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READING FROM A CONDEMNATION SCRIPT

The obstacles that interviewees say prevent them from making good are not delusions or figments of their imagination. Making an honest living is not easy for a poorly educated, poorly connected, working-class ex-convict with a massive criminal record, weak family ties, and no savings. This is especially true when one lives in a city where almost half of the male population is either unemployed or has stopped looking for work altogether. The potential appeal of crime in such situations is obvious, when interviewees say they can “go like that” [snaps fingers] and have “all the money you want” by entering the illegal drug trade (male, age 26):

The reality is I'll never be able to get a straight, decent job unless I was working for myself or something. So, it looks like I'm back to crime, doesn't it? I mean, I'd love to go to work for £200 a week plastering walls, but I just can't see it. I'm now a single man. I've met people from all over the world, who have offered me [illegal] jobs all over the world . . . so, it looks like that's what I'm going to do. Isn't it? (male, age 28)

As logical as this reasoning might sound, though, persistent criminal behavior still requires some explanation. As easy as the money can be in the world of drugs and crime, this pursuit almost inevitably leads to imprisonment and renewed cycles of poverty and stigma. Although a first-

me delinquent may overestimate his or her chances of escaping this fate, rarely every inmate sitting in prison has started to guess that crime does not pay.

To understand how repeat offending makes sense in the face of such entrenchment, one must understand the mind-set or self-perspective of the deviant actor. A vast literature explores this terrain "inside the mind" of deviants, spanning both sociology (e.g., Katz, 1988; Lofland, 1969; Shover, 1996; Sykes & Matza, 1957) and psychology (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 1998; Lackburn, 1998; Dodge, 1993; Hollin, 1989; Ross & Ross, 1995; Singer, 1997; Toch, 1969, 1993). The behavioral manifestations of interest to these researchers differ. For instance, Dodge discussed conduct disorder in children, Singer studied alcoholism, and Toch focused on adult violence. Nonetheless, remarkable similarities can be found in the phenomenology of all these deviant behavior patterns. Bush (1995), in fact, suggested that almost all deviants share an "antisocial logic" or a "small set of cognitive habits that define their orientation toward life" (p. 144).

The basic structure of this logical self-narrative can be outlined by examining the life stories provided by participants in the Liverpool Deviance Study (LDS). Although this is a study of how ex-offenders can stay away from crime, the LDS includes the narratives of 20 active offenders to serve as a reference point or a contrasting sample for the "desisting" group. The assumption guiding this research is that the two groups (desisting and persisting offenders) represent similar individuals in different stages of the process of change (e.g., Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992) and not two starkly different "types" of people (e.g., adolescent-limited vs. lifetime persistent offenders). In other words, from everything we know about crime and the life course, all of the active sample members will almost surely desist in the near future (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1986).

DOOMED TO DEVIANCE

The long-term, persistent offenders in this sample generally said that they are sick of offending, sick of prison, and sick of their position in life. Several talked at length about wanting to go legit or at least doing something different with their lives (see also Burnett, 1992). Yet, they said that they feel powerless to change their behavior because of drug dependency, poverty, a lack of education or skills, or societal prejudice. They do not want to offend, they said, but feel that they have no choice.

In trying to find a sample for this research project, I was prepared for difficulty in finding ex-offenders committed to a straight life. I imagined that finding ex-offenders committed to a criminal lifestyle, on the other hand, would be much easier. This did not turn out to be the case. Like Matza's delinquents, most of the adult offenders I contacted lacked any sort

of enthusiastic commitment to crime. Even among those included in the persisting sample, hand-picked for their willingness to admit to active criminal involvement, most only begrudgingly accept the labels society has applied to them: "I'm a thief, but if there was some other way, I'd do that. [pause] I guess I'm just a thief—no more, no less" (male, age 28).

I characterize the narrative of persistent offenders as a *condemnation script*. The condemned person in the story is the narrator (although he or she reserves plenty of condemnation and blame for society as well). Active offenders in this sample largely saw their life scripts as having been written for them a long time ago. In a description of "ontologies of the self," Hankiss (1981) called this a "self-absolutory" narrative strategy, in which a negative present follows linearly from a negative past.

When asked to describe "some of the important turning points in your life," for instance, persisting interviewees often described only events that took place in childhood. One 25-year-old answered that the time he was sexually attacked as a small boy was his life's turning point. As we had discussed this event earlier in the interview, I did not ask for further details, but rather asked, "Any other turning points, important episodes since then?" He responded, "Just that really, everything else was normal." Another 36-year-old respondent said that her father was her turning point. I asked what she meant by this, and she explained, "Just being treated the way I was by him and that."

The turning points described by active offenders tended to take on the quality of life sentences for these narrators:

Participant: I was always on the border of being a good guy and drifting into the other side. I mean, I can fit in with anybody—with either group—I can adapt. I could have gone either way. But the judge, he decided for me. . . . One day I was on the way to work, and I had a fight. The judge sent me to remand for it. Since then, I've applied for other jobs and just—nothing. I eventually found a job working in a warehouse and stuff, but like life had mostly just straightened itself out after that, you know? Just prison, prison, prison, prison from then on.

SM: What happened on that first conviction? What was it for?

Participant: I'd been taking some drugs—coke, snorting, you know—and I couldn't get to sleep, right. I'm sitting there, watching "Santa Barbara" and shit at 9 a.m. and still can't sleep. And, I got to get to work. On the way, I just clashed with a geezer [claps his hands] and a fight sort of started. That was the deciding factor in my life. Now

I wish I'd just taken that day off work, called in sick or whatever. (male, age 27)

Participants in the persisting or active offender group largely see no hope for change in their lives and have generally accepted the fate that has been handed to them.

[My ex-wife] said, like, "If you got off heroin now, I'd come back," you know, but I'm happy the way I am. I'm just happy to plod along, and I know I've got a habit. I'm at the stage now where I'm resigned to the fact that I'm an addict and I'm going to be an addict to the day I die, and nothing's going to change that. (male, age 33)

It was just—we were completely like opposites. Me old fella [father], like, he—like I'm complacent like—but me old fella like, he used to be an alcoholic, and he tried to stop drinking and he stopped. He used to smoke, and he decided to stop and he stopped. You know what I mean, if he decided he was going stop then he stopped. If he said he was going to do something, he'd do it and then that would be the end of it. Whereas me like, I'll say something, and I'll half mean it and you know, I mightn't do it. . . . The fact that I look like me old fella, you know, I just couldn't be me old fella, you know what I mean. We are just completely different people. (male, age 32)

To refer to the active offenders in this sample as "persistent" misses is ubiquitous feeling of helplessness among active offenders. Attached to the word *persistence* in a thesaurus, one finds synonyms like *tenacity*, *perseverance*, *resolve*, *determination*, *pluck*, *grit* and, most ironically, *purpose*. Evidently none of the above, the persistent offender's orientation toward life is far more like what de Charms (1968) described as the "Pawn" self. Whereas "Origins"—or people with high self-efficacy—feel that they are masters of their own fates, Pawns feel that life outcomes are largely dependent on circumstance and chance events. As such, Pawns are unlikely to search for meaning in their lives and lack a "language of agency" or self-initiative (Larson, 2000). In the Pawn's version of causality, "shit happens."

SM: What do you see in your life, say 5 or 10 years down the road?

Participant: I'm scared to think that far ahead actually. Right now, I'm just living one day at a time actually. You can't afford to look any further I suppose, 'cause you just don't know what's around the next corner. You know what I mean? (male, age 38)

Some cognitive-based theories suggest that this weak sense of personal control may be linked to depression, substance abuse, and possibly criminal behavior (e.g., Bush, 1995). We were able to empirically examine this hypothesis using the two samples of narratives in the LDS. Turning-point

episodes offered by interviewees in both groups were extracted and were content analyzed by two independent raters using McAdams's (1992) coding scheme for measuring agentic themes (self-mastery, status—victory, achievement—responsibility, and empowerment) in life narratives. In a test of proportions, the narratives of active offenders were found to be five times more likely ($\chi^2 = 10.3$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) than the desisting offender stories to be completely lacking a "language of agency" (Larson, 2000) in their descriptions of life turning points. This coding scheme and the details of the content analysis can be found in the appendix under "Agency Content Analysis."

ESCAPING THE BURDEN OF CHOICE

This lack of self-efficacy may encourage offending in several ways. First, a person who subscribes to a Pawn story of self might seek out situations that can reinforce and even enhance one's sense of self-victimization (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995; Rotenberg, 1978, p. 95). As one desisting interviewee said in retrospect, "I offended to be caught; I didn't stop" (male, age 28). According to Shover (1996), imprisonment in particular can "crystallize and strengthen a conception of oneself as a person who has been treated unfairly by authorities" (p. 181). This may be precisely what the persistent offender consciously or unconsciously wants.

