

THE CORONA CHRONICLE PART 2: MORE LIFE AND DEATH

by Tracy Lee Kendall

March 23, 2020: Normally, most prisoners move about in lines of 25. Today, the lines are reduced to 10 as a preventative measure against COVID-19. We are also seated in the chow hall with an empty row between each occupied row for social distancing. For similar reasons, only 40 prisoners are allowed into chapel services, with 6 feet between each seat. Meanwhile, guards are spraying chemicals in cells and cubicles.

March 24, 2020: Over 500 people in the U.S. have now died from COVID-19; and the people in care about most are all high-risk. Meanwhile on Lynaugh, dayroom time is regulated differently in the cellblocks, with half a wing allowed in their dayroom for an hour or so before returning to their cells to give the other half their time. This is another social distancing measure imposed by administration. I continue to educate people about COVID-19. Chapel activities, except for main services, are canceled.

March 25, 2020: New protocol--instead of empty rows in the chow hall, it is now filled with prisoners, but only from one living area at a time. This seems to be an attempt to contain potential outbreaks in a single area, rather than the entire unit.

March 27, 2020: Rumors circulate about citizens in Fort Stockton being told to stay indoors while helicopters spray something over the town. I reflect on the unusual chemical smell I've noticed outside on some mornings.

March 28, 2020: Rumors circulate about the warden offloading respiratory masks (for unit staff) from a van in the parking lot. I pass two gray sealpoint tomcats facing off as I travel around working.

March 29, 2020: On a mildly cloudy and windy day, the world is slowing down as more people begin to care.

March 31, 2020: I saw a lot of people while working today, but it doesn't seem like it lost in thought about people and turmoil in the freeworld.

April 1, 2020: New York receives 60 tons of medical supplies from Moscow after President Vladimir Putin sets the phone down after speaking with President Donald Trump. I look up at the sky and see a lot of contrails for conspiracy theorists to ponder about. Conspiracy theorists in here are occupied with rumors of lingering COVID-19 effects being hidden by the government.

April 2, 2020: Over 1,000,000 now have COVID-19 around the world on Lady Gaga's 34th birthday.



April 3, 2020: Of 1,000,000+ people with COVID-19 in the world, over 51,000 of them have died. Not surprisingly, a cold wind brings rumors of more COVID-19 cases in the TDCJ (on Jester III, Gatesville, and 2 other units).

A Sgt. tells me my dad is in critical condition, unresponsive, in a hospice in Wichita Falls, TX. I had no idea he is sick, but I suspect a life of smoking menthol cigarettes contributed. After making some calls on a phone in the dorm, I get the phone numbers and password I need. When I call, a hospice nurse informs me a little about the situation, including my mother's wish to speak with me, and puts the phone up to my dad's ear. I speak with my father for the first time in over 21 years, telling him I love him and that he did good. The only response is quiet breathing. While prepared for the eventuality, I am sad for my father, and confused about my mother--I had been led to believe she was angry about various things I did and never wished to speak to me again.

April 4, 2020: U.S. COVID-19 cases have surpassed 301,000, with over 5,100 deaths resulting thereof. In the chaplain's office, I speak with my mother (via speakerphone) for the first time in over 21 years (while I corresponded a little with my father, I had absolutely no communication with my mother). I tell her I love her and am glad she's not mad at me. Unfortunately, she doesn't know how to drive, use computers or cellphones, write checks, or any of a multitude of everyday tasks. Additionally, she's not sure how to access military and insurance benefits she needs to mitigate the transition she's experiencing; and she's days from running out of food in the midst of the pandemic. So I begin networking with a lot of really good people who are coming to her aid after my father's collapse.

April 5, 2020: Guards and other staff begin wearing respiratory masks. Rumors circulate about a mosquito-borne disease (called, "Triple D") in our area causing paralysis and/or death. An angel sends my mom corn, sweetpeas, and Starkist Chunk Light Tuna in Water.

April 6, 2020: A letter is sent informing me of my father's COPD and lung cancer.

April 7, 2020: A guard asks me about wearing a mask (currently, no prisoners on the Lynaugh Unit have been issued respiratory masks). On night shift, a Lt. understandably asks me not to move between buildings.

