

‘There’s No One Left to Hurt But Me’

By **Jesse Jackson** | August 25, 2017

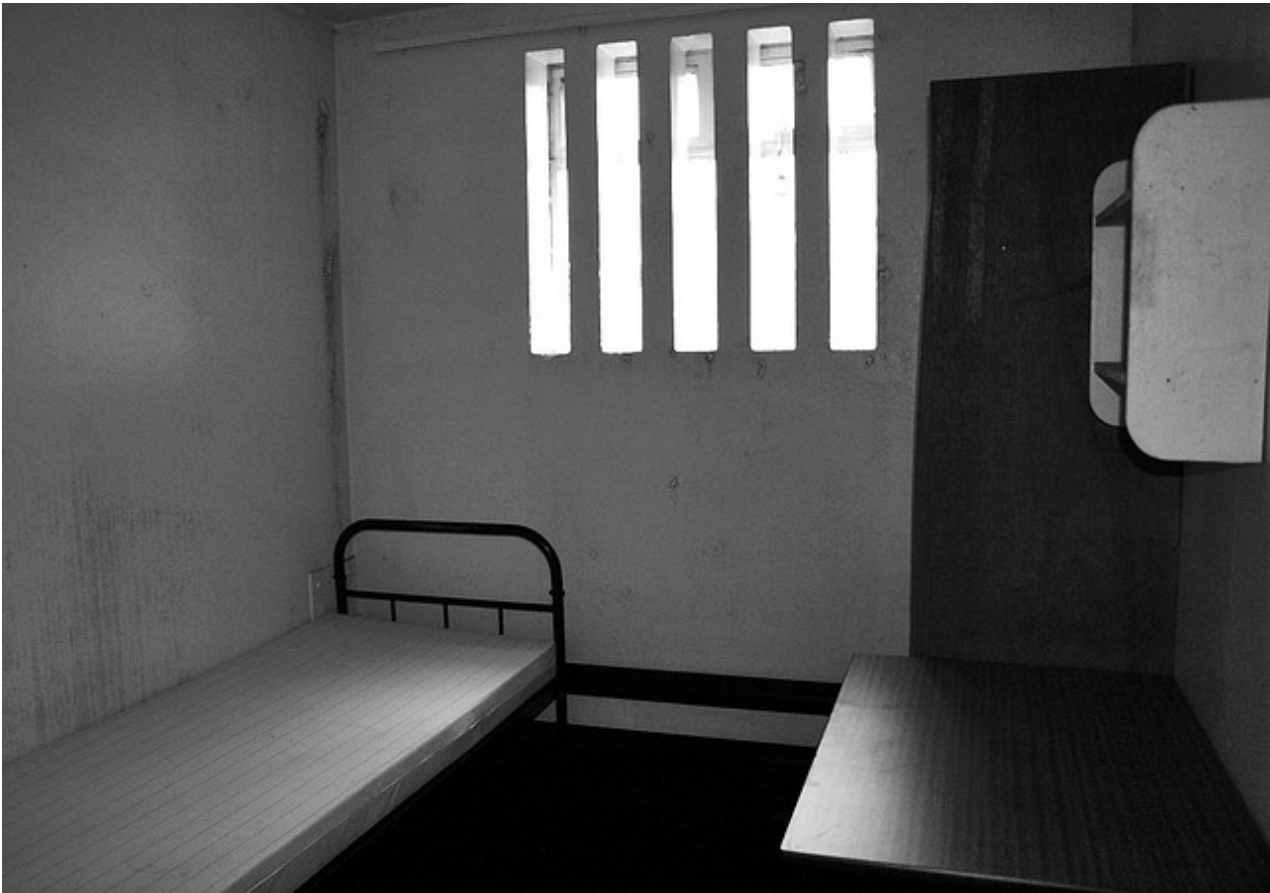


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As I look back at all the things I’ve done to get me to this point, I must admit I’ve worked really hard to mess up my life. All the illegal things I did on the streets earned me a (lifetime) in prison.

