

Crossing Over

What factors generally cause people to reevaluate the way they conduct themselves in life? Do they wake one day to realize that there are areas of their lives that are dissatisfying? Do they do it at the urging of someone else; perhaps someone they respect and care about?

There are many factors that lead people to change something (s) about themselves or the direction their lives are going. Regardless the influences that persuade a person they need to make changes in their life, the decision ultimately comes down to what each individual hopes to gain by those changes.

Whatever the stated reason(s) for making changes in our lives, the primary driving force behind our decision is almost always that we believe those changes will result in enjoying a better quality of life. Many would say we do it for morals, religious tenets, even love; but the reality is that the most effective motivator for change is "How is this going to improve my life?"

It is this motivating factor that makes me believe the best path to take in rehabilitating men and women is to show them that they must make changes in how they conduct themselves if they are to enjoy a better life. By putting people in real life situations where they are surrounded by a positive work environment, positive people, positive feedback for a job well done, and consistent instruction towards a higher moral standard, they will become conditioned to associate those things to normality.

An old study that is particularly instructive in this principle is the one of "Pavlov's Dogs". Pavlov proved that when given a repeated, consistent stimulus, his dogs would begin to salivate in anticipation of being fed. Many people mistakenly refer to this type of conditioning as "Brain Washing", but the naked truth is that life is full of conditioning stimuli anyway. The very habits that society finds negative and unacceptable in criminals are just another form of conditioning. They are only doing what they have become conditioned to believe will reward them with positive stimuli. Regardless of the fact that their belief system is flawed, until they are conditioned with something else, they will continue to rely on what they know to get them through day to day life.

All people are creatures of habit. If people are in the habit of going to work every day, being honest, saving money, paying their bills, and treating others justly, it is fairly safe to assume that they will enjoy a successful life. On the other hand, when people engage in dishonesty, are lazy, and have no regard for anyone else, it is no surprise when they run afoul of the law. *It is our value systems that dictate our decisions and actions, which in turn dictate the course of our lives.*

Crossing Over is the process of exchanging a flawed value system for one that is based on sound principles that fit in with societal norms. This process is not easily accomplished, even if a person is properly motivated by the knowledge of their own need for change. The development of a skewed value system did not happen overnight, it took years of contributing factors and experiences to build the bad habits exhibited by criminals and other social outcasts. Conversely, it will take a protracted period of time and positive influences to replace those bad habits and skewed values with accepted, successful ones.

It is not enough to merely treat criminals for their substance abuse issues and other **obvious** shortcomings. All of the factors that combined to create a person who engages in criminal and other anti-social behaviors must be assessed and addressed if that person is to turn the corner to responsible citizenship. To treat an addict for a period of 12 to 16 weeks for addiction and then release them into society with an expectation that they will go straight is not only naïve, it is irresponsible. And to castigate these people for failing is an unwitting cruelty, because the majority of those who fail due to addiction and thinking errors are already drowning in shame and self-loathing. These people are already very good at failing in most everything they do. And therein lies their dilemma; how do they break away from the self-destructive life style that is all they know?

I propose that the answer to that question lies in indoctrination. Criminals and addicts must be indoctrinated into a workable life system by those who have long histories of success in that arena of life. Not just a 12 to 16-week program, but a 2 to 3-year program where they deal with **all** of the shortcomings that have thus far held them back from being successful, contributing members of the community.

There is a certain percentage of incarcerated people who are “Ready for change” and only need to be put within the framework of a complete reeducation program in order to effectively turn the corner. I will admit that there is also another percentage of people who are not yet ready, while yet another group will never be ready. The purpose of putting together an integrated system of rehabilitation is to weed through the masses and help those who can be helped.

