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THE END OF SECOND ACTS?

The mass warehousing of convicts is a sign of America's faltering belief in second chances. Considering how individuals atone for their crimes can help us restore rehabilitation as an ideal.

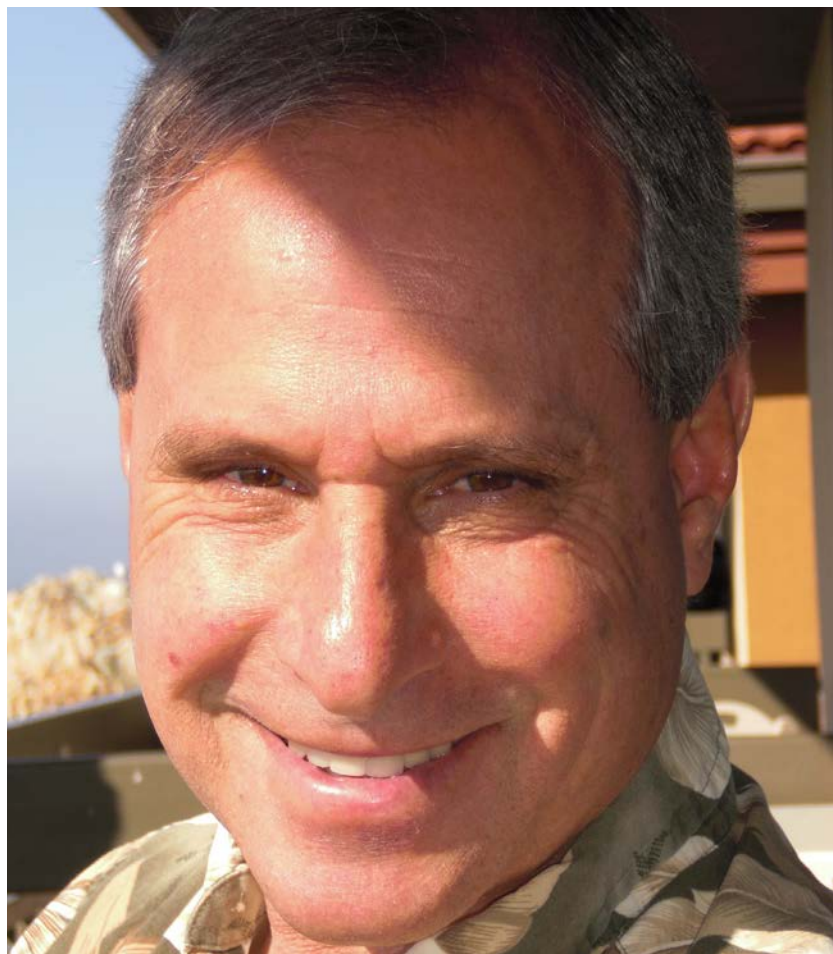
BY **SHADD MARUNA** AND **CHARLES BARBER**

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THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, DAVID DEUTSCH was arrested in Salinas, California, while making his regular drug trafficking run from Los Angeles to San Francisco. When his car was pulled over, he was under the influence of marijuana; police found large amounts of cocaine and marijuana in the vehicle, as well as \$715,000 in cash. Although he had been using and dealing drugs most of his adult life, Deutsch had never previously been caught, so he received a rather lenient sentence (by California standards) of six years in San Quentin State Prison.

The day of his arrest was the last time Deutsch used drugs. Early in his prison term, he says, he decided to dedicate the rest of his life to helping others with drug problems. At San Quentin he volunteered to run a peer tutoring program, joined Narcotics Anonymous, and became a chapel clerk. He published an article on prison education in *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*—unlike most inmates, he held a college degree. After his release, he became a certified addiction counselor and earned a master's degree in social work, with a 4.0 grade point average. Despite all that, he needed no less than 58 letters of recommendation to get his license as an associate



COURTESY DAVID DEUTSCH

David Deutsch

social worker. Once equipped with those testimonials, Deutsch received a formal Certificate of Rehabilitation—declaring him to be officially reformed—from the state of California in 2011. His drive to inspire others to turn their lives around has an almost physical intensity. He currently works as a clinical director for one of the country's largest mental health agencies, where he runs a program for former prisoners who are mentally ill.

Deutsch's story is both extraordinary and highly ordinary. Extraordinary because more than half of all released prisoners are returned to prison for new crimes or parole violations within three

years of their release. Ordinary because most ex-offenders do, eventually, manage to overcome the substantial hurdles they face and “go straight.” After all, crime is a young person’s game. Research on the life paths of prisoners over long stretches of time suggests that around 85 percent of them grow out of criminal behavior by the time they turn 28.

