

# survivors manual



**A manual written by and for people  
living in control units**



**American Friends  
Service Committee**

Survivors Manual: Surviving In Solitary  
A manual written by and for people  
living in control units

The federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, went on permanent lock down in 1983. This created the first “control unit.” Now, in addition to the federal government, some forty states have built these “maxi-maxi” prisons — representations of the angry and cruel repression that grips our country today. Human beings are put alone in a small cell with double steel doors and no window for 23 hours a day. No program, no work, no education, meals alone, and maybe one hour by oneself in a bare dog-run outside. A religious task force calls such conditions psychological pain and agony tantamount to torture. It is torture. Here, now, in the following pages, people who are captives in these cells write about what goes on and how you can survive.

Dedicated to those who have contributed to this manual, to all courageous people living in prison, and to the memory and example of Holbrook Teter.

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Coordinator, Prison Watch Program, AFSC

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The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Our Healing Justice Program challenges the morality and effectiveness of the “tough on crime” mentality. The program's ultimate goal is to help shift the system of justice from a paradigm of retribution to one of healing and transformative justice that seeks to restore wholeness to individuals and communities. The program has long resisted the use of control units by prisons and has challenged conditions in them. Our STOPMAX Campaign is building a nationwide network to abolish solitary confinement and devices of torture in U.S. prisons. We gather testimony from prisoners in isolation and survivors; undertake research, plan human rights trainings and regional hearings; and organize lawyers, activists, families, and communities to oppose the use of control unit isolation.

**Please note that some of the opinions, statements, and language used by prisoners in this manual are not in keeping with AFSC's Quaker principles to “see that of God in everyone.” However, these women and men have been censored enough. We refuse to be part of their oppression and have printed their letters and stories in their entirety and without eliminating language that some might find objectionable.**

## I. A powerful community of resistance

By Bonnie Kerness

Director, Prison Watch Program

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

*Excerpt from a presentation at the AFSC STOPMAX*

*Conference, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA*

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In the mid 1980s I received a letter from Ojore Lutalo who had just been placed in the Management Control Unit at Trenton [New Jersey] State Prison. He asked what a control unit was, why he was in there, and how long he would have to stay.

At that point, we knew little of control units, except for the groundbreaking work of Nancy Kurshan and Steve Whitman of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML) and the many prisoners who reached out to the AFSC, which, in 1985 produced a pamphlet called “The Lessons of Marion.” We began hearing from people throughout the country who said that they were prisoners being held in extended isolation for political reasons. We also heard from jailhouse lawyers, Islamic militants, and prisoner activists, many of whom found themselves locked down in 24/7 solitary confinement.

The AFSC began contacting people inside and outside the prisons to see who was interested in working specifically on control unit isolation issues, and in 1994, after eight years of organizing, we hosted the formation of the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons (NCSCUP). This was done with the help of many groups and individuals who gave strength and purpose to the work...

## The freedom to dissent

The history of the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons really began with the movements of the 60s and 70s. My generation belonged to a society where we genuinely believed that each of us was free to dissent politically.

In those years, people acted out this belief in a number of ways. Native peoples contributed to the formation of the American Indian Movement dedicated to self determination; Puerto Ricans joined the movement to free the island from U.S. colonialism; white students formed the Students for a Democratic Society and other groups, while others worked in the southern Civil Rights movements.

This was also a time that the New Afrikan Independence Movement reasserted itself, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed, as well as a time when there was a distinct rise in the prisoners' rights movement.

It was a time when television news had graphic pictures of state troopers, police, the FBI, and the National Guard killing our peers.

It was a time when I saw on the evening news the bullet holes fired by police into Panther Fred Hampton's sleeping body, a time when young people protesting the Viet Nam War died on the Jackson and Kent State campuses killed by the National Guard, a time when civil rights workers were killed with impunity, and a time when we felt as if there was no opportunity to stop mourning because each day another activist was dead. These killings and other acts of oppression led to underground formations such as the Black Liberation Army and the Weathermen Underground.

In response to this massive outcry against social ineq-

unities and for national liberation, the government utilized an FBI counter-intelligence program, called COINTELPRO, which had as its objective the crippling of the Black Panther Party and other radical forces. Over the years that this directive was carried out, many of those young people who weren't murdered were put in prisons across the country. Some, now in their 60s and 70s, are still there. Those directives are still being carried out, only now we have an entire office of Homeland Security monitoring what it calls "radical prisoners."

While the U.S. denied that there were people being held for political reasons, there was no way at the time to work with prisoners without hearing repeatedly of the existence of such people, including individuals who clearly fit the United Nations' definition of political prisoners and prisoners of war — and the particular treatment they endured once in prison. As early as 1978, Andrew Young, who was then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, was quoted in newspaper interviews as saying that "there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people I would describe as political prisoners" in U.S. prisons.

Across the nation, we saw an enhanced use of sensory deprivation/isolation units for such people, and it was this growing "special treatment" which we began monitoring. At the time, Ralph Arons, a former warden at Marion, was quoted at a congressional hearing as saying, "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large."

## **A promise to abolish the torture chambers**

For those of us who have been in the struggle for decades, the deliberate use of long-term sensory deprivation

is haunting. People that we've known, worked with, and loved have been, and some still are, being held in this manner:

- Ojore Lutalo
- Sundiata Acoli, for whom the Management Control Unit in New Jersey was built in 1975
- Assata Shakur, who was held in isolation for over five years
- Marshall Eddie Conway
- Albert Nuh Washington, who died in prison
- Geronimo Pratt
- Dhoruba Bin Wahad
- Dr. Mutulu Shakur
- Mumia Abu Jamal
- Leonard Peltier
- David Gilbert
- Marilyn Buck
- Sekou Odinga
- Ray Luc Levasseur
- Kazi Toure
- Leonard Peltier
- Oscar Lopez Rivera
- Alejandrina Torres
- Dylcia Pagan
- Bashir Hameed, who died in prison
- Standing Deer
- Sekou Odinga
- Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin
- Richard Williams
- Tom Manning
- Merle and the rest of the Africas
- Susan Rosenberg
- Laura Whitehorn
- Linda Evans
- Sylvia Baraldini
- Imam Jamil Al-Amin

Their names and thousands of others haunt the spaces of every control unit, SHU, DDU, ad seq unit, and special housing unit in the country.



No matter what name they are given, their purpose is the same as it is in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo — the breaking of minds...

For people of my generation, this work is done with a compelling and lifetime passion and an understanding that the work is not risk free. We've made a promise to those dead and alive to abolish these torture chambers.

People throughout the world are beginning to understand what the prisoners have been saying to us for decades about the oppressive tactics of the U.S. government. The department of corrections is more than a set of institutions; it is a state of mind. It is that state of mind which has expanded the use of isolation, the use of devices of torture and the counter intelligence program, as part of Homeland Security, against activists, both inside and outside the walls.

Ojore Lutalo, the man who first contacted us in 1986, was released from the control unit via litigation in 2002 after 16 years in isolation. In 2004, he let us know that he had been placed back into the Management Control Unit with no charges pending or any explanation. When I called the Department of Corrections, it took many conversations before I was bluntly told that this was upon the order of Homeland Security. He is one of a number of prisoners across the country who have been targeted in this way.

### **Who's a "security threat"?**

The latest progression of control units are called "security threat group management units." This is particularly egregious because it is the government which gets to define what a "security threat group" is. According to a national survey conducted by the Department of Justice in 1997,

the Departments of Corrections of Minnesota and Oregon named all Asians as gangs, which Minnesota further compounds by adding all Native Americans. The State of New Jersey DOC lists the Black Cat Collective as a gang. The Black Cat Collective is my free foster son along with two friends who put on Afro-Centric cultural programs in libraries. Because my own background stems from the Civil Rights era, I am very mindful of who is considered a “security threat” to this country and how they are treated.

Prison gang policies occur within the context of larger society and the wider criminal justice system, and the growth of security threat group management units are part of the larger policy agenda regarding U.S. prisons. One of the standards that the federal government sets in order for states to receive prison construction subsidies is to mandate the building of supermax prisons or security threat group management units.

One of the things that makes this such an exciting time to renew our efforts through STOPMAX is that we now have the growing understanding of the validity of United Nations international law. The Convention Against Torture, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, The UN Convention on Political and Civil Rights, and other international and regional treaties help give us a new set of legal, educational, and organizing tools for social change.

Our work this weekend is rooted in struggle against the system and political oppression. It is deeply touching to me to have representatives of so many long-time political formations present. Those of us in AFSC rooted in these issues continue to hear from prisoner activists, prisoners with mental illness, people charged with being gang members

and thousands of others — all being housed in extended isolation where devices of torture are used with impunity. After each Homeland Security Code change, Prison Watch is flooded with calls from people reporting loved ones with Islamic names being placed in solitary without charges.

Our work this weekend is a time when the building of new relationships and the broadening of our base can truly create social change. I think we all need to be mindful of the deep sense of grief that many of us feel as it impacts on our work and interactions. There may be groups here who need to work through differences with one another. There may be groups here who can form working alliances no matter what those differences are. Our priority has to be to work cooperatively to shut down these torture chambers.

We, all of us, are a powerful community of resistance, and this is a dream come true for me.

Thank you.

## II. Letters from prisoners: Life in a control unit

### The importance of understanding

It was great to hear you're updating the *Survivors Manual*. While I haven't read one in awhile, it left quite an impression on me. In fact, you had sent it to me. And it was right when I first got locked down in the units. I can't tell you just how helpful it was knowing/understanding what this place is.

One of the things I remember the best and absolutely know to be true is the need to have some type of schedule for yourself. Perhaps we are just creatures of habit but having some type of schedule for yard, time to do laundry, writing, reading, and even time for mindless stuff to balance out everything – it just makes this situation a little easier to tolerate.

Also I definitely liked how it broke down why certain things are done... i.e. standing at the gate with the lights on for meals reinforces compliance. Understanding why they do these things makes it so much easier to deal with it, AND not be adversely affected by it.

Todd Tarselli  
Pennsylvania



### Sensory deprivation is depravity

From within and beyond the one hundred thousand dollar, 8 by 14 square foot steel and stone Sensory Deprivation cell that is designed for my mental, physical, and social dehumanization, I bring to you this letter of concern regarding

the adverse effects of long-term Sensory Deprivation.

After spending over a year in the Supermax undergoing long-term intensive solitary confinement, denied and deprived of direct human contact, I was transferred back to the Maryland Penitentiary. Upon seeing me for the first time in over a year, a fellow prisoner shook my hand and then proceeded to put both arms around me to embrace me and I became visibly shaken and cringed up as if I had been physically violated. I had not had any physical contact with another human being in so long that I wasn't used to being touched. I had become super-sensitive to one of the basic human senses — the sense of human touch.

### **Welcome to the “Sensory Deprivation Experience”**

Definition: self-explanatory—the deliberate and intentional stripping of the cell down to an isolation cell, then the stripping of the individual down to the basic necessities, even down to the personal effects. Then locked within this cell twenty-three hours a day with barely the bare essentials, where even the wall-mounted stainless steel mirror in the segregation cells is removed from the walls so that even the sight of one's own image is denied.

This is Sensory Deprivation. And no matter how strong a person is, Sensory Deprivation is depravity at its worst. All five basic human senses — sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste — are severely suppressed — when one is slowly, but surely, and very subtly stripped of all the common sentiments of humanity.

Under these adverse conditions of confinement, one tends to crave a change of scenery, location, atmosphere, and environment just so s/he can see new sights instead of the same ole, everyday, mind-deadening routine and face-

less faces ... hear new and different sounds other than the quiet, indescribable silence that seems to speak louder than noise ... smell different scents besides the foul, stale, contemptible odor so common to everyday existence in this bottomless pit ... one seeks to touch base with, feel and embrace another human in an intimate, sensitive, humane, compassionate, personal way as opposed to the impersonal, inhumane, insensitive, degrading manner ... one develops a strong, intense desire to taste various foods besides the same ole, tasteless, non-variety, everyday, recycled meals.

One is served just enough food to have a bowel movement, just enough to stay alive. This is Sensory Deprivation where even one's sense of taste, appetite, and taste buds is denied and deprived.

All of the aforementioned increased, heightened senses are common among convicted persons held in prisons, but such senses are magnified one hundred times in Control Unit Sensory Deprivation Prisons. [These are] steel and stone torture chambers where, absent various forms of social stimuli, the human mind can become so debased, so dehumanized, and sink so low that if one isn't careful, there is a tendency to adjust, conform, and accustom oneself to a standard of living that is lower than that which exists within the animal kingdom. This is the adverse effect of long-term Sensory Deprivation. It is a form of physical, social, and psychological torture, and it pushes many self-respecting, rational thinking, decent-minded men and women to a quest for excitement, acts of desperation, and to the most extreme points of paranoia.

