CONTRACT PAROLE

Applied, and applied properly, Contract Parole is the best possible means to ensure that inmates leave prison both qualified and likely to be productive members of society. This in turn means that, properly applied, Contract Parole is the best possible insurance against recidivism.

Written by
John W. Eddings

A man sentenced to 904 years
plus three life sentences

Written by John W. Eddings

Contract Parole
Danger Alert!
The Lord Looseth the Prisoners

Edited by John W. Eddings

California Inmate Firefighter
Calm My Troubled Heart (*The Book of Contemporary Psalms*)
Lucy's Magical Five Leaf Clover

The author drew from his experiences during 43 years of incarceration (four as a juvenile, 39 as an adult) to write *Contract Parole*. It was originally written in 1993 and has since gone through several revisions. Although registered with the Library of Congress in 2001, this is the first printing.

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www.eph428.org

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Let him who stole steal no more: but rather let him labour,
working with his hands the thing which is good,
that he may have to give to him that needeth.
—Ephesians 4:28 (KJV)

Dedicated to:

William Gerald Eddings
Loving dad, wonderful man—*Happy Father's Day!*

&

Dr. Regina B. Shearn
I would not be where I am today without her

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.
—Proverbs 13:12

Contract Parole

The old adage, "You can lead a horse to water…but you can't make him drink," has probably been around ever since man captured and tamed his first horse. This adage has come to be oft used in relation to stubborn rebellion, willful disobedience, and all sorts of other inexplicable behavior. One of its more apt and common uses in our time has been in reference to felons repeatedly returning to prison: *You can lead a horse to water…but you can't make him drink.*

The thing is: there *is* a way to lead the inmate to water *and to make him drink.*

You just have to use some "horse sense."

* * *

Three major hurdles stand in the way of an inmate's rehabilitation.

First, sound academic and vocational opportunities must be made available—with emphasis on the word sound.

Contrary to what the public may believe, such opportunities are not always available.

Years back—even before the great prison "overhaul" that began in the early 1990's razed so many of the educational and other beneficial programs offered to inmates—the education department at the facility where I was incarcerated at the time was totally eliminated. We were told: "This is a prison, not an institution; education is not a concern."

Not a concern?

Later, at another prison, I enrolled in the vocational drafting class being offered there. But when I got to the class, instead of being taken through the steps in this highly technical area of learning, the teacher gave me my books, a list of exercises for the course, and told me to let him know if I had any questions.

My fellow students took me through the steps; my "teacher" drew a salary he did not earn.

I have provided one example where no educational opportunities were available at all. I provided yet another example where the opportunity that was available was definitely *un*sound.

Inadequacies of this nature must be satisfactorily addressed before anything else can reasonably be considered.

* * *

Another hurdle, and arguably the toughest one of all from the inmates' point of view, is peer pressure.

Most inmates entering the prison system for the very first time are nervous. The "war stories" they hear before getting there make fitting in with the crowd their top priority. They want to be seen as "stand up convicts" and "cool." They have not realized yet that if they will only carry themselves like men (or, as mature women, as that may apply), none of the rest really matters. By the time they do realize this, it is often too late; they have already wasted their lives with antisocial behavior.

The way an inmate starts his sentence off is usually pretty much how he plods his way through the rest of it. If he comes into an environment where he feels he has to do antisocial things in order to fit in, he is almost certainly destined to fail. In turn, he will become part of that same peer pressure, influencing many of those who come in after him to follow in this same negative direction. On the other hand, if upon entering the prison system he finds the majority of his peers involved in positive pursuits, a different and productive kind of peer pressure is more likely to develop and thus influence his direction. This applies as well to the influence he will have on others who come in after him.

* * *

The last hurdle we need to look at is the effect that an unchangeable or an uncertain future has on an inmate's ambition.

Some inmates have been given sentences where nothing they can do will make any significant change in their release dates. A perfect example of this is those people in Florida who are required to serve a minimum of 85% of their sentences. No matter how good or bad they behave, they will still be released around the same time, and they will have served the near-total length of their sentences regardless. To them, the motivating concern (in general) is not what they might do to better themselves, but instead it is centered on what they might do to make the time pass more swiftly. All too often, this seems more easily accomplished through antisocial behavior.

