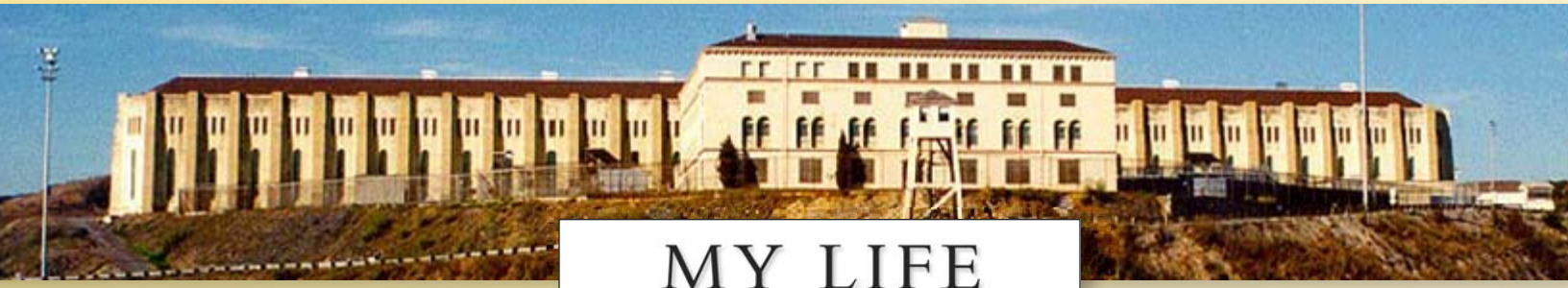
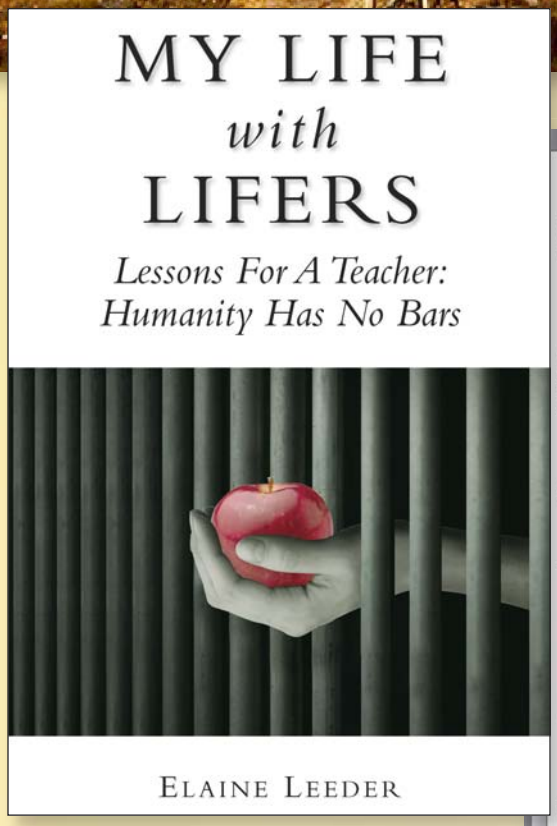
My Life With Lifers





"I have always been drawn to darkness," Elaine Leeder writes. "I know I always championed the underdog."

As a sociology professor at Ithaca College in the 1990s, she began teaching at Elmira Correctional Facility in upstate New York. When she moved to California, that same desire to help led her to the prison education program at San Quentin. Then, inspired by her lessons, a group of Leeder's students approached her about working with a program the prisoners had established to aid in their long and difficult process of redemption and transformation. She accepted.

These members of New Leaf on Life—the San Quentin "lifers"—have been sentenced to terms ranging from fifteen years to life. Unlike Death Row inmates, who will either die in prison or be executed, many of the lifers are eligible for parole after having spent twenty to thirty years behind bars. But too often, they never see that opportunity because of the popular view that they are all "hardened criminals," killers incapable of rehabilitation and unfit to be free.

What Leeder has learned, however, is that incarceration does not dictate character. Her students, although they are convicts, are committed to making their time in jail a life sentence in the best sense, not a death sentence. They have gone the extra mile to come to terms with their crimes, and have often managed to redeem their lives.

My Life With Lifers shares the journey of a woman "on the outside" as she discovers the true nature of life in prison, and the roadblocks—so many of them unnecessary—on the inmates' path to freedom. Leeder's experiences add up to both a fascinating human story and a reasoned and impassioned case for prison reform.

