

## Mohamid Rashid

Fifteen years ago, Gerard G. Schultz, Jr., now 38, was convicted of murder in Phoenix, Arizona. He is serving a life sentence and has been in solitary since 2008, when he was transferred from Arizona to Illinois under the Interstate Corrections Compact. In Illinois, he was placed in Tamms Supermax Prison until it was closed by the governor in January 2013. Since that time, he has been held in the Pontiac Correctional Center, where he reports that he is still in isolation.

Unable to be perceived by the outside world and sometimes unable to be perceived by our own selves. We are an estimated 2 million, but the sound of a pin falling to the ground makes a much louder sound than 4 million teardrops, incessantly falling every second of every hour of every day for the “phantom souls” that are entombed in their purgatory state of existence inside correctional facilities across the United States.

We are “phantom souls”: the men, women and children incarcerated from all realms of life. Yes, it can be said that we’ve made mistakes and wrong choices in our lives’ quest. It can be said that, in more cases than one, we deserve to be imprisoned, some of us for the rest of our lives. It can also be said that many of us have disappointed and let down the people of our own communities, but has it been said that we are human beings too? Has everyone forgotten that we, too, are your parents, spouses, children, relatives and friends? Has it been said that we, too, still bleed and even breathe the very same air as the rest of the world does? We still bleed! We still breathe! Unfortunately, the world has immediately forgotten our presence and existence as soon as the iron gates slam and cell doors close.

That is why we are “phantom souls,” because no one can even see us or hear us, and if it were possible to do so, it would be like a bee’s wing falling onto your shoulder or an eyelash falling on your nose: hardly detectable. We have no outside

effect at all. What we do have in here is something mentally, emotionally and physically corrosively debilitating, which none of us convicted felons would ever wish upon anyone else to ever experience.

As “phantom souls,” we are trapped in a purgatory state of existence with Hell’s fire already burning our feet. I’ve been locked in this purgatory state for over a decade, and I still have not gotten used to this burning sensation that never ceases, not even in my sleep! Animals in animal shelters, in a horrid way, are blessed. Because after seven days, if no one wants them, then they are morbidly euthanized. An inhumane, bittersweet luxury of a quick escape from this protracted nightmare we unfortunately cannot receive. For we “phantom souls” must endure the pain of life without parole sentences, with no rehabilitation or educational reform available, just left to rot inside supermax prisons.

Everyone eventually leaves your side—friends, siblings, parents, relatives, your spouse and, lastly, your own children leave you to stand utterly alone. Everyone scatters away from our lives like cockroaches scatter when the lights turn on. No more visits, no more collect calls accepted, no more photos, no more letters and no more outside financial assistance to purchase the bare necessities that are hard to come by in here. No more—nothing! That’s it! You are officially cut off from the very essential things that were giving your “phantom soul” the slightest hope by having to endure Hell itself, just to try to get back to its body, back to life and back to love.

This is when mental illness, violence, murder and the suicide rate in correctional facilities and their draconian supermax prisons drastically increases. Because a “phantom soul” with no help, no education, no vocational training and no proper rehabilitation, for the vast majority, with nothing to lose and no hope for the future, is better off dead. Actually, that is what a “phantom soul” truly is. For we are dead men walking. It’s a bone-chilling feeling to realize that.

Now, as a “phantom soul” loses itself completely, it then attaches itself to the prison atmosphere: its lifestyle, culture and methods of mere survival, like a leech to your inviting flesh, thirsty for your blood. It is nothing nice or positive at all! For we do not live in here, we must strive daily to survive in a cold isolated world full of pain, loneliness, anger, confusion and hate. It’s a menagerie where big dog eats little dog. Kill or be killed. Human snakes of all shapes and sizes roam this place with two faces, menacing glares and evil agendas, having to resort to convict criminal ingenuity to get by and survive. “Phantom souls” must condition themselves to be alert and ready at any moment for the instant danger reveals itself and chaos erupts.