The current approach of being “**Tough on crime**” is not only a lie, it is an irresponsible approach to a problem that is not going to go away with longer prison sentences. It is a lie because being tough on crime would entail taking an approach that serves to eradicate the cancer. What we currently see is an approach of being tough on those who transgress; a misplaced sense of revenge, commonly referred to in many States as “Community Condemnation”. It is irresponsible in that it does nothing to address the root issues, it only puts off and exacerbates the problem. By feeding an over inflated sense of outrage and fear amongst the public; police, prosecutors, and law makers only perpetuate a system that is clearly not working. Drug addicts and petty criminals are temporarily dealt with, only to be released and eventually graduate from the lesser crimes of theft, burglary, and simple assault, to the greater offenses of robbery, serious assault, rape, and murder.

American citizens want to be safe! People want their lost sons, daughters, husbands, wives, mothers and fathers to once again be loved, trusted and respected members of the community. With many people who are ready for change this is possible because they now recognize that need. But without the proper framework in place and fully committed professionals to lead them down the path to redemption, they have little chance of finding their way out of the vicious cycle their current lives have become.

During the course of a conversation I recently had with a corrections officer whose background includes a number of years spent as a drill sergeant in the United States armed services, a mindset that runs contrary to the overall mission of rehabilitation became quite apparent to me. While we agreed on many things concerning how to break down and rebuild individuals into law abiding, productive citizens, it was *who* should be considered a candidate for rehabilitative efforts that we differed on. Perhaps with a lengthier discussion about who should be considered as candidates we could come to an agreement on the subject, but during the course of that particular conversation, a pervasive bias became painfully evident to me. Not just this officer, but many people within the framework of the criminal justice machine consider only a select, narrow field of criminals as potential candidates for rehabilitation. The general consensus

being that *only* first time, low level, non-violent offenders should be considered for any programs that provide a path to early release and redemption.

It is my position that the exclusion of other classes of criminals from incentive based rehabilitative programs is just more of the "Community Condemnation" mantra that is so clearly not working. The reality is that the majority of incarcerated individuals will be released back in to the community at some future point and time. This includes multiple time offenders, violent offenders, sex offenders, and of course, those who are currently considered "low level" offenders. The position that any of these people do not warrant or deserve rehabilitative programs aimed at successful reentry because their crimes are too reprehensible defies logic. The truth is that often times, it is the people who have been through the criminal justice grinder more than once are the very people who are now ready to make significant changes in their approach to life on the outside. Until repeated failures and prison terms become *absolute bottom* for a person, they are usually not ready to make the changes necessary for successful reintegration to society.

Worthy candidates can and should be chosen from the *entire* pool of offenders, not just the oh so narrow slice that comprises those who are currently deemed "low level/nonviolent". Once again, to purposely ignore the entire population of offenders when considering who to target for programming is contrary to logic and is therefore irresponsible. Moreover, this pervasive adversarial attitude towards biasedly classified groups is a blatant display of bigotry and intolerance. The bottom line is that if you "Change a man's mind, you change the man." This applies to all men and women!

In order for societies outcasts to **Cross Over** from being addicted and criminally inclined to being clean, responsible and honest, the criminal justice system must first **Cross Over** from being reactionary and vengeful. The criminal justice system must adopt an approach of comprehensive thought/behavior modification regimens for *all* offenders prior to their release back in to society. The overarching goal is or should be the greater good of our entire society, not the perpetuation of a poorly conceived and outdated system of mass incarceration.

While I could write a massive expose detailing the *for profit* corporate monsters that have been allowed develop and feed off of the current system of mass incarceration, I instead choose to focus on solutions available to those of us who are motivated by a more altruistic motive. Considering the undisputed fact that the good old U.S. of A. is the world leader in incarcerating its citizens, we surely have room to make some much needed changes in how we approach the intrinsically linked issues of poverty, substance abuse, homelessness, and crime within our population. There just has to be a better way! I submit that those of you who have a healthy social conscience and are reading this today redouble your efforts to force change. Just as the minds of the lawless must be changed in order for their actions to change, so too must the minds of those tasked with dealing with the lawless be changed in order for them to adopt comprehensive, non-biased program models that provide real structure and incentives for their charges.

Donald J. Trump coined the phrase "Make America Great Again". I submit that a large part of that ideal should encompass effectively dealing with our dirtier, unmentionable, not so hidden section of society currently being warehoused for profit.

Soberly,

