

The entire world has been impacted by the recent Covid 19 pandemic in so many ways and, in light of the uncertainty that looms in the mornings of each new tomorrow, I am reminded of just how fragile life itself can be. We must be mindful of how vulnerable we are to dangers we are often oblivious to and take for granted (such as our health) when an extremely volatile and contagious virus literally changes the face of the world we live in. The Coronavirus is a serious matter and no one seems to have seen it coming as of a year ago. Who could have guessed that one batch of tainted bat soup in China could have affected every individual alive today, crippled the global economy, and changed the way we are able to safely interact with each other? I am personally in a state of institutional quarantine which has totally changed my daily routines and limited my ability to serve my sentence in the manner I had originally anticipated. I realize the urgency due to being in a crowded, susceptible environment and I know that I must do my part to stop this from spreading even in my extremely limited capacity to move about "freely". I honestly didn't have many privileges left to sacrifice before we were forced into our cells for an average of 23 hours a day, but I know I must comply with orders by practicing "social distancing" even on this side of an electrified razorwire fence that literally keeps me separated from society itself. As difficult and undesirable as this truly is, I still choose to be grateful for each today and I know that this is probably much harder for others out there in the "free world" to accept and adapt to. I guess the term "free world" isn't really accurate anymore since it sounds like everyone is now living under some form of modified house arrest for the time being. I can literally sense the intensity of the collective anxiety, confusion, apprehensiveness, doubt, fear, stress, depression, and frustration that our culture must now come to terms with until we defeat this overwhelming adversity. That being said, I can also feel something else - hope. I'm 100% positive that there are so many unsung heroes out there doing everything in their power to help others in their time of need. 6 months ago, few people realized how critical and essential certain occupational responsibilities truly are to the overall nature, health, and well being of our society. Doctors, nurses, EMTs, managers, cooks, grocery store workers, truck drivers, department store associates, factory workers, and convenience

store employees have generally been overlooked and not deemed as imperative as they really are and I just wish it didn't take disastrous situations like this one for them to be recognized for their diligence. Keep in mind that all of the "regular" needs are also still needed. For example, secretaries, lawyers, cops, fire fighters, maintenance workers, delivery drivers, post office workers, clerks, guards, animal caretakers, hospice workers, house cleaners, automotive service providers, and the services of so many others are still in demand despite the collapse of the economy. I do feel especially bad for food service workers, various entertainment positions, teachers, child care representatives, shop owners, hotel staff members, farmers, taxi drivers and many others who have been affected financially more than some others as a result of everyone needing to respect personal spaces and limit exposure via isolation from one another though. Fortunately, there are 2 things that Americans are traditionally known for that will eventually become even more prominent and obvious as we inevitably move towards recovery - "grit" and resiliency. Even from the confines of my 11' x 7' cell, I've noticed something different about the way people are treating each other - albeit from a physical distance away from each other.

Throughout the last decade in particular, there seems to have been a noticeable (yet not formally addressed) division between people. Initially, I saw this through a vast political divide as people were constantly bickering about biased preferences in relation to how our country should be operated and what should or shouldn't be deemed as acceptable. Sadly, I think we all forgot about the more important aspects of our nature such as mutual respect for differences of opinions and/or what many describe as an obligation to do for others in an outgoing manner while simultaneously strengthening our communities which promotes growth for everyone collectively. I find it to be ironically surreal that our benevolent qualities always seem to stand out more in the midst of united crisis, tragedy, or widespread hardship. This does not exactly sit well with me personally and I believe we have the ability to do better than this. More often than not, this eventually erodes into a question of "how" and I have a very spontaneous, equally applicable yet undefined, broad answer - I think we should individually humble ourselves and act in a spirit of genuine love for others to an

extent, we must learn to keep our egos balanced with an appreciation for diversity. The majority of us have more in common with each other than we do not so making mountains out of molehills is a preposterous character flaw that often becomes blown out of proportion and leads to hostility and hatred. I am reminded that intentions are everything and that there is 80% truth in a lie that the lie depends on in order to exist through a means of corruption. Empathy is difficult to infect others with because it must begin internally and this is only possible if we can prove that we care for each other despite our differences. I can't even begin to tell you how many friends I have in the world that don't see eye to eye with me in relation to various topics that are subject to personal perspective and interpretation. I never attempt to "force" them to conform to how I see things and, instead, I just tell them how I see things and explain why while ALSO taking their stances into consideration. In short, I may not always love what they say, think, or do but I still choose to love THEM no matter what. I am sure that I am occasionally seen as some sort of a "weak" and/or foolish person even in their eyes at times, but I counteract this with the epiphany that sometimes they're "right" and I'm "wrong". Balancing pride with humility is not always an easy feat, but it's personally what I know I must do in order to generate peace both intrinsically and externally. We all fall short of perfection but at least we all have this in common.