Another compelling contributor to why many inmates rarely use their time in prison wisely is because they face an uncertain future that lacks any form of real hope. They have been "incapacitated" by long prison terms, and while their sentences may call for them to be eligible for parole after "X" number of years, the truth is that they never really know if or when good behavior or studies or any other positive endeavors might lead to their freedom. It is not uncommon for an inmate who has conducted himself in a productive manner year in and year out to find himself still

being turned down for parole time and time again. Sometimes he gives up. Neither is it uncommon for other inmates to see how this model prisoner is rejected over and over for parole, and to decide that model behavior is not worth the effort.

* * *

Inadequate (and in some cases no) educational opportunities.

Inmate peer pressure.

Unchangeable and uncertain futures.

These are the primary hurdles standing in the way of an inmate's progress.

But these hurdles are not insurmountable.

Assuming (sound) educational opportunities will be provided, the peer pressure and unchangeable or uncertain futures can be taken care of by the introduction of Contract Parole.

Basically, Contract Parole is a concept wherein at the start of his sentence the inmate agrees to a certain set of goals with the understanding that his parole will be implemented immediately after their completion.

The following is how I believe Contract Parole can best be applied:

Inmates entering the prison system should first be placed in an orientation program. While there, they would undergo exhaustive testing to determine their aptitudes. Before being transferred to the general population, each inmate would meet with a classification team, and together they would iron out a set of goals for the inmate to pursue, e.g. work, education, counseling, workshops, et cetera. These goals would mainly be influenced by the results from the individual's aptitude tests: geared toward enhancing the strengths and shoring up whatever weaknesses were indicated by those tests. The goals would be demanding—achievable, but always very demanding—and they would amount to stipulations of the inmate's parole contract.

Other stipulations of the inmate's contract would include things like a minimum time served, a maximum time for completing all of the goals, good behavior, plus anything else which might be deemed beneficial to the individual's growth.

A sound parole plan would be another requirement of the inmate's contract. (A parole plan is a detailed, concrete proposal that outlines how the incarcerated person will live, work, and stay supported safely in the community after being released from prison.)

Completion of all the goals set for the inmate would result in his being paroled immediately. No questions asked: *the contract would be binding and freedom its reward.*

Let me provide an example of what I am talking about: Suppose an inmate has a twenty-year sentence. His tests indicate an aptitude for drafting. The tests also reveal a weakness in math, a subject in which all draftsmen must be proficient. The inmate acknowledges his desire to pursue a drafting career (he will be allowed his own choice from whatever opportunities are available, as long as he shows an aptitude for his chosen field), so the classification team sets goals for him highlighted by vocational drafting and supported by academic courses in math. Normally, the drafting course might take approximately one year to complete. But he will be taking math classes, too, and with this in mind the classification team might allow him two years to make it through his drafting and math classes combined. Maybe they will add a third year of school, with him taking another drafting related course to further his skills in this area. The three years of education might be followed by a mandatory two years of working in some related prison industry, using the drafting and math skills he has acquired, giving him valuable hands-on work experience while advancing the work ethic he began to develop in the classroom.

In the meantime, he will also undergo individual psychological counseling, to help him better understand the nature of the things which brought him to that point in life, as well as to help him understand how to successfully deal with the same in the future.

Similarly, workshops will be conducted on a regular basis, with his attendance required, aimed at teaching him what sort of things to expect and the best way to manage himself in various situations he may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with, e.g. job hunting, personal relationships, rejection, and so on. (Seminars will also be held in specialized areas, with required attendance depending upon whether that particular subject applies to the individual.)

If this inmate has a history of drug abuse, another stipulation of his contract shall be for him to submit to random drug testing throughout his period of imprisonment (illegal drugs are known to be available to some degree at most prisons).

It should be noted at this point that participation in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and/or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) should not be made a stipulation of any inmate's contract. These organizations should always be made available to prisoners, but participation in them should never be demanded. Insincerity invades the group whenever attendance becomes involuntary, making those members who are sincere hesitant to open themselves up to the other members. And opening oneself up to the other members, letting them become a part of him, and him a part of them, is one of the chief cornerstones to making these programs work.

