirelessly through my mind. What about all of the resistance I had put up? What if the officers at the other prison had called their buddies to give me a nice work over? After being processed, I was escorted to the hole in a cellblock known as the Graves. It had earned the moniker from the captives there because once you were thrown in the Graves, it was like being entombed in a place where you lost sight of time. It was as though you were dead to everyone in general population, and the cells were so small that you felt like you had been squeezed into a coffin.

Being sentenced to lay down was to be sentenced to an indeterminate amount of time in hell. The first thing I noticed when I entered the cellblock was the gloomy ambiance. The windows were painted a gray and the only natural light present was the few streams that snuck through when the officers were nice enough to leave one of the windows cracked, which was very rare. Being stripped of all personal belongings, with the exception of the bare necessities, made it impossible to tell if it was morning or night unless you asked the officers or the windows were open. Other than that, I had to guess the time based on when my meals were passed out.

As I was escorted down to my cell, I had to navigate my way around spoiled food, empty milk cartons, fecal-stained towels, and piles of shredded and soiled paper. I kept my head straight forward as I walked toward my cell, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see several captives standing at their bars looking out curiously. I had learned from day one inside of the Reformatory not to look into another captives cell. It was an old code of respect. Since we were already being deprived of so much by the system, we didnt want to deny each other the last semblance of privacy, so we didnt look into each others cell. Not everyone stayed true to this code, and it was often the cause of conflict, leading the Peeping Tom to be stabbed on the yard, or flashed with genitalia. I had no desire to see another man shaking his private parts in anger, nor did I have a desire to stab anyone or get stabbed for looking in someones cell, so I always kept my head forward.

When I reached my cell, the bars squeaked open and the officer ordered me to step inside. Once the bars closed shut, he removed the handcuffs and left. I looked around at the dingy cell in disgust. The bed was six inches off the floor and the toilet was stuffed behind a small footlocker. In order to sit down and take a dump, I had to remove my whole jumpsuit so that I could fold my legs behind the locker. After my initial observations, I stood at my cell bars for the next hour waiting on the officer to make his round so that I could get some cleaning supplies to sanitize my cell. To my surprise, it was relatively quiet, but as I would soon learn, this was the calm before the storm. Most of the captives in the hole slept the bulk of their days away only waking up to get their food trays. Once the final meal of the day was passed out, the cellblock would come alive with activity.

When the officer returned, I asked him for some cleaning supplies and was informed that the porters would pass them out after lunch, so I continued to stand at the bars until lunch. There was no way I was going to sit or lay down on a mattress that someone else had sweated and farted on without it being sanitized. When the porters arrived with our food trays, I took mine and stood at the bars eating the hastily thrown together meal. The portions were nearly a half-size smaller than what I was used to receiving in general population. I devoured the small meal in all of five minutes like a ravenous wolf and placed my tray on the bars. I didnt really like drinking milk all that much, so I left the carton sitting on the locker. When they came around to pick up trays, one of the porters whispered that I had better hide the milk in my locker unless I wanted to be placed on food loaf. I placed the milk back on the tray as I looked at him curiously. I had never heard of food loaf, but from the way he conveyed the message, I could tell it was something very bad. I also realized his Man, you crazy look was letting me know that it in the hole, no food was to be wasted. That milk I threw back on the tray could have bought me a bag of cereal, a juice, or an extra piece of toast. In the hole, everything pertaining to eating and smoking was to be bartered and nothing was to be wasted. Once they banned smoking, a cigarette smuggled in could net you three dollars in store items. It was in the hole that I learned to start eating Brussels sprouts and dressing and a few other things I would have never eaten if I were in general population. Every time I ate green beans or Brussels sprouts, I thought about all of the times my parents had tried to get me to eat them when I was a child, and I felt some shame.

After the trays were picked up, a porter came back and handed me some cleaning supplies. I swept beneath the small bunk and was surprised at how much dirt and dust came from under the bed. I washed the mattress, toilet and sink down before making my bed. After I cleaned up and laid back on the bunk, I drifted off into a fitful sleep. My mind was full of thoughts that I had stuffed deep down inside where they were safe. All of the things I had hidden from while in general population by watching television or playing basketball to exhaustion now came rushing back to the forefront of my mind. I dreamt of how soft my sons mothers lips used to feel against mine. I dreamt of how good it used to feel to guzzle down an ice cold forty ounce on a hot summer day. I dreamt of the late night laughter that echoed through the hood as we sat on the porch at two in the morning playing the dozens. My dreams were a kaleidoscope of all that my life had been, and all that it could have been.

I was awakened by the sound of the chow cart squeaking down the tier. I retrieved my tray and sucked down the bland slop that they called dinner, and this time I drank the milk. Despite my aversion to plain milk, it sure beat the brownish water that drizzled out of the old porcelain sink in my cell. I set the tray on the bars, laid back on my bunk and forced myself back to sleep in an attempt to retrieve those lost and stolen dreams, but to no avail. After the officers picked up the food trays, they passed out mail and the cellblock was pretty quiet for the next few hours. The hum of a few conversations could be heard as inmates discussed religion, politics, and stories of their lives on the streets. Stories shared between inmates were our way of staying connected to the neighborhoods we came from. It was one of the few means we had of touching, tasting and smelling our former lives, if only for a few minutes. It didnt matter if you were part of the conversation or not, you could relate, because when it was all said and done, most Black communities were pretty much the same. So when I sat back on my bunk listening to a guy from Flint, Saginaw or Lansing talking about their neighborhoods and what they had been through, it was like reliving my own memories of life before prison.

