

## **I FELL FROM THE SKY: CONVICT BECOMES PROFESSOR**

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Nobody chooses how he or she enters this world. Some people are born to the bottom, others the top, a few with no parents. I fell from the sky. I am an orphan, raised in an institution, a ward of the state (see Richards, 2004). Nevertheless, it was a collective environment where adult childcare workers read books and shared their ideas and dreams. I learned to love school, as it was a place where I could prove I was as good or better than anyone, despite having no parents. I grew up tough and competitive, excelling in sports and academics, desperate to prove that I deserved attention.

I was fortunate - it could have been worse. At least I had numerous brothers and sisters. There were three meals each day, other children to play with, and I had my own bed. Still, we slept as many as five to a room and took our meals at long communal style tables. As orphans, we wore nametags on our clothes, had no parental protection or family privilege, and were raised to be self-sufficient.

### **The University**

At age 17, I graduated from high school early and left the orphanage to attend the University of Wisconsin (UW). Once I left the institution there was no return. I was on my own with only the clothes on my back and a few bucks in my pocket.

Still, I was unprepared for the disadvantage of my poverty compared to the social-class privilege of many other students. I found most of the undergraduate students to be silly and immature, totally dependent on their parent's financial support and direction. Despite their cool demeanor and assertion of independent thinking they were still mere children. Meanwhile, I read textbooks in the college bookstore because I could not afford to purchase books. When I got hungry I would go hustle some over-fed suburban female student who had a meal ticket and lived in a dormitory. I was determined to be a good student, even if I could not afford the books and food. Finally, I discovered the student aid office. I remember

the financial-aid counselor cried when I told her that I could not complete the parent information on the application form because I was an orphan.

Attending an elite public university I met students from all over the world. At UW, I remember taking courses about China, Latin America, and Africa and learned that my government opposed liberation movements all over the world. I was struck by the fact that there is, at the very least, three separate worlds existing side by side. I was born of the first world, which is composed of the rich industrial countries. The second world is the so-called developing countries, where the first world has elected to deploy some investment capital. The third world is the domain of countries that are largely seen by American and European bankers as places to extract mineral resources, rather than economies to develop as a means to raise the standard of living for the indigenous population.

### **The Pot Business**

In 1970 I left the land of privilege and travelled to Mexico for the first time. I should have stuck to the tourist destinations, but no I had to seek adventure, get to know the people, and venture beyond the pale. Mexico is a country that may be characterized as balancing on the edge of the second and third world. This is a large nation, with vast potential, but serious economic disparities. The Mexican elite is very rich, and most everybody else dirt poor. I quickly found myself mesmerized by a country dominated by a ruthless upper class, mired in poverty and a long history of failed revolutions.

Spending months at a time as a guest of left-wing students in the interior of the country, I lived in villages and urban districts, where electric and water services were sporadic (if they existed at all), the daily staple was beans and corn, and the people knew the federal police and military to be bandits. In retrospect, I understood very little of the language or culture, but I still remember the poverty. The economic conditions, not just the beggars who stood on every tourist corner, but also the death that came so young and was so common shocked me.

My romantic interest in the plight of the Mexican people introduced me to a strange business, where Yankee greenbacks flowed south and pipe dreams north. Over the next

decade I travelled extensively south of the border, returning home to the states, indifferent to the inherent risks, an adventurer playing a dangerous game. I played a role that could only end in disaster. By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 'war on drugs', many of my friends were dead or in prison. By 1982 I was a bit worn from living on the lunatic fringe and way outside the law. The years of travel had taken their toll. Still, the work continued, as the Yankee dollars brought hope and relative prosperity to so many people who worked the land in quiet desperation. But I shouldn't have been so surprised that the US Government thought less of my endeavors and decided I was a dangerous criminal.

### **Federal Prisons**

I was arrested in 1982, and when I refused to cooperate with the Drug Enforcement Agency, indicted on ten counts of Conspiracy to Distribute Marijuana. Facing 150 years if convicted on all charges (15 years for each count), I stood jury trial in the Federal District Courthouse in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1983, upon being convicted of one count and while on bail, I appealed the case to the US Court of Appeals and in 1984 to the US Supreme Court. I was sentenced to nine years and designated to maximum-security at the United States Penitentiary Atlanta (USP Atlanta).

