

Voices from Solitary: A Sentence Worse Than Death

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The following essay is by William Blake, who has been held in solitary confinement for nearly 26 years. Currently he is in administrative segregation at Elmira Correctional Facility, a maximum security facility located in south central New York State. In 1987, Blake, then 23 and in county court on a drug charge, murdered one deputy and wounded another in a failed escape attempt. He was sentenced to 77 years to life.

This powerful essay earned Blake an Honorable Mention in the Yale Law Journal's Prison Law Writing Contest, chosen from more than 1,500 entries. He describes here in painstaking detail his excruciating experiences over the last quarter-century. "I've read of the studies done regarding the effects of long-term isolation in solitary confinement on inmates, seen how researchers say it can ruin a man's mind, and I've watched with my own eyes the slow descent of sane men into madness—sometimes not so slow," Blake writes. "What I've never seen the experts write about, though, is what year after year of abject isolation can do to that immaterial part in our middle where hopes survive or die and the spirit resides." That is what Blake himself seeks to convey in his essay. —Lisa Dawson

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"You deserve an eternity in hell," Onondaga County Supreme Court judge Kevin Mulroy told me from his bench as I stood before him for sentencing on July 10, 1987. Apparently he had the idea that God was not the only one qualified to make such judgment calls.

Judge Mulroy wanted to "pump six buck's worth of electricity into [my] body," he also said, though I suggest that it wouldn't have taken six cent's worth to get me good and dead. He must have wanted to reduce me and The Chair to a pile of ashes. My "friend" Governor Mario Cuomo wouldn't allow him to do that, though, the judge went on, bemoaning New York State's lack of a death statute due to the then-Governor's repeated vetoes of death penalty bills that had been approved by the state legislature. Governor Cuomo's publicly expressed dudgeon over being called a friend of mine by Judge Mulroy was understandable, given the crimes that I had just been convicted of committing. I didn't care much for him either, truth be told. He built too many new prisons in my opinion, and cut academic and vocational programs in the prisons already standing.

I know that Judge Mulroy was not nearly alone in wanting to see me executed for the crime I committed when I shot two Onondaga County sheriff's deputies inside the Town of Dewitt courtroom during a failed escape attempt, killing one and critically wounding the other. There were many people in the Syracuse area who shared his sentiments, to be sure. I read the hateful letters to the editor printed in the local newspapers; I could even feel the anger of the people when I'd go to court, so palpable was it. Even by the standards of my own belief system, such as it was back then, I deserved to die for what I had done. I took the life of a man without just cause, committing an act so monumentally wrong that I could not have argued that it was unfair had I been required to pay with my own life.

What nobody knew or suspected back then, not even I, on that very day I would begin suffering a punishment that I am convinced beyond all doubt is far worse than any death sentence could possibly have been. On July 10, 2012, I finished my 25th consecutive year in solitary confinement, where at the time of this writing I remain. Though it is true that I've never died and so don't know exactly what the experience would entail, for the life of me I cannot fathom how dying any death could be harder or more terrible than living through all that I have been forced to endure for the last quarter-century.

Prisoners call it The Box. Prison authorities have euphemistically dubbed it the Special Housing Unit, or SHU (pronounced "shoe") for short. In society it is known as solitary confinement. It is 23-hour a day lockdown in a cell smaller than some closets I've seen, with one hour allotted to "recreation" consisting of placement in a concrete enclosed yard by oneself or, in some prisons, a cage made of steel bars. There is nothing in a SHU yard but air: no TV, no balls to bounce, no games to play, no other inmates, nothing. There is very little allowed in a SHU cell, also. Three sets of plain white underwear, one pair of green pants, one green short-sleeved button-up shirt, one green sweatshirt, ten books or magazines total, twenty pictures of the people you love, writing supplies, a bar of soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, one deodorant stick but no shampoo, and that's about it. No clothes of your own, only prison-made. No food from commissary or packages, only three unappetizing meals a day handed to you through a narrow slot in your cell door. No phone calls, no TV, no luxury items at all. You get a set of cheap headphones to use, and you can pick between the two or three (depending on which prison you're in) jacks in the cell wall to plug into. You can listen to a TV station in one jack, and use your imagination while trying to figure out what is going on when the music indicates drama but the dialogue doesn't suffice to tell you anything. Or you can listen to some music, but you're out of luck if you're a rock-n-roll fan and find only rap is playing.

