

What do prisoners and ex-offenders need to learn?

PJG is a member of Clinks, which is a member of a Fellowship convened by The Monument Trust who asked for submissions of between 800-2000 words answering the question, 'What do prisoners and ex-offenders need to learn?' they were not only looking for contributions from academics, researchers and policy experts - everyone was welcome to contribute, in particular people who have first-hand experience of the criminal justice system.

Two members of the PJG committee and our friend, Norman Anderson (who has spoken at PJG meetings in the past) entered this, and their work will be included in a book which will be launched at the Southbank centre on 7 November as part of the Koestler exhibition of prisoners' art.

PJG contributions below.

LIBERATION AND TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE EVEN IN PRISON

My story I feel can offer at least information, at best inspiration.

My life of drug addiction and crime lasted forty years, through I can say through heroin and crack cocaine and stories that could fill volumes. I will concentrate on my last prison sentence. In 2004 I was sentenced to 18 years in prison for drug importation. I was 54 years old and on entering prison I was a heroin addict, and continued to use for the first two years. Standing in my cell one evening a letter came under my door, this letter was a reply from my eldest daughter who I had written to saying sorry for not being around and would not be for a long time. Her letter began with, Dear daddy you are our daddy so we forgive you.

This struck me to the core of my being and became the catalyst for change. I realised how selfish and wrong I had been, what I did to myself was one thing all the casualties of my chaotic lifestyle was another. I stopped using and then I found myself in a very vulnerable state. What do I do now? The cloud and comfort of losing myself in drugs was gone. I was lost, years of prison ahead of me. I started with yoga and meditation that I had tried in the seventies, I saw a counsellor for two hours a week for six months. This woman was a Sikh, her name was Bali, she was someone I felt empathy with, and could be very open with. Bali Batal wherever you are thank you.

Around this time I went to a weekly art class, watercolour painting, during our first demo of clean water on a brush was dropped onto the paper, the mystery of this mark really took hold of me and something in me was transformed. Art then became a journey from then till now.

I started to exhibit yearly with the Koestler Trust. The gift of being able to attend full time art classes for the next five years was helped by the koestler's feedback and prizes. This was a big chink of light in my transformation, engaging with a creative community was invaluable. Shortly before I moved to an open prison, by chance I met through art a Quaker Chaplain, during that first conversation with her I was intrigued to find out more about Quakers, this I did. It turned out to be one of the best things I ever did, I am now a Quaker. A big shout to the Prison Phoenix Trust who also supported me with books letters and especially light.

In the open prison I carried on with Quakers Art and yoga and lots of advice from the art tutors, during this time I asked for and was allowed to attend Doncaster college to do an adult access course. Also during this time I was offered a place on the Fine Art and Craft Degree. This I was allowed to do even in prison. After the first semester I was released from prison and chose to carry on with my degree. But also from the open prison I attended Doncaster Quaker meeting, where I eventually became a member.

Upon reading Quaker literature, I came across two words which were 'applied mysticism'. For some reason I was like a dog with a bone and couldn't let go of those words until I found out what they meant. The simplest answer for me was the best. It was that the mystical part is what you find you find in a meeting for worship and the applied part is how you use it in your daily life. Having become a Quaker while in prison, the day I left I went to live in the Quaker community in Derbyshire for four years. I now have a degree in fine art and am just about to finish a Masters Degree. Creativity and being open to the transformational qualities of spirit, can and does change

our lives.
Norman Anderson

CONNECTING IS THE KEY

I have known several prisoners who have changed their lives. They have all said that the very first step is recognising that there is someone who accepts them unconditionally.

Norman had his letter from his daughter...ee started to talk about his crimes when he realised there was someone who knew what he had done and still did not reject him... Sally, found someone she could trust...

The first step is making contact with another person. It could be with an animal, a course, a religion, but it is usually another person who gives the prisoner a different view of him/herself. Suddenly they feel worthwhile. That it is worth making the effort to change.

That contact is like cracking a shell. The imprisoned person starts to grow.

Sometimes the prisoner has to make the first move, but connecting is always the key.

Hilary Peters

WE ARE ALL MEANT TO SHINE

I believe that the most important thing that prisoners and ex-offenders need to learn is exactly the same as what the rest of us need to learn: the truth of the words spoken by Nelson Mandela, quoting Marianne Williamson's A Return to Love:

'We are all meant to shine as children do. It's not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own lights shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.'

This is not formal cognitive, classroom learning, it is emotional understanding that we all have the capacity to shine.