Altogether I stood trial in three federal courtrooms and completed two years on close bail supervision, three years of incarceration, and six years on parole, for a total of eleven years in correctional custody. I served time in several jails, penitentiaries, medium-security institutions, minimum-security camps, and a work-release center; and I had a half-dozen different parole officers (Ross and Richards, 2009).

I entered federal prison at the beginning of the drug war. Because I had fought a federal case all the way to the US Supreme Court, I was sentenced to maximum-security. The day I arrived at USP Atlanta the penitentiary was on fire. The Cubans had torched a number of buildings. I never entered "general population" there. Instead I was transported along with 200 other men first to FCI Talladega (Alabama), then USP Terre Haute (Indiana), and later to USP Marion (Richards, 2008, 2012) (Illinois) and then USP Leavenworth (Kansas). I got the tour of the federal "American gulag" (Richards, 1990, 2003; Ross and Richards, 2002; Richards and Ross, 2003).

In federal prison I found a lot of men like myself raised in difficult circumstances. Many of them were the products of indifferent parents, broken homes, the foster care system, or children's homes. Few of them received regular family letters or visits. Once a year they received a Christmas card or maybe a visit from their ex-wife. These men were very much like the children I grew up with in the orphanage. In many cell houses they were the more experienced prisoners who set the tune and ruled the tier. This included operating the most lucrative inmate business - gambling, drugs, and homemade liquor.

### **Graduate School**

In 1987 I left federal prison, returned to Wisconsin, and entered graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Most men and women encounter serious problems exiting prison and re-entering society. Fortunately I had a lot of experience with difficult transitions. After foreign adventures and federal penitentiaries I was happy to be back at school reading books and writing research papers. I enjoyed graduate school at UW-Milwaukee and later at Iowa State University. Nevertheless, I was always surprised at the attrition rate, the number of students who lost interest in their studies, failed comprehensive exams, or never completed their dissertations. Then again, these students had other opportunities. They could pursue alternative careers. As a felon, my options were more limited.

In the USA, ex-cons have no protection from discrimination. In fact, by law we are subject to and singled out, for brutal exclusion and discrimination. As 'semi-citizens' we are denied employment, housing, consumer credit and the right to vote, depending on the state. There are even numerous states that deny ex-convict entrance to graduate schools and employment at universities, and, by federal law, university students are denied financial aid because of drug convictions.

### **Desistance From Crime**

Despite being convicted in federal court 30 years ago, I have never considered myself a criminal. I do not regret my youthful transgressions of the law. Today, marijuana has been decriminalized in many states. I think it should be legal. Reflecting on my past, I see my

participation in the pot business as an adventurous detour. I got out of federal prison in 1986, completed a PhD in 1992, and have now been a professor for 20 years. Fortunately, my formal education has provided a means to learn restraint and curb my reckless activity.

Desistance assumes that a person needs to find a new path, a way to avoid returning to a life breaking the law. For myself, the pot business was a long detour, where I deviated from a path I had began in school many years before. I was young and fearless, and the money was good, and I was so tired of being poor. Maybe, I was just bored with studying at the university.

I exited federal prison with a bachelor's degree and admission to graduate school. I immediately began classes and then completed the Masters and Doctorate degrees in five years. I had no interest in returning to my former illegal endeavors. Instead, I used what I had learned about courts, jails, and prisons to inform what I researched and published.

## **Conclusion**

I have told my story as simply and sincerely as I dare. I am an orphan and an ex-convict. I am the child of many parents, an adult assembled from the bits and pieces of many caring people who crossed my path and somehow shared their gifts. The lessons they taught kept me alive in the penitentiary and prepared me to be a professor.

What are the odds that a person with no parents and a prison record will become a university professor? Today, I am a Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Every semester I begin my classes by quietly studying the faces of my students. I mean no offense. I am simply searching for those few souls that may find the courage to live their lives with their eyes open.

As an ex-convict criminologist I live my professional life with one foot still in the penitentiary and the other in the university. I enjoy being an ex-convict professor. As one of the leaders of the Convict Criminology (CC) movement (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003; Jones et al., 2009), I prefer the company of my 'felonious friends', who although they have fancy college degrees, have not forgotten from where they came. CC is now thriving in

the university and is beginning to inform and transform the way academics research and write about prisoners and prisons (St. John, 2003).

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