

## ARTICLES

### **Desistance, Anomalies and Rabbit Holes: A Transformative Experience from Inside Out** *Christopher Havens and Marta Cerruti*

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#### ABSTRACT

Desistance, plainly stated, is the discontinuance of criminal behaviour. This article presents an informative conversation on the topic of desistance through the lived experience of a currently incarcerated individual. The conversation that took place over the span of several months includes the factors that led to the desistance of one of the authors, Christopher Havens, as well as his story from a behavioural perspective, which in the process suggests the idea that prisoners can be categorized by their readiness for positive change and personal growth. While this article can be viewed as a single empirical data point by sociologists and criminologists, the authors hope to present one particular case of desistance which can serve as an inspirational tool for the readers, including other incarcerated people so as to make this very same step.

Marta and Christopher's stories intersected in December 2012, when Christopher sent an email to the editor of Mathematical Science Publishers, where Marta's partner Matt was working as technical editor at the time. Christopher was asking for information on how to subscribe to *Annals of Mathematics*, a very high-level academic mathematics journal, as well as for help from any mathematician willing to guide him in his mathematical explorations. Marta asked her mom, Luisella Caire, a mathematician working in Torino, Italy, if she was interested. Luisella and Christopher started corresponding, which continued with the involvement of Marta's dad Umberto Cerruti. Christopher joined Umberto's research group and after about four years of back-and-forth letters flying across the ocean, they came up with a new contribution to the field of continued fractions, a big topic in number theory. Their results have been published on "Research in Number Theory" in January 2020 (Havens et al., 2020).

Marta has followed these developments from a distance until she decided to write an article about Christopher's story for *The Conversation*, a news website dedicated to evidence-based journalism with articles written by academics with the help of journalists (Cerruti, 2020). The

article was a huge success. It has been translated into German, Chinese, and Spanish, and was re-published by countless news websites, leading to about 140,000 views in the first month of its publication. About ten mathematicians got in touch with Christopher to further help him in his mathematical endeavors. Marta and Christopher have been interviewed by multiple news channels including the *Global News* and *CBC*. The story has been re-written by *Inside Time*, the United Kingdom's national prisoners' newspaper, which circulates 60,000 copies monthly in every UK prison. This tremendous success showed the inspirational power that Christopher's story can have on people.

Since writing the two publications noted above, Marta and Christopher have exchanged countless emails. This article is an edited transcription of their three-month long email conversation on the topic of desistance.

M: What does desistance mean for you?

C: I believe that desistance is a pattern in which one chooses to live a life where their decisions are followed by actions that do not involve breaking the law. You can think of as an accessorial attribute to an already healthy lifestyle. To me, desistance is only part of the rehabilitation process that should begin before being released from incarceration. It is a necessary part of justice.

M: Why would you call yourself a desister?

C: Well, I suppose I call myself a desister because I have made the choice to live a life that does not include breaking the laws. My state of incarceration does not change this. Contrary to popular belief, it is not necessary that "When in prison, do as the other prisoners do". I do not consider being in prison a reason to break the law, nor do I consider it a means to become a better criminal. I reject the viewpoint that incarceration is a reason to put our goals and dreams on hold. Imagine serving a 25-year sentence waiting for the gate to open. That is the common practice by most prisoners, for the length of their sentence. What people fail to see is that we can still contribute to society, we can make beautiful memories... If we get creative and work hard enough, we can even become members of research groups and make advancements in science... if we simply work for it. This is my

life. I am an amateur mathematician, a prisoner, and an individual who does not commit crimes. I believe it's my responsibility to make sure that justice is served to the victims of my crimes by rehabilitating myself in such a way that I am no longer a risk to society. This is why I consider myself a desister.

Desistance is actually a hot topic for me, and I often think of how we could make it easier for others who want to desist... because there is so much recidivism! And why is the rate of recidivism so high? When I consider situations similar to my own, part of the adversity we face as prisoners attempting to redefine our role in society is in the public's perception of incarcerated individuals. It seems, from the inside, that most of society does not distinguish from different types of prisoners unless one is making a distinction with respect to the severity of our crimes. For example, I have experienced a very inclusive mathematical community. Do you think that recidivism would decrease if society were more inclusive? The amount of interaction I've had in the community was a huge factor in my successes. I wonder, if other prisoners had experienced similar inclusion in the community, would they have pursued different lifestyles as well?