For many, pride is sealed by tattoos. For others they are shields, for they shield many from exposing their true selves. Respect, acceptance, loyalty, acknowledgement, reputation, honor and authority are earned by the degree of corrupt mercilessness and violent deeds of ruthlessness against any other prisoner who violates convict code of ethics and by-laws: violence against rival gangs, racial enemies and against the guards. We cannot forget the guards. For they are the most ruthless, deceitful, dangerous, conniving, lying and cheating gang in the prison. For seven times out of ten, if a prisoner is assaulted, marked for death, unjustly persecuted, punished or even killed, a guard one way or another had his hand in the treachery. Sad but true.

Hate is the only way that emotion is expressed inside of this concrete bed of barbed wire, thorny roses that we reside in. Unfortunately, in prison life, jealousy, envy, deceit, gossiping and plotting against others without anything else to do, look forward to or lose is what many fall into. All other positive extracurricular activities are cut, only available to select few or are non-existent. The vast majority display acts of treachery and hate against one another, burning with boredom and lack of mental, emotional and physical stimulations that are positive and

productive, all wanting what the next person is or has. As I've said, we are "phantom souls," so we are never satisfied with who we are or what we have. Yet people out in society wonder why prisons become so rampant with gangs, violence, drug abuse, racism, hate and the mass deterioration of once good-natured souls.

Men die in here both physically and mentally, and it's worse than any war or natural disaster because this is all planned. Oh, you think that it is the prisoners who do the planning? They are a problem, but it is the government and its reckless prison administrations and faulty judicial systems that do the planning to provide laws, sentences, stipulations, restrictions and budget cuts of prison rehabilitation, education, therapy, job training and recidivism prevention programs. It is hard for us not to fall prone to its negative backlash; in that way, we become prisoners cast off into this environment. I didn't make these laws, and I didn't create these fetid institutions and their mind-altering supermax prisons with no other purpose but to punish physically, torture us and break us mentally, emotionally and physically, creating the animals many of us unfortunately become. The government did this and planned this horrendous thing that is the greatest unknown atrocity in America, for all men are neither created nor treated equally. Like I said, we are "phantom souls," and we are unknown. For a "phantom soul" is nothing but an institutionalized, lost sense of hope.

Every day when the guard comes by the cells to pass out mail, there are so many "phantom souls" literally trying to maintain their composure from the overwhelming anxiety and desperate hope of possibly receiving a letter. From whom? It doesn't really matter, just a letter from someone telling you "that you are thought of and exist to the outside world." In most cases, the letters do not come and the sadness creeps in, but it's quickly deterred by anger and aloofness. A couple of curse words, reassuring comments and thoughts to tell yourself, "I don't

care if I get mail or not”. Well, it is a lie and if any “phantom soul” claims such, then he is a damned liar! But hey, everyone lies to someone, so why not lie to yourself, right?

If you do receive a letter, an answered collect call, or even a visit, for a brief moment of time one is not a “phantom soul.” He is once again a parent, sibling, someone’s child, spouse or a friend. He is a person, he is a human being; plain and simple, he is alive again. Oh, and it’s a Beautiful thing. You can literally feel the next man exhale a breath of relief and then inhale in a breath of hope to try to last until the next letter, visit or answered collect call comes again.

Do we “phantom souls” ever cry? Well...this is actually a touchy and controversial subject because, in essence, we are not supposed to, but my personal opinion as a hardened “phantom soul” is that, yes, everyone does, somehow, some way.

Especially for us “phantom souls” in here who experience hurt, anger, confusion, loneliness and stress daily, we tend to hide it best. Sort of like an M&M candy: a hard shell on the outside but soft on the inside. Through one’s artwork, poetry or creative writing, tears are shed symbolically or secretly crying and muffling your sobs and hiding your tears into your pillow so that no one else is able to see or hear. I guess some of us even cry in our sleep. I can honestly say that I did once that I am aware of. One night, I awoke to find hot tears running down my face. I felt a deep, aching sense of sorrow and hurt. What was I crying about? I don’t even know, which astounds me.