After spending over a year in the Supermax, I was transferred back to the Maryland Penitentiary without any consideration given to the desocialization process I had under-

gone. Nor was any provision made to resocialize me back into a general population setting. Upon having difficulty adjusting into general population, it became necessary for me to be placed on punitive segregation for refusing to be housed in a cell with another human being. There was a time when I could tolerate double-cell housing on a temporary, short-term, voluntary basis, but after my experience with Sensory Deprivation, I have now become more anti-social than ever and I now have a zero-degree tolerance level for double-celling and general population settings.

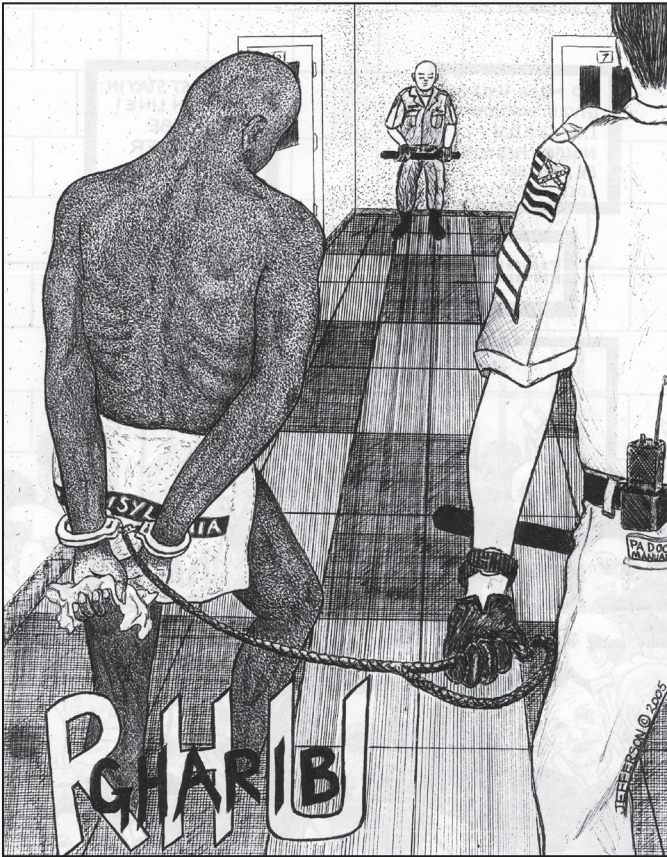
As a result, for the past five years that I have been out of the Supermax, I have spent a total of only seven months in a general population setting.

In addition, on two occasions, I have had official street charges pressed against me. This never before happened to me in the entire history of my imprisonment. I am currently waiting to go to trial for the latest charge. I have not received, encouraged, nor welcomed any outside contact by way of visits from family members, loved ones, or friends in the past five years since leaving Supermax. This entire experience is uncharacteristic of me, but I believe the underlying root cause is the social dislocation I have suffered from my first encounter with Supermax's Sensory Deprivation. I am only now beginning to question and understand what has happened to me.

Now that I am back in the Supermax for a second time, armed with this overstanding of what Sensory Deprivation actually is, I am less likely to leave Supermax no better off for my experience than when I first arrived. My concern now is with controlling and reversing the ill-effects of my first encounter with Sensory Deprivation. Otherwise, I am concerned that my social dislocation will in all likelihood go

from bad to worse, and ruin me to the extent that not only would I not be mentally, physically, or socially fit for a general population setting, but society in general.

Ronald Epps  
Maryland



Graphic: Leonard Jefferson



## Psychological effects and political platform

**I. Psychological effects of SHU** (security housing unit) on prisoners.

Psychological torture takes the form of physical pain (i.e., migraines, stress-related illnesses, suicide, etc.). The situation (evidence of physical torture) that I am about to present is not an isolated reality. This is a daily ritual which occurs throughout the Pelican Bay SHU.

Three stages to strategy of psychological torture: 1st , 2nd , and 3rd “watches.”

1. The Guard makes noise in early AM hours, every morning. Any complaint results only in the antagonization of the situation.
2. Slamming food ports when guards serve meals. Every day. Deliberate action to antagonize, irritate, and exercise and flaunt power dynamic.
3. Excessive noise when doing all four counts: 11 p.m., 1 a.m., 2:30 a.m., and 4 a.m. Again, deliberate exercise of power, disrespect, and brandish power.

Other forms [range] from blasting the P.A. system to intentionally withholding personal mail.

Those who lack the knowledge and understanding of torture and its different applications may dismiss the significance of the evidence that I have presented, but before you do, allow me to bring your attention to certain facts that will substantiate my evidence.

Sound is a well known tactic in both psychological warfare and torture, from the sound of dripping water to the blasting of loud music. The Waco massacre is a perfect example. When the U.S. racist, fascist government used loud

music and bright lights as a tool of torture against women and children, the results varied, from sleep deprivation to the constant shocking of the nerves.

## **II. Political issues**

The constant emotional abuse leads to permanently disturbed ex-cons who then reenter society with needs for therapy, or without the facilities to adequately readjust. Either way, they continue to cost the taxpayers' money. The Correction Department is failing at its goals of correction.

The prison system is now a sanctuary to preserve and proliferate the Criminal Mentality Syndrome. This is the very psychological disposition which guarantees the continuity of the government scheme to financially benefit from the inner city crime. This also explains why there is no genuine effort on part of the CDC (California Department of Corrections) to implement a serious program for criminal rehabilitation, especially here in the security housing unit at Pelican Bay. The CDC fully understands that absence of such programs would only increase the recidivism rate among its prison population. Crime prevention or criminal rehabilitation would in fact undermine the government's CDC endeavors to economically exploit the New Afrikan and Latino/Mexican communities via poverty and crime!!

### **CDC deliberate indifference clause**

The evolution of civilization cannot be discussed without discussing the evolution of human mortality. The control-unit prisons and their proliferation is a perfect example of a society's immorality. How could any society justify the existence of such a brutal and inhumane place?

Demands:

- Rehabilitation programs, especially education
- Racially diverse independent review board
- Black community parole board
- Taxpayers allowed to tour Pelican Bay SHU
- Compensation to victims of extortion schemes
- Termination of employees involved in torture of prisoners
- End to the criminalization of Prisoners' Rights Activists
- Release political prisoners and P.O.W.'s

Abdul O. Shakur  
California



## Anger & the senses

### Anger

On April 20, 1990, former hostage Dr. Robert Polhill was released by his kidnapers. He stated the following to the media while being interviewed: “I survived by staying angry at my kidnapers, I was able to keep my focus this way. Had I allowed my anger to leave me, and not stayed angry for what was happening to me, I wouldn’t have made it.”

The news media reported on the release of Dr. Polhill and I watched the three different networks. Although each reported on the story from a somewhat different angle, I noticed each anchorperson and each network appeared to praise Dr. Polhill regarding his anger. The general consensus was that he had a right to be angry and I think we all agree that anytime you’re held against your will, captive, told what to do, how to do it and when to do it, naturally you will have aggression towards your overseer. Yet the Corrections Department deems it as inappropriate behavior when

a prisoner demonstrates anger after being confined for a period of years. Dr. Polhill was held for a little over two years while some men are incarcerated for ten, fifteen, twenty-five years. How can the department and society have the audacity to expect that prisoners remain passive and docile when to do so is against the very nature of a human being?

The anger one feels from being held captive is akin to slavery. It sets off emotions that few will ever know, short of being in a hostage situation or in an American prison.

### **The senses**

When I first heard of sensory deprivation, it was being associated with the conditions of which I was subjected to, of which I and others similarly situated, were suffering from. But even to this day, I have not been informed or educated as to exactly how sensory deprivation targets and effects the human being. It was only through personal research, and contemplation, that the connection with sensory deprivation and our day to day afflictions by it became profoundly understood. The fundamental principle upon which any of our endeavors may be successful, is to understand the nature of our human make-up, and those elements that either complement it or harm it.

I humbly believe that first and foremost in our struggle to overcome and survive this cruel and evil practice of sensory deprivation is to take the two words (sensory and deprivation) and analyze them in their individual components.

Sensory: directly relating to our basic five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch — essential components in every human being's make-up. It is the senses that by nature establish contact with the natural elements of creation (environment) and are stimulated towards de-

velopment and growth. The natural elements in the environment provide that necessary contact with the senses in which we as human beings may know the inner relationship with the outer world. Wo/mankind looks upon the natural elements and through them, knowledge and understanding is stimulated. The human looked upon the birds and discovered the plane, he observed the whale and discovered the submarine. Our forest trees contribute to the oxygen in the atmosphere as our flowers and roses contribute to the fragrance that stimulates smell and allows us to discover commodities as perfume and colognes, enchantment.

It is the sense of touch, in which we made contact with the wild life (animals) and found comfort in furs and skins, cloth. A child will see a butterfly (sight sense) and our dear child's motor skills will be activated, curiosity will lead them to chase it in play. In each element of nature there is a direct connection with the senses in which the human being is always stimulated. The thoughts are activated, creativity is contemplated and realized, human potential is cultivated and most importantly, balanced sociability is fostered.

Deprivation: means to deprive someone of something, to take away, or debar. In relation to the senses that have just been set forth, to deprive would mean: creating the structural setting in which the senses are cut off from contact with the natural elements of creation. To prevent the senses from having contact with the natural elements would result in depriving the senses the necessary stimulant for healthy growth and development as a human being.

The will and motivation towards creativity or productivity would be numbed by the absence of environmental stimulant. (I sound like one of them witnesses giving testimony before a hearing.) Anyway, when the architects of PBSP

(Pelican Bay State Prison) built this SHU, they designed it for the express purpose of making sure that its captives would suffer an inhumane deprivation of the senses. For those of us faced with each awakening day inside of these tombs, we must forever be mindful of the overwhelming effects taking place each moment of our existence.

As children growing up in the natural environment outside of these walls, we have come into contact with the natural elements of creation. Our senses were nurtured to the extent upon which we developed a relation with the birds, flowers, trees, ocean, animals, etc., that shall always be an ingrained part of our humanity.

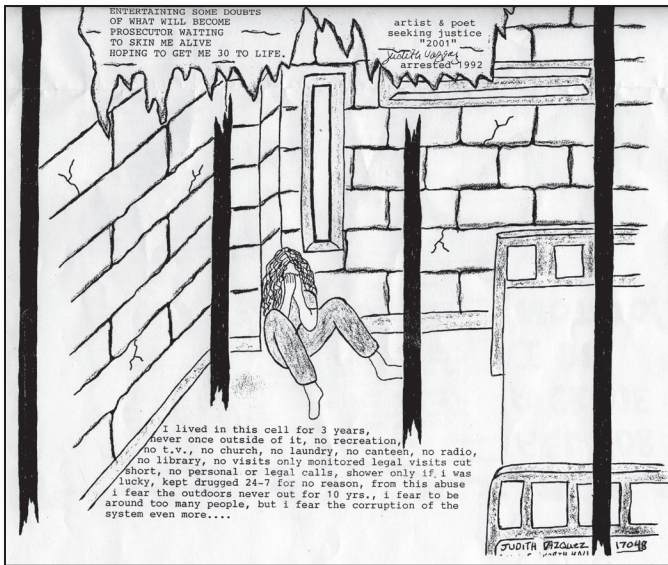
It is from those experiences that we must always rely upon in contemplating, meditating, and visualizing the world we know. Those who have televisions: spend time watching nature programs, not for the lone sake of entertainment, but now in the context of an everyday struggle in which we realize the forces of sensory deprivation. Ponder the insights entailed within nature itself, as we look at animals, life beneath the sea, the galactical skies, the ecological systems, and we shall prevail.

Latif Asad Abdullah  
California



## **The strength of a woman**

Believe me, Ms. Bonnie, I am a very strong person, I have suffered and been abused enough to make anyone commit suicide. My first 3 years they kept me locked in a cell with no T.V., no gym, no recreation, no outdoors, no library, no radio, no canteen, no ice, no laundry, no nothing. For 3 Whole Years!!! Not once was I allowed to ever go out of that cell. I



Graphic: Judith Vasquez

was lucky if I was allowed to shower which was just five feet from my cell.

I never seen the sky, or felt the warmth of the sun, or a breeze pass me by, the trees and grass or a rain drop. I never knew how painful it could be to be denied nature itself. I had a small narrow window which does not open, but all I could see was brick walls and nothing more. I remember from those brick walls was a small plant growing from within the cracks of the brick; that was my only part of nature that gave me hope. As the wind would blow against the leaves of this plant, I would actually close my eyes and pretend this very wind was blowing against my face. I know it sounds crazy, but it was the only part of nature I had.

