

From England

HEALING THE COMPULSIVE AND PERSISTENT OFFENDER

by Peter Sedgwick

“Weeping is heard on the bare places, Israel’s people pleading for mercy, because they have taken to crooked ways and ignored the Lord their God ... Let us lie down in shame, covered by dishonour”.
Jeremiah 3:21 and 25

We have become used to the idea that there is a crime epidemic in our society, and that it is unsafe to walk the streets in our large cities because you are likely to be mugged, set upon and robbed. This is the daily fare of the tabloids and it affects the way we think as a society about them. Who do we mean by them? Those whom we fear, those who feel no remorse in taking from others, those outside the pale of our comprehension.

This theme of darkness is all too obvious in many people who feel afraid in our society. The world becomes a place where we do not trust others. As Auden put it in *The Shield of Achilles*:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
Of any world where promises were made
Or one could weep because another wept.

In one way the desire for order is too easily mocked by those who lead secure lives. It is not simply that it can be terrifying to be burgled, robbed or mugged, and we do not forget it lightly. It is more deeply that to be caught up in this chaos can be destructive for those who live in it, and for their friends and family.

I remember vividly a drug addict who came to stay with my wife and me after he had gone through detoxification and rehabilitation. He was a gifted writer without much education, and he had had pieces published in *The Guardian* and received a writing award from Princess Diana. But he had burgled since he became a heroin addict at the age of 12, and he was now 30. He had done over 12 years in prison. It was, he said, the constant living on the edge, the constant reduction of his universe to the next kick from the crack and the sweet oblivion from the relaxation of the heroin that he remembered so well. What else was there but a life measured out in needles, women and planning the next break-in. That was what measured my horizons, he said. He relapsed, perhaps predictably, but one day he may, just may, succeed in breaking free of an obsession and learn to manage his life, as he would want it. He is typical of many offenders, on the one hand young and gifted, but also sadly compulsive and caught in an addiction from which he cannot manage (yet) to break free.

Prisoners are those who in the main know little of secure relationships, although some have incredibly loyal parents or partners or children. I am always moved by how many families do stay with offenders and keep in touch over great distances. Nevertheless many prisoners have not enjoyed a stable family life. If they know little of relationships, or the achievement found in work, then sex, violence and drugs offer a different path. There is little to be lost when there is little there anyway.

At the edge of this world lies chaos. It is a Biblical image, of chaos hovering at the furthest edges of the world. “The earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep.” Then God speaks, creating order, in the book of Genesis. So in criminal justice law holds back the chaos which can overwhelm society. But that can never be enough. There must also be a healing of the chaos within a person.

Let me digress for a moment to talk about prison life, before returning to the theme of addiction. In a survey of offenders the London probation service found that 75 per cent were unemployed, 46 per cent had drink problems and 35 per cent drug problems, 10 per cent had attempted suicide, 15 per cent were mentally ill and 33 per cent

had been in care. This represents a chaos in a person's life which it is difficult to describe. Prison, when it is badly run, allows bullying and intimidation which can tip that chaos into mental illness and self-harm. This is the daily reality of life inside a prison. Thank goodness that some prisons are well run, do provide good programmes, and care for offenders. But by no means all do so, and it is much harder when overcrowding is a stark reality, as the recent inspection of Norwich prison makes clear.

So how might a person be healed and set free from addiction for a new life with others and with him or herself? What we are talking about in personal terms is a deep compulsion which directs a person's will. Compulsion operates in a person as desire, desiring which engages internal motivations and constricts the range of possible actions. We act in a way where none of the alternatives of action are what we would choose if we were free of the constraints of the situation.

This is why the distortion of a person's life by the power of the past, or by habits, or by a situation, or a relationship is so powerful. It can mean that the internal dynamics that make us who we are become compelled to act in a particular way. Our will, our intentions, the ultimate orientation of our life and the choices we make are none of them separate from the concrete circumstances of our life.

