

Cauldron of Solitude

Eugene Dey

August 2, 2006. Sirens blare. Running feet stampede the hall. Pulse racing, I search for a spot out of harm's way. Contingents of correctional officers converge, wielding batons and pepper spray. "Get on your stomachs!", they scream. "Don't move a muscle!" The officers bind our hands behind our backs using plastic flex-ties that are much stronger than the zip ties they resemble. The officer's panic only adds to the pandemonium.

My mouth is dry. I've been breathing open-mouthed, out of control. Once the rush of adrenaline subsides, my pulse will return to normal and my mouth will moisten again. A few feet away, a prisoner is pressing a shirt against his throat. It's been cut open. He staunches the wound while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. After he's whisked away, prisoners begin to complain. "My hands are turning blue!" "This is fucking bullshit!"

To take my mind off the pain in my hands – the tingle rapidly turns to a sting, then to pinpricks of fire – I listen to the officers' talk. I watch them as they watch us. Some take photos and write notes. Others stand around and look bored. A fan of the reality competition *Rock Star Supernova* I wonder who will be voted off tonight. Lying on my stomach with my arms tied behind my back, I try to look cool. It doesn't work. The smell of disinfectant and mouldy mop is a humbling experience.

Prisoners secured in their cells come to their windows and stare. They are unimpressed by the chaos. This is how we do it – just another day. Most are happy they aren't cuffed up. I'm happy for them. Running out of distractions, I fix my gaze on the solid steel door of what looks like the lid to my concrete casket. Lockdown looming large, my concrete coffin beckons.

THE CALIFORNIA MODEL

Lockdown has become the norm in the prisons of my native Golden State. When an incident occurs, prisoners are "slammed" in their cells. If the incident is racial, we are sorted out by gang, race and geographic considerations: total segregation. While prison managers determine what tactics to employ in controlling prisoners, all prison activities come to an abrupt halt. No movement whatsoever.

Sequestered 24 hours a day, wards on lockdown are allowed to live and not much else. While those "involved in" or "suspected of" institutional

transgressions are carried off to administrative segregation (ad-seg) the “hole”, or “supermax” – identical all – the rest are left to fester in total seclusion.

Cut off from outdoor exercise. Educational programs cancelled. The ability to obtain basic amenities like hygiene or canteen items is completely taken away. The thin grasp even the strongest have on sanity is challenged by the conditions of untreated addiction and, for some, co-occurring mental ailments. As they exacerbate existing ailments, the lockdowns create new ones. The human mind can only take so much. California’s suicide rate is the highest in the nation.

It’s all bad. California’s prisons are racially segregated systems prone to chronic violence. Simple solutions to the unending conflicts don’t exist. We’re literally forced to live next to and on top of our friends and enemies. Reluctantly we tolerate one another. It’s a nightmare.

There was a huge race riot at the California Correctional Center in Susanville on July 31, 2006. Just a few days later, a number of white prisoners had their throats cut. We call it “clean up.” Prisoners suspected of betrayal or cowardice – not to mention sex offenders and snitches – are violently removed from the population. Like nefarious alchemists, convicts turn grown men into “victims”.

Automatically, I knew it when I saw it. I could care less if someone fought valiantly at the riot, but most do not share my indifference. Not participating during a riot is a serious offence and this particular person ran. To say we are harsh critics for those who don’t tow the party line would be an extreme understatement. The following night, two more “vics” had their throats cut. We heard the Skinheads did it. In the vernacular of the underground, “Susanville is rocking and rolling”.

SLAMMED

If rehabilitation were truly the goal, then placing the institution on lockdown would be counterproductive. When over two-thirds of the prisoners in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) have substance abuse issues, a system of treatment and training seems would be a more logical approach. But under the California model, lockdown is the main staple on penology’s pungent diet, treat ‘em bad enough for long enough and they’ll correct their behaviour. What a sad joke.