SM: So what did you do when you got out [of prison]?

Participant: I went home, and when I got home, as soon as I got home, me brother picked me up and took me home, and me brother was sat in the living room on his own, and I walked in to him and I said, "Take me back." Believe it or not like, I did. He said, "What?" and I said "Go ahead, take me back." I said, "It's not for me, this life," and that's the truth like. I said, "Take me back," and he said, "No." I said, "Take me back like, I'm not ready for this life." (male, age 26)

The cycle of "just prison, prison, prison" helps to maintain a coherent sense of oneself as a victim of society, which for the active offenders in this sample may be the only life script they know (see Epstein & Erskine, 1983).

At the same time, as indicated in their scores on the personality trait questionnaires, the individuals in this sample tend to be repelled by authority, regulation, and outside control. Therefore, they may feel the indignity of being controlled by circumstance more deeply and painfully than others, and therefore be motivated to try to regain some control by offending. Indeed, this idea is central to Matza's (1964) theory of delinquency among adolescent males. Matza argued that being "pushed around" puts a

young man in a "fatalistic mood," whereby he starts to "see himself as an effect" rather than a cause (p. 88; cf. Bush, 1995). This sense of irresponsibility frees him from moral constraints. In such situations, delinquent behavior can be viewed as a way of "restoring the mood of humanism" or allowing the individual to feel in control of a situation (see also Hollin, 1989).

Singer (1997) described a similar process in his discussion of individuals experiencing chronic alcoholism:

Convinced that failure, relapse and death are his inevitable fate, the chronically addicted man chooses to say, "I might as well do the damage to myself before life does it to me." At such moments the individual turns his capacity for self-mastery against himself. His only sense of control is the harm he can do to his body and to those people who still love him. . . . There are two avenues to a sense of agency that any individual can travel—one is the independence gained by success, the other the freedom of total loss. (p. 39)

The "freedom of total loss" can be understood as a way of avoiding the burden of responsibility that accompanies free choice. Rather than self-destruction, this can be considered a form of self-protection for those with a vulnerable or shame-prone sense of self (Baumeister, 2000; Khantzian, Halliday, & McAuliffe, 1990). Intentionally failing may be less stressful on a person's ego than trying to succeed and failing anyway. Sabotaging one's life chances with alcohol and other drugs, therefore, may be "the best available excuse for not living up to expectations" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 154).

The following story, told by a 25-year-old male (who incidentally had stolen a television set in the hour prior to our interview) illustrates this possibility in sharp detail:

Participant: I got nicked [arrested], goes in, does me turkey [heroin withdrawal] in jail, and it was fucking, very rough. I got sent to [prison], down near London from Liverpool—no visits, no letters, no nothing. . . . Gets out. And, as soon as I got out the first thing on me mind was smack [heroin]. I had, like, I took some money off a couple of the lads, getting out, I had like £300 [approximately U.S. \$500] in me pocket, I had another £200 waiting for me on the way home. . . . I bought a bottle of whiskey, 4 tins of lager, and just got bevied [liquored] up on the train going home. As soon as I got home, it was just smack, rocks [crack cocaine], smack, rocks.

SM: Had you done rocks before?

Participant: Yeah, been doing them on and off, not as often, but this day when I went home I had £500 to spend, and I'm

spending it, I'm going to have a good day of it, but I thought I'll have one day of it and then pack it in. So anyway, I gets through the money, I'm just injecting it, and I was injecting this bag into me arm, and [my friend] said "Your face has just turned blue," and I've gone, boomph [claps hands] on the deck and died. Three times I died on the way to hospital. Got brought 'round and you don't remember nothing about it. I just, one minute I was there at [my friend]'s, pumping gear [heroin] into me arm, and then the next minute I woke up in a hospital. Just, "What the fuck's going on? What's happened here?" . . . I remember the doctor coming in and saying "Did you try to kill yourself?" I said "No, I never, I was just having a hit, and I woke up here." And that was it. I got treated like a piece of shit then. He said, "Smack-heads, they deserve what they get." I just got straight back into it then, and I was going out, I was robbing, shoplifting, scheming, borrowing, begging, and I wasn't getting anywhere fast. I knew what I was doing, getting back into the old routine, and I didn't want to, because I knew exactly what would happen, you know. I'd end up dead somewhere, but . . . (male, age 27)

In sports, these might be called "head games." The basketball player who internalizes a reputation as a poor free-throw shooter, for instance, not only has to manage the relatively simple shot from the foul line, she also has to wrestle with that "little voice in her head" telling her that she is going to miss. All of the participants in the sample probably heard these little voices telling them they would "screw up," telling them they do not deserve any better.

Interestingly, as in the excerpt above, this "voice" of condemnation for narrators in this sample is generally not interpreted as an internal pleasure-seeking "id"—some internal trait leading them to commit crimes. Rather, using a victim stance narrative, the interviewees attributed the voice to the doctor who says "Smackheads don't deserve to live" or the parent who said "You're a waste of space" (male, age 26). The voice becomes the voice of a society that has largely given up on the person. After all, if the persistent offenders in this sample think they are doomed to a life of crime and punishment, they are most certainly not alone in this belief.

After a series of highly publicized reports in the 1970s that claimed to show that "nothing works" in efforts to rehabilitate offenders (e.g.: Martinson, 1974), a good deal has been written about how demoralized rehabilitation professionals have become. For instance, the probation service in the United Kingdom (once thought to be in the business of helping offenders change their lives) is said to have become "uncomfortable, threat-

ened, unsure of its role, and not at all confident of its social or political credibility" (Garland, 1997b, p. 3). Yet, if these professionals have become demoralized, imagine what messages their recidivist clients must be receiving! When offenders say that they "can't" change, they are reflecting the views of many of those around them.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Importantly, even when active offenders in the LDS are optimistic about their futures, they still see little personal control over this outcome:

SM: How about long term, 5 or 10 years down the road? Any vision?

Participant: I haven't got a vision to be truthful, long term. Maybe I'll win the lottery, you know. (male, age 29)

Following Emmons (1986), all LDS participants were asked to name 5 to 10 of their "personal strivings"—things they are trying to accomplish in their day-to-day lives, like "being a good husband," "doing my best at work," or "raising my kids right." One of the first active offenders I interviewed, immediately responded with "winning the lottery" as one of his daily strivings. I explained that these should be "day-to-day" goals, not ultimate dreams, but still recorded his answer. I was surprised when three other interviewees from the active offender group gave the same response.

Although all four probably misunderstood the question, this response is still telling. The myth of winning it big or making the "big score" is an internally consistent element of a passive self-narrative. If there is no connection between intentional actions and ultimate outcomes, and life is a series of chance events ("shit happens"), then why work hard or play by the rules? Success, like failure, is as randomly allocated as the daily lottery. The fact that a lottery windfall is gained through luck and not "earned" through effort, therefore, does not diminish its appeal as a life goal.

In fact, for offenders, the mythical "big score" often becomes "imbued with almost magical prospects for reversing or ending the state of discomfort" (Shover, 1996, p. 100). If only I could strike it rich, interviewees implied, everything will be all right—the hurt or indignity of a life of disrepute will vanish. Ironically, research suggests that when people do win the lottery they can become habituated to this good luck, consequently reducing the level of pleasure they experience in ordinary experiences (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978).

During the fieldwork for this project, a probation officer joked, "You want to know what will make people give up crime? Winning the lottery." Oddly enough, several months later, I interviewed an active offender who had recently won the lottery: "Believe it or not, I won the lottery. Yea,

[I matched] five balls. Second week out [of prison] and I got five balls" (male, age 31). This unfortunately did not have the predicted rehabilitative effect: "Don't get me wrong, I've still been doing bits [of crime], doin' bits of cars and that."

Importantly, the quest for the "big score" is not about selfishness or accumulative greed in the familiar sense. Quite to the contrary, active offenders described considerable generosity in their spending patterns. Tipping extravagantly, buying gifts for others, and consistently throwing money around are all part of the experiential lifestyle that characterizes offending (cf. Katz, 1988; Matza, 1964).

I used to go to the meat market and rob a van full of meat, drive it out, drive it into the flats [public housing projects]. I'd take what I wanted, and then I'd say, "There y'are," and everyone would come down and help themselves, you know? I've done that all me life, yeah? I've basically done that all me life, you know. (male, age 38)

The point of winning the big score is not to horde it, but to spend it, and the path to happiness is to be found in this hyperconsumption:

Participant: I wanted money for a solid base. I liked to party and liked a decent motor [car]. As I said before, I equated 50 grand with excitement. The money will go, of course. I'd sort my friends out, then you get stupid with it, really stupid spending, which goes with the job. That seems to be a sort of tedious, sort of boring prerequisite—being the big spender, spending more in a week than most people spend in a lifetime, and on trivia, you know.