Your options in what to do to occupy your time in SHU are scant, but there will be boredom aplenty. You probably think that you understand boredom, know its feel, but really you don't. What you call boredom would seem a whirlwind of activity to me, choices so many that I'd likely be befuddled in trying to pick one over all the others. You could turn on a TV and watch a movie or some other show; I haven't seen a TV since the 1980s. You could go for a walk in the neighborhood; I can't walk more than a few feet in any direction before I run into a concrete wall or steel bars. You could pick up your phone and call a friend; I don't know if I'd be able to remember how to make a collect call or even if the process is still the same, so many years it's been since I've used a telephone. Play with your dog or cat and experience their love, or watch your fish in their aquarium; the only creatures I see daily are the mice and cockroaches that infest the unit, and they're not very lovable and nothing much to look at. There is a pretty good list of options available to you, if you think about it, many things that

you could do even when you believe you are so bored. You take them for granted because they are there all the time, but if it were all taken away you'd find yourself missing even the things that right now seem so small and insignificant. Even the smallest stuff can become as large as life when you have had nearly nothing for far too long.

I haven't been outside in one of the SHU yards in this prison for about four years now. I haven't seen a tree or blade of grass in all that time, and wouldn't see these things were I to go to the yard. In Elmira Correctional Facility, where I am presently imprisoned, the SHU yards are about three or four times as big as my cell. There are twelve SHU yards total, each surrounded by concrete walls, one or two of the walls lined with windows. If you look in the windows you'll see the same SHU company that you live on, and maybe you'll get a look at a guy who was locked next to you for months that you've talked to every day but had never before gotten a look at. If you look up you'll find bars and a screen covering the yard, and if you're lucky maybe you can see a bit of blue sky through the mesh, otherwise it'll be hard to believe that you're even outside. If it's a good day you can walk around the SHU yard in small circles staring ahead with your mind on nothingness, like the nothing you've got in that lacuna with you. If it's a bad day, though, maybe your mind will be filled with remembrances of all you used to have that you haven't seen now for many years, and you'll be missing it, feeling the loss, feeling it bad.

Life in the box is about an austere sameness that makes it difficult to tell one day from a thousand others. Nothing much and nothing new ever happen to tell you if it's a Monday or a Friday, March or September, 1987 or 2012. The world turns, technology advances, and things in the streets change and keep changing all the time. Not so in a solitary confinement unit, however. I've never seen a cell phone except in pictures in magazines. I've never touched a computer in my life, never been on the Internet and wouldn't know how to get there if you sat me in front of a computer, turned it on for me, and gave me directions. SHU is a timeless place, and I can honestly say that there is not a single thing I'd see looking around right now that is different from what I saw in Shawangunk Correctional Facility's box when I first arrived there from Syracuse's county jail in 1987. Indeed, there is probably nothing different in SHU now than in SHU a hundred years ago, save the headphones. Then and now there were a few books, a few prison-made clothing articles, walls and bars and human beings locked in cages... and misery.

There is always the misery. If you manage to escape it yourself for a time, there will ever be plenty around in others for you to sense; and though you'll be unable to look into their eyes and see it, you might hear it in the nighttime when tough guys cry not-so-tough tears that are forced out of them by the unrelenting stress and strain that life in SHU is an exercise in.

I've read of the studies done regarding the effects of long-term isolation in solitary confinement on inmates, seen how researchers say it can ruin a man's mind, and I've watched with my own eyes the slow descent of sane men into madness—sometimes not so slow. What I've never seen the experts write about, though, is what year after year of abject isolation can do to that immaterial part in our middle where hopes survive or die and the spirit resides. So please allow me to speak to you of what I've seen and felt during some of the harder times of my twenty-five-year SHU odyssey.

I've experienced times so difficult and felt boredom and loneliness to such a degree that it seemed to be a physical thing inside so thick it felt like it was choking me, trying to squeeze the sanity from my mind, the spirit from my soul, and the life from my body. I've seen and felt hope becoming like a

foggy ephemeral thing, hard to get ahold of, even harder to keep ahold of as the years and then decades disappeared while I stayed trapped in the emptiness of the SHU world. I've seen minds slipping down the slope of sanity, descending into insanity, and I've been terrified that I would end up like the guys around me that have cracked and become nuts. It's a sad thing to watch a human being go insane before your eyes because he can't handle the pressure that the box exerts on the mind, but it is sadder still to see the spirit shaken from a soul. And it is more disastrous. Sometimes the prison guards find them hanging and blue; sometimes their necks get broken when they jump from their bed, the sheet tied around the neck that's also wrapped around the grate covering the light in the ceiling snapping taut with a pop. I've seen the spirit leaving men in SHU and have witnessed the results.

