

## The Via Doloroso of the Habitual Criminal

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I speak as a prisoner. I make no claims to being a sociological or penological authority in matters of crime, correction and confinement. Because of my stand as a criminal, or a convict, or an inmate, or a student (depending in what school you were trained to label us) I can only relate what I believe to be some invaluable insights for the care and treatment and detention of criminals — not only in Massachusetts, but across the land — for I have had 23-years of confinement in the various prisons of our Commonwealth, and being experienced in the areas of care, custody, corrections, and treatment, I feel I can offer something that may be of some help to the legal, judicial, and penological experts of our day.

Every thinking man and woman who asks about the habitual criminal invariably wants to know how he became that way; why he persists being that way; and wonders whether or not there is something — some magic panacea — that will change him into what the expected repentant criminal should be like. This is not an easy question to answer. For every habitual criminal behind the bars of a maximum-security prison today, there is a different answer which requires a different approach for understanding and resolvment. It would take a battery of sociologists, psychiatrists, educators, clergymen, and physicians to analyze the asocial and amoral problems of these men to find out what motivated them to commit one crime after another following repeated imprisonment in jails, houses of correction, and, finally, prisons in the states where they committed their crimes.

If my own years of association and confinement have any value in determining the mental and criminal etiology of these men, I could venture a few hypotheses that would make sense to some people who specialize in the behavioral sciences, but would probably be considered nonsense by others whose professional training is contrary to that of the objecting dissentors.

As a life-term inmate in the Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts, I have seen thousands of prisoners come-and-go during my

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years of imprisonment. I have lived with these men. I have shared my meals with these men. I have come to know them — as they really are — perhaps better than I care to have them know in my day-by-day associations with them in this massive institution which is located less than 30 miles south of Boston.

Habitual criminals look no different than first offenders. Their outward demeanor is unlike the stereotyped criminal that one sees on television and on the movie screen. These men are surprisingly bright — even though the majority of them never went beyond the grammar grades in school. They are omnivorous readers, most of whom prefer literature of the western world, with leftist political ideologies. They are seldom religious. Those who do profess a religion in their lives more often than not prefer the esoteric religions of the East and are excellent conversationalists in the teachings of Theosophy, Zen Buddha, Mental Science, Shintoism and others that require disciplines of the mind in preference to the simple declarations of faith that are so fundamental to salvation in the various Christian denominations of the world.

Unlike the first offender, the habitual criminal has a high pain threshold, which means he can withstand pain and punishment in a more stoic way than his counterpart in any given situation of stress and/or trial. Also unlike the first offender, the habitual criminal has an easier life in a prison setting, because long years of confinement have taught him to become crafty, cunning, and wise in every area that will benefit his material needs.

In contrast to the first offender, the habitual criminal always appears prosperous. He has mastered most of the games of chance; he is an authority on most of the race horses that run out of the great parks; he knows the history, background, and possible future destination of baseball, football, hockey, and basketball players, and he wouldn't hesitate to gamble his last package of cigarettes on which of two rain drops will fall first on a wet window pane.

The mind of the habitual criminal is the mind that has been tempered like Damascus steel in the white hot fires of pain, punishments, deprivations and disillusionments.

Ask the habitual criminal what he thinks of law and order and he will give you an answer that sounds both believable and unbelievable at the same time. "I've been paying off cops ever since I was ten years old," one man said to me recently. "My mother gave up on me when I was 15 years old," he added, "after shelling out more than \$10,000.00 to keep me from going to reform school."

"Me?" another replied, "I hate cops. They're all on the take. They broke me more than once."

"Most of them (cops) should be in here and we should be out there. It got so bad that I had to steal just to keep them well-heeled and off my back," said another.

"Everybody's crooked out there," came this awful indictment from another habitual criminal. "Look at the white collar worker — he steals from his boss; his boss steals from his company; his company steals from the stockholders; and the stockholders steal from one another. It's a vicious circle. You couldn't break it if you tried. Man is a naturally congenital liar, cheater, and thief. So where are you going to start to make things right again?"

And so the story goes. The habitual criminal, it seems, is a man who has become so habituated by his habits of criminal and social activity that he can no longer think, act, feel, and react the way non-criminals do in situations that affect them in different ways. They are a strange breed of men. They surprise you in that they can act-and-react without registering too many loud complaints. "When it gets too tough for the punks around here, it's just right for me," smirked one long-termer when he was asked for his opinion on a recent tightening up of the prison's rules. "I've done time in tougher cans than this! So who cares if you've got to strip your cell of all unauthorized furniture and trappings! The thing you punks worry about! I've lived in the 'hole' with only bread and water for my meals. The thing that kept me from blowing my stack was a little game I invented in there. I yanked all the buttons off my shirt and I tossed them — one-by-one — in a tin cup that I put in the corner of the room. Do you think I care about this shakedown? After you've had a taste of the worst, you can take anything!"

Perhaps this is the clue the behavioral scientists are looking for: "*After you've had a taste of the worst, you can take anything!*"

And where did the worst begin? Was it in a deprived childhood? In a carelessly run school? In his first brush with the law? In the brutalizations of a reform school? In the over-punishments of an early prison experience?