SM: Did you ever meet somebody in your line of work [drug smuggling] who would save it up and was more conservative with money?

Participant: No, otherwise they'd get a job as a bank teller, because it's safe, if they want to save money. We lost bundles. It's bad business. (male, age 47)

Excessive alcohol or drug usage, often involving week-long binges, may represent the pinnacle experience in this quest for consumption according to sample members.

One of my close friends owns a security firm. You know, it seems like everyone has done something with their lives, and it's only me that's not done nothing. I've just like, you know—it's like, I've partied! At the end of the day, I can say honestly, you know, [laughs] I can show what I've got for my money at the end of the day. (male, age 30)

In many ways, the persisting narrative, then, seems to embody Cushman's (1990) notion of the "empty self." Cushman argued that contemporary Western individuals seek "the experience of being continually filled

up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era" (p. 600). The active offender seeks to stave off this emptiness primarily with experiential thrills (drug highs, popularity, excitement).

I used to enjoy it, the offending. I would enjoy doing what I did, just burgling, joy riding, shoplifting. . . . I enjoyed the rush. . . . But I used to buy friends as well. I've always liked attention. I've always liked to have a lot of people around me, and again, if I had the money I would take me friends out for a drink. (male, age 28)

I was starting to enjoy the sort of fame in school, like the big car thief. Everyone wanted to know me and find out what I was doing and that. We weren't even selling [the car parts] then. It was just the sheer excitement. The speed of the car. (male, age 24)

Being momentary, of course, such thrills are incapable of satiating the empty self's need, and so the quest for fulfillment carries on to the next night's adventures (see Brickman et al.'s, 1978, lottery winners). Indeed, considerable research suggests that extrinsically oriented goals, such as achieving financial success or social recognition, are frequently associated with low measures of personal well-being and self-actualization (Emmons, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Repeat offending is only understandable if one understands the impossibility of this quest for happiness.

I love driving and all that like, you know, I love, you know, putting cars to the limits, like, putting meself to the limit in a car like, you know, like, it's good, like. You know what? You know what I've just thought about there, right? You know, like, when I used to get in stolen cars, like, sometimes I'd just go out on me own in it and there's these country lanes, like. And, you get the odd couple going at ten miles per hour. I was doing fucking 70 down it. And, I think, like, you know, like, I think, like, the adrenaline and all that like—I think, you know, like, I was saying, "I couldn't feel," you understand what I mean? Honest, to God, I've just thought about this now: Like, [I was] doing that just to feel something inside, like, you know what I mean? Fuck me, like, you know, I just thought of that now. You know what I mean, 'cause I get a kick out of it and all that, you know what I mean? I love throwing cars around and that, like, it's great. D'you reckon . . . you know what I mean, like, trying to, you know, make yourself feel something, like, going that fast, like, and you go 'round a bend and you, like, go sideways 'round it and next thing there's just this big fucking tree in front of you and that, and you just go, "Aaargh!" You know what I mean? Does that make sense, like? To me it does, like. Trying to sort of, like going 'round a corner and seeing a brick wall there, you're bound to shit yourself, like, but at least you're feeling something like, which is scared, isn't it? It's something, like. Like when I used to

get chased by the police, I used to feel so—honest to God—you feel so exhilarated. "Phew," but you're high as a kite on adrenaline. I got chased right, fucking from—I didn't know I was getting chased, though. I was doing 129 miles per hour, right, and when I come to the bottom of the M62 motorway, right, all of a sudden, the police surrounded me everywhere. And, this copper said, "We've been fucking chasing you for over half an hour, and we couldn't fucking catch you," and I said, "I didn't know." I didn't even know, you know what I mean? I was just flying, you know what I mean? Me and me mates were in it, like, in a 3i [sports car], and I didn't even know I was getting chased. You need to like, to like, you need sometimes just to remind yourself that you're alive, don't you, like? (male, age 26)

Again, there is no mystery regarding where this particular quest for happiness "comes from." As Matza and Sykes (1961) pointed out, "The delinquent's attachment to conspicuous consumption hardly makes him a stranger to dominant society" (p. 717). Perhaps increasingly over the past two decades (see Schor, 1998), the virtues of hyperconsumption are celebrated by the mass media, popular culture, and particularly in advertising of all sorts. Although these values compete with the popular virtues of hard work and contributing to society, the pleasures of hyperconsumption get a lot more air time (Cushman, 1990; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Do offenders need to be reintegrated into mainstream society, then? They may be too well integrated as it is.

OFFENDING WISDOM

Persistent offenders in this sample view themselves as victims of circumstance. They claim to have a clear picture of the "good life" but do not feel they have the ability to get there using their own volition. The only refuge they can imagine is found in a bottle or behind the wheel of a stolen sports car. In the words of the participant above, "going around a corner and seeing a brick wall there, you're bound to shit yourself, like, but at least you're feeling something. It's something" (male, age 26). It is not a happy narrative.

The irony is that they just might be "right." Research on individuals suffering from depression suggests that they may actually be more realistic about their prospects for success than nondepressed people (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Bandura, 1989). Seligman (1991) wrote,

On average, optimistic people will distort reality and pessimists, as Ambrose Bierce defined them, will "see the world aright." The pessimist seems to be at the mercy of reality, whereas the optimist has a massive defense against reality that maintains good cheer in the face of a relentlessly indifferent universe. (p. 111)

ent offenders, like people who are clinically depressed, might be "wiser" than their contemporaries who struggle to desist. The dominant script the persistent offender constructs for him- or herself may not be an "accurate" assessment of reality, but it certainly accords with societal wisdom about deviance, criminality, and the meaning of personal success.

5

MAKING GOOD: THE RHETORIC OF REDEMPTION

Unlike active offenders, the long-time, persistent offender who tries to desist from crime has a lot to explain. The participants in the Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS) each spent around a decade selling drugs, stealing cars, and sitting in prison. Most critically, they have made repeated breaks with the life of crime and drugs (often announcing their "reform" to authorities and significant others), only to return to offending behavior. No one (including the speaker himself or herself) is going to automatically believe such a person, when they announce, "I am a new person" or "I have changed my ways."

If such an enormous life transformation is to be believed, the person needs a coherent narrative to explain and justify this turnaround. According to Lofland (1969),

One of the most broadly and deeply held beliefs in recent Western societies is that an actor must have some consistent and special history that explains the current social object that he [she] is seen as being. . . . The present evil of current characters must be related to past evil that can be discovered in biography. (p. 150)

Similarly, the present "good" of the reformed ex-offender must also be explained somehow through biographical events. Otherwise, audiences

(i.e., significant others, employers, the public) will simply not "buy" a person's claims to being reformed.

Perhaps most importantly, ex-offenders need to have a believable story of why they are going straight to convince *themselves* that this is a real change. It is easy to say one is giving up drugs and crime. Yet, when setbacks occur—and ex-convicts are likely to face many such disappointments—wanting to desist is not enough. The individual needs a logical, believable, and respectable story about who they are that "makes it impossible to engage in criminal conduct without arousing guilt reactions and feelings of shame that are incompatible with the self-conception" (Cressey, 1963, p. 158). The desisting person's self-story, therefore, not only has to allow for desistance but also has to make desistance a logical necessity.

One might imagine that if the condemnation script allows for the continuance of deviant behavior, then the desisting person's self-narrative would simply be the opposite of the active offender's script. This assumption is made all the time in correctional practice (see Fox, 1999a). If offenders make excuses for their behavior, they need to stop making excuses. If offenders see themselves as victims, then they need to stop seeing themselves as victims. The self-perspective of the desisting persons in this sample, however, did not fit this model of simple negation.

One of the overlooked difficulties of going straight (or of any comparable identity change) is what Lofland (1969) called the "horrors of identity nakedness" (p. 288). Being completely stripped of one's identity, Lofland said, is "a fate worse than death" (p. 282). Faced with the disorientation of a radical change in behavior, desisting ex-offenders may seek to maintain a consistent and coherent sense of who they are. According to Sutherland and Cressey (1978):

Once a man has gone through the impersonal procedures necessary to processing and labeling him as a criminal and a prisoner, about all he has left in the world is his "self." No matter what that self may be, he takes elaborate steps to protect it, to guard it, to maintain it. If it should be taken away from him, even in the name of rehabilitation or treatment, he will have lost everything. (p. 558)

This is consistent with what is known about self-identity in general. Self-schemas tend to remain fairly stable over time, because individuals carefully screen and select from their experiences in an effort to maintain a structural equilibrium of the self (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995, p. 485). Although self-narratives do change, this change tends to involve incremental, internally consistent shifts rather than a wholesale overthrow of the previous self-story. Epstein and Erskine (1983) compared personal identity change to the shifting of paradigms in science. Although such a change can appear revolutionary in retrospect, it is often experienced as a more gradual evolution based on the slow accumulation of disconfirming information.