And then one day I could not stand it and I so desperately needed to feel real air, so I started to scrape the seal

from the window with my fingertips. I was determined to make an opening.

For three months of every day I scraped and scraped [until] my fingers bled, but I managed to make a very small opening and I only has room to place one side of my nose against this opening at a time and I would take such a deep breath where I finally was able to inhale a very small amount of air but it was all in needed in order to survive this mental abuse I was being put through for no apparent reasons.

Well, Ms. Bonnie, after all the abuse I been put through including the sex abuse, that was enough for me to give up and commit suicide, but I am very strong...

Judith Vasquez  
New Jersey



### III. Letters from prisoners: Survival

#### What survival is

Survival is being spiritually and mentally filled by the Angels of Justice fighting the fight for our liberation from Pelican Bay SHU.

Survival is possessing the intellect to know when the psych comes into the housing unit to ask the mentally unstable if they need a psych line, and you realize how ridiculous he sounds — you're surviving.

Survival is waking up in the morning, in a sound mind, realizing that one was not killed during the night or moved to some unknown destination.

Survival is hearing one's neighbor laughing out loud because his son or daughter received a good grade in school or a great report card.

Survival is when one can assist his neighbor in his time of need, no matter what his racial, political, or cultural views may be.

Survival is hearing one's neighbor call out to make sure the man is not taking advantage of one, and to let the man know you're not alone.

Survival is being able to state to oneself that I have made it through another day — without being killed, beaten half to death or made to stand in a shower or holding cell naked, hand-cuffed for hours (for not moving fast enough, or having the wrong look, not using the right words, or for speaking out on injustices) — having one's dignity at the end of the day still intact to fight another day.

And giving thanks to whatever God one might believe in, before closing one's eyes for sleep.

You smile because you have survived another day at Pelican Bay.

Bambari S. Kelly Andersen  
California



## Inner consciousness v. isolation

Before I begin sharing what I feel are some valid key points on “how to survive” the isolation in these dungeons, death traps, hell holes, SHU's, Supermax — or whatever you want to call them — let me first touch on three facts we can all agree on — a consensus:

- 1) The barbarian architects behind these sickass designs had (have) serious mental problems dealing with their own inferiority syndrome and dealing with peoples in the world.
- 2) These holes were purposely designed as torture chambers to break you mentally and physically into submission and to abandon your own beliefs, etc.
- 3) The isolations and restrictions in these dungeons that our captors like referring to as Control Units vary from state to state, prison to prison — some more isolated and restricted than others. However, their structure and use have the same malicious intent, and that is to control your existence and way of thinking.

This brings me to another very important point that I would like to paraphrase from Carter G. Woodson:

If you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think, you do not have to concern yourself about what he

will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the backdoor. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one...

You recall the old adage — cliché: don't let time do you, you do the time. There is great truth in that above cliché.

I have now been in prison 20 years and 18 of them have been spent in various SHU's (holes) — from D.V.I. Folsom State Prison, San Quentin (briefly), then to the new more high-tech isolation chambers at Corcoran State Prison and now Pelican Bay State Prison. I have now been here since 1990.

I have many years of experience in these hell holes and have witnessed a great deal in terms of seeing individuals giving up their inner strength and beliefs because in their minds they could no longer deal with the mental torture, isolation, the materialistic restrictions, etc.

These individuals gave up and broke themselves because they were missing the key essentials to their inner consciousness that give them the power to survive isolation.

I have been asked over the years: “How have you been able to survive all this and still be mentally intact?” My answers are very simple:

- 1) I know who I am and where I am going.
- 2) I don't let time do me, I do the time.
- 3) My mind and thinking are far beyond prison walls.

Only my body is being held captive. To put it more plain-

ly, 95% of time daily is spent writing and thinking outside of prison.

Now I would like to share with those who are new to this or/and those who have not yet developed the inner consciousness that gives them the power to survive — here are my pointers on how to survive and use isolation to your advantage:

- 1) Regrowth — begin with studying your history, culture, and yourself.
- 2) Make a real commitment to your inner consciousness.
- 3) Think of ways you can make positive contributions to our peoples in the communities.
- 4) Write letters with your ideas and input to unify yourselves with the young and old. Send your letters to family members, friends, churches, publications, progressive newspapers, radio deejays, artists, college students on campus, lawyers, etc., etc. Keep writing, don't stop. You may not get responses from everyone you write to, but you will get some. In them some may be referrals to our peoples, or they may like your ideas and be willing to help you get it going.

Constantly writing these letters reinforces your inner consciousness to solidify your internal change beyond mere words. Your focus is no longer your immediate isolation; therefore your thinking is not controlled.

Knowing you are from your history and culture gives you self pride and respect. But you must take this to another level in reaching to the outside with a positive mission.

This is the power to survive these hell holes, because your ability to know who you are as a people and your ability in thinking outside the walls take away these barbarians' control over your existence and your mind.

Like I said, many of these individuals I have seen give up or/and break themselves knew their history and were very politically conscious and had many applicable valid ideas to revitalize our communities. Their biggest problem was they never took the conversation and ideas outside of the isolated areas. They made absolutely no attempt to make contact with the outside. Soon they became bored with hearing only themselves, and those around them began to view them as good conversationalists with no actions behind their words. Their thinking stayed contained within the isolated walls and soon isolation consumed them.

The pointers I have shared with those reading this document have worked for me well, have kept me focused and, most importantly, they have kept me real and above prison.

Paul Redd  
California



### **Focus on Surviving! Not Dying!**

Yes! Some prison officials are in prisons, doing some very wrong things to people. But we must not! respond with actions! that will open avenues for these same prison officials, to have justified reasons to escalate their wrongs directed at us, to a level of critical wrong doing, and fatal wrong doing. That's what they want to do. Therefore, they are constantly! applying constant effort! to create Attica type situations. So they can kill people on a massive level. And say it was done in response to the wrongs of the people.

## **Diplomacy!**

Is a means of survival, it don't mean you're scared.

Survival!

Should be our main focus.

**Yes!**

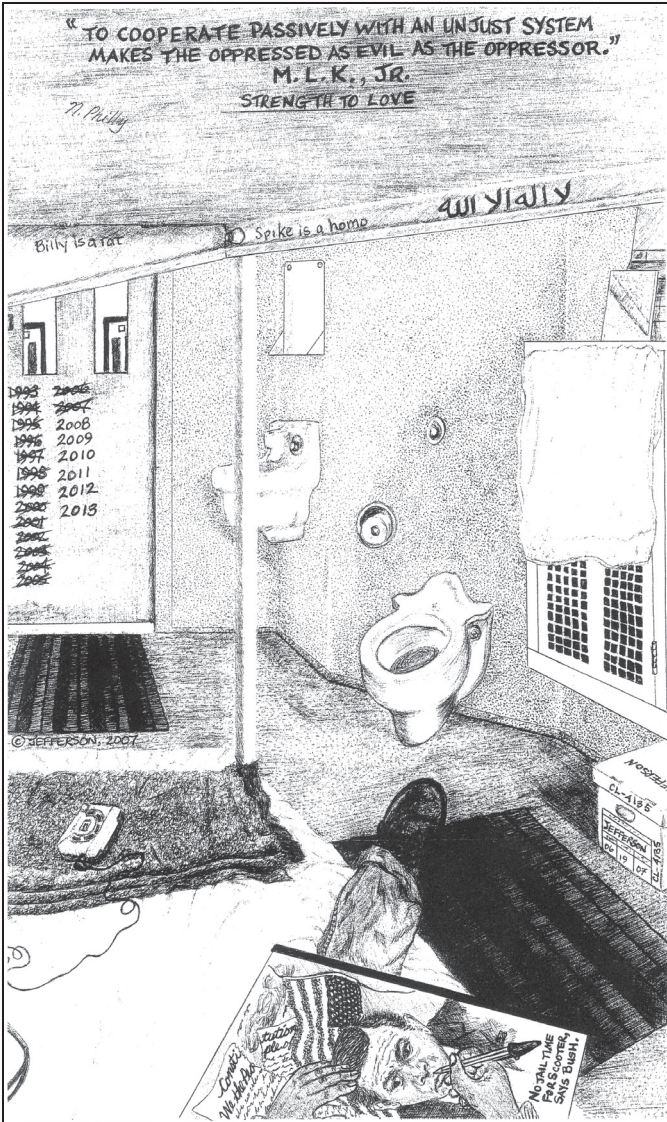
Some of us are done very bad here. Very, very, bad. But focus on surviving these wrongs. By means of your Intelligence, discipline, and your diplomacy. This is not the 50s, it is not the 60s, the 70s, nor the 80s. We are almost at the thousands. We are within the age of diplomacy and litigation. Therefore! we are obligated to our efforts! to survive. It's not being a coward! It's not living in fear! It's survival.

**Yes!**

We have to accept things we don't like. Even certain amounts of disrespect will have to be tolerated. Each individual has to judge for themselves what is acceptable. And what is not! acceptable. Let your wisdom, your discipline and your intelligence guide your actions and responses. Not! your anger, your hostility, or your dislikeful feelings for the wrong things they do to you.

**Yes!**

Many of us are being done wrong. Some! are being done worse! Than others. But always focus on your main objective. And your main objective whenever in situations as this should be survival! For those that cannot get out. Your victory can be survival today! With hopes of getting to better prison environments tomorrow. Or surviving this moment of adversity, to experience another moment of happiness. Happiness comes and goes with moments, not decades. But never give up! my precious loved ones, never ever give up! And hurl yourselves into the flames. Just because the



Graphic: Leonard Jefferson

going gets tough. Stand tall! And focus on surviving! Not dying.

P.S. Recently I've just completed 16-straight years of being in S.H.U.

James H. Swon  
California

*(NOTE: On August 8, 1997, Mr. Swon went to the main population.)*



## **Things an SHU prisoner should know**

The purpose of the California Department of “Corrections” SHU program is to reduce prisoners to a state of submission essential for their ideological conversion. That failing, the next objective is to reduce them to a state of psychological incompetence sufficient to neutralize them as efficient, self-directing antagonists. That failing, the only alternative is to destroy them, preferably by making them desperate enough to destroy themselves.

## **Recovery from the SHU experience**

In a situation removed from the reinforcing pressures of the SHU program, the ex-detainees should be encouraged to think for themselves, so that they are once again in charge of their own volition and their own decision-making.

The primary purpose of the SHU program is mentacide, which can be defined as consisting of any organized system of psychological intervention in which the perpetrator injects his own thoughts and words into the minds and mouths of the victims. By assaulting ego strengths, culture shock is deliberately created, with isolation, alienation, and intimidation, and the victim becomes increasingly vulner-



able to the implantation of ideas or the suggestion of behavior that would ordinarily be rejected as unacceptable or abnormal.

Mentacide consists of four major components:

1. Behavior control
2. Thought control
3. Emotional control
4. Information control

Prisoners who survive the SHU program should be told first that s/he was, is, in a trap — a situation where s/he was psychologically disabled and couldn't get out. Second, s/he should be shown s/he didn't originally choose to enter a trap. Third, it should be pointed out that other prisoners were in similar traps. Fourth, tell the prisoners that it is possible to get out of the trap through restoring their will power and sense of self.

It is a fact that mentacide renders its victims virtually irresponsible for “their” actions or beliefs. The process whereby the victim is “psychologically incarcerated” in the oppressive SHU system is a subtle but powerful force over which the victim/prisoner has little or no control, and therefore the victims need not feel either guilt or shame because of abnormal experiences, thus resulting in abnormal behavior.

Victims of the SHU program would need to relearn how to relate to others, restore a positive self-concept and self-esteem, how to think and make healthy decisions. Prisoners who have suffered from the SHU should be told that the strength to move obstacles begins in our minds.

Troy Thomas  
California

## Contact

As for doing time in the Control Unit, my suggestions are to establish and maintain contact with activists out there; use the time productively by studying law, theology; reading; exercising and working to improve your mind and body.

Maintaining outside contacts is very important. Without such contacts, the prisoncrats will abuse prisoners, knowing they don't have anyone to answer to.

Unity is also important since prisoners are often pitted against others, by design.

It's a bad environment, both mentally and physically, so you need to set a program for yourself to try and maintain any form of sanity. Long-term isolation causes Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well, so those in contact with prisoners should always work to keep them in touch with reality.

I know for years I was in the Us v. Them mode, where it was the feeling you're at war, which in reality you are, since the whole purpose of the control unit is to break your spirit. But you have to keep a semblance of future goals in mind too, or you can self-destruct.

It's important for everyone out there to send as much literature as possible, and try to establish one-on-one contact with those in the control units. Outside support should be a priority, as well as an emergency response network for crises.