There are those of us trying to do something for ourselves and rehabilitate back into our enriched flesh and bones. Well, just imagine the civil rights movement between blacks and whites, the United Farmworkers union striking against the greedy grape grower industry and immigrants trying to get a fair shake on the new biased and even bigoted immigration reform policies and laws. Intensify that a trillion times over and over: The government and its reckless prison

administrations feel justified in how they treat and deprive our “phantom souls” from a transition back to life through any rehabilitation reform with light at the other end of the dark tunnel. For it is no secret that the government and its reckless prison administrations have literally cut back or cut off the means for prisoner reform through rehabilitation, education and vocational and job training. This is true especially for prisoners with lengthy sentences or who are sentenced to life without parole and have great influence over many younger prisoners and those with shorter sentences. Yet America gives away billions of dollars to supposedly help and aid Pakistan for whatever reason and has the audacity to question and look down its nose at countries like China over human rights violations.

Meanwhile, America cannot or chooses not to fix its own.

It is a struggle in every way, so we continue to remain “phantom souls”: lost, wandering, ghost-like souls between Hell and a hard place, in a purgatory state and soulless cells. Think about it, have you ever seen someone’s eyes that reflect nothing? It is heart-wrenching, and people say, “Oh, they deserve it for what they’ve done.” I feel sorry for those people because their souls are more lost than ours. Compassion and understanding are gifts that are attained, and the sad thing is that few people ever attain those gifts. As “phantom souls,” we have no voice to the outside world, but there are minds of great intelligence in here that could put an end to all issues that are deteriorating our Beautiful world. Many discussions in here of art, politics, religion, history, war, philosophy, economics, literature, hobbies and music are so baffling, people wouldn’t be able to fathom what we know, are truly capable of and are trying to express. Just imagine what we could accomplish with the proper rehabilitative and educational reform provided to all of us while incarcerated at all levels.

This is why people out in the free society are so astounded and even sickened by the fact that the prison system continues to corrupt and not help many young and

first-time offenders who become repeat offenders and progress further into crime. Prisoners with long-term sentences and life without parole who are not being rehabilitated and positively stimulated become part of the virus that helps spread the disease to other prisoners entering and leaving prison. For as “phantom souls,” we become institutionalized through this deterioration and negative unreformed recidivism disease eating us alive!

We “phantom souls” experience a real travesty of loss, despair, anger, sadness, confusion and loneliness. What we feel is so intense, it can be described as that feeling in the movie Titanic when Leonardo Di Caprio drifts off into his icy tomb of death from making sure his true love Kate Winslet would be safe, or that first initial thought and feeling after the attacks on 9/11, and that feeling of anger and despair over the flooding of Hurricane Katrina and the errors made in the aftermath in New Orleans. Think about the first few seconds of each of those feelings. That is what we feel in our hearts, and our hearts pump blood, which means we still bleed and we still breathe.

This is not a “poor me” story, for I deserve to be punished for my crimes that I take full responsibility for, but I also need help to be better for myself, the prison I survive in and for society who pays taxes to the government to help and fix our society and those things to make it better and more productive and prosperous.

This is something felt by everyone. Most, if not all, convicts will not admit it, but there is no fault in that. Because, in a crazy way, if we do admit it to ourselves that we are alive, then it all rushes in and the emotions are too much to bear. Prison is not always the answer for everything. Punishment with no reform and no proper educational rehabilitation is not the answer. Life without parole with hopelessness and nothing to lose or gain is not the answer. Long-term solitary confinement in draconian supermax prisons is not the answer.

Rehabilitation, love, education, understanding, hope and change are the answer.

But how can it be properly applied so that it is not taken advantage of? I don't know, but I sure hope that someone can find a way or a solid solution to this problem before this "phantom soul" completely fades away.