

**. THE CRIMINAL'S
SEARCH FOR GOD**

**Criminal Transformation,
Catholic Social Teaching, Deep
Knowledge Leadership, and
Communal Reentry**

**By
David H. Lukenbill**

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*To Marlene and Erika, who always understood;
and to Joe and Kathleen, who were always there.*

70% of the 650,000 criminals released from prison every year return to crime and prison. 30% don't. This book is written by one of the 30% who transformed himself. It is written for the many other criminals who seek transformation and in the realizing of that redemption, are able to then help others transform their life.

This book proposes that transformed, redeemed criminals can help other criminals transform their lives, through higher education, Catholic social teaching, conversion, and reconciliation.

David H. Lukenbill was a criminal for 20 years, 12 of them in prison. He transformed his life through education—eventually earning a masters degree in public administration—working with grassroots community organizations, and intense spiritual work. He founded a Catholic lay apostolate, *The LampStand Foundation*, dedicated to providing the inspiration and tools for other transformed criminals to begin to change lives.

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Preface

Speaking of Criminals

This book has been in progress for 33 years, ever since it was first written in a whirlwind gushing of words, emotions, and musings in a Madison, Wisconsin studio apartment.

Originally entitled *The Prisoner*, I carried it with me for the next several years, finally losing the manuscript in one move or another as I struggled to find my life amid the debris of too many years in the criminal world.

I am fortunate it was not published then, as it was just the beginning of what I wanted to say and it would be many more years before it became clear; which happened soon after my conversion to Catholicism.

Speaking of my criminal life is difficult but what I have learned might be of value to a criminal justice system that has been failing terribly in its vitally important public charge of criminal transformation and rehabilitation.

The criminals I speak of in this book are those of whose world I was a part—those who commit crimes for money—for whom crime is a way of life and to whom the criminal world is a world with a subtly defined code of behavior and strong cultural connection.

I am not speaking in this book of those of whom Christ has spoken:

Matthew (18: 5-7) Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6) But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have a faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck. 7). Alas for the world that there should be such obstacles! Obstacles indeed there must be, but alas for the man who provides them! (Jerusalem Bible)

The criminals of whom I speak are great sinners as was I but like the prodigal son are capable of transformation and may deserve our forgiveness if truly redeemed.

I have written this book because as a human being and a Catholic, I owe to humanity and the Church the deepest apostolate work that my experience and knowledge can produce.

Introduction

A Life Far From God

But God, as he is the supremely good Creator of good natures, so is He of evil wills the most just Ruler; so that, while they make an ill use of good natures, He makes a good use of evil wills. St. Augustine

Few human beings are farther from God than criminals, yet the first canonized saint of the Church Christ established on the rock of Peter was the criminal Dismas, the Good Thief, who Christ took with Him from Calvary to heaven, thereby revealing the eternal path to criminal transformation.

This book is in two parts; the first about the criminal world through the prism of my criminal life—as a thief and robber—lasting for almost twenty years with twelve of them in maximum security prisons.

The second is about my transformation, education, and conversion to Catholicism with a focus on the public policy of using transformed criminals to help other criminals transform their lives.

Transformed criminals with advanced degrees and Catholic social teaching knowledge—I describe as deep knowledge leaders—working through grassroots community organizations, can help reverse the long-term failure of criminal rehabilitation programs as they possess the elemental experiential knowledge of the criminal world allowing them, and them only, the authentic access to criminals long denied the social work professional.

The larger issue of how we treat those who have committed crimes against us, who have asked for forgiveness and validated it through their redemptive actions, are thus addressed by an acceptance of their transformation and their help, and an eventual welcome into full communion.

The prodigal son's return can address the four central criminal justice issues our society struggles with: 1) our nation's youth who are at risk of becoming criminals, 2) the failure of prisons to rehabilitate, 3) the failure of reentry, and 4) the increasing criminalization of culture.

The number of criminals involved in the correctional system in the United States is in the multi-millions, currently increasing inexorably and 60-70% of them will return to crime once released.

It is hoped this book will be of help to criminals who are called to transform their lives, restore their connection to the community and help other criminals find the path home to Rome.

It is also hoped it will stimulate a deeper and Catholic informed criminal justice work around the issue of criminal transformation.

Part One

A Criminal Life

One's own life has meaning not only because it is earthly but also because in it we decide to be near or far from God, we decide for sin or redemption.
Hannah Arendt (p. 25)

I was born into the criminal world, far from God, and though well before memory it clearly marked the path I was to walk for many years.

My father was a member of a criminal organization and by the time I was two years old we were on the run from the FBI.

They caught up with us and my father was sentenced to twenty years in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. Years later when I was sentenced to Leavenworth, I met people who were still serving time from when my father was there, a situation that is unfortunately all too common among many families.

