From My Perspective...

**Don’t Be Afraid to Change What You Know**

**Eve Brank, JD, PhD**

At 14, I knew I wanted to be a prison psychologist. Over the course of the next 14 years, my pursuit of that career shifted three times to lead me to where I am today.

My interest in crime and prisons started because I was too busy to buy a book or visit a library before a family vacation in 1988. I was heading into the ninth grade the following year, and my time was consumed with cheer practices, trips to the beach, and hanging out with my friends. As I was packing for a two-week RV trip with my parents, I realized I had not taken the time to get a book to take with me—there were no e-readers in 1988. Thankfully, we had a bookcase full of books at home that I had not read. I chose two: *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathanial Hawthorne and *Life Sentence* by Chuck Colson. I do not remember why I chose either; perhaps the thought of being in an RV for two weeks with my parents felt like a life sentence to my 14-year-old self, and maybe it was the drawing of Hester Prynne on the cover of Hawthorne’s book that intrigued me.

You are probably familiar with *The Scarlet Letter* and the strict legal code that ruled Hester and her daughter, Pearl. That unforgiving historical society was juxtaposed with the words of Colson that focused on notions of rehabilitation and restorative justice for those in prison and released from prison. Colson, a top aide to then- President Nixon, pled guilty to obstruction of justice in a case related to the Watergate scandal. His pre-prison religious conversion combined with his experiences with fellow inmates led Colson to start Prison Fellowship when he was released. Prison Fellowship focuses from a religious perspective on the restoration of prisoners and their families.

I read these books as my mom, dad, and I rolled across the country in our old RV. Swirling around together with these two books were the different parts of the country I was seeing—from the back roads of Tennessee to the strip of Las Vegas. There were so many different people and paths they chose or had thrust upon them. The sights, people, and these books, drew me to the idea of working within the adult criminal justice system.

In college, I majored in sociology and psychology thinking I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. During this time, two somewhat trivial things happened that changed my course. First, I was working on my honors thesis and I wanted to do a study with inmates and their relationships with prison staff. My faculty advisor had a contact in the juvenile detention facility and suggested I do my study there instead of in a prison. Preparing for that project and working in the detention facility turned my attention to juveniles and their needs within the juvenile justice system, and my interest in adult prisons lessened.

As I was preparing to submit my applications to graduate school in clinical psychology, I had the opportunity to do an internship at an early delin­quency intervention program. My internship supervi­sor allowed me to lead group and individual sessions. This is where the second hiccup came that changed my path. I really did not enjoy talking to these juveniles. I remember my mind wandering to research questions while they talked and thinking, “When do I get to talk?” I stubbornly thought I still needed to apply to clini­cal psychology because that was what I had planned to do. Thankfully, I also applied and was admitted to the University of Nebraska’s Law-Psychology program. As a graduate and law student, I was able to focus on social psychology and law. I was also able to work on issues relevant to the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Throughout my graduate school training, I vowed I did not want to be a professor and worked to estab­lish myself to be most suitable for work in a research or policy advocacy center. Here is where my third shift came. I had a one-year-old daughter when I finished graduate school, and my husband was entering medical school. I ended up getting a job as a lecturer at the same university where my husband was in school because there weren’t any research or policy advocacy centers in the city where we were. I enjoyed teaching classes and getting to do some research; working with gradu­ate students made me realize I wanted to be a profes­sor. I absolutely loved the mentoring, the exchange of knowledge, and the apprenticeship model. I was very fortunate to become a professor at the University of Florida and later at the University of Nebraska, where my research focuses on the way the law intervenes, and sometimes interferes, in family and personal decision making.

As you can see, I did not set out to be a college pro­fessor, but I absolutely love my career. In a somewhat ironic twist, I recently became the director of a research center that was only an option for me because of my background as a professor. Because I allowed myself to shift my focus and not be too inflexible in my pursuit of what I thought I wanted to do, I ended up in a fulfilling career with wonderful students and colleagues.

I was fortunate to meet Chuck Colson relatively early in my career. I told him that one of his books indirectly influenced me to pursue my career as a pro­fessor. After our meeting, he followed up with a personal letter that I have framed and sitting in my home office. I reread that letter whenever I need a reminder to be flexible with my goals and take chances. My advice to you is the same: Know what you want to do but don’t be afraid to change what you know.

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