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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by Voices from Solitary | July 1, 2020

Incarcerated writer James Keownhas been composing a series, Postcards From a Prison Pandemic, about the coronaviruss impact on the medium-security MCI-Norfolk in Massachusetts, where he has spent the past two decades. Here we include excerpts from three of his posts. First, writing in April, he compared bracing for the impact of coronavirus to watching an approaching tsunami. Later that month, he wrote of life in lockdown and the unacknowledged essential workers risking their lives behind bars. Finally, in mid-May, he described his first eerie, tentative return to a mostly deserted recreation yard, and living life in a never-ending present.

The lockdown conditions Keown describes are being felt by people in facilities around the country. Many prisons have responded to the coronavirus pandemic by instituting facility-wide lockdowns, leading to a 500 percent increase in the use of solitary confinement. In Massachusetts, aCOVID-relatedlockdown only compounded the Departmentof Corrections longstanding resistance to implementing solitary confinement reforms mandated by law.The use of isolation appears to have done nothing to preventmajor outbreaksof the virus in some state prisons.Katie Rose Quandt

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Part I: Imagine

Imagine yourself standing on a crowded beach. You look out to the horizon and see a massive tsunami wave lifting high into the sky as it rushes toward you with the speed of a bullet train.

Pressed in between the throngs of other bodies on the beach, you turn to run. As you lift your knee to begin your panicked sprint, you feel the painful yank of a heavy chain. You are locked to the beach. You frantically tug and pull at the chain. As you do so, you realize all the other densely packed people filling the beach are trapped the same as you. You scream and yell, but your voice is lost in the cacophony of cries rising from the beach. You turn your head to check the waves progress. It has climbed far above the horizon and now looks like a watery bulldozer blade plowing closer and closer. You return to frantically pulling the chain latched to your ankle. A shadow climbs over you as the wave eclipses the sun. You turn back toward the violent wave, as does everyone else on the beach. Shrieks fade to pure silence. You close your eyes and wait for the inevitable.

This is what it feels like to be in prison during the Coronavirus.

More than 2.2 million women and men are trapped on the beach that is the American criminal punishment system. Prisoners like me are in a position where all we can do is wait for the wave to hit us.

When I look out my window, I see staff walking back and forth bringing food, medication, and supplies. Some are wearing protective gear, others are not. They are one part of the viral tsunami. When the virus comes in, it will come in through them.

The other part of the wave is the structure of the prison itself. We are strategically packed into units, housing blocks, and facilities like products inside an Amazon warehouse. For example, where I am, there are men stuck in two-man cells the size of a parking space. There are other men in four-man cells not much larger. In other prisons there are six-man cells and dormitories filled with bunks that hold hundreds. When the virus hits these places, it will hit hard.

Politicians and judges cannot think of another way to handle incarcerated people because we have spent more than a century failing to use imagination to make improvements to the criminal punishment system. The United States long ago settled on the idea of warehousing people, and the nation has rarely tried to move past the concept toward a better model.

The reality of American prisons in a post-Coronavirus world is that they are no longer a realistic solution. Once we all accept this fact, the quicker we can begin to imagine something else. We need to start that work right now. The virus wont wait, so we cannot wait.

Many of us in prison are not a threat to society. That is not my opinion. That is the studied determination of the Department of Correction. If nothing changes, I and many others will continue to wake up each day to find that we are still trapped on the beach; still

locked in place. We will spend our days scanning the tumultuous and unpredictable horizon wondering if today will be the day the tsunami crashes into us.

Part II: Life on Lockdown, and the Essential Employees You Never Hear About

Lockdowns are uncommon in the Commonwealths prisons, even more so in medium security. Over the past twenty years at MCI-Norfolk, where I am housed, there have only been two lockdowns that lasted longer than a day. So it is fair to say that the current lock down is unprecedented.

A typical lockdown is triggered by a security event related to the prison. During a lockdown, prisoners are confined to their cells and only allowed out for limited purposes, such as to shower or to use the telephone. When the coronavirus began infecting prisoners and staff members at various prisons, the only thing the DOC could think to use to prevent the spread of the virus was a security lockdown.

The DOC, however, is learning a lesson that many on the outside have learned over the past month. The essential employees in a crisis like this are sometimes the people we think least about.