I also need to note that the problem I just described is the biggest reason today why AA and NA are less successful in prisons than they could be. Although it appears on the surface as if attendance is strictly voluntary, in reality it often is not. In some prison systems, time off one's sentence (in the form of "good time") is awarded for attendance. Parole boards regularly insist upon attendance before paroling most people with alcohol or drug histories. Classification teams sometimes require attendance before recommending a transfer to a better institution. This is nothing but involuntary attendance! The majority of the inmates referred to in these situations are not there to get help; they are there because it is held over their heads as one of the few possible means of obtaining something they hold dear. This is how insincerity finds its way in, and when

this happens it dislodges the group's foundation: the faith of the members in each other. Destroy this faith and you destroy the group.[1]

For the same reason, attendance at group therapy sessions sponsored by the psychology department should never be made a stipulation of any inmate's contract. These sessions should always be made available to inmates, but attendance should never be involuntary.[2](Mandatory one-on-one sessions with a psychologist or psychiatrist are a different matter. The inmate will be more apt to open up to, and put his trust in, a professional counselor.)

But getting back to the example of the prisoner with the twenty-year sentence: His contract calls for three years of education followed by two years of work in his chosen field. On a social level, he will consistently attend workshops/seminars to prepare himself for the future. Good behavior will be required during his incarceration. He will submit to random drug testing, which hopefully will work as a deterrent to drug abuse and help him get used to a life of abstinence. He will submit to mandatory psychological/mental health counseling. He will outline a parole plan that, if followed, will help him organize a sustained life after prison. If this inmate fulfills all of these requirements within the specified five-year period, his parole will be automatic.

Once set, the inmate's mandatory work time should never be lessened. But if he satisfactorily completes his education in less time than is allotted, that amount of less time should be subtracted from the length of his contract, serving as added incentive for his performance in the one area which will make or break this program: the classroom.

Lack of effort toward his goals and/or antisocial behavior will extend the length of the inmate's contract. The length of extension shall depend on the amount and the degree of the offense(s).

In other words, at the start of his sentence, the inmate will be made to understand that he has two alternatives:

(1) He can work toward his goals with the assurance that when he completes them, he will be paroled.

(2) The choice will be his, but if he does not comply, he will be penalized against the length of his contract for at least whatever amount of time he fails to comply, even if it means having to serve his full prison term outright.

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[1] There are other substance abuse programs that can effectively be made mandatory. The primary difference between these and AA/NA is that they are essentially educational in nature, whereas AA/NA's main strength is its members who are there to help each other through situations only a fellow addict can truly understand. Hence the absolute need for them to be able to believe in one another.

[2] Religious activities fit into this same category. The essence of religious beliefs is that they must be taken on faith, not forced on one. If you force people to attend services, study the texts, et cetera, the probability is that you will alienate rather than draw them to the good which is being offered.

Only the most hard-headed and foolish will fail to comply—this is the promise of Contract Parole—not so much because of the threat of having to serve more of one's sentence, which, sadly enough, is something one can learn to live with: Instead, compliance will be sparked by the contract's assurance of freedom at a *known* time.

Or, as in the case of those serving fixed (and often elongated) sentences, such as those who are serving 85% of their sentences, the chance to change this to a lesser and known release date will be sufficient incentive to guarantee their responsiveness.

Then, with the majority of prisoners complying with their contracts, being involved in positive endeavors, *the productive type of peer pressure that is needed will evolve.*

* * *

It is up to "the system" to provide adequate educational opportunities, and to also provide related work assignments to give inmates that oh-so-valuable hands-on experience in their chosen fields.

A steady influx of workshops/seminars to compliment the educational/work/other opportunities is essential. In addition to the surface value of these sessions, the consistent positive input from them will act as a stimulus for conscious, rational thought. Constantly stimulating the inmate with this positive input throughout his incarceration increases the likelihood that this conscious, rational way of thinking will become more natural to him and be apt to carry over into his life after prison.

Another thing to consider here is the length of parole contracts.

When determining the length of a contract, going to either extreme has to be guarded against. Obviously, the length has to be sufficient enough so that the inmate will have time to learn a trade, work out his problems, and address his other needs. But there is such a thing as overdoing it.

Ten years of productivity—repeat: of *productivity*—is more than enough time for any prisoner to put his life in order.

