

Shave and a Haircut

FAQ questions: Sarah Shourd/*The Box*

Sarah Shourd is a journalist, playwright and UC Berkeley Visiting Scholar based in Oakland, CA. She spent 410 days in solitary confinement from 2009 to 2010 while being held as a political hostage by the Iranian government. For the last five years, her work has been centered on storytelling about and advocacy for the 100,000 people in the US being subjected to the cruelty and overuse of solitary confinement every day. To this end, Shourd has traveled the United States as a public speaker as well as written and reported extensively on criminal justice issues, including: *The Box*, a play that will premiere at Z Space in San Francisco in July of 2016; an anthology, *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement* (New Press, 2016); and numerous articles for such outlets as *The Daily Beast*, *The New York Times*, *Mother Jones*, CNN, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Salon*, Huffington Post, Reuters and more. Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt published her memoir, *A Sliver of Light: Three Americans Imprisoned in Iran*, in 2011.

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1. What were the dates of your imprisonment in Iran?

July 31st, 2009 to September 14th, 2010.

2. What percentage of the 14 months did you spend in solitary confinement?

I was in solitary the entire time.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture defines solitary confinement as at least 22-23 hours alone in a cell per day. The only time I had more than two hours out of my cell in a day was during interrogation, during which I

was placed blindfolded in a padded cell, which hardly constitutes meaningful social contact. Eventually—after hunger striking and pressure from the outside—I was allowed short visits with Shane and Josh, who were held together in the same cell, but I was never taken out of solitary confinement.

For the entire 410 days I was held in illegal, arbitrary, incommunicado, solitary detention—I was only allowed to see my lawyer the day I was released, and my first phone call was nearly six months after I was captured. I received highly redacted letters from my mother and was never allowed to respond.

3. What were you doing hiking along the U.S./Iran border? Do you think the Iranian government believed you were a spy?

My now-husband Shane Bauer and I had been living in Damascus, Syria for over a year before we were captured. Moving to Damascus was an extension of the anti-war and international solidarity work that was the focus of my twenties. I was starting out as a journalist and teaching English Literature to Iraqi refugees as part of a program that helped them pursue a higher education in the U.S. and Europe. That July, I had a two-week vacation from my teaching job so we decided to travel to Iraqi Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region of northern Iraq where no American had been killed or kidnapped in recent decades. Though that's since changed, at that time Iraqi Kurdistan was not a war zone, it was a popular tourist destination for adventure travelers and very pro-American.

On July 30th we left the bustling city of Sulimaniyya and traveled to Ahmad Awa, a tourist site where we found hundreds of Kurds camping near a waterfall enjoying the green mountains that part of Iraq is known for.

We decided to spend the night there, and the next morning asked around for a good trail so we could take a hike. If we made any mistake, we hiked too far; it was a gorgeous day and we wanted to see the view from the top of the ridge. When we arrived at the top, we were lured across an unmarked border and captured by Iranian border guards. As terrifying as it was being blindfolded and driven into an unknown country, in the beginning I felt certain the ordeal would be resolved in a matter of days, if not hours. I don't believe any Iranian authorities ever actually suspected us of espionage. We spoke no Farsi and carried no money or fake documents.

As a woman, I would have immediately been arrested in Iran for

“indecent” because at the time of my capture I was not wearing a headscarf or long sleeves. Months later, my interrogator told me he knew I was innocent and that my friends and I were being used as a political pawn in hopes of gaining concessions from the U.S. government.

4. Can you describe the routine you experienced while in solitary—what were your days and weeks like?

In the early months I could not control my anguish and terror.

I spent days weeping uncontrollably and raging in my solitary cell. Plagued with nightmares, I barely slept. I paced endlessly all day and night. The only way I found to calm myself was repeating multiplication tables in my head for hours and hours at a time.

People just aren't wired for this type of sensory deprivation and isolation. You quickly begin to decompensate, and the sadness and uncertainty manifest as constant physical and psychological pain. The only respite I found was in memories, trying to recall every moment of my life that had brought me joy and meaning. But with these “reruns” came the painful knowledge that I might not ever get my life back, which spiraled me deeper and deeper into depression. For long periods of time I didn't eat or even move. Then, I would explode into rage and beat at the walls of my cell until my knuckles bled.

