

Postcards From A Prison Pandemic

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The Ride

By James Keown

Looking down from my metallic perch, I could see looks of intoxicated anticipation and glee on the faces of the crowd that had gathered below me. The smell of sawdust rising from the floor mixed with the aroma of Budweiser to create a unique honky tonk perfume that ringed my body. I gripped the rope in my right hand tight. The ill-fitting leather glove I wore was already filled with sweat. I asked myself that question that I have seemingly asked more than any other in my life. How did I get here? The answer, not surprisingly, was comprised of a bit too much drink and far too much ego.

I adjusted the borrowed cowboy hat atop my head with my left hand, gripped the rope in my right hand even tighter, and then nodded toward an operator inside a booth to my right. A moment later, the mechanical beast underneath me roared to life and began spinning and bucking. As yee-haws and cheers combined, I did my best to count down the eight second ride in my head. With three seconds remaining, I leaned left just as the mechanical bull heaved right.

Splayed out on the well dented and beer stained black landing mats that surrounded the victorious machine, I exhaled deeply any breath still in my lungs after hitting the floor. I climbed to my feet, threw my hands into the air in celebration, and thanked God that it was over.

Riding a mechanical bull may not be what most people think about when taking their first COVID-19 test, but I couldn't get the image out of my head. This morning after breakfast, I, along with the other men who I have been in lockdown with for almost two months, reported to the first floor of our housing unit to be tested for COVID-19.

The space that in past times had served as the unit chow hall had been converted into a mobile testing clinic. Three health care workers, donned head to toe in personal protective equipment, processed us through the procedure one at a time. When my name was called, I proceeded to a stainless steel dining table where I was asked to sit.

A polite voice emerged from behind a face shield, surgical mask, and N95 mask as I straddled the cold metal bench welded to the table. The health care worker introduced herself and explained how the test would proceed. She asked if I had any questions, and then directed me to tilt my head up. As a nasal swab entered my left nostril, my back pressed against the wall. The health care worker spun the swab at the back of my nose and lightly counted down from eight.

Hearing the countdown, my legs locked tight under the seat while my feet searched for spurs. My right hand reached out a little trying to wrap a nonexistent rope tighter in the hopes of drawing myself in closer to the metal steed below me. By the count of six, I couldn't tell if the feeling inside my nose was a tickle or a burn or both. By four, my left eye began watering uncontrollably. When I passed three, I momentarily celebrated that I had lasted longer than my bull ride. By two, I had to sneeze, but held it.

"There you go. All set. Good job."

I made it the eight seconds. I staggered to my feet. I held back the urge to throw my hands in the air in celebration. And, I thanked God that was over. I had successfully taken my first COVID-19 test. I doubt it will be my last.

The Massachusetts Department of Correction has been sending mobile testing teams around to each prison. They arrived on May 29th at MCI-Norfolk. The COVID-19 test is voluntary, but it seemed like most of the men in my housing unit agreed to be tested. The question we now face is the same faced by so many outside of prison. What next?

I have heard many staff and residents alike talk about today's testing like it were a magical gateway. Phrases like, "After the tests, things will open up more," or "After the tests, everything will go back to normal," have filled conversations for the past two weeks since testing was announced. That scares me.

Testing is a snapshot. It tells us who has COVID-19 today. The test is practically meaningless come tomorrow. But staff, who are eager to ditch their masks (some already do) and eliminate social distancing protocols seem poised to use today's testing as an excuse to conduct themselves in a manner that will guarantee that the coronavirus will not only get into Norfolk, but will ravage it as well.

Those of us who have lived under a lockdown order since early April want to come out from our units. We want to access the yard more. We want to return to school. We want to go back to our church, mosque, or synagogue. We want to participate again in programs.

We don't want to get sick. And we don't want to die.

I continue to hear staff members talk about life inside the walls in binary terms. It is either lockdown or back to how it was. I certainly hope the DOC has not squandered the past two months relying on those two options only. Like the rest of the world, we must find a way to live our lives in this new reality. Yes, a vaccine may come sooner rather than later. It also may not.

The time has come for the DOC to end its wait-and-see strategy. To do so, the department must plan for a reality that does not include a vaccine. We need an immediate prison strategy that protects rights, enhances health, and provides safety. The primary hurdle to overcoming this challenge is an illogical want for things to be the way they used to be.

Every prisoner I know also wishes things were the way they used to be. That is, the way they used to be before they came to prison. But we are each met with the reality of our circumstances when we are told to stand for count, when we are strip searched after returning from a hospital trip, and when we are told we can't have an extra blanket.

For Commissioner Carol Mici and everyone in the DOC, it is count time. It is time to stand up. If I refuse to stand for count, I will receive a disciplinary ticket. If Commissioner Mici and her staff refuses to stand up when it counts, people will die.

This ride with COVID-19 is far from over. I see the DOC beginning to drift back to their old plans and I see residents starting to talk about softball. We all need to wrap our collective hands around the rope and pull ourselves in tighter. We cannot, we must not ignore the reality that prisons are not safe places to house people, especially people who are not a threat to society. If we are not careful, this bronco that is the coronavirus will buck us hard. And in this ride, there are no soft landing mats below. If we get tossed, there may be no standing back up again.keown