M: That would be my guess, too. Being treated as marked cannot help anyone change their lifestyle. I read some articles that discussed how hard it can be to try to go back into society if you have a criminal record. As you write in your own story, most people don't really spend much time thinking about prison other than what they see on TV. They have little idea of what happens in prisons to help people change, and of their own role and responsibility in helping that change once people are released, and even before. I was appalled when I heard that there were several negative reactions to the program "Walls to Bridges", which strives to create a connection between prisoners and community members by allowing professors to teach courses inside prisons, and students to take the courses along with prisoners. Apparently, several community members have been critical of the idea that students would go inside prisons, and that prisoners could take courses for credit without paying! So yes, I agree. A more inclusive community could definitely help decrease recidivism, and obviously this would help back the community, by making it safer and more functional. How can we create such a change? Have more information about what goes on inside prisons, which is different from what people see inside movies? I think this is why we are writing this article, as one of the many steps in this direction.

C: One of my goals is to show the world that prisons do not only consist of their stereotypical convict. In prisons, there are three different types of prisoners. The ones that we see in the movies and on the media... the stereotypical dangerous drains on society are called convicts. The arbiters of the convict mentality proudly wearing the badge of the convict code. Next, are the common prisoners. They generally wish only to serve their sentence while making as little waves as possible. Some prisoners practice the convict mentality, and some choose to better themselves along the way. Finally, on the other end of the spectrum, there are people who do amazing things with their time... anomalies among the prison population.

M: Can you tell me more about the ‘anomalies’?

C: Sure. Of course, this is a made-up classification. I hear about the societal viewpoints on prisoners and it’s sad that most people seem to think that we are what we are portrayed to be by the media. A single category where all of us are lumped together. I think that most of the anomalies have had this same thought. The societal view taken towards prisoners affects us and so most of the other anomalies I’ve met have worked to change this in their own way. The way the public perceives us is important. Not because we strive for recognition. It’s not about that. It’s important because the anomalies move things and make changes in the prison. Without some support from the community, our hands are tied. For example, much of the community frowns on college education for prisoners. And why not? If all I knew about prison was that it was full of the convict variety, I would be a little bitter as well. But anomalies are active inside the prison and the community because to some of us, the prison walls serve primarily as a metaphor. We live in a gated community... maybe a bit of a ghetto, sure. But the prison is in our minds. Let me ask you... if all of the sudden, all modes of transportation were cut off to you, what would you do with your life? Would you wait until the problem solved itself or would you find a way to be productive despite the adversity? That’s at the heart of the question. Most anomalies have spent their time in self rehabilitation, and so our minds are no longer stuck inside our own prisons. Of course, we continue to make positive changes, but we must also carry on with life... except we can’t leave. Our transportation to and from our previous circumstances has been cut off. And so we find ways to be productive and work through the adversity.

M: Can you tell me about some of the anomalies you've met?

C: Absolutely! Here's a good one. Ruth Utnage is a transgender person who previously committed with a sex offense. She has been very active as a model for other prisoners while incarcerated. I have lived around her for quite a while and one specific story sticks out. Ruth was denied eligibility for SOPT (Sex Offender Treatment Program) because she didn't present enough risk to reoffend. She then proceeded to write the treatment coordinator every two weeks. The treatment coordinator got tired of this and told her to stop. Instead of stopping, she wrote to the review board, and continued writing this treatment coordinator. The reply was usually that there were higher risks that needed the treatment. So Ruth began accumulating the materials that they provided in treatment, like worksheets and exercises. Then, once the work was finished, she made copies and sent it to the review board, the treatment coordinator, and other staff. This went on for a year. Finally, and begrudgingly, she was accepted for treatment.

During the writing of this article, the COVID-19 outbreak was at its peak. As masks have been vital to the prevention of the spread of COVID-19, Ruth has contributed by making several thousand masks for the Community Aid Coalition. At the same time, she owns and maintains a website (HumanMe.org) aimed at highlighting the shared humanity of prisoners and un-incarcerated people. It seems like this true engagement in the better aspects of the human experience that make a prisoner an anomaly.

It's a shame that there is such a contrast between certain types of prisoners. Really, why should the stories of these anomalies in prisons be so special? When the deeds of a prisoner begin to transcend the walls of confinement it speaks to the fact that this is not expected of us. It takes people by surprise. But here is what I hope is the reality. These things we do, our walk, and our role in prisons... we are setting the stage for future prisoners desist. They are seeing things done that most would say is not possible from inside prison. We want these impossible things to become common. There should be no anomalies.

