

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/08/28/voices-from-solitary-walla-walla-imu/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 28, 2010

Robert Longworth was awarded First Place in memoir in the PEN American Centers [2010 Prison Writing Contest](#), for his piece about life in solitary confinement in the Intensive Management Unit, or IMU, at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla.

Longworth provides this [biography](#) on the PEN website: I am a forty-five year old state-raised prisoner. And, I will not be silent. Most of the time I have spent at the state penitentiary in Walla Walla, WA which is also the subject of my essay. Entering the prison with only a 7th-grade education, I taught myself to write by reading books from the prison library. I work as a Spanish language translator.

The bread is moving. A small piece broken off of what was pushed through the narrow cuffport to me earlier that morning. A horde of tiny red ants have surrounded it, are beneath it, hefting it up on little ant shoulders as they struggle to carry it back to where they live, a crack in the concrete floor a short distance away. Their task appears impossible. But the bread, I know, will soon make it to the crack. It always does.

Why do I do this? My mind searches for an answer as I continue watching the ants, looking down at them from where I sit cross-legged on the cell floor in stinking orange coveralls. Because they're living beings? In some way like me?

Another question rises in my mind, piqued by the ones before it. I am still alive, aren't I? And as ridiculous as the question seems, it holds my attention because it's hard for me to be certain of anything in this place anymore. I haven't spoken in months. What do I actually have to verify that I am still alive? A heartbeat? It strikes me that someone dead may still perceive his heart as beating. Breath? Dead people probably think they're breathing too.

I look at the heavy steel cell door beside me. That is something that keeps me sealed inside this concrete box, this IMU cell. If I am no longer alive, would it still do this to me? God, I hope not. I motherfucking hope not. The thought scares me. Deepens despair. Hell, in my mind, not the fiery nether world of Christianity. How can I adopt an abstract when I know something worse, a thousand times more concrete?

Read the rest [here](#).



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

Solitary Watch encourages comments 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. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I have recommended a writing contest in April. Concerning wrongful convictions PEN has no chapter.

In order to strengthen

- a) privately self-conscious, more focused on inner thoughts and feelings of the present and past
- b) publicly self-conscious persons particularly concerns about how others/society realize the individual

I propose in Letter to My Friends V

Contest among inmates

Presentation of inmates curriculum vitae

An application for the return to his/her community

Entering in the competition would be much appreciated as well encouraging in literacy qualification for better mutual understanding.

Since Ive got various writings Who is going to organize this?

i use to do that my self in the one room in oakhill i was had ants some how i use to feed them to watch them move the stuff gave me something to do lol thow one day i ate some they didnt want let me have my lunch i was ready to eat ants if you wondering are just crchy no flavor in them like getting sand in mouth not as gritty thow lol but yes it was fun watching them like the only freds you have in that life you know still feed some them out side now days they do bring hope they work thow it no mater what ants are grate models for us if we ran for are kinds good we be better off then we are now that and the thot that they where brakeing me out thow the wall slowly was kind of cool to lol

It breaks my heart to know that we are putting real live people, created in the image of God in isolation units. Many for decades. I feel so helpless. All I can do is hope to educate the general population and legislators by talking about this in my prison newsletter, and re-printing some of these writings. I would like to send my newsletter to these prisoners if possible. If we can work out the contact info, please let me know.

How can this be allowed? I just dont know what to say about all of this.

P.O. Box 11374

Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News