The life stories of desisting narrators in this sample maintain this equilibrium by connecting negative past experiences to the present in such a way that the present good seems an almost inevitable outcome. "Because of all that I have been through, I am now this new way." If this can be accomplished, desistance can be reshaped as a process of "maintaining one's sense of self or one's personal identity" (Waldorf et al., 1991, p. 222) rather than the "schizophrenic" process of rejecting one's old self and becoming a "new person" (Rotenberg, 1978). This secure self-identity also helps protect the person from becoming overwhelmed with shame regarding his or her past self.

A parallel can be found to the prototypical Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) narrative. O'Reilly (1997) wrote,

Telling the story—it may be said that, in a sense, there is only one story in AA—enables the speaker to reconstruct a chaotic, absurd, or violent past as a meaningful, indeed a necessary, prelude to the structured, purposeful, and comparatively serene present. (p. 24)

Although each story is of course unique, the self-narratives of the desisting sample feature a number of key plot devices with striking regularity. This indicates that a particular identity narrative may be the most personally and culturally persuasive, meaningful, and enabling for the person who is trying to desist. This section addresses how this recovery story (or *redemption script*) "works," by outlining the elements of this particular narrative that make it especially coherent and convincing by the standards of "narrative logic" (Bruner, 1987).

The redemption script begins by establishing the goodness and conventionality of the narrator—a victim of society who gets involved with crime and drugs to achieve some sort of power over otherwise bleak circumstances. This deviance eventually becomes its own trap, however, as the narrator becomes ensnared in the vicious cycle of crime and imprisonment. Yet, with the help of some outside force, someone who "believed in" the ex-offender, the narrator is able to accomplish what he or she was "always meant to do." Newly empowered, he or she now also seeks to "give something back" to society as a display of gratitude.

This process might be characterized as "making good." Rather than "knifing off" one's troubled past (e.g., Elder, 1998), this redemption script allows the person to rewrite a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive and worthy life. Although the personal agency implied in the "knifing off" concept remains, "making good" involves more self-reconstruction than amputation. McAdams (1994a) divided personality into three, separate domains: Traits (the "having" aspects of the self), strivings (the "doing" aspects), and identity narratives (the "making" aspects). Desistance, perhaps like criminality, seems to exist "in the making" (my apologies to Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Thematically, the narratives that desisting interviewees make out of their lives differ from those of active offenders in three fundamental ways:

1. an establishment of the core beliefs that characterize the person's "true self"
2. an optimistic perception (some might say useful "illusion") of personal control over one's destiny
3. the desire to be productive and give something back to society, particularly the next generation.

Because similar themes can be found among samples of desisting ex-offenders as diverse as those in Burnett (1992), Hughes (1998), Leibrich (1993), and Shover (1996), these themes may form some larger construct such as *maturity* (Glueck & Glueck, 1940) or the "Reformed Self." At any rate, adapting some version of this macronarrative seems to help the desisting ex-offender find a meaning in a life filled with failure and shame.

THE "REAL ME"

Essential to every desisting narrative is the establishment of a "true self" or "real me." Turner (1976) described the "real self" as a person's subjective understanding of his or her true nature. In contemporary, Western society, Turner suggested, the individual increasingly looks for clues to the nature of this real self in what are experienced as deep, unsocialized, inner feelings and impulses and not in institutionalized roles or professional identities. Thus, one might play the part of the responsible parent, the caring nurse, or the no-nonsense drug dealer "on the outside," but one's self-perceived "real self" might be completely different.

The judge was saying I'm no good as a mother. They don't know me as a person. They just judge me by what I've done. Other than that, they don't know me as a person. I've stood in front of the judge and said, "You are not my judge. God is my judge." (female, age 42)

In a life narrative, this core or inner self is established in recurring themes and significant episodes in the person's past, however brief or unimportant they might have seemed at the time. Filmmakers frequently use this narrative technique. Think of any generic group of "bad guys" (they are almost always "guys") in the movies. The leader will show no sign of common humanity. A handful of others will be stock character thugs: ugly, stupid, and generally disposable (their demise will precede the climactic disposal of the leader, with a fraction of the fanfare). Yet, often, there will be one bad guy who will show the occasional glimpse of redeeming personal integrity. This may be conveyed in a moment of hesitation or a lingering look back at a victim, but it will be enough to foreshadow an ending

whereby this particular bad guy aids our heroes in some way, ensuring victory for the good side. Such an ending is only believable because of the use of foreshadowing scenes. If one of the other thugs were to make such a conversion at the film's end, viewers would be confused and the narrative might be lost.

Narrators in this sample carefully established their essential nature through personally significant foreshadowing episodes. Even when they were "at their worst," the desisting narrators emphasized that "deep down" they were good people. In a process with parallels to Braithwaite's (1989) restoration process, the ex-offenders look in their past to find some redeeming value and emphasize their "essential core of normalcy" (cf. Lofland, 1969, p. 214).

I used to play truant, and there used to be a show on in the afternoon in England in the '70s, called "Crown Court," and it was like, reconstructions of court cases. And, I used to play truant to watch that because I used to want to be a lawyer. Um, because of the justice thing, you know, the world wasn't fair. And, I do believe that if I hadn't have gone the way I did [into armed robbery], um, 'cause I am quite intelligent and articulate, I would have done it. I would have actually been a lawyer now. It was me burning ambition it really was, and I'd stand about like this all day [pretends to be a barrister], with me wig on and all that. You know, righting wrongs. (male, age 30)

Even in descriptions of playing truant, protagonists emerge as moral heroes, concerned with greater truths.

Instead of discovering a "new me," the desisting ex-offender reaches back into early experiences to find and reestablish an "old me" in order to desist (see Rotenberg, 1987). In some ways, this narrative reconstruction functions in the same way as Goffman's (1961) process of "reverting to an unspoiled identity" (see Biernacki, 1986). After all, not all of the roles played by participants in this sample have been deviant ones. All of the narrators have played the role of the thief or the junkie, but they have also occasionally played the loving parent, working-class hero, loyal friend, and so forth. By falling back on these other identities, they are able to deemphasize the centrality of crime in the life history and suggest that they were just a normal people "all along." Notice the repetition in these quotes:

I now feel as though I can achieve what I've *always wanted* to achieve, you know, which is gain some qualifications and get a job that I can, um, help other people in. (male, age 36)

What I always saw in other people was one thing I *always wanted*, and that was integrity. . . . It's either in you or it isn't and I used to think—I knew I had integrity, but as soon as I used to pick up a drink, it just went wayward. (male, age 32)

This rebiographing also parallels what Lofland (1969) called the

“well-nigh universal practice” of digging through newly discovered deviants’ pasts for evidence that they were always different.

Acts in [the deviant person’s] past that were once viewed in a certain way are reinterpreted. Other acts, which had gone unnoticed or had seemed irrelevant, are brought forth and considered central, for they help others to understand that the Actor was that way all along. (p. 150)

Most likely, this consistency is retrospectively imposed on one’s narrative. For instance, the same narrator who described beating up suspected homosexual men in public men’s rooms as a teenager later said,

Yeah, [getting a] job was good because like, you know it was giving me a chance to earn me money honestly, which is something I’ve never done before you know. Plus it was helping charity, which is something like I’ve always wanted to do. I’ve always liked helping people who are worse off than meself. (male, age 24)

There is no objective sense in which this claim to a lifelong charitable desire can be verified or refuted. It becomes believable, however, when there are clues or hints of this core self in the person’s self-narrative. For instance, few of the participants claimed that their true self was careful with money, diligent, tender-hearted, steady, reliable, or responsible. Such a story would be completely at odds with their known histories and would require considerable evidence or explanation.

The most common strategy, therefore, is to mine even deviant episodes in one’s past for positive qualities. For instance, many narrators establish their “true self” as a heroic underdog who only did what needed to be done to help family and friends.

We used to live by a coal pit thing. . . . We had a coal fire, no one had coal fires, but we did. . . . And, I always remember, I was about, I don’t know, 8 or 9 years of age, and we had no coal, so the most sensible thing to do was to steal some from the pit. But, we had to go through all these woods and forests, and it was so spooky. And, I always remember I had my other brother with me, who was crying and moaning, and I dragged him along. And, we had to go down what must have been a 40- or 50-foot embankment, get the coal in a bag, carry it all the way back, but that was the way it had to be. When I did it, I never ever told anyone, I think certain things that I did when I was young, and I was always wise enough to know it was wrong, and I felt ashamed, but some things you did because you just felt you had to. (male, age 32)

Another Hollywood trick: In any group of bad guys, if one of them is unusually intelligent, witty, or attractive, it is a safe bet that this character will be the one to change by the film’s conclusion. The ugly, stupid, and brutish are rarely thought to be worth redeeming in Hollywood scripts

or in rehabilitative efforts. Similarly, the desisting participants in this sample seem to have also decided that they are “better than some common criminal.”

