

I've felt all kinds of things since entering this SHU¹ in 1998, while isolated from human touch; caged and tortured; often starved; having shit and piss thrown on my body, my face and my hair; having my dreadlocks pulled out; having ribs and fingers fractured; and having my head and lips busted.

I've had my mail censored, had my personal belongings ransacked, read and used to contact my family and friends in the free world behind my back. My personal photos have been passed out among their gossip hounds for purposes of starting false rumors about my family and friends. I've been labeled a troublemaker, a snitch, a racist, a rapist, a child molester, and a woman killer to try to turn prisoners against me and what I believe in. I've been labeled as suicidal, insane and as a predator.

After the blood, sweat and tears over the past six years on this SHU — the loneliness, isolation, long nights, longer days, the dreams, nightmares, the cold sweats, the hot sweats, and the confusion — what is left of me? I can't understand, relate to, or communicate with people the way I used to. Much as I long for human contact, I find myself pulling back from what opportunities there are for dialogue. I purposefully push people away. I can't afford to allow anyone to penetrate my space for fear of people not understanding my anger, my frustration, and my fears over the last six years.

I tell people that have just come on the unit to be cool and do what it takes to get off the SHU as fast as possible, to avoid misconduct reports that could keep them here longer, to accept the bullshit around here in order to get off, to keep their mouths shut, do what they're told, show no resistance or they'll be here as long as I have...then I look inwardly at where this SHU has brought me. Now this SHU has me preaching passivity and not resistance.

I search to find something positive that I can take away from this experience. What can I possibly tell future comrades about this SHU? All I can think of as advice is to stay the hell away.

Every 30 days, a psycho-doctor comes to ask each of us, "Do you have any problems?" For six years, I've been asked this question. For the first year or so I answered, "No," but as time went on I stopped answering the question altogether. They didn't need me to tell them that they were creating problems for prisoners — mentally, physically, and spiritually.

I feel as though the SHU has emptied me and left me hollow. Have you heard an old saying that goes, "I'm up a creek without a paddle?" Well,

that's me, plus I'm handcuffed behind my back with a million holes in the bottom of the boat and I'm sinking fast... .

Still, I want hope — I crave hope. I seek reassurance that the struggle for prisoners' human rights remains alive — that I remain alive — that the SHU regime can be ended.

I tell you without shame that I'm scared. I'm as afraid as anyone would be here. Some days I don't know where to turn. I cry. I want to give up, but what would I be if I didn't challenge the violence here that haunts me?

I long for the day when I can relax, when I can sleep peacefully for eight hours, eat a good meal, take a nice hot shower, and not have these stresses, these ills, this nonsense, this foolishness, this darkness of the SHU waiting for me when I'm done.

I've counted every brick of these walls in this cell, and it seems that every time that I count them one is missing, or maybe the walls are closing in on me. Whatever the case, this cage has become my friend, enemy, my love, my fear, and my shelter, as well as home to my demons. It plays tricks with my mind, and it soothes my mind. A contradiction? It's much more than that now.

When I'm taken from this cell for anything, shower, sick call, law library, I long to return. Despite all the negative things the cell is, I also see it as my protector. Explain that! But it shields me, not from the shit and the piss throwers, but from something that I can't explain, yet I feel protected from everything else. Crazy, huh?

Despite my isolation, or perhaps because of it I long to be as alone as possible. I sleep (or try to) during the daylight hours and stay up all night. My thoughts just seem to work better during these hours, because of all the bullshit that goes on around me during the day. I steal what time I can for myself, by reading and writing. I take joy from any escape from SHU madness.

I hope that I can be "de-SHU-ed" when I leave here — that I'll become more social when I'm back in a regular population where prisoners interact with each other. I had the experience of being off the SHU recently. In February and August of 2003, I returned to the county that I'm from, up north, to go to court to request a modification of my sentence. I had to stay in an over crowded county jail. The cells were made for two people, but held four — a very tight fit. I could neither sleep nor interact. I felt paranoid, out of place. I isolated myself as best I could, from everybody else. When

the other three were out of the cell, and I stayed there alone, I felt more at peace, more comfortable, more protected from sharing even my feelings.

When it was lockdown, from 11pm until 4am (that's the time the doors were locked and we were confined to that small cell), I sat up and watched these other three dudes. None of them was threatening in any way. I was there for four days each visit to court, and every night I slept sitting up, as to be in a defensive position — physically and mentally. That's how I felt.

One of the dudes in the cell asked me, "Man, why are you always by yourself"? I said, "Just thinking about this court date".

By my second visit to the jail, I was at least aware of keeping to myself and why I did it. It wasn't that the dudes posed a threat to me, but that I was uncomfortable because I had not had interaction in so long that I didn't know how to act. I was basically in shock, and my fear level was off the scale. I was scared to be around people. Isn't that crazy? I've never talked about this to anyone before now. I find myself wondering what my reaction will be if I'm let off the SHU back into population with other prisoners, let alone released from prison altogether.

This is a look inside this SHU, as well as a look inside my mind and feelings. I think people need to know not just about the shit and piss throwing, but about the possible long-term effects of isolation, the dehumanization, loneliness, and being forgotten. All questions, criticisms, or whatsoever that's on anyone's mind, please address your questions to me personally. Just please don't assume you know about me. If you have any questions, please ask.

This was hard for me to write and it was even harder to let somebody read it. I feel that I have exposed myself to a lot of people. I worry that some people will try to use my words against me, but I'm all right with that as long as we can possibly help to "de-SHU" prisoners, not just in Indiana but nation and worldwide.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ SHU is the Indiana Department of Correction's term for its "Security Housing Unit," known elsewhere as adjustment units, control units, and supermax prison units; beginning with the federal prison unit in Marion, Illinois, designed so that in theory, prisoners can be held in well-lit and monitored isolation with no direct human contact — advertised as models of technological advancement.

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