

Dungeon Diary

by Jason J. Hernandez

Polunsky Unit, solitary confinement

Livingston, Texas

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'I was a stranger, and ye took me not in:
naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison,
and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying,
Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst,
or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and
did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them saying, Verily
I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one
of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting
punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.'

JESUS CHRIST

Mathew 25:43-46

I stand in total darkness. Looking out of the 3 inch wide, one foot long window of my concrete cell's steel door. I live in administrative segregation (ad seg) in solitary confinement with no human contact. Each cell in ad seg is a 8 by 10 concrete tomb with a stainless steel toilet and sink; and a small amount of sunlight enters through a window 3 inches wide, three feet long at the very top edge of the ceiling.

Isolated in solitary confinement, where there's no type of human contact and sensory deprivation slowly deteriorates your mind and train of thought, at times, in my sleep I wake up to my own mind and consciousness speaking, sing-

ing, laughing, or processing its own thoughts as for what I should say, think, do or write to friends or fellow prisoners next to me in ad seg.

What is this mental torture of solitary confinement exactly designed for? I struggle to find a reason society would allow any human being to be punished in a court of law for a crime, sentenced to serve time, only to compound that punishment with subjecting certain prisoners to the mental torture of solitary confinement. The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which was drafted by the United Nations in 1984, came into force in 1987 and ratified by the United States in 1994. Article 2, section 2 of the Convention states:

'No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture'.

Through the humidity and darkness, I see an elderly senior fellow prisoner being escorted by two guards. Who are these guards?

As I focus on them, I notice that one is a thin male Chicano, preppy type in his mid 20's. The other is a 200 pound African American female, butch type. The senior fellow prisoner is about 80 years old and has been in ad seg for over 30 years, he happens to be an extended family member of mine, like an uncle that I never had.

I know that since about 2011 he, along with other alleged high risk prisoners are moved from cell to cell every 10 to 14 days. The method of moving them every two weeks, is designed to keep them from getting too comfortable in one location in ad seg with their surroundings. This way it keeps them off balance and disoriented. Having to pack up and move every two weeks creates a hidden stressful psychological effect on your mind that causes symptoms of

neurotic like behavior. Imagine if you were forced against your will to move into a new place to live every two weeks, you'd start to feel abnormally sensitive, anxious, or obsessive and depressed. Having to pack up everything that belongs to you and move repetitively wears you down psychologically, you don't know if your moving into a better or worse environment. Some cell neighbors will be easier to live next to than others. There was a prisoner here who would stand at the edge of his steel bunk and urinate on his cell floor, the stench of urine was unbearable; many talk to themselves by screaming and banging loudly all day and night.

I can see in this senior's eyes as he passes my cell, he's really tired of being forced to move every two weeks, and the heat and humidity along with the no clean air circulation of the Dungeon, isn't helping at all. I notice that the senior has on one pair of handcuffs and both his hands are cuffed behind his back. He's made several requests to the doctor here asking that he be granted a medical pass allowing that he only be cuffed with two pairs of cuffs behind his back, and not just with only one pair. This would ease the pain in his shoulder whenever he has to be cuffed. Two pairs of cuffs allows for your wrists not to be stretched directly at the center of your back. But for some unknown reason the doctor here has refused to grant him the double cuff medical pass, despite many plea's he suffers pain in his shoulder.

The guards place the senior in the shower in my section downstairs on the first floor also known as one row, while they remove my neighbor from the cell next to mine. Yeah, good! The senior will be my new neighbor for the next two weeks and my old neighbor will move into the senior's last cell in another area.

The guards leave the senior in the shower and leave the area to move my old

neighbor to his new cell in another pod. Wait a minute, what's going on? Why don't they pull out the senior from the shower and place him in his new cell first before they just leave? The senior suffers from serious health issues and the shower he's been left in is a very small area of about 3 by 5 feet.

There's no ventilation or air circulation in these showers. The steel door and frame to these showers are all covered in corrosive rust. The humidity in the showers causes the walls and ceiling to drip with what appears to be water from the moisture and no ventilation. I'm 42 years old and have difficulty breathing in these showers. These showers are left filthy with grime and hair in them, only cleaned once every night at around midnight after they are closed for the day. Why these showers are only cleaned once each day at midnight is beyond me, because the prisoners who are trusties are who do the cleaning, not the guards. So why don't the guards allow the trusties to clean them during the day once, then at midnight also?

