Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://solitarywatch.org/2010/02/23/voices-from-solitary-charles-p-norman-on-the-insanity-of-solitary-confinement/

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by James Ridgeway | February 23, 2010

Charles Patrick Norman, who has served more than 30 years in Floridas prisons,is aneloquent and accomplished writer whosepoetry, short stories, essays, memoirs, and plays have won several awards, including first place in the memoir category in the 2008 PEN Prison Writing Contest.

After reading some of his work, I wrote to him to tell him about Solitary Watch and invite him to send us any relevant writing for our Voices from Solitary archive. Charlie generously wrote a long piece for Solitary Watch about his own experiences and thoughts on the subject.

Charles P. Normanspiece, called Caged Beasts: The Insanity of Solitary Confinement,appears in full in the memoirs section of Voices from Solitary. We are including some excerpts here. In this excerpt, after describingthe anguish and madness he saw, as a child,in the eyes of a caged gorilla in the Houston Zoo,Charliewrites abouthis first glimpse of the effects of long-term lockdown on a human being.

I sat on a bench in the Reidsville, Georgia, jail, waiting for an airplane ride to Florida. An elderly deputy brought in a man in a convict-striped uniform, who sat down next to me. Ive never seen a *whiter* person, before or since. The man wasnt white so much as he was translucent. It was like I could almost see through the manghostly-white skin, blue eyes, squinting in the light, pink, inflamed eyelids, scabby shaved head. I could see the blue veins in his hands, resting on his knees, and could almost imagine the corpuscles coursing toward his fingertips. Was this an albino, a mutant?

What happened to you? I asked.

He slowly turned his head and looked at me, as if realizing for the first time that someone else was sitting next to himHe opened his mouth to speak, and I saw the brown, rotting, gapped teeth like so many pieces of bark stuck behind his lips. The rancid breath repelled me, and I leaned away from him. He didnt appear to be much older than I was, early thirties, perhaps, but it was hard to tell. He had a cowed, browbeaten look, and it took a moment for him to form a response.

In stops and starts he told me that he was being released from prison that day, Georgia State Prison at Reidsville. I didnt even know they had a prison there. Years later I learned that Burt Reynolds had filmed the original The Longest Yard movie at Reidsville, and heard many horror stories from fellow Florida prisoners whod previously vacationed there. A human zoo.

I never learned his name. I didnt ask, and he didnt volunteer. Hed spent the past fifteen years in the box, solitary, and had not seen the sun until that day, when it blinded him. I wondered what hed done to deserve such treatment. Thats often the first thought people have when meeting someone like him or mewhat did you do? It must be his fault, right? He must have brought this onto himself. In my prison education I eventually learned that you dont have to do anything, sometimes, to unleash the weight of God, the Devil, and the prison system onto yourself, like the falling buildings of the Haitian earthquake, burying people alive. Sometimes it takes years to be dug out of the rubble of imprisonment. Many never make it out alive at all. I still await my rescue.

In the half hour we shared the same bench I discovered that hed left others behind at the state prison whod been in lockup years longer than he had been. Where was he going? Back to his hometown. Did he have any people, family? No. They were either dead or gone. Hed not received a single letter the entire time. Visits were not allowed to those in solitary. What was he going to do? Where was he going to stay? He didnt know. He expected someone would tell him when he got to where he was going. He would be on parolescrew up and come back.

The deputy brought a tee shirt, trousers, and a pair of cheap shoes for him to change into. They threwthe convict stripes into the trash can. He still looked like a deathly-ill person when hed changed into the street clothes. The deputy told him to come on, he had a bus to catch. As he shuffled out I wished him luck. He said nothing and didnt look back..

Charlie Norman alsowrites about what he learned fromhis own experiences in solitary confinement.

Little did I know, that day, that the wheels of justice were already turning toward me, and I would be ground exceedingly fine during

thirty-two years of continuous incarceration, for the record, for a murder I did not commit. Didnt matter. And off and on during that time, I would experience varying lengths of solitary confinement, though never to the destructive ends of the Houston Zoo gorilla or the Reidsville ghost. I had the benefit of their experiences to draw on, and the determination to never allow them to break me, to become less than human.

To this day solitary confinement is a corrections tool that is known by euphemisms like administrative or disciplinary segregation or close management, a.k.a. C.M., in Florida. An ordinary person can get a good idea of what solitary confinement is like by walking the rows of cages at a local animal shelter and observing the dogs held there, not only the living conditions, but also the behavior of the caged animal and how it has adapted to confined living.

