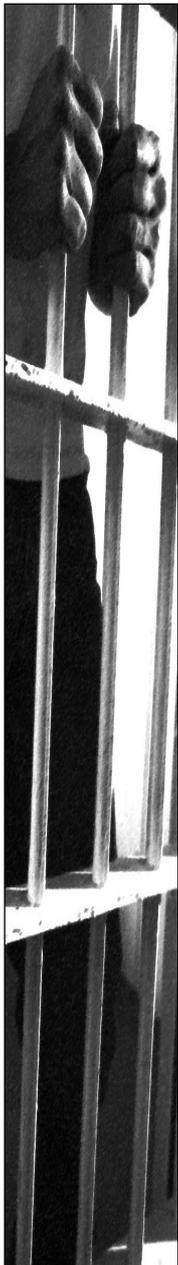


John Bayley describes how young male offenders leaving prison can be helped to overcome their pasts and look forward to a meaningful future.

History but not destiny

THE saddest sight I witness at the prison where I work is a twice daily procession, at 8am and 4pm, when groups of young male prisoners trudge across to the healthcare centre to receive their medication, the majority of it antidepressants and antipsychotics. Perhaps just as concerning is that this is treated as the norm: in this large, austere Victorian prison, which houses 600 young men aged between 18 and 21, mental health problems are seen by other prisoners as just par for the course and don't carry the same degree of stigma that they do 'on the out'.



The 'medical model', here as in many other places, is seen as a solution to problems – by staff as well as prisoners. If young men are locked up behind their cell doors for prolonged periods of time (up to 23 hours a day in some cases), of course they go over and over things in their minds and their imaginations run riot. The result is hopelessness, depression, terror, paranoia, agitation, crazy behaviour. To deal with the demons, young men who have to spend long periods alone in their cells commonly "sleep their sentence away". It is a prison term. As I write this, I have just been over to try and see a young man I'm working with. It is 11am. I opened the flap on his door (no privacy here) and see he is fast asleep in bed. At 11.45am he will be awakened for lunch, which he will eat alone, locked up in his cell. He will then sleep till 2pm, when he will be woken so that he can pass back his tray. Because he is a prisoner who is under threat of being attacked – he had his nose broken last week in the showers – he will spend the afternoon in bed, to be woken at 4.45pm for his tea. He will remain in his cell for the rest of the day and sleep through most of it until breakfast time tomorrow at 8am. He has six weeks left of this routine before he is released back to South London. Without help, I know he will be extremely anxious and depressed by that time. He is already exhibiting signs of paranoia – but then, so would I, in his shoes. I know how hopelessness and fear feel.

"You'll never work again"

My earlier career was in education, where I started as a teacher, rising to become the head teacher of a school in Dorset. I had held that job for eight years when I became ill with what was diagnosed as clinical depression and, after various treatments, including antidepressants, lithium and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), was told that I

would never work again. (Interestingly, at that time, my local education authority had just issued all head teachers with discreet cards bearing the telephone number of a clinical psychologist – a service initiated after two head teachers committed suicide attributed to 'stress'.)

But eventually I *did* work again. With the enduring love and support of my family, my confidence grew and my health improved and, because of some previous experience I'd had of work in a prison environment, I was offered a full-time position at Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Portland, working for Nacro, the country's leading crime reduction charity. An innovative project was being trialled, mentoring the neediest of the young men, whose histories included drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, family breakdown, involvement in the care system, homelessness and sexual and/or physical abuse. They were the prisoners whom nobody else would work with, because of what was considered to be their inevitable reoffending behaviour.

Respect

I became one of three professional mentors on the On-Side Mentoring Project, each of us with a caseload of up to 12 young men, preparing them for release and then supporting them afterwards. We would see our lads three or four times a week for a couple of hours, starting two to four months before their release date and then for, on average, six months outside prison – though once I worked with a lad for 18 months. I started at Portland before I knew about the human givens but I was instinctively aware that, if I treated the young men with respect and actually listened to them, they responded to me very differently from the way they were used to responding whilst in prison. The secret of success seemed to me very simple: develop a relationship based on trust, put in place some simple acts of practical assistance, such as help in finding accommodation or work placements, and, most of all, be reliable. (I discovered that being reliable was priceless; most of the lads I work with have had a lifetime of being let down, so to have someone turn up when they said that they would turn up and then actually do what they said they would do created an enormously positive response.)

The project was so successful that the main funder of the project, The Monument Trust, asked me to extend it by recruiting and training volunteer mentors from the community and

matching them with young men being released to Dorset and Hampshire, so that a larger number of young men could be helped. And so, in April 2005, the Milestones mentoring project was born.