And if that wasn’t enough, once in prison I continued down that same path. The things I did while in prison earned me a sentence in Pelican Bay’s infamous SHU program—“the Hole”—a prison within a prison. It’s a place designed for those deemed by the prison administration to be the worst of the worst.

Staring at the 5,286 holes that make up the front of my cold concrete (SHU) cell, I remember thinking, “Is this it?”

Is this where I’ve been working so hard to get to, in a cell by myself for 22 ½ hours a day, going to a yard the size of a walk-in closet with nothing in it: no handball, no basketball, no dip bars, no pull-up bars, not even a sink or toilet?

Nothing but concrete walls, a camera and me!

I had to be strip-searched, handcuffed, waist-chained, leg-shackled and escorted by two correctional officers with billy clubs in hand every time I left my cell...”Escort coming through!”...they would always yell, as if the sounds of my many chains couldn’t be heard echoing throughout the empty corridors with every step I took.

Having no direct sunlight or human contact whatsoever (means) complete isolation, humiliation and sensory deprivation. It means having all my food and cosmetics taken out of their original containers and placed in paper bags and paper cups; having to drink my coffee and eat my food out of milk cartons because bowls and cups aren’t allowed; having absolutely no access to a telephone, not even when there was a death in my family.

It means having to be told that the only way I would get out of the SHU was if I died, was paroled, or debriefed (to snitch). It means I have to fight every single day just to keep my sanity!

To be honest, I find it impossible to even pretend anymore. As I take a real hard look at my life and all the harm I’ve done to myself, I realize that I have absolutely nothing to show for my life. That hurts more than words can describe. I don’t have anything, because I’ve never done what it takes to get something and keep it! I’ve lived the life of an irresponsible fool!

Even when people tried to tell me where my life was going to end up if I kept down the road I was going, I refused to listen, thinking I knew what I was doing. Now here I sit in a jail cell, wishing I had listened to somebody other than myself, because thanks to me my life has literally been one disaster after another. I've messed up my life on so many levels that I may never be able to fully recover!

Being honest with myself has taken me from blame to shame.

Those self-inflicted wounds hurt like hell!

Being honest with myself has taken me from blame to shame. Now I find myself at that fork in the road everyone keeps talking about, where my life literally depends on my making the right choices. Because when I do get another chance, it will surely be my last. I've done 16 months in juvenile hall, three years in CYA (youth prison), three years in the county jail, and 23 years, 6 months and 18 days in prison. I now have five "strikes," which means I'm faced with the possibility of a life sentence any time I come back to jail, no matter the charge.

Not only am I all out of chances, but I can't even afford the luxury of a negative thought. I'm done subjecting myself to this. When I walk out these jailhouse doors I will never be back!

Not only have I been in jail most of my life, but I've also been alone for most of my life.

I've done all the time I can do. I've given the game, the streets, the hood, the block and the homies all that I can give. The rest of my life goes to me and my family.

It really saddens me to say this, but not only have I been in jail most of my life but I've also been alone for most of my life as well. Sadly, I'm used to it. I wish that I wasn't, but I am.

That definitely isn't normal—nothing about being in these places is normal—and the longer you stay inside these places, the further away from normal you get.

This place eats away at you a few bites at a time till there's nothing left but a shell of your former self, wasting away in some cell with nothing but a few war stories to tell. I'm done lying and playing games with myself. I'm tired of saying, "It is what it is!" When the truth is—it is what it is because this is what I've made it! I created this mess!

My choices put me here. And in all honesty, after looking at my life for what it is and finally facing some ugly truths about myself and what I've done to my life, I can see why I am where I am. I've been my own worst enemy most of my life. I've always found something or someone else to blame, when the truth is—I'm to blame.

I've had so many opportunities to have a wonderful life, but each time I was on the brink of success, I sabotaged myself again and again by making all the wrong choices. Choosing the wrong people, places and things is why I am where I am today—alone—in a jail cell.

I've hurt everyone in my life over and over again, till finally, there's no one left to hurt but me!

Jesse Jackson is a participant in the Beat Within's San Francisco County Jail writing workshops. Other prisoner essays are available [here](http://www.thebeatwithin.org/) (<http://www.thebeatwithin.org/>). Readers' comments are welcome.