Somewhere in these areas a sociological fracture took place in the lives of habitual criminals, and these fractures never healed properly. From childhood to manhood there is an unbroken chain of damaging experiences that twisted, contorted, and warped the minds of these men to such an extent that they grew up this way and behaved this way without experiencing too much compunction when they com-

mitted their crimes and were sentenced to long periods of confinement. In their minds the confinement experience was supposed to cancel out the commission of the crime. The scales of Justice were supposed to be balanced. But the next crime and the next confinement proved otherwise and, like one of the men said, "It's a vicious circle. You couldn't break it if you tried."

We are fortunate in that there are scores of professional men who are trying to break this vicious circle; men who have dedicated their lives to the hope of salvaging some of these men who think the whole world is yellow because they see it that way through jaundiced eyes. These professionals, unfortunately, are asked to produce quick cures; they are asked to undo and refashion what has taken years to get out of shape; and the sad part is that society in general cares less whether or not they succeed. The only time society appears to care about what is going on in the prisons of our country is when there is a disturbance of some kind which usually ends up on page one of the morning newspaper. That's when the politically-oriented politician becomes a "headline hunter" and appeases the wrath and conscience of his constituency by proposing stiffer legislation that would make all future disturbances punishable by a loss of "good time" and/or additional sentences which are to run on-and-after the present sentences have expired.

In the Book of Proverbs there is a wise injunction which says, "Train up a child in the way he should grow, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Alexander Pope once said, "As the twig is bent, the tree's inclined," which is another way of saying that criminals are made; they are not born that way. If society spent more time and more money on its youthful offenders programs, it is logical to assume that there would be less habitual criminals behind the walls of our maximum-security institutions today. It's as simple as all that; or as difficult as all that — depending on the sensitivity of the person who is asked to make an objective analysis on the cause and effect of deprivation in the lives of children who are depressed in all the areas of healthful growth. "I became depraved when I became deprived," one habitual criminal told me. "Depravation is the natural — or unnatural — outgrowth of deprivation," he added. "I'm in here because of a long history of that."

The habitual criminal problem is a realistic one which has to be faced for some solution. Society cannot ignore it. Society cannot hide its head in the sands of indifference and pretend that it doesn't exist; nor can it delegate this awesome responsibility without support to those men who are dedicating their lives for a solution that will be satisfying to all concerned with this problem.

If there are habitual criminals who do not respond to the programs of the correctional department, it is because this response does not win the respect of society as a whole, especially since society is divided between the two theories of imprisonment which vacillate between punitive procedures and the treatment procedures — depending on which of the two makes the more interesting copy material for the morning newspapers. After a while prisoners get tired of being social yo-yo's for those who get their kicks out of their behavior patterns which are dramatized more for entertainment than for remedial purposes in the newspapers. "Even caged animals in the city zoo react this way!" a prisoner replied in response to the two types of penal management that are always vying for control of the prison system.

When prisoners abandon hope of getting another chance at life as socially-acceptable citizens of the community, they feel morally and intellectually justified to live as social outcasts. This justification is tempered with a host of unexpressed regrets within the minds of those who are stigmatized as beyond rehabilitation. One doesn't have to be a psychologist to plumb and analyse and understand the depths of remorse that was uttered by the man who couldn't sleep at night because he saw his whole life pass in review, and what he saw hurt more than if he were kicked in the guts. This was a genuinely sincere confession of a man who is definitely a habitual criminal — who lives the tortured life of an unwanted, rejected individual; who vacillates like a pendulum between being outwardly aggressive and anti-social, while inwardly there is a tantalizing hunger for social acceptance.

Add this man to the long list of other habitual criminals who comprise so much of the prison population, and you'll have an idea why they act and react the way they do. "If I've got the same, I'll play the game", is what they would arrogantly tell you if you asked them about the "whys-and-wherefores" of their lives. When you brand a man as an unwanted individual, you can't expect him to abide by — and respect — what is supposed to be the law of the land. You have made an enemy out of him. His natural reaction is to consider you an enemy, too.

Continuing with the question: "Is there room for improvement in the Commonwealth's prison system?" and the answer has to be a definite, yes.

A new prison for habitual criminals is a must. It should be small in size. It should be staffed with professional men who are specialists in the behavioral sciences. It should be operated under the joint

auspices of the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Correction.

Such an institution would enable these professional men the opportunity to treat each habitual criminal on an individual basis so that a program of retraining and redevelopment can be the scientific means of restoring them back to the communities of their choice.

If the habitual criminals are given this hope for another chance at life, you can be sure many of them will forsake their false philosophical crutches for something that is conformable and acceptable, *providing* society is willing to forgive in accordance to the "seventy-times-seven" directive that is found in the Sermon on the Mount.

"*I wonder what it's like to feel clean again!*" the habitual criminal asked as he travelled within himself for the answer he never got.

Only you — the reader — as a representative of society, can answer this question.

The other question is, is it worth it?

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