

LET HE WITHOUT SIN CAST THE FIRST STONE

by

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If you knew that the person sitting next to you was a criminal would you be afraid? I expect your answer would be an affirmative one. However, I refuse to believe that after thousands of years of evolution human beings still allow fear to take over and cloud their thinking. I also refuse to believe that the only thing that has evolved is the way people choose to attack those they consider to be a threat. Unfortunately, it so happens that even in our civilized society forgiveness has no place and once a person is labeled as criminal everyone turns his or her back to them. Instead of trying to deal with the problem, people choose to ignore it, hoping that it will vanish, or that someone else will deal with it. This is a problematic behavior that can prove harmful to society in the long run. Instead of trying to help former criminals, people discriminate against them and marginalize them leaving them no chance for a better life. In my opinion, this is an extremely inhuman behavior caused by people's fear. It is very important that everyone realizes that such actions can only harm society.

The first time I encountered Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* written in 1850 I felt that society had not changed much since then. The book deals with public shame caused by adultery and my first thoughts were that today this is something that most TV shows include as one of their usual subplots. However, When Hawthorne says that "the founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among the earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as a site of a prison" (45) I sadly realized that this is not an idea of the past but proof that people have always had trouble believing in second chances. It is true that in the course of human history there has never been a society where people were not imprisoned, ostracized or killed for their crimes. However, each crime should be viewed as an independent case, with attention paid to the circumstances that led to it as well as to the rules each society resorts to in order to castigate it. No one can deny there are people who have committed horrible crimes and they pose a serious threat to society. The world witnessed Anders Breivik's killings in Norway that took place on July 22nd, 2011 starting with the car bomb incident in Oslo and finishing with the shooting spree in Otoyoya island. No one can deny that such criminals deserve the most severe punishment that the legal system of the society they belong to foresees in such circumstances. However, what happens in the case for example of an abused wife who killed her husband in his sleep and the teenager who got involved with the wrong people and shot someone during a gang fight?

Not all prisoners are murderers though. Ironically, for all of them there exists a peculiar kind of equality: they are all criminals so they should be treated as such. Society will treat them as outcasts once they are released from prison and make them feel rejected, unable to change or do something useful with their lives. This reminds me of the famous Victor Hugo character in *Les Misérables* (1862), Jean Valjean, who ended up in prison for having stolen a loaf of bread when he was still a child. After his release, this prison experience determined the rest of his life, forcing him to hide his identity. Nowadays, most people would say no one should end up in prison for

stealing a loaf of bread, but it is possible that someone takes a loan to provide for his family and then end up in prison for being unable to pay it back. These people will reach a point where they will be treated in the same way as murderers, bank robbers and drug dealers.

People say “you do the crime, you do the time.” I like this statement. It means that there is a specific punishment for every crime and that there is a court that will decide the time lawbreakers will spend in prison. And when this time is over they are free to continue their lives. Unfortunately, this is valid in paper only. Ex-convicts usually stay stigmatized for the rest of their life and the sentence itself is only the beginning of their punishment. I believe that hardly anyone would stop and ask each person labeled by society as a criminal why they went to prison in the first place. Not that it would make any difference to people who immediately think that since criminals were able to commit a crime in the first place they are capable of all sorts of dangerous things. In their mind, a small thief can easily turn into a bank robber, and a kid that got involved in a gang fight when he was fifteen is certain to be a full scale mobster when he grows up. Somehow no one believes that these people really change while they are in prison.

I have heard people arguing that prisons are not strict enough, even that prison time is like a long vacation during which you are being “taken care of” by the state. I haven’t seen any of them volunteering to spend the next ten years in prison though. In my opinion, such claims completely ignore the value of freedom. Freedom is now considered a human right but we should never forget how many people have fought and died to make it so. The taking away of a person’s freedom is indeed a punishment in itself, and prisons should focus on helping to reinstate people in society and not to make them suffer every day on the rack as if it were the Middle Ages. It can sometimes prove more useful to provide them with practical skills that will help them find jobs in order to survive when they are released, rather than simply locking them away without helping them change. These are people we are talking about and not wild animals. Then there is the argument that people can easily get parole and reduce the sentence duration. Due to this, certain people would decide that a few years in prison is not much to withstand before they can be free again. People should not forget that laws were created to protect society, and people who are to be released early have to prove that they *have* changed by passing through interviews and sitting tests with experts who can judge whether the criminal in question is indeed ready to be free. The government certainly has no desire to unleash dangerous individuals who will cause problems to society. This may sound cynical but people rarely care about whether others are essentially good people as long as they act properly. If someone causes no trouble, everyone accepts him or her.

This someone could easily be someone we know. Would those who say that prisons should be as strict as possible wish that for their friends and relatives? I think in this case they would do anything in their power to help them get a good lawyer and get out of prison. Every prisoner is someone’s child and can be someone’s sibling, spouse or parent. So when they are released they should be allowed to lead a quiet life. The truth is that when someone goes to prison the rest of the family suffers the consequences too. Even after the prisoner’s release the family has to bear their loved one’s suffering from people’s discrimination, being unable to find a job and being rejected by fellow citizens. To make matters worse, family members that never broke

any law can be discriminated against on the basis of their kinship to a person who committed a crime. What gives any person the right to make the life of these families a living hell? This form of behavior is based on arbitrary assumptions leading the people labeled as potential criminals to despair.