Eventually, I realized I would lose my mind if I didn't find means to cope and adapt to my situation. Over the next year I developed a disciplined regime of exercise, meditation, study and other invented activities to pass the time. I tried to never allow for an idle moment when frightening thoughts could inevitably enter my mind. I sang to myself, invented stories and set aside time to “talk” to my mother and other loved ones each day. I practiced my Spanish as well as Arabic aloud each day, and tried to learn Farsi.

I surrendered to a spiritual belief in something much bigger than myself, constantly working to keep my pain at a distance and stubbornly cling to hope. Eventually, I got books and a few movies, which I consumed again and again. I was still plagued by fits of rage and depression, nightmares, hallucinations and difficulty concentrating, but I kept myself strong by resisting and protesting my confinement in every way possible.

5. What happens to one's sense of time while in solitary?

Time becomes your enemy, something you must “kill” in order to survive.

A minute, a day, a week, a month ... all become inexplicably different concepts that feel impossible to fill. I would track time by watching a thin sliver of light slowly creep across the wall of my cell each day.

6. Is it difficult to sleep or stay awake?

I suffered from insomnia and nightmares, mostly about my mother whom I was sick with worry about.

The lights were never turned off in my cell, so I slept with a scarf tied across my eyes.

Vigorous exercise resulted in the best sleep and sometimes I would have what I called “temporary freedom dreams” where I was back home with my friends and family, but I knew they were only dreams and that when I woke up I would still be locked in a cell.

7. Are there any scenes or situations you experienced that made their way into the play? If so, give 2-3 examples.

Yes, many of which I wasn't fully aware of at the time of the writing. There is a scene when a prisoner, Ray De Vul, is suddenly released. He'd spent 19 years thinking he was never going to be out of solitary let alone prison, and suddenly an unexpected turn of events brings freedom. For Ray, this was what he'd always dreamed of, yet at the same time feels completely unprepared for. It means he has to suddenly leave the only reality he understands and be shot into the unknown. Though spending a year in solitary confinement is of course vastly different than spending 19, my release also happened with no warning and I had no choice but to leave my fiancé and friend behind.

It was impossible for me to feel any joy in it for a long time. If anything, I was terrified and in shock.

There is also a scene where two prisoners have a very intimate conversation through a vent between their cells, which happened to me in Iranian prison when I discovered I could talk to Zahra Bahrami, the woman celled next to me, if I stood on my sink and shouted into our common vent. Prior to this discovery, we would sing down the hall to each other and knock back and forth on our common wall. Zahra was a Dutch-Iranian political prisoner who was part of the movement for Democracy and

Human Rights. She told me she knew who I was, and that she'd seen my mother fighting for my release on BBC.

As beautiful as it was to find a way to connect with another human being, the event ended badly when an overzealous guard who had slowly crept down the hall in her bare stockings so we wouldn't hear her, caught us in this illicit act. After we were caught, Zahra was moved to another part of the prison. About a year later, months after I was released, I found out she had been executed.

There are many creative ways that prisoners in isolation find to pass notes and connect with each other, including flushing letters into each other's cells through the toilet pipes and flying "kites" under their cell doors. "Kite-flying," also called "fishing," is when prisoners in isolation tie a piece of soap or other weight to the end of a string they make from a sheet. Each sails the "kite" artfully under their cell doors; when the tow weights are linked together the receiver pulls in both lines and finds a note tied to the end. "Kite-flying" is reenacted in the play. Ironically, though this is a play primarily about isolation, it's also just as much about finding connection.

The narratives I created for the play are driven by relationships—between a prisoner and his guard as well as a father and his teenage daughter, for example. They deal with themes of violence and nonviolence, loyalty and deception and the ripple effects of a kind of torture that can only be described as systematic.

The longer I was imprisoned, the more I was willing to risk punishment to reach out in solidarity to the other women political prisoners around me. I've heard similar stories countless times in the process of researching this play. It's what people do.

8. Are there any scenes, situations or characters you met or observed in your research for your book or the play that became part of fabric of the play itself? If so, give 2-3 examples.