John W. Perotti  
Ohio

## **Tips from a transgender woman in a men's facility on surviving in AdSeg (higher levels)**

1. Try to maintain a respectful stance with inmates and staff alike because staff control who stays and who leaves. Even though other inmates are in your situation, it's best to be respectful to them because you could very well create a situation with another inmate that will follow you for years unresolved.
2. Find things to do to spend your time productively such as writing songs, poems, reading. Idle hands are the devil's playground.
3. Remember that guys hate rejection. There are ways to tell someone you're not interested that doesn't hurt his pride so much. If you're too harsh in your tone, he may be concerned about how others think and will try to show off for their behalf.
4. It's best to remain single but if you must, be cautious of "getting with" more than one guy. You're playing a dangerous game when you toy with someone's emotions. There's no safe way to have sexual intercourse. Many guys have different health problems that they hide. Ask for paperwork ensuring his health is up to code (at that moment). Be watchful that he isn't messing around with more than one partner. Some choices don't end well.
5. Focus on a goal; build a time table of when you'd like to be released or your custody reduced. Remain misconduct free.
6. Choose your friends closely. Remember you're locked



*"Untitled" by Martin Vargas*

up with prisoners who are locked up for being in some type of trouble so some people enjoy continuing that same behavior. Don't gossip or spread rumors as this will only keep you in constant conflict.

7. Some guys (predators) will do anything to get with you against your will, creating situations where you'd need his assistance! Remember it's only a ploy. He could very well be behind the situation. Don't go into debt. If someone wanted to squeeze you for money, they'd be able to continuously keep you owing them simply by taking you. Or your debt could be passed on from inmate to inmate. Guys look at transsexuals as being the weakest link and will play off of that. If you don't have it, consider going without it or if the risk is worth it!
8. Many transsexuals and homosexuals get with other inmates in a relationship for money. Remember if a guy feels used he may cause you harm. Many guys believe that they own you after they've bought you so much. Then think about that if you realize his money is gone, then what? Many guys are in prison because they felt betrayed by family, friends, wives, or girlfriends and once betrayed again, you could be in a situation that's hard if not impossible to get out of.

Anonymous  
Michigan

## Coping mechanisms for trans prisoners

I heard that you were seeking input from transsexuals on coping mechanisms that have helped them survive isolation for your new *Survivor's Manual*.

From October 1990 to January of 1993 I was held in isolation in a county jail, ostensibly to protect me from assault, while I awaited trial.

Networking by mail helped me a lot and I had help from AFSC staff. I developed a routine of reading and calisthenics and letter writing to keep sane. The wisest thing I did was to file a civil action for denial of medical care (1992) which I won in 2002. Now after a second civil action, I am awaiting a ruling that will result in getting my surgery, recommended by the DOC's own doctors. The second wisest choice I made was to change my voice by reading aloud to myself, the best practice there is, and plenty of time to get the pitch just right.

Anonymous  
Massachusetts



### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

*Because transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex people in prison are often highly visible, they become frequent targets for homophobic and transphobic violence, brutality, isolation, and poor medical care.*

*Protective custody units are reserved for people who are at a higher risk of violence or harassment by other prisoners. This includes those who might be targeted based on their gender expression or sexual orientation. However, the level of safety that protective custody actually provides is ques-*

*tionable and varies among facilities. In some cases this can be a safe place to avoid the violence of other prisoners. More often this isolation of transgender prisoners places them at a greater risk of violence at the hands of correctional officers.*

*In addition to being placed in protective custody, gender variant people also end up in other forms of segregation, at times, because of bogus tickets and “behavioral” issues that prompt increases in security classification. The conditions of solitary confinement in these segregation units present the same dangers.*

*Regardless of whether or not it provides some level of protection or safety, isolation is a poor alternative to general population. The physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological impacts of solitary confinement are tantamount to torture for many.*

*At a time when the vernacular of torture has become part of the national conversation, we must think seriously about the violence in our systems of punishment and detention, and expose and acknowledge the plight of transgender people in prison. Transgender people experience violence and are persecuted for their stubborn visibility within the penal system, but remain a marginalized and misunderstood community to an indifferent world outside.*

*Transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex people in prison can get help from the The Sylvia Rivera Law Project. The project provides services for transgender people in New York. They also have information and publications relevant to trans people in prison, including “It’s War in Here”: A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Intersex People in New York State Men’s Prisons.*

*To contact the project, write to:*

*Sylvia Rivera Law Project*  
322 8th Avenue, 3rd Floor  
New York, NY 10001



## **A revolutionary statement on survival**

I was asked by a friend: What is the difference for someone who maintains strength and others who often cave in?

My response was simple: “I use history as my guide.”

Afrikans have a “historical obligation” and duty to carry on the legacy and struggle of our ancestors. The terms upon which we exist here have always been that of a slave in service of the master.

The entire fabric of Amerikan society is riddled with racism and enforced via its institutions which ensure that Afrikans/Blacks will not succeed or be given an opportunity to carve out a meaningful existence or make an honest living by which to support one’s family unless one is willing to part with his/her cultural identity and awareness.

To be revolutionary calls for the ability to practice revolution as a religion—meaning you must study it to understand its principles, just as you would your Bible or Koran, etc. You must dig deep down within yourself and remove any impurities instilled by a diseased society.

Just as you would when asking God to forgive your sins, one must be equally committed to destroying within oneself all the vestiges of that society which he/she desires to change. This means eliminating the values of the ruling class of that society and the petty aspirations of wanting to be like that class. If an individual was a liar and a cheat prior to embracing the revolutionary ideal, then a deep critical self-

examination would be in order so as to purge all vestiges of that lie and cheat. Because to be revolutionary is to be as good as your word! This process does not and cannot occur overnight. Thus before any real transformation can occur, the struggle must be waged and won with oneself!

Control units exist with their sole purpose being to crush the revolutionary spirit embodied within certain prisoners of consciousness aimed at crushing their resistance to fascist control and inevitably making them a tool of reaction for the state. The ideas of the state are embodied within the functions of the prison regime. The state is able to continue executing its political agenda through the prison regime by convincing the public through its vast propaganda network (the media) and intrigue, that control units are designed to preclude the consolidated functioning of some of the most violent prison gangs, with little public resistance to this overt display of fascism. The state is allowed full latitude in exercising its authority in crushing political dissent.

Sure these units contain prisoners who are anything but revolutionary or politically conscious, but then again how else is the state to accomplish its objectives without reactionary tools to fuel its motor?

Here in California the political prisoner/prisoner-of-war class exists alongside perhaps the largest reactionary prisoner class in the nation who willingly offers itself as a tool for the state—aiding it in its fascist political objective of discouraging political dissent and wholesale murder under the guise of “rival gang” warfare fighting to survive to control the prison.

To survive a control unit, one must have grasped the understanding that struggle is a life-long commitment, that it embodies all kinds of consequences, none of which should



deter one from continuing on. One must have grasped the principles of the revolutionary and be willing to die for those principles—principles that are not swayed by the promise of some petty prison privilege or the assurance of leniency because the cave-in or surrender will not halt the fascist machine from moving forward with its objectives of total authoritarian rule.

Professor W.E.B. DuBois recognized this when he wrote nearly 45 years ago. He said that Amerika would eventually and inevitably come to a basic decision—either it would move toward worker self-management, anti-racism, and a new democratic state apparatus, or it would lapse into authoritarian, racial barbarism, and militarization of the work force and a descent into military fascism.

Comrade George echoed this powerful sentiment when he issued the call for us to:

Settle your quarrels. Come together. Understand the reality of our situation. Understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives as we do now if you fail to act.

Amerika has proven consistently that it is an enemy of the Afrikans, who mobilizes as we speak to deliver her final blow of death, destruction, and total fascist rule. Control units are but a consequence of those who resist us, to deter those who dare to think about it. Therefore, using history as your guide, you will find the strength is already there.

Sondai Kamdibe  
California

## Mapping out survival

Survival implies discipline which is the habit of instant and automatic obedience to one's will. It is the human basis or response on which effective control and survival rests. Good plans minus discipline equals failure. And failure in executing plans destroys survival. In understanding strategies to be used for survival, one must survey his/her situation and determine what has been done or what has not, and what should be done.

Observation: Little that is worthwhile is accomplished without discipline. Discipline is a learned process, which we must have for survival. There must be something to drive us to move beyond the limiting expectations of loser, that something is motivation. Many men, women, P.P./P.O.W.'s have many worries while in lock down (control units) which causes much stress. Sometimes this stress leads to suicide, drug addiction, and actively fights against discipline. Therefore it is important that those of us locked down in control units discipline ourselves for survival.

**Health**—Mental and physical health are key factors in survival. Study is very important in survival. We must read books, newspapers, magazines, etc. "Information is Power!"

**Communicate** regularly with family, friends, comrades, organizations in society as often as possible.

**Exercise** at least four times a week: push-ups, jumping jacks, squats, toe touches, dips, knees to the chest, arm rotations, sit ups, etc. The numbers of how many to do in a set, and how many sets is up to you. 45 minutes of constant working is good.

**Stretching** before you exercise is very important. Yoga is the best way to stretch.

**Breathing**—deep breathing three or four times a day is rejuvenating.

**Walking and running** if space is available, or running in place for 30 minutes is good.

**Self Defense**—learning some form of self defense, boxing, karate, judo, etc., are most important to protect oneself.

**Diet**—vegetarian diets are very important for survival in control units (lock downs), because of the lack of properly cooked foods. Strokes, peptic ulcers, diabetes, hypertension, salmonellosis, stomach cancer, colon cancer, kidney disease, hemorrhoids; are all illnesses that can be produced from a lack of proper dieting.

Remember, medical care isn't worthwhile depending on in control units (lock down). A question was once asked: "What do the prisoncrats care about a few sick prisoners?"

### Daily schedule

5 am	Wake up and wash up
6:30 am	Breakfast
8 am	Yard/Exercise
9 am	Wash up/read
11:30 am	Lunch
12 pm	Wash clothes, cell, etc
1 pm	Read/study/write, etc.
2 pm	Hold class on unit on politics, history, economics, or general discussion on legal endeavors
4 pm	Dinner
4:30 pm	Back to reading, writing, studying, etc.

Times of turning in for the night may differ. Survival de-



“Thinking Inside the box” by Steven Lake

depends on one to remove bad habits from one’s activities. Seek truth and base one’s life on it. Seek life giving and saving ideas. Work for Success. Be productive, creative, and learn craft to keep the mind and body active.

Be security minded, avoid imbalances, which result from the taking away of some component necessary to mental stability. In order to restore from imbalance, the missing component must be restored or compensated for. Our

brains were created to think right. Falsehood, which is untruth, injustice, or deception produces chemical imbalance in the brain. The proof that humanity is unbalanced is the absence of the three essentials of balance: Freedom, Justice, and Equality. This is due to the oppression and mistreatment of people by one another. But we are made to achieve balance.

Our survival strategy should be like a map. A plan for getting from where we are to where we want to go. Planning strategy is like planning a trip. Our tactics should be the specific things that we must do for survival, to help us get there. Petitions, pressure campaigns, etc. Progress reports, quality reports, assignments, and progress schedules are important for survival in monitoring oneself.

In dealing with the prisoncrats, remember they aren't here to make sure we are comfortable, so the less we deal with them the better off we are; to alleviate any hardships. Accept the worst, improve on the worst.

- 1) How to break the worry habit: Keep busy.
- 2) Ways to cultivate a mental attitude, leading to peace and happiness. Fill your mind with thoughts of peace, courage, health, and hope. Always keep aware of things around you.
- 3) To keep from worrying about criticism: remember unjust criticism is often a disguised compliment.
- 4) Ways to prevent fatigue and worry, keeping spirits high: Rest before you get tired. When you face a problem, solve it, then and there, if you have the facts necessary to make a decision.
- 5) Good thoughts lead to wise actions.

Survival is the most important thing for every creature on the planet earth. Our survival in Control Units (lock down) on Administrative Custody is no different. Control Units were designed to destroy our survival instincts. We must not let this evil succeed. Free all Political Prisoners; Prisoners of War; fight to stop the Injustice, and Shut them Down (Control Units)!

LuQman Abdullah  
Pennsylvania



## Active

To keep one's self mentally and physically healthy through a period of long-term isolation has been a challenge for myself as I know it has for others. Though I'm one of those rare persons who has beaten the million to one odds (at least to date) by doing one simple thing ... keeping thyself extremely active, occupying the loads of free time with a daily crammed schedule.

It all starts with an hour-long exercise regimen which includes doing push-ups, jumping jacks, running in place, crunches, pull ups, chin ups, and stretching different muscle groups. But the most unique way I have discovered to keep the upper body in shape is by taking a pillow case and filling it with heavy books and/or tons of personal and legal documents (you know the kind which are stuffed in clasp envelopes) and then using the open end of the pillow case as a handle to lift the one-half to three-fourth filled bag four different ways. (Lifting with each arm, then both arms in the front of the body and behind, right above the shoulder blades.)