Stop to think about what I am saying here.

It takes in the neighborhood of ten years of combined medical school and residency training for someone to qualify as a general surgeon (a little less, actually). So, if a surgeon can be successfully trained in this amount of time, often meaning the difference between life and death, why should it take more than ten years to successfully train a prisoner how to get his life together?

Anything beyond ten (productive) years spent incarcerated under the auspices of Contract Parole should be considered excessive and detrimental to the cause.

Certainly, punishment has to be figured into the equation. But even then, a solid effort toward striking a reasonable balance between punishment and rehabilitation is a must…or else

rehabilitation will remain elusive. If the years are stacked so high in front of the inmate that he is unable to see past them to find anything worth sacrificing for, the chances of acceptably motivating him become increasingly poor.

Give the inmate *demanding* goals. *Design* the goals so that their completion will leave the individual a well-rounded person *qualified* to be a productive member of society. Allow the inmate an opportunity to *earn* a parole date within a time frame that lets him glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel. If he does not comply with the program, then by all means revoke his contract and make him serve his full prison term without hope of parole. But do not permit the desire to punish cloud good judgment: *There must be a reasonable balance between punishment and rehabilitation.*

* * *

I know that there are those who will object to the idea of some people being freed within just ten years, no matter what the person has to overcome to earn this relief. I have struggled to find a way to address this concern fairly to all parties. It is not for me to say whose offenses are, or are not, parole-eligible. I do know from personal experience that ten years in prison is a lot of punishment. I also know that a great deal can be accomplished in a person during ten years under the guidance of Contract Parole. No amount of punishment can ever erase the wrongs any of us have committed. But if release is not ruled out altogether, I beg for my words regarding ten *productive* years not to be judged lightly. At the same time, please understand that false hope is a slow death; if "the powers that be" have no intention of releasing someone from prison, they should just respectfully say so and be done with it.

* * *

To my knowledge, Contract Parole (also called the Mutual Participation Program) has seen different use throughout the country going as far back as the early 1970's. However, it has never been used anywhere in the method I am proposing here.

Applied, and applied properly, Contract Parole is the best possible means to ensure that inmates leave prison both qualified and likely to be productive members of society. This in turn means that, properly applied, Contract Parole is the best possible insurance against recidivism. Even so, this program will not help everyone.

Some inmates have sentences too short to allow them the full benefit of Contract Parole.

Others will slip through the cracks and fail regardless.

But more so than ever before in history, inmates will be leaving prison…never to return. This is the true promise of Contract Parole.

* * *

Opportunities for improvement must be provided. And hope given. As well as certainty.

Hope: in a future that can be changed for the better through one's own efforts.

Certainty: in knowing that freedom waits at the end of one's work.

These are the promises that will make the promise of Contract Parole come true.

* * *

Hope. Certainty. So little to give. So much more to gain. *Give me one good reason why not.*

A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.
—Proverbs 25:11

Addendum I: Victim Awareness

Before a felon can truly be rehabilitated, I believe he must first come to a point where he is able to see his actions through the eyes of a victim.

Programs designed to raise prisoners' awareness in this area should be instituted, and might include any combination of written materials, audio and/or audio/visual tapes/CD's/DVD's, and personal appearances where victims speak about the outrage and horrors they suffered from their violations.

But the thing that I feel has the potential to have the most positive effect would be workshops which used role-playing exercises to put offenders in the positions not only of the victims of their crimes, but also of those people who might come into contact with them and in one way or another be called upon to help restore them following their experiences. This role-playing could possibly do more than all else to make prisoners mindful of the wrongness of their deeds, and in so doing might make them intent to never be guilty of such ever again.

At the same time, it is equally important that these programs not place the emphasis solely on making offenders aware of the harm of their deeds. If you do, then you risk burying the offender in too much guilt to be able to rise above his own difficulties. Perhaps the best way to achieve the necessary balance is to also seek ways that offenders might be able to assist with victims' restoration. If they are allowed to be a part of the healing process, this in turn might even help them find their own healing.

* * *

The best time to institute these programs is at the very beginning of one's sentence. This is the time when a prisoner generally feels most vulnerable, and that is also when he is most pliant. These programs should be established as an integral part of their orientation period and continued throughout the span of their incarceration.

