

# BURIED ALIVE

## THE REAL HORRORS OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

There is a dark place within us all. For some, though, that dark place is just a tad bit closer to the surface than it is for others. And for some others still, it is so intolerably close to the surface that it is no longer really within them at all, but without, where it all at once becomes their ultimate reality, their living nightmare, their own personal Dead Zone, and no matter what form of escape-ism tactics that they fruitfully attempt to employ — be it drugs, alcohol, sex, pain, or all of the above — they are as impotent against it as would be the little blue pill against the horrors of castration itself. It cannot be out-gunned; it cannot be out-manuevered; and, most importantly, it cannot ever be out-disturbed. For the devil in their darkness is akin to those such as Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees, wherein it is forever plodding onward, forever on the hunt, forever there.  
Forever.

Only someone who has had to live with such an overwhelming and oppressive weight bearing down upon their very soul could truly fathom the depths of darkness in which I speak. Personally, I can think of only four types of people of whom would fit such stringent criteria.

Foremost would probably be the Paranoid Schizophrenic, whose inner darkness has indeed risen to the surface of their mind and become a dark reality composed of continuously shifting shadows and shadows of nothingness, full of



unknowable and conspiracies and only-God-knows-what-else, and whose impenetrable darkness offers no available avenues of escape.

Those poor souls unlucky-enough to find themselves descending slowly into the dark and inexpressible depths of degradation, where they will forever be a stranger in the present, ignorant of the past, and sadly unable to fathom the future, yet aware enough of what is happening to them to be both horror-stricken and deeply despairing, would also understand these truths well.

Those suffering from the deepest, darkest, most debilitating depression, that which not only incapacitates but eventually leads to one form of self-destruction or another, be it recklessness or intentional self-harm, are likewise well qualified to understand the depths of such impenetrable darkness.

As are the many millions of prisoners across this country, this so-called Land of the Free, that are continuously — and in some cases abhorrently — forced to endure, against their will, the torturous and inhumane conditions of solitary confinement.

And yet still, solitary confinement exists.

According to a report titled Solitary Confinement as Torture, compiled by the University of North Carolina School of Law (2014), solitary confinement first came into use in the United States as a result of a penal reformation movement in the early nineteenth century. Apparently, some community leaders in Pennsylvania somehow came to the conclusion that convicts weren't inherently evil, but victims of exposure to the evils of "modern" society, and that allowing "the absolute and total isolation of the offender from any evil and corrupting influences" would give the convict time to reflect on his crimes and become repentant. It should be good. [ 2/4 ]



queens, but forced isolation is never a good thing; it's torture, and its extremely dangerous side effects were soon made apparent.

In less than a year after 83 offenders were confined in "small cells with no exercise and no work", "five of the eighty-three had died, one became an idiot, another, when his door opened for some chance purpose, dashed himself from the gallery into the fearful area below, and the rest, with haggard looks and despairing voices, begged pitifully to be taken back to the shops and set to work. This was suffering applied to both the body and mind."<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after, in 1890, the Supreme Court condemned the practice of solitary confinement by calling it a "punishment of the most important and painful character." Furthermore, the Court described the adverse effects of its use:

"A considerable number of prisoners fall, after even a short confinement, into a senile condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others become violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stand the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community."<sup>4</sup>

Even still, solitary confinement endures. In the 1960's, both psychologists and penologists began to explore the potential brainwashing effects of solitary confinement; and so it transformed from a form of rehabilitation into a form of behavior modification.

Today, though, neither of those forms of solitary confinement exist. The goal of solitary confinement is now incapacitation. This I can confidently report as fact



through not just extensive research but first hand experience.

Let me explain.

I am right now, at this very moment, seated on the floor of a cell that is roughly the size of a bathroom or a walk-in closet. Beneath me is the plastic (fire retardant) mattress that I sleep on at night; it is only about 2 1/2 or 3 inches thick and not much better than bare cement. I am sitting on the floor because I am being forced to use the steel bed frame as a "desk" to write on; one is not provided otherwise. I am allowed nothing on the walls or even the floor. If the wrong guard (correctional officer) sees my mattress on the floor I could receive an infraction and be forced to spend another 90-180 days on solitary confinement. At the moment, I have already been in solitary confinement for 163 days.

This time.

Since my initial incarceration in August 2008, I have spent approximately ten years on solitary confinement.

In approximately ten out of the past twelve years that I've been incarcerated, I have been forced to remain in cells just like the one where I now sit, day after day for a minimum of 23 hours per day, several days a week, month after agonizing month — and sometimes, year after painful year — with only the intricacies of my own mind for entertainment.

Even despite concordant evidence from countless experts showing that long-term solitary confinement has damaging mental health effects and is particularly inappropriate — and dangerous — for prisoners with pre-existing mental illnesses.

Such as myself and countless others.

Like the guy in the cell beside me, who spends every waking hour beating



and banging, banging and beating, so obviously lost in his own fantastic delusions of rap stardom that he doesn't notice the people around him who are bothered by the endless idiocy. That is, until one of these prisoners tired of the noise and tricked the guards into thinking the guy was kicking on the door so that they pepper sprayed him. Now he says nothing. He rarely eats. He no longer takes showers or changes his linens.

His inner darkness has become a reality.

Then there's the guy down stairs and suicide watch. He was just transferred here from supermax. He was okay, at first; then they sent him to regular population. Within about four or five days he was back and on suicide watch. Now he stands in the middle of his bare cell, completely nude, screaming at the top of his lungs that fanatic worshippers are trying to kill him and that there are prisoners using secret passages in the walls to try to get at him. Last night he urinated on the floor of his cell and laid in it until the guards made him move. Do they care? No. They tell him to "shut up" and call him vulgar and demeaning names, even while the prisoners around him do the same because he won't stop screaming.

His reality is darkness, as well.

Sadly, though, these examples are not only minor, they're normal. I've seen prisoners hang themselves from the air vent with their pants; try to overdose with various medications, die, be resuscitated, and die again; cut their wrists and bathe in their own blood; slice open their stomach and play in their own intestines; swallow toothbrushes, batteries, razor blades, nail clippers, and a myriad other items; eat feces. Leave a man alone with himself long enough and, under the right circumstances, we all break at some point.

Even those of us who are considered "strong-minded".

A lot of people falsely believe that because I have an above-average IQ, and because I can take care of myself in most situations that this cell doesn't affect me as well. Well, they're wrong.

Entirely so.

Over these past 12 years my intermittent darkness has become a pervasive unreality constructed upon pillars of irrational paranoia and blind aggression, sunk deep into free-standing pools of frustration and excessive anxiety, and permeating with nearly intolerable levels of rage and disorientation, and there is nothing that I can possibly do to change it.

I know that these things are happening; it is the deterioration of a mental state that has been balakindly precariously since an unstable childhood. I am painfully aware of it, but can do nothing to stop it. For my complaints and cries for help go unheard. In the meantime, I am continuously faced with longer and longer bouts of punitive isolation for the very behavior that solitary confinement is exacerbating to begin with.

And so every single day the darkness grows blacker.

The future grows bleaker.

My heart grows colder.

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1. Stuart Grassian, Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement, 22 WASH U.J.L. §  
POL'Y 325, 333-340 (2006).

2. Robert Rogers, Solitary Confinement, 37 J. OFFENDER THERAPY & CORP. CRIMINOLOGY  
339, 339 (1993).

3. Henry Hall, THE HISTORY OF AUBURN (1869).

4. Free Medical, 134 J.B. MED. 170 (1890).

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