In all, exercise is very important in a forced sedentary



“Weapons of Mass Destruction” by Todd (Hyung-Rae) Tarselli

lifestyle. To linger in a bunk all day long only results in health problems such as irregular heartbeats, hypertension, depressed immune system, and atrophy of muscles which even I have been affected by after six years of isolation.

The next thing I do is to write. What I mean by this is drafting articles/essays and now and then a poem mostly for the small press to counter-attack the hysteria dished out against the prisoner class. This includes telling about the conditions within America’s dungeon and the impracticalities of the criminal (in)justice system. This activity alone takes up the majority of my time and has had one positive effect and that’s bringing the public’s attention to the repressive conditions here at the Iowa state “warehouse”

and the reality of the American prison system as a whole.

In fact, I encourage those similarly situated to pick up those ink pens or pencils, whichever is allowed, and make a habit of communicating your experiences either as simply as keeping a journal—which I do on a daily basis—or sending letters to the editors of the local newspaper to criticize an article or opinion you may have read which may have not been true or was one of those “let’s get tougher on the criminal” opinions that needs a person from the inside to rebut. Just keep in mind that, occasionally, the editor will print your letter which is reason enough for taking up such activities.

Other things I do to keep busy include helping others with their legal cases (civil and criminal), filing grievances every time I see a grievable issue no matter if it’s personal or if it involves another prisoner, keeping log books/charts of all mail, memos (kites) and grievances. This helps in storing in order the paperwork which I do not discard in hopes of using it as evidence against my keepers at a later date.

And most importantly: Read! Especially books which further one’s knowledge. I am one who discourages those that fill one’s time on “junk novels” and encourage subjects like politics, science, poetry, how-to books, and reference publications. Personally I just love to soak my brain into anything dealing with technology and its related issues.

Now, not everyone may want to follow a schedule like mine, but that’s what the imagination is for. Just use whatever know-how you may have obtained from past experiences and education then shape it into something productive. By this you will stonewall the boredom devil, hopefully conserve sanity and make your isolation a little more bearable.



In all, if you want to survive that long-term isolation, the mind and body need to continually be fully active.

D.A. Sheldon  
Iowa



## **A practical guide from an Indiana SHU**

### Priority list

- 1) Secure outside contacts
- 2) Reconnaissance
- 3) Physical maintenance
- 4) Mental maintenance
- 5) Time management

Basically, the above list represents areas that a Control Unit prisoner should emphasize to be equipped with the necessary coping skills for survival. They do not represent the foundation of any monolithic concept, nor are they set in stone. Others should particularize. What they do represent is systematic referencing of ideals that have been ingrained in me through diligent study of revolutionary science, human psychology, sociology and years of uncut prison struggle.

### **Secure outside contacts**

My suggestion to secure outside contacts originates from an overstanding that prison in and of itself is designed to isolate prisoners from society. Thus the concept of Control Units takes this reality to another level. Isolation from society and fellow prisoners is a basic component in the prisoncrats' attempt to weaken the resolve of those that have been tagged "unmanageable."

Once inside a Control Unit, if not before, one should immediately try to cement familial contacts as the months and years of isolation coupled with lack of visit and phone calls weaken, if not destroy, fragile families. Hearing from loved ones and sharing with them the many-sided assaults on their humanity helps to keep one focused. Implicit in this should be the overstanding that Control Unit prisoners' priority should be to preserve family contact and relations as opposed to forcing new ideological concepts on them. If one is politically conscious and aware, then one should be clear on the level of backwardness or assimilationist tendencies found in most folks. Plant your seeds of growth, but be aware that they need as much nurturing as do we, if not more.

In addition to familial contact, it should be a priority of Control Unit prisoners to reach out to progressive groups, associations, etc. This would be to secure open lines of communication, printed literature, and a balanced historical foundation of Control Units and their use.

I think that viewing the assignment to a Control Unit from a collective sense enables a prisoner to free himself or begin the process of freeing himself from individualism. This hopefully will foster an overstanding for the need to collectively organize one's efforts. Also this securing of dialogue, papers, etc., opens one's eyes to how various others have dealt with and continue to deal with the oppression of 21st century penological science.

In conclusion, exchanging and sharing information on the various units enables the struggle to proceed with clarity.

## Reconnaissance

As defined by Webster's dictionary, the term Reconnaissance is "an observation of the territory of the enemy." I incorporate this as a priority for Control Unit prisoners in that it's a must for us to learn our environment as quickly as possible in order to negate as much unnecessary static as possible.

Inherent in learning one's environment is the task of concealing one's self to a certain degree. One thing that I have found is that Control Units are also used to isolate psychotic prisoners, safe keepers (disguised as disciplinary problems), snitches, etc. And because of this I recommend that upon entry, Cadre-Revolutionaries, Anti-Authoritarians, Anarchists, etc. exercise secure communication and act as though anyone that you don't know or have been out of contact with for any length of time as potential threats, suspects, or what have you.

Because of the realization that the dialectical process of analyzation shows us that everything is in a constant state of change, it is our duty to incorporate that fact into how we approach being thrown into a Control Unit. The behavioral/psychological implications of these units exposes itself in the personalization and individualistic attitudes of many here. This is not limited to the obviously psychotic—a lot of once stand-up prisoners wilt under the strain of isolation and other sensory deprivations. So do your homework before you initiate, embrace, or lend your reputation and efforts to someone or something.

Briefly let me say that it's important to secure any and all rules, policies, and other materials governing the unit. Ascertain the chain of command and mentally note as much as possible about the habits of the staff, their attitudes and

anything else that can give you an edge in staying prepared. Once you have learned the set, identified fellow cadre, you need to tie into or formulate means of communication for obvious reasons.

### **Physical maintenance**

Because of the long hours of confinement to the cells, everyone should discipline themselves to some type of vigorous workout/exercise routine on a regular basis. The prevailing attitude is to stay in shape or “combat ready,” which is something we can’t ignore.

But the reality is that we are only able to do so much to combat the onslaught of five or six heavily padded guards in possession of various tools of incapacitation. So I see the discipline of exercise as a health necessity first and foremost.

Regular exercise keeps the muscles toned and the cardiovascular system strong, and helps to rid our bodies of “toxins and other impurities” that invade our bodies through food, water, and air-borne particles.

Not being a physical health doctor, I cannot begin to address the many ways that one can maintain a high level of strength, endurance, and general well-being. But most of us are familiar with exercise routines that meet the needs of the areas spoken about. I suggest, though, that one should get some literature dealing specifically with stretching, calisthenics and how to meditate, as it, too, is a physical function.

### **Mental maintenance**

This area is beyond a doubt the most prevalent issue for concern, but I’m going to keep my thoughts on it simple

and straight forward. The first thing for me was to adjust to the level of barbarity a lot of prisoners had succumbed to—throwing feces/urine, constantly verbally attacking each other, and simply showing no restraint. So to stay mentally healthy I had to be realistic about what I could contribute to the immediate unit, in terms of combating the administration and the lack of collective solidarity.

Secondly, I immediately found out that the principled position and righteous behavior of a brother did not necessarily mean that I was immune to the personal verbal attacks, accusations of superiority, etc. Which let me know that just because the state labels us all as one, the philosophical, ethnic differences, etc., are so extreme that identifying a primary enemy was not a given. So I suggest that one be particular about approaching arguments as peacemakers, that one really be about holding onto his decency because some Control Units are ripe with Psycho Babble day in and day out. So you can't realistically expect to influence it very much, and you stand the chance of getting "caught up," as they say, if you prioritize every contradiction.

It's important to learn the art of meditation, as I find that maintaining focus and concentration is solidified through meditation. I have also concluded that my study has got to be tempered with some leisure reading. It enables one to be vulnerable emotionally without jeopardizing his objective view of the struggle inside and outside.

Some prisoners utilize the behavioral psychologists to deal with stress, under the guise of Anger Control. And where I choose not to incorporate myself in the state's offering, I don't condemn those that seek out information from them. Some people simply need somebody they can talk to. I can only say that when you don't respond as they wish,

you may become a candidate for a psychotropic drug!

### **Time management**

A lot of prisoners operate on the concept of “passing time.” This can be harmful to Control Unit prisoners. I say this because the concept itself is synonymous with bull shitting, and that isn’t healthy for those of us confined for years on end in Control Units or otherwise. So I have concluded that it’s important for us to formulate some form of “time management.” All one has to do is sit down with pen and paper and write out his daily activities for three days or so. If the individual is not involved in meaningful study, exercise, dialogue, etc., he quickly sees that his day is wasted aimlessly.

So one should list the things they are interested in doing, chart them according to time of day and length and institute this daily. Being mindful of when you’re most alert for study, and appropriate times for exercise, meditation, etc. This may sound like something out of left field for some, or those that have never organized their lives or activities. But in such a situation as Control Units, it’s important to maintain control over our own selves as much as possible. Developing discipline is one thing, keeping it is another!

Anane Baye Camara  
Indiana



### **The prison cell workout**

I’m an inmate at the Pelican Bay State Prison in Crescent City, California. Pelican Bay is considered the toughest, most secure prison in the United States. Prisoners in the Security Housing Unit here are so isolated from the outside world that we sometimes go years without seeing fresh earth,

plant life, or unfiltered sunlight.

Confined to our cells for most of the time, we're allowed to exercise alone in a 10-by-20-foot "dog run" for 1-1/2 hours per day. We have no weights, no chin-up bars, no basketball courts—only a concrete floor and walls.

We do all the usual exercises to keep in shape—push-ups, handstand push-ups, abdominal work—but by far the most popular exercise at Pelican Bay is the burpee routine. It works your chest, arms, front deltoids, thighs and abs while giving you a grueling cardiovascular workout.

There are all kinds of ways to do this exercise, but I'll describe the basic six-count burpee. To start, stand straight with your hands at your sides, your toes pointing forward and your feet three to six inches apart. Now:

1. Squat down and place both hands on the floor.
2. Kick both feet out behind you, so you're in a push-up position.
3. Go down until your chest touches the floor.
4. Push back up.
5. Pull both feet back under your body.
6. Return to the standing position, using only your legs.

Start with a "20 down" routine. Do a set of 20 reps, rest 30 seconds, then do a set of 19, rest, then a set of 18 and so on until you work your way down to zero. You'll do a total of 210 burpees, which means 210 push-ups and 210 squat-thrusts combined. If you do a 30-down, you'll be doing 465 burpees; tack on a set of 35 at the beginning and you'll give yourself an even 500.

Once you've mastered that routine, you're ready for a real test of will: the straight-set routine. Try for 150 to 200 to start, then add 10 reps every week. (The "burpee mon-

sters” at Pelican Bay do straight sets of 1,000 reps, at a pace of 100 every six minutes.) For an even better workout, follow your straight set with two sets of wide grip push-ups, followed by two-sets of close-grip push-ups, followed by a five-minute ab routine.

Burpees are a good exercise choice any time you’re in an enclosed area for an extended period of time — a hotel room, your office. And if you’re ever sent to a maximum-security prison, at least you’ll know how to keep in shape.

Michael Shepherd  
California



## **T'ai Chi Ch'uan**

This article is to let you know the benefits you can receive from the regular practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

T'ai Chi is a form of martial art that emphasizes achieving balance within yourself through slow movements and deep breathing. It originated in China and is referred to at times as “moving meditation.” If you practice it regularly you will notice an increase in energy to face the day, you will be calmer, able to handle situations that would usually end in conflicts or arguments. T'ai Chi can be used for self defense and is designed to deal with an opponent in the least violent way.

The health benefits of T'ai Chi have been proven in tests conducted by medical experts. It has reduced blood pressure, aided people with asthma and heart trouble. It can be practiced by young, old, weak, and strong.

Since I have been practicing T'ai Chi each day, I have overcome depression. My outlook on life has changed from



a negative one to a positive one, and that is saying something because of my long exposure to the prison system. The best thing about T'ai Chi is that with as little as 10-25 minutes each morning you can meet the day with a steady head, heart, and body. You will benefit physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

This isn't any snake oil salesman's "come on." IT WORKS, but you only get out of it what you put into it. T'ai Chi works for me; I know it can work for you.