Variations of this theme are already being utilized in some places. But I believe that this is something which should be employed everywhere, with all prisoners. I also believe that programs of this nature can only enhance the effectiveness of Contract Parole, and vice-versa

* * *

Incarceration, with its inherent afflictions, is notorious for robbing inmates of what little bit of humanity they might bring with them to prison.

What I am suggesting here could very well put some of that humanity back into them.

A servant cannot be corrected by mere words; though he understands, he will not respond.
—Proverbs 29:19

Addendum II: Contract Parole Revisited (*The Secular Application of a Godly Principle)*

I am a Christian, and I have learned during my Christian walk that the only perfect answer to any problem—whether it is the difficulties facing a parolee, or whatever—is a total commitment to, with total dependence upon, Jesus Christ.

But receiving the utmost benefit from this relationship with Jesus requires the surrendering of one's own will to God's will, which is a solution even we Christians often have problems with: because we do not want to relinquish our personal control over whatever the situation is.

So, if Christians have a difficult time utilizing this perfect solution, even though we should know better, how can others reasonably be expected to avail themselves of it?

It behooves Christians, then, regardless, to make this, as well as all the rest of God's promises, known to everyone.

Sadly, though, this will not be enough, because many will not believe our message.

In the meantime, recidivism—like so many other problems—will continue to exist and, in one way or another, will continue to plague Christians and non-Christians alike.

This is why Contract Parole is so needed, as it offers a sensible *and* likely solution no matter what a person's religious beliefs are (or are not). But even this (Contract Parole) can rightly be called *the secular application of a Godly principle.*

Let me explain.

God's favored teaching method when dealing with those of us who have been stubborn and rebellious is to humble us in some way. Then, when we have no place left to turn but to Him, and He finally has our undivided attention, this is when He guides us in the way He would have us to go. And this usually turns out to be a lasting lesson, as all too often it also turns out to be one which was painfully learned.

Most Christians are very familiar with what I am talking about. Indeed, many of us were converted in exactly this manner. Our lives had sunk so low that we felt we had to look up to see the bottom, and it was at precisely this point of our despair when we cried out to God for help.

Which goes to show just how wise God truly is.

Because right then, when we were purely *humbled,* when we had been purged of all our pride and willfulness and were totally dependent upon God for relief, that was also the time when we were most malleable. *"[God] guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way"* (Psalms 25:9).

Now, take this same thought and apply it to Contract Parole.

Believe me, *any*time *any*one goes to prison, *that person is humbled;* he may not act like it, but he is. (If there is an instance where this statement does not apply, then that person was sent to the wrong facility—literally—and should have been institutionalized in a mental asylum instead!)

Unfortunately, when people do get to prison, humbled, and most malleable, the guidance waiting on them is generally inadequately designed.

Even during the days when a lot more programs existed benefiting prisoners, a guiding hand that pushed prisoners in a properly *structured* direction was not there.

Basically, those programs were offered, and that was that.

There were people who took advantage of the opportunities available, but this approach failed on a larger scale because it assumed the recipients would be rational enough to act like normal people and leap at this chance to improve themselves. But these were not normal people—if they were, they would not have done the things which put them in that position—and that definitely was not, and it still is not, a normal situation.

This situation calls for prisoners to be treated as someone *ab*normal in that they should not just be given the opportunity to improve and then leave it to them to make the best decision. Instead, at that point when they have been humbled, when they first come into the system, and before they have a chance to build up a solid shield against their doubts and fears, *from this time onward they should be led by the strengths of Contract Parole.*

On the one hand, Contract Parole will provide them with the means to find the relief they are so desperate for.

On the other hand, it also promises them—and everyone else for that matter—that if they should fail to abide by its precepts, then they will be doomed to no relief.

And it will be there with them throughout their journey, guiding them in the way they should go, step by step, making them into a new creation.

Exactly as God does when we are humbled and cry out to him for relief.

* * *

This might very well be the most optimal time in history to implement Contract Parole.

So many people today are being sentenced to such hopeless sentences—85%, 10-20-life, no parole, three strikes, et cetera—and those prisoners to whom this applies have been *seriously* humbled. As a result, they should be the ones most easily guided by Contract Parole.

