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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by Jean Casella and James Ridgeway | September 25, 2011

In 2008 Hector Gallegos won second prize in the essay category in PEN American Centers Prison Writing Contest with his powerful account of life in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) of Californias Pelican Bay State Prison. What follows is a long excerpt from his essay, entitled Species of a Lesser God; the full piece can be read on PENs website.

Indelibly etched in the canyons of memory I can remember being herded onto the Grey Gooses as these prison transportation buses are commonly referred to throughout the California Penal System. The solemn procession of prisoners wore a somber ghostly mask; one by one waist-chained, handcuffed and shackled we stepped into the belly of the Grey Goose. I cannot quite describe with any degree of accuracy, the feeling that settled over me prior to boarding, but there was an ominous silence which hung thickly in the air like a heavy dark cloud forecasting a wickedly vicious storm. It projected the coming of a tempest that would progressively descend upon my life like a savage moving monsoon. Indeed, a psychological-emotional storm we would all come to knew in the life negating emptiness that awaited our arrival in the Security Housing Units (SHU) of Pelican Bay State Prison

The heat inside the bus was as stifling as the tension which lingered in the surrounding atmosphere. As the bus roared angrily down Highway 101 the trance inducing drone of the big diesel engine lulled me into reflections of my life. Memories that had soared past me like the scenery flying by outside the barred, tinted windows of the anonymous Grey Groose and as swiftly as the life I had led thus far.

The restless dismal chimes of shackles and chains broke me away from the melancholy spell I had fallen under, and there followed the sudden realization that the world of oceans, mountains and landscapes would all soon be but a memory of another lifetime. Looking around me I found not to be alone in this realization, for the other prisoners there seemed to be entertaining similar thoughts, but no one dare speak of them.

What awaited us at the Pelican Bay SHU with its eerily silent corridors was a purgatory of sorts, a vacuum of uncertainty, sealed off from every thing and every one. A place where one is virtually entombed in a concrete vault with scarred and pitted walls depicting the idleness, boredom and, in some cases, the lunacy of a previous occupant. Its a world of its own where, for most, refuge can only be found through a dreamless state of slumber.

There is a look in the SHU prisoners eyes that is haunting. A foreboding look from eyes that have themselves stared into the eyes of madness and human cruelty. Eyes that have looked far into the abyss of emptiness. Eyes belonging to a species of a lesser God.

This is where my writings began. Borne of a burning need to find meaning during one of the darkest periods in my life. That this took place within the confines of the most depraved, isolated and suffocating prison units in California, did much to determine my present view of the world, perception of self and that of the human condition as a whole. It was a period in time which would ultimately lead me through the loneliest corridors of my soul, across the coldest expanses of relived personal tragedy and finally back to the fulcrum in which this paradox is precariously balanced.

It is within this balance between the suffering of existence and the reality of living where I found a powerful hidden truth that gave way to a deeper meaning to life. I say this with a deep rooted conviction because I have come face to face with what has been said are among mans greatest fears; the fear of death, fear of the dark and fear of being alone. Before I continue, however, I wish to briefly define what is meant by this writer in having faced the fears mentioned above, so that the intended meaning is not lost on the reader. It further provides a basis from where the imagination is better able to perceive the underlying message which yearns so strongly and with such passion to express itself. Its an account that not only wants, but needs to be told.

In any case, when I speak of having faced the fear of death, I do not mean DEATH as in the clinical sense of the word, but rather of two aspects of the one thing; both of which are essential to the phenomenon of death. One being symbolic of death as in the then and there physical presence, and the other of a physic-psychological color. The prisoner who has given it some thought, in particular the ones confined in extremely isolated conditions such as those found in the Security Housing Units (SHUs) of Pelican Bay State Prison, soon finds himself faced with a terribly frightening reality. That, with the exception of a few loving family members, or maybe a dear friend, he no longer exists to the outside world. The only thing that remains of him out there are memories, and the love for him vigilantly kept in the sanctity of the hearts and minds of his family. As such, in a world beyond prison walls, one is nothing more than a ghost of his

former self. The point is nailed home when one realizes how much of his life has passed him by while he sits in the same cell, year after year. He longs for what is passing him by, knowing he can never be a part of it. It is as if he has died and observes this from a reality, which indeed perhaps only the dead would understand.

Another aspect of the symbolism of death experienced by a prisoner is when he discerns, by the mere fact of his incarceration he has killed the Him that should have been, the lover he wishes to be, the father he cannot be, the son he failed to be and the person he never grew into. He has, in essence, killed, at least for the duration of his confinement, that greater part of himself. In this sense and for the time being he may well be dead, for he cannot live up to the expectations of what he should have been. The prisoner lives on the dark side of the moon. He is tormented by two worlds, the one he lives in and the one he left behind; caught in sticky quagmire somewhere between heaven and Hell.