F SCOTT FITZGERALD FAMOUSLY WROTE, in his personal essay of doom, *The Crack-Up* (1936), that there are “no second acts in American lives.” Yet most Americans firmly believe that there are. President George W. Bush, who had his own second chance after years of alcohol abuse, made this case in introducing new prisoner rehabilitation legislation in his 2004 State of the Union speech. “America is the land of second chance, and when the gates of prison open, the path should lead to a better life,” he declared. Dan McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University and author of *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (2006), has spent a lifetime studying the stories that Americans, to borrow a phrase from Joan Didion, tell themselves in order to live. McAdams argues that there is in the American psyche a deeply ingrained belief in a special destiny and self-reinvention that dates

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from the Massachusetts Bay Puritans and has continued through Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger on to the present-day reign of Oprah and 12-step therapy. Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting from France in the 1830s, wrote that Americans “have an immensely high opinion of themselves and are not far from believing that they form a species apart from the rest of the human race.”

Redemption is a centerpiece of nearly every religion and culture, but in none does it loom larger than the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly the American variant. The redemption narrative sustains Hollywood’s happy endings and Madison Avenue’s mantra of endless self-improvement. As book critic Michiko Kakutani wrote a decade ago in *The New York Times*, “There is no public narrative more potent today—or throughout American history—than the one about redemption.” The saga of redemption and reinvention—the creation



GEORGE BURNS / OPRAH WINFREY NETWORK VIA GETTY IMAGES

When disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong took the tried-and-true route of seeking public redemption in a January interview with Oprah Winfrey, viewers were largely unmoved.

of our own individually unique second acts—is arguably *the* American story.

Yet there are signs that our faith in this narrative is slipping. Champion cyclist Lance Armstrong is the latest in a string of fallen celebrities and politicians—from actor Mel Gibson and former New York governor Eliot Spitzer to retired baseball superstars Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds, both emphatically denied spots in the Hall of Fame in the last balloting—who have found that the old rituals of repentance and redemption are not as effective as they used to be.

A more serious early symptom of our declining faith came several decades ago with the loss of belief within the criminal justice system in the possibilities of criminal rehabilitation. Beginning in the 1970s, states gave up this ideal, and began warehousing prisoners in ever

greater numbers. The United States now incarcerates a larger percentage of its citizens than any other country, with about one in 100 adults currently behind bars. About a quarter of the world's prisoners are confined in U.S. prisons and jails. President Bush's Second Chance Act, which funded community and mentoring programs for prisoners after their release, was inadequate when he announced it nine years ago, and the programs have seen their combined budgets shrink from \$100 million in 2010 to \$63 million last year. With nearly 700,000 former prisoners hitting the streets annually across the United States, such sums are little more than token gestures. Far more is spent simply to put people behind bars and keep them there. California alone has a corrections budget of \$9 billion.

Americans still love a good redemption story, at least in movies and other imagined worlds. (The middling *Shawshank Redemption* is consistently ranked online as one of the country's greatest films, and *Les Misérables* has been one of the longest-running shows on Broadway.) But they are often less convinced about such accounts in reality. Many would regard a story such as David Deutsch's with either skepticism (interpreting his change as a con game) or hostility (asking why he should be allowed to be so successful after what he has done). Indeed Deutsch says that he met resistance early in his journey. His parole officer took a wait-and-see attitude, while the criminal justice system as a whole operated on a simpler assumption: once a criminal, always a criminal.

THE SKEPTICISM ABOUT SECOND ACTS is no longer confined to corrections systems. Once universally known as the land of irrepressible optimism, America seems to have entered a sustained period of doubt, a kind of antiswagger. A series of national and international cataclysms have shaken Americans' traditional confidence. A recession that never seems to end has left many resigned to just hanging on. Upward mobility, the traditional elixir

of American society, seems increasingly out of reach. Almost half of American boys reared in households in the bottom quintile of income stay there as adults, according to a recent study, and only eight percent rise to the highest quintile. In Britain, young men who start out in the bottom quintile have a 50 percent better chance of rising to the top than their counterparts in the United States. Higher education, the most reliable avenue of upward mobility, is significantly less attainable than it used to be. Family income has been largely stagnant, while the cost of attending a public university has risen 60 percent in the last 20 years.

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A less obvious factor in the waning of the redemption script is the rise of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which, with their obsessive focus on the chronicling of personal micro-events, have drawn many users away from the

larger narratives and collective themes that provide hope and inspiration. Only other people can provide redemption, yet social media are a boon to narcissism, calling for us to publish and advertise our every move, no matter how incidental. As Daniel Boorstin wrote, with remarkable prescience, a half-century ago in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, “We have fallen in love with our own image, with images of our making, which turn out to be images of ourselves.”