As I see this unfolding, I think to myself, is this type of activity of mistreating a senior what citizens of Texas elect our State Legislators to use their office for when they create legislation and policies for the state prison system? Even a prisoner who's a senior deserves some higher level of respect due to their age in life. Why is this senior's human dignity being violated egregiously on so many levels? Would a far right conservative or left winger approve of one of their own family members who's a senior, to be mistreated in a state prison, if they had a family member incarcerated? Does the Bible or any religion approve of allowing governmental officials to mistreat prisoners who are seniors? Then why are our elected officials at the Capital in Austin letting these things take place within our state prison system? What would the public think if they witnessed this taking place before their

eyes. Answer: if they were to witness just one night in the Dungeon, the mental torture would make them loose their mind.

What can I do as I watch this take place before my eyes? As I listen, I can hear a faint sounding thump. It's the senior in the shower, he's hitting the door as hard as he can, he wants out and to go to his new cell ... for the guards to pull him out of that hot, humid small space where it's difficult to breath or move around.

It's been 30 minutes that he's been left and forgotten in that hot, humid, rustily corroded, small confined, mildewed, filthy, grimy shower! We all try to tell the two Chicano guards that are working our pod, "Hey you have someone in the shower who needs to come out of there!" The guards just blow us off and leave to the other side of the pod to do other things.

What can I do to help the senior get out of there, these guards are ignoring him and he's old and sick, he can't be left in there that long in that heat. The Dungeon is a dark, depressed, cruel environment, it has no respect for age, race, or human dignity.

Here's a senior who's been diagnosed with cancer, high blood pressure and other serious medical issues, being put through mental torture and stress. The last thing this man needs is stress and mental torture at his age with his medical condition. So why is this taking place!

The two Chicano guards working our pod come to our section, but both men ignore our calls to them, they act preoccupied and way to busy doing more important things than to listen to our cries out to them for a second of their valuable time. They chose instead to go switch out the prisoners at outside recreation, instead of checking to see why we are all calling them for help.

I realize at this point, if I don't get these two guards' attention somehow and explain to them the senior's been in that hot 90 plus degree shower going on close to one hour now - he may be left in there for an hour and a half to two hours.

I know this senior is ill and not well in that type of heat and small space. With every ounce of energy within me I start to kick my cell's steel door loudly. Maybe 10 or 20 times as hard possible. I'm outraged and pushed to the edge, because I care about this senior as an extended family member, I don't like seeing him mistreated due to his health and age!

The guards come running up to my door, they say to me, "What, what's wrong, why are you kicking the door?"

I don't stop, I continue to kick the door not realizing that the guards are standing there asking me what's wrong. In my mind I'm thinking all that's left is for the guards to call the riot team to come and extract me out of my cell by force after they spray me with tear gas and place me in restraints. I've been in the Dungeon 6 years but never had any problems with any guards or prison staff. But I blanked out and was ready to fight the team with all my might as hard as I could. My adrenaline was so high I was prepared to die in the fight.

I tried to push the issue, I began to yell at the guards, "What's up Bitch, what's up you fucken pussys!" In my mind I'm thinking, I disrespect them and that will push them to open the doors and try to fight me.

I notice one of the guards was telling me, "I'm sorry, we didn't know the senior was in the shower." As soon as I heard that, it completely defused my outrage and brought me back to my normal rational mindset.

"Get him out of the shower!" I said. "He's old and really sick, he's been

in there for over an hour and it's 90 plus degrees and humid and hard to breath in there!" I said. Understanding the seriousness, the guard fearfully apologized.

"It's fine, it's fine, and everything is okay now," I said to the guard. Through all of this anger and hate, desolation and darkness in the Dungeon, somehow God saved my life this day 10 April 2015. Because he kept the incident from escalating into a fight between me against the riot team. I know myself, when I loose control of my anger, I'm not myself anymore and I don't feel pain or care about dying. I know the riot team are trained to beat you until you submit, even if it kills you. They are stronger than I am and would've probably killed me that day had God not intervened by de-escalating the incident.