I reflect on the emails I've received from the people trying to help my mom. Among those mentioned therein is my aunt, who I have not communicated with in over 37 years, and she wishes to connect with me.

April 8, 2020: Received an email with a copy of an email from my aunt



to the sender that it seemed that my dad would pass, but his breathing improved so my mom left. Later, she came back and was with my dad when he passed peacefully.

April 9, 2020: I listen to recordings on NPR of people confined around the world due to COVID-19. One is a lady from Barcelona weeping for dying people. Over 16,000 are dead in the U.S. from COVID-19 now--799 of them in New York (the 3rd day of 700+ in a row). A lot less people in here are laughing about COVID-19 now.

I am allowed to call my mom concerning my dad's death. Like me, she was prepared for it. She wants to honor his wish to be cremated and buried, but is more focused in the call on what someone put in her head about me getting compassionate leave to take care of her due to my record. I try to help her realize I have a murder conviction and there is little to no chance of me getting leave or a pardon or anything. She's fearful of facing life alone, resists an uber account (suspicious drivers), and does not wish to relocate somewhere she would be taken care of better. I worry about her future.

April 10, 2020: At 08:30, we are forced to pack all of our property, drag it out to the rec yard, unpack it and wipe everything off with disinfectant, pack it back up, take it back to our housing, and unpack it--again. This makes little sense to me because the big picture was that we set all our property down on an unclean communal surface, exposing us to whatever any one of us may have.

The chaplain called me in concerning my father. She also informed me that the warden said that only the clerk and 2 non-employee volunteer prisoners could come to work. So now, myself, the other Field Minister, and 3 chapel/gym janitors are mostly confined to our living quarters.

Also, COVID-19 information included in what I have been passing out, posting, and educating people about since February 26, 2020 was posted by staff today. I look at it along with the emails of concerned people trying to help my mom as I vegetate on NPR's "Undercurrents."

April 11, 2020: The semi-desert surrounding the unit always looks new to me, like the COVID-19 numbers. Today, these numbers in the U.S. are around 504,000, with over 19,000 of them dead. Among the results are more frequent self-isolation advisories on the radio, with threats of future compliance mandates.

2 hours later: U.S. COVID-19 positives surpass 514,000.

4 hours later: Over 20,000 people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19.

I finally notice that Ector County has replaced Midland as having the



most COVID-19 cases in the Permian Basin.

April 12, 2020: Now, over 542,000 people in the U.S. are infected with COVID-19, 21,000+ dying. Friends in Virginia are out playing golf trying to live amidst worldwide death and respiratory masks at the grocery store. It's hard to tell it's Easter.

April 14, 2020: The COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. has topped 25,000-- around 11,000 of those in New York. A guard enters our dorm and issues a respiratory mask to a prisoner over 65 (this is occurring all over the unit). On the phone I discuss my mother's fears of the world and confusion over when my father will be cremated and buried. I learn from the listener that my mom is doing a little better. Nearly 1,000,000 loans were issued today--many of which I suspect will be defaulted upon during bankruptcies.

April 15, 2020: By 08:00, nearly 2,000,000 have tested positive for COVID-19 worldwide. 609,516 of them are in the U.S., 26,049 of whom are dead (around 15,000 in New York). At dinner, we pass through the chow hall to receive johnnies, but are not allowed to eat in the chow hall. There are rumors of a guard catching COVID-19 from a prisoner at N-5 (a unit closeby) and coming here. The nightly news seems a lot more positive, with reports that overall COVID-19 cases are falling. Another positive is the first email I received directly from my aunt. New things are coming.

This area has some of the clearest sky on Earth; and while the lights here block many out, I can see more stars than I ever have (other than the moments during a blackout) in over 21 years of incarceration. Stars tell me of people, so bright, with so much darkness between them. With our brightness, we have to help guide each other through the darkness. Otherwise, the darkness extinguishes us, and like a dimming star, an entire galaxy is lost.

The stars around us also measure our time, and these times bring uncertainty and fear. However, we can literally give each other more time, if we take care of ourselves and each other through this crisis. Assuring that is a matter of remembering what we truly need, which is not politics, pipedreams, and other nonessentials. If we feed each other and truly have the compassion to take the necessary steps toward mutual survival, personally and collectively, then our story beneath the stars will be one of continuing life, rather than final death.