

TO: The Michigan Humanities Collaboratory
ATTN: Carceral State Project (Conditions Team)

FROM: Jack S. Copeman

Re: Self-Initiated Initiative, The Coronavirus Experience

Please note that I am trying my best to present this information and running commentary in some kind of order with respect toward cohesion as events and ideas develop. However, my process maybe disorganized at times due to the chronic noise and distractions of prisoners (and dogs) outside of my door—being loud and stupid. So annoying! Moreover, that I am actually diagnosed schizo-affective, so any bizarre rants and digressions could be the product of my defective brain. (Also, so annoying!)

Sat.
4/4/20

If I Die in A Corrections Zone...
(Three)

The Governor. "Call the roller of big cigars..." is a great line from a poem by Wallace Stevens. It's about death. And after watching a couple of Gov. Whitmer's press briefings now, especially that virtual town hall (4/2/20) where she

Was specifically asked about the topic of prisoners and what she plans to do...? Looking rather surprised like it was some kind of "gotcha question" or something. While also considering her overall handling of the crisis. So far, well... I immediately felt the frosty fingers of The Emperor of Ice Cream glide across my back.

Confident, reassuring, proactive and charismatic — a Governor Cuomo she is not. Hell... she's not even as good as Insley and they had the virus TWO WEEKS before we did and they don't have half the problems that we do now! Our governor did nothing to get in front of this thing and so COVID-19 is currently running amok through the cities and filling up the hospitals. That's just poor leadership. And I'm not being political either — I'm a Democrat, for Pete's sake! I started off liking her. I even liked her when she was in the Senate. That's since changed.

Face masks. Over the past week, the wearing and usage of masks, any masks, from hospital grade to homemade has been a big issue around the country and on television. So big that even the MDOC has been promising to issue them within

their 30 prisons throughout the State. Being conscious of the need to protect my health, I have been sending medical letters to Health-Services for two-weeks requesting one. They never bothered to respond. I was just getting ready to write a grievance over this issue when I spied the unloading of boxes on Friday.

The very next day (04/04), the administration activated the siren after breakfast so that we were all forced to return to our cells. When they do this, it's known as "emergency count" (or mobilization of staff) and we are compelled to return immediately so they can perform a count round. This is also what is known as a "lock-down." Typically, when we hear the siren going off and they start barking orders at us "To take it in!" Everyone jams on down to the communal bathroom, forming a line to use one of the three toilets or one of the two urinals because we know these activations usually last 2-3 hours at a minimum. And sometimes they top-lock our doors so we cannot get out. So nobody wants to be in agony trying to hold themselves together for that long. Especially after you just drank half a pint of milk, a cup of juice and one or two mugs of coffee for breakfast. Then it's torturous and you may just have to pee in a bottle or something. That's prison.

Also typically, the housing unit officers like to use this time as an opportunity "to suggest" that we toss any excess quartermaster (issued clothing) out into the hall. They call this amnesty because no misconducts (tickets) will be issued. So it's a freebie to get rid of any extra clothing, bedding, cardboard—that's used to make shelves, fermenting orange juice (called "spud" which is a potato and so a misnomer, thus stupid.), and any dangerous contraband items: tattoo equipment, bleach, and most of all—weapons.

I started doing this "bit" (Sentence) in Jackson. Back-in-the-day, as they say, in the old-style cellblocks. So I have seen plenty of emergency counts where trashbags full of spud juice were being thrown off the tiers to explode onto base, popping the bags open to leak all over. Or the tossing of crude weapons, bars, pipes, and any kind of shank that you could think of. You can actually tell by hearing the peculiar clang of metal against a stone floor. Back then the cellblocks would literally rain trash down from as high as five-stories. Base plus four galleries. That was Jackson during a lockdown.

The activation of the siren on a Saturday morning is **HIGHLY** unusual though. Actually it ~~never~~ happens unless there's an attempted escape. And that's rare. So when it went off, we all knew what it was about. The MDOC finally received the masks they made at one of their MSI factories and they distributed them to us. These masks are made out of the same material they make pants with. Stitched together with a couple of elastic bands. We are required to wear them anytime we leave our rooms now, barring eating and showering.

The MDOC also announced the death of their first employee on 4/4/20 as well. A female staff member that worked in logistics somewhere around the department. Not in the prison proper.

