

## COVID-19

A few months ago, the Coronavirus became the hot topic on news channels, yet somehow, safely tucked inside the one hundred and sixty-five year old prison that I've called home for 24 years, it still felt a world away.

Then, seemingly overnight, that same virus was spreading wildly inside the walls of the Oregon State Penitentiary. I'll never forget standing at my cell window, watching as strangers in full hazmat gear began escorting prisoners...peers, friends, co-workers, men that I've known for decades...off to quarantine (segregation). I'll never forget the look on their faces as they were walked away.

Fearing the unknown potential of the virus, this pandemic has turned incarcerated life completely upside down. Even though our punishment is often enough more than deserved, I believe that being separated from the people we love, exiled from the people that make up the mental construct of our entire existence, amounts to a small version of Hell. I've been here since the age of 17, and I'm at the lowest point, hope-wise, of my life. This pandemic has changed everything.

When it began to make its way through the prison I'm housed in, segregation was quickly designated as the official staging area for ill prisoners. It was news that none of us wanted to hear. Segregation is a dark, dreary place, and no one wants to go there. It's devoid of everything that we hold dear; coffee, books, photo albums, regular showers, personal hygiene items, our own underwear and socks, and most importantly, access to a telephone to simply hear that a loved one is still healthy. Segregation offers no measure of comfort, and no ability to hold tightly to the mantra that with time *these things too shall pass*. We don't know if they will.

As a result, many of my peers have become increasingly hesitant to ask for help when ill.

To date, over two hundred staff and prisoners have tested positive here, and each day brings the promise of more becoming ill. All normal operations have been suspended. It has been months since we've had haircuts. It has been months since we've felt the comfort of sitting with a loved one.

On the last day of May, I was approached by a corrections officer and instructed to climb the many levels of stairs leading up to the prison's chapel. I was told that the chaplain wanted to see me.

The thing that prisoners fear above everything else while serving time is being told to see the chaplain. It comes with the inherent understanding that the news will be bad.

I took a deep breath, and I put my hand on the wall to steady myself.

I was trying desperately to push away images that in a few short moments I would be told that I'd lost another family member. It didn't feel like I could handle such news.

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As I climbed the stairs, I couldn't help but run through a mental checklist of my loved ones. Everyone seemed healthy. Everything felt fine the last time I'd talked with my little brother, which was the night before.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I was out of breath. I stood there for a few seconds, trying to calm my nerves. I took several deep breaths, and then I turned the corner. The chaplain was standing there with a look of sadness in his eyes.

He told me that my little brother was dead.

Everything stopped in that moment.

A couple years ago my brother and I lost our mother, and when it happened it felt like the world had crumbled from beneath our feet. She was our rock. The only solace we found came from holding tightly to each other during that tough and tragic time.

Now my brother was gone too, and I've never felt so alone.

When I threw my mask in the garbage can shortly after seeing the chaplain, I knew that I wouldn't be putting another one on again. I also knew that it was the first sign that I was giving up.

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