Anonymous



### **Controlling the control unit**

To me the overriding thing of importance in surviving my various stints in control units was to refuse to relinquish control! By that I mean: keeping always in mind the purpose of the control unit — i.e., remembering what the state was trying to accomplish by putting me there, and then using my own powers of understanding to resist their plan. Among other things, this meant:

- Making a schedule for my days, instead of allowing the cops to determine my days.
- Having several different schedules, and alternating them, to avoid having the days all melt into sameness, and to keep track of what day and date it was, etc.
- Using exterior signals, such as changes in light, shift changes, regular noises from outside my cell, to keep track of time. The first few weeks I'd note a sound or other objective occurrence, then yell for the cops to find out what time it was, etc.
- Developing several different forms of exercise for dif-

ferent days and conditions. One technique of control used in every unit I've been in is withholding or postponing rec time. Since exercise was a very important way I controlled my anger so that I didn't become upset or stressed, it was crucial for me to develop ways to avoid letting this necessity for exercise become one more tool for them to use against me. I learned yoga and did isometric weight-training in my cell, and I ran on the occasions I was able to go out to the rec yards.

- Developed some creative activity that allowed me to admire my own human creativity— i.e., draw, write, make things from what is available, etc. Reminding myself that my place in the universe was as a sentient, loving, creative human being, not a caged animal, was helpful. (This is why so many prisoners turn out incredible drawings in ballpoint pen!)
- Learn something—undertake to study something and use the mind so I left each unit having grown rather than been diminished by the experience.
- Write letters—get pen pals if needed; some active communication with the outside.
- For me, as a political creature, it was essential to get a subscription to a major newspaper. (I then managed to share it by smuggling it to another prisoner in the unit.) I was fortunate to have friends who chipped in to get me the paper. I wonder if the Campaign to Stop Control Units could somehow get money or get people to get subs to weekly news magazines — *Time* or *Newsweek*, or a decent daily or weekly newspaper—for people in control units? In women's prisons and most control units, no news media are provided.
- I fought for every shred of what I was supposed to

have a "right" to, based in the Code of Federal Regs, which governs the BOP. But it's hard not to get full of rage and frustration while doing this, so once in a while I would write a furious letter to the warden or someone else, saying everything I wanted and then tear it up. Therapeutic, to a point.

Warden Burkhardt of Alderson responded to my BP-9 (fed prison grievance form) protesting my isolation. He said I was being held in solitary because of my "associations and beliefs." Knowing what your enemy's goals are helps you a lot in resisting giving ground. In my case, on days when I felt (and was) particularly abused and mistreated, I could always find hope and strength in feeling it was an honor to be held in conditions of control—in the way Chairman Mao meant it in that old quote we used to love so much about it being a good thing to be hated by the enemy.

Finally, one thing about control units is that, since their goal is to dehumanize, to destroy one's personality, each individual kind of needs to design her/his own program for survival, based in her/his identity and sense of what makes each of us human. How one person expresses and controls rage is not necessarily right for another. For example, for some people, keeping busy is important; for others, maybe stillness and inward thought is important. What resources, internal and external, each prisoner has available make a big difference, too. (One reason why activist groups are so important!)

Finally, really, I do believe that everyone who has spent time in prison, double for control units, suffers physical if not also mental damage. Having this recognized—say, by the international anti-torture forces—helps. I think it was Stuart Grassian who observed that the women in the LexHSU

developed illnesses as a result of the unit. When I read that, it helped me understand the damage to my own health that resulted or was exacerbated by the control unit time.

Venceremos!

P.S. Have you been able to see the comet? It's gorgeous! Every morning I get up at 5 to go to a window in our unit from which I can see it; now in the evening we can see it before we're locked in. Every time I look at it I think of all those in the control units who are robbed of this incredible experience.

Laura Whitehom  
California



## **Goals & methods of control units: Survival strategies**

Security Housing Units or Control Units are generally based on the “Stammheim Model” perfected by West Germany during the early 1970s. The purpose was unabashedly political, as is demonstrated in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons official criteria for incarceration: “(A) prisoner’s past or present affiliation, association or membership in an organization which attempts to disrupt or overthrow the government of the U.S. or whose published ideology includes advocating law violations in order to free prisoners.”

The object was to invoke in prisoners a sense of being totally at the mercy of and dependent upon their keepers. In the polite language of the John Howard Association: “Through a year or more of sensory and psychological deprivation, prisoners are stripped of their individual identities in order that compliant behavior patterns can be implanted,

## BIDERMAN'S CHART ON PENAL COERCION

(Source: Amnesty International Report on Torture, 1983)

GENERAL METHOD	EFFECT	VARIANTS
1. <b>Isolation</b>	Deprive victims of all social supports, of his ability to resist. Develops an intense concern with self. Makes victim dependent upon interrogator.	Complete solitary confinement, complete isolation, semi-isolation, group isolation.
2. <b>Monopolization of perception</b>	Fixes attention upon immediate predicament; fosters introspection. Eliminates stimuli competing with those controlled by captive. Frustrates all actions not consistent with compliance.	Physical isolation, darkness or bright light, barren environment, restricted movement monotonous food.
3. <b>Induced debility, exhaustion</b>	Weakens mental and physical ability to resist.	Semi-starvation, exposure, exploitation of wounds, induced illness, sleep deprivation, prolonged constraint, prolonged interrogation, forced writing, overexertion.
4. <b>Threats</b>	Cultivates anxiety and despair.	Threats of death, threats of non-return, threats of endless interrogation.
5. <b>Occasional indulgences</b>	Provides positive motivation for compliance. Hinders adjustment to deprivation.	Occasional favors, fluctuations of attitudes, promises, rewards for partial compliance, tantalizing.

GENERAL METHOD	EFFECT	VARIANTS
6. <b>Demonstrating omnipotence</b>	Suggests futility of resistance.	Confrontation, pretending cooperation taken for granted, demonstrating complete control over victim's fate.
7. <b>Degradation</b>	Makes cost of resistance appear more damaging to self-esteem than capitulation. Reduce prisoners to "animal level" concerns.	Personal hygiene prevented. Filthy, infested surroundings. Demeaning punishment, insults and taunts, denials of privacy.
8. <b>Enforcing trivial demands</b>	Develops habit of compliance.	Forced writing, enforcement of minute rules.

a process of mortification and depersonalization.”

The techniques involved have been described by Amnesty International in the chart on pages 57 and 58.

As early as 1962, Dr. Edgar Schein described the methodology at issue rather more straight-forwardly in an address to all federal maximum security prison wardens in Washington, D.C.:

“In order to produce marked changes in behavior, it is necessary to weaken, undermine, or remove supports for old attitudes. I would like you to think of brainwashing not in terms of...ethics and morals, but in terms of the deliberate changing of human behavior by a group of men who have relatively complete control over the environment in which the captives live...[These changes can be induced by]

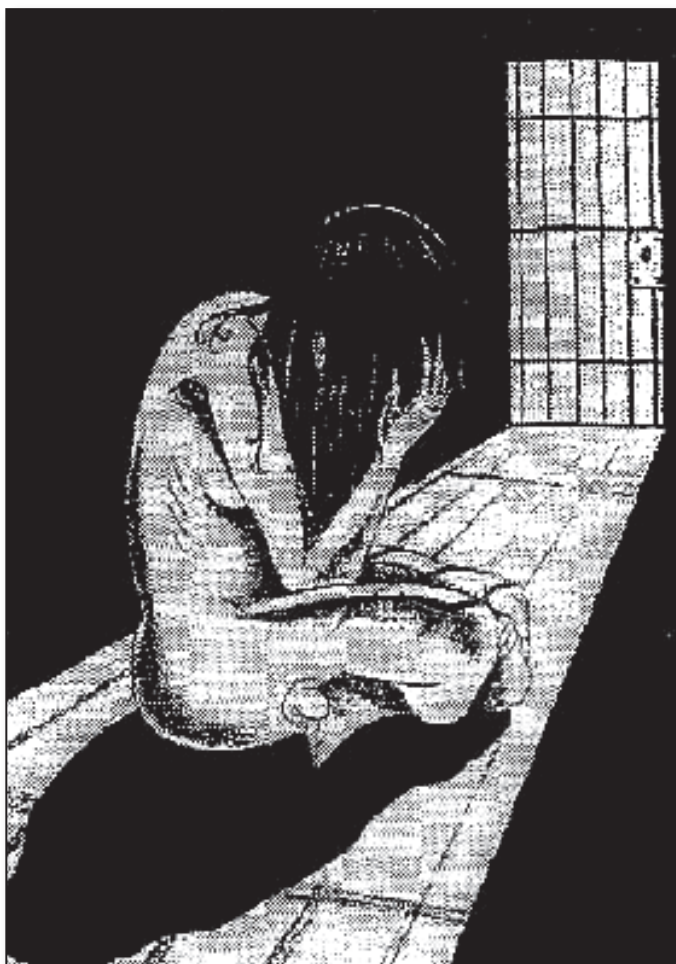
isolation, sensory deprivation, segregation of leaders, spying, tricking men into signing written statements which are then shown to others, placing individuals whose will power has been severely weakened into a living situation with others more advanced in thought reform, character invalidation, humiliation, sleeplessness, rewarding subservience, and fear.”

This introduction has served as a diagnosis of the problem from an historical perspective as well as analytical. It is important that our readers comprehend that “SHU Strategies Toward Survival” are solutions and Ways and Means to counter this attack.

### **“SHU survival strategies”**

1. Maintain as much communication with as many people in society as possible.
2. Seek to read as many different publications as possible on as many different subjects as possible in order to have a consistent flow of information.
3. Create an environment of cooperation between yourself and the other prisoners around you in order to develop community and “Unity of Purpose.”
4. Develop an exercise and study program which builds over time; that is, levels of progression.
5. Communicate as little as possible with staff.
6. Attempt to politicize other prisoners and encourage collective problem solving.
7. Remember that during time in prison it is not where you are but who you are, because time is time.

I cannot hope these strategies to be successful for all



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Todd (Hyung-Rae)Tarselli



prisoners in all situations, but only the test to survive the SHU will determine who is able to transcend the torture.

Walter Daily  
California



## **Love**

At the Attica Remembrance event, September 6, 1997, Geronimo Ji Jaga told us: “I survived because of the spirit there .... I survived because of the love there.”

Women’s Building  
San Francisco



## **Clear sight**

Hopefully the day will come that my freedom is finally returned. There are so many things I think I’ll be able to give back to the community from which I came. Pelican Bay, for all the underhanded and cruel things that’s being done there, one good thing is I now understand and see so many things, mainly life, very clearly.

Johnny Bames  
California

## IV Poetry from solitary

- I Bodies leaning  
against steel doors  
eyes always watching, missing nothing.  
A deep breath taken amid isolated tension.  
White walls stretching endlessly,  
Silent barriers between two worlds  
containing society's shame, the prisoner.
- II The men  
of nothingness  
pursue the endless hours  
and the passage through silence.  
in lands of half-burned hopes  
and shattered dreams  
scratched by vengeful winds
- III He has gone to bed crying  
And woke up crying  
He has begged for a peace that was never given.  
He has plunged into the deepest despair  
and fallen into that place  
where everything is nothing.  
Growing in the darkness, his rage.
- IV Each day  
in this place  
is a struggle for him;  
he's alive, but not living.  
He's feeling everything, feeling nothing,  
tired of existing, and longing to join  
those who truly know peace, the dead.

**V** He can hear

it,  
it's there in his head, everywhere.  
A voice he prays will not last, but does.  
An unrelenting being  
that chokes his mind, his vision blurs...  
Another creature runs inward, mad.

**VI** But the

pain  
goes on and on...  
running down the walls.  
crawling beneath the bunks,  
and deep within the cracks  
where lay his sanity, lost.

### **Ever-present Sound**

A savage sound,  
the sharp crack of a man's fist  
against  
the concrete wall  
of his cell

An ever-present sound, him cursing  
the Voice of madness  
in the darkness  
as it buries his humanity  
beneath a fetid mound  
of nothingness.

### **Fatalistic Suicide**

After years of isolation, depression and hopelessness, he decided – as simply as turning down the blanket on his bunk for the night – to take his own life, so they could no longer inflict a pain that robbed him of his identity, stripped him of his dignity, destroyed his mind, and left him to hang.

### **Express Nothing**

The walls of this cell are so scarred by emotional graffiti they appear to swirl and shift, like thick white smoke trapped in a glass case.

Words, once petrified in my throat, again become possible.

But I shut myself up and the fear and anger mix within me, fuel and fire.

This is nothing  
I will express nothing.

*All the preceding poems by Kevin Campbell*

## S.H.U.

I am brought before a committee of men,  
Insidious: irony, sublet: words of the pen.  
They smile in my face; they reach for my soul,  
Letting misery and solitude take their toll.  
Announcing their judgment with noses held high  
The power they flaunt will make you sigh.  
I live in oppression, I live in a cage,  
With all of my anger building up to a rage.

I have been given an indeterminate SHU.  
You ask what that means?! You mean this is new?!  
Averaging twenty-three hours a day in a cell,  
A windowless closet, a solitary hell.