Going back to the point where the law decides that some criminals have indeed paid for their crimes and are ready to be members of society once more, there are people who believe that it is fair to take the law into their own hands and make sure they remind those people they are still criminals. These people show a false feeling of superiority that lies in the belief that they should be praised for not committing crimes as if this is something special and not their lawful duty. Society is not there to reward people who obey the laws. People who do not recognize the authority of the legal system and do not respect its decisions are as much a threat to society as the criminals themselves.

Furthermore, society's role is not to punish but to help. What people do not realize is that a person who has shown problematic behavior in the past is likely to have psychological problems that need to be dealt with. Be it a feeling of having being oppressed by others, the idea that one is trapped in bad living conditions unlikely to change or hatred towards the world and its inequalities, it is vital for these people to be shown that others care. They need to feel that society has not given up on them so as not to give up on society. If what they find after prison is acceptance, they will start feeling they belong somewhere and they will try to make the best out of their lives. If what they experience is rejection, they will feel alone against the world once more, which may push them to further illegal actions. They will think that the only way for them is crime and they should just make sure they don't get caught this time. Quoting George W. Bush in his 2004 State of the Union Address "America is the land of the second chance – and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life. What is most commonly known as the American dream, it is that any person is able to achieve what he or she wants as long as he or she is willing to work for it. Any person has a chance to succeed. That is what people need after prison: a chance. This chance should not be to try crime again being more careful and cover their trail but to make a brand new start and create a better life for themselves and whatever family they might have. But is this the case for everyone?"

A focal point in any new beginning is the means to earn a living. Every person needs a job. However, normally this is when things start going wrong. Employers see the criminal record of the person who asks for a job and they refuse to hire them out of fear. Logic tells them that the person in front of them has proven his ability to commit a crime therefore it should only be a matter of time until they do it again. Employers worry they will be putting a ticking bomb near them if they hire someone who carries the label of a criminal. Little do they know that they are actually detonating that bomb. This can easily result in him seeking less legal methods to get the money he needs to survive. The worst part of this behavior is that people try to find ways to hide the real reason for not hiring them. They will say these people do not have the necessary qualifications, or that they don't live close enough or have a phone number for contact or anything else they can think of. It was very interesting to see this incident from a black ex-convict's point of view when I read Walter Mosley's 1998 novel *Always outnumbered Always Outgunned*. I was amazed to read about the main character's, Socrates Fortlow's, efforts to get a job in a supermarket. They ignored his application and lied to him about it so he kept on going there every

day asking whether there was an answer for him. His response, "If I don't work I can afford no phone. If I don't have no phone then I can't work. You might as well put me in the ground" (76), expresses his despair about his situation and the vicious circle that his kind of situation creates.

Former convicts find it difficult to approach people. They can see the fear in the eyes of others and it makes them feel unwanted. Society does not seem to forgive anything and it certainly does not forget, so they become outcasts. This might lead them to seek the company of those who are like them, other criminals. This is the only place with people who accept them as they are, not because they are kind-hearted but because they are alike. As a result, they voluntarily trap themselves in a criminal environment that might easily affect them and make them commit crimes again. Society creates a vicious circle of crime by not letting people get away from their old lives by insisting on their marginalization. One should consider the ghetto neighborhoods one finds in big urban centers with high crime rates. People trapped in such ghettos feel they have nothing to lose when committing crimes because they are already at the bottom of the social chain. The worst case scenario is a few more years in prison and then back out again trying to live with people who see and treat them like parasites. Discrimination against former prisoners is no different than any other discrimination against a specific group of people and it is just as wrong. There are a lot of people who claim to accept others as they are but they would keep a distance from an ex-convict as much as they could.

This way of thinking needs to change in order to have a healthy society. It is vital that all members of a community feel, and really are, equal. Turning a blind eye to marginalization of criminals will not make them go away. Nor can one lock them up and throw the key away. What needs to be done is to face the problem and acknowledge the side effects that it may trigger if it is ignored. There needs to be a humane attitude towards these people. They are not the disease itself but only its victims. I recently came across some statistics claiming that the U.S. has the highest rate of criminality on NationMaster.com. I could not help thinking that since the law allows people to carry guns and therefore use violence this was bound to happen eventually. Is this the sign of a healthy society? The sooner people recognize that there is a problem in the structure of society, the sooner something will be done to change the statistics. The right to bear arms works in favor of potential criminals who can go and buy a gun like they were shopping groceries. It is not a solution to arm everyone and hope the victim is better at shooting. Another statistic that was unpleasant to see was the incarceration by race rate, where black males have the highest rank. This reminds me of a later part in Mosley's book where Socrates takes a young boy to a ghetto neighborhood and explains how the police keep it under surveillance for political ideas but ignore drug activities and other crimes that take place as long as they stay within their small community (88-89). I feel this is really unfair and encourages the separation of society in smaller groups which can easily result in clashes between them. Racial ghettos breed crime as inequalities that stem from racial discrimination lead to gang activity. People caught in the midst of these events will go to prison and once they are free they will be marginalized as prisoners. No one will consider the fact that if they had not faced racism and discrimination they might not have become criminals in the first place.

