

Book Review: Damon West, *The Change Agent: How a Former College QB Sentenced to Life in Prison Transformed His World*. New York: Post Hill Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-1642931020 (Hardcover). 352 Pages. \$26.

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In the book *The Change Agent: How a Former College QB Sentenced to Life in Prison Transformed His World*, Damon West tells a compelling story of redemption, grace, transformation and hope—a success story about the American criminal justice system. The narrative is about a promising young man with the world at his feet who stumbled at the critical crossroad of assured greatness. West was a quarterback for the University of North Texas when a sharp twist in his life’s journey

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occurred due to an injury. Though the book starts with West's fall from grace into the cracks of the American criminal justice system, it is his journey from the despair of a 65 year prison sentence that makes it a captivating read. West relays these events in 28 chapters, including a prologue and an epilogue.

There are obvious salient contemporary criminal justice issues that West's incredible story highlights. One is the punitive crime policy that has not served the United States well, leading to an era of mass incarceration. The United States with only five percent of the global population has 25% of the total inmate population in the world (Collier, 2014). Even more significant in West's case is the dire need for effective social services and a comprehensive proactive plan on drug rehabilitation in a period of overwhelming drug and opioid crisis. One can only wonder how different West's life could have been if he had received proper help for his heroin addiction, before his entire world fell apart as he went down the path of crime to feed his addiction. A point in question is vividly illustrated in chapter two, where his situation cannot be divorced from the sexual assaults which he experienced at the age of 9, ugly memories etched in the fragile mind of a kid approaching adolescence, which he describes as an "activating event." The slide into deviant behavior began innocuously. He began to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana at the age of 12 to cope with the psychological hurt. His helpless parents resorted to counseling and prayer to help their son. But nothing could save West as the inevitable slide into a life of drugs, alcohol and crime ensued.

The goals of the correctional system are evident in West's unusual story. Redemption and transformation are evident in the correction goals of restoration and rehabilitation in West's story when he explains the "coffee bean" concept in chapter 13. He got the coffee bean concept from an older African American inmate he calls Mr. Jackson, at the county jail. Mr. Jackson asked West what would happen to a carrot, an egg and a coffee bean when placed in boiling water. West rightly confirms that a carrot will become soft, an egg becomes hard boiled; but did not know what would happen to a coffee bean. Mr. Jackson states that a coffee bean changes the water to coffee. Mr. Jackson used the coffee bean analogy to explain to West that there are three types of people that exist in prison. He claimed that West did not want to be like the soft carrot or the hard-boiled egg, but that West should be a coffee bean and change the prison environment with his positive attitude. Jackson told West that his survival in prison will depend on his mental fortitude. West states that at first this analogy did not make sense to him

but eventually gave him a psychological boost to successfully navigate the brutality of the American prison system. He began to understand the full import of Jackson's message when he settled into prison life. Henceforth, he began to use his time in prison productively, one of which was writing a writ of habeas corpus, which led to his early release from prison and to ultimately writing this book. Jackson and West's coffee bean concept reminds us of the capacity of the correctional system if it is anchored on a truly rehabilitative philosophy, changing criminal thinking errors (Alarid & Reichel, 2018). West had a couple of other things going for him that helped him overcome the ordeal of prison life. He was a college athlete. He had a great family support system. He also had the benefit of a college education and an unbending determination to emerge from his hellish experience unbroken.

Other correctional goals like retribution, and deterrence which align with a more punitive stance are also obvious in West's story when he describes the sentencing phase of his trial. He received a 65-year sentence which is a harsh sentence for a non-violent, burglar with no prior criminal record of violence. Though he served only 7 years, eventually, he must be on parole for the remaining 58 years of his sentence. Parole is a measure in place to ensure he does not re-offend and serves as a deterrent for future criminal behavior. However, we believe the retributive stance taken in his sentencing to 65 years was excessive.

It is important to note that West's story is not that of the typical American prisoner who has been incarcerated for drug crimes or first-time non-violent offenders who, due to lack of financial capacity, are compelled to settle for a plea deal that may not be commensurate to their crimes. It is not the typical story of the disproportionately represented minorities in prisons who often don't get the justice deserved in the American criminal justice system. For example, 1 in 3 black boys and 1 in 6 Latino boys will be incarcerated at least once in their lifetime compared to 1 in 17 white boys (American Civil Liberties Union, (ACLU), n.d). In addition, Blacks also tend to receive harsher sentences than whites (ACLU, 2014; Franklin, 2018; Mitchell, Haw, Pfeifer, & Meissner, 2005). These injustices in incarceration rates are evident throughout the criminal justice system and have been documented by researchers (Kelly, 2016; Tonry, 2004).