Sensory deprivation, a prison within a prison.  
Creative insanity or inspiring vision?  
Living my life like a chaotic scream,  
Someone please wake me from this horrible dream.

Not wanting to give in, not wanting to die,  
If I were not a man, I would surely cry.  
I shall not feel the sun's warming ray,  
For I will be in Pelican Bay.

Sykes

## V Past times

### Long ago, but not so far away

*Ammon Hennacy was put in solitary. The year was 1918. He wrote about his experiences:*

1. Warden Zerbst offered to let Hennacy out of solitary if he would snitch.

In about five minutes he returned, saying: "I forgot to ask you something, Hennacy. I'll leave you out tomorrow just the same."

"What is on your mind?" I asked.

"Have you been sneaking letters out of this prison?" he asked in an angry tone.

"Sure," I replied, smiling.

"Who is doing it for you?" he demanded.

"A friend of mine," I answered.

"What is his name?" was the query.

"That is for you and your guards and stool pigeons to find out. I won't tell you, for I want to get some more letters out concerning the evil things that go on," I replied good-naturedly.

He stormed around my cell, somewhat taken back by the fact that I had not lied or given in. "You'll stay in here all your good time and get another year, you stubborn fool," he said as he left.

It was not for many years that I knew I had used the method of moral jiu jitsu as advised by Ghandi: If you don't give your enemy a hold he can't throw you.

Never be on the defensive; always answer quickly and keep the enemy on the run. He is used to trickery and is put off his guard by an honest and courageous opponent whom he cannot scare or bribe... (But) the world needs a Samson to pull down their whole structure of lies.

*2. Hennacy hears the groans of the prisoner in the cell next to him. This man is being tortured to the point of madness. Hennacy thinks of suicide.*

How soon would I be strung to the bars? How long could a fellow stand such treatment?

As soon as it was dark I sharpened my spoon again and tried it gently on my wrist. The skin seemed to be quite tough, but then I could press harder. If I cut my wrist at midnight I could be dead by morning. I thought I ought to write a note to Selma and to my mother and I couldn't see to do it until morning. Well, I had waited that long, I could wait a day longer.

*3. Hennacy survives. He sings, reads, and thinks about love and purpose.*

The sun shone brightly in my cell the next morning for the first time in weeks. I crouched again by the door and saw Berkman's bald head.

Tears came into my eyes and I felt ashamed of myself for my cowardly idea of suicide just because I had a few reverses. Here was Berkman who had passed through much more than I would ever have to endure if I stayed two more years in solitary. How was the world to know more about the continued torture of Popoff and others if I gave up?

The last two verses of the I.W.W. Prison Song now had

a real meaning to me as I sang them again. I was through with despair. I wanted to live to make the world better. Just because more prisoners, and for all that, most people on the outside, did not understand and know what solitary meant was all the more reason why I should be strong. I sang cheerfully:

By all the graves of Labors dead,  
By Labor's deathless/lag of red,  
We make a solemn vow to you,  
We'll keep the faith, we will be true.  
For freedom laughs at prison bars,  
Her voice reaches to the stars;  
Proclaiming with the tempest's breath  
A cause beyond the reach of death.

I had now read [the Bible] through four times and read the New Testament many times and the Sermon on the Mount scores of times.

I had made up games with pages and chapters and names of characters in the Bible to pass away the time. I had memorized certain chapters that I liked. As I read of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah and others of the prophets and of Jesus, I could see that they had opposed tyranny. I had also spent many days reviewing all of the historical knowledge that I could remember and in trying to think through a philosophy of life. I had passed through the idea of killing myself. This was an escape, not any solution to life. The remainder of my two years in solitary must result in a clear-cut plan whereby I could go forth and be a force in the world. I could not take any halfway measures...

I had called loudly for the sword and mentally listed those whom I desired to kill when I was free. Was this really the universal method which should be used? I would read



the Sermon on the Mount again. When a child I had been frightened by hell fire into proclaiming a change of life.

Now I spent months making a decision; there was no sudden change. I had all the time in the world and no one could talk to me or influence me. I was deciding this idea for myself.

Gradually I came to gain a glimpse of what Jesus meant when He said, “The Kingdom of God is Within You.” In my heart now after six months I could love everybody in the world but the warden, but if I did not love him then the Sermon on the Mount meant nothing at all. I really saw this and felt it in my heart, but I was too stubborn to admit it in my mind.

One day, I was walking back and forth in my cell when, in turning, my head hit the wall. Then the thought came to me:

“Here I am locked up in a cell. The warden was never locked up in any cell and he never had a chance to know what Jesus meant. Neither did I until yesterday. So I must not blame him. I must love him.”

Now the whole thing was clear. The Kingdom of God must be in everyone: in the deputy, the warden, in the rat and the pervert. And now I came to know it—in myself.

I read and reread the Sermon on the Mount: the fifth, sixth and seventh chapter of Matthew thus became a living thing to me. I tried to take every sentence and apply it to my present problems. The warden had said that he did not understand political prisoners. He and the deputy, in plain words, did not know any better; they had put on the false face of sternness and tyranny because this was the only method which they knew. It was my job to teach them an-

other method: that of goodwill overcoming their evil intention, or rather habits.

The opposite of the Sermon on the Mount was what the whole world has been practicing in prisons and out of prison; and hate piled on hate has brought hate and revenge. It was plain that this system did not work.

*Ammon Hennacy  
Georgia*

## VI The community outside

### In response to Ronald Epps

I am hoping you don't mind my presumption in writing to you. Cathy Brennan took the liberty of sharing your letter with me out of a deep concern for your well being. (Note: Mr. Epps' letter, "*Sensory deprivation is depravity*," begins on p.8.) While there is little any of us can do in terms of gaining your release from the isolation of the supermax, perhaps we can assist in helping you endure and gain strength.

I am going to speak candidly—and from years of experience in counseling those in isolation units (via the phone) and those who have returned to the streets. I claim no great victories because it is true that the damage that can sometimes occur is severe. While no one escapes long periods of isolation unscathed, some do come out healthier than others—and it is the mental and physical health techniques of those people that I would like to share with you.

Your reaction to the hug of a fellow prisoner upon your last release was one I have seen before. I have also reached out to hug someone as a welcome and felt them flinch from the contact. And you are correct in your assessment that the entire purpose of isolation units is to break human beings down, in essence to make them useless.

There are also other uses to supermax isolation, obviously political ones such as using it as a management tool to keep prisoners (especially the young ones coming in such numbers) from getting organized. From a Corrections point of view, it is also a way to maintain the safety of personnel, and it is less expensive to run a supermax than a prison with general population.

As for the “public,” most folks don’t seem to care what Corrections does as long as “criminals” are kept away from the streets. Although this is most certainly a form of genocide, most people do not understand the political uses of prisons in that way. Knowing this doesn’t help your situation any, but it is important for you to hold onto the political nature of what is happening to you—and hundreds of thousands of others across the country.

You write that one of the impacts of your social dislocation is that you have not sought out or encouraged any contacts on the street—either family or friends. Reading that reminded me of one person I know who has been in New Jersey State Prison’s Management Control Unit for almost eleven years. While the purposes of a control unit vs. a supermax are different, the conditions are often the same. Through a great sense of self discipline, he has consistently reached out to people on the streets resulting in a comparatively active “social” life via the mail and his occasional telephone calls. He, along with the healthiest survivors I know, maintains a strict daily regimen including hours of physical exercises, spending a specific portion of each day reading and studying political and Afrocentric materials, and then another portion of the day writing to outside people and publications.

It has been my observation that those who remain the healthiest are those who maintain and grow in their political understanding. The emphasis of their daily existence is not what is happening in the prison, but rather what is happening on the streets. It has been my privilege to work with some of the most intelligent political minds via the mail and occasional telephone calls, and I have benefited enormously in my own work as a result. The concept of the National

Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons came out of written dialogue with a number of prisoners living in sensory deprivation units throughout the country.

It seems to me that those who retain the highest degree of their mental health also maintain ties with family and friends, often receiving photographs, relevant newspaper articles, news magazines, rap magazines, and so on. In other words, at least a portion of their mental and physical health is as a result of their own self-discipline and self-education, and the rest is as a result of their remaining street-oriented.

It is also very necessary to battle the self-destructiveness that you describe in the commission of “acts of desperation” in a quest for excitement. In a number of supermax prisons that I hear from, people are describing “wars” consisting of flinging excrement at one another as a form of stimulation, often resulting in letters of self-disgust and rage.

It is possible through inner conviction to turn anger into the will to survive. Many of the healthier survivors that I have met also talk about coming to terms with the consequences of their own behavior—that is, acknowledging self-destructive behavior in an effort to rid oneself of it. They feel that self-destructive behavior is a show of weakness rather than strength. It is also important that you balance the reality of surveillance with the extreme paranoia that you describe. That paranoia can become permanently embedded.

At the very least, maintain your sense of control over your own behavior in an attempt to stay sane inside the insanity in which you are forced to live.

While I don't know who your support system consists of, it may be important for your own health to begin to reach out to family, friends—and you may even want to attempt making new friends. I am enclosing an article which came out some time ago called the “T Bag factor.” In it they note that with long-term hostages, those who survived the experience best were those who were secure in the love of their friends and family. This is an important clue for your own ability to retain your health and humanity.

It seems to me from your letter that you are well on your way to assessing the impact of supermax and how to recover from the sensory deprivation. That assessment mechanism can be enhanced and used on a daily basis. Whether in there or out here, assessing and balancing oneself is a daily mental health task.

You describe well the tendency to adjust and conform to the mind-deadening conditions, and I am reminded of the words of Assata Shakur's grandmother during a prison visit. She advised Assata to NEVER get used to prison. There is a great need for more people to comprehend the horrors of this latest “invention” of the corrections industry, and your ability to assess yourself, along with your writing ability, can contribute to this effort. There are a number of alternative newspapers throughout the country which may accept your written commentary.

After having worked for over a decade with people in isolation, I understand clearly that it is not possible to come out of such an experience undamaged. It is, however, possible and imperative to minimize that damage by seeking out whatever forms of stimulation which are available. I am sure that you understand that your concern about becoming “mentally, physically, and socially” unfit for general

population and society in general is an exact description of the purposes of supermax prisons. Minimizing the impact of the horror of your living conditions will be difficult, but not impossible. Your reaching out to Cathy is a sign of your own health and determination.

If you are willing, I would like permission to share your letter and my response in the next national mailing of the Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons. It may be that we can engender survival-oriented commentary.

Bonnie Kerness, MSW, LSW



### **Eight constructive activities for a prisoner in lock down**

1. Study an area of law or learning that would be of use to yourself and others (a language, art, history, etc.). Develop an expertise in an area that others do not have. Share your learning and information with others.

2. Organize a family member or friend to do prison support work on the outside. Persuade them of the importance of hooking up with a prison support group on the outside that is working to turn the prison/industrial complex around. Tell your loved ones not to mourn, but to organize.

3. Write about your feelings and emotions in a way that people on the outside can get a sense of your humanity and concerns. Break down the image of prisoners as selfish, brutal, uncaring monsters. Let others see the individual qualities of each person on the inside, and their potential for change.

4. Keep a chronicle of the oppressive conditions in prison. Make the chronicle available to others who can docu-

ment the dehumanizing effect that cruelty has on people incarcerated. Be specific, and help break through the cynical suggestion that prison is a “country club” where people don’t have to work.

5. Engage in physical exercise to keep your body in shape. Refrain from physical activities and conduct that is detrimental to your health.

6. Write to newspapers, elected representatives, and others to describe conditions in prison. Don’t just complain about your own case, but educate the reader about how prisons destroy people, rather than improving them.

7. Take every chance you get to create solidarity among prisoners. Break down the issues that divide prisoners from one another—racism, homophobia, etc. Help prisoners to respect each other’s differences and space. Don’t allow the prison administration to divide you from other prisoners, through debriefing or bribery.

8. “Write poetry, short stories, novels, or any other kind of fiction that lets your mind free itself from the boundaries of the four walls. Expand the walls through your imagination and creativity.” (Quote from Luis Talamantez)

Louis Hiken  
Prison Law Project, National Lawyer’s Guild



## When the prison gates slam

When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization conclud-



ed. If anything, the need for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing prison environment. Whether an o. Henry writing his short stories in a jail cell or a frightened young inmate writing his family, a prisoner needs a medium for self-expression.

Thurgood Marshall, U.S. Supreme Court Justice  
*Procunier v. Martinez*, 1974



## **The SHU syndrome and community mental health**

By Terry A. Kupers, M.D.

The SHU Syndrome is a little known form of psychiatric decompensation, with a quickly rising incidence. It occurs in supermaximum security prisons, where a growing number of individuals suffering from serious and persistent mental disorders are housed.