Lockdowns are the norm. The practice of trapping two grown men in a concrete cage produces an amalgam of mind-numbing isolation and disagreeable conditions of cohabitation. For those with pre-existing conditions, seclusion exacerbates mental disorders. Deviance is reinforced as the prisoner is pressured into a state of desperation. Subtle are the strains isolation places on the psyche.

While some institutions allow visiting during lockdowns, Susanville takes a harder line. Family photos become the only solace. My celly, a young man from Los Angeles, stares at pictures of his wife for hours to counteract the pressures of being locked up with me 24 hours a day. Maybe he's just lonely as hell. I'm not qualified to make a diagnosis, but I don't need a doctorate in psychology to recognize the damage he's enduring because of severed family ties.

Each extended session of solitude takes something away from me I'll never get back. As I try to maintain a grasp on sanity, no matter how tenuous, I manage to keep writing, and exercising in order to keep myself busy. Testing the patience and sanity of my celly, I rarely stop moving. I made a permanent departure from the ranks of the sane long ago, so why bother to pretend. I just do the best I can. Institutions generally return to normal program at the same point, but not always. Even when the lockdown is lifted, we know that peace is always temporary. Our escape from the confines of two-man asylums never lasts long.

HARD TIMES

On August 2, I spent three hours as a piece of "physical evidence" at the crime scene of the stabbing. It ended with being escorted back to my cell. I had mixed feelings. Relieved this torturous session of being treated like physical evidence is about to come to an end, I resisted the temptation to yearn for the familiar comforts of my concrete coffin. Prisoners find comfort in their cells, and I find it inhumane. Escorted like a dead man walking past a number of cuffed up suspects, I knew some of them to be innocent. Rarely do the guards get it right. But they had their own problems and I had mine. In times like these it's every man for himself – doing time isn't a team sport.

The process begins in the first few days of a lockdown. Enveloped by the warm embrace of the cell, I begin to fight off a coven of personal demons. It's

a struggle. Through a regimen of litigious, literary, and physical exercises, I try to expand the claustrophobic parameters of the coffin. Only time will tell if I'm successful.

On lockdown, hard times can hit someone like a ton of bricks. Everyone has a method. Some sleep all the time, others read. Most, however, watch endless hours of television. When we're finally let out of our cells, it's like being released from one form of hell into Hades. A few weeks into this lockdown, I was given a breath of not-so-fresh air. Starting with a strip search in the doorway of our cells, we're then escorted in boxer shorts and shower sandals back into the dayroom. Seated at tables, separated by race, we're held like hostages in the middle of a standoff.

Once again, I was cuffed up in the dayroom, the scene of the previous crime. Though no longer in the middle of an emergency, "search teams" of correctional officers ripped through our belongings like Nazis through Warsaw. They confiscated a multitude of books, clothes, and small appliances. There is a policy about excess property. It seems more about the constant pressure of correctional managers who use policy to draw the walls of an already-restricted environment even closer. As I awaited the completion of this stripping – materially, physically and emotionally – I caught it staring at me. The solid steel door of my cell, much like the lid of a coffin in shape and form, locked into the open position. This was going to be a bad trip.

THE CHILL EFFECT

While group punishment rolls on, investigations of individuals continue behind the scenes. Periodically suspects are taken away, excised from the whole. In order to catch their prey off guard, raids are usually executed around sunrise. Dulled senses diminish the likelihood of resistance.

For me, my turn came a few months after the cell search on the morning of Friday the 13th, October 2006. "Dey. Get dressed", an officer ordered as the electric door to my cell was again locked open. An early riser, I put down a book I was reading. I stared at two officers who filled the narrow doorway and took my time putting on my clothes. They tried to look mean. Most guards are regular folks and many are decent. The nature of their job, however, turns them into the enemy. I've seen this movie a million times as they become faceless ghouls. Already knowing the cause, I inquired about my destination.

“Where am I going?” I asked, as if unconcerned. “R&R”, replied a third. Receiving and release is where we pick up care packages from home.

