

## Pathology of the SHU (Security Housing Unit)

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Prison mirrors society, surrounded by a landscape of electrified barb wire fences, warning signs for trespassers and gun towers are concrete structures of pathological incubators which breeds psychological trauma. This experience was especially true for thousands of men subjected to decades of prolonged isolation and sensory deprivation in a restrictive environment. Not a single individual was unaffected nor immune from the state's repressive program of behavior modification. In its extremity, the mind is decapitated from the body, the body decapitated from the spirit. 'Pathology of the SHU' is based on my personal observations and reflections on the systemic mental incapacitation of other human beings. Borne out of the initial shock of imprisonment, a dehumanizing process set in motion an idea that regarded some human beings' worth or value to be less than other human beings. Their personhood became less valuable than a chimpanzee imprisoned at the local zoo. Stripped of the moral or ethical values of our human identity, our lives became viewed from within the prism of a concrete cage. The moral justification in considering prisoners as less than a human person is based on the pseudo-science of criminology. This is the same science that determines what constituted criminology by the measurement of a person's skull of smile. We became 'worst of the worst' without any redeemable qualities.

Decades of being warehoused inside an unnatural environment produced unnatural thoughts and behavior. Captivity robs us of identity. Think for a moment about the common threads between prisons, circuses, and zoos. Such an approach will better understand how many men lost their human spirit. The commonality between the three is the feature of denaturing. People by their very nature are social beings. Both their individual and collective identity is formed through their interaction with other people within a social context. What this basically means is who we are as human beings is forged by the reciprocal nature of our basic needs, wants, and desires. How we work and play with each other, how we cooperate with each other in building networks, families, and other types of relationships. So it's easy to see how this environment breeds internal emotional conflicts and psychological damage. Its effect on humans is the transformation of some men into a domesticated, docile, passive new species.

Imagine living in an unnatural environment where any social interaction doesn't produce experience or knowledge that has some utility value. Experience is only limited to the past in the form of meaningless, senseless stories with no productive value. Our individual struggle is how to

make ourselves meaningful and relevant both inside and outside these walls, especially when our physical, social, mental, and spiritual needs are controlled by administrations of these human warehouses. My struggle is maintaining my self-respect, respect for others, dignity and integrity when everything around us stinks of broken minds and rotting flesh.

So my story is about how human beings became invisible and different. It wasn't until my experiences at Folsom and San Quentin that I began to seriously take note of the psychological effects prison life was having on other prisoners. I began to reflect on all the horrors I personally observed. I concluded that the dependency complex is the source of the psychosis. At times this complex borders on anxiety, stress, mild depression, frustration and alienation. Often the cause of the complex is putting up with the constant bullshit and denials. How do we cope with the denials and responsibilities of being men, fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, nephews, cousins and friends?

The dependency complex also creates disappointment and anger. These reactions were the result of promised visitors that didn't show up, mail that's never received or answered, money orders that were never received, and other bullshit denials. The disappointments led to mood swings, loss of interest and restlessness. Some individuals became so lethargic they took on the behavior traits of a pigeon: eat, sleep and shit in order to pass the time. Others felt hopeless and helpless, losing their spirit to fight. Some chose to deal with their pain by suicide, others chose self-mutilation. I also heard the deafening screams, cries and incomprehensible mutterings of men's minds succumbing to madness. They became victim to the pathological incubator.

In order to talk about my 38 years of being warehoused inside the security housing unit (SHU), I was given a 9 month SHU term for a rule infraction, ultimately being warehoused in SHU indefinitely. I was told by the administrators of these golden gulags that I was a threat to inmate, staff and the security of the institution. I am always asked how did I survive decades of solitary confinement? The SHU back then was structured like a university or school of higher learning. It was an environment that gave me guidance, direction and purpose. It was during this era that gave birth to a new political conscious. I began to learn about human rights, liberation movements, history, world events, justice, racism, women's rights, etc. The environment was conducive to learning and teaching, because each one of us were held accountable for our actions. During day time hours, we had quiet periods in which no talking over the tier was allowed. This time was used

for self-reflection. There was a quiet period for both study and exercising. No time was loud, disrespectful conversations permitted over the tier. We existed as a community. It was here I rediscovered my humanity, and it was here we practiced community values. I was introduced to the book *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Most importantly he showed me the possibility of change, transformation and redemption. The possibility of rebirth.

My early education in SHU challenged me to think before acting, and made me understand that our strengths and courage are forged by our willingness to not be afraid or undaunted by the challenges or difficulties.