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Introduction

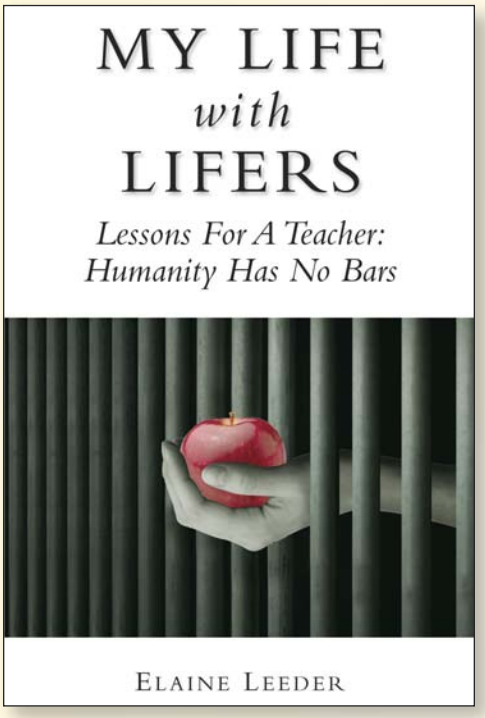
What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?

"I knew something was wrong with the way we dealt with the 'other.' To me, there was no 'other.'"

I have always been drawn to darkness and the dark side of people's lives. It may be because my father's family was killed in Lithuania during the Holocaust; it might also be because my mother's people were immigrants from Poland, with many of the troubles that immigrant families experienced, including poverty and mental illness.

My childhood home always had the shades drawn so the neighbors would not see what was going on inside. In my father's village in Lithuania, it was the neighbors who turned in the Jews and watched them being marched off to the pits where my family was shot and buried. My father spent his whole life remembering his dead mother, sister, and brother, and feeling survivor's guilt for having made it out alive before the war began.

Money had been sent for one family member to travel to the U.S. His sister was to go, but she decided to stay home to care for their elderly father. My own father was sent instead, with plans to pay the way for the rest of the family when he raised the money. But Hitler marched through Eastern Europe first, slaughtering millions. My family was among them. My father's faith in God was his only solace through tormented days and nights. He often sat late into the night reading Jewish religious tracts seeking the peace he could not find otherwise.



Whatever the cause of my being drawn to darkness, I know I always championed the underdog. In the first grade, a young African-American friend called for me on the second day of school, but my mother told me I could not walk with her or be her friend. I knew something was wrong with the way we dealt with the "other." To me, there was no "other"—she was my friend, and I would spend time with her, no matter what I was told.

"By the time I was in college, I had marched with Martin Luther King before his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech."

This rebellion stayed with me through childhood, college, and later life. By the time I was in college, I had marched with Martin Luther King before his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In Boston, where I went to school, there was a rich tradition of rebellion, and it was easy for me to find it. I smoked pot before it was "in," be-

"In these groups, I discovered that as a woman in a patriarchal society, I, too, was an underdog."

ginning as early as 1965. I joined civil rights and antiwar activities, and I was in a feminist consciousness-raising group as soon as such movements emerged. In these groups, I discovered that as a woman in a patriarchal society, I, too, was an underdog.

When I saw that I was discriminated against as a woman, I began to identify my dissatisfaction with the way things were in our society; I was tormented by social inequality, gender discrimination, class bias, racism, and militarism.

Having been raised an orthodox Jew, I knew about "doing good" in the world; it was part of a Jewish world view. These deeply instilled values taught me to love all human beings, to give charity, to wrong no one, to help a neighbor, to never take revenge, to embrace the stranger among us, to work for justice in the world, and to repair the "tear" in the universe by being a good human being. These values are called *mitzvoth*, part of the 613 commandments that Jews are supposed to follow. I might not have followed the religious rituals all my life, but they have governed my behavior as much as possible.

As a social worker in New York City, a therapist at mental hospitals and mental health clinics, and while working with alcoholics and drug addicts, I was fascinated by people who did not fit the norm. I always wondered how they could do it, since I tended to be someone who could not do much that was illegal. After many years of education and training, I became a college professor. I began to study deviance and its complexity, wanting to understand what drove people to do harm to others. At first, I began working with victims of domestic violence, but I was soon drawn to the perpetrators, to the challenge of their complicated minds. As a feminist, I felt it was my social obligation to work with people who caused pain to women. While working in a summer program for students about to enter college, some of them asked to visit a prison. I, too, was interested in such places, knowing that people there could help me understand perpetrators of domestic violence.