The box is a place like no other place on planet Earth. It's a place where men full of rage can stand at their cell gates fulminating on their neighbor or neighbors, yelling and screaming and speaking some of the filthiest words that could ever come from a human mouth, do it for hours on end, and despite it all never suffer the loss of a single tooth, never get his head knocked clean off his shoulders. You will never hear words more despicable or see mouth wars more insane than what occurs all the time in SHU, not anywhere else in the world, because there would be serious violence before any person could speak so much foulness for so long. In the box the heavy steel bars allow mouths to run with impunity when they could not otherwise do so, while the ambient is one that is sorely conducive to an exceedingly hot sort of anger that seems to press the lips on to ridiculous extremes. Day and night I have been awakened to the sound of the rage being loosed loudly on SHU gates, and I'd be a liar if I said I haven't at times been one of the madmen doing the yelling.

I have lived for months where the first thing I became aware of upon waking in the morning is the malodorous funk of human feces, tinged with the acrid stench of days-old urine, where I eat my breakfast, lunch, and dinner with that same stink assaulting my senses, and where the last thought I had before falling into unconscious sleep was: "Damn, it smells like shit in here." I have felt like I was on an island surrounded by vicious sharks, flanked on both sides by mentally ill inmates who would splash their excrement all over their cells, all over the company outside their cells, and even all over themselves. I have went days into weeks that seemed like they'd never end without being able to sleep more than short snatches before I was shocked out of my dreams, and thrown back into a living nightmare, by the screams of sick men who have lost all ability to control themselves, or by the banging of cell bars and walls of these same madmen. I have been so tired when sleep inside was impossible that I went outside into a snowstorm to get some sleep.

The wind blew hard and snowflakes swirled around and around in the small SHU yard at Shawangunk, and I had but one cheap prison-produced coat on and a single set of state clothes beneath. To escape the biting cold I dug into the seven- or eight-foot high mountain of snow that was piled in the center of the yard, the accumulation from inmates shoveling a narrow path to walk along the perimeter. With bare hands gone numb, I dug out a small room in that pile of snow, making myself a sort of igloo. When it was done I crawled inside, rolled onto my back on the snow-covered concrete ground, and almost instantly fell asleep, my bare head pillowed in the snow. I didn't even have a hat to wear.

An hour or so later I was awakened by the guards come to take me back to the stink and insanity inside: "Blake, rec's over..." I had gotten an hour's straight sleep, minus the few minutes it had taken

me to dig my igloo. That was more than I had gotten in weeks without being shocked awake by the CA-RACK! of a sneaker being slapped into a plexiglass shield covering the cell of an inmate who had thrown things nasty; or the THUD-THUD-THUD! of an inmate pounding his cell wall, or bars being banged, gates being kicked and rattled, or men screaming like they're dying and maybe wishing that they were; or to the tirade of an inmate letting loose his pent-up rage on a guard or fellow inmate, sounding every bit the lunatic that too long a time in the mind-breaking confines of the box had caused him to be.

I have been so exhausted physically, mental strength being tested to limits that can cause strong folks to snap, that I have begged God, tough guy I fancy myself, "Please, Lord, make them stop. Please let me get some peace." As the prayers went ungranted and the insanity around me persisted, I felt my own rage rising above the exhaustion and misery, no longer in a begging mood: "Lord, kill those motherfuckers, why don't you!" I yelled at the Almighty, my own sanity so close to being gone that it seemed as if I were walking along a precipice and could see down to where I'd be falling, seeing myself shot, sanity a dead thing killed by the fall. I'd be afraid later on, terrified, when I reflected back on how close I had seemed to come to losing my mind, but at that moment all I could do was feel anger of a fiery kind: anger at the maniacs creating the noise and the stink and the madness; anger at my keepers and the real creators of this hell; anger at society for turning a blind eye to the torment and torture going on here that its tax dollars are financing; and perhaps most of all, anger at myself for doing all that I did that never should have been done that put me into the clutches of this beastly prison system to begin with. I would be angry at the world; enraged, actually, so burning hot was what I would be feeling.