I wasn’t happy selling [drugs], you know. You’re making money and whatever, it was just something that, what it was, it was the people that I’d come into contact with, selling it. I just didn’t like—it took me into a world, a seedy world that I didn’t like. So, um, that had a little sort of, also had a, um, I don’t know what the word is, a contributing factor. . . . I didn’t like the shady world that it brings with it. You know, and when I say that, I mean the low-life scum bags, low intelligence, you know. I had nothing in common. (male, age 20)

When describing their offending histories, almost all the desisting narrators frequently emphasized that they have “a good brain,” “a good heart,” or some other positive attributes. Even those who did admit to being “no bright spark” frequently emphasized their street smarts and understanding of how life works.

What I used to do—this is why I’ve escaped jail so far, I really used to use me brain—so what I used to do is get trains and coaches out to places. I’d spend the first of the morning checking around everywhere, routes of escape, which way I could go, stuff like that. Then, I’d usually do it in the afternoon, around four, quarter past four. That’s the time we used to steal the computers, too. Because, it’s like a low-energy time for people. They usually aren’t very alert. They usually have other things on their mind, getting dinner ready or whatever. People don’t tend to take so much notice of things about quarter past four. But what I did as well, I got a mate’s girl to cut off all me hair, and I super-glued the hair to the inside of me baseball cap, and wear the baseball cap, so they’d be looking for somebody with long hair. I used to take a change of clothes with me in a carrier bag. Never wear a mask. It’s trouble. It’s really obvious [we laugh]. But, you know, I’d bend the baseball cap down and sometimes I’d wear glasses as well. I must have done about six or seven of them [armed robberies] at various places. . . . and I never got caught ‘cause I used me brain, see. (male, age 30)

Interviewees use the intelligence and bravery they displayed as offenders as evidence in convincing themselves that they will be equally successful at going straight.

Yea I always classed myself as a good thief now I want to be a good photographer. (male, age 36)

I lived in the fast lane then, [and] I still live life in the fast lane in respect of work. I’m a highly, highly motivated sort of person. (male, age 32)

All the energy we used to have for thieving—we used to get up and rob all over the country, that's what we used to do get up hire a car we'd be all over the place just busy all the time, making money—and all that energy has just gone into all legit things, you know. (male, age 33)

THE "I," THE "ME," AND THE "IT"

While the redemption script emphasizes the socially valued aspects of deviant involvement, the other aspects of one's criminal past (selfishness, macho posturing, violence, cruelty, slothfulness) are put into a different category by participants. These are not part of the "real self," rather these are products of the environment.

It was just that, um, I realized that the entire thing had all been an act, my entire life, all me criminal offenses, all me drug taking, it was all a sham. . . . It was just like what it was, was right at the core of me, I am who I am now, who I've always been inside. I've always been intelligent, right, inside. I've always been intelligent, honest, hard working, truthful, erm, nice, you know, loving. I've always like. But it was always wrapped up in so much shit it couldn't get out. Um and it's only now that . . . I've realized that. That that wasn't who I was, I did it all to try and, to try and find out who I was. . . . That's what people I knew were doing, people I looked up to and . . . you know I was just adapting. I used to adapt to me peers, which most people do, but some people choose the right peers. (male, age 30)

The core self of the desisting ex-offender is the diamond, whereas the environment she or he lives in is described as the rough.

Then me mum found out what I was doing [heroin use and burglary]. She come to the flat and got me, um, brought me home. She knew I had a bad problem. I was a different person, psychologically. I just—it weren't me. (male, age 25)

Participant: I was working [at a youth apprentice scheme]. Me and me mates were also getting [legitimate] work on the side, like, through this scheme. That was the only time that I hadn't been in trouble or been robbin'. And then it finished, the scheme, it just ended. Phhhwrrt. I just started to take drugs then, and it all started to go wrong.

SM: You had never taken drugs prior to that?

Participant: Didn't even smoke or nothing. It was just where you lived. As soon as you come out of your house it was there. Like everyone was on it. Every single one. Near

enough every single lad was on it. Smack, all kinds, rock [crack], coke—normal cocaine.

SM: But you weren't tempted by all this when you were working?

Participant: No, didn't bother with it. *It wasn't me.* (male, age 29)

The offending came from out there, not inside. It "wasn't me," interviewees said. Frequently, when describing their past lives in crime, desisting narrators seemed to attribute their behaviors to something Petrunik and Shearing (1988) called "the It." According to William James, the self consists of an "I" (the self-as-subject, the I who acts, does, and chooses) and a "Me" (the self-as-object, the Me who is known, observed, and blamed). Petrunik and Shearing added to this conceptualization by calling attention to human behavior that agents believe to emanate not from the "I" but rather from an alien source of action, or an "It." This autonomous "not-I" force is internal (i.e., part of the self) yet is responsible for behavior considered unintentional, unpredictable, and uncontrollable.

Therefore, even though the person appears to do some behaviors intentionally, the behavior is experienced as something that happens to them (see also Bateson, 1971). Petrunik and Shearing (1988) used the example of stuttering. Stuttering is something that certain individuals feel "happens to them," whereas speech pathologists say that "stutterers do their stuttering" (p. 440). Individuals who stutter may acknowledge that they "have a stutter" but feel that the behavior is beyond their control. Stuttering is experienced as the product of a "mysterious, intrusive force," or the It.

Using quite similar language, participants in this sample repeatedly described heroin addiction or alcoholism as an alien force, a monkey on one's back. Frequently, this addiction itself was endowed with the ability to "do" things:

The drink was killing me by the age of 21. (male, age 32)

Heroin made me sneaky. . . . But it just become part of me life kind of thing, I had to have it. (male, age 25)

One interviewee described a period of 5 years over which he had remained abstinent from drugs, but said that one day, "You know, it just happened to lapse" (male, age 31). Rather than "I got back into drugs," or even "I had a relapse," the "It" just happened. Many sought explicitly or implicitly to separate themselves or at least their "real selves" (the I) from the addiction, suggesting that the behavior that others attribute to the Me (crime, for instance), can be caused by either the I or by the It.

This pattern was not limited to interviewees who used addictive drugs, however. The overuse of the passive voice and descriptions of being carried away by situations and circumstances were common to almost all

the narratives. In a somewhat extreme example, one interviewee described how he was rearrested within a week of his release from prison:

Mad isn't it. What it was, was, it was breach of probation but it was relatin' to cars. What happened was, you see, I've got this—I haven't got the fetish anymore, believe it or not, but I had this fetish. I could just be walking 'round town, and something would just say to me, "Go in that car and take it." And, zoom, I'd be gone. I've had like people trying to smash the windows to try and get me out of their cars. (male, age 31)

More typically, narrators used more subtle, linguistic devices to avoid directly acknowledging responsibility for extensive patterns of negative patterns:

It just went on and on. It went on like that for about 2 or 3 years. (male, age 33)

It started off with little things and then it got bigger you know. (male, age 40)

You're stuck in a vicious circle. It's money, drugs, money, drugs—and it just goes round and round and round. It's like a roundabout. (male, age 27)

Even when describing the process of desistance, criminal behavior can still be passively described as an "it" that just goes away:

It just like fizzled out. It's just been years. It just stopped. (male, age 29)

It just stopped for some reason. I don't know why. (male, age 31)

Another linguistic strategy used by participants was to deindividuate or refer to themselves as just "one of many" (Matza, 1964, p. 90). Especially in describing their childhoods, narrators often replaced the singular "I" with the plural "we" to diffuse the blame and hence soften pangs of guilt (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952):

Me and my gang, we were like the local hard cases, and we turned into a gang of tit heads, idiots. Like real scruffy, "Give us a ciggie," [he pretends to panhandle] and that type of thing. . . . With stealing, it wasn't so much a fashion, but I would have looked odd if I didn't. As I say, the company I was in all through school, we all done exactly the same thing. All my mates were in the same gang. They're all in jail now or out and on heroin. There's no exception really—maybe one or two—but basically we are all the same. (male, age 29)

If "we" are all the same, and there is no exception to this rule, then little blame can fairly befall the "me."

We started hanging about on street corners, we all had our heads shaved and started wearing Doc Marten's boots, stuff like that, going

'round beating people up, you know, that used to hang round public toilets—you know the type that used to hang round public toilets and that. . . . Like, we had a thing against homosexuals back then, you know. Just kids growing up. Then we started stealing more cars then—not for any reason except just to drive 'round in them and then dump them. You know, the feeling of power, having your own car. (male, age 24)

Substituting an "I" for the "we" in the preceding passages might change the meaning from almost sociological descriptions of working-class, British youths "just growing up" to admissions of essential psychopathy.