There are more safeguards than there once were, but its only a matter of degree. Depending on the length of confinement and the conditions, some prisoners Ive known have claimed to like C.M., a year or two in a one-man cell, their own TV, reading material, no hassles from predatory prisoners in open population. Within the past year, I knew a prisoner who planted a knife on himself, under his mattress, then told on himself, guaranteeing a few years in solitary, since hed been there before. He was caught up in homosexual intrigue and just wanted to get away from it all for awhile. He got his wish. Hell be numbed out on psychotropic medications, will sleep for most of each twenty-four hour day, will have his trays of food brought to him, will become progressively more mentally disturbed until he dies. With a mandatory life sentence, he has no hope for release. Such despair would seem to be unbearable. Sadly, it is a common story.

Clearly, Charles P. Normans writing is a big part of what enables him to hold on to his humanity in spite of such experiences. Charlie,who had already graduated from college when his incarceration began, has been a teacher and mentor to other prison writersincreasingly, in the absence of any other educational opportunities for inmates. The following comes from a 2008 interviewwithHettie Jones, conducted by written correspondence:

Sadly the Florida Prison System has changed for the worse since I came in. Forget about rehabilitation. Where we once had a vibrant education system in prison, from very basic first grade level to advanced college, the cutbacks and changes in correctional philosophy have relegated learning to the back of the bus, and reduced the remnants to Potemkin villages, paper programs that accomplish little for few prisoners, but let the public believe otherwise. I have done all I could for the entire time of my imprisonment until today, but I am Hans, my finger hurts, and the dike is cracking.

I have worked with literally thousands of prisoners in formal classes, workshops provided by outside volunteers, several guys sitting on the ground at the rec field reading their poems, from remedial to advanced. Some of my most meaningful successes came in teaching men how to write a letter to their mother, wife or children, men who did not even know how to put down, Dear Mom, or say, Love, Joe, at the end

You can read Charlies blog posts at Free Charlie Norman Now.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was 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.

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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The link to Caged Beasts is not working by the way.

I had read his award winning story Fighting the Ninja last year. And in it he brought light to a problem few of us could ever imagine exists. In it he graphically illustrates how taking a refreshing shower becomes a frightful experience behind bars. All you aids activists out there should read it.

He also brings up the illiteracy of many of the inmates. Since most of these men have priors in which they spent time behind bars it

shows you something about the quality of the education and rehabilitation programs that the BOP claims are priorities for them.

For those of you who are finding it difficult to find work in todays job market ask yourself how hard it would it be if you were on parole and couldnt write your name on an application. He also illustrates the confusion inmates such as this ghostly figure have upon their release and their own expectations of successful reintegration into a free society.

School at Preston:

As had always been the case in these institutions the school at Preston never held formal classes. There were never any lectures or structured classes per-say and with much of the inmate population functionally illiterate paradoxically all the materials at school were self study. We were each given our assignments based on our school records and the materials to complete each assignment came with little or no explanation. So we were forced to rely on the meager assistance from the assigned teachers, or more accurately the custodians of educational materials, so few inmates ever advanced their educational standing. Most inmates in fact fell further and further behind their peers on the outside which diminished their chances of a successful reintegration to their community schools upon their release. Even my best friend Bill couldnt read or write past the grammar school level. This was as much a shock to me as his crime of murder.

On July 7, 1969 I was released to my father in Baton Rouge, LA. I had never been to Louisiana nor had I flown in a plane since I was 5 or 6 years old.

I felt both joy and sadness as I packed my things to leave Preston. As I left my room thoughts of my best friend Bill forced me to quietly enter his cell room and leave everything that I had already packed to take home with me. I attached a note to the items that read Ill see you on the main line. This was a reference to prison, a place that I fully expected we would both end up in someday. I had only a small glimmer of hope that I would never be incarcerated again and if I was I expected that Bill would still be there.

My step was light as I walked up the hill towards the administration building and I quickly turned my focus towards what lay ahead of me. As I walked up the hill I decided that there was no use in dwelling on my dear friends plight lest I become overly despondent. After all this was suppose to be a joyous occasion.