All the characters and scenes in *The Box* are fictionalized. In part to protect the identities of the people I interviewed, but also to give myself permission to draw upon my own experiences of imprisonment. Every word is inspired by the interviews, letters and conversations I had with people around the country who had spent time in solitary or were still inside.

For example, Jerry Elster, who did five years in the "hole" and now

advocates for others, told me about a conversation he had with a guard about whether they could ever be friends. This reminded me very much of the feelings I had toward guards in Iran. That even though some might be decent human beings, the nature of our relationship—one human being having unjust power over another—meant I could never see them as an equal deserving of the respect and vulnerability friendship requires.

Another detail that made it into the play was a story told to me by Five Mualimm-ak, an activist and survivor in New York who told me about the “yellow line” in prison isolation pods that a prisoner cannot cross without permission. When Mualimm-ak was released, every time he saw a yellow line painted on a crosswalk or on the street he would stop, often finding it too difficult to proceed. The relationship between the character of Victor Santiago and his teenage daughter Olivia is fictionalized, but draws heavily from Raphael Cacique, a prisoner at Pelican Bay whom I’ve come to know well.

These stories affected me very deeply, helping me to tap into something deeper in myself, yet at the same time tug at something universal. I am hopeful audiences will be able to relate to and care about them as well.

9. Would you say the experience in Iran changed your view of the way the world works in a permanent way?

Yes. Having everything I love taken from me and ultimately getting my life back raised the bar for me.

With the knowledge that so many people fought for my freedom, I can never again doubt or underestimate how important my life is. While I’m the same person with the same values I had when I went to prison, I’m more determined, ambitious and focused than I used to be. I want to use the little power, influence, talent ... and whatever I have at my disposal, in the pursuit of justice.

10. How long did it take to adjust to freedom and life back in the United States?

The only thing harder than getting out of prison is getting prison out of you.

You learn to put up walls within walls and in many ways those are the hardest to come down. When I was in solitary I told myself that when I left that cell I would never have to be alone again. Ironically, when I did get out, it was often very hard to be around people.

For months after my release I felt numb, as if I was going through the motions of being with my family and loved ones. I couldn't feel anything. My body would jerk when I was touched; eye contact was stressful. I just wanted to crawl back inside a hole and lick my wounds.

Of course, I couldn't let myself do that because I had a mission to get my fiancé and friend out of prison. I think having that focal point really helped me fight the psychological symptoms that at times threatened to overwhelm me.

11. When did you first decide that prison reform—specifically the practice of solitary confinement—was something you felt you wanted to dedicate your energies to?

The day after my husband was released I opened my eyes in a strange room at the American Embassy in Oman and felt this kind of terrible stillness. I could hear him downstairs talking with his sisters, and on one hand I was so relieved but I also felt this growing emptiness. I realized that with the fight of my life now over, I had no real reason to get out of bed. What was the meaning of my life now? Who was I?

All the emotions I had stuffed inside for so long flooded in and for the next months I struggled more than ever to keep myself afloat. And to deal with my PTSD, which meant a new wave of intense bouts of insomnia, rage, panic and depression.

Right around this time, The New York Times asked me to write an article. I knew it would be about the horror of what I had experienced in solitary confinement, which was still with me every day.

I began to do research and found out we hold over 100,000 people in solitary confinement every day in the United States, in conditions almost identical to what I experienced in Iran, yet often for years and even decades. It's not just prisoners that have committed violent offenses either. Forty percent are mentally ill before they go to solitary; others are put in for non-violent infractions like having too much stuff in their cells, walking too slowly or just looking at a guard the wrong way. The truth is, solitary is meted out arbitrarily without any oversight, and often it targets politicized prisoners, jailhouse lawyers and those who have the courage stand up to inhumane and unjust prison conditions, just like I did.

I also learned that in the majority of U.S. prisons, administrators refuse to

admit that the practice of solitary confinement is even used. They call it “Administrative Segregation,” “Protective Custody” or “Security Housing Units.” Prisoners refer to it as “the hole,” “the box,” or “the dungeon.”

I ended up using my experiences as a bridge in order to address the fact that in the United States we use this practice on a far larger scale than Iran or any other country on the world, or in history for that matter. Around the same time, the UN Special Rapporteur stated that two weeks in solitary can cause permanent brain damage and constitutes torture. Then, a group of prisoners in California kicked off a hunger strike in protest of their isolation.