Breaking free of that distortion can be the work of a lifetime but all of us are called to discover how we can live out our lives in ways that liberate us from this bondage. This task is one of discovering what it means to be creative in ways that do not distort our own life, or bind other people, or cause harmful consequences for others. That, it seems to me, is what the Biblical message is all about. The possibility of such change is basic to the message of the Old Testament, as it postulates the possibility of 'truth, justice and uprightness'. This is a blessedness into which God in the spirit surrounding these words has called Israel, and when it responds (if it responds) this new life will be a self-authenticating life that can be seen by others.

In the New Testament the possibility of such a community coming into existence depends on the certainty that we are the objects of a generous love. Need is the beginning of such truthfulness, the need

that recognises that we cannot talk ourselves into that change which we cannot do without if we are to change. If this change is to happen there must be the possibility of reaching a “good “ that empowers us and sets us free to be persons that can flourish and reach a true depth of relationships. But what might that “good” be? Certainly it is not addiction to drugs, sex or money.

Every day people are sent to prison as punishment for what they have done. But this can never be a way of life that sends people to prison for punishment. Instead there has to be a prison regime working with people that enables them to break through the past and to become people who wish to lead a new life. Indeed prison is often the worst place to begin learning such lessons, for it can undermine any sense of responsibility and instead the prisoner sees himself or herself as a cog in the machine, passive and deprived of initiative, a number in the criminal justice system. Community programmes are far more likely to nurture that sense of responsibility, as has been shown again and again.

But it will not do either just to hope that with kindness, or the evangelical sermonising beloved of prison reformers 150 years ago, a person will start a new life. The patterns of compulsion run deep, and nowhere more so than in sex offenders and persistent offenders. What is needed is both treating the offender as a responsible person and also recognising that there are deep compulsions within him or her.

The grace of God, which brings healing for all of humanity, may be couched in very moralistic terms in Titus but the message is the same. The healing of compulsion begins with a recognition that a person needs to be taken out of the situation in which their wills are formed, energised and directed so that there can be a new way of life. Such a way of life will not be de-energising, disorienting and subverting. In Christian terms this is the experience of conversion and in this new life there can be reconciliation, forgiveness and transformation. This is not a cheap letting go but a costly facing up to where a person has damaged another. Faith is the orientation to a new desire in life, centred on God and on the transformation of self.

But it is also about giving a person a new responsibility. There is much in prison which takes away that responsibility and I have

worked with a prison governor on a project to give greater responsibility to those in custody. It is *The Responsible Prisoner Project* with Stephen Pryor and it ranged from small things such as the proper way to address people to much larger schemes of employment and listening. Custody often undermines any sense of being an active participant in a community. Penitence is learning to see the past differently so that we can see how circumstance and freedom are interwoven in any decision. This is an imaginative leap into a different perspective that enables us to see how our action will affect others. Giving a person responsibility is a means of allowing that imaginative leap to take place. Community programmes can set a person's imagination on fire when they see what can be achieved if there is the right support.

For a Christian there is no option of ignoring the capacity of anyone to give and receive as a member of a community. Some of those prison governors and officers who have most impressed me across the years are those who are quite realistic and hard headed about the nature of the people with whom they deal. Yet they are also prepared to celebrate with humour and insight the warmth, compassion and expression of feelings that can make up prison life. Being made in the image of God involves accepting this claim upon us all that there are no limits to the possibilities of participating in this giving and receiving.

In the end this is all about helping those in prison, those who are offenders, those who have become addicts, to find their vocation as much as any of us. True and false freedom is easily confused and the idea of freedom as uncommitment is very alluring. So too is the easygoing acceptance that the compulsions which pattern our lives are what we really want, and that we can stay where we are. As Rowan Williams says in one of his sermons, vocation may be to be whom we are, but that is not the same as leaving us where we are. We need to find the structure and form of life that leaves us alert, responsive and open to God's grace and judgement. That grace and judgement is ever faithful, but it often does not feel like that, and the unpredictability can be high. Nevertheless there can be change, transformation and an end to shame. But that is not just the work of the offender, or even those who work in criminal justice. It is the work

of all of us to provide the sort of society in which there can be acceptance and the possibility of change: where there are no more “thems”, but only an understanding that we are all part of this flawed, but redeemed, humanity.

Dr. Peter Sedgwick, is the Secretary of the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England.

He holds the copyright. peter.sedgwick@bsr.c-of-e.org.uk

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