Finally, like the previous narrator, participants frequently substituted the second-person pronoun "you" for the "I," in an attempt to draw the listener into the story and emphasize the universality of the behavior.

It sounds mad, but when you're on drugs, you don't think about . . . (male, age 29)

At 19, you just think it goes hand-in-hand with being young. (male, age 32)

The compulsive, ubiquitous use of "you know" and "you know what I mean" is also a way of constantly maintaining a connection between the speaker and the audience. Phrases like "I was young, you know" and "You know yourself that if you can't find a job . . ." beg the question of the legitimacy for one's behavior. All of these largely unconscious rhetorical devices are probably best understood as being part of an impression management strategy (Goffman, 1959). By separating the actions of the "I" from the essential nature of both the "I" and the "Me," ex-offenders are also able to protect themselves from the internalization of blame and shame.

REDEEMING ONE'S "SELF"

Making good, in this framework, is not seen as a matter of being resocialized or cured, but rather becomes a process of freeing one's "real me" from these external constraints or "finding the diamond in the rough." This process of self-discovery was frequently described in terms of empowerment from some outside source.

Before I came here [to a job training program for ex-offenders], I was just looking at this brick wall. But when I came here, that brick wall moved out of the way, and it's given me a clearer view, you know, it's given me a runway. And I'm halfway up that runway. And when I get to the end of that runway: take-off. (male, age 31)

Several desisting interviewees used some variation of the following theme

"If it weren't for X (organization, new philosophy or religion, some special individual, God, etc.), I would still be involved with crime" in their explanation of desisting.

When I got out [of prison], you know, it's as if someone in a higher place is looking down and saying, "Right you are starting now. All the cogs are fitting together, and you are going away from that and you are going to become this sort of thing." You want to become what you want to become, set your own ambitions, don't you? (male, age 33)

In fact, the theme of empowerment was one of the most distinguishing characteristics between the two LDS samples in a test of proportions ($\chi^2 = 12.46$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). At five times the proportion of persisting narratives, desisting narratives described scenes in which "The subject is enlarged, enhanced, empowered, ennobled, built up, or made better through his or her association with something larger and more powerful than the self" (McAdams, 1992; see appendix for a description of this coding).

Importantly, while the catalyst for the change is said to be an outside force, desistance almost always seems to come from "within." You "become what you want to become." Interviewees did not describe being passively rehabilitated or reformed by the outside force, rather they describe gaining personal power. The outside force removes the "brick wall" but it is up to the individual to "take off."

This initiation into personal initiative is frequently described in terms of a "looking-glass recovery" process. At first, the individual had no belief in himself or herself, but someone else (often a partner or a social organization) "believed in" the person and made the ex-offender realize they did in fact have personal value.

Well, before I'd gone to college, [my girlfriend] had said that she knew that I had potential, and nobody else had ever told me that, that I could do something with me life. (male, age 28)

Following this external "certification" (Meisenhelder, 1982), however, the individual now internalizes his own self-worth and realizes his own ability to choose a destiny.

Describing Malcolm X's transformation from prisoner to civil rights leader, one ex-offender said, "Malcolm found himself, in himself" (male, 30s, *field notes*). On a less grand scale, most desisting participants said they found some buried talent or personal trait, however mundane, that they could now exploit in their new lives.

I've *always* liked playing with wood, making things out of wood. I've *always* been good with me hands. . . . So I thought "woodwork." . . . That is just the choice I made. It's supposed to take you a year doing the NVQ [degree], and I've just finished in four and a half months!

The teacher said like, he said he doesn't believe that I haven't done [professional training] before. (male, age 33)

Another interviewee described his decision to take up truck driving as a similar process of finding a buried talent.

I don't know, like. I know fucking I'm not any bright spark [genius], you know what I mean? . . . But I love, I don't know, I'm not being big-headed or boasting, you know what I mean, but I can drive. You know what I mean, and I *know* I can. Going to jail, they give you these tests to see if you're mentally—or whether you're better with your hands or your mind. For coordination, right, out of 100 points, right, I scored 110. (male, age 26)

TRAGIC OPTIMISM: MAKING "GOOD FROM THE BAD"

As in the above examples, redemption narratives rarely involve just getting by. Reformed ex-offenders seem to always operate at "110 percent."

[Now I'm doing] a part-time diploma over 4 years or 3 years, and . . . I'm top of the class, all of me assignments are all As. So yeah, I'm doing really well on it. This is the end of me first University year, in 3 weeks time, so I've got another 2½ to go. (male, age 30)

While sometimes measured in grades or skill, this sense of achievement is most often reflected in a person's contribution to his or her community, family, or group. The fathers I talked to were not just fathers, but super-fathers. The volunteers were super-volunteers. The counselors were super-counselors. In the redemption narrative, making good is part of a higher mission, fulfilling a role that had been inherent in the person's true self.

To test whether desisting participants tended to be more consistently optimistic in their outlooks, the LDS narratives were analyzed for occurrences of "redemption sequences" or "contamination sequences" (see McAdams et al., 1997). In a *contamination sequence*, a decidedly good event "turns sour." In a *redemption sequence*, the opposite occurs, "something good" emerges out of otherwise negative circumstances. (Of course, descriptions of giving up crime itself were not included in this coding.) In this analysis, two independent raters found that 70% of the desisting group narratives included redemption sequences in the sampled passages compared with 25% of active offender narratives ($\chi^2 = 12.39$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

In perhaps the most important manifestation of this positive outlook, former offenders tend to recast their lives as being "planned" or orchestrated by a higher power for a certain purpose.

It's as if [being involved with crime, going to prison] was all meant to happen now you know. (male, age 33)

I have the philosophy that things happen when they are meant to happen. Like this [going straight] now. (male, age 30)

I'm glad I had to go through what I had to go through. See, this is recovery for me. I'm glad I had to go what I had to go through to be where I'm at, because this is where I am supposed to be. See, I believe in predestination. Whatever's happened to you is supposed to happen to you. (female, 30s, *field notes*)

Narrators seek to find some reason or purpose for the long stretches of their lives for which they have "nothing to show." This rationalization usually takes the form of "if it weren't for X (me going to jail, my life of crime, etc.), I never would have realized Y (that there are more important things in life than money, that I was good at helping others, etc.)." The good has emerged out of the bad.

In many ways, this resembles what Frankl (1984) called "tragic optimism," or the belief that suffering can be redemptive. In this case, however, the belief is that one's *mistakes* can make one a stronger person. In fact, for many, the only thing they do have "to show for themselves" after 10 years of involvement in criminal behavior is the wisdom they gained from spending this much time on and beyond "the edge." This experience, for whatever it is worth, is turned into a strength in the redemption script.

I can honestly say, I've ducked and dived, but I've never been crooked. . . . All that shit and all that rubbish and all those things I've done have been the biggest asset to where I am now. It's like, you do find yourself being a bit of a role model sometimes. (male, age 32)

Not only has the speaker effectively separated his past mistakes from his true self (he was never "crooked" deep down), he also has become a better person because of all that he has been through.

Sometimes the benefits of having experienced crime and drug use are literal. One interviewee who found work counseling young offenders said that going to prison was a "good career move" for him. More typically, interviewees said, the experience of having "been there and back" has provided them with a sense of "street cred" (credibility among young people) or else an insight into life or how the world works. Ex-offenders say they have learned from their past lives, and this knowledge has made them wiser people.

This is vividly expressed in the following excerpt from an interview with a female ex-convict from New York (Maruna et al., 1999):

I believe that all recovering addicts are the Chosen Ones. That's my point of view. I feel we are all chosen by God, because we're loved. . . . Like, I feel addicts are lucky when they learn recovery. Because the people who are not addicts, they're not—they still have their problems. People who are in recovery and go through programs, they

learn how to live life on life's terms. . . . So I feel we're special because we're learning how to deal with the world. And, the people that aren't addicts, they don't know how to deal with the world because they were never taught. So, I just feel like we're the special ones. (female, 30s)

While rarely this explicit, the underlying suggestion in many desisting narratives is that the person who experiences crime and then goes straight is in some ways morally superior to the person who has never experienced drug use or criminal behavior. The ex-offender, after all, has tasted the euphoria of easy money, drugs, and criminal domination and has still managed to renounce these pleasures and pursue a more productive lifestyle. Rotenberg (1987) described this as the theme of "ascent through descent" and argued that such a belief is firmly rooted in Midrashic hermeneutics. Talmudic sayings such as "Repentance is so great that premeditated sins are accounted for as though they were merits" and "In a place where repenters stand, the perfect righteous may not stand" celebrate the reformed deviant as the bearer of wisdom and hope (Rotenberg, 1987, p. 87; cf. Augustine's *Confessions*).