My sister and aunt, had just written me to inform me about my mom, age 58, found in her home incoherent and with a blood pressure of 495. She'd been stabalized and in a rehab hospital for 6 weeks. Doctors said my mom would've fell into an induced diabetic coma, had my mom's friend not called EMS when she found my mom in that condition. I feel this recent bad news weighing up- on my conscience also fueled my anger, and would have made me want to clash with the riot team. No one wants to hear their loved ones are ill out there in the free world while you're in prison with your hands tied behind your back and unable to be there to help them and be by their side to support them until they've recovered. You feel hopeless not being able to help a family member suffering while you're incarcerated, you feel to blame that their in the predictament that they're in. When I saw the senior being left in the shower for an hour, I thought of my mom's situation as well. Once the senior got settled in to the cell next to me, we had the opportu-

nity the following day to get a chance to go spend 2 hours outside together for recreation. In ad seg, outside recreation is two seperate cages about 20 by 20 in size, similar to the cages at the city zoo where the monkeys are kept. Each cage contains a basketball hoop and a urinal with water fountain made of stainless steele.

In conversation, what struck me was his experiences while on the medical chain from Polunsky to the hospital at UTMB on his regular medical visits. The trip is about an hour drive away, and each trip he's black-boxed in restraints. The black-box restraints, limit your range of movement by about 95% in comparison to the regular restraints used on prisoners housed in the general population or gp. The black-box is heavy and painful on your wrists, it only allows your hands to sit directly in front of your abdomen. I'm thinking, is it right in societies eyes, for an elderly senior citizen, 79 years of age, who poses no threat to anyone, to be placed in a black-box restraint while on medical chain? These black-box restraints are for prisoners who are a threat to security and pose a threat to other prisoners. What goal is this achieving by placig this senior in black-box restraints at this stage of his life and condition? It's achieving abuse of a senior citizen.

Then, he explained how the leg cuffs on each ankle aren't seperated enough to step onto the chain bus. He has to hop up onto the first step entering the bus, and hop down to exit it. It's very easy slip and fall down in the process of simply getting on and off the bus in leg restraints. In the van used for medical chain, the step is so high, you have to jump on the first step to get in the van, and it's dangerous because it's easy to hit your head on the van's ceiling's enterance, it's happened to him before.

He explained there was a prisoner from gp who'd undergone surgery, and he

couldn't jump on to the first step on the chain bus. So, he crawled, in restraints, up the steps entering the chain bus until he could reach a seat to pull himself up into. The senior, out of anger and disbelief for the lack of respect for the crawling prisoner's human dignity, asked the chain bus guards, "Why don't you all help him into the bus and his seat, he just had surgery and can't jump up into the bus?" The guards said, "We can't help him into the bus, it's against policy."

As I listened to these disgusting atrocities taking place, being witnessed by the senior on his trips to UTMB hospital, I could see in his eyes that he knew that prisoner forced to crawl into the chain bus after his surgery, could just as well be himself one day. Just another piece of mental torture being inflicted on an elderly senior with cancer and other serious illnesses. In my mind I thought, is this what our country is about, is this societies idea of justice?

He then told me, that on one trip, an overweight man had undergone knee surgery and he was struggling into the chain bus. In the process of trying to get into the bus, his pants began to fall down to his ankles. The prisoner asked the chain guards to please help him pull up his pants so that he wouldn't trip, because he'd just underwent surgery on his knees and couldn't bend down. The guards said, "We're not going to lift up his pants for him." The prisoner was stuck with his pants down in front of everyone. So, the senior asked the person sitting on the opposite side of the bus, to grab one side of the prisoner's pants, and they lifted the man's pants for him so he could get into the bus and his seat.

The Dungeon is a purely evil place in the world, our seniors don't belong here, because it serves no purpose of justice. Only abuse and mental tor-

ture of the weakest humans in our society, our elderly senior citizens.

How anyone can work in a dehumanizing environment such as the Dungeon, and not feel sickened to their stomach, shows how our society in America has evolved very little since committing past atrocities such as slavery and lynching.

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