**“ex-convict” should not be a permanent tattoo**

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Humans are imperfect. We are told to “Think before [we] act”. Yet there are times when we act on impulse - whether it be as small as eating a large bowl of ice-cream late in the night or as large as committing a crime. There are consequences to our actions, we gain two pounds for late-night eating or we serve jail time for a crime. We can easily make amends for eating ice-cream - just exercise off the calories. However, committing a crime comes not only with the punishment of serving jail time, but also a permanent tattoo - “ex-convict”.

Is a felony really a life sentence? Can stigmas never be washed away?

In Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester committed a sin in the eyes of the Puritan community - adultery. As punishment, Hester had to stand on the scaffold for three hours in public and was sentenced to wear the scarlet letter, “a mark of shame”, for the rest of her life.

At age 16, Reginald Dwayne Betts commited a carjacking. He was caught, sentenced as an adult and served 8 years in maximum security prisons.

Before they committed the crime, they were simply common people. One was a loyal wife and religious follower; the other was an “honor student with braces”. Anyone can make a mistake; but to let a mistake define a person is judgemental.

After a brief confinement and public humiliation, Hester “bestowed all her superfluous means in charity”. She dedicated “much of the time...in making coarse garments for the poor”. No one is so devoted to helping people in need as Hester. To have “so much power to do, and power to sympathize” as Hester did eventually change the views of a few Puritans; many started to refer to the scarlet A as “able” rather than “adultery” (Hawthorne, 58). Seeing Hester willingly help people, who were witness to her public shaming, was admirable.

In prison, Betts dedicated himself to literature. He learned the meaning of life and discovered the beauty that life could offer. After 8 years with another year in solitary confinement, Betts was released at the age of 24 and chose to continue his education. He received his B.A. and M.F.A., became a Radcliffe fellow at Harvard and graduated from Yale Law School. A quick scan of Betts’ curriculum vitae reveals his many achievements: a poet, a memoirist, and a national spokesperson of the Campaign for Youth Justice. He also founded a book club for youth and represented minorities to help fight against discrimination.

Merely looking at the surface, the two stories may seem like fairy tales. However, the realities were much crueler than I thought. On their path towards redemption, both Betts and Hester faced discrimination. Both were branded by their scarlet letter.

After the term of confinement, Hester’s was transformed into an outcast of the society. People looked at her in disdain and even children mocked her wherever she went. Hester was seen as “the general symbol…of woman’s frailty and sinful passion” and “as the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (55). The poor “often reviled the hand that was stretched forth to succor them” and women “were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into her heart” (105). The trail never ended, “To-morrow would bring its own trial with it; so, would the next day, and so would the next; each its own trail and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous” (55).

After being released, it was very difficult for Betts to enter into the workforce and society. He was denied access to education and jobs from many places because of the record of felony. Even 20 years after the crime, Betts was still being discriminated against because of the stigma. He received a letter from the Connecticut Bar Examining Committee that denied his admission despite his amazing accomplishments. The committee stated that Betts’s record showed a lack of “honesty, trustworthiness, diligence or reliability” in Betts’s character. The committee took on the role of determining “good moral character”, and their decision clearly conveyed a message: “a felony is a life sentence”.

Although both Betts and Hester managed to successfully redeem themselves, others don’t have the opportunity to do so.

According to Couloute L. and Kopf D.’s analysis in their article *Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people*, the unemployment rate of people with a felony record in 2008 was 27.3%, exceedingly even higher than the unemployment during the Great Depression. Besides unemployment, those convicted of a felony are denied certain privileges such as the right to vote. As with Betts initially, having a criminal record is a hindrance to licensure. Licensing authorities often determine what is considered “good moral character” without much guidance. Failure to meet the criteria of a “good moral character” bans the individual. Needless to say, failure is a common occurrence for people with a criminal record.

So here I pose again: Is a felony really a life sentence? Can stigmas never be washed away?

The answer is no. People should not be labeled as ex-convicts for life, many are able to make amends.

As Betts confessed that “[he]was wrong and [he] was caught, and the best thing [he] could do was admit it and find a way to make amends*”.* Hester became the “Sister of Mercy”, using her limited power to help the poor and the needy. Similarly, Betts studied law and aspired to do post-conviction work and represent people on pardons. They became contributing members of society and proved that people can achieve absolution.

Everyone deserves a “second chance”. At the very least, they deserve the chance to prove to the world they can be better.

All humans are prone to mistakes. It’s the obligation of the society to foster a system that gives people opportunity to redeem themselves and become contributing members. So yes, “Think before you act”; but maybe society should also consider thinking before making hypercritical judgements.

**Citations:**

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