There are many people out there who probably feel scared, hopeless, and/or all alone. To them, I say you are important and you are no more alone than I am. Like it or not, we are in this together and the sea remains the same regardless of which ship we sail upon it in. My pain plus your pain equals OUR pain and I refuse to let it dictate, control, or limit my hope for the future. I was originally going to list all the things that I've "lost" as a direct result of being quarantined in the equivalence of a run down, dirty gas station bathroom with a bunkbed and a disgruntled roommate in it, but I feel much more satisfied and compelled to tell you what I've gained instead. I've learned to appreciate the value of the seemingly more trivial things such as working in a prison kitchen for 19¢ an hour, jogging circles around a yard with absolutely no abundant

amount of grass in it, having weekly access to books in a library, fellowship of others I've attended groups with in the past, the potential kindness of convicted men I've never met or said a word to in my entire life, how good memories can get me through bad days, and how to be mentally self-sufficient as I find new unconventional ways to constructively pass my time. Do I worry about my family members and friends out there who may contract and/or even succumb to this virus? - I can assure you that the answer is a resounding YES, I ABSOLUTELY DO. To make matters worse, I am locked in a box for 23 hours a day everyday for the immediately foreseeable future with this anxiety and I obviously don't have access to my cell phone and/or other social media outlets to check on them as often as I'd like to. I am also not very comfortable expressing these concerns to any of the few people around me who I CAN communicate with mainly because I know that they are likely experiencing the same thing to some degree and I don't know how receptive or reactive they might be to me sharing my pain with them. Instead, I choose to write about it because I feel a detectable amount of relief afterwards and I can use this to reflect back upon in the future as proof that it undeniably worked for some duration of elapsed time. I can not ignore the pain I must endure as I realize that I've missed another birthday with my daughter, I don't know when I'll be able to see any of my family again since visitations have been indefinitely suspended, I originally planned on returning back home by now, I'll probably/inevitably end up spending more time on this side of the fence as a result of delayed treatment program enrollments, and the fact that an executive order granting reprieve/release to non-violent inmates who are within 9 months of their minimum sentences with no impending negative parole board actions is somehow not likely to apply to me for reasons yet to be explained to me as my requests for such have been completely ignored. I'm doing my best to accept all this as I experience it while understanding that this pandemic affects everyone, the world does not revolve around me, and that things could STILL be much worse. I do have sympathy for everyone out there who will probably never develop this perspective and the people who lose loved ones and/or have extreme difficulty in providing

what they need for themselves and their families. As devastating and life changing as the impact of the Coronavirus is, it will not exterminate mankind and there is a tomorrow out there in the distance that will make the pain of every today we must endure worthwhile. Until then, we must accept and embrace the responsibilities that we are collectively expected to practice in order to get through every "today" one day at a time. Afterally, the only thing more detrimental and plausibly damaging to humanity than the Coronavirus itself is the bi-product of hopelessness that we must combat as veraciously as possible.

I will conclude this essay with some inspirational words I wrote many years ago with the intention of instilling a sense of hope for those who may need it now more than ever. It's called "Never Give Up" and I can only ask that you join me in doing precisely that. Thank You all for being who you are and for doing your part to defy despair, remain healthy, happy, and safe in these troublesome times of change.

NEVER GIVE UP

To get where you want to go,
You must know you can achieve;
So don't let any failures scare you,
Just suppress your regrets and then believe.
Your success will happen soon,
Through trial and error it can be found;
But don't bear out towards The Moon,
While you're staring at the ground.
Keep your eyes on the prize,
There's no score too high to beat.

You must ignore all of the lies,
And put all your doubts to sleep.
The days will start to pass,
From one to another and to the next;
The mistakes that we make,
Are part of what it takes to be our best.
So when you're down and out,
And you don't think you have enough,
Just take a second deeper breath,
And NEVER GIVE UP!

[RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED ON APRIL 16TH, 2020 BY 'MERLIN DUFREIN']