

THE CAUSES AND CORRECTION OF THE CRIMINAL MIND

This is written with the intention of bringing awareness to the reader of the causes and remedies of the criminal mind, the gross failure of America's prisons systems to correct criminal behavior, and the lack of moral guidance in today's youth. My name is Anthony Nicholas Brunetti. I am 33 years old, at nineteen years old I was charged and convicted of murder and sentenced to 60 years in prison.

I am qualified to speak on these issues not because of any degrees or schooling in psychology, sociology, or criminal justice- I own no such degrees-but because I am one of the few prisoners who took the necessary steps to correct and reform his own criminal mind. During my 14 plus years of incarceration, I've spent many hours studying various religious and spiritual philosophies in an attempt to understand life's greater mysteries. In my search for answers there was an unintended side effect, a radical change in my thought processes and sense of morality. I believe this change was largely due to the emphasis on the importance of the qualities of love, compassion, kindness, mercy, and forgiveness in most, if not all systems of spiritual philosophy.

In retrospect I see that throughout my life, my morals, character, and personality traits were the result of the type of information I was taking in. My sense of right and wrong, my moral compass was being formed by a combination of rap music, television, and the influence from friends and family. The problem with this mixture is that very little influence came from family, not because of any conscious fault on the part of my parents or other adults in my life, but because of the lack of understanding of the impressionability and formation of morals in the youth mind. My parents were and still are good people. They are generous, honest and law abiding citizen's who work for a living, always provided for their kids and are loyal to friends and family. Their continued love and support has allowed me to retain my sense of humanity during my incarceration. They set a good example for me and my sister growing up, but unfortunately a good example is not always enough to combat the myriad of negative, and even evil influences bombarding our youth today. My parents were not overly religious, we were not required to read any religious or spiritual texts. We did not have long conversations about morality, or why something is right or wrong, if we did something our parents did not approve of, we got yelled at, were beaten and sent to our rooms. My parents were young, worked hard for a living, and did not have the time or education to not just teach, but to make us understand right from wrong. Unfortunately this is the case in many households in America today.

As a child still discovering life, my morals and perception of what is good and what is bad still being formed, I was drawn by the hypnotic sound of "Gangsta rap" and mesmerized by the glamorous picture of violence and criminal activity portrayed by Hollywood. To get an idea of the type of influence entertainment can have on a child, think for a moment of an instance where you or someone you know was influenced, inspired or encouraged to a particular activity because of a movie you watched. How many people do you know who may have watched a Rocky movie and decided they want to box or at least go and punch a heavy bag? How many kids have signed up for a martial arts class after watching Bruce Lee films? Look at the recent upsurge of teen girls taking an interest in archery after the "Hunger

Games" movie came out. For many these interests are nothing more than a fad or passing fancy. The encouragement to engage in these activities is not sustained unless one watches these movies over and over. For a very young child who is allowed to listen to violent music that glorifies murder, robbery, and drug dealing for many hours a day, the effect can be catastrophic to his moral development, especially if no one is teaching them something positive to counteract this harmful influence. I was 8 years old when I received my first rap album "Ice t's OG original gangster". As I grew older my collection grew to include N.W.A. , Dr. Dre, Mobb Deep2pac, Smif-n-Wessun, Onyx, and many others who send the message that the more drugs you sell, the more murders and robberies you commit the greater the man you will become. Add to the many hours spent memorizing and rapping along with these deplorable lyrics, the countless movies that glamorize organized crime, gang membership, violence and the criminal lifestyle in general and it's no wonder that I (as well as many of my fellow prisoners had such a warped sense of morality. This is not intended to be an attack on rap music or violent movies, but to show the deleterious effect such forms of entertainment has on a youth's moral development. If you have any doubt about the ability of violent media to influence youth to commit violent acts, look at the recent "slenderman" case in which two 12 year old girls repeatedly stabbed another girl in honor to this fictitious character the girls believed to be real. Their perspective on life, their understanding of what is right and what is wrong is being shaped and molded by this form of entertainment. They not only believe that acts of violence and sales of drugs are acceptable but they believe these actions should be committed in order to solidify one's status amongst his peers, if one does not engage in violence or criminal activity he is labeled as "soft" or "weak" and is ostracized or worse, seen as an easy target by his by his peers. The combination of these factors, the negative influence of media, peer pressure, and the lack of moral guidance from parents and school systems, are the leading cause of the criminalization of today's youth. I would like the reader to take a moment and think about this quote from Napoleon Hill, a well respected writer and businessman.