These people are also the ones considered to cause the most trouble wherever they go, often explaining their type of sentences. And since it is generally the trouble makers who are looked up to and followed in antisocial environments, it stands to reason that if these people are swayed toward a positive bent due to the advent of Contract Parole, *they will also be the ones who will lead the charge toward a new, positive peer pressure.*

* * *

There is an old saying about a yacht being a hole in the water its owner pours money into.

This is more or less (mostly more!) what prisons have become: holes in the ground for taxpayers to pour money into.

At the expense of some other, much needed programs, I should add.

With no end in sight.

True, the present course is keeping more criminals off the streets. But what is to be done when there is no more money left to build and operate new prisons? Should all of the non-violent offenders then be released, and from that point only violent offenders sent to prison?

Do this…and then watch non-violent crime go through the roof!

Yet if this decision were to be made—and there might not be a choice but to make such a decision if the powers that be wait until then to try and prevent it—there would still come a day when there was no further room to house any more of the violent offenders, and a backlog of others would be waiting in jails to join them.

Then what should be done?

Stack them on top of each other in cells like so many piles of cordwood, or like lumps of so much meat?

Or, make room for those waiting in jails by releasing violent offenders who have been cast aside and left to rot in prison for some 10-20-30 years?

Rest assured that a situation like this will someday surely develop unless steps are taken to prevent it. Rather than be forced to make a bad decision then based on the need for some immediate (and short lived) respite, why not start planning now for a solution that has a *logical* chance of success?

Contract Parole offers the most logical approach there is for reforming prisoners on a widespread scale, as it will ensure that all of its graduates leave prison qualified—and thus more likely to be of the mind-set—to make a new and better life for themselves (and in so doing also make a positive contribution to society).

Combine both of these approaches so that each can strengthen the other.

Use the tougher sentencing to fully humble offenders, putting them in the best frame of mind to be guided by Contract Parole—and use Contract Parole to guide them to the desired point.

If they fail to accept and grow from this guidance, then they are still sentenced for the duration and the public's protection is maintained with just as much as integrity as it was prior to Contract Parole.

But if Contract Parole does prove successful with an offender, that frees up one more bed space and sends a healed person—a restored human being—back out into the world of the living.

* * *

Just as laws were voted in to allow tougher sentencing, other laws can also be voted in to change them to the extent where they can be used conjunctively with Contract Parole. *Combine* both of these approaches. *Permit* one to strengthen the other.

* * *

I can fathom just one reasonable objection to Contract Parole: its cost.

But this objection begs the question: Can the public really afford not to implement it? It should be obvious that the status quo cannot stay intact indefinitely. Something has to give sooner or later, and if not dealt with now it could give a lot sooner and be a lot uglier than the public is prepared for.

Let me pose another question: Does the public really know what kind of prisoner the status quo is breeding? It is breeding one who thinks more and more of "holding court in the streets" the next time he might be arrested, choosing to die there—and take as many others with him as he can—rather than return to prison.

Contract Parole, on the other hand, promises to do more than anything else before it toward restoring these same people's humanity.

It also promises to do much more.

Think about it.

Properly implemented, there is every logical reason to expect that Contract Parole would surely cause a vital decrease in recidivism.

Now add this expectation to the reduced crime rate (arguably) brought on by tougher sentencing, and their combination should result in a dwindling prison population: which would mean an overall reduced operating cost and should argue ***for*** the implementation of Contract Parole.

* * *

Big businesses make long-term investments all the time, realizing it will be years down the road before they turn a profit.

It is time for the public to make a similar investment, incurring the expense of Contract Parole now, even if only to avoid an unaffordable expense later down the line.

Again, *give me one good reason why not.*

Ears that hear and eyes that see—the Lord has made them both.
—Proverbs 20:12

Addendum III: Closing Comments

If anyone reading this has been left with the impression that I am suggesting an "easy way out" for prisoners, then I failed here as a writer.

My belief is that Contract Parole should require inmates to give more of themselves than ever before, putting it all on the line.

And I truly believe they would be up for it. As they should be. Because they would literally be fighting for their lives.

Any prisoner who saw it in any other way than this would be unworthy of Contract Parole.