FINDING ONE'S PURPOSE

According to Lofland (1969), "Transformed deviants tend to become not merely moral but hypermoral. . . . They take on a relatively fervent moral purpose" (p. 283). The desisting participants in this sample indeed often claimed to have found a higher purpose and found fulfillment in "fighting the good fight" (male, age 30), defined differently by each narrator. For this Liverpool sample, this "moral purpose" often took the form of mutual-help movements or class-based identity politics. In a U.S. sample, ex-offenders may be more likely to turn to race- or faith-based social movements (e.g., Maruna, 1997). Regardless of the specific framework, ex-offenders who desist seem to find some larger cause that brings them a sense of purpose.

In many ways, desisting participants seem to have reached the revelation that "I am what survives me," described by Erik Erikson (1968, p. 141) as the essence of a construct he called *generativity*. *Generativity* has been defined as

The concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and generating products and outcomes that aim to benefit youth and foster the development and well-being of individuals and social systems that will outlive the self. (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998, p. xx)

In a content analysis using Stewart et al.'s (1988) coding system, desisting narratives in the LDS scored significantly higher than persisting

narratives on this theme. On a measure of overall generativity content, the median score in the desisting group was 6.71 ($M = 6.9$), compared with a median of 1.79 ($M = 1.79$) in the persisting group narratives ($p < .01$). The details of this content analysis can be found in the appendix.

Changing the Currency

Each of us seeks to stave off meaninglessness and void by finding some life pursuit worthy of our time. As was outlined in chapter 4, for the active offenders in this sample this fulfillment is largely sought in the "big score" and other experiential thrills. Desisting interviewees, on the other hand, expressed a desire for more lasting accomplishments or "something to show" for themselves. They described newfound pleasures in creative and productive pursuits, and often expressed a special attachment or duty to some particular community, group, or cause.

I just—I get more of a thrill out of being on my little computer at home at ten o'clock at night, writing a song, than going out earning all kinds of money. It's like, because like I say, I wanted to be recognized for my creativity, it's true. I really, at the end of the day, want nothing more than someone else to say they like my work. That's more important. Whenever I've put money first, that's been the root of my evil. (male, age 32)

One interviewee, a former drug smuggler who took up painting in a prison education course, described this eloquently as a "change of currency":

The only thing that is going to improve a geezer [guy] is changing your currency of life, from pounds [money] to something slightly more heady: yoga or art or music or whatever. The people I know from nick [prison] that took up art, they get an equivalent buzz. When I finish a painting, I get the same buzz as I got when I landed 80 kilos on a beach in Spain. So, I don't make much money, I'm quite poor, but I altered the currency. Life's currencies can be less, you know, hard cash, basically less physical. What do you spend your money on? Having a nice time. For what? So you can enjoy life. But if I can enjoy life by painting pictures, talking to impoverished artists and getting arse-holed [drunk] every now and again, going to exhibitions, it suits me fine. (male, age 47)

This difference in motivation goes beyond realizing that crime is "wrong." In fact, few desisting ex-offenders described reaching this conclusion (cf. Burnett, 1992; Irwin, 1970). The difference can be found in

personal definitions of success and assessments of "what matters in life (Leibrich, 1993).

It's what you want out of life, isn't it? Like, I always thought I was going to be rich. I always robbed thinking I'll hit the jackpot one day, but I never did. (male, age 33)

Several desisting ex-offenders said that they have never been as financially poor as they are now that they have gone legit.

Whereas before I wouldn't dream, wouldn't think, wouldn't bat an eyelid, do you know what I mean, to spend 200, 300, 400, even 500 pounds a day. Now I have to manage on 100 pounds [US \$150] a week. Whereas I was spending up to 500 pounds a day. It's a big leap from 500 pounds a day to 100 pounds a week. I'm trying to manage it, barely, but I'm managing it. (female, age 23)

Desisting interviewees said that experiential and consumptive pleasures are no longer seen as ends in themselves that can justify any means

The luxuries most people think of in life are fast cars and all that, like. That's bullshit. They're not, like. Luxuries in life are fucking running water in your taps, like. Some people haven't got that. Food in your cupboard, leccy [electricity], gas, and a TV to watch, maybe. You wouldn't worry if you haven't got a TV. You've still got luxuries, you know what I mean? . . . But because, you know, nowadays there's so much of it and all that in this country, like people have forgot, you know, just like how fucking fortunate they are, like, you know what I mean? You know, [I wish] someone had've said that to me [when I was young] like, 'cause I always wanted fast cars and loads of money and that like. (male, age 26)

Several participants mentioned "learning the value of money" since going legit.

SM: What do you think has been the high point, the best times of your life so far?

Participant: Well, getting to go to Australia [on a work assignment].

SM: Why that?

Participant: It's just cause I've achieved it. I could have went out and robbed the money for that and went to Sydney anytime I wanted, like, but it wouldn't be the same, you know. (male, age 36)

Another participant explained:

Participant: I'm not proud of being poor, because I am poor, but I earned what I own, and that makes me proud. (male, age 30)

A few desisting ex-offenders, in fact, blamed their offending behavior on the evils of money itself:

Me mind's changed a bit about money, the more money I have, the more I take drugs. The less money I've got, and I'm not taking it. The money's the evil thing. (male, age 33)

Unfortunately, as a desisting interviewee explains, "It doesn't work like that" (male, age 32). In quite similar stories, two interviewees said that at one point they gave away all of their money (thousands of pounds in ill-gotten savings) in an attempt to go straight, only to find this left them in worse shape than before.

Participant: I was just sick of it all. So, I had this crazy notion that if I made meself poor, I wouldn't be able to afford heroin or cocaine. So if I remove the money, I won't be able to score. . . . Looking back on it, it was pure idiocy. It went a lot downhill after that.

SM: What happened next?

Participant: I went to live with me friends. . . . Tried to do me turkey [come off heroin]. Couldn't hack it. So, I had to go out stealing. Just the shame of it, I had to go out stealing car radios, car stereos, getting 60 quid [pounds] from them. (male, age 30)

According to interviewees, for a person to desist, scaling down monetary ambitions is only half the battle. One also needs to find a new purpose in life. Generative motivations can apparently fill this void.

Degenerative Lives, Generative Stories

The prototypical example of generativity and ex-deviants might be the case of Bill Sands (1964), an ex-convict who says the only way that he could find "inner peace" and a "sense of accomplishment" was to abandon a successful entrepreneurial career and dedicate himself to helping other ex-convicts change their lives. Like Sands, several sample members assumed the generative role of the "wounded healer" or "professional ex-." Brown (1991) defined "professional exes" as individuals who "have exited their deviant careers by replacing them with occupations in professional counseling" (p. 219). This seems to be an increasingly popular path for former deviants who desist from crime and drugs. As one reintegrated worker told me, "I don't know how much time you've spent around re-covering addicts, but every addict who gives up drugs wants to become a drug counselor."

Although only 3 of the participants in this study had found full-time, paid work as counselors or social workers at the time of the interview, 11

others were doing volunteer work to this regard or hoped to become full-time counselors or youth workers. Two others were employed full time in different careers but were active as volunteers with young offenders. Because of the use of snowball sampling, such volunteers have likely been oversampled in the LDS. Still, the desire among reformed deviants to help others in this process is a well-documented phenomenon. Brown (1991, p. 219) reported that an estimated 72% of the professional counselors working in the over 10,000 substance abuse treatment centers in the United States are former substance abusers. In addition to such professional work, thousands of long-sober individuals freely volunteer their time to helping others in mutual-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

In the LDS, I purposely avoided oversampling members of any particular organization, such as AA or Phoenix House, as these groups can promote consistencies in the language of reform used by their members (Denzin, 1987). Nonetheless, the impulse toward volunteerism and mentoring could be found in almost every narrative:

Hopefully I'll be a probation officer soon—or rather work in the probation service, not as a probation officer. I want to give people my life—you know, experiences—what I been through. You know, tell them what experiences they can have if they do what I done, basically. (male, age 31)

This urge to "give people my life" appears repeatedly in the interviews with desisting people, who use almost identical language in explaining this desire:

Like, the way I see it, if I could stop even one person taking drugs again, it would be enough. I don't want to be a drug counselor or nothing like that, but if you can learn off what I'm telling you and stop one person going through the life that I've gone through, that's an achievement, isn't it? A big achievement, 'cause I wouldn't like anyone to go through what I've gone through and what I've put me family through as well, you know what I mean? (male, age 33)

I now feel as though I can achieve what I've always wanted to achieve, you know, which is gain some qualifications and get a job that I can, um, help other people in, you know. Train and get some full-time employment where I can contribute, you know, and maybe help save—even if I only saved one out of a hundred, you know, um. I know there's people out there, they'll trust me, once they gain my trust and I can tell them things about me. There's things that I haven't told you yet—things I'm just remembering now. Like, I've had fights while under the influence of alcohol, lots of bad things. You know, just try and make the connections, just try and get through to them. (male, age 36)

Participant: I just woke up one morning and said, "I've got to put this to use now." You know, I can actually tell youngsters where I'm coming from and basically what jail's about. And that's what I want to do. That's me aim. It's gonna take me a couple years to get settled in, 'cause I'm actually starting some work now for probation. It's gonna take me six or seven months before I actually start. I'm gonna be buzzin' with that, you know what I mean?