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Each generation tends to have its characteristic or favored mood or diagnosis. During the Cold War we had the Age of Anxiety; in the late 1970s it was “malaise.” In the Prozac-fueled 1990s the diagnosis was depression, followed soon after by attention deficit disorder, often treated with Adderall. The signature diagnosis of the last decade may be PTSD: posttraumatic stress disorder. Legions of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have received that di-

agnosis, and enormous resources have gone into its treatment. But trauma of all sorts—from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina to Newtown—now feels like a constant on the American scene. Memoirs of suffering such as James Frey’s best-selling *A Million Little Pieces* (2003)—later caught up in scandal when it emerged that Frey had embellished his hardships as a recovering drug and alcohol addict—have burgeoned into a new genre of “misery lit,” a far cry from the long line of self-improvement tales descended from the Horatio Alger stories. The victim—or perhaps “survivor”—has become one of our reigning cultural figures.

Highly publicized tragedies such as the December massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, that left 26 children and adults dead pose the greatest threat to our belief in the redeemability of the most marginalized among us. (And when such events occur, as Newtown did, in the kind of tranquil, upper-middle-class community to which many Americans aspire, they subtract all the more from our hopes.) Take, for example, the story of Sister Karen Klimczak, a Catholic nun who was murdered in Buffalo, New York, on Good Friday in 2006. Two decades earlier she had opened HOPE House (the acronym stands for



DON HEUPEL / AP IMAGES

Sister Karen Klimczak started distributing “I leave peaceprints” signs before she was murdered in 2006. Bishop Edward Kmicc of Buffalo, New York, was given one of them after the memorial service for Klimczak, and they are still seen in the city today.

Home of Positive Experience), a Buffalo-based residential treatment center for ex-offenders, where she also lived. She was known as a whirlwind of grace and positive energy, described locally as “Mother Teresa in fast-forward.” Klimczak was murdered in her room by new resident Craig Lynch nine days after his release from prison, where he had served time for car theft. She walked in as he was stealing her cell phone, and

he strangled her in an attempt to keep her from screaming. Hours before she was murdered, Klimczak had said about the man who would kill her, “I think Craig’s doing well. I think he’s going to be all right.” Her funeral is believed to have been the largest in Buffalo history. After killing Klimczak, Lynch traded in the cell phone for a rock of crack. When he tried to smoke it, it wouldn’t light. The rock was fake.

There was a horrible forerunner to Klimczak's murder. Several years earlier, she had moved her halfway house to a former rectory and renamed it Bissonette House in honor of a Catholic priest who had once lived there. The Reverend Joseph Bissonette was killed in the building in 1987, at the height of the crack era, by two teens who had sought him out for help. In the spirit of forgiveness, Sister Karen had made it a point to lead prayers every morning in the ground-floor room where Bissonette was killed.

If, as a result of tragedies such as those in Buffalo and Newtown, Americans have become more cynical about hope and second chances, who can blame them? Perhaps F. Scott Fitzgerald was right about second acts. Certainly for Fitzgerald, who wrote so much about the promise of youth yet died an alcoholic at 44 without ever equaling the dazzling success of his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, there was no second act. Maybe America is finally facing an uncomfortable reality.

DAN McADAMS ARGUES THAT THE American redemption script has two key components. The first is the belief that we, as individuals and as a people, are fortunate, blessed, or "chosen for a special, manifest destiny" to do

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great things in the world. The second is the conviction that by responding successfully to hardships and tribulations, we will only grow stronger and better. We will take bad things and create good things out of them. Both beliefs are under threat. Americans have probably never been as special and blessed as they believed themselves to be, but they are particularly less special today. In many areas, from educational achievement to average life span to rates of violent death and infant mortality, measurable evidence shows that we are special only by virtue of our poor standing compared with other countries. And as for our capacity to overcome adversity, it may be limited in the future by increased global competition and environmental challenges.

There may be something to be gained by loosening our grip on the

redemption narrative. It has promoted a belief in American exceptionalism that, while serving America and the world well during the world wars and at other times, has often bred national arrogance and self-righteousness. George W. Bush, who so embodied the second act, also embraced American exceptionalism in foreign policy, with far-reaching and destructive results.

There is a counternarrative to the redemption script. Its sources of inspiration include Shakespeare, the Greek dramatists, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the tragic narrative, the hero suffers a plight that he is not responsible for and cannot overcome. Many non-American cultures are rooted in this more tragic, perhaps more realistic view of the world. Such a narrative would allow for a more balanced approach, a realistic appraisal of the challenges and rewards of living. Tragedy, McAdams writes, “teaches us . . . lessons that serve as psychologically useful counterpoints to the redemptive self. Tragedy calls into question the belief that any particular individual is blessed and destined to achieve good things. It looks with skepticism upon the kind of ideological certitude celebrated in the redemptive self.”