"You are where you are and what you are because of your habits of thought. Let me say that again so you absorb this information. You are and where you are what you are because of your habits of thought." It's these "Habits' of thought", these hours upon hours of contemplation upon criminal acts being fed to our youth by the entertainment industry that is creating the criminal mind. I literally grew into a criminal, and developed a criminal mind by what I was feeding my brain.

Now that we know the causes, at least some of them, of the criminal mindset, we need to ask ourselves what can be done to correct and reform this way of thinking. The answer to this question as I have learned from personal experience, is a very similar process to what created the criminal mindset to begin with- the sustained feeding of information and subsequent development of patterns of thought. The difference this time is to inundate the prisoners with positive, life changing information rather than the negative, violent information previously absorbed. I came into prison, young, angry, and felt justified in all the criminal acts I've ever committed. I not only thought it was acceptable behavior, but I thought it was "cool" to sell drugs and engage in violent acts, and why not? Growing up my peers and I were praised and patted on the back for attempting to live up to the deplorable behavior encouraged by the music we listened to and the movies we watched. So what was it that radically altered my view on life, gave me a new sense of morality that I did not previously possess?

Many hours of study, contemplation and reading of information that cultivated compassion, logic, kindness, forgiveness, reason and love. The same process that led me to become a criminal- the taking in and processing of information- has transformed me into an anti-criminal. This is not just my experience, the few prisoners I know who have really changed, who have truly turned their backs on the criminal lifestyle have followed a similar process.

It usually involves finding a religion or spiritual path to follow, furthering their education, and making sincere efforts at self-improvement. The problem with this scenario is that almost all of the prisoners I've met that have truly changed are not the ones that are being released, they are in most cases the ones who have been given outrageously long sentences and have very little if any hope of redemption. I believe the reason prisoners in such situations start to change is that the shock, the traumatic experience, of having your life taken from you, being sentenced to 30, 50, or even 60 years, causes you to really think about the steps you took to land in such a nightmare. This time of reflection causes the prisoner to start to wonder why he lived the life he lived, and made the choices he made. Some will move on from this time of reflection and return to their old way of thinking, others however will start looking for answers and turn to religion, spirituality and even psychology. The more a person reads, studies, and furthers his education, the more logical and reasonable his thinking becomes. The more a person focuses on and contemplates literature stressing the qualities of love, compassion, kindness and forgiveness the more these qualities become ingrained in his thinking. A prisoner finding a spiritual path to follow, gives him a new perspective on life, a new set of ethics and morals to live by, and in most cases the prisoner moves past simple regret for ending up in the situation he's in to feeling regret, guilt and remorse for the pain and suffering he's caused to the victim, the victim's family and friends, and to his own loved ones. As I've personally experienced we begin to develop a distaste for the violent music we grew up on and are repulsed by the conversations of criminal activity so prevalent in the prison system. The reformed convict is kinder, more generous, considerate and more respectful than before. This process of transforming the criminal mind does not happen overnight. It is a gradual and ongoing process. The feeding of new information and stimulation of positive thought must be a prolonged experience- not a 6 to 10 week course as many D.O.C. programs are. I will give an example of two positive activities I have been engaged in for an extended period of time which have had profound impacts on my thinking, behavior, and moral/character development. One is a correspondence course with the Theosophical society which is a combination of spiritual, scientific, and philosophical teachings which emphasize the oneness of humankind regardless of race, religion, sex or other distinguishing characteristics and the importance of love, compassion, and forgiveness for our fellow man and strongly encourages acts of altruism and philanthropy. This course over a period of time molded and shaped my thinking into something completely different from what it was prior to taking this course. I have been studying with the Theosophical society for over 10 years and am still engaged in these courses.

The second activity which has helped me to reform is the applied Theatre/play writing program which I have been part of for over 3 years. In this program prisoners are encouraged to write and perform original plays as well as classics. It provides me an avenue for positive, creative artistic expression and teaches prisoners-many of whom are antisocial- to learn to cooperate and interact with

others in a peaceful and productive way, and build skills which are vital to a successful reintegration into society. Credit for the success and effectiveness of this program must be given to Mark Aldrich the kind, compassionate humanitarian who runs this program and is also the prisoner Librarian at Garner correctional Institution. He treats his students like human beings not criminals, a practice which gains respect and should be adopted by more D.O.C. staff to aid in the rehabilitative process. The point I am trying make in mentioning the above activities is that they have been a constant influence in my life for years, not weeks. Programming in prisons, need to continue for an extended period if the effect is going to be lasting. The problem is that our prison systems are not designed to effect such a change. It is ironic that they are called "correctional institutions" when very little is being done to correct the criminal mind. Prisons are hostile, antagonistic, and dehumanizing environments. Sadistic human beings who engage in dog fighting will treat the dog cruelly and antagonize it in order to make it meaner and angrier with the hope that it will make the dog a better fighter.

