
Postcards From A Prison Pandemic
May 14, 2020

Blue Sky
By James Keown: MCI-Norfolk

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 sky's 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 Correction's 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 yard's 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 gym's garage door to mix with the sounds of card games, laughing, and the occasional argument over the result of last night's game. All of these things would be present on a typical morning in Norfolk's prison yard. But none of these things exist now.

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 prison's wall. The hushness and sense of open space was unnerving. Twenty-five bodies moved through a space use to hosting so many more.

The DOC's 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. One at the benches along the third base line. Another by the pull-up bars. And another on the bleachers. Here and there were standouts, like the one man standing in the middle of the basketball court listening to his radio, another shuffling slowly around the track.

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 couldn't 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 find it often so hard to allow my heart to feel beyond the present.

It is easy for me to think about the future. It is much more difficult for me to believe in the future. That is my curse right now. I can sit on a bench, stare up at a beautiful blue sky and imagine what might come, what should come, but have little faith in what will come. It is a curse that I know I share with many others.

That does not mean I stop dreaming -- that I stop trying to see my dreams clearer. It means that I must constantly remind myself that time does exist even when it feels as if it is gone forever. And if time exists, then there is a future. And, the less I try to populate that future with my dreams, the easier it is for bureaucrats and policies to fill it for me.

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.