When I got to the administration building I was signed out and given a ticket to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and a ten dollar bill. Then I was escorted to the airport by two state correctional officers in an unmarked vehicle. Once we arrived at the airport I was unceremoniously left at the doorway without any advice or luggage.

I felt awkward and out of place in this new environment and I was unsure of how to act or where I should go. I found my way to the Continental Airlines counter and I handed the woman behind the counter my ticket. The agent checked my ticket and directed me towards the appropriate gate. I thanked her then anxiously walked towards the gate, sat down and waited to board the plane silently contemplating all that might lie ahead of me. Having never been to the south before, I knew nothing about its culture other than the disturbing images on the news depicting civil rights marchers being attacked by police dogs, fire hoses and baton wielding angry police including some on horseback.

So I nervously boarded the flight around an hour later while trying to ignore the concerned stares of some of the people around me that I attributed to my ill fitted attire but looking back on it now was most likely due to my jailhouse demeanor. As I sat down after boarding the plane I was disappointed to learn that I had been assigned a middle seat between two very large young men. I felt uncomfortably squeezed in between these two hulking lads that I assumed were football players. Feeling that I had little in common with either of them I dont recall speaking at all during the flight.

Later on I observed the stewardess selling alcoholic drinks and assumed that I would have to pay for anything that I received. When she reached our position and asked if I wanted something to eat or drink I lied and said I didnt. However I was actually famished and my stomach grumbled for the rest of the duration of the flight.

When I got off the plane in Baton Rouge I searched the crowd for my maternal father. It had been years since I had seen him last and I wasnt at all sure I would still recognize him. I waited and waited until late in the day then I decided to just start walking before it got dark.

Before my incarceration I had often walked miles at a time to my friends houses, school or work so I thought nothing of it. I began to walk in the street because there were no sidewalks only drainage ditches lining the street. I noticed that the trees were covered with Spanish moss and the birds made strange noises that I had never heard before. It was a humid mid-summer day down south and I soon felt the sweat running down my spine. I noticed that the occupants of all the houses that I passed were all African Americans. Whole families observed me closely as they sought shelter from the heat on their porches. About a mile or two down the road I noticed that the sun was getting low on the horizon. I began to worry about finding myself lost in an African American neighborhood alone and in the dark.

Then I heard a car approaching from behind me so I turned and stuck out my thumb hoping for a quick ride out of the area. The car stopped just ahead of me so I ran up beside it and opened the passenger door then stuck my head inside. The driver was a kindly looking middle aged African American man who then said Where are you headed? Believing that he was no threat I sat down in front seat and answered My fathers house. I took out my fathers address from my shirt pocket and read it to him. He said Well I can take you up as far as the main road but then I will be going in the opposite direction. That would be great. I replied and I closed the door.

We made some small talk about where I was from etc then he pulled up in front of a small shopping center. He said you can call a cab from here if you want. I looked up at the phone booth on the wall and then I saw the adjacent sign located just outside the Laundromats front door. It read Whites only. I felt embarrassed for the man that had just treated me so kind. I thanked him and shook his hand having found myself for a loss of words. I opened the door to get out and glanced at the people behind a counter in the Laundromat. I had never seen such a sign before and I wondered what kind of people they were. I didnt feel I had any more in common with these two then I had with the people on the porches that I had just passed. I chuckled under my breath as I noticed that the couples facial expressions at the counter of the Laundromat seemed to indicate that they thought I was a bit odd also. I began to worry as to just what kind of place I had

arrived to and how I was going to fit in here. To counter my growing concern about my new home I reminded myself that at least I was healthy and free now.

It started to rain almost immediately so with daylight fading fast I decided to call a taxi then I sat on the bench outside the Laundromat under the protective cover of the centers overhang and waited for my cab to arrive. In about thirty minutes my taxi arrived and I gave the driver my fathers address. Then I told him to take me as far as ten dollars would allow. He turned on the meter and let it run up to the ten dollar limit then stopped to let me out a few blocks from my fathers house. I ran the rest of the way in heavy rain arriving soaking wet at my fathers porch. I knocked and knocked on the door with no answer, my father it seems wasnt home so I sat down on the porch and pondered what to do next. I waited for awhile until some lights turned into the driveway. My father hesitated to get out of his car not recognizing me at first. So I walked over to him and announced Its me Alan. Relieved he answered Hi son. Im just getting back from work outside the city and no one told me you were arriving today.

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