In regard to the physic-psychological aspect of death. What is meant here is the collective summation of the effects isolation has on a person subjected to a prolonged period of sensory deprivation. Here a prisoner is no longer able to experience what is inherent in human lifethe touch of another human being! I speak of a place where one is stripped of not only his freedom but of his association with other human beings and of his personal sense of purpose and awareness. Where common compassion, pity and human decency are virtually unheard of. And when man is deprived of the qualities which make him human, for a lengthy amount of time, he is gradually and unwittingly transformed into a creature of sorts and will respond in kind. Then there are those who will give way to perhaps the saddest, cruelest death a man can suffer; death of the mind and will to resist. An individuals sense of self worth is quietly and maliciously gnawed away at by monotony and emptiness. Death by attrition slow, sure, and maddeningly relentless.

I can describe what I just have with such clarity because I gave witness to it in the catacombs of Pelican Bay. And like any experience that cannot be wholly understood by mere observation; I lived it! I, like the countless others whose misfortune it was, and continues to be in the SHU, know how cold and terrifying it is to be in the suffocating grip of oblivion. An oblivion I came to terms with only because I was bullied into it by a brutal reality. But whats unsettling about this acceptance is the realization that within this oblivion my thoughts alone confined my existence. For in the face of such emptiness I had nothing by which to measure it. Questions such as, Why do I continue to forge on? would pound away at me. For what purpose? And most of all, Who or what have I become? It was then when I was cast under the unbearable light of conscious being. I was forced into it**.** The isolation in the SHU demanded that I ponder my situation, otherwise I would have surely drowned in its paralyzing numbness, living out a slow death. Even as I write this account, I wonder if my writings are not merely the ravings of a mad man, perhaps I am already submerged in the numbness.

To question ones own sanity and existence is a disquieting discourse, because when the questions are posed, initially there are no viable answers. One shouts out these questions in the seemingly empty canyons of thought, only to be reciprocated with haunting echoes of the same questions. To realize this is to recognize the pressing need for meaning in ones life. Here in prison one must travel through the crucibles of self-examination and through all of its fires to arrive at the answers. In doing this one must first learn to confront his fears, whether they be death, darkness or loneliness, before he is able to move on in search of his own lifes meaning. It is here in this gulag of concrete, steel and misery where I came to learn the subtle difference between existing and living. This self discovery came by way of learning what it feels like spending countless hours in the icy grip of loneliness. Through this experience I am able to understand why so many people are so utterly afraid of being alonea piece of knowledge attached to the price of bitterness.

My personal experience is not just a poignant account of human misery in solitary confinement, but also of a collective experience of what prison life entails. I believe it gives the reader a penetrating insight into the human condition as a whole. Its through my personal writings that I seek to reach out. Not only for myself but for those others whom are still struggling to find a rational context for it all

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.

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by Voices from Solitary

September 30, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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SHU abolishmentThats what I want. This is the most inhumane form of treatment. But it does not surprise me. Human beings are able to turn away from the suffering they inflict on others. Look at the torture of animals, the cruel torture.

what a true form he speeks solitary dose suck but in ways it opens ones mind if they make it out sane they come to see life as it is and just how dum we are oddly it is inlightment but at a cost much to grate that is as well a trial that meny do not make it out of sane and those who do still bare the scars forever and must live with what they come to see from it may thare be light in the darknes of justice

Great piece that brings back so much in my memory even thou I only experienced a flash of what this man has gone through. The bus rides are indeed a poignant, and pensive experience. I know the trance well. It is so powerful that I find the memory of each of my trips to a new institution are impossible to recall. The only one I can truly recall is a round trip on an adult prison bus that I took from Ione, CA to L.A. to go to court. Probably since I knew what to expect. This trip however was a eye opener as we visited all the major prisons of the day. Folsom, Vacaville, Atascadero State Hospital, San Quentin, Soledad, California Mens Colony and a collection of lesser institutions. After bearing witness to an escape attempt and a sexual assault I was back in Prestons Sequoia Lodge housing the most violent wards of the state. But even there I felt relieved to be back.

I can only vaguely imagine what he has experienced. The same goes for solitary. I have only spent a few weeks at a time X dozens of trips. Even that does not equal even 1 year total. How sad of a life or maybe he is right it is a form of death. Of those that are all ready civilly dead.

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