

The following ideas were written in 1971 when I was a full-time teacher at Auburn Correctional Facility in Auburn, NY. I began teaching at the prison in August 1969. This paper summarizes the observations and struggles I was trying to understand as I sought ways to teach English, reading, writing to the adult male prisoners who passed through my classroom.

THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF THE CRIMINAL

by

Lucien X. Lombardo
Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA 23527
757-683-3800
llombard@odu.edu

“...if we can bring to bear what is often called sympathy, or, more intensively empathy.”

R.D. Laing, THE DIVIDED SELF, p.32.

Criminality exists in the heart of society. It weaves its way through the fabric of social interaction. Humanity also exists in the heart of society. When we are able to express ourselves to others we are able to project our share of human existence. Those of us able to articulate and communicate our ideas and emotions with any degree of expertise find it possible to function within the society, though at times the struggle to survive is a difficult one. Because we are able to put ourselves into spheres of social interaction, our selves become more a part of and therefore have a stake in the existing social fabric. The self that can (or at least thinks that it can) communicate goes beyond itself. It is able to incorporate itself into the values of those around it; it is able to evaluate and choose among various alternatives that it perceives; it can adapt and settle for less than it really wants. It can become apathetic to the problems of others because it

has the ability to at least recognize those problems. The individual relates to his group, to anonymous others. The individual maintains the safety of his self by isolating it from any other individual self. The individual cannot allow his self to appear naked before another self. He does not know how. His ability to survive and function lies in this ignorance.

But what of the criminal, the man who, in one way or another, breaks society's codes? What kind of self does he bring to bear on the social environment that surrounds him? What does he see around him? How does he see himself? How does he view his relationship with the world?

Our criminal is a man of intense human feeling. He sincerely cares about others. He desires more than anything else to express these feelings to others. Whenever he strives to express himself and be heard, however, he finds himself facing a pair of impenetrable barriers. The first is the apathy of the communicative self of the others around him. To him they are insular, self-group contained. From the criminals' perspective, they communicate nothing but banalities and trivialities. He is unable to extract any meaningful message from their jabber. As he is confined, either in prison or on the street, he sees others come and go with freedom. They are free: the workers, the teachers, the police. "They are all free", he says to himself. But in reality are they any more free than our criminal. They are free from the walls, the cell blocks, the tiers of cells and bars, from the all-seeing eye. But our criminal asks, "For what are they all free?" What is their purpose. They are shallow, uneducated, and blind to personal feeling, unable to see beyond their selves and groups. Sure our criminal values freedom and truly desires it. But more than anything else he wants a purpose to exist outside the walls. Freedom without purpose

is to the criminal confinement.

The prisoner's second barrier is himself. He feels, he sees like an artist. He knows social hypocrisy. He feels other person's apathy more strongly than perhaps anyone else. He needs to communicate, or at least feels the need. He needs to be seen as a person by another person in order to see himself as a person and verify his worth as an individual. In his sense he feels, senses, these needs. However, he is unable or only vaguely able to transform these feelings and sensations into knowledge existing in his conscious.

Our criminal is equipped with almost a total lack of the ability to grasp the concept of context. Everything and everyone which presents itself to him appears without context. It is merely an accidental presence confronting him, having no relation whatsoever to his past or future experience. He is incapable of confronting a context. The context must be transformed into his immediate experience, it cannot remain an experience he has as an observer. Thus he is always active in his environment, and is not capable of being passive. Everything must become his property, his experience, part of his being.

Although he is always the actor, our criminal knows that he cannot communicate, and he knows or thinks that others can. He feels that he wants to communicate. He knows that other do not. He is suspicious of other when they try to communicate. His past experience has taught him to be so. He lacks skills in language; words to him are things to be conquered, things to be swallowed up but not understood. Words are foreign to his experience. What words he does know he often uses to take advantage of other's lack of desire to communicate on the person level. He uses the other's aloofness to destroy him.

Because others cannot feel person as he does, he is still able to make the other perform to his liking, even with his lack of communicating skills.

He cannot read or write. He cannot grasp ideas as cognitions. Ideas are only vague feelings which emanate from his self. He feels and can empathize in his gut. He will not be categorized, but is. He cannot fight it. He cannot cope with the world he feels and understands because he cannot compromise his feelings. An artist in a similar situation becomes creative, he has a skill with which he can communicate. A criminal becomes destructive: towards others, towards property, but always toward himself. Our criminal is incapable of being truly apathetic.

Try to think what it is like to be alone in the world, alone with only your thoughts and inner most feelings. All you can do is feel. You don't know what is happening to you, but you are sure that something is happening. You must keep these feelings and sensations from becoming real, even though it is only through their becoming real an expressed can you gain release. But even if you could express them, no one would listen. Those who are able to communicate won't; those who will communicate, are not able. Anonymity, turning back on the self is the only escape. You must destroy your only chance for release in order to survive, but your survival cannot save your self. Outside the walls, inside the walls, in the needle, the bottle, the pills, the gun, in sex, the answer is always the same. What you feel you are not capable of knowing, and even if you could know it, you would not communicate it, because no one would care. Those around you who feel the same share your predicament. The others who can know, do not feel or do not wish to feel.

You scream to be recognized, but you do not know what you want to be recognized. You would not recognize it yourself. You scream to be understood, but you cannot express what you want others to understand. You want someone to get inside you, to grab you by the guts, turn you inside-out and hold you before a mirror so you can know what you feel and understand what you want others to understand.