Many years ago, I taught what was then called, 'Basic Education' in an open prison. I used to ask men why they had opted for education, which was much worse paid than most jobs in a prison where all were expected to work. Most replied, 'because I'm thick, Miss.' I very quickly learned that almost all were far from 'thick,' but this is what they had learned in 11 years of compulsory education. Most, of course, had not spent much time in school, once they had learned that it had little to offer them, because they were 'thick'.

At the end of the first term of full time education in that prison, a small group of men wrote a poem as part of their (rejected) plea to be allowed to remain on education for more than one ten week term. This ended:

*We may be the deviants
And we know we've been bad
But education's helped ;us
Get back what we had,'*

What was it we helped them get back? Perhaps their shining potential, possibly lost at school.

Much later, when I was a Quaker prison chaplain in a local prison, I told a man that, as a Quaker, I believed that he had 'that of God' or of good, or an 'Inner Light' within him, as has everyone. He told me that this was the first time in his life that anyone had told him that there might be something

good about him. What a burden for anyone to have to carry through life. Were his parents, his teachers, his employers all blind to his shining potential?

Over the years I have heard of so many, diverse initiatives that lead to rehabilitation, or reduce re-offending: art, writing, music, religious faith, caring for animals, catering, horticulture, yoga and meditation, repairing old bicycles for use by third world health workers, and many, many more. All these myriad routes to rehabilitation have one thing in common: they help to uncover the shining potential that is in each one of us. Perhaps 'rehabilitation' is the wrong word, so many of those in prison seem never to have been 'habilitated' in the first place. Arbitrarily assigned to the lowest status in a society that punishes rather than helps the unfortunate, many of those in our prisons and ex-offenders seem to lack any sense of self worth. They need to learn that they have worth, and those of us not in prison need to know and to value their worth. We all are meant to shine: our, and their, shining will help others to shine.

Winston Churchill, when home secretary, famously said,

'The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country.'

How does our civilisation fare on this test? Churchill went on to say,

'There is a treasure, if only you can find it, in the heart of every person.'

To me, this treasure, which we all need to find within us, seems very similar to Williamson's shining, or to the Quaker 'that of God' within all.

One man whose shining I remember clearly from years ago, who used to be in my basic education class, was Charley. He was coming to the end of a life sentence for murder, and shone through his art. He told me of a troubled childhood, when he was always in what he called 'spots of bother'. Once, when sickening for whooping cough, he told his mother he did not feel well, she hit him with the poker. He started painting because of the cost of Christmas cards. The education officer in Kingston prison thought his work was good enough to be entered for the Koestler award. He won many prizes over the years, and shone. He was able to say, 'I'm an artist' in stead of 'I'm a lifer.' This shining changed his life, and I am sure helped him eventually to get his release on licence.

A Quaker 'advice' says, *'Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God.'* 'Us' here is everyone. Some of the more fortunate among us may like to castigate offenders: it helps us to deny our own failures and weaknesses as we point to others and declare them wicked, even evil. The media fans this with emotive headlines, that vilify people in prison, particularly sex offenders. The media has tremendous power to shape our views, and our legislation. They feed us stories of wickedness which make us feel comfortable, secure in the knowledge that we are not like them. In fact we are. All of us have within us, as well as Churchill's 'treasure', a propensity for evil

Solzhenitsyn wrote:

'If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil runs through the heart of every human being and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?'

Linked to this treasure, this shining potential, and an important part of it, is the fact that we are not alone: all of us are part of the great web of life. We share a common humanity, and are linked at a very deep level. Jung called this the collective unconscious. I think this is also the Quakers' Inner Light, or that of God within. But one does not need to believe in a God, or even in Inner Light, to understand that we all have a place in this universal oneness: offenders, ex-offenders and all the rest of us. We are not essentially different.

Desmond Tutu, in his book 'No Future without Forgiveness', writes of the African concept of ubuntu, which, he says, does not readily translate into English:

'It speaks of the very essence of being human... We say, "a person is a person through other people" ..."I am human because I belong"... Ubuntu means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system.'

So we are all harmed by the harm done by our criminal justice system. Restorative justice attempts to limit this harm, but do we want to restore a system in which some people are perceived as having less value than others, to restore an unjust society? Rather than a society which punishes those who most need our help, we need is a society in which all recognise that all are born to shine. I believe we all have a responsibility to work for such a society.

As the sixteenth century poet, John Donne wrote, echoing Tutu's ubuntu:

'No man is an island entire of itself....Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.'

(John Donne, Meditation xvii)

Mary Brown