

## **The Loss of Contact with Loved Ones during the Covid-19 pandemic**

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I sit in my 8 by 12 cell in C house at Stateville prison. In my hand I hold the phone, my lifeline to the outside world and the people I love. The phone, one of those old office models from the 80s with an incredibly long cord so it can stretch down the gallery from cell to cell is slick with the sweat from my hand. We are 2 weeks into the Covid-19 pandemic, there are no visits, not outsiders and we are quarantined. As I listen to the weak and raspy voice of my only sibling, Kim, she is the younger of the two of us, she explains to me that the doctors have told her there is nothing they can do with her stage 4 cancer. I stare at the drab gray bars, but I cannot see through the tears that are streaming down my face. I have cried more in the last 2 weeks since Kim revealed to me the presence of her deadly visitor than I have in the entire 30 years of my incarceration. Because of covid-19 Kim cannot come to see me before she dies. Likewise, we cannot even video visit because I am quarantined, and have not left my cell in 2 weeks. So, the telephone, emails and letters are my only modes of communion with my baby sister. I cannot hold her hand, look her in the eye as I tell her how much I love her and how dearly I will miss her.

My grief is a raging storm inside of me, but I am powerless. I can't put on my shoes, jump in my car and go sit by her death bed. So, once every day I call her for the 20 minutes intervals the prison allows me, and I email her incessantly though she is too weak and groggy to email me back. Kim's cancer is terminal, so they've given her a 'pain-management' system, a machine that injects doses of morphine into her body so the pain doesn't overwhelm her. I get the phone every day, but one day is morning phone calls, and the next is evening phone calls. As a result, sometimes when call, Kim is more lucid than others. Her mind is clear in the mornings, so that is the time I choose to ask her to do something very important to me. I ask her to perform SHAHADA (the Muslim declaration of faith. i.e. There is no god except God; He has no partners or associates, and Muhammad is His last messenger.) This is important to me because Muslims believe that to die without shahada places one in danger of the Hell-Fire. Kim is a Christian so I explain that this is not a negation of her love and belief in Jesus. I assure that the same God who sent Jesus for her salvation is the same God who sent Muhammad to revive pure monotheism.

She takes a few moments to think over everything I've said. Finally, she says, "Ok, Bill, I can do that." She repeats the Shahada and I silently weep. Inshallah (God willing) I will see my sister again in Jenna (Heaven). Losing a loved one in prison is difficult; but Covid-19 has exacerbated the grieving process ten-fold. I am amongst strangers. There is no comfort or solace for me. There is no one to hug me or hold my hand as I weep. In fact, I try to hide my tears because in prison they are signs of weakness. The most traumatic part for me is not being by Kim's side. When my mother brought her home in 1969 I was five years old, and I stayed by her side. I even slept on the floor in a make-shift bed next to her crib. I walked her to school on her first day of kindergarten and when she became a teen mom, I babysat her oldest daughter while Kim went to night school to get her GED. It seems wrong that on this last journey of her life I will not be there to help her leave this world. Before the phone cuts off she and I say our goodbyes and I love yous. I am unsuccessful at hiding the tremor in my voice. Kim tells me it's ok to cry and the phone call ends. I sit for a moment consumed by grief, and then I take a bleach-soaked towel, wipe the phone off, and pass it to the next cell.