In 1995, in what was to be a pivotal moment in my career, I took the high school students to the Elmira Correctional Facility in upstate New York for a tour by the warden. I was struck by the cold, harsh facility and the fact that it was 150 years old. When the tour was over, I asked the warden if the inmates had any educational opportunities. He said they had only GED classes and some self-help programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). In an impetuous moment of generosity, I offered to bring some college education programs inside. The warden was thrilled, and thus began my career with prisoners.

Several years later when I moved to California to become the dean of social sciences at Sonoma State University, I discovered a prison education program at San Quentin State Prison. Drawn once again to the dark side, I began volunteering there and was once again taken with the work because it was so gripping to find human connection in such a dark and miserable place.

When the class ended, a few prisoners who were my students asked if I

"I discovered a prison education program at San Quentin State Prison . . . I began volunteering there and was once again taken with the work because it was so gripping to find human connection in such a dark and miserable place."

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would lead a group of lifers. I was flattered that they thought enough of me to have our own group. New Leaf on Life, a name chosen by the prisoners themselves, has continued since its inception in 2005. These men were sentenced to life in prison—with the possibility of parole—not to death in prison. And yet there they stay because of the attitudes and prejudices against them. Having paid their dues to society, most pose no risk to that society anymore, and many guards, educators, and administrators in prisons agree that they should be out. In California, it costs $46,000 a year to incarcerate a prisoner. Certainly, this money could be better spent elsewhere than for these men who no longer need to be there.

I am not writing here about those who are unable or unwilling to change, nor those who will continue to pose a risk to society. But they are the minority among those who are in for "life." Yet social policy often focuses on the young "gang bangers" who are doing short sentences, or on death row inmates who will never get out.

The experience in prison has set me on a new path of work. I have learned much from my students, perhaps even more than they gained from me. In this book, I share these lessons I have learned as I watch men inside begin the long and difficult process of redemption and transformation.

In my fifteen years' work in major prisons, I have spent much time in the darkness of life there, and I have seen many inmates come into the light as the process of change occurs. Many people have asked me details of my work with prisoners; thus, I have decided to document my experiences and highlight some of the men with whom I have had the privilege of working. Most of these men have committed terrible crimes, crimes for which they have been sentenced to long terms. Many have served at least the minimum necessary for parole, but still they remain in prison because of the nature of parole and "get tough on crime" views that make it impossible for men who are ready to be released to begin life outside.

Public policy and social change efforts need to distinguish among groups of prisoners and see that they cannot be generalized; each category has its own risks, challenges, and policy issues.

How many of us outside drive by prisons rarely thinking of the warehousing of humanity taking place behind those walls? Before I went into a prison, I thought everyone there deserved to be there—they belonged inside; the experience of prison was good for them, punishing them for what they had done. Once inside, I have learned about the real people, with real stories and reasons for doing what they did.

"In this book, I will tell you some of these stories, since every one is different. Though they have committed terrible crimes, these are not evil people. "

In this book, I will tell you some of these stories, since every one is different. Though they have committed terrible crimes, these are not evil people. For the most part, they are aware of and disturbed by what they did. I have learned that each one has a family traumatized by his crimes, as the victims and their families have been. Most are remorseful for what they did, and often want to make amends to the victims, their families, and the community they have harmed.

These are thoughts often not con-

"I also have learned there is little to no rehabilitation in prisons, and that if a prisoner is to transform, it is done through sheer grit and determination —succeeding in spite of the system, not because of it."

veyed to the larger society, which watches "Lockup" and thinks everyone inside is a predator, and that violence is a daily experience in prison life. Many in our society enjoy seeing others suffer; thus, we watch such shows catering to our prurient interests. Just remember how we were all glued to the television during the 9/11 attacks, watching people jump from the burning towers. Often, we think no further about such shows after we turn off the TV. Now, I have learned that there is more to what goes on in prison than is covered by movies and TV.

I also have learned there is little to no rehabilitation in prisons, and that if a prisoner is to transform, it is done through sheer grit and determination—succeeding in spite of the system, not because of it. I have learned that people who commit crimes can change, and that many of them could do more good on the outside working with young people. These men were once directionless kids in gangs, often in trouble. Sure, there are inmates I would never want to see on the streets, but they are the minority. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 95 percent of those who are incarcerated will be eventually discharged. Therefore, it is imperative as a society that we do something for these prisoners so they can become contributing members of our world.