On the outside, essential employees include hospital janitors, grocery store employees, and people like my mother. She works as a baker in a middle school cafeteria. Even though she is 79 years old, she has gone into work every day since her school closed to help prepare and distribute hundreds of meals each day for kids who might otherwise go hungry.

In here, the essential employees include scores of prisoners. That point was made clear only nine hours into the two-week lockdown when I caught my first glimpse of an essential worker wearing a gray uniform with DOC printed across the back. The uniform of a prisoner. The next day, I noticed two more prisoners out helping sanitize the facility. The following day, I watched a number of prisoners return to their jobs in prison industries where they are producing hand sanitizer, soap, cleaning chemicals, and face masks for use throughout Massachusetts. As the week progressed, more and more essential employees were called to report to work. Laundry workers cleaned clothes while supply workers delivered cleaning chemicals to each unit.

The essential employees inside prisons are also like many of the essential employees on the outside. They are underpaid, with many prison workers earning less than $10.00 per week. They also have little job security, especially given that they can be removed from their work assignment for any reason or no reason at all. And most prisoner workers have no access to protective gear. While DOC staff have been issued masks and gloves, such protection has not been offered to most of the essential employees that have kept this prison running during the lockdown.

We are essential, but we are not equal.

I wanted to take a moment to salute my friends and neighbors inside the walls who are risking their own health and safety each day to make sure my laundry is clean and my unit is disinfected. I also thank those who I see going to industries each day who are helping people far beyond the walls that imprison us and who will never publicly be credited for their contribution.

The coronavirus crisis will one day pass. When it does, we must not forget all those people in society who are essential, whether they live in the free world or inside a prison. And, we must do all we can to make them equal.

Part III: Blue Sky

The sky was the first thing I noticed. A fresh powder blue sky dotted with cottony wisps of clouds that reminded me of a plush blanket I once had when I was as a child. I craned my neck to watch a star-shaped purple balloon float high overhead. Other than the occasional gull or pigeon, the balloon was the skys only occupant. The planes that normally lined up for their final approaches into Logan Airport were all gone. Like Noah emerging from the Ark, after forty days and forty nights, I returned to the world outside my prison cell.

Access to the yard for two hours twice a week is phase one of the Department of Corrections plan to return to a new normal. Four hours of recreation each week is the only change the DOC has made to our lockdown status since early April.

Outside, I sat on a decrepit wooden bench along the first base line of the yards softball diamond. Typically, on a morning like that, men would be raking the infield and enjoying batting practice. Others would be jogging around the track that loops from the outfield around the backstop. The ricochet pinging of handballs would fill the air as teams competed on the two cement courts. Sounds of weights clanging would echo out of the gyms garage door to mix with the sounds of card games, laughing, and the occasional argument over the result of last nights game.

Instead, the yard was filled with little more than eerie quiet. The chatter of men muted behind surgical masks was easily drowned out by the songs of birds resting in the trees beyond the prisons wall. The hush and sense of open space was unnerving. Twenty-five bodies moved through a space used to hosting so many more.

The DOCs decision to allow only one housing unit at a time to access the yard was designed to promote social distancing. It strangely had a different effect as men clustered together in groups. After being apart from other people for more than a month, our human nature that nature the virus exploited so well drew us together in the yard. It was as if we had each wandered through a desert only to come upon an oasis at the same time. News from inside and outside the wall was exchanged. Condolences over lost loved ones were shared. And theories about what might come next were traded.

As the sun colored my pale skin, I couldnt help but to reflect on how we were people living outside of time. Time must be measured three ways: past, present, and future. We, however, were people, each with a past, who were forced to live in a never ending present.

Our condition and location had always forced us to experience the future like a shadowy dream. Our hopes and desires have long been corralled by bureaucrats and policies. Only rarely could I even allow myself the luxury to dream beyond my condition and location to dream of family, to dream of friends, to dream of love. Now with the coronavirus, my dreams are more hazy. I have all the time in the

world to dream, but I often find it hard to allow my heart to feel beyond the present.

Tomorrow will arrive. What that tomorrow is like is more a mystery than ever. I know the future I want. I fear the future bureaucrats and policies may create. After forty days and forty nights, I wonder what this new world will reveal. I wonder what dreams may come.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by Voices from Solitary

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