One of the things about prison is that you have some very amusing storytellers with expansive imaginations, capable of creating the kind of vivid imagery that would put Hollywood screenwriters to shame. I have always marveled at how a person could remember the exact color of their socks, how much money they had in their pocket to the nearest dime, and all the ingredients that were used to make the meal on the day they got shot, had sex for the first time, or made their first thousand. When retelling a story, everyone has a tendency to embellish things a little, but in the hole, there were a few captives who were infamous for their ability to tell a lie-filled story that was so entertaining that each night everyone would grow quiet as they recounted their neighborhood exploits.

As the voices hummed about from cell to cell, I found myself thinking about how I had arrived at this point in my life. Growing up, I never imagined that I would be living my life out caged in a cell like a wild animal. I was too smart for this shit, I thought angrily as I stared up at the paint-chipped ceiling. But no matter how many times I closed and opened my eyes, my nightmarish existence was still there. After speaking with several captives at length, I realized that most of us go through this extreme feeling of disbelief. At some point, we all think this is a nightmare, and that at any moment we will awaken and be back home in the warm comfort of our own bed. But we all learn after years of incarceration that prison is all too real. And for me, things were about to get more real than I could have ever imagined.

After getting bored listening to the conversations going on around me, I decided to get up and write a few letters. The first, I wrote to my sons mother, and then to my ex-girlfriend in Ohio. Before I knew it, I was writing to everyone I knew. The hours spun past quickly as I scratched out letter after letter with a dull two-inch pencil. When the third shift came on at ten oclock, I was still immersed in writing letters. It was through writing letters home that I realized writing was my escape. With a pen and piece of paper, I could get away whenever I wanted to. I could go stand on the corner in my neighborhood and no one could stop me. I could drive down the freeway and go see my ex-girlfriend in Ohio if that was what I wanted to do, and the bars and wired fences couldnt hold me back. Writing was freedom! So I wrote until midnight when they cut the power off and my fingers became sore to the bone.

When the lights went out, the cellblock had an eerie feel to it. I was on the bottom tier toward the end, and there were no lights in the hall near my cell so I couldnt stand at the bars and read or write like guys who had lights in front of their cells. I climbed into my bunk and prayed that I could drift off into a deep sleep before the dreams of my life before prison came back to haunt me. I had to get away from them; otherwise I knew I would go insane. There was nothing I could do to change my reality, and I didnt need to be constantly reminded by the dreams. As I lay there trying to capture sleep, the world around me exploded into chaos.

Get yall bitch ass up. Aint no sleep around here, a loud voice called, followed by a sound as loud and startling as a shotgun blast in a small church. Boom! Boom! Boom! The sound came relentlessly as the voice banged the lid down on his footlocker over and over, which set into motion a chain of events that was unlike anything I had ever imagined. For the next four hours, the hole became an anarchist stronghold as inmates banged lockers and hurled racial epithets and disparaging homosexual remarks through the air like hand grenades. Some stuffed their toilets with sheets and flushed until water cascaded over the tier like Victoria Falls. I stared out of my cell in disbelief as the floor quickly became a small wading pool. Trash and sheets that had been set on fire flew out of countless cells. After their initial attempts to restore order by turning off the water supply to all of the cells, the officers gave up. As dawn slowly crept upon us, everyone settled down and the cellblock grew quiet again.

The only thing that seemed to be stirring was a giant rat the size of a possum, who the captives had named Food Loaf, after the loaf of bread-sized brick of mashed up food that was fed to recalcitrant captives. I watched as Food Loaf sludged through the murky water to retrieve the soggy bread and rotted apple cores that had been thrown out onto the cellblock floors. He moved with a quiet confidence about him that came as a result of being around hundreds of people every day. The rest of the vermin that darted in and out of the cells were more cautious. I often wondered why no one had killed Food Loaf, but then it dawned on me. In a lot of ways, he was a lot like us. He was an outcast, and for the most part, he was despised by everyone and we could all identify with that. Though the term rat had been used over the years to describe someone who told on others to protect their own asses, Food Loaf had won over our respect and was therefore allowed to coexist with us.

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 encouragescomments 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. Commentsthat violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Thank you for sharing my work. I am now free and doing advocacy work.

Since I found this website, I have been in correspondence with two new friends in SC. It helps me a lot. I was nave about sending a book. It has to be new and sent from an approved vendor. It cant go into the library or shared with anyone else. I tried to share my own books, we cant afford to buy new books. Today I am going to copy Senka Senghors memoir to see if it goes through. It is July 4 and all I can think of is the misery and suffering in our prisons. We must do something about it, but what?

This is disgraceful and inhumane. We all must do something about it!

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about rights and permissions.

Solitary Watch News