The timing was incredible. I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

12. What were your first projects revolving around this?

First, Shane and Josh and I wrote our memoir, *A Sliver of Light: Three Americans Imprisoned in Iran*, which was published by Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt in 2013. After that we went on tour. In the same time frame I was continuing to write more articles, as well as starting to work with Solitary Watch. It was my colleagues there, Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, who suggested I write a play.

13. When did you decide that you wanted to write a play?

After I’d written about my particular experiences for our memoir, I realized that what I wanted to communicate was much larger than one soul’s fight for survival. The necessity for me was to find artistic expression of an experience that threatened my sanity, my dignity and my future. And connect that to what was still happening in my own backyard.

Solitary confinement affects as many as 100,000 direct victims in my own country each day. Families are torn apart, children are left parentless, social divisions are deepened, hatred is sown and society as a whole is marred by the consequences of this needless cruelty.

Survivors like myself have to live with the reality that every day countless people are in that place of horror that we once lived—and a part of us stays with them.

14. Why a play?

Theater offers people the unique and visceral opportunity to get inside a

story. Through light, set design, video, sound and of course live actors, we can recreate the experience of isolation and imprisonment that most people will never have access to. It's a facsimile, of course, but it's also deeply authentic because the play is based on the lives of real people.

You can also do things the fictional world of a play that you can't do in other mediums. So, there's a power there, the "lie" that tells its own truth. I don't think it's possible for a person who hasn't endured the cruelty and torture of solitary confinement to experience its effects in a play. And frankly, I'd never want to subject my audience to that. The point is not to live the conditions, but rather to get inside a few examples of those living it; to walk in their shoes. After doing so, many will find it hard to go back to the illusion that what happens behind prison walls stays behind prison walls. Let them be seduced and enlightened by fascinating characters—let them hear from the ones living it.

Ultimately, it's about making the invisible visible. In the process of writing, you crawl inside a story, immerse yourself in the characters you're creating and then bring your intuition and life experiences as an artist to bear so you can then open up that world and invite audiences to join you.

15. You're primarily a journalist, is *The Box* your first foray into playwriting?

In my twenties I wrote, directed and performed in several theater pieces about U.S.-led wars in the Middle East and the Zapatista struggle against neoliberalism. I have been a social justice activist for almost 20 years. I spent my twenties engaged in human rights, antiwar and international solidarity work around the world. I volunteered as a peace observer and participated in the Zapatista indigenous movement in Chiapas, Mexico. I also studied Theatre of the Oppressed with world-renowned teachers Marc Weinblatt and Hector Aristizabal and led workshops in Oakland, Damascus and Los Angeles, as well as juvenile detention facilities in San Francisco.

16. How long did it take to research *The Box*?

I engaged in intensive letter correspondences with over a dozen people in isolation over a year's period. I also visited and met with victims in thirteen prisons, detention centers and/or jails. And I conducted more than 75 interviews with experts, family members, survivors and prison officials.

17. Over what period of time was it written?

About six months of writing, and another six months of editing, working with a dramaturge and work-shopping it with actors.

18. *Were there any books, movies or other plays that inspired The Box?*

The Exonerated was a big inspiration as a model. Seen by over half a million people, it even directly influenced policy and the lives of people when the Governor of Illinois commuted the sentences of a handful of people on death row. I was also influenced by the movie 12 Years a Slave, particularly the long camera close-ups of the lead character's face. 12 Years a Slave captured his indoctrination into the life of slavery and subjugation in a way words alone simply couldn't. We plan on using live-feed video in The Box during the visitation scenes in a similar way.

19. *Actor/director Sean Penn was notably involved in securing your freedom; has he been involved with The Box as it's made its way to the page and now to the stage?*

Sean's was a huge part of the campaign to free my husband and friend, and we worked really closely together after my release. He's also really supportive of the play. My director, Michael Garces, and I wanted him to play the role of one of the prisoners, Jake Juchau, but his time was already committed. But I'd really like to see this happen in the future.

