

Perspectives on Prisoners' Potential

What is the value of a human life? I would think infinitely more than the most precious stones ever found or carved. Without a doubt more than the accumulated wealth of all the world's nations combined. I'd even argue the worth of a human life is priceless.

A majority of people would agree with this assertion. Let's change the question: what is the value of an incarcerated individual's life?

Undoubtedly, now, you're in a similar predicament as myself. You may find it difficult to attach the word **priceless** to the life of a convicted criminal. Believe me, you're not alone in experiencing contradictory feelings. I myself had experienced this same duality of conviction. Now as a result I've set out to examine why it's such a difficult task to find value and/or place worth in regards to a convict's or incarcerated individual's life?

To begin with, I'll start with our conditioned perspective. In our society, the evaluation of a human life is generally based on a few universal factors. On one side of the scales: decency of character, positive contributions or potential for them, uprightness under the law, meeting society's expectations and numerous others. On the other side: lawlessness, dishonesty, cruelty, destructiveness and such. The society judges a human life's value on a lack of abundance of these undesirable characteristics. Social promotion of the former factors over their counterparts has created our conditioned perspective. Of course, this is an oversimplification. From childhood through adolescence to young adulthood and beyond, we're constantly reminded that the former is good and the latter is bad. Consequently, we spend a great amount of time and effort avoiding it (the bad) or being labeled "bad" or trouble-maker. Bad kids become bad adults who then become lawbreakers and go to prison. As my aunt favored saying, "if you're a bad boy you'll end up in prison." Our attitudes become almost reflexive.

Fast forward some 20 years and I'm struck by the monstrous unfairness of that attitude. Admittedly, it's my own attitude now. Can a human's life be so easily relegated to being of no consequence? My mind screams, "no," empathetically no. But in my heart I know that this is happening. It isn't an impossibility, as it should be. Instead it does and continues occurring even as you read this; it's our reality, our society.

Prisons in most societies are full of the zero-value lives of trouble-makers, criminals. Does a human life lose its potential, its vibrancy, its possibilities for making qualitative contributions to society, solely because the person concerned is a criminal or prisoner? Can something so miniscule destroy the worthiness of a life? After reflecting, you'll probably arrive at the same conclusion I did prior to writing this essay: a person's current status or situation shouldn't change, diminish, or erase their life's value. In reality, it seems to do just that.

Our society often views prisoners as undesirable problems to be removed, out of sight and out of mind. I'll concede many inmates do fit this category, but what about the remaining minority? Do they also merit such abandonment? Prisons are populated by trouble-makers and such, and at the same time, they contain untold amounts of creative potential: artists, poets, musicians, writers, future humanitarians, world leaders, among many others. They can't all be worthless.

In a society that values creative talent and the role it plays in advancing civilization; how can such worth be ignored, dismissed, and left to languish, neglected? How many examples do you need? I'll choose just four to illustrate the wrongness of our conditioned perspective towards prisoners: Nelson Mandela, José Martí, Stanley "Tookie" Williams, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

The value of human life is based only in part on past actions. One's future potential is the other variable in this particular equation. Without giving any consideration to future potential, it's quite possible there never would have been a Nelson Mandela to overthrow apartheid, become president and Nobel Peace Prize winner recipient. No José Martí to organize the final stages in the Cuban Wars of Independence, win freedom and inspire innumerable Latinos across Latin America. No Tookie to help educate children about the dangers of gangs. Considering these few examples; I'll ask you again: What is the value of a prisoner or convict's life? My last example is Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was imprisoned in Czarist Russia. He'd been sentenced to death by firing squad until that sentence was commuted to Siberian exile instead. Despite this, today Dostoevsky is one of the world's greatest and most revered 19th century authors. As you contemplate the questions raised, I'm certain your views have changed, or are changing, becoming less and less sure. =>

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Talent and creative genius flourish under any and all conditions. As a society, it's our responsibility, no, our most pressing duty to acknowledge the potential of prisoners as we do that of non-prisoners. As the past shows us we shouldn't disregard, neglect, abandon, nor ignore those talents. The value of human life cannot be conditioned on the current situation of an individual. The assistant prosecutor in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* had it right when he told the jurors: "The fate of these people is in your hands, but also in the fate of our society itself" In conclusion, I ask you for a final time: What is the value of a human life?

—Emmanuel C. Theus-Roberts, Cuban American writer & historiographer, Colorado. He is writing a book on Cuban history & U.S. - Cuban relations.