M: Is this really possible? Even in 'the outside world', anomalies, meaning maybe people who actively try to improve the world around them, are not the norm. I can make some easy parallels in my mind. There are some people that truly bring positive change around them or try to. Would there

be the anomalies? Can we say that everyone could be an anomaly? True, everyone could do wonderful things in their life. Yet many people choose not to; sometimes they just don't think about it as they are too busy with something that they enjoy doing or who knows, looking for power or money. Nothing necessarily bad in this but nothing that brings positive change in the world necessarily. Or sometimes people don't do wonderful things that bring positive change because of the situations they live in; they are really hard. We don't all have the same possibilities at birth. Or sometimes just a few wrong steps bring to disasters.

C: I never thought about how my metaphor can apply to the outside world. I like what you had to say on this... I tend to agree with you about your view on this, except for one part. I think adversity is common for most anomalies. I suppose it's all in how we deal with it. I think that anyone can be an anomaly. Especially for the people whose circumstances cage them. Imagine a person who fits the circumstantial limits you described. Imagine that every time they tried, they failed. Every attempt to succeed, they fell. Every chance to advance, they failed... but imagine that in each of those failures, they still tried. What if nobody had ever been impacted by that person because they spent their whole lives trying to live their dreams, after endlessly failing. Trying and failing, trying and failing... For whatever the reason, however circumstantial, they always failed, but always picked themselves up and tried. Is that person an anomaly? :) Some of the most beautiful aspects of the human condition go unnoticed by others... As far as prison, adversity is one of the most common ingredients to an anomaly. Not a necessary ingredient, but a sufficient one.

M: Thanks for a really good point you made. I love your point that it is not crucial that things are noticed by others and that trying and failing, and keep trying again can be seen as 'anomaly'. Back to the point of this conversation, 'desistance'. In that sense, it's true. We all have that capability inside us. We can see it in our kids when they're really small. Think about a child learning to walk or trying to climb on something. If you allow them to keep trying instead of solving the problem for them, they will find their own solution and won't be afraid of the repeated failures.

Now let's get back to your way of being an anomaly. You just published a first author paper on the academic journal "Research in Number Theory".

That's clearly an 'anomalous' achievement for someone who's in prison. Tell me something more about this. How did your passion for math started?

C: Let's begin the story right after being sentenced for making the worst decision in my life.

As soon as I arrived in prison, I was scouted by the gangs. I was fully in the convict mentality at that time and so it wasn't long until I was involved in a hit, landing me in solitary confinement for a year.

Our name for solitary confinement is 'the hole'. A prison within prison. It's 24 hours a day of people banging on the walls and yelling out their cell doors. The bed is a concrete slab and the large fluorescent light directly above your head never shuts off. Most people don't handle it too well. When the main form of entertainment comes from watching the guards pepper spray an angry prisoner, it's not surprising that people begin losing parts of their minds. Indeed, some of them snap. Myself... I played Sudoku.

I've spent so much time on the streets that isolation was already familiar. I'm very comfortable being alone with myself. And so, I filled my time involved in puzzles, which were quickly losing their challenge. It wasn't long until I noticed an older gentleman making rounds to some of the cells. He was passing around manilla envelopes full of... something. I had no idea. By this time, I was ready for any different type of stimulation, and so I was compelled to ask, "Can I have an envelope too?" This, I suppose, is where it all began for me. The man's name was simply "Mr. G". He worked in education and the contents of the envelope was enough math homework to keep you busy for a week or two. When you finished, you'd give him your envelope and, shortly after, he'd replace the envelope with graded papers, comments, and more work. My mind was like a sponge. I believe the old man took to a caffeine habit because of me. Suddenly everything seemed less important. The sounds of the yelling and banging faded into nothing. I had tons of books sent in and lesson after lesson... But before long I received a kite (message) from Mr. G saying: "Mr. Havens. At this time, you have surpassed my mathematical abilities and I wish you luck on your journey". That was the spark. A proper invitation to a life of mathematics.

From that moment on, I studied and learned about different maths that went beyond the basic curriculum. I studied different mathematical histories and philosophies. My journey into mathematics began having transformative powers. Things were coming together in my mind that I'd

have never previously thought about. This was right about the first time I remember ever having planned a long-term goal. The memory is still clear in my mind... I was becoming enamoured with mathematics and I had these image in my mind of mathematical movies... I had always viewed mathematicians to have an almost legendary status. I viewed cryptographers to be the intellectual equivalent of a fifth degree wizard... slinging symbols like Gandalf the Grey. And as I pictured these images, I decided that in 25 years, I had enough time to work towards becoming a mathematician.