In the spirit of prevention being better than cure, I believe education can play a dual and very important role. First of all, there are a lot of crimes occurring in poor low-

class neighborhoods, where people do not have many career options. Were they to be better educated, their future prospects would improve and they would not feel their only way out is crime. Furthermore, education can help individuals realize their place within society and treat others the way they want to be treated themselves. As a result, they grow up showing respect for others and think twice before harming anyone by committing a crime. Likewise, the well-educated members of society will not let fear take over but give former criminals a chance to prove who they really are.

It would be unreal however to expect that education can eliminate all crime. Crimes are bound to occur and punished but this is hardly the end of the kind of responsibility a state has. It is crucial that there should be a plan to reinstate criminals who are released and to make sure society is able to accept them. The first step is to make sure convicts who get paroles or finish their sentences and are about to be released will enter a world which is ready to accept them. Otherwise, they are likely to commit crimes again. It is vital that these people know that they really have a second chance, especially in a country that claims equality for all its citizens. It is true that no one can force employers to hire people they do not wish to. Still, ex-convicts need jobs. It helps no one to release a prisoner and let him starve and sleep in the street. There should be a government scheme designed to provide jobs for criminals once they are released. In order to make the scheme more attractive and encourage businesses to participate in it, an amount of tax benefits should be granted. The more ex-convicts the business employs, the more tax relief it should gain. This plan would work in a twofold way, benefiting both businessmen and former prisoners who want to start creating a better life.

The question posed here is how one can change the entire society and make them behave differently towards people with criminal records. A good place to start would be the mass media. Since they are able to create stereotypes and fit people into categories then they can be used to change these categories and show that not every person is the same. There could be informative shows about crime, and criminals pointing out the reasons that lead people to crime by showing how some people are in such situations that they are made to think they have no other choice. True stories from prisoners can be used for that purpose. I have only seen documentaries showing crimes by serial killers that place emphasis on pointing out that the criminals were mentally ill or had psychological problems and how they made that fatal mistake that led to their arrest. The documentary may show their trial and finish by saying they are now in prison. I have to say here that it may be simply out of chance, but I have never seen a documentary about how a person is reinstated in society and tries to make their life better. However, I have seen in real life a neighbor who had done some time for drugs trying to find a job to be able to take care of his old mother and everyone thinking he could still be involved in illegal things. This must have been about six or seven years ago but I remember being told not to talk to him because he was not a good person by people who talked to him politely but made sure to keep their distance. I don't know if he was a good person or not or what happened to him because his mother died a couple of years later but I know that I never saw him with anyone and I doubt that people tried to help him to make a better life. This is why I think it is important for the public to realize that anyone could go to prison for various reasons and that should not mean their life is over. People have to realize that it is their duty to help those in need when they can, and that if it is up to them to help a person change and become a useful member of society they should do all they can.

Religion too can be a powerful tool to influence people towards more humane behavior. Although the U.S. has no state endorsed religion, the majority of people are Christians. This means that there is a large number of citizens who claim to believe in a God who says to love others no matter who they are and to forgive. It should not be too much to ask that this large group of people actually acts accordingly and treats every person, including criminals, as brothers. People should stop and think that they are facing a human being and not a monster. Therefore, they should feel obligated to show mercy. The ex-convict's guilt for having harmed the people who treat him kindly will make them realize there are good people out there, and feel even more gratitude for this second chance they are given.

No matter what the attempts to change people's mentality are there will always be people who refuse to alter their way of thinking. And they will mistreat and abuse minority groups, in this case ex-convicts. As regards attempts of physical abuse against them, even if the law says the abuser should be punished, seldom does this actually happen. The abused will either fight back and risk being accused for starting a riot or suffer in silence. Psychological abuse may seem less violent but can actually be more harmful. The hatred people receive from society is multiplied within them and makes life unbearable to say the least. Attempts to harm themselves or others are likely to occur. For this reason, these people should be under psychological surveillance. An expert would not only be someone they can talk to but he can help them gain confidence and find the will to face the world. If someone is determined to change and be a useful member of their society, then some psychological support can provide that extra push they need to actually succeed. In addition, these people should be encouraged to participate in activities organized by their community and take up hobbies that would help them interact with as many people as possible. This way their neighbors will start getting to know them as individuals and seeing beyond their "criminal" label. All these would help to make former prisoners feel part of their community and start living a normal life.

Modern society has undergone numerous changes of heart regarding racism. It has learnt to accept people of various ethnic backgrounds, religious and political beliefs and sexual orientations. The next logical step is to accept people who have made mistakes especially when they have already paid for them. People should always treat others like they want others to treat them and their loved ones. After all, anyone can find themselves in a situation they might break the law. It takes a community who forgives, and helps all its members equally to prosper and truly become great. What I have to say to people is let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

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