I had wet toilet paper stuffed hard into both ears, socks folded up and pressed into my ears, a pillow wrapped around the sides and back of my head covering my ears, and a blanket tied around all that to hold everything in place, lying in bed praying for sleep. But still the noise was incredible, a thunderous cacophony of insanity, sleep impossible. Inmates lost in the throes of lavalike rage firing philippics at one another for even reasons they didn't know, threatening to kill one another's mommas, daddies, even the children, too. Nothing is sacred in SHU. It is an environment that is so grossly abnormal, so antithetical to normal human interactions, that it twists the innerds of men all around who for too long dwell there. Their minds, their morals, and their mannerisms get bent badly, ending far off-center. Right becomes whatever and wrong no longer exists. Restraint becomes a burden and is unnecessary with concrete and steel separating everyone, so inmates let it go. Day after day, perhaps year after year, the anger grows, fueled by the pain caused by the conditions till rage is born and burning so hot that it too hurts.

Trying to put into words what is so unlike anything else I know or have ever experienced seems an impossible endeavor, because there is nothing even remotely like it any place else to compare it to, and nothing that will do to you on the inside what so many years in SHU has done to me. All that I am able to articulate about the world of Special Housing Unit and what it is and what it does may seem terrible to you indeed, but the reality of living in this place for a full quarter of a century is yet even more terrible, still. You would have to live it, experience it in all its aspects with the fullness of its days and struggles added up, to really appreciate and understand just how truly terrible this plight of mine has been, and how truly ugly life in the box can be at times, even for just a single day. I spent nine years in Shawangunk's box, six years in Sullivan's, six years in Great Meadow's, and I've been here in Elmira's SHU for four years now, and through all of this time I have never spent a single day in

a Mental Health Unit cell because I attempted or threatened suicide, or for any other reason. I have thought about suicide in times past when the days had become exceedingly difficult to handle, but I'm still here. I've had some of my SHU neighbors succumb to the suicidal thoughts, though, choosing death over another day of life in the box. I have never bugged out myself, but I've known times that I had come too close. I've had neighbors who came to SHU normal men, and I've seen them leave broken and not anything resembling normal anymore. I've seen guys give up on their dreams and lose all hope in the box, but my own hopes and dreams are still alive and well inside me. The insidious workings of the SHU program have yet to get me stuck on that meandering path to internal destruction that I have seen so many of my neighbors end up on, and perhaps this is a miracle; I'd rather be dead than to lose control of my mind.

Had I known in 1987 that I would spend the next quarter-century in solitary confinement, I would have certainly killed myself. If I took a month to die and spent every minute of it in severe pain, it seems to me that on a balance that fate would still be far easier to endure than the last twenty-five years have been. If I try to imagine what kind of death, even a slow one, would be worse than twenty-five years in the box—and I have tried to imagine it—I can come up with nothing. Set me afire, pummel and bludgeon me, cut me to bits, stab me, shoot me, do what you will in the worst of ways, but none of it could come close to making me feel things as cumulatively horrifying as what I've experienced through my years in solitary. Dying couldn't take but a short time if you or the State were to kill me; in SHU I have died a thousand internal deaths. The sum of my quarter-century's worth of suffering has been that bad.

To some judges sitting on high who've never done a day in the box, maybe twenty-five years of this isn't cruel and unusual. To folks who have an insatiable appetite for vengeance against prisoners who have committed terrible crimes, perhaps it doesn't even matter how cruel or unusual my plight is or isn't. For people who cannot let go of hate and know not how to forgive, no amount of remorse would matter, no level of contrition would be quite enough, only endless retribution would be right in their eyes. Like Judge Milroy, only an eternity in hell would satisfy them. Given even that in retribution, though, the unforgiving haters wouldn't be satisfied that hell was hot enough; they'd want the heat turned up. Thankfully these folks are the few, that in the minds of the many, at a point, enough is enough.

No matter what the world would think about things that they cannot imagine in even their worst nightmares, I know that twenty-five years in solitary confinement is utterly and certainly cruel, moreso than death in or by an electric chair, gas chamber, lethal injection, bullet in the head, or even immolation could possibly be. The sum of the suffering caused by any of these quick deaths would be a small thing next to the sum of the suffering that this quarter-century in SHU has brought to bear on me. Solitary confinement for the length of time that I have endured it, even apart from the inhuman conditions that I have too often been made to endure it in, is torture of a terrible kind; and anyone who doesn't think so surely knows not what to think.

I have served a sentence worse than death