

SOME REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTS OF LONG TERM SHU:  
IMPRISONED RESPONSES TO READING EXCERPTS FROM  
DR. TERRY KUPERS' REPORT



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1. FROM SALINAS VALLEY July 13, 2017

"In every age, no matter how cruel the oppression carried on by those in power, there have been those who struggled for a different world. I believe this is the genius of human kind, the thing that makes us half divine; the fact that some human beings can envision a world that has never existed." Anne Braden

"I will be calling again after getting in touch with my grandchildren (Vino 17, Princess Snoony 15, Velli 13, & lil Eric 11, who live back in Leavenworth City, Kansas, who were all born while I was in SHU. So far, they have been receptive to communicating openly and warmly with the "PA PA" (that's what they call me). Now I owe these young ones so much, but I'm still trying to get my normalcy balanced, because of the deep psychic struggles that the PTSD — Solitary Confinement does to your internal being.

"Both Brutha ...and I are constantly trying to wrap our minds around that whole decades-long ordeal. We speak with some of the other class fellas here with us who are also suffering in their own PTSD-SC effects. For instance, one guy who spent 20+ years in S.C. (since he was 19) came out here, and when his 80 year old Mother Queen hugged him in the Visiting room for the first time, he froze up, wanting her to stop. A few others said they, too, had this experience. (But not me, I pushed myself to challenge the abnormality.."

2. FROM CORCORAN SHU July 31, 2017

"I hope and pray my letter finds you well in health and strength. I've just finished reading Terry Kupers' analysis of the psychological effects of long term isolation, and he did a very thorough study of the ramifications of the SHU. It's sad to say I do feel some of these symptoms now, but I can maintain my mind in a way that allows me not to give into the despair, loneliness, panic and anxiety, and further isolating myself is out of the question.

"Being that we're already anti-social, the AEH (Agreement to End Hostilities) stops that practice and allows us to get to know each other, even more than when we limited ourselves to just football & March Madness game pools, or shared literature and minimal conversation at Medical or helping each other with legal work.

"I think what is needed are programs that are community-based, like if you all at PHSS had an outpatient program for those of us who parole from long term isolation. That will minimize the substance abuse and further self isolation, I think. You all have the Parole Committee in Lancaster and the End Sleep Deprivation in Eureka, so it looks like you all can attack this thing in important areas. It would be much better than the State's EOP program and CCCMS Medications that I feel hurt people, rather than helping them. I know you might not have the resources right now, but hopefully, this is something to consider in the future.

"Now that Black August resistance is upon us, I have a lot of work to do this time, and being that I'm one of the program developers. I've put together a little essay writing for the few young New Afrikans in my section, for them to do on specific days that have meaning and purpose. Exercise routines go well, and this pamphlet by Dr. Kupers I'd like them to read also, so I'll pass it around for them to understand how this place was built to break us, and we can't let it. Thank you for this. It is helpful now! I've heard of CFASC, but what do they do now?"

(Editor's note: The author spent about 10 years in Corcoran SHU. He was released to General Population thanx to the hunger strike and the class action settlement. But three weeks later, the guards put him back in Ad Seg (Administrative Segregation), and he's now in Ad Seg for almost a year.)



3. FROM LANCASTER August 1, 2017

"Thank you so much for the most recent PLEJ packet. Dr. Kupers expert report on Psychological Effects of Long Term SHU (Solitary Confinement). I guess I don't have to tell you that I saw a lot of myself in the majority of those twenty-four men that were interviewed. Though I hate to admit it, I know that my 27 years of extreme solitary isolation at PBSP-SHU had a harmful effect on me mentally that's not all that easily detected by the people that I interact with daily.

"The people that I'm around in G.P. are mostly those I know from the SHU, and I do often retreat to my cell during yard and dayroom. My excuse is always the same — 'There's nothing to do out here.' or 'they just want to talk about women — whom they are very disrespectful of — or they want to talk about 'killing n'words, past and present.' Mostly, it's a rumor mill about people they don't like, or they hear a rumor and build on it in their heads to distort it, and present it as a fact. In order to avoid it, I retreat to my isolated space and do my thing: read, write, all the while with my radio or TV/CD player pumping out music into my ears.

"It's so true that my concentration and memory are off-kilter, in the sense that I will misplace things — in my tiny area of the bottom bunk — and take several minutes to look for it, sometimes finding it during the search for it, but also, some times not finding it until I come across it accidentally.

"Being out of the SHU has been an experience in trying to get on back to living again. Thanx to ....., and you all at Human Rights Pen Pals/PLEJ/PHSS; I am learning to rebuild my relationship to the community, and regain confidence in social interactions with others. You all have been a very important part of my healing process. Thank you.

"Can we ever replace the parts of our minds that PBSP-SHU erased?"

4. FROM NEW FOLSOM August 7, 2017

"The Psychological Effects of Long Term SHU Solitary Confinement. After reading that material, it brought back so many memories. I can recall while in SHU how much anger I would be feeling, how I stayed on edge, didn't want to socialize. At times, unexpected noises would cause me to be jumpy, when the c/o's would count at night and put the light in my eyes, that would anger me as well.

