

Why Some of Us Made It Out of the Box

A decade of solitary. Six years straight. And the question I have been turning over ever since: why do some of us come out with our minds still working, while others are carried out in pieces.

I have spoken about solitary confinement publicly. But not often. And never quite like this.

A decade of my life, total, was spent in solitary or long-term confinement. Six of those years were consecutive. I went in. I stayed in. I reached what I can only describe as the lowest geography a human being can reach inside themselves and still technically be alive. And then, somehow, I came out. Functional. Present. Able to build something from the years that followed.

That fact is statistically unusual. And I have been turning it over in my mind long enough now that I think I owe the conversation an honest accounting.

The Scale of What We Are Talking About

People need to understand what a decade in solitary actually means in the context of this country's practice, because the numbers themselves are an indictment.

In California's Pelican Bay State Prison in 2011, nearly all of the 1,100 men in the Security Housing Unit had been in solitary for five years or more. About half for a decade or more. Over 200 for 15 years or more. Seventy-eight men had been locked in a box for 20 years or more.

Albert Woodfox of the Angola Three spent nearly 44 years in solitary confinement inside a 6-by-9-foot cell for 23 hours a day, enduring claustrophobia, gassings, beatings and other forms of torture. His conviction was overturned multiple times. He was not released until he was 69 years old.

"If I dwelled on the pain I have endured and stopped to think about how 40 years locked in a cage has affected

| *me, it would give insanity the victory it has sought for 40 years.”*

ALBERT WOODFOX – ANGOLA THREE

That sentence contains an entire survival philosophy. I understand it in my body.

What the Research Says Happens to Most People

The science is not ambiguous and it is not gentle.

More than 150 years of research across psychiatry, psychology, criminology, and epidemiology has documented the detrimental effects of solitary confinement on mental health. Physical and social isolation, coupled with sensory deprivation and forced idleness, create a toxic combination that can produce serious and lasting psychological damage. Negative mental health repercussions can persist long-term, well after a person’s release.

Even one day in solitary confinement increases the likelihood of premature death after release, by suicide, homicide, or opioid overdose. People in solitary make up only 6 to 8 percent of the total prison population, yet they account for approximately half of all prison suicides.

Social psychologist Craig Haney, whose research directly impacted policy reforms in California, found that prisoners held for long periods in solitary at Pelican Bay reported nearly twice the number of symptoms of stress and trauma compared to the general prison population. He has also documented an emerging consensus that the practice does not achieve its intended objectives and may actually worsen the problems it was designed to solve.

Knowing all of that, I want to be honest. I was not untouched. I was not invincible. The lows I hit during those six consecutive years were real and deep and sometimes I was not sure what was going to be left of me when it was over. What I am trying to examine is why there was anything left at all.

The Vulnerability Window Nobody Talks About

Here is something I have thought about for a long time. One of the underreported findings in the research on solitary resilience is this: there is a particular period of vulnerability at the beginning of a solitary placement, especially for inexperienced prisoners who do not know what to make of it or whether they can survive it. Though longer duration generally produces worse outcomes, the opening period can be the most psychologically destabilizing for someone encountering isolation for the first time.

I was not encountering it for the first time. That matters enormously, and the field has not fully grappled with why.

My first experience with isolation was as a juvenile. Then Rikers. Long before I ever hit the box as an adult, my nervous system had a reference point for the silence, the walls closing in, the psychological weaponization of time. That is not a healthy thing to say. I am not presenting it as a gift. But it is a real variable. The shock that breaks people in those first days and weeks of solitary, the disorientation, the terror of not knowing whether this is survivable, I had already metabolized an earlier version of that experience. My body had already built something, a crude architecture for endurance, that I could access the next time the door closed.

The science calls this stress inoculation. Research in biology describes a phenomenon called hormesis, in which small and brief exposures to stressors can contribute to the development of repair mechanisms that protect against the impact of subsequent, more severe exposure. The immune system analogy is almost too clean. The body builds antibodies. Not immunity. Antibodies. The pain still arrives. But the system has seen something like it before and knows it has survived.

I am not arguing that exposing young people to isolation produces resilience. I am describing a mechanism that operated in me without my consent, beginning when I was a child in systems that should never have put me there in the first place.

The Construction of an Interior Life

Research on solitary survivors identifies a set of psychological strategies that distinguish those who adapt from those who deteriorate. One of the most powerful is a shift in time orientation. The solitary prisoner who can achieve immersion in the present, rather than dwelling on past regret or obsessing over a future that may not arrive as hoped, gains a significant psychological advantage over the environment.

Inside six years, you either build a world inside your own mind or you have no world at all.

I built one. I am not going to romanticize what that looked like in its worst moments. But I structured my days with intention, even when there was nothing to structure. I held onto thought as a form of property. Ideas became territory. Discipline over my own mental routines became the only sovereignty I had.

Albert Woodfox said that when he began to understand who he was, he considered himself free. He attributed that to reading, to learning his history

as a Black man in America, to developing a political and intellectual framework that the cell could not confiscate.

That resonates. There is a version of freedom that operates entirely inside the skull, and it is not metaphorical. It is neurological. You are literally choosing what to activate in an environment designed to give you nothing to activate.

Identity as the Last Line of Defense

Solitary confinement survivors and the experts who treat them describe the central challenge as one of sustained identity. Without the daily mirrors of social interaction, without being called by name, without work or role or relationship, the self begins to lose its outline. Rebuilding after solitary requires relationship, meaning, and the gradual reconstruction of a sense of agency.

What protected me, in part, was that I entered those years with a self I was not willing to surrender. Not a perfect self. Not a fully formed one. But a stubborn one. Something in me refused to let the institution define the final version of who I was. That refusal is not something I can fully explain as strategy. It felt more like something constitutional, something laid down before I even understood what it was.

Some people go into solitary with that. Some do not. And I think that difference is often laid down long before the cell door closes. It is laid down in what people have already survived, in what kind of meaning they have been able to construct from prior pain, in whether anyone in their life ever reflected back to them that they were worth something.

What This Means Beyond My Story

Surveys of solitary survivors have found that fewer than half of the jurisdictions they passed through had any step-down programs for people transitioning out of isolation. The programs that do exist largely fail to help survivors understand what happened to them, establish a sense of safety, or rebuild the capacity for relationship.

That is a policy scandal. It means we are releasing people from one of the most psychologically devastating conditions documented in modern research, with no framework for what was done to them and no infrastructure to help them reconstruct themselves.

I came home and built that framework largely on my own, in the absence of any system designed to help me. What I want people to understand is that the men who do not make it, the ones who cycle back, the ones who collapse into the statistics, they are not weaker than I am. They are often carrying the same wounds with less access to the raw materials of recovery.

The question of why some of us make it out of the box with our minds still working is not only a question about individual psychology. It is a question about what we were given or denied before we ever walked in. It is a question about who showed us ourselves before the state decided to erase us. It is a question about which early wounds, perversely, became the architecture of endurance, and which ones simply became fractures.

I am still working out which of mine are which.

That work is the real reentry. And it never fully ends.

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