Many questions, however, come to mind. West received a rather punitive 65-year sentence for a first-time non-violent offender. He was a victim of a punitive crime policy anchored on mass incarceration, West and many others like him received stiff sentences that were not commensurate with their offenses and criminal history. For long, the "get

tough on crime” rhetoric has been the mantra of politicians and district attorneys in the United States who are heavily involved in making criminal justice policies. This process is unlike many other countries in the world where criminal justice and correctional administrators typically draft such policies (Tonry, 2004). In addition, criminal justice policies have often been crafted based on emotion and feelings of politicians, what Mears (2017) calls “intuition” (pg. xiii), rather than on evidence-based policies and programs that have been empirically proven to reduce crime and recidivism, and keep the public safe (Kelly, 2016; Mears, 2017). Mears (2017) further states that there are two main problems with the American criminal justice system; policies and programs are introduced without any scientific/empirical proof that they work, and; two, policies are made in a piece-meal fashion without considering the whole system. Therefore, there is no real “system” in place that looks at programs and policies holistically and how they affect the overall criminal justice system. Consequently, one policy may look good for one problem but have negative consequences for other aspects of the criminal justice system. A good example is the War on Drugs with several laws enacted to deal with the increasing drug problem without contemplating that it would lead to a burden on the correctional system and taxpayers’ money. Consequently, this punitive stance led to West’s harsh sentence.

With the benefit of hindsight, the punitive crime policy which precipitated the war on drugs, leading to an era of mass incarceration was counterproductive (Clear & Frost, 2014; Kelly, 2016; Mears, 2017). It created more problems than solutions. What was needed was a rehabilitative drug policy focused on helping individuals with addiction get treatment, rather than criminalizing them. Dealing with the demand side of the drug epidemic rather than a narrow concentration on the supply would have been more effective in stemming the flow of drugs. The dark side of the drug war cannot, however, be ignored.

It is important to mention that researchers have pointed out how differently the opioid crisis is being treated as a case in point (Smith, 2017; Sung, 2018; Young, 2019). The approach to the opioid epidemic is being treated more as a public health crisis rather than as criminal behavior. The response is decidedly less punitive, decriminalized, rehabilitative and is generally more tailored to getting affected individuals help, rather than punishment (Netherland & Hansen, 2017). It is important to note that despite the above argument, current opioid resolutions may be as a result of drug rehabilitation being addressed as a public health issue due to its inclusion in the Affordable Care Act, a move that has been applauded by professionals across medicine

(Abraham et al., 2017) and criminal justice (Kelly, 2016). However, we do not know if West could have been helped with drug rehabilitation.

The Change Agent shows that there are two main areas connected to Damon West's story that need to be addressed in today's criminal justice system; (1) the need for justice for all and (2) the need for enhanced drug rehabilitation and social services. Justice is not served when a first-time non-violent offender gets a 65-year sentence for burglary. There is a need for consistent sentencing policies to ensure fairness in the justice system (Kelly, 2016). Secondly, West *may* have been saved if he had access to quality drug rehabilitation and effective social services. Extant literature has already established the nexus between drug use and crime (Belenko, 2019; Contreras & Hipp, 2019; French et al., 2000). In addition, recognition of drug use as a health rather than a criminal justice issue is a move in the right direction. Finally, social service advocacy in the criminal justice system is increasingly being recognized (Kelly, 2016). These changes in policies are likely to provide help for people who need them and will most likely divert many people from the criminal justice system. For example, drug courts have been found to be successful in reducing recidivism by 8-14% (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2017). Therefore, decriminalization of the war on drugs, diversion policies and programs like drug courts, drug treatment and social service advocacy have the capacity to provide help for those who need them and reduce mass incarceration perpetuated through the war on drugs (Clear & Frost, 2014; Kelly, 2016; Mears, 2017; Tonry, 2004); a policy which is costly to the correctional system and taxpayers.

In conclusion, we believe *The Change Agent* is a story of hope anchored on positivity and changing thinking errors. It is a remarkable story that shows what hope can do, and how transformation can take place when an individual has the help and support to be rehabilitated and restored, even when they have made wrong detours in life. We recommend that every criminal justice professional involved in making correctional decisions and impacting lives, read this book. It provides readers with a different perspective, one from an ex-offender, one of hope, transformation and rehabilitation that is rarely heard in America's criminal justice system.

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