

## **ON BEING A PRISONER**

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**by Robert Shaw**

During my first year in prison I became increasingly aware of the gulf between my experience of prison and the perceptions many of those who work in prison or in penal affairs generally have of prison, prisoners and prison officers and instructors. The longer I stayed in prison the deeper the understanding I gained of what it means to be in prison — something which someone who has never been in that position cannot imagine. One prison instructor very wisely said to me, ‘I enjoy my job; I come in here every day but I cannot imagine what it must be like for you.’ Nonetheless it seems worth sharing some of my experiences to redress some of the misconceptions people have of life in prison.

From my very first day I was struck by the many kindnesses I received from fellow prisoners often unexpected and from unexpected quarters. I also found that most prisoners are honest and reliable. Those who are not may cause problems which draw them to the attention of staff and, because senior staff in particular are more likely to encounter the prisoners who cause problems than those who do not, the impression they get of prisoners and the accounts they give may have an unavoidable bias in them.

My next surprise occurred about two weeks after I was imprisoned when a fellow prisoner said to me, ‘You’re innocent, aren’t you?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘We could tell by the way you behaved,’ he said. I was subsequently to realise that it is not too difficult to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent in prison, particularly when you are regularly in contact with people. Experienced prison officers can often distinguish them, though I know of only one occasion when a prison officer explicitly told someone who was subsequently acquitted that he believed he was innocent.

Rather I found that experienced prison officers are experts in nonverbal communication and in using intangible rewards to motivate prisoners. As the Prison Service in England and Wales has become increasingly bureaucratic, so the opportunities for prison officers to reward or punish prisoners formally have decreased. For example, the Incentives and Earned

Privileges Scheme generally requires at least three misdemeanours before a prisoner is punished and six months' good behaviour before a prisoner is rewarded. Though prison officers can contribute to the scheme by writing up misdemeanours or commendations, punishments and rewards are most effective if they are immediate. So many prison officers find ways of rewarding prisoners intangibly by responding to requests with alacrity, by following things up for prisoners or by direct praise or encouragement. They also use their non-verbal skills in dealing with tricky situations and I saw some of the highest quality interpersonal interaction between people at the end of a landing as a prison officer responded to a prisoner's distress. But, because the high level of skill shown by experienced prison officers defused so many tricky situations, it never came to the attention of senior staff or, one suspects, even of the prison officer's colleagues.

Using non-verbal techniques has risks; not all prisoners respond appropriately to them and some prisoners will misunderstand or seek to take advantage of a prison officer's intangible reward. Equally much bullying and harassment takes place entirely through nonverbal interaction; so a less scrupulous officer may use an environment in which experienced prison officers make good use of non-verbal communication so that s/he can harass or bully prisoners. Where prisoners understand and can respond constructively to nonverbal communication from prison officers a pattern of positive interaction can ensue which makes the experience of prison more rewarding for both prisoners and prison officers. Just as the person at work or the partner in a marriage who fails to pick up the non-verbal signals from others about their unacceptable behaviour can have problems, so prisoners who fail to recognise the non-verbal signals being given to them by other prisoners and by prison officers are likely to have problems.

The commitment of many prison officers and instructors to quality work came out time and again; the quality of their interviewing and chairing of meetings matched the highest levels I had encountered in 30 years as a professional; the seminar managed by a health prevention officer was among the five best seminars I have experienced in 30 years of attending conferences and seminars in the UK and abroad while the seminar on drugs led by his colleague was of a similarly high standard. One senior prison officer in an extremely poorly managed prison told me that she continued to work there because she hoped there would come a time when those who were committed to quality work would be given encouragement.

Whether or not these officers were aware of Churchill's comment about needing 'an unflinching faith that there is a treasure, if you only find it, in the heart of every man' (Ramsbotham, 2003, p. 67) many prisoners reported that an individual prisoner or prison officer had been crucial to their own repentance or reconciliation with their situation and commitment to taking a constructive approach to their imprisonment. Though some prisoners reported positive experiences from taking part in offending behaviour programmes, positive interactions with individual prisoners or prison officers stood out most in their stories.

Prison is a levelling experience which enables people from very different backgrounds to meet. Having left the 'shopfloor' 27 years before I was imprisoned, I had to unpack a whole series of skills I had hardly used for 27 years to work in a prison workshop and in return I was part of group behaviour which I had only ever read about in books and saw afresh the therapeutic potential of groups in a work context. I acquired friends from a wide range of backgrounds whom I might have met as a teacher of mature students in the role of 'teacher' but not as a potential lifelong friend.

The skills needed to make the most of prison are the same as those needed outside prison. Just as people outside prison need to look after themselves by eating well and exercising, so prisoners need to look after themselves in similar ways. Just as people need to manage relationships outside prison, so they need to make and maintain relationships both with those inside prison and with those outside. Just as people need personal self-confidence to achieve many things outside prison, so they need personal self-confidence to make the most of prison. Teamwork and groupwork skills can be acquired through work and leisure activities in prison just as they can outside.

Before my imprisonment much of my work had been with people working with adults who present difficult behaviour; the same skills work with prisoners who present difficult behaviour. Over the years I have taught people the value of setting SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-limited — goals but even I was surprised when I looked back at what I had achieved over 4 years in prison simply by putting that principle into practice. Just as I have encouraged people in difficult situations to look for the opportunities in the situation, so I found many opportunities to learn about myself, to study and to write. Similarly, fellow prisoners found opportunities in prison which they had not had outside from a dyslexic prisoner who completed the CLAIT computer course to prisoners who have

learned Braille or completed a degree. Just as successful millionaire business people take responsibility for their actions and do not blame others when things go wrong, so do successful prisoners.