Three against one hardly seemed like a fair fight. Having worn many hats throughout my crazy life, a hustler’s cap being one of them, I recognize a game of dirty pool a mile away. Picking up packages at R&R had been taken away long ago. Dangling a coveted box of morsels in front of the stupid prisoner added insult to injury. I don’t care if they lie. It’s us against them and they lie just as much as we do. The enemy isn’t privy to the truth – with distinct lines of demarcation that I won’t cross. My honour and integrity are at stake, not to mention my life. As they say, snitches get stitches.

Going to R&R to pick up a package sounded so stupid I felt like refusing. I would make my stand. Like a soldier, I would go out on my shield. But I was in no position to initiate a debate; I just did what I was told. I knew the deal. A shit list had been assembled, and like turds we were being flushed down the toilet.

My third handcuffed sojourn into the dayroom in as many months, and this would be my last. Under heavy escort, I was now the suspect. I saw many staring from the cells. Some just looked. Others just looked scared. Trying to look tough, I mainly looked busted. Paraded around like a punk, I made my penological “perp walk.”

The chill effect is age-old. By intimidating and terrorizing the masses from speaking out, those in positions of power effectively scare the masses. The chill effect is a control mechanism. I don’t blame someone for being afraid. Oppression defeats the spirit. For me, it’s a matter of principle. I’m too stubborn – or stupid – to allow fear to take control of my emotions. “Eugene”, screamed a friend. “Is it good or bad?” “It doesn’t look good, bro!”, I yelled, to the irritation of my escorts. Oppressors prefer their captives quiet. Given the circumstances, I couldn’t care less. “Take it easy, Eugene!”, he replied. “Give ‘em hell, brother!”, hollered another. My heart growing heavier by the second, I held my head up high and smiled. They whisked me away, and out of the corner of my eye I caught it staring at me. It’s wicked miscreant, my concrete coffin. Good riddance.

THE QUAGMIRE

The officers of the CDCR are a lawless lot. A lack of competence, compounded by corruption caused the federal judiciary to take control of various functions

of the mammoth agency. Ranging from unconstitutional delivery of mental and health care services, to offer malfeasance and contempt of court in numerous class action lawsuits, the Supreme Court would validate a population cap placed on the agency by a three-judge panel.

Stacking prisoners high and tight like oily cords of human firewood forces us to compete like savages for scarce resources. Negative resources are tattooed on our minds. Riots, stabbings, and fights – not to mention the homies carted off to the hole, the infirmary, or the morgue – are all too familiar sights. While most taken to the hole are guilty of something, many have not done what is charged – or nothing at all. After the August stabbings, without an iota of evidence, a friend of mine had been charged with orchestrating one of the assaults. Every document had been falsified in a sad example of police work.

While the right to seek redress against the government is absolute, the courts give wide deference to the actions and decisions of correctional officials. Hitting an apex in the tough on crime 1990s, the civil liberties of prisoners had been completely stifled until serious officer misconduct at the notorious Pelican Bay State Prison blew up in their faces. Officers attempted to suppress numerous instances of guard-on-prisoner assaults, and the media discovered a cover-up going all the way to Edward Alameda, the director of what was then the CDC. Under threat of a federal contempt charge, he resigned in 2003, citing personal reasons. Despite the ensuing scrutiny, including federal oversight and unending negative media, a higher standard of peace officer has not materialized.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Prison administrators can always be counted on to viciously reciprocate. It's the nature of the game. Following the August 2006 stabbings, after confiscating from the population mass quantities of personal property under the catchall label of contraband, the officers made sure white prisoners would bear the brunt of the administration's nefarious quid pro quo. This time us, next time prisoners of colour. Waves of punitive methodologies are unleashed just to let us know who's on charge.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly what I did during this lockdown to become a target of corrupt officials. I've covered many facets of prisondom for numerous publications (see Dey, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2006a). These

legal actions don't coalesce with the malicious goals of prison officials. A complete ban on the press implemented in the tough-on-crime 1990s gave corrections a much-desired cloak of secrecy. Penitentiaries are closed societies by their very definition. Keeping investigative journalists out of prisons gives agents of government absolute power.