20. *Are the characters in The Box based on actual prisoners or ex-prisoners you've met during your research?*

Yes, the characters draw heavily from real people, but they are hybrid, fictionalized characters filtered through my own experiences and my own lens as an artist and survivor. Most of the dialogue is invented, but some of the writing is borrowed (with permission) from accomplished writers inside, like Billy Blake (author of A Sentence Worse than Death) and C.F. Villa (author of Life in the SHU).

It's impossible to thank everyone who contributed to this project, but I do want to acknowledge and thank those who shared their own stories and experiences of incarceration: Francisco Cacique, Rafael Cacique, Dolores Canales, Jacqueline Craig, Steven Czifra, Jerry Eisler, Rudolph Howell, Five Mualimm-ak, Brian Nelson, Raul Rocha, Alfred Sandoval, Ricky De Silva, Leon Singletery, Maher Suarez, Judith Vasquez and Caesar Villa.

I also drew from writing and recordings by the late Dannie Martin and Herman Wallace of the Angola 3. Like so many people around the world, I was deeply inspired by the historic California Prisoner Hunger Strike in 2011, which brought the issue of long-term solitary confinement to the world's attention, as well as by the hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay Detention Center and elsewhere around the world.

21. Some of the characters in *The Box* seem truly to be people you would not want to run into—do you have any opinions on how those who have demonstrated themselves to be a danger to society and/or to those close to them should be handled?

People are sentenced to prison for their crimes.

Solitary confinement is a sentence on top of a sentence, one decided upon internally, without due process, legal representation or the other rights afforded by a democratic society. It's the harshest punishment our system doles out apart from the death penalty, and yet it's administered arbitrarily with little to no recourse available to the prisoner being subjected to it.

Forty percent of people sent to the hole are mentally ill and, in my opinion, shouldn't be in prison to begin with. Many more come out with mental illness they develop while they're there. Others are put in the hole for non-violent offenses like having contraband in their cells, walking too slowly or looking at a guard the wrong way ("insubordination").

Still others are put there because they are "jailhouse lawyers," prisoners who protest the inhumanity of prison conditions; they are there to be silenced.

What it comes down to is a management issue. Our prison population is far too large to be managed in a humane way. Cruelty and extreme punishment (sometimes elevated to the level of torture) have become routine control mechanisms necessary to subjugate an unruly and unmanageable population. So, instead of rehabilitating people as prisons are supposed to, they just warehouse people till their sentences are up and then dump the problem back on society.

This system is costing us an insane amount of money and it isn't making us safer or stronger as a society.

Our prisons are full of violent people and we need to deal with that. Yes, some of those in solitary confinement might be dangerous or violent, and I

wouldn't necessarily want to be best friends with a number of characters in my play, but does that mean we are justified in torturing them? Subjecting them to conditions that make them more violent?

The vast majority of prisoners in the hole will some day be released into our streets; they will be our neighbors.

22. *What do you hope to accomplish with *The Box*?*

My imprisonment, like so many others, was pointless and cruel. It didn't make sense. Yet, in order to maintain sanity and hope inside, I had to integrate my experience into the story of my life. In other words, my imprisonment didn't happen for a reason, but in order to survive, I had to make a reason.

What I want is for people to leave the theater after seeing *The Box* with a new understanding about who ends up in the deep end of our prison system, and why.

These are the people who, as a society, we are basically throwing away, so we should at least have an idea of what some of them are like. As a survivor, I wish I could get these people out of solitary confinement and give them the second chance at life I was given, but I can't do that.

Yet, as a writer, there is something I can do: I can provide a window that allows the public to peer in. I can create an experience that makes this reality come to life for people who otherwise are unaffected by the prison system. If people walk out of the theater with the faces of real, flawed, hilarious messed-up and beautiful human beings in their minds instead of just a number, I think we will have accomplished a lot.

The stories we collect throughout our lives define us. It's how we organize our thoughts, strengthen our values and form our world-view. Ultimately, I think the stories we carry determine our actions.

23. *Clearly, an experience like the one you endured in Iran—and the subsequent notoriety—is something that will be with you the rest of your life. Would you say *The Box* is somehow a way of putting those experiences into perspective so you are able to move on?*

Yes, this project has propelled me into the next stage of my life. I didn't want to come out of my imprisonment bitter or angry, so I've sought to turn something negative into something positive.

It's an act of love. It's a small attempt to give back what's been given to me.

