Postcards From A Prison Pandemic
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Quality of Character

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Growing up, both of my parents instilled into me many of the lessons they learned during the tumultuous civil rights battles of the late 1960s. "Quality of character" was a term I heard my father say often. The words were those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who had hoped that one day his children would be judged on the quality of their character and not by the color of their skin. My parents converted Dr. King's hope into a charge for me. I was not to judge others by the color of their skin, nor their choice of religion, nor their sexual orientation, nor their financial status, nor any other stereotype or static element of life.

I was reminded of my parent's lesson on Dr. King's words when I heard Boston Police Commissioner William Gross speak to reporters while at a weekend crime scene in Boston. Clearly frustrated, Commissioner Gross lashed out at people like me. He said that he didn't care if people convicted of violent crimes contracted COVID-19. The callous line was one of the most bigoted public statements I have heard from a Boston official since the days of the violent racist-led fight against the city's integrated busing program.

For weeks now, since it became clear that COVID-19 is a virus that can easily decimate any congregate population, I have listened to politicians, judges, law enforcement officials, and others go on and on about how governments can help low-level nonviolent offenders, but not violent offenders. None of us who have been charged with a violent offense will ever be able to change the charges for which we were convicted. Ever. The fact is as static to my life as the color of my skin. The statements about violent offenses represent a form of stereotyping that we would not accept in most parts of our society, but that many are far too quick to accept when it involves prisoners.

There is no such thing as a stereotypical prisoner. Prisons are full of people of all different makeups. There are very few sociopaths and psychopaths in prison, although television police shows would have you believe differently. There are, by contrast, a lot of nuanced stories behind people convicted of violent crimes. These stories involve issues like race, poverty, education, addiction, and mental health. There are also scores of stories demonstrating how so many of these people through time, mentoring, education, and programming have overcome the challenges that contributed to their convictions.

Yet, Commissioner Gross believes that a now recovering alcoholic grandmother at MCI-Framingham, a now college educated youthful offender at MCI-Concord, and a now religiously converted former gang leader at MCI-Shirley should not only be exposed to the coronavirus in prison, but that there should be no sympathy given to any of them should they contract COVID-19 because they were convicted of violent offenses years ago. Commissioner Gross' comments are emblematic of the punishment-centric shallow thinking that fostered mass incarceration in the first place. It also echoes of earlier bigotries.

I grew up in the 1980s when people around the world worried about a different virus that disproportionately affected marginalized communities. It was not uncommon to hear people, even public officials, declare that people who contracted HIV got what they deserved because of their lifestyle choices. Such declarations ring to most people now as ignorant and vile. Yet, we continue to allow public officials to say similar things today, just with a new virus and a different marginalized community.

Dr. King while studying at Boston University surely dreamed that people of color would one day be strong public leaders in Boston city government. He may have even dreamed that a black man would rise to lead the city's police force What I doubt Dr. King ever imagined was that the city's first minority police commissioner would perpetuate ill-informed and untrue stereotypes, rather than evaluating people on the quality of their character.