In the following pages, I will tell you about my experiences inside prisons and what I have learned working with this population, as well as suggest some policy changes that are badly needed. Having taught sociology for many years, I know about social problems from the inside out.

The mass incarceration we in the U.S. are living with now, particularly of people of color, can be considered the newest form of slavery. Angela Davis argues in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2003) that this incarceration binge is a contemporary manifestation of the racialized disparities that many of us believe were abolished in 1865. In fact, more black men are in prison now than lived under slavery. From 1990 to 2003, African-Americans made up the majority of the increase in incarceration, with the number of imprisoned blacks jumping 76.2 percent from 360,000 to 621,000 (Wright J., 2006). Now, 3.5 percent of all black males are in prison, and more than 10 percent in the 25-29 age group (p. 316). More black men are in prison than attending college. This increase is in stark contrast to the fact that the numbers of violent crimes is decreasing at the same time!

In the U.S. today, there is a movement toward decarceration. The prisoner rights movement is advocating alternatives to incarceration—restorative justice and reconciliation rather than building more prisons. It seems undeniable that economic and racial disparities are major contributors to crime, that lack of opportunity leads people to meet their needs illegally. We could take major steps toward decarceration and its many benefits if our society sought solutions to poverty and an end to both the gross inequalities in our public education system and the criminalization of drugs. My experiences with men in prison have taught me that change is possible. Here is my story and theirs.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
APRIL 5, 2012

My Life With Lifers, *by Elaine Leeder*

Ebook tells educator's story of redemption behind bars, and of a society blinded by denial and revenge

Book publisher Ebooks Unbound releases the latest book by Sonoma State University Dean of Social Sciences Elaine Leeder. *My Life With Lifers: Lessons for a Teacher—Humanity Has No Bars* is a memoir of Dr. Leeder's experiences teaching men serving life sentences at San Quentin State Prison in California. In telling her fascinating human story, Dr. Leeder also makes a reasoned but impassioned case for prison reform.

Elaine Leeder's latest book,* My Life With Lifers, *combines a fascinating human story with a reasoned but impassioned call for prison reform.

"I have always been drawn to darkness," Elaine Leeder writes. "I know I have always championed the underdog." At San Quentin, she learned that incarceration does not dictate character. Her students, although they are convicts, are committed to making their time in jail a life sentence in the best sense, not a death sentence. *My Life With Lifers* shares the journey of a woman "on the outside" as she discovers the true character of life in jail, and the roadblocks—so many of them unnecessary—on the inmates' path to freedom.

Author, activist, and educator Elaine Leeder is committed to shifting the United States' prison policies from an atmosphere of fear and revenge to one of rehabilitation.

Dr. Leeder currently serves as Dean of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University in California, and has authored more than two dozen articles on sociological and psychological issues. Her previous books include *The Gentle General: Rose Pesotta, Anarchist and Labor Organizer* (1993); *Treating Abuse in Families: A Feminist and Community Approach* (1994); *The Family in Global Perspective: A Gendered Journey* (2003); and *Inside and Out: Women, Prison, and Therapy* (2006).

My Life With Lifers: Lessons for a Teacher—Humanity Has No Bars is available for Kindle and Nook, on PCs through free Kindle and Nook apps, and in paperback. For more information on Elaine Leeder and her work, visit www.MyLifeWithLifers.com.

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The Press Democrat

SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 2010 *Reprinted from www.PressDemocrat.com* SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

My life among the lifers at San Quentin prison

By Elaine Leeder

As I walk through the iron doors, gates banging behind me, I often feel like I am entering a foreign world. It is a world I am slowly learning about, but I always seem to have to learn more, every time I enter.

For the past nine years, I have been running groups for "lifers" at San Quentin State Prison. These are men, sentenced to 15 years to life for first- and second-degree murder or attempted murder, who after spending at least 20 or 30 years behind bars are eligible for parole. There are some 10,000 of them among the 167,000 inmates in the California prison system.

The guys in my group at San Quentin might be called "hardened criminals" and not worthy of parole. My experience has taught me otherwise.

These are felons who have gone the extra mile to come to terms with their crimes, who have redeemed their lives and are ready to join society, having worked hard to change their lives.

Yet many have been denied release by the parole board or the governor. They differ from Death Row prisoners, who will die in prison or be executed.

My group is for lifers who are interested in this kind of self-help program. It is self-selecting and inmate-run. I am the sponsor, along with another private citizen and one prison employee.

