



Contact: [info@georgecritchlow.com](mailto:info@georgecritchlow.com)

## PROLOGUE

Chains bound my client's feet to his hands and neck. He stood at counsel table, immobile, bent and sad, dressed in a bright yellow jumpsuit, surrounded by a small police force and a mob of reporters anxious to scribble the final words of a terrifying drama. An indignant judge would soon sentence him, a judge who hated his violence, his audacity, and the color of his skin. The judge believed Michael to be depraved and irredeemable, and almost everyone agreed. They wanted him to die in prison.

The sentencing was a long time ago and it is strange to think that it occurred before I had lived most of my life. Now, I am nearing old age, looking back more than ahead. My client, too, is getting old—a great-grandfather, a committed, long-time man of God, and still behind bars after forty-two years, even though he has killed no one and has been a law-abiding, model prisoner for three decades. His name is Michael Anderson and he inspired me to write this book.

Anderson has spent almost 16,000 days in a prison cell where he is officially known as Prisoner #287309. I have spent the same time practicing law, teaching law, and exploring the world. The irony is that I believe he has traveled further than I, and his reach -- his potential for impacting lives, for doing good -- is greater than mine. I am not envious because

I would never have wanted to trade places. But I look at him with wonder, I respect him, and he has become my friend.

As a child, Michael never once heard anyone tell him “I love you.” For him, this is very much a story about emerging into the light out of a dark background, a story about trauma, redemption, transcendence, and learning how to love. For me, a product of privilege, the tale of our connected lives raises questions about how we become who we are. Is it our nature or is it determined by the conditions to which we are born? Can we change who we are by an act of will? And what is the role of faith? For forty years, I wondered about the consequence of our different skin colors and family histories. Most significantly, I questioned whether Michael’s spiritual and moral metamorphoses came from correctional coercion, inborn will, or divine influence.

We imagine our paths are freely chosen. But there is a need to account for biology and history, the random intercession of other people, culture, race, and the mystery of the transcendent. The variables make it difficult to predict the course of any individual life even though there are those who claim expertise in such matters.

This book is a collaborative account of my long journey with my old client, and what we have learned: about the effects of childhood trauma, the importance of communicating love, the pernicious effects of racism, the purpose of punishment, and the redemptive power of faith and self-knowledge.

## **PART 1: RETRIBUTION AND REDEMPTION**

### **Chapter 1**

***“Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in....”*** Leonard Cohen

I climbed the circular staircase to a packed second-floor courtroom. People stood or sat wherever they could find space. In time, Judge Knight's entrance was announced, and he ascended to his accustomed position. The man's considerable physical stature complemented and enhanced his judicial prestige and he commanded the courtroom the way General Patton commanded the Third Army.

The judge shuffled some papers, adjusted his glasses, and looked down from the Superior Court bench at the man who stood before him in yellow prison garb and chains. This was followed by a long pause as the judge shifted his focus to the assembled people squeezed together on rows of courtroom benches: sheriff's deputies, city police officers, victims and their families, courthouse regulars. He then turned to the right, to the jury box now reserved for the press, and his gaze lingered for a moment on the squirming collection of reporters and newscasters. He nodded, almost imperceptibly.

I stood at counsel table with my co-counsel, Tim Mahoney, our client standing between us. The courtroom was quiet, all eyes on the arresting black-robed man flanked by Lady Justice and the American flag. Behind him hung the great seal of the State of Washington. It was a setting designed both to inspire and intimidate. The judge ignored Mahoney and me and turned to the defendant.

“Mr. Anderson, are you prepared to be sentenced?”

I answered on his behalf. “We are, your Honor.”

Judge Knight shot me an impatient look and turned back to my client.

“You have the right of allocution. You are probably not familiar with the term. It means that you have the right to say something on your own behalf before I pronounce sentence. Do you have anything to add to your lawyers’ plea for lenience at last week’s hearing?”

The defendant understood his right to allocution well enough as we had discussed it in private just that morning. He had no desire to address the court.

Again, I spoke for him: “Mr. Anderson does not wish to address the court, your honor.”

My words provoked the judge. “I am not talking to you, Mr. Critchlow,” he scolded. “I’ll let you know when I want to hear from you.”

“With all due respect, Judge, Mr. Mahoney and I are here representing our client. We are ethically bound to speak for him if he chooses not to speak for himself.”

A week earlier Mahoney and I had argued that our client’s serious crimes should not deprive him of a chance to someday rejoin his family and reenter society. I had urged the court to take a close and sympathetic look at the defendant’s background, especially the neglect and abuse he suffered as a child. Tim reminded the court that our client had committed violent crimes but had not killed anyone. Convicted murderers were often given a realistic chance for parole, and so should Anderson. We conceded he should not be released without evidence of rehabilitation, but we urged the court to structure a sentence that would allow at least a possibility for parole before the defendant was a doddering old man. The judge then delayed sentencing for an additional week while he reviewed the court record and the recommendations of experts.

Now, I was not optimistic. Judge Knight continued to ignore me. He fixed his eyes on the defendant like a hunter zeroing in on a wild beast. I stood before him vibrating with the memory of what the judge had said a few months earlier behind closed doors, in chambers, during the course of an intensely combative trial. While debating technical legal points relating to Anderson taking the witness stand, the judge had struggled to compose himself. He was overcome by the dark part of his being that was supposed to be vanquished by education, discipline, and the rule of law. He might be given credit for his candor, but the words he excreted were profoundly unseemly and astonishing to the mind of a young lawyer who believed even the most conflicted judge would overcome or conceal his prejudice.

“I am going to get that black S.O.B. whether you put him on the stand or not,” Judge Knight had said to me. “This discussion is over!”

It was time for that promise to be fulfilled.

Judge Knight announced: “Very well, I shall sentence you forthwith, Mr. Anderson. You are perhaps the most notorious criminal ever to be prosecuted in Franklin County. You are the most dangerous man I have ever had the misfortune to encounter. Your life is a recipe for how to inflict suffering, terrorize communities, take what is not yours, and forsake the most basic obligations that make for a decent society. I will delineate the acts and events that make up the horror story that is your regrettable life. Before doing so, I want you and the world to know that I intend to impose a sentence that will insure, as much as is possible under our laws, that you spend the rest of your life in prison and that you never again walk the streets of this or any other community.”

The judge continued but the point was already well made. Justice had been rendered. A brutish interloper from a distant inner-city jungle would never again threaten the decent folks who lived on the quiet banks of the Columbia River in Southeastern Washington.