



Corona State of Mind  
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The virus is spreading. Thousands of confirmed cases. Cemeteries are being overwhelmed. Italy. Spain. China. Iran. New York. Miami. All on lockdown. Just like us. Anxieties about the outside world - especially my elderly parents - visit me at least once a day. The rest of my time is divided in adapting to the changes in my own life (washing my hands for twenty seconds 10-15 times a day, greeting people with elbow-bumps, holding my breath as I walk by prison staff) and agonizing about what is going to happen if someone gets infected on this compound.

There are no testing sites here. Institutional staff are not checked for a fever or questioned about flu-like symptoms when reporting to work. I've asked them. Yet, despite expert recommendations and municipal orders, they gather in groups of twos, fives, even tens to gossip and socialize to my dismay. Staff cannot realize we will not know they have infected residents until it is too late. In this setting, the virus will spread like - well, a virus.

Our medical facilities are not prepared to handle the magnitude of what I see on television very day. You might think that they will have to send us to an outside hospital, but consider the logistics. Every prisoner that goes to outside medical must be escorted by two correctional officers at all times. The institution's available staff will be quickly depleted after seven or eight residents need medical attention. Then what will they do? When men get sick here it will be too late.

But, I worry about how this will affect me. Is that a little bit selfish? While society is concerned with having a job to return to when this is over, I am thinking about when volunteers will be allowed to return to the institution so I can continue my classes. People outside want to return to beaches and restaurants and movies theaters; I just want to lift the suspension of our gavel club. The one we self imposed because we felt the administration was not being proactive enough.

Three days ago two county correctional officers tested positive for covid-19. The same day, our administration shut down all programs: chapel, education and library. They began to feed us quad by quad, forcing us to sit two to a table. Why? These men live in the same quad. They use the same phones, the same drinking fountain, the same showers.

I think segregating us by quad for all movement is an excellent idea. However, the effort



is defeated when security gives residents the choice to either return to the dorm or go to the recreation yard until the compound has been fed. They enforce social distancing on men living together and then invite them to go to the recreation yard with the rest of the compound. They either don't take it seriously, don't care, or don't get it. And this frightens me. These are the people in charge of my safety.

The irony is that there are activities I would continue to participate in given the chance even considering the risks. I decry the Department of Corrections' reactive nature while bemoaning the activities I have lost. It has only been three days and I miss my friends, my brothers. I cannot call them on the phone or write them an email like the public can just to check up in them. I miss the myriad activities we participated in together. God only knows when I will be able to see them and have an intelligent conversation about writing again.

The truth is that the activities I filled my schedule with had been carefully balanced to include personal growth, community involvement, and recreation: classes, clubs, executive committee meetings, newsletter creation, speaking engagements, writers' groups, workshops, even planning and practicing for a licensed TEDx event that has now been canceled.

Finding purpose while serving a natural life sentence has been difficult. These activities gave me purpose. Being involved kept me positive and helped me maintain my sanity and subsequent sobriety. And the thought of a drawn out quarantine frankly makes my blood pressure rise and brings tears to my eyes, even as I type this essay. This whole pandemic scares me. I fear for my family. I fear for my friends. And I fear for my state of mind when this is finally over.

In the meantime, I continue to hold my breath when I am forced to walk by a gaggle of officers. I wash my hands and sing the ABC's until I finish (it's a 20 second song). I read books and trade them off in the quad for another one. I watch and listen to the news and I worry. And at the end of the day, I write. Because writing allows me to regurgitate my anxieties on a blank page, thus helping me manage my fears. At least until the next newscast which will feed this ever-present corona state of mind.