My first experience in prison was teaching a class at Elmira Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where inmates were given credit for the sociology class I taught through Ithaca College. When I moved to California, I heard about the Patten University Program, which grants community college credit to prisoners at San Quentin through volunteer teaching on the part of faculty from all over the Bay Area.

After teaching for them, I was asked by some of the guys to run our own group, prisoner-initiated and managed. Since then I have been attending the New Leaf on Life Program, bringing faculty members in to teach their specialties.

Elaine Leeder

The room is a classroom where 35 prisoners, the speaker, myself and my co-sponsor run the class. The guards are outside the room and down the hall, should we need them. That has never happened.

One of my first encounters at San Quentin was with a prisoner named Vinny. I related to him immediately, with his thick Brooklyn accent, his mellow Buddhist ways and the ability to relate to all he encountered. He is a lovely guy, one who is respected by guards and inmates alike.

He is in for having permanently disabled a man in a botched robbery attempt while on drugs. The crime was committed in the late 1970s and he has served his time ever since, in many state facilities.

Another inmate in my group is John D. He was an engineer and a respected businessman who killed his wife in 1985 in an argument that got physical.

John was recently paroled after 32 years inside, primarily through his own legal efforts, challenging the courts and being cited in many legal books for setting precedents in cases involving lifers.

Another of my guys is Marv, a man who to this day, after more than 30 years, insists that he is innocent. The newest D.A. on this case believes the same. It was prosecuted years ago by a D.A. who did believe Marv was guilty, although there was just circumstantial evidence. Nonetheless he remains incarcerated, now in a medical facility due to small strokes and deteriorating health.

As I engage in this kind of work, I find it the most meaningful undertaking I have ever done. It is so personally rewarding and often my prison students tell me how grateful they are that someone from the outside has shown an interest in them. They feel forgotten and isolated, with family having given up on them because of the long years they have served.

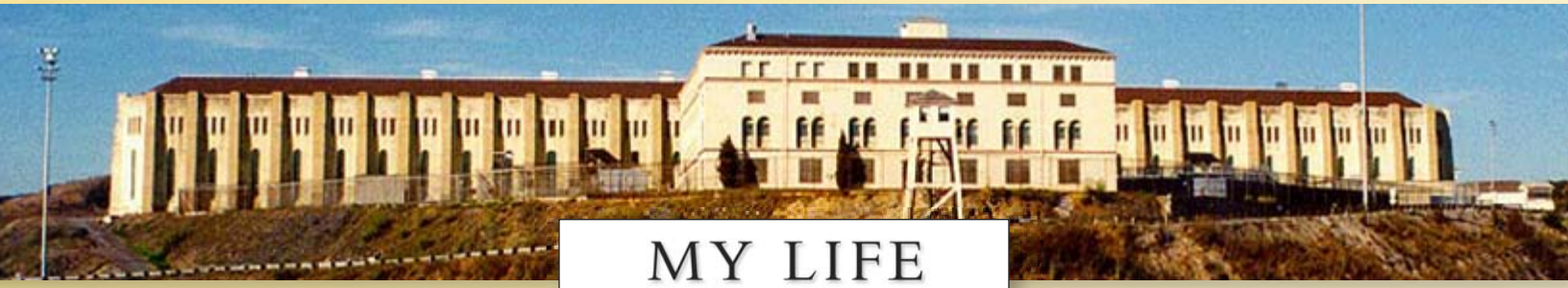
I have learned that people can redeem themselves; that they go through many changes when they have been inside so long. First they might be the thugs that brought them there, but then they mature, they awaken to the crimes that they did, and they then engage in programs in an attempt to change their lives.

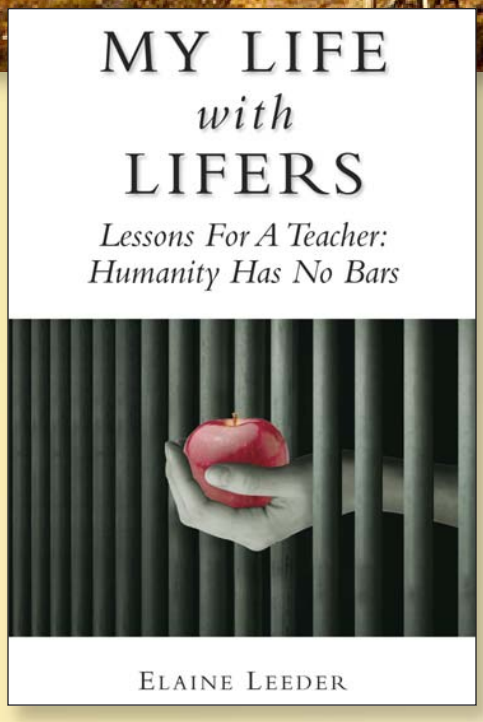
Later they atone, feeling remorse and taking responsibility for their actions.