Incarcerated activists like me are an anomaly. Corrupt government officials have little respect for free speech. Whether they are covering up malfeasance or choosing not to weather some well-deserved criticism in the press the CDCR will never voluntarily end their embargo on free speech. Retaliation is assured.

The Constitution is the ultimate loser. My activism took shape in late 2006. On behalf of those on lockdown, I filed an administrative appeal in early October. Severed family ties caused by the total denial of all visitors for months based on race, not individual culpability, motivated me to file the administrative class action. Exercising my rights on multiple levels, I also covered the story for a publication for whom I served as an inside reporter (Dey, 2006b).

With corrections mired in crisis, one must take chances. Medical was placed in total federal receivership, and, perhaps, if enough prisoners speak out, the entire corrections agency would face a similar fate. Overcrowding brought the CDCR to the precipice of overcapacity. The federal judiciary hovered over the prison system like an angry parent. The time to act was now. Though few constitutional protections exist for those who lawfully express themselves in a literary or litigious manner, at some point those able to must be willing to make a stand. Generally motivated by a sense of social responsibility, not gang or race-based intolerance, I placed cause over self.

FALSIFIED EVIDENCE

Such were the factual circumstances under which “the guards” took me to the hole. Having already worn me down from months of lockdown, my captors then took me to an even worse place. To the harbingers of correctional sorrow, incarcerated activist is synonymous with institutional transgressor.

On the morning of October 13, 2006, I found myself seated and handcuffed in front of R&R. The abundance of racial tattoos and lengthy rap sheets amongst my co-defendants – and my lack thereof – had me horribly miscast for this production of *The Usual Suspects*.

As if being treated like a recently captured enemy combatant wasn't bad enough, each of us had been served identical documents alleging our instrumental roles "in promoting racial unrest" as members or affiliates of the "Skin Heads". I'm not a gangbanger. Not one to accept a total fabrication of charges without a vicious court battle, I took such charges very serious. Instinctive reflexes on how to fight false charges fired in the back of my mind. But the first order of business involved survival.

Memories resurfaced. The six months in 1999 I spent in the Serenity Housing Unit (SHU) in Corcoran had shaped me. Corcoran SHU is infamous. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Corcoran applied a morbid doctrine of pitting rival gang members against each other on concrete exercise yards. Roughly 50 men were shot point-blank. Seven were killed. Forced to fight their rivals, these human beings had been executed under a murderous shooting policy. Nothing has changed. One horrible policy is replaced by an even worse procedure to be administered by yet another carbon copy prisoncrat cut from the same piece of shit.

When I arrived at Corcoran, I was mad at the world for an unjust life sentence for drugs, determined to fight back. From the platform of the chair's position of the inmate council, I took on one of the most notorious prison administrations in the nation. Corcoran's administration made short work of me. After a riot between the whites and the Crips, Corcoran's version of the Green Wall – a guard gang of sorts – sent me to the hole. So when the Susanville faction of the correctional oppressors came to get me, I felt like I had come full circle.

They did me a favour. In Corcoran, I learned how to really do time. I entered a notorious hellhole an undisciplined and angry quasi-activist. In such settings, with absolutely nothing to lose, the guards have no choice but to show respect. We give it like we get it, and the calming effect of mutual respect is almost therapeutic. I emerged a better man. I emerged an accomplished activist who desired to become a jailhouse lawyer – and to start writing again. I would now rather die than submit. By the hard-times that seem to be in abundance, I'm empowered.

THE VORTEX

That Friday morning in October an explosion of barbed wire, chain-linked fence, and one-man holding cages overwhelmed my senses as I entered

the abyss. My heart rate elevated. The reality that a torture chamber once resembling a housing unit would serve as my new home slapped me hard in the face. My mind raced. I tried not to lose my cool. I had to fight back the instinct to cry out like a wolf caught in a steel trap. Girding the mind for the rigors of a supermax, the absolute bare minimum the law allows, is an exercise of extreme difficulty. I maintained control at all costs.