Michigan Cases. On Sunday, there are now 15,000 plus positive or confirmed with 670 deaths. The Detroit and Flint areas are particular "hotspots" as reported on the news. With Genesee over a 1,000 and Saginaw County nearing 100, it won't be long now before the virus shows up in here as the greater majority of staff reside in these districts. Sooner or later it's coming. I'm just trying to brace myself and tamp down my anxiety. Don't think that it will be long now. What I believe that it will come

down to, as in all cases of survival, is the will (and of course ability) of the individual. Beginning with caution, the personal measures one takes to protect themselves. And when that fails, against this virus, it is each person's chemistry that determines how severe a case you will be. That's the bottom line. For the scientists do not know the how and why this illness effects people differently. They won't figure that out for? Who knows? Could be years.

Observations. A couple of things noticed. As I was just outside in front of the housing unit, standing on the edge of an empty basketball court covertly sipping coffee around my face mask, I suddenly took note of the latest behavioral change related to the times. Being the sudden interest toward physical fitness by inmates ^{who are} ~~that~~ normally sedentary; overweight, infirm and aged fellows are now into power-walking, jogging, pulling and pushing up the planet with a new found zeal. This has been going on for the past couple of weeks now. And yet, I have seen this before. It's the same with those I have known for years that can only manage to exercise their mouths by talking and eating. Until, that is, they get

Close to seeing the Parole Board.
Then they become fitness fanatics. Donning the de rigueur sweats, workout-gloves, water-bottle and towel of course. Now they're interested into going to the Big Yard or Small Yard when you typically don't see them out there at all. It's really comical to someone who that has made staying in shape a priority throughout the course of life. I imagine that's the same explanation for those receiving any kind of health scare, it's motivation to keep on keeping on. And I believe that's what happening now.

The other noteworthy moment came as I was watching Dr. Phil, the topic was on depression during isolation or social distancing in these times. It appears, understandably so, that there is a lot of fear and anxiety out there in the populace. People are calling psychologists to seek help for their symptoms of depression, loneliness, and other debilitations to the point of feeling suicidal. One woman on the Skype (or whatever) said that she hugs her dogs so much ^{that} they run from her and that she forgets to shower.

The professionals, for their part, urge people

to reach out and seek help. Offering tips and suggestions so that a person doesn't feel as helpless and anxiety-ridden. Reminding us that "Mental health is just as important as physical health."

While I sit on my bunk for the 4:00 p.m. count-round, thinking: Hey, this is just another routine day for me where absolutely nothing has changed. Nothing at all! I don't see the closed businesses, the empty streets and sidewalks, the signs and posters urging compliance with the stay-at-home order.

As prisoners have been isolated from the very beginning, it is only natural for us to think—Welcome to our world to the 70% of Americans having to practice pseudo-solitude. As their complaints of being cut-off and lacking social bonds while dealing with boredom is laughable to us. No, your separation isn't pure at all. No, your ^{months of} loneliness and depression is NOTHING to someone who has skated over decades behind bars. But that's what we get and deserve, isn't that right.

And there's that. There's always that. It's always there. The criminal conviction thing. It's the winning (ahem) trump hand that is designed to short-cut an argument everytime.

"Law-abiding citizens" justify their position
condemning U.S.

J-Pay. I shall include a copy of the latest MDOC update to share their information. As the overall figures in this state continue to climb, Michigan being third in the nation at 17,104 infected and 727 deaths, (4/7/20) with the number doubling roughly every three days. While the Department reports the deaths of two employees, the infection of 238 prisoners around nine different facilities, and announcing the recovery of 20 along with the death of one. The landscape appears rather bleak at the moment.

It is time to start using my brain as well as some more initiative by writing to my successor judge and seeing what kind of mercy he strains. This shall be my next project. Think to tackle it over the coming weekend.

Economics. Something else I've noticed over the past few weeks is the lack of any pat-down (or "shake-down") searches by the C.O.s. Not that they would ever tell us that they've been ordered or directed to stop—but they also know that we pick these things up sooner or later. My sources tell me that is why there is a surplus of

pilfered chowhall food flooding the unit. As the kitchen officers are not searching prison workers, well... the convicts are stealing whatever they can fit in their pockets or wrap around their bodies like drug mules. Making items such as onions, green peppers, cheese, meat, sugar packs, eggs available for purchase with store goods. An onion costs a \$1.00, which is either one soap and a soup ($.65 + .34 = \$$ close enough) or 3 Ramen soups, for instance. It's the underground economy that seems to be given a boost thanks to the pandemic. That's how perverse prison is. Sad but true.

Closing thought. In today's mail, I received notice from Veterans Affairs acknowledging receipt of my application for disabled veterans insurance. That's right, I'm hedging my bet and looking to purchase life insurance just in case I make the list. To believe that I won't be exposed to it while in this environment, while living with these careless fools? Hah! That would be extremely naive. If you look at the current update, nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of the prisons in this State now have active cases of COVID-19, so I'm trying to be prudent these days. That's all.

J. Copeman
4/18/20