And if any non-prisoner objects in principle to Contract Parole…again, I feel *must* have failed here as a writer.

* * *

Earlier, when I gave the example of how an inmate's contract might play out, I used in that example someone pursuing a drafting career. Later, when I was planning the revision to this text, I became concerned with whether that example might fall short in the minds of readers because of any defects there may be in the description due to my own admittedly inferior understanding of drafting (and I even graduated and got my diploma from that drafting class I attended!).

But for lack of the knowledge with which to describe it any better, and in order that it might also serve to highlight the existence and futility of inept programs like the drafting class I wrote about attending, I decided to let this description remain. I pray readers will have seen past any of its deficiencies and grasped the intended concept regardless.

* * *

I stayed with masculine pronouns (wherever needed) throughout the foregoing so that the writing might be more fluid. But this does not in any way mean I have forgotten the plight of women prisoners. I pray that this concept (Contract Parole) will someday be allowed to benefit men *and*

women everywhere who are incarcerated…and in so doing also serve the same public who would first have to pave the way for its implementation.

Get wisdom, get understanding.

—Proverbs 4:5(a)

Afterword

I was an incorrigible juvenile; as a result, I spent most of my teens incarcerated in juvenile homes, reform schools, and jails; I was also at two different boys' ranches. Then, shortly before my 19th birthday, I was arrested for armed robbery, for which I was sentenced to fifteen years. In prison, I continued my incorrigible lifestyle, staying in constant disciplinary trouble. I escaped from prison twice, and due to related offenses (primarily robbery, kidnapping, and armed escape), my convictions grew to a convoluted mixture of concurrent and consecutive terms totaling 904 years plus three life sentences. During my 24th year of incarceration I returned to the Christian roots I was raised in, and this change helped me rebuild my life. I became something I had never been before: a positive, contributing member of my society. I read my Bible and prayed daily, attended Chapel services on a regular basis, participated in every positive program I could find, stayed out of disciplinary trouble, and helped other inmates when I was needed.

On February 13, 2013—38 years, seven months, and thirteen days after my adult incarceration began—I was released from prison and placed on lifetime parole supervision. Then, on January 9, 2019, my parole supervision was terminated. For the first time since I was twelve, I became a completely free person.

I will always give God credit and thanks for these wonderful things that have happened in my life since I returned to Him. I also want to give credit and thanks to the Florida Commission on Offender Review (formerly called the Florida Parole Commission) for their role in helping me reach this point in my life.

Since my release from prison, I have attended numerous parole hearings, often attending in support of others. (In Florida, inmates cannot personally attend their parole hearings. They can submit supportive materials for consideration, and their families, friends, and other representatives can attend and speak on their behalf, but inmates cannot attend personally. However, once released from prison, one can attend the scheduled parole supervision reviews and the hearings of others.) During these hearings I have attended, I have observed the Commissioners at work and my respect for them and their responsibilities has grown enormously. When I was incarcerated, I saw this exclusively from the viewpoint of a person who hoped and prayed to be freed someday. But seeing them at work has enlightened me considerably.

I have witnessed many cases where the inmate's family pleaded for release due to the years of incarceration already served, only to have their hearts broken when they learned that the inmate had numerous disciplinary issues without ever telling them about it. And then there are the times when the inmate does not participate in any positive programs, not giving the Commissioners any reason to believe in him or her. And there are other times when the inmate's victims and/or law enforcement officials and/or state attorneys appear and speak about the horror of the crimes. On the other side of the coin, I have seen the Commissioners give serious consideration toward those who remain disciplinary-free and participate in positive programs. The Commissioners' task is not an easy one, and what I have seen in them is an even balance of decisions: they research the individual cases well and make fair and reasonable choices.

Considering my history, it may surprise some that I am speaking favorably of the Commissioners; right is right, though, and I must be honest to make my points here.

