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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | March 8, 2019

John Jay Powers, the author of this piece and a prolific prison writer, spent over twelve years isolated at the notorious ADX federal supermax facility in Florence, Colorado. The severity of the conditions in solitary confinement led him to develop critical mental health conditions and engage in dire [acts of self-harm](#). Overall, Powers has spent 25 years in solitary confinement. Following a class-action lawsuit against the federal Bureau of Prisons, Powers and a number of other people with mental health issues were transferred out of ADX. He now writes from a special unit at the maximum security United States Penitentiary, Allenwood, in Pennsylvania, where he hopes for his living conditions to improve. In the following essay, Powers contemplates the universal human experiences of grief, sorrow, and despair from the excruciatingly singular point of view of someone living alone in a small cell, cut off from the human community.
Valerie Kiebala

Today seemed doomed from the beginning. Around midnight a guard shone his five-battery spotlight on me as I lie on the floor trying to either sleep or think. Then he turned on the light inside the cell and told me to get up off the floor. Well, suffice it to say, my blood instantly boiled over. I had found this tiny nook in time where I was no longer inside a stark solitary confinement cell and, sure enough, the watchers show up to spoil it.

So I was up for a long time after that, pacing back and forth. It is either two-and-a-half steps (if they are long) or three steps (if they are shorter). I do a lot of thinking. A lot of pacing and a lot of thinking. The vivid memories of the people, places and events that made an impression on my then young mind come to me then. In the night, in the darkness of the cell, alone with my thoughts, I walk nowhere. The spotlight flashes on me every 30 minutes.

I want to think about good times and happy things in order to buoy my flagging spirits, but it always ends up going the other way. I started thinking about my older sister Micki who died of liver cancer while I was at the ADX control unit. I wanted to think about the kind of person she was and give her some honor by paying her life some respect. I remembered how she was as a teenager, how aloof and mysterious she seemed. She was not a beauty queen, but she had a beautiful smile and a sunny disposition. We lived under the same roof, but we lived different lives. She was heavily involved with the church, got married to a good man, had a wonderful daughter, a career, a home, a life. And I had gone the other way the way that landed me in prison.

Micki did a lot for me while I was in prison. She took my son into her home and raised him for several years until he went to live with his mother. She visited a number of times. She was never big on writing, but she sent birthday and Christmas cards and talked to me on the phone whenever I could call. And it was while I was pacing back and forth in solitary confinement in the control unit of ADX that I got the news. Micki was in the hospital and she was not going to make it. The administration there at the ADX would not allow me to call her. I never got to say a goodbye.

Every road, every path, every life leads to sorrow. Big George Washington died what was probably a miserable death; Christopher Columbus ended up in chains and died on a small island in the Atlantic; Socrates was forced to drink the poison. In the shadows of the night, alone and pacing back and forth, back and forth, I think about human sorrow. I have a lot of questions. I have tried to distract, I have tried to avoid, and I have tried to adapt: it seems I am no good at those things.

My feelings can shift so quickly that my thoughts are caught off guard. Standing at the sink this morning the tears began to flow and I thought, I must be having a nervous breakdown. As I write this, I am in tears on and off again (wiping them with the bottom of my t-shirt and hoping no one sees me). Though this may have the earmarks of clinical depression, I believe the nature of what is happening to me is not so clinical. The depths of my mind are in an upheaval, and it is causing me the most severe emotional pain possible.

It is also causing me to see things and to know things that go beyond any of my prior experiences. My behavior is odd to me. Yesterday, for example, I began saying, This is wrong! This is wrong! This is wrong! and could not stop saying it. Maybe what is happening is a breakthrough instead of a breakdown. But maybe this entire ordeal of being 30 years in a cage has damaged me in ways that can never be fixed. I simply do not know. The only thing I do know is that I am in touch with human sorrow. I see and feel it all around me every day and every night, and it is real.

There is no secret formula for human happiness. There are only times and places when life seems to be good, and these do not last. When they begin to slip away, we often try to grasp them tighter; and when we lose them, we experience sorrow. Eventually the force of that sorrow dissipates because we have to move on with our lives. We do not forget, but other people and places and events pull us up from that well of sorrow, dry us off, and encourage us to look forward to better days. This last part does not happen when a person is kept in solitary confinement because that person has no life to move on with. Tomorrow is going to look exactly like today for those who remain in solitary confinement.

We human beings grieve for ourselves. We intuitively understand our dilemma, our predicament, our condition. Everything we do is done to avoid, distract or adapt. But there is only so far these techniques will stretch, and their coverage tends to become thinner as they are extended. Eventually, the underlying reality becomes apparent and there is nothing left except to deny it or to accept it. But to try to suppress sorrow cannot be the answer, for sorrow seems to be a force of the human mind that must find expression

We are alone with our sorrow, but we are not alone *in* our sorrow.

For every human being has sorrow.

Sometimes while I am walking inside my cell at night, I think that maybe all of us are being held in solitary confinement. Maybe our idealistic reach exceeds our practical grasp. Maybe it is best to find distraction in work, avoid the pitfalls of excess, and adapt to the circumstances of life's demands without too much complaining. There are many people who seem to be able to do this without any trouble. Maybe too much thinking is not good.

I guess the point I am trying to make is that solitary confinement can mess with a person's mind. My own sorrow is linked to many people, places, and things. I have lost a lot; I have been mistreated; and worse, I have been misunderstood. I have spent a long, long time pacing these cages they call prison cells. I have been through it. I would like to say that I do not feel sorry for myself, but I do not know if that is true. I would like to think that I feel sorry for all of us because that seems more true. And I know that there is nothing for me to do now except to keep waiting, hoping, thinking. I need to learn how to live with sorrow in a way that allows me to become a better human being.

Solitary confinement produces more sorrow than it eliminates. Its use should be restricted. Without the regular association with other human beings, the moorings of good mental health begin to break away from the psyche. The results are probably not all that good in most cases. Without a doubt, most prisoners who have spent long periods in solitary develop some form of mental illness. Many of the prisoners on this unit show signs and symptoms of functional deficiencies that have developed as a direct result of solitary confinement. I know it is true in my own case.

It seems that prison officials use solitary confinement for the very purpose of incapacitating a person's mind. On most days (including this one) I walk around feeling like my frontal lobes are missing. There is an effect from all of this sensory deprivation. Any zookeeper knows that animals fail to thrive in captivity without essential stimulation of their senses. My main sense as of late has been a sense of sorrow. I hope this means that I will be able to look at other human beings and understand their pain. I hope I get past today.

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](#)

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September 6, 2022

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John Jay Powers post videos every week, check him out here
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdeyr7zChECFulYD0c5ZAPw>

Where is the outcry such as we hear for immigrants at the border? Are not these people citizens within their own country and yet they are being tortured in a way that would find mobs at the gates of a zoo were they elephants, monkeys or such.

I feel for this very articulate individual who has to endure this practice day to day as human beings are social and the daily struggle in solitary reduces their God-given humanity through intense suffering.

One need only read this to know that putting people, yes, human beings, in solitary confinement is totally insane and cruel and unusual punishment. Shame on DOCCS for allowing such an inhumane practice to flourish.

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