Men who have gone though this process through multiple programs and self-help activities deserve another chance. Why is it that we do not give them the opportunity they have earned after so many years inside?

Why do we spend $57.92 a day, or $34 billion a year, when so many men who have made such visible progress could be paroled? I know that we live in an anti-crime climate, but this makes no sense to me.

Praise for My Life With Lifers





In her compelling book *My Life With Lifers*, Elaine Leeder gives voice to the "real people with real stories" who are serving life sentences at San Quentin. She shares the lessons she learned watching these men begin the long and difficult process of redemption and transformation, and offers powerful policy recommendations that deserve to be taken seriously.

—Prof. Barbara Bloom
Department of Criminology
and Criminal Justice Studies
Sonoma State University

Elaine Leeder shines a bright light on the men in San Quentin as she brings their voices to us. We hear the pertinent, intelligent, and poignant things they have to say, which might just enlighten us and give us pause and reflection.

—Mary Cone, Chairperson
Sonoma County Juvenile Justice Commission

Social worker, sociologist, university dean, and author, Leeder gets to the fundamentals of learning in her deeply personal and socially conscious accounts of her regular treks to San Quentin to teach classes to men who may never be released from prison.

My Life With Lifers educates us about the penal system and enlightens us about prisoners' thirst for learning as it excites us about a true educator's experience of taking learning to the bereft and forgotten.

—Kathleen Barry
Professor Emerita
Pennsylvania State University

Leeder's book offers a valuable lens through which to look at this important topic. More importantly, it offers a reminder to "shift" one's perspective—not to become "settled" or "comfortable" with whatever lens one happens to be looking through at a particular moment—whether the topic is imprisonment, or something wholly unrelated. Thus, this book serves as a haunting and powerful reminder—as well as a friendly nudge—on macro as well as micro levels.

It also challenges me as a teacher to rethink my student population, what they bring to learning experiences, and what they contribute to those learning experiences.

—C.L. Gibson, Charlotte, NC
(Amazon reader review)

Elaine Leeder tells how her experience of teaching prisoners has changed her own values in addition to the way the inmates' values have done a 180-degree turn. People who once took a life without thinking now put so much of their thought into how they can help other people to change and grow. Leeder was supposed to be teaching them sociology, but she obviously taught them a great deal more as well.

—Randy Gilbert, Santa Fe, NM
(Amazon reader review)

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About Elaine Leeder

Author, Educator, Advocate —a Tireless Voice for Change

Elaine Leeder has devoted her life to remembering and speaking out for the marginalized members of society. In her commitment to moving U.S. prison policies away from an atmosphere of fear and revenge, she also aims to help her own college students make sense of a changing society and influence its direction. Driven by both love for her students and the nation's vital need for social change, Leeder works tirelessly as an educator, author, and speaker on subjects ranging from the Holocaust to global perspectives on families to therapeutic issues facing female prisoners and their children.

Dr. Leeder, Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University in California, has thirty-five years of distinguished accomplishments in academia and public service. She began her career as an undergraduate at Northeastern University, where she earned a B.A. in sociology with a minor in psychology before receiving a master's in social work from Yeshiva University in New York and a second master's degree in public health from the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Leeder earned her Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1985. She served as a sociology professor at Ithaca College before joining the faculty at Sonoma State, where, in addition to her duties as dean, she teaches courses in introductory sociology and family violence.

Dr. Leeder is listed in *Who's Who of American Women, Who's Who in America,* and *Who's Who of American Teachers.* Her awards include a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, outstanding teacher awards, research and travel grants, and numerous awards from student and community agencies. In addition to her academic career, Dr. Leeder has served as a psychotherapist, consultant, and advocate for social justice. She was a visiting scholar at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and has twice sailed on the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea.

In addition to *My Life With Lifers,* Dr. Leeder has written more than two dozen articles on sociological and psychological issues. She is the author of four other books: *The Gentle General: Rose Pesotta, Anarchist and Labor Organizer* (1993); *Treating Abuse in Families: A Feminist and Community Approach* (1994); *The Family in Global Perspective: A Gendered Journey* (2003); and *Inside and Out: Women, Prison, and Therapy.*

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