"I can most definitely relate to what those who were interviewed said in this material.

"And the transition from SHU to mainline, it's a whole other animal and it requires one to be very disciplined in dealing with G.P. (General Population). After reading the prisoners' stories, I can recall going through some of the growing pains that those guys were experiencing. It took time to adjust to being around so many prisoners, dealing with the c/o's, because in the SHU, you had very little contact with them, but on the mainline, you are almost forced to have some kind of interactions with them, or you can isolate yourself from the Population as well.

"I made the decision to be active in General Population, go out and interact with the Prison Population, regardless of race. I am still a work in progress and still have things to work on in how to conduct myself, but I am learning to do that each and everyday and you (pen pals) have been and still are someones who had made my transition from SHU to General Population, as smooth as I could have imagined along with the Pen Pal Program, and all the People who have worked so hard to make all those who spent decades in the SHU's transition to G.P. or even to the community..."



5. FROM SOLANO August 6, 2017

"I for one believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, they will create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action." Malcolm X

"One of the things that I have become very much aware of ....is the difference in how we manage our time out in the General Population, compared to Solitary.

"How well we were able to deal with the destructive effects of isolation depended on how engaged you were in the work that you were committed to (which included every relationship that you developed, both personally and professionally/principally/progressively.) You felt as though your every waking hour had to be occupied by work. (Writing or discussions on the tiers/exercise.) Except for those occasions when you might be asleep (and at some point, many of us started to think in our sleep.), or those occasions when you allowed yourself to drift to a time in your life when we were liberated enough to love, and live without all of the concrete and metal and isolation!

"In solitary, the work was confined to struggle. Out here in General Population, that work has expanded to include aspects that you simply did not know existed then. And it is all important work.

"Being able to compartmentalize issues according to their importance, is absolutely doable, but it is here in the General Population that you realize how, as a result of the volume of work that is before you (and there are times when an issue is presented to you immediately in the moment) it becomes overwhelming.

"You think of everything, ok, what do I have to do to create a space that makes it possible to consider a different perspective. Not to agree with what we might be saying, but just get a person/people to consider that there might be another side to whatever the issue is.

"Rest is a very effective tool, but it usually does not last long for me. (I tend to think even with my eyes closed at times (smiles). A buddy let me listen to a couple of jazz cd's, they were smooth jazz recordings. (I have always been a bit biased when it came to jazz, it was either Miles Davis and the John Coltranes, or nothing at all.) And, at least for now, it creates this space for me/us that makes things seem less... overwhelming....."





## Pathology of the SHU (Security Housing Unit)

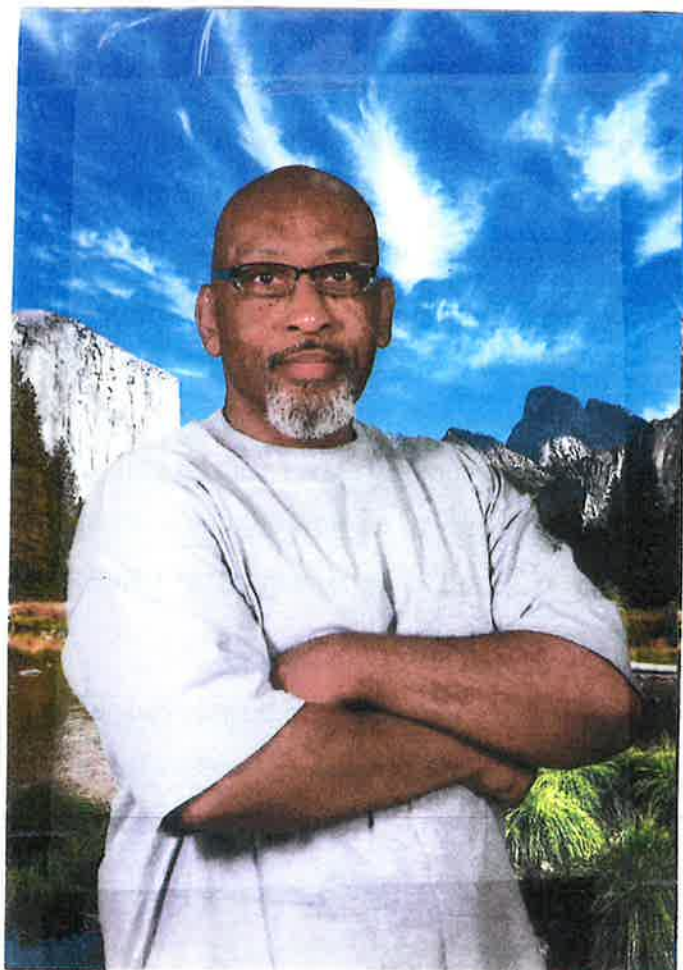
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Prison mirrors society, surrounded by a landscape of electrified barb wire fences, warning signs for trespassers and gun towers are concrete structures of pathological incubators which breeds psychological trauma. This experience was especially true for thousands of men subjected to decades of prolong 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,



May 15, 2013 a few months after release from SHU



October 24, 2015



Art by Baridi