But this is not to say I was unaffected by the psychological sufferings of other prisoners. The continued years in SHU produced migraine headaches, for others it marked the endless engagements in self-dehumanizing acts. I can recall waking up some mornings so stressed out that the veins in my head for the flexing championship of my mind. Physically I was beginning to undergo internal changes that neither 'will' or 'determination' was able to resist. Some prisoners who were experiencing the same impulses acted differently. They reacted by throwing food, feces, urine and kicked on the cell doors, exemplifying the behavior of a caged animal who is now on display at the local zoo.

In order to cope with the stress, I adopted a vigorous program of exercise, meditation, reading and playing chess. As time passed, even the infallible prisoners who through using constructive physical and mental exercises in restraint, found themselves expressing bitterness and anger in a descriptive manner. My only way of doing time had been interrupted, my tolerance snapped. I began hollering at those who I classified as fools, telling them to shut up or hang themselves. The noise was nerve-racking and disruptive to say the very least. Somehow my own humanity was under assault. I became argumentative with folks suffering mental problems. Instead of separating people suffering from mental trauma, the administrators mix them in with other prisoners. No one became immune from the psychological incubator.

The past always informs the here and now, so I am never forgetful of the horrors at Vacaville State Prison, where medical experiments were conducted on human bodies. Prisoners became guinea pigs for drug research and testing. Years later, these experiments took on a new form: behavior modification. Another manufactured virus was unleashed in the prison environment which produced mindless zombies, broken bodies. After being targeted and selected for extreme

psychological torture, I was sent to Pelican Bay. The germ unleashed into the environment was called Boogey Man. It was based on fear-mongering that led to the moral justification to subject human beings to solitary confinement and sensory deprivation. Their strategy was to break the minds and spirits of men viewed as a threat to inmates, staff and security of the institution.

The classification committee's job it is to determine whether a SHU prisoner is eligible for placement in general population. The only possible eligibility for placement in the general population placement was our willingness to submit to the classification terms for release. These terms are anchored to a process which entails informing (snitching) on prisoners by prisoners. Information may not be new or true. Year after year, decade after decade we were exposed to pathological conditions that ruin hundreds of minds.

Can you imagine being invisible, without a voice?

Can you imagine being constantly told that the only way to gain relief from these conditions is if we debrief by becoming informants? Hundreds of men chose this path rather than suffer prolonged isolation, for others it meant becoming invisible. It meant having shit and piss thrown on you by the broken minds as a condition of internment. It meant the screaming and yelling of broken minds. It meant mail never received in its real time and space, because of the gang censors. It meant presumption and fear-mongering became the new regulations. It meant parole denials because we refuse to become rats. It meant the constant bullshit of denials one puts up with daily. It meant no human contact with family or friends. It meant no telephone calls to family and friends. It meant living in a dungeon for decades. It meant being told that the only way to better health care is if we debrief. It meant that we were allowed only a 15-minute phone call when our family member passed away. It meant 15 goddamn minutes to express condolences, listen and talk to people for the first time in decades. It meant living in a prison hundreds of miles from home. It meant having to share a jacket with other prisoners. It meant having to use a dog toothbrush because regular toothbrushes were security threats. It meant constantly appealing to the courts for relief, but being denied time and time again. It meant visitors behind glass, and visitors being subjected to the disrespect of the guards. It meant little children unable to embrace their daddies.

I became tired of being so tired, but kept on pushing. Culture and prison activism were criminalized. It meant the criminalization of dissent. It meant the criminalization of art. It meant the criminalization of assembly, speech and association. It meant through dehumanization we were

‘the worst of the worst’. It meant walking everywhere in your shorts or having to squat and cough to go to the yard by yourself. It meant the state paid psychologists supporting the inhumanity of solitary confinement. It meant overwhelming stress from the violence of gun shots and stabbings.

It meant hearing your father’s voice for the last time. It meant feeling the guilt of not being there for family and friends in a meaningful way. It meant no phones while you awaited the news no one wants to receive, death phone calls. It meant after a year of not hearing from my mother and when I hear some news about her, she was given two weeks to live, but dies days later. It meant the enormous grief, pain and resiliency of watching my father, mother, sister, son, brother, all died in consecutive years.

This story is about struggle, pain, hope, suppression. Most importantly it is about the men whose spirit, minds, and bodies survived. It was the bond that we had with each other that helped forge the courage and strength to resist the campaign to destroy our minds, bodies and spirits. This story is not only about me, but rather the community of men who understood that there’s strength in our commonality of struggle. We put aside our artificial differences and answered the revolutionary call to organize, to put aside our differences and build collective will and purpose. This is for the men who maintain their self-respect, dignity and honor.

In kindred spirit,

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