“SHU” means Security Housing Unit. Some states use that acronym for their supermaximum security prison units, where the prisoners are locked in their cells nearly 24 hours per day and are cell-fed. Other states use other initials, but “SHU” has become the generic term for supermax or “maxi-maxi” or “control units,” such as the ones at Pelican Bay State Prison in California or Marion or Florence in the federal system. Thirty-eight states and the federal system currently operate such units.

These units are like “the hole” of the old days, except a prisoner who misbehaved was thrown in “the hole” for 10 days, whereas prisoners are sent to the SHU for years. And instead of being a dark, damp dungeon; most SHU’s are high tech, lights-on-all-night, doors open by remote control, video monitoring of prisoners, etc. (i.e., the prisoners have

very minimal contact with guards and other prisoners).

Psychiatrist Stuart Grassian coined the term “SHU Syndrome.” He examined a large number of prisoners during their stay in segregated, solitary confinement units and concluded that these units, like the sensory deprivation environments that were studied in the sixties, tend to induce psychosis. Even those inmates who do not become frankly psychotic report a number of psychosis-like symptoms:

1. Massive free-floating anxiety
2. Hyper-responsiveness to external stimuli, including a startle response
3. Perceptual distortions and hallucinations in multiple spheres (auditory, visual, olfactory)
4. Derealization experiences
5. Difficulty with concentration and memory
6. Acute confusional states, at times associated with dissociative features, mutism, and subsequent partial amnesia for those events
7. The emergence of primitive, ego-dystonic aggressive fantasies
8. Ideas of reference (paranoia) and persecutory ideation, at times reaching delusional proportions
9. Motor excitement, often associated with sudden, violent destructive or self-mutilatory outbursts
10. Rapid reduction of symptoms upon termination of isolation

And why should we, as public mental health practitioners, be concerned about this widespread development? I

can think of two very frightening reasons:

1. Between a quarter and a half of the prisoners in the SHU's I have visited or read about suffer serious and long-term mental illnesses. They are, on average, the most severely psychotic people I have seen in my entire 25 years of psychiatric practice. There are two basic reasons for this: inadequately treated prisoners suffering from mental disorders break rules, get into fights (often as victims—they are called “dings” or “bugs” by other prisoners), and are punished with time in “lock-up” or solitary confinement of one kind or another. After they get sentenced to enough time in solitary, they are sent to the SHU—where the “SHU Syndrome” effect worsens their psychiatric symptoms and their prognoses.
2. Increasingly, prisoners are “maxing out of the SHU.” Prisoners on fixed sentences have a release date, their disciplinary infractions in prison do not extend that date, though they are sentenced to SHU time for the infractions. When their release date comes up, even if they are housed in a SHU at the time, they are simply set free. (Some states do some pre-release programming, but the ones I have reviewed are inadequate to the task of re-socializing someone who has been psychotic and has been in solitary for a long time.)

Of course, the implications for community mental health are ominous. Not only are individuals suffering from serious and long-term mental illnesses being sent to prisons in larger proportions, but they are not adequately treated and they wind up in lock-up. A subgroup of them are showing up in SHU's (another subgroup voluntarily isolates themselves in their cells so they won't get in trouble), then, eventually,

“maxing out of the SHU.” This means they come out of prison after spending months or years in a cell by themselves, decompensated and full of rage.

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## **Issues of torture and re-entry into the community**

African and Latino young people in Newark, New Jersey, tell me that the police feel like an occupation army. They speak about a school system being used to feed young people into youth detention, jails and prisons where those bodies are suddenly worth a fortune.

People say that the criminal justice system doesn't work. I've come to believe that it works perfectly, just as slavery did, as a matter of economic and political policy. How is it that a 15 year old in Atlanta who can't get a job can suddenly generate \$30,000 a year, once trapped in a criminal justice system, where architects, food and medical providers, correctional officers, administrators, etc., get paid? Just like in the era of chattel slavery, there is a class of people dependent on the poor, and on bodies of color as a source of income.

In the U.S. criminal justice system, the politics of the police, the politics of the courts, the politics of the prison system, and the politics of the death penalty are a manifestation of the racism and classism which governs the lives of all of us. Every part of the criminal justice system falls most heavily on the poor and people of color, including the fact that slavery is mandated in prisons by the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The U.S. didn't abolish slavery; it simply transferred it into the prisons. Prison slavery in the form of involuntary labor is everyday real.

I'd like to share with you some of the voices that I hear during my day. The first two are from youngsters who spent time in juvenile detention describing a system in which parents have no say over what happens to their children and which prepares them for a future of imprisonment.

"I went in when I was 14. They have what they call the 'hole.' Kids that fight go in there. If you refuse they come and get you. You get a shower once a week and they even bring the food to you. I was so cold."

"I heard people scream, yell and holler. I saw boys get strung out on meds. The food was mostly Sloppy Joes and one cup of water. They make you take sleeping stuff in the needles. They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting one time. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn't breathe. They kept hitting her. We kept telling them that she had asthma, but they wouldn't listen."

On Mother's Day a couple of years ago in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Eddie Sinclair, Jr., hung himself in the Union County Youth detention facility. Eddie was 17 and had stolen a bicycle. He had missed a court appointment, was picked up by police and locked in an isolation cage. It is not irrelevant that Eddie's father is African and his mother is Puerto Rican.

A woman in Texas writes, "The guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of five male guards. Then they carried me to a cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off. They left me in that cell with that pepper spray in my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that.

I just didn't want to take my clothes off.”

The proportion of complaints coming from women has risen, with women describing conditions of confinement which are torture. They suffer from sexual abuse by staff with one woman saying, “That was not part of my sentence to perform oral sex with officers.”

Women have reported the inappropriate use of restraints on pregnant and sick prisoners, including one woman whose baby was coming at the same the time guard who had shackled her legs was on a break somewhere else in the hospital.

Some of the saddest letters are from prisoners writing on behalf of the mentally ill—like the man who spread feces over his body. The guards' response to this was to put him in a bath so hot it boiled 30 percent of the skin off him. These past years have been full of thousands of calls and complaints from prisoners and their families, describing inhumane conditions including cold, filth, callous medical care, extended isolation often lasting over a decade, use of devices of torture, harassment, brutality and racism. I have received vivid descriptions of four point restraints, restraint hoods, restraint belts, restraint beds, stun grenades, stun guns, stun belts, tethers, waist and leg chains.

Prolonged solitary confinement often for the purpose of behavior modification has been a long-time concern for many prison activists, on both sides of the walls. The reports coming in about the use of devices of torture are often from isolation units, which are called control units or supermax prisons, where there are few witnesses. Right now there are thousands of people living in enforced solitary confinement units in U.S. prisons, including young people in juvenile detention facilities and prisoners with mental illness.

When the news about what was going on in Abu Ghraib broke, President Bush said that “what took place in that prison doesn’t represent the America I know.” Unfortunately, for the more than two million U.S. citizens and countless undocumented immigrants living in U.S. prisons, this is the “America” that they, their family members, their lawyers, and activists DO know and experience daily.

Furthermore, given what has happened at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and given that the entire executive branch of the U.S. government seems to sanction torture, it becomes imperative that we as advocates give more long-term attention to what is happening to people in U.S. prisons.

The conditions and practices that imprisoned men, women, and children testify to are in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. U.S. prison practices also violate dozens of other international treaties and fit the United Nations definition of genocide.

Article 1 of the UN Convention Against Torture prohibits policies and practices that “constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.” The history of international attention to these issues is compelling. In 1995, the UN Human Rights Committee stated that conditions in certain U.S. maximum security prisons were incompatible with international standards. In 1996, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture reported on cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in U.S. supermax prisons. In 1998, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women took testimony in California on the ill treatment of women in U.S. prisons. In 2000, the United

Nations Committee on Torture roundly condemned the United States for its treatment of prisoners, citing supermax prisons and the use of torture devices, as well as the practice of jailing youth with adults. The use of stun belts and restraints chairs were also cited as violating the UN Convention against Torture. In May 2006, the same committee concluded that the United States should “review the regimen imposed on detainees in supermaximum prisons, in particular, the practice of prolonged isolation.”

In 1998 and again in 2005, the AFSC and other human rights groups contributed to the World Organization Against Torture and Prison Reform Internationale’s Shadow Reports on the Status of Compliance by the U.S. government with the International Convention Against Torture. We found that the United States was not meeting its obligations under that treaty. Given what has happened at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and given that the entire executive branch of the U.S. government seems to sanction torture, it becomes imperative that we as advocates strategize more long term attention to what is happening to people in U.S. prisons.

Public health issues concerning prisoners coming out abound with mental and physical issues including Hepatitis C, Tuberculosis, HIV, mental illness, and symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder. Many leave the prisons without any of the medication which formed the bedrock of their treatment, thereby risking the diffusion of these diseases. Dealing with these issues of cruelty and torture isn’t just a matter of human decency. They involve, among other things, serious public health concerns with both immediate and long-term implications.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has al-



ways recognized the existence and continued expansion of the penal system as a profound spiritual crises. It is a crisis that allows children to be demonized. It is a crisis which legitimizes torture, isolation, and the abuse of power. It is a crisis which extends beyond prisons into school and judicial systems.

I know each time we send a child to bed hungry, that is violence. That wealth concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of many is violence. That the denial of dignity based on race, class, or sexual preference is violence. And that poverty and prisons are a form of state-manifested violence.

We need to alter the very core of every system that slavery, racism, and poverty has given birth to, particularly the criminal justice system. The United States must stop violating the human rights of men, women, and children. We need to decriminalize poverty and mental illness, and in many cases, homosexuality. We must eliminate solitary confinement, torture, and the use of devices of torture. The restriction of civil rights is something we can and should debate regularly as a society. The violation of human rights simply isn't negotiable.

*Excerpts from a speech by Bonnie Kerness (Coordinator,  
Prison Watch Project, AFSC) at the War and Health  
Conference, Emory University, School of Public Health.  
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## VII Acknowledgments

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The response to the correspondence between Ronald and myself prompted the National Campaign To Stop Control Unit Prisons, California Prison Focus, and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to produce this booklet.

Many thanks go to each of the courageous contributors. Special appreciation goes also to Holbrook Teter of the California Prison Focus without whose vision and hard work this would not have been completed. And we ALL want to thank Patrick Sheldon from the Oberlin Prison Awareness Group for his patient typing of the manual.

There can be no excuse or condoning the use of isolation or sensory deprivation for prisoners. Human rights groups all over the country have decried this practice which is certainly inhumane and arguably torture. These control units and supermax prisons seriously violate the rights of prisoners. They are used to incapacitate and demoralize those held in them.

This booklet is one humble attempt by those enduring this brutality to help others enduring this brutality. It is important to us that each of you forced to live in such circumstances maintain your mental and physical health.

In 1974, Ruchell Cinque Magee noted, “Those people in this judicial system, their concern is not for justice, as they claim. That is what they come in disguise of, to strip people of everything. When I say strip, I mean rob, murder, exploit, intimidate, harass, persecute, everything to destroy the mind and body. They seek to take a person and make a complete vegetable of them.”

Ruchell spent more than 30 years living in forced isolation in California prisons.

It seems to me that Assata Shakur’s poem “Affirmation,” which is so strong a statement of the human ability to overcome, belongs in these pages:

Affirmation

I believe in living.

I believe in the spectrum  
of Beta days and Gamma people.

I believe in sunshine  
in windmills and waterfalls,  
tricycles and rocking chairs.

And I believe that seeds grow into sprouts,  
And sprouts grow into trees.

I believe in the magic of the hands.

And in the wisdom of the eyes. I believe in rain and  
tears. And in the blood of infinity. I believe in life. And  
I have seen the death parade march through the torso  
of the earth, sculpting mud bodies in its path. I have  
seen the destruction of the daylight, and seen the  
bloodthirsty maggots prayed to and saluted.

I have seen the kind become the blind and the blind  
become the blind in one easy lesson. I have walked on  
cut glass. I have eaten crow and blunder bread and  
breathed the stench of indifference.

I have been locked by the lawless. Handcuffed by the haters. Gagged by the greedy. And, if I know anything at all, it's that a wall is just a wall and nothing more at all. It can be broken down.

I believe in living. I believe in birth. I believe in the sweat of love and in the fire of truth.

And I believe that a lost ship,  
steered by tired, seasick sailors, can still be guided home to port.

Again, deep thanks to each of you for your contribution.

Bonnie Kerness  
1997



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## **STOPMAX Campaign mission**

The mission of AFSC's STOPMAX Campaign is to promote and support a national movement to end the use of solitary confinement and related forms of torture in U.S. prisons. Campaign work is realized through grassroots organizing, research, public education, human rights training, and policy advocacy. The work is carried out by staff and community nationwide including the following offices:

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