The view that prisoners are either ‘bad’ or ‘mad’ is unhelpful to both prisoners and those supporting them. Very few prisoners are committed to a lifetime of offending; most would like to live their lives without offending; similarly, though I estimate that 70 per cent of prisoners need some support to deal with a variety of psychological problems, very few prisoners are so disturbed that they need specialist help; the majority need help that is no different from that which many people outside prison need; often it is unrelated to their offending but very significant for their resettlement. The vast majority of prisoners are perfectly ordinary people who have found themselves in situations with which they could not cope or have made mistakes which have had serious consequences for themselves and others.

However, unlike the people satirised by Stephen Sondheim in ‘Gee, Officer Krupke,’ many prisoners do not seek to place responsibility for their situations on others; this is an artifact of the sort of questions they are asked by probation officers and psychologists who are seeking an ‘explanation’ for their offending. When prisoners tell their stories without any pressure to justify their actions, they can be anything from fatalistic to quite sensitive about others in the situation. Most of those who end up in prison are not the ‘worst’ offenders — even though a few may have committed extremely brutal offences; they are for the most part the poor (Guadaloupe, 2002) and those who happen to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most of all they need the time and the space to come to terms with their situations and to find ways of living their lives in harmony with their neighbours.

### **Responding to prison**

For some prisoners the opportunity to perform acts of kindness to other prisoners may be a reaction to the vilification they received in the press when they were convicted — a way of showing that they are not all bad — but for others, as evidenced by the rest of their behaviour in prison, it is an expression of how they normally behave. Many are intangible acts of kindness, encouragement and support such as are also provided by experienced prison officers. Similarly the skills used by prisoners and prison officers to assess whether people are guilty or not are the skills that anyone in a particular situation develops to understand and deal with the situation in which they find themselves.

Jesus often gave non-verbal 'hints' as when he went off to pray (Mark 1:35), or carried on sleeping through the storm (Matthew 8:24) or cooked breakfast for the disciples (John 21:9); He also found it frustrating when people did not pick them up (Matthew 8:26). He was committed to quality as evidenced by the wine He provided at Cana (John 2:10) and He was prepared to mix with Pharisees (Luke 7:36- 50), social outcasts such as the woman of Samaria (John 4:7-27) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and with Jairus, the synagogue official (Luke 8:40-53). Time and again I found that His teaching and that of His apostles illuminated life in prison just as much as it had illuminated my life outside prison. Though I did not encounter anything comparable with Jens Soring's experience (2003), I did encounter one of the few really disturbed people in prison; so I prayed about this and received the reply, 'You must love him.' 'How can I love him?' I replied. But God showed me how I could love him and I appreciated for the first time the real power of: 'There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear' (1 John 4:18).

Jesus had to deal with the conventional view that disabilities or misfortune were a consequence of sin (Matthew 9:1-7); we need to deal with the conventional view that people offend because they are 'bad,' 'mad' or environmentally deprived. However heinous the crimes people have committed, no-one is wholly bad and everyone has a treasure in their heart. I saw that day in day out even among the most notorious offenders. Some people may be so out of touch with reality that all their behaviour is bizarre and some of that may include offences but it is unhelpful to base our idea of offenders on such a small number of people. Moreover, the easiest way to produce bizarre behaviour in normal people is to treat them as 'mad.' It is very difficult not to pretend you are mad when that is how other people treat you and, if it carries on for long enough, you may come to believe it yourself.

Though many people all over the world end up in prison because they are poor rather than because they have committed more serious offences than more wealthy people who are 'let off' with fines or community sentences (Guadaloupe, 2002) and measures to address poverty and other forms of environmental deprivation would certainly reduce crime, none of this helps offenders to deal with their situation or the impact their offending has had on themselves, their victims, their families and society in general, not least because not everyone who is poor or has been abused has turned to

crime. They have to deal with the fact that they have, like all of us, ‘failed to hit the mark’ — the original sense of hamartia, or sin — in all sorts of ways: failing to handle relationships, to take opportunities for education, to see the consequences of their actions, to heed the advice of others or to recognise the stress of their own situation, their own weaknesses or even their need for support from others. As probation officers and psychologists know, most prisoners can, when asked, give you a long list of things that have contributed to their failure to ‘hit the mark.’ But this is the wrong question to ask; Jesus does not ask ‘Why did you sin in the past?’ but ‘Are you going to sin again?’

Many prisoners come into prison with a commitment not to sin again but that commitment can be eroded, sometimes within days, by the failure to offer them anything which will help them not to sin again. Those who maintain their commitment do so because they accept responsibility for their offences and for finding out how best to avoid re-offending and, as Churchill argued, the best way to do that is to find the treasure in themselves that can give them the foundation for their lives on release.

Of course, some prisoners never show any remorse or any commitment to taking a constructive approach to their situations; some prisoners and some prison officers behave badly and prisoners have to find ways of dealing with this. Some prisoners arrive in prison so damaged that they will inevitably be damaged by the experience regardless of whether they are on the wrong end of any bad behaviour on the part of fellow prisoners or prison officers. But those who have found ways of dealing with prison constructively down the generations, whether or not they have what is conventionally called a ‘faith,’ have done so because they have received, or been able to engage, the support of their fellow prisoners or their warders. Many continue to do so and it is largely thanks to their efforts that the English Prison Service has not collapsed under the weight of the overcrowding and mismanagement that account for 85 per cent of all the things that go wrong in the system. Whatever the future of prisons in England and Wales, they can only offer something to victims, offenders, their families and society in general if they build on the 85 per cent of good that flows from the actions of prisoners and prison officers.

## References

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