



Eileen Maher //

Dear America,

Greetings and Salutations to my fellow world citizens. I am Eileen, your local, or not-so-local, Individual-Who-Is-Formerly-Incarcerated and a Criminalized-Survivor-of-Domestic-Violence. I have always enjoyed writing, and while I was incarcerated I, like most others, spent a great deal of time writing letters, essays, and journals. I was in jail and prison as a result of a crime committed by an abusive ex-partner of mine. Because of poor legal representation, a bail that was on par with a kidnapper's ransom, and an Assistant District Attorney who was on a mission to carve as many notches as possible onto his conviction post, I pleaded out and accepted a sentence of two-to-six years in state prison. I served two years "on the inside" and one year on parole. I relish my freedom, and I thank God and everyone else for it every day. The attached photo is a picture that I took of the Coney Island Parachute Drop about ten days after my release from prison, early in the morning, before the amusements and restaurants open.

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Photograph by Eileen Maher

In fact, one of my favorite places in the world is Coney Island (CI) during the night and early morning, when everything is closed and locked away. The boardwalk is mostly deserted, and you can hear the ocean waves. I would always sneak out there when I needed to think and talk to myself. Sort out the world for myself. My late night/early morning visits to CI always leave me with a sense of serenity and clarity. So yes, I made it my business to take my inaugural trip out there once I was home and settled. I have made several trips since then as well, including during this pandemic and quarantine-in-place order. In fact, I loved my jaunt to the boardwalk even more during this time. I took one of my trips out there to reflect on a sentiment that has been circling the United States during this crisis—the sentiment that has likened this quarantine to incarceration. Many people have said, “This quarantine is just like jail, I feel like I am in prison!” Or referred to it as a “lockdown.” And it seems that those with the least amount of knowledge or experience with incarceration are the ones expressing these sentiments the loudest, and in a rather dramatic and desperate tone. Initially I just laughed; however, as time went on, and I began to hear it more and more, I became irritated and then angry with them for their (what I now call) “over-dramatization.” As a formerly incarcerated individual this struck a nerve with me. So, of course, I needed to reflect and sort it all out for myself. And off I went on a jaunt to Coney. To reflect and meditate on both the sentiments and my reaction towards them.

With that said, after much reflection, I have decided to write a letter to the world, so that I can address the general feeling of being incarcerated, on lockdown, and so that I can break it down for you and explain how wrong you are.

When I was “on the Island” (Rikers Island) fighting my case, I went back and forth to court in Manhattan via that tin-can-bus approximately eighteen to twenty times. As we would pull away

from the Manhattan/New York Supreme Court, I would stare out the window with a leaden heart—I was always mesmerized by people just walking down the street. Even in the snow and sleet, I would stare at them, with an actual physical ache in my heart. I was insanely jealous of them, just being able to walk down the street as a free person. Can you leave your home and walk down the street and just walk? Yes, you can. Does anyone come into your room at three am, or five am, and kick your bed demanding that you make some kind of movement? Moving or Live Count, one of the several times a day an incarcerated person is counted, as if they were items on a conveyor belt. Not human beings.

Speaking of humanity...did anyone tell you that you were not a real human today? That inmates are not real people anymore. We were told that daily, if not hourly: "You aren't real people, you are inmates." Less than human.

Can you eat, read, wear (or not wear) what you want? What would happen if you walked out of your home and into the street? Would someone shoot at you and tack another seven-plus years onto the quarantine? And let's leave the coronavirus out of this next question for a minute: can you hug a friend or loved one without fearing a reprimand or ticket?

If you are or were unhappy with a doctor or other medical provider, can you seek out and switch to a new one? Are you deathly allergic to something to the point of having to carry an EpiPen? Well if you are, be thankful you can. In prison the EpiPen may be held in the medical building on the other side of the compound. Who knows how long it will take the sub-par, slow-as-a-new-bottle-of-ketchup medical professional to get to you?

How many pillows are you allowed on your bed? Can you get up at two am and fix yourself a meal or dessert of your choice? The other day I woke up and made salmon shish kebobs at three am. Just because I could, and, oh, because I like to eat.

Do you spend the entire night worried about your family and friends? With no way to contact them, having to wait until a certain time when the phones are open again. Or can you shoot them a text or even call them (as much as it may annoy that person) at four am to check on her or him? Yes, you can.

Did you listen to music today? Were you at the mercy of local radio or a limited cassette collection? Or could you scroll through your playlists and blast it through the house? I prefer vinyl myself.

Did you have to get naked and cough and squat for anyone today just for the privilege of visiting with family or friends?

Do you have a fur, feather, or aquatic baby, aka a pet? Enough said.

Are you addressed by your first name or a Mr. or Ms. in front of your last name? Did you have to wait until Wednesday or Saturday to shave? Did you have to give your ID card over in order to use said razor? Ladies—were you worried that you would not have enough sanitary products to cover

your monthly flow? Or would you always pop out to CVS to pick up some more, or even have them delivered? One month I did not have enough, and DOCCS (Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) claimed there was a shortage. So, I had to make “reusable Kotex” out of old tee shirts that I tore up, not with a seam ripper or scissor, but with the top of an old tuna can.

Are these enough examples? If not, I have more.

While I know that being separated from friends and family members is difficult, heartbreaking at times, you still have the freedom to initiate some contact, even face to face, maybe through a patio window, at your leisure. Personally, I love the guy who went to see his wife at the wellness home in a cherry picker wearing a tuxedo on their wedding anniversary. I beg to differ on the fact that your quarantine is “My Attica” as I heard some hipsters phrase it. No. It is not. Not as long as I can eat what I want, walk where I want and when I want to. Not as long as I can watch, listen to, and read what I want, text or call who I want when I want to, and live free of fear that if I get stung by a wasp I won't die of anaphylactic shock while waiting for the EpiPen to arrive.

No one is telling me that I am not a real human being, or searching my belongings at will. I can lock and unlock my door at will and sanitize my home with bleach and get scented Mr. Clean to my heart's content. Not germicide and that pink deodorizer liquid snuck into a rinsed-out nasal spray. And I can take a one am jaunt out to Coney Island and think it all through on the Boardwalk.

I hope that I was able to clear some things up for you, world. I wish you all health, happiness and safety. I am off to drink a glass of wine and watch the new Beastie Boys docu on Apple TV while my cat walks in front of the TV 300 and my dog barks at those random plastic bags blowing down the street,

Ta Ta For Now!!

Eileen M. Maher (She/Her/Hers)

No longer 14G1138

**Author bio:** Eileen M. Maher (She/Her/Hers) is a Community Activist and Social Worker from Brooklyn. She is engaged in the fight against mass incarceration and to support Prisoners' Rights and criminal justice reform. She is also involved in the animal rescue world including ending dog racing and puppy mills.