Ritualistic greetings and salutations peppered the airwaves as the shit list enters the abyss. Those who went MIA days, weeks, and months ago welcomed us into the vortex. “Eugene!”, I heard someone scream over all the noise. “That’s fucked up!” Everybody knew the administration arbitrarily deemed us insurgents. My inclusion seemed like a capricious stretch of the evidence that everyone knew didn’t exist. “I never expected to see you in here, Dey”, said the guard performing my inaugural strip search. Such disingenuous small talk did little to diminish the indignation of unjustified subjugation of being flushed down the toilet. “Neither did I”, I lied. I shrugged off his comment with a grin. Just another day at the office – my demeanour was calm. “Dey. You’re going to cell 24/7”. It was a bad dream that kept getting worse. I tried not to make eye contact – my cauldron awaited.

AFTERWARDS

If life imitates art, then my body of work chronicles my existence as an activist. One of my hometown newspapers ran a part of this piece that I drafted while on lockdown (Dey, 2007a). Since the charges were so poorly crafted, I determined to flesh out the entire episode as an example of correctional corruption. My effort won third place from PEN America (Dey, 2008a). With the perpetual assistance from Jessie, my PEN writing mentor, I further developed two PEN pieces: “Cauldron” and “Requiem for Freddy”, which won an Honourable Mention in 2007 (Dey, 2007b). Since the events of “Cauldron”, I feel I’ve progressed as an advocate for social justice.

After going to ad-seg in 2006, for the next couple of years my litigation took on a sense of purpose. In the hole I met J.P. Cuellar, and for him and the cause I took his poorly written prisoner appeals earning my first Order to Show Cause (Cuellar, 2007). When released from another trip to the hole in 2007 (Dey, 2008b; Dey, 2008c), I managed to have my case joined to Cuellar’s (Dey, 2008d).

With the appointment of counsel, evidentiary hearings, and the attorney general deposing those responsible, pressure coming from outsiders undoubtedly didn't feel so good. I broadened the scope to cover how complaints of misconduct against guards are systematically covered up. As my petition worked its way through the state courts, I found myself in a streak of litigious success. Covering an assortment of claims, I had attorneys appointed in the state and federal courts for over half a dozen guys. In 2009, I secured the release of a lifer.

My all-out reactions to the actions of dirty cops made me a hero in the eyes of my people. The experience made me a better person. Advocacy is serious business. I may be mad, but I treat it like a game. By not taking it personally, I kept my sanity. After I finally transferred (Dey, 2010a), I still couldn't let it go. But a reporter at my other hometown newspaper used my case as part of a larger piece about correctional corruption (Piller, 2010). Being part of a story that led to statewide changes in the appeals process, I achieved closure.

Preferring to write rather than litigate, my literary activism restarted in Soledad (Dey, 2010b; Dey, 2011). Administrators in these lower-level institutions are not as quick to retaliate with felonious deviations from the law. When I determined to illuminate the injustice of forcing integration on the most volatile demographic in the carceral (Dey, 2011), a minor act of retaliation didn't warrant a response. Battles with merit and substance move me.

Since jailhouse journalists are frequent targets (Hucklebury, 1999; McMaster, 1999; Dey, 2009), our underappreciated work deserves a place in the literature (Gaucher, 1999; Piché, 2008). Risks involved with intrepid expression are universal, but the intensity of the almost automatic response by staff is decreased in the more stable carceral environments. Officials will go to great lengths to chill the effectiveness of resistance in higher custody institutions, and for those who take a stand I'm there with them in spirit. Making it out of the warzone and to Soledad feels like a miracle.

Times are changing, and I'm adjusting my focus. In my last year at Susanville, and my first year and a half at Soledad, I've been working with a team of "qualified offenders" to develop and deliver evidence-based programs. With the assistance of a well-connected non-profit organization, through a group we call Inside Solutions, I'm holstering some of my "acidic views" (Dey, 2009, p. 122) as I chase transcendence in the form of unleashing systemic restoration to the community.

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