

**In Sight** Perspective

# A photographer and a prisoner ruminate on life's limitations in 'The Parameters of Our Cage'

By [Kenneth Dickerman](#)

Some time ago, I was presented a book that the publisher Mack thought might be of interest to me and our readers here at In Sight. It is a slim volume with few photos. At first, I thought, "No, it's not for us." But as the weeks have passed, and after cracking open the book and starting to read it, I haven't been able to shake it. The events of the past week brought it roaring back to mind. So here we are now. I'm writing about it and sharing it with you.

The book in question is titled, "[The Parameters of Our Cage](#)." It's a compilation of correspondence between the acclaimed photographer Alec Soth and Chris Fausto Cabrera, an inmate at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Rush City.

In January 2020, Cabrera reached out to Soth on a whim, seeking to start a dialogue about art. Soth responded and the rest, as they say, is history. Throughout the book's 100-plus pages, we are invited to listen in as Soth and Cabrera talk about everything from the function of photography and art to national social issues, including the [coronavirus](#) and justice as it relates to the protests sparked over the summer after the death of [George Floyd](#).

The title of the book comes from an exchange early on when Cabrera tells Soth that he is only able to keep a few possessions with him in the Rush City prison. He tells Soth that he is only allowed to keep two bins' worth of items:

"So the worst part about my 2-bin restriction at Rush City is that my choices are even limited to an allowable property list. It all boils down to limits, huh? Whether enforced by nature — biological or social, tangible or abstract, we all confront the parameters of our cage eventually. What we do when we reach those bars helps define us, huh."

This becomes one of the major themes of the book and of their correspondence. Faced with the "parameters of our cage," how do we go forward? The limitations Cabrera talks about are very real and concrete, but they also serve as a reminder to us that we are all confronted by certain limitations that affect how we approach life.

There are many ways limitations manifest themselves in our lives. As I said, the past week brought that into sharp relief. It reminded me of this book and of the limitations that are thrust onto us, whether we ask for them or not.

I have been having trouble breathing for a couple of years and, having recently switched health insurance plans, decided to go to the doctor to see if it could be resolved. I made an appointment. After a few preliminary tests, my doctor looked at me and very firmly suggested that he call an ambulance to take me to the emergency room to have my breathing checked out.

I won't go into detail about what happened other than to say, that day, and the days afterward, made it clear that I would be faced with the parameters of my cage. To put it simply, I found out that I had blood clots in my lungs, which were causing my shortness of breath.

I went through a battery of tests in two hospitals to help determine a course of action. Of course, during the coronavirus pandemic, nobody can visit. So in addition to the tests, I had ample time to think. Given the circumstances, I mostly thought: "How will I respond? What shall I do with the limitations now imposed on me?"

It was during this time that Soth and Cabrera's exchanges in "The Parameters of Our Cage" came rushing back. The profundity of the book hit me like a ton of bricks. At its simplest, it is a book about learning to live with the limitations that life puts on us, whether that is confronting the reasons one's body is failing them (my case) or figuring out how to claw one's way out of the morass of consequences that come from the actions that put you in prison (Cabrera's case).

I don't mean to be reductive or coy about the book. There's a lot contained in it. Too much, really, for me to comment here.

One of the themes that pops up and made a real impression on me is empathy. A little more than halfway through the book, Cabrera tells Soth:

"I think it all boils down to the simplicity of communication. We don't know how to give or take criticisms and we get so offended when people disagree, which results in polarization. There is a lack of empathy in all of us. My pain and hardships don't entitle me to anything, but I hope to at least be heard. We are entering a time of greatness — where we can examine our cages and confront that our parameters can be limitless when we connect with others."

No matter what challenges we face, no matter what the parameters of our cage are, we all need empathy. We all need to be heard. That's really what journalism, and art, and storytelling, does for all of us. It makes us feel heard, it presents us to the world asking for empathy. As goofy as it might seem, for some of us, that's all we're looking for. I suppose it's still up to us to figure out how to live according to the parameters of our

cage. For me, for you and for all of us.

One of my biggest takeaways from the book and being stuck in the hospital — while being punctured repeatedly like a pincushion — is to approach life and others with empathy and curiosity.

Empathy and curiosity — I've always believed those two things to be core to what we do as journalists. The work that always brings me to my knees, so to speak, is work that I find some connection to, that tells me not only about other people but also about myself.

Maybe that's one thing we are missing too much of these days: a sense of connection and a capacity to empathize with one another. Too much "us vs. them," when in fact it's mostly about us, strike the them. I hurt, you hurt; I laugh, you laugh; I cry, you cry; I triumph, you triumph. To use an overblown cliché, we're all in this together. Whether we attack life with empathy is up to each of us. Repeat reminders are not just helpful and welcome, they are necessary.

You can see previous posts about Soth's work [here](#) and [here](#). And you can buy "The Parameters of Our Cage" [here](#).

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