After some time, I was transported from Walla Walla to Clallam Bay Prison, where I was released back into general population. My studies continued the entire time, and I was immersed to such an extent that I began changing more and more. I was finding myself having less and less in common with the old gang. I realized it and they realized it. There were two things going on at that time. First, I was changing so much that I found myself becoming a little lost in the turmoil. My thoughts weren't the same types of thoughts that I was used to having and my actions were based on decisions that followed this type of thought. Second, the gang felt that I should be focusing on the ins and outs of their politics and philosophical ideals, and not wasting my time studying mathematics. I found myself standing at a crossroads.

... I can't explain this appropriately, because so much happened in my mind rather quickly. I think I had seen my entire past flash before me... in comparison with how I felt while doing mathematics, it took me only fraction of a heartbeat to decide that I needed to leave that life behind... and as I made this decision, I knew that what I was doing was going to decide the rest of my life. And so I decided to enter into the Intensive Transition Program (ITP). The ITP is a one-year program for prisoners want to make positive changes in their life, but perhaps lack some of the tools that might help them in their journey. For me, I had been experiencing so many personal changes that I needed a safe place where I would completely open-up and allow the floodgate to open... because I wanted more of this change. Even today, I think this personal growth resulted from my mathematical focus. Something pure and positive came into my life and I fell in love. I let my love grow because it felt so good and for the first time, I knew it was right. The resulting changes slapped me in the face... and I suppose it's as simple as saying that I finally woke up, after all those years.



Let me say that when your life isn't focused on plotting, scheming, and getting high, you have much more time to reflect on things that matter. That seems like an obvious statement, but don't take that simple fact for granted. Please take the time to read that sentence again. For somebody who has wasted their entire life and then – at the pinnacle of their mediocrity – they kill a man, think of what this might mean. I'll tell you. I began thinking on all the things that had gone so wrong in my life. Then I'd think of how I can repair some of those things. I thought of how it felt being the unfortunate person who stood downwind from my actions... all of the people I hurt and affected from either trying to fit in or simply not thinking. Empathy began. I wondered how I would feel in similar scenarios. Then, I let the thought of myself go... Be those people I hurt. Now. How does it feel? ... What the hell am I doing? I realized that my actions were beginning to initiate actual justice. I was finally working to correct the behaviours that led to my past decisions.

Here's when my ITP treatment began, right in the middle of some of the most important realizations in my life. Imagine going through so many changes and then continuing at a much faster pace. Then imagine being in the best possible place to truly grasp those changes. Imagine having a team of professionals to help you when you need it. This was a pivotal part of my life. I had finally grown up... at 32 years old. Here's something interesting that I had never thought of before now. I was in prison now for three years. My old friends had long abandoned me. Some of my family had even become very distant. I left the gang and the convict mentality behind me. Truly, I had only two people actively in my life: my Mom and my daughter, Hope. This was precisely the time when I met my first member of the mathematical community. Luisella Caire, your mom. She's changed my perspective on mathematics. She introduced me to number theory and gave me different ways of learning. My interactions with her were so impactful for me that I actually devoted the rest of my life to the study of mathematics. She then introduced me to your dad, Umberto Cerruti, and gave me an opportunity at research. Hence, I had responsibilities doing something that I love, while interacting with real mathematicians.

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Christopher Havens* is the Executive Director and a founder of the Prison Mathematics Project organization. Aside from an interest in understanding the role of mathematics in self-identity and desistance, he spends his time researching mathematics in the realm of number theory. The area he is most passionate about is the study of various types of convergents of continued fractions, specifically naturally leaping and leaping convergents of both linear and quadratic convergents. Christopher one day hopes to show the world that the service of Justice can be a meaningful and beautiful pursuit, and that it should not stop when one leaves the gates of prison. He can be reached by email at [chavens28@gmail.com](mailto:chavens28@gmail.com) and [christopher@pmathp.org](mailto:christopher@pmathp.org).

*Marta Cerruti* is a professor in the Department of Mining and Materials Engineering and Co-director of the Institute for Advanced Materials at McGill University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada). She is also an emerging watercolour artist. Her research interests lay at the interface between materials science, chemistry, biology, and medicine. With her students, she published more than 100 papers on journals such as the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, *Advanced Materials*, and *Chemistry of Materials*. She is a member of the College of New Artists, Scholars and Scientists of the Royal Society of Canada, and was a Canada Research Chair and a Young Scientist invited at the World Economic Forum. Her research is often featured on *CBC Radio*, *Global News*, and *The Conversation*. She can be reached by email at [marta.cerruti@mcgill.ca](mailto:marta.cerruti@mcgill.ca).