In Florida, there are three basic sentencing systems:

1. Prior to October 1, 1983, all felony sentences except death penalties were eligible for parole.
2. Effective October 1, 1983, the law was changed to leave only capital crimes/convictions parole-eligible: **First-degree murder** (premeditated murder or certain forms of felony murder) and **capital sexual battery** (sexual battery on a child aged 12 or younger by an adult). Murder convictions in the 1st degree that did not net a death penalty continued to be parole-eligible after 25 years, as were the life sentences for capital sexual battery, but all other life sentences were ***in***eligible for parole. (It was terribly imbalanced and wrong for the state legislature to create a sentence structure where a person could be sentenced to life without parole for a crime where no one was killed or raped [like kidnapping or robbery], yet someone who did kill someone or raped a child was eligible for parole. I am not opposed to the latter being eligible for parole, but I am opposed to the unfairness that those convicted of a lesser crime received a harsher punishment. **This is a terribly uneven punishment that should be rectified.**) Those sentenced to a specific number of years were required to serve 65% of that time before being released. The remaining 35% of the sentence was called "gain time," and if one got into disciplinary trouble, time could be reduced from that 35% making one have to serve more than 65% (if not all) of the (full) sentence.
3. On October 1, 1995, the third/current Florida system was put into place. One serves 85% of the numbered year sentence, and **all** life sentences are ***ineligible*** for parole.

These are the three sentencing systems in place in Florida; the time range that the crime was committed in dictates the pertinent gain time and parole eligibility status. (There are some prison sentences that fall into a category which no one receives "gain time" for, but these are the three basic sentencing structures utilized connectively in the state of Florida.)

Each state (plus the federal government) has its own individual sentencing and prison release systems, but I have used the Florida example here to help me make my points *no matter which system (state or federal) is being utilized*.

If the goal is to rehabilitate prisoners, that goal will *never* be accomplished to a significant degree if that system dictates the amount of time being served based solely on a set time frame (for instance) like 65% or 85%—this is because there is no *incentive* to improve. In these cases, a regular parole system would lead to more rehabilitation because that would provide incentive to some. At least there would be a chance for improvement of the release date if one programmed properly. My own situation is a perfect example of what I am talking about. I had multiple life and other lengthy sentences that were all parole-eligible. There came a point in my life when I walked away from bad behavior and worked toward freedom. I was able to do this despite the lengthiness of my sentences because they were all parole-eligible. But what would I have done if there was no hope? No incentive?

This is why a parole system will always be more effective in establishing rehabilitation than a specific, unchangeable time frame set for inmates to serve: The parole system provides some incentive where the other provides none, and incentive is the most powerful tool available.

We must keep in mind that people do not commit their crimes and go to prison because they are thinking reasonably. Since this is the reality, these people need to be guided down the road to rehabilitation as intelligently as possible. If a person is sentenced to ten years and required to serve 85% of it (8½ years), and there is nothing he or she can do to reduce the time served, most will worry less about rehabilitation and look instead for ways to pass that time as "pleasantly" as possible—and this "pleasantness" is generally sought in areas of antisocial behavior. This is why the incentive provided by the parole system will always be superior to any system that calls solely for a specific amount of time to be served.

But even this improvement pales by comparison to the promise Contract Parole.

With Contract Parole, inmates will behave better during their incarceration and shall leave prison *prepared* to take on their new lives in society: this result is assured on a widespread basis because of the contract's guarantee to the inmate.

This is a win-win situation for inmates and society alike.

Give me one good reason why not.

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established.
—Proverbs 24:3

To Whom it May Concern:

Thank you very much for taking the time to read *Contract Parole*. Our special request is that you write a review telling us what you think about its proposal. Also, please add any input you think would prove helpful for us and/or ask any questions you may have (which we will respond to gratefully). We look forward to sharing your thoughts with others as we work to bring attention to the value of parole in general and to the specific value of *Contract Parole* on its own.

We have three primary goals:

1. To help bring parole eligibility back to full, productive use in the state of Florida.
2. In the course of bringing parole eligibility back to Florida, to work to get at least some (and prayerfully all!) of the components of *Contract Parole* added to its revision.
3. In an effort to improve related conditions everywhere, to make people in every state aware of the wisdom of *Contract Parole*.

Again, we are grateful for your time reviewing *Contract Parole*, and we will treasure whatever related input about it that you will share with us. You may reach us through email at **johneddings@eph428.org** or by regular mail at:

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Ephesians 4:28 Ministries, Inc.
P. O. Box 220804
West Palm Beach, FL 33422

Thank you,

John W. Eddings