

**TESTIMONY OF
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TO THE
CHARLES COLSON TASK FORCE
ON FEDERAL CORRECTIONS**

I begin my testimony with this question:

What good are nonviolent, low-level, white collar convicted felons?

These are people, after all, who have broken the law, who—in one or more ways—have proven to be criminals, and who have betrayed the public trust, right?

What good are these people who crossed the line, did not pay the right amount of taxes or embezzled money or had an illegal nannie?

What good are such men and women who brought shame to their families, who exaggerated their income on a mortgage or credit card application, or who said "yes" when they should have said "no" and ended up serving time in a federal prison?

I could go on and on...but you get the picture. What good are these men and women? Should we not simply toss them aside (as we currently do), render them virtually useless, and hope they never surface again?

I am here to tell you such convicted felons are incredibly valuable.

Truly?

Why do I say this?

As someone who teaches graduate courses in ethics, crisis leadership, organizational behavior (among others) at the State University of New York Empire State College, I want to tell you that many—not all—convicted felons such as these can be excellent teachers. Those who are courageous enough to tell their stories—with candor, courage and conviction—to those who are willing to listen can make a *huge* difference.

Case in point: For years now, I teach what I call "the real world of ethics" to adult MBA students. Each semester one or more white-collar felons serve as guest speakers. Far more impactful than any textbook my students could read or any lecture I could give,

these men and women who tell their stories of “crossing the line” inform minds, open eyes, and change lives.

To say the felons' stories are riveting is to put it mildly. They are often also gut-wrenching, sometimes hard to fathom, but never sob stories. These men and women take responsibility for their actions. They do not blame the system or other people. They own what they did...and the consequences. This is what makes them so credible, such good teachers.

To say what students learn are life-changing lessons is also to understate. Students listen keenly as they hear that lines have become blurred between ethical violations and criminal conduct, that almost any of us can break the law without ever intending to. And that oftentimes, what used to be considered misdemeanors or ethics violations or regulatory issues are now considered criminal conduct.

Instead of tossing these men and women aside, instead of locking them up in minimum security prison camps where they drain taxpayer dollars and cannot make a difference, let us create laws and policies that allow them go on the road, telling their stories at high schools, colleges and universities, law schools, business meetings, conventions, religious gatherings, Rotary meetings, and wherever people will come to listen.

These "convicted felons" can tell it like it is. The rest of us, frankly, are on the other side of the bars and fences, having little to no idea what even minimum security prison life is like. Having visited over two dozen times, I know this much: *it is no country club.*

If we should listen to anyone, we should listen to those who have been there. In telling us how it is—as well as how to make it better and how to never end up in prison in the first place—they become one of America's greatest assets...instead of a throwaway.