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Recommended Citation

Kevin Dugar, Pandemic Thoughts While on Lock, 110 J. Crim. L. & Criminology Online 107 (2020).

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PANDEMIC THOUGHTS WHILE ON LOCK

KEVIN DUGAR*

After struggling with the hard reality of being wrongfully convicted and sentenced to what might as well be called a death sentence, COVID-19 emerged inside Stateville prison, where I reside, killing men faster than I've ever seen a sickness take a person out.

Imagine having no place to run or hide when you start seeing big, strong, healthy men drop like flies. The atmosphere was like a scene out of that *Walking Dead* series, only we couldn't see the virus jumping into the residents. "God, please don't let me get bit by this disease," I prayed silently, going into OCD overdrive. I was already experiencing a mental beating from being caged, but never in my wildest dreams could I imagine living through another pandemic. The first pandemic being racism with the entire criminal justice system. It's heavy inside the prisons as well, especially the prisons in southern Illinois. I spent at least seven years in Menard Correctional Center, one of the most racist prisons in Illinois.

I was already living inside of a cage stuck between two slabs of concrete with another man who was mentally unstable. He was unable to handle all of the time he had been given for his first crime, and to have some racist guards treat us like cattle was overwhelming.

For well over a decade, I thought my mental suffering was at an equilibrium, to the point where I could still focus and be creative. Then, out the blue, COVID-19 said: "Wake up or get infected." Saying COVID-19 was bad timing for me was an understatement—my last three years had already been chilling enough. I had been unfairly denied relief in my evidentiary hearing. I lost my father, my aunt, and my friend and lawyer, Karen Daniel, to an accident. She fought for my freedom in that very same hearing. Then after that, I lost my older cousin.

Mentally, I was exhausted, and I don't know if it was all of the death around me from the COVID-19 or me just feeling helpless, but I began to drift back in my mind to my third and fourth year in prison. Those were my

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most challenging days mentally, and I didn't have a grip on my mindset by a long shot. I guess I had to revisit those days to see how I could face the dark journey I had ahead of me. As I write this, 17 years after those hard years, I must say the mind is a blessing, and I now share with you some buried thoughts the coronavirus brought back from the dead.

Dark days of the unknown came upon me at times that made me want to curl up in ball in bed for days. Looking at bars with peeling paint chips falling off let me know these cells had outlasted many men. Pain would come upon me so heavy at times I came to where I was ready to give up on life and release the grip on the little hope that I had left.

I felt boxed in with little breathing room and in my mind the only person I knew could understand and comfort me was the creator, God.

And I wanted to physically be in his presence. Sounds crazy, huh? Yes, I agree. And I must admit, I was trippin' (losing my mind). How in the hell was I going to physically meet up with the creator? I don't know. Taking myself out, committing suicide? I didn't have the guts. However, I didn't care if someone else took me out, if that makes any sense.

The prison journey had been a rough one for me, and it felt like the State's Attorney's Office was literally trying to break my spirits and turn me into a savage after I refused to accept an 11-year plea deal they offered me before my trial in 2005. I am blessed the depression and dangerous thoughts didn't stick to my psyche, to where I had become a med patient like some of the younger guys entering the prison. There would be days when I would have thoughts about doing something stupid to make one of the hateful tower guards shoot me to end the pain. But flashes of my purpose on this earth would start blinking before my eyes, like an out of order red signal light, making my spirits rise again. I would experience these mental interruptions at least three to four times a year, and when I say I would be taken on an emotional roller coaster ride mentally, it's not to be taken lightly. And now coronavirus.

Now, in 2020, I feel as if I am on this rollercoaster again. Watching my friends and fellow Stateville residents continue to be affected by the pandemic of racism, and now coronavirus, threatens to bring me back to that place of pain and darkness. But out of that darkness, flashes of red light remind me of my purpose.