The prisoner is dehumanized and antagonized by the conditions and procedures common in today's penal institutions. Routine strip searches, shakedown, pat downs, poor food quality and being forced to live in a bathroom with another human being is an affront to one's sense of dignity and self-worth. Such conditions may be necessary for cost and safety/security issues, but nothing positive is being offered to counteract the resentment, anger, and dehumanization these experiences cause.

On top this a bunch of violent, immoral individuals are given free recreation periods to plot, scheme, and encourage one another to continue the criminal lifestyle. It's no wonder the recidivism rate is so high and many prisoners come out of prison worse than when they come in. The truth is most prisoners are not truly evil people, they are living the way they have been taught to live and nothing better is being offered. I've seen some of the "worst" prisoners show their humanity displaying compassion, generosity, and honor.

Many prisoners just need the right influence, the right training and push in the right direction to reform their ways and become law abiding citizens. You cannot change a person unless you change their thought process, you cannot rehabilitate a man unless you rehabilitate his mind. If correction and rehabilitation is truly the goal of America's "correctional" institutions, then a complete overhaul is in order. The prison must become a place of positivity, education and skill building rather than the depressing, dehumanizing, hostile, antagonistic place it is, if true correction is going to take place on a large scale. Prison should not just have programs it should be a program. I would recommend the following changes to help facilitate a successful rehabilitative prison program.

- Competent, qualified professionals specializing in human behavior and transformational psychology should be in charge of running and developing a curriculum for our penal institutions with the aim of reforming the prisoner and drastically reducing the recidivism rate.
- Courses in anger management and conflict resolution should be mandatory and ongoing.
- Jobs should be mandatory in order to instill in the prisoner a good work ethic and sense of responsibility.

- Educational courses designed to show the effects of crime upon society, and families of victims and offenders should be mandatory. It's not enough to tell someone something is wrong, make them understand why it is wrong. Essay writing should be a requirement in such a course to ensure that the prisoner is absorbing the information and the thought process is being stimulated.
- Idle recreation time should be reduced while out of cell time is increased and spent engaging in positive life-changing, and skill building activities.
- More educational and job training courses should be offered.
- Participation in religious services and studies should be encouraged.
- Exercise, working out and participation in intra-mural sports should be made available and encouraged.

If such changes are made, the recidivism rate would greatly be reduced and the need for outrageously long and harsh sentences eliminated except in the rare case of serial killers and pedophiles that cannot be rehabilitated.

With these changes prisoners who are sentenced to more than 25 years, should be given a chance for early release as it would be unnecessarily cruel to reform and correct a person and not give them a reasonable chance at redemption. History has shown that longer sentences and harsher penalties are not a deterrent to crime. The reason for this is nobody commits a crime with the expectation of being caught. Most criminals are engaging in illegal activity on a daily basis and months and sometimes years go by, before they are arrested for anything. The threat of a long sentence for a particular crime is no threat at all if the offender believes he is going to get away with the crime he has committed, and this is why long sentences or harsh prison conditions are not a deterrent to crime. Another important point to be made is that it does not make much of a difference if you keep a person incarcerated for 6 months, 5 years, or 20 years if nothing is being done during the term of incarceration to help reform the individual. Unless prison reform is taken seriously society will continue to be victimized by ex-offenders who usually come out of prison worse than when they came in.

One final note, prevention is the best medicine. We can start now to combat the criminalization of our youth by implementing courses on ethics and behavior in our school systems. Such courses of course would have to avoid topics that may offend one's personal or religious morals such as abortion or homosexuality. Instead they should focus on how to manage anger and peacefully resolve conflict, the damage drugs and crime have upon society and the individuals affected by it, and the difference between crime in entertainment and in reality. This would be a huge step towards a more peaceful society. I would like to thank Rabbi Shaul Praver- a man who in a very short time has earned my respect and admiration- for encouraging me to write on this important topic. If the reader has any questions, comments, or would like to contact the author for any reason, he can be reached at:

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