My first criminal act was the theft of a pair of fur-lined leather gloves of another boy in sixth grade. He reported the theft and the teacher had us all stand and face her as she demanded that the thief return the gloves and nothing further would be said. I had put the gloves under my hat where they lay perched on the top of my head, surely sticking up at a strange angle I thought at the time.

Though trembling with barely suppressed fear, and the excitement of dealing with that fear, I never said a word and walking home, hands warm in the

gloves; I felt the first joy of gaining something for nothing and the brilliant glow of a risk taken and my fear conquered.

This fear and excitement was always to be present in all of the future crimes I committed.

When I was twelve, my father was released from prison.

I had been raised without any knowledge of him and was completely taken by surprise the day he showed up. He knocked on the door and I answered, immediately sensing in his warm “Hello David” someone other than a mere friend of the family.

My father was charming and brought an excitement and worldliness to my life that I had never known. He took me to places I had never been, gave me more money than I had ever had, and let me drive his Cadillac convertible. I deeply love Cadillac’s to this very day and drive a pale yellow one that almost perfectly matches the brilliant pale yellow of the Cadillac convertible he was driving the first day he showed up at our door.

I began telling my eighth grade friends about my father, breathlessly describing what I had been told of his criminal exploits to my wide-eyed friends. I started smoking and drinking as he did, and soon began getting in trouble and became more rebellious at school and home.

My first contact with police came when I stole a pair of diving goggles from a store when I was thirteen. I was caught by the store manager and held for the police. They took me down to the city jail and showed

me the juvenile cell where I was told I would wind up if I didn't straighten out. They were trying to scare me straight but it had the opposite effect. I was thrilled. I thought the jail cell and the guys in it were the coolest thing going and could not wait to join them and the world that my father had belonged to.

I began by running away from home on several occasions.

One time a friend and I got all the way to Mexico and back—in his chopped and channeled Ford—without getting caught.

After that, another friend and I stole a car—a big red Dodge convertible—and got to Los Angeles before we were caught. Since it was his first offence and his family convinced the judge he was redeemable, he was returned to his family. Since it was not my first offence and my family was not sure if I was redeemable, I was sentenced to a foster youth ranch.

While I was in jail—in the same jail cell I had been shown a year or so earlier—awaiting transfer to the foster youth ranch, I and two others escaped from the jail by jimmying the cell door open, tying up the guard on duty and stealing his gun.

It was three in the morning and we decided to go down the stairs to the basement garage to get out of the city jail building. One of us was in front and slipped out the door and made for the river, but I was hobbling due to a sprained ankle I suffered during a jail fight and my other partner was helping me hop down the stairs. He also had the gun. As we opened the stairwell door into the garage a police officer came through. He recognized

my partner and asked what he was doing out of jail. My partner pulled the gun, pointed it at the officer and pulled the trigger. The safety was still on and it did not fire, and how the future of one's life hangs on events that happen so quickly and so decisively.

I was not charged for the escape—though it made the front page of the local paper as the first time anyone had ever escaped from the city jail and the fact that we were juveniles gave it even more news value—and was sent to the youth ranch as planned.

I was warned that if I did not change my behavior the escape would be charged and I would be sent to the state reformatory.

I liked the ranch. We played basketball, did chores, and I might have stayed for my allotted time had I not run into one of my former jail-escape partners, the one who made it to the river and was caught trying to swim across when police on both sides, fired a couple warning shots which brought him out of the frigid water.

One of the duties we had at the ranch was to raise money. We did this by going door-to-door selling stationary, donations for the work of the youth ranch. The counselors would drive us around to the towns in Nevada and we would sell our stationary for three or four hours a day. One day we were selling in my hometown and to my surprise, I knocked on the door of my escape partner.

That effectively ended my ranch stay as we took up where we had left off, stealing cars and anything else

not bolted down, drinking too much and driving all over creation convinced we were big time outlaws.

I was picked up three weeks later for car theft and promptly sent to the state reformatory in Elko. This was a barren, dusty, and cold place where one of my first chores was fighting the toughest guy there to determine my place in the pecking order.

The reformatory guards refereed the fight which all the other wards watched, circled around me and my protagonist as we slugged it out with boxing gloves in the gym.

We spent our days baling hay, feeding cows, and doing pretty much all of the ranch work we were directed to do. The days were much regimented, the weather was extremely cold and I started thinking about escape.

A few months later I rounded up another escape partner and in the late night hours climbed out the window, over the fence and ran several miles to Elko in our nightshirts and bare feet.

That is how they made us spend the night, away from our clothes and shoes for the express purpose of discouraging escape, but I was determined.

We broke into a church and found money and clothes. We then walked the early dawn streets until we located a car with the keys in it—not hard in the 1950's—and headed east for Salt Lake City. Once there we stole another car from a used car lot, clothes and a shotgun from a sporting goods store, and food from a grocery.