

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/04/10/voices-from-solitary-the-freedom-i-feel-in-my-heart-and-mind/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | April 10, 2018

The following account was written by John Jay (Jack) Powers, who was arrested in 1989 for what he describes as unarmed bank robbery, possession of a stolen motor vehicle, and illegal firearms found in a closet in the house. After representing himself, Powers was given a very lengthy sentence and sent to USP-Leavenworth where he was watched at all times and placed in segregation at the drop of a hat. After witnessing a gang murder inside a federal prison in Atlanta and testifying against those who committed the crime, Powers was not provided the protection he had been promised. Believing his life to be in danger, he made a nonviolent escape attempt in 1999 and was subsequently sent to the United States Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colorado, where he spent 12 years in extreme solitary confinement. Powers says he spent 25 years in solitary confinement altogether for one reason or another.

Before entering prison, Powers had no history of mental illness, but during his time in solitary confinement, he developed severe psychological problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suffered through several suicide attempts and a compulsion toward [self-harm](#), causing him to slice his fingers and genitals and drill a hole in his skull. The self injury, Powers wrote, was pretty much my overall response to being locked down inside the ADX control unit for more than a decade.

Powers, who has become a prolific and accomplished writer while in prison, is currently being held at USP Florence (in regular maximum security rather than supermax conditions). At a hearing in late 2017, he argued that he was entitled to an earlier release date. Though he did not, as he had hoped, win immediate release, he is now scheduled to complete his sentence in less than five years. In this powerful essay, Jack Powers describes the complex thoughts and feelings that come with contemplating release after having experienced decades of institutionalization, isolation, and trauma. Valerie Kieba

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In a few days, I will be resentenced. Depending on how the judge calls it, I could be released. After having served nearly 30 years and surviving an onerous ordeal, it seems the time has come to turn the page. I am heartened by the many people who want me out so that I can be a part of their lives. One of my goals is to be there for my old mom and step-pop during the time they have left. There are a number of folks who have done this time with me, and the outcome of the hearing will affect their lives in a big way. Regrettably, there are a couple of people who are still nursing age-old grievances against me, and they will try to throw a wrench in the works if they can. This is to be expected.

From what I understand, the judge has a remarkable story of his own. As a local boy who kept his head down and his nose to the grindstone, he worked his way through law school. It was not Harvard or Yale or any Ivy League College he attended, but a local spot where he could stay close to friends and family. After he graduated and passed the bar exam with high marks, he opted to take a job as a public defender. He built a reputation for being diligent, circumspect, and honest. He could have secured employment at some white shoe or silk stocking law firm but he was content to remain a street lawyer, a man of the people. And then one day, out of the blue, he was nominated to take up a vacancy on the federal bench. The president signed on, Pat Leahy and the other members of the Senate Judiciary Committee gave the nod, and it was a done deal.

The reason I mention this is because it makes me feel better to stand before a judge who will put a keen eye on my situation and help me to overcome the challenges I face in transitioning to the community. If not for my old mom and step-pop and the fact that I want to serve their needs, I honestly would not care if I was eligible for release or not. Everyone tells me that it is a different world out there than it was 30 years ago. They say that people are more impatient, rude, and lazy. They say that technology has taken over, that drug abuse is pandemic, and that it is hard to trust anyone or anything. They say I may be better off where I am. Right now would probably be the best chance I will have to transition into the community because I have a house to live in and family, friends and business associates to support me, and I have good plans and prospects.

The other morning and sergeant here at the jail came into my cell to kick it. He was trying to find out what my reaction would be if I did not get released. Apparently, he was thinking I would bug out, have a breakdown, or try to kill myself if I had to stay in any longer. Release from imprisonment in most people's minds is like someone rising up out of a steel and concrete tomb, stumbling forward into the sunlight and shouting, Im alive! Im alive! For me to be sent back to the pen would be anticlimactic given the situation, but I will not be

distraught if that happens. I have never allowed jail or prison to define me in that way and I am not about to start now.

Others have told me I am institutionalized, that I must be after having been locked up for so many years. But I am not so sure. I have always hated the way I am forced to live on someone else's dime. Moreover, I have always rejected the prison lifestyle and routine; and, I have never accepted the idea that it was alright to live in a cage. In fact, I have fought tooth and nail to keep from being conformed (my disciplinary record reveals that much). My criminality and confinement is a manifestation of the thick walls of ignorance that encapsulated my mind for too long. The physical prison is nothing compared to the mental and emotional prison I have endured. But my former self that ignorant young man of 30 years ago who thought he could take shortcuts has been dead and gone for a long time now, and I am glad of it.

There is no doubt that 30 years ago, I was a bad person. I was lucky enough to realize that much early on so that I could isolate the problem, and the problem was me. My criminality was not some inherent aberration; it was underdeveloped character. My values, my perspective, and my outlook on the future were largely uninformed. When certain people say, Once a criminal, always a criminal or The best way to predict the future is to look at the past, I cringe. To contend that human beings are incapable of change is dumb. If this was the case, no one could ever hope to become any better at anything. I believe that the only way to change the past is to change myself, and I have both done that and will continue to do that until my last breath.

I am proud of having reformed my character to such a significant degree. I am glad to have discovered a valid and highly effective method of change. I am satisfied that I am well on my way to becoming a decent human being, and this is a personal sensation that fulfills my deepest needs. The secret is really not that much of a secret: I can continue to grow and develop, which is my main desire in life, no matter where I am, whether in a prison cell or in the community. Either way, I will be alright. And eventually, my physical location will come to reflect the freedom I feel in my heart and mind right now.

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

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September 19, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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Your essay is really compelling, Jack. It left me thinking a lot about your decades in prison, and wondering how anyone could think the world was better with you in exile, often in hell. I tried to recall what I had done in those same years, how I would have fared in the same circumstances, how your family and friends managed their feelings . . . and how long America's criminal law and justice system has seemed unrelentingly irrational.

Having my own, brief experiences in the steel grip of that system, I despise it like no other failing of this country, and that list isn't short. But you illuminated the power of judges better than I've ever heard. Their immense power, and the fact that many are chosen by political ideology, drains flexibility from an already rigid system. Unfortunately, much of the world labors under similar, 19th-century penal systems, still stuck in ancient notions of punitive vengeance. But no one served such justice would say that justice was the notion served. I'm so glad you're in your own life, Jack, out of exile. The world is a better place with you in it.

Congratulations to Mr. Powers on his freedom, after living through such difficult times for so many years! I look forward to more prophetic words and practical critiques on the criminal justice system from Mr. Powers. I believe every person (including an incarcerated individual) has the potential to be transformed and to change the world. As Sister Helen Prejean wisely says, People are more than the worst thing they have ever done in their lives.

This dear man's writing is as sorely needed as the rising sun each morning on a new day without clouds is needed. This man is a gift from the Great Maker and therefore is, wisely, NOT to be taken lightly by anyone, high or low.

Moved by your writings and rooting for you, Jack!

Smart man. Thank you for sharing your insight.

Go Powers!!!!

I share Marilee's thoughts. And thanks to Pete Quandt and many others who told this short story of the first day of Jack's new life. Peace to you Jack!

beautifully written. glad he is out now

This poor man been through a lot .let him go home to his parents.

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