SM: Why do you think that's something you want to do?

Participant: Well, basically, I'm sick of jail, you know, and I know what jail's about. And I know a lot of these youngsters wouldn't want to go to jail. They need guidance. Do you get me? So, I feel as if I can give the guidance. Maybe *if I had ten lads in a room and I could stop one of them going to jail*, I'd have done a job, and that's basically what I want to try and do. If I get one to listen to me, and think, "Well fuckin' hell, look where he's been all his life." I'm talking like ten years in jail, basically half of my life gone. . . . You total all my sentences up, it's over eleven and a half years and I could have done a life sentence. I just want to get through to them. (male, age 30)

A lifetime that is deemed a "waste" or a shame can be "put to use" by saving one—"even just one"—other life from repeating the same mistakes. This cautionary story is intended in particular as a gift for the next generation.

I was saying to [my brother's] kids the other day. I'd sat both of them down the other day, and I said, "Listen, me and your dad have wasted our lives. I don't want you to do what we've done. For 15 or 16 years, me and your dad wasted our lives, and now we want you to take a leaf out of our book." (male, age 33)

Ironically, although the speaker says that his life has been wasted, by living to tell the tale, he has in fact found a social purpose or meaning for this part of his life: It has produced a "book" that he can pass on to the next generation.

Indeed the desire among inmates and ex-offenders to convert their life stories into actual book form seems to be quite common. "For whatever reason, a great many former offenders believe their life history would make an entertaining and perhaps useful contribution to understanding crime and those who commit it" (Shover, 1996, p. 190). This phenomenon may be rooted in the same underlying motivation that is behind the "professional ex-" phenomenon—the desire to make a lasting contribution or leave a positive legacy ("something to show") with one's life.

The professional ex-, according to Lofland (1969), essentially has two

"selves": the deviant person that he or she was and the normal person that he or she is now. "The deviant person that he was is kept very much alive through the practice of relating, even ad nauseam, the character of the deviant person he used to be" (p. 232).

Hopefully, I'll be something to other people. To a few people down by ours, I already am. I know people coming in here [to a voluntary re-integration program] now, and they've found out about it because they've seen me. I led through example. I get a lot of people now, everyone else's ma's whose on drugs, have got me harassed all the time, saying "Can you help our boy, Joe, or whatever?" "What if you just come round for a couple of nights and spend time?" (male, age 36)

The construction or reconstruction of one's life story into a moral tale might therefore, itself, be an important element of sustaining significant behavioral reform.

RECOVERING WISDOM

The moral heroism of the redemption script "serves to make acceptable, explicable and even meritorious the guilt-laden, 'wasted' portions of an Actor's life" (Lofland, 1969, p. 287). This reconstruction also allows the ex-offender to "unabashedly and proudly" announce his or her past, instead of having to run from it (Irwin, 1980, p. 94). Essentially, the desisting ex-offender has found a meaning in his or her otherwise shame-filled past.

The transition from being a model of degeneracy and vice to being a generative role model for the next generation may seem like an extreme shift. Indeed, some may be troubled that long-term ex-offenders could feel so positive about their lives. Yet, this sense of optimism and self-efficacy might be useful for sustaining desistance. For all of its problems, being a criminal provides individuals with at least momentary escapes into excitement, power, and notoriety. If going straight means accepting docility, self-hatred, and stigma, there is little reason to desist from such escapes.

Making good in the face of all the obstacles and risk factors detailed in chapter 3 is hard work. It is far easier to allow oneself to slip back into familiar behavior patterns than face such challenges without one's usual comforting defenses. (As one active offender liked to say, "Better the devil you know.") According to Bandura (1989),

There is a growing body of evidence that human attainments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy. This is because ordinary social realities are strewn with difficulties. They are full of impediments, failures, adversities, setbacks, frustrations and inequities. People must have a robust sense of personal efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed. (p. 1176)

As such, it is the desisting sample members who seem to be distorters of reality (see Seligman, 1991). Yet, rather than criminogenic cognitive distortions, in Bandura's (1989) words, "They exhibit self-enhancing biases that distort appraisals in the positive direction" (p. 1177).

The major components of the redemption script are also largely consistent with what is known about how individuals rationalize different types of life traumas. When individuals suffering from illnesses or other life traumas find some "silver lining" or convince themselves that some benefits have emerged out of their adversity, they tend to adjust better to their situation (e.g. Taylor, 1983; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). People who construct these "positive illusions" also seem to suffer less psychological distress and are less prone to depression (Taylor, 1989).

The difficulty, in the case of ex-offenders, of course, is that transforming a deviant life story into "an inordinately worthwhile personal identity" (Lofland, 1969, p. 283) carries an implicit (and sometimes explicit) attitude toward mainstream morality and justice.

I want to go into some kind of counseling work, because I know I'd be good at it, because I've been there. A lot of the problem with probation is they're just, they're pen pushers, you know, they just sit in the college for a few years, read a book about psychology and they think they know it all, and they don't. They just haven't got a clue. (male, age 24)

[An ex-con] can empathize with you, because he's been there. He knows what it's like to need it [heroin], to be standing there in the rain and the cold for hours waiting for your dealer. He knows what it is like to feel that, you know, humiliated and worthless and just have no respect for yourself at all, like. If someone hasn't been there . . . why should I listen to them [talk about rehabilitation]? Why should anybody? (male, age 31)

The confession that conventional authorities had it "right all along," while seemingly implicit in the act of choosing to desist, does not come easily to the lips of many reformed ex-offenders.

One interviewee explained that he has not become a volunteer with probation because he now supports "The System." Quite to the contrary, he is entering the probation service because he was "so bloody fed up with The System, that I wanted to get in here and try to change some things" (male, age 31). This reformist approach is common to many of the desisting narratives:

SM: Why (would you want a career in) social work?

Participant: I always said that I'd like to work with kids my age, and just the amount of things I've seen done to children by social workers, who are out of hand. . . . There are social

workers who are qualified, but are idiots. You can't tell me about social work! (male, age 28)

I'd love to actually go and work within the system, the prison system. Find out what is really happening in the system, find the faults, and write a report. (female, age 26)

Another participant explained:

The main reason I do this job [working with other ex-cons] isn't because it's easy for me because I've been there and I speak the language. I do this because I still believe in justice. A lot of the people I work with have been shunned by society. They're seen as scum. A lot of people would just as soon kill them. They really would. But I see the diamond [in the rough]. (male, age 30)

In the desisting self-story, the "System" may need more reform than the recovering individual himself or herself. While the ex-offenders in this sample are playing by the rules of mainstream society, they often emphasized their dissatisfaction with the culture that "led" them to offending in the first place (see also Irwin, 1970, p. 156). In fact, rather than overcoming a "criminal value system," the interviewees saw themselves as recovering from society's value system in some sense.

Well, at least I've got food in the cupboard you know. You've got to be grateful for the little things in life. People who have everything don't appreciate what they've got. They take things and people for granted. They treat people like shit. They've got money and they think they're better than you. (female, age 42)

This critique is reflected in the well-known monologue of a desisting ex-offender in the film *Trainspotting*:

Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose Life.

While the speaker, Renton, does eventually go straight by the end of the film, "choosing life" as it were, the antieablishment message is quite clear

Before you judge my past choices as deviant, take a long look at your own life, mate.

This long monologue, quite remarkably, became something of a pop culture mantra among teenagers and university students throughout the United Kingdom. In 1996–1997, the ubiquitous “Choose Life” monologue could be found on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and posters, and a pop song even set the speech to dance music. Although few of these legions of *Trainspotting* fans are themselves former heroin addicts or burglars like the character of Renton in the film, discomfort regarding the transition away from deviance might be somewhat universal among young people. Like the ex-offenders in this sample, many youths may seek to balance this tension by trying to transform the mainstream even while they are joining it. Idealistic passion, overconfidence, and even a touch of self-righteousness may be traits shared by both successful ex-offenders and successful young people as members of both groups seek to make a place for themselves in the world of conventional adults.

III

APPLIED MYTHOLOGY