

Postcards From a Prison Pandemic

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Moon Shot

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Donald G. McNeil, Jr., science writer for the New York Times, began ringing the alarm bells over a pending coronavirus crisis in America around the time when many Americans were arguing over which Super Bowl commercial had been the best and whether or not it had been appropriate for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to have ripped up President Trump's State of the Union address on live television. Oh, what a simpler time that was!

McNeil's reporting in the Times on the need for a nationwide lockdown and mass testing makes him seem today to be more a prescient oracle than a skilled reporter. But, McNeil is quick to note that while it may seem like he possesses a crystal ball, his predictive pandemic accuracy is thanks to solid journalism and good sources. When McNeil reports on the coronavirus pandemic, I and many others pay close attention.

On April 20, McNeil appeared on The New York Times podcast "The Daily," which is now aired on many public radio stations. During the interview, McNeil revealed something that I had not heard anyone else mention. It was a fact that rocked me back onto my heels. McNeil said that the fastest we have ever been able to produce a new vaccine is four years. Four years. I'll let you sit with that for a moment.

The good news is that many of the brightest minds in the world are working to solve the coronavirus puzzle in what they hope is record time. New treatments are being researched every day and a human trial of a possible vaccine is underway in the UK already. Still, McNeil's cold splash of reality must not be lost on us.

When I was preparing to go to trial many years ago, a man I was locked up with gave me a piece of good advice: "Hope for the best, but expect the worst." Hope is critical in times like these. It is important that we all

stock up on hope like it was a Costco-sized bundle of toilet paper. But, as I have learned many times in my life, hope is not a strategy.

During the fourth week of the Massachusetts Department of Correction's lockdown, I want to spend time exploring how the prison system must change to reflect the new reality COVID-19 has created. Just as I cannot hope for a miracle coronavirus cure, I also cannot hope for the DOC to cure its own ills. The department has a brutally poor record when it comes to positive change. Prisons today operate in much the same way they did a century ago. They represent one of the largest segments of American society that has been insulated from real innovation.

I believe strongly in the power of ingenuity to solve challenges. And, some of the biggest leaps in thinking occur because of necessity. The coronavirus is proving true many of the awful and inhumane things about prisons and jails that have long been argued. The question now is how do we fix it all? There is a real opportunity to create a social system designed to seek equitable justice, rather than the current system that delivers disproportional punishment. For those of us who work on prison and justice reform, this is our moon shot moment.

Throughout this week, I plan to look at a different piece of the system each day. It is not that I have all the answers. I do not. And, it is not that the areas I will explore are the only areas that need addressing. They are not. Still, I hope my contributions to this discussion will help lead to a comprehensive strategy to rethink how we work with people convicted of crimes.

General Jack Hammond runs Operation Home Base and led the successful effort to create the field hospital "Boston Hope." He noted that there was a principle he learned in the military that helped to guide his work in solving the countless logistics challenges he and others faced in building out Boston Hope: "Plan or be planned upon." I am tired of being planned upon. Therefore, with General Hammond's charge in mind, I am ready to help create a plan that will turn hope into reality.