Most important, McAdams says, tragedy brings people together. “People often

identify moments of greatest intimacy in their lives as those times when they shared with others deep sadness and pain.” As veterans of any war know, tragedy creates bonds that those who haven’t shared it can never fully understand.

Perhaps a greater acceptance of suffering would relieve Americans of a pressure to pursue happiness in a world that quite often doesn’t make it possible. As a Swedish woman once said to us at a reading, “In America, everybody says ‘Have a nice day’ and everybody is supposed to be happy. You ask people how they are doing, and they say, ‘Great!’ In Sweden, you ask people how they are doing, and they say, ‘Terrible!’ But you get to know them, and they are doing fine, while the Americans, once you get to know them, are all on Prozac and miserable.”

Yet the American redemption script has many virtues. Researchers have consistently found that adults who hold such beliefs are far more likely to be successful than others in areas such as parenting, social support, and religious and civic involvement. Our own research on the reintegration of ex-prisoners suggests that developing a personal redemption script may be essential for them to overcome the many obstacles they face. We have studied the life histories

of hundreds of men and women with long records of drug and property offenses, some of whom desist from crime and others who carry on undeterred by any punishment. Both groups face the same obstacles (poverty, childhood abuse, addiction, poor education, the stigma of a criminal record) and have similar personality traits. What appear to distinguish them from each other are their subjective orientations, or understandings of the world. They live by very different stories. Persistent offenders often told us they were tired of living in a cycle of crime and imprisonment, but they portrayed themselves as being doomed to their path by circumstances beyond their control. They saw their lives in terms of what we call “condemnation scripts,” as a kind of lottery they have lost. By contrast, ex-prisoners who succeed in putting crime behind them seek to transform their tragic pasts into resources for the future, remaking, as criminologist (and former prisoner) Charles Terry writes, “a seemingly intractable pattern of deviance into a life of benevolence and social contribution.”

The desistance process involves getting in touch with a real or core self that was fundamentally good and making explicit efforts to “make good” and give back to others, particularly young people

vulnerable to going down the wrong path. The redemption script appears, in other words, to be self-fulfilling.

Our research also shows how redemption occurs in a practical sense, and how we might maximize “redemption opportunities” for people who have been on the wrong side of the law. Successful reintegration appears to require not only that a person stop bad behaviors but actively make amends and reparations to prove his reform to family members and the wider community. So it would be wise to incorporate into the criminal justice system more ways for people to make good, such as opportunities to do volunteer work.

The criminal justice system is rife with ceremonies of stigmatization. Why can't we do more to celebrate those who have changed their lives?

The kind of counseling Deutsch does—delivered by peers who have “been there and done that”—holds special credibility among offenders. Studies show that it is both effective

and cost efficient. After all, redemption is clearly a two-way street: It requires not only behavioral change by the individual, but ratification of that change by others. People say, “I redeemed myself *in the eyes* of my family,” or that the White Sox have “redeemed themselves *in the eyes* of their fans.” It is the “eyes” that matter, whether they belong to one’s god or to community members or to the state. In Deutsch’s case, the official Certificate of Rehabilitation he received was enormously important. Validation of his success by an external source such as the state (the very entity that had sentenced him) served to make his internal journey incontrovertibly real. The criminal justice system is rife with ceremonies of stigmatization. When people have served their time and made behavioral progress, why can’t we do more to ratify and even celebrate their effort?

SIX YEARS AFTER HE LEFT SAN QUENTIN, David Deutsch is thriving. He remarried several years ago and is advancing in his field, becoming, as he puts it, a “poster boy” for the promise of redeeming lives seemingly lost to crime. He is routinely asked to share his story with prisoners and with young people, showing them the living, breathing

example of his personal redemption. Even more remarkably, Sister Karen Klimczak’s supporters in Buffalo and around the world appear more inspired than ever to carry on her message of hope. Bissonette House continues its work today with new volunteers and donations.

America’s belief in redemption has been tested and stretched in recent decades. We have become sadder but wiser as a nation, less hopeful, more realistic. Yet this core aspect of our culture’s narrative remains surprisingly intact. Without it, it seems, we might not be American. ■

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CHARLES BARBER is a lecturer in psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine and the author of two books on mental health and psychiatry. He directs the Connection Institute, which is conducting a study of the life stories of residents of a New Haven, Connecticut, halfway house. He is completing a novel about a depressed detective who redeems himself by solving a crime.