A life-changing MindFields seminar

By then, I had already, by good fortune, come across the human givens approach. My boss at the time told me that we needed to spend some money on training and asked me to find a course we could both go on. A flier happened to have come through the post, advertising something called human givens and a seminar in Portsmouth on understanding and managing anxiety without drugs. So off we went for what we thought would be just a nice day out – which, in the event, changed my life completely. I was intrigued but sceptical: I had totally believed in the medication route to recovery because my consultant psychiatrist had insisted on it and I regarded psychiatry as a legitimate, professional, scientific remedy to mental illness; so there had to be a flaw. I asked an old friend who had had 30 years' experience in working in the mental health field to come with me to another seminar, this time on depression, and tell me what that flaw was. After half an hour, he turned to me and said, "John, this is the best thing I've heard in 30 years."

So we both became hooked. I had always wanted to find out why had I become depressed and what I was hearing at the seminar made so much sense. There were lots of, "If I had known then what I know now" moments, for me. And there were a lot of "If the psychiatrists treating me then knew what I know now" moments, too. (My psychiatrist had said to me, "You need to get used to the idea that you will never work again, as this depression is so deep seated.")

Three years later I had qualified as a human givens therapist (and my friend Seán, who sat next to me in that seminar, was using human givens principles extensively with all his staff, in his role as chief executive officer of a group of residential homes for adults with learning disabilities. He recently wrote an article for this journal about how the human givens approach is enhancing the lives of the people in their homes.¹) I instantly found much from my training that I could add to what I was achieving in my prison work. I already knew that treating people with common humanity encouraged a positive response. Now I knew the importance, too, of instilling hope. This is not to forget that these young men have committed crimes, ranging from relatively mild misdemeanours to murder. But, once there is hope, the young men can start looking outwards, beyond their prison sentence, to a realistic possibility of what they might be capable of achieving, with support, instead of reverting to crime.

For, even if a prisoner has family support and good relationships, had had work or is promised a job on release, life in prison is difficult and often leads to depressed states. The lads often get dumped by girlfriends who won't wait. Rent

arrears, because of imprisonment, can mean loss of tenancies. On top of that, the prison experience itself can be very scary. There is a lot of testosterone in an institution in which 600 males aged 18–21 are locked up. I now realise that what I saw in prison, reflected in the daily queue for psychoactive drugs, was largely the result of emotional and physical needs not being met – an inevitable consequence, it seemed to me, of being in a prison environment. Let's just look at the list.

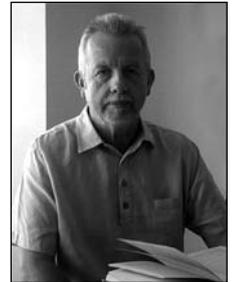
A sense of security: physical attacks are commonplace and random; looking at someone the wrong way can result in a pool cue in your face. Owing somebody for drugs or the use of an illicit mobile phone or tobacco can seriously damage your health. It is common for there to be stabbings, achieved with whatever comes to hand (razor blades hidden in toothbrushes are popular) or for lads to be held down in the shower and brutally beaten.

A sense of purpose: despite the forward thinking of Portland, and the learning activities it offers, there are just not the facilities for everyone to take part. Some young men have no purposeful activity to engage in whatsoever and are alone in their cells for 23 hours a day. Indeed, their most meaningful activity may be watching *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (the most popular programme within the prison) in which 'unsuspecting' members of the public learn that their nearest and dearest is having an affair/a baby with someone else/is in a homosexual relationship on the side, etc. "It's great to watch people who have even more shit in their lives than I do," they tell me, morosely.

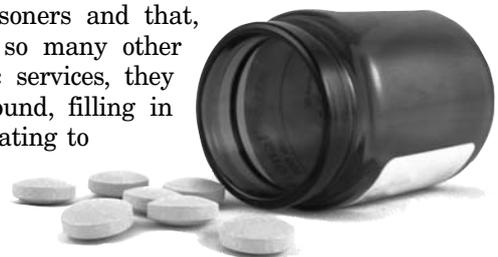
Privacy: there is no privacy in prison. There is a flap on each cell door to allow staff to see where a prisoner is before opening the door, as well as for checking their wellbeing. Most, but not all, cells have in-cell sanitation and a prisoner could be sitting on the toilet when staff look in before unlocking their cell. (The small "modesty" screen provided does not disguise much.)

A sense of autonomy and control: this clearly is not available to prisoners. It is in the nature of being a prisoner that you do what you are told. If not, you are in danger of 'C & R' (control and restraint – or 'getting twisted up', in prison parlance). Three officers dressed in protective clothing, helmets and shields go through a well-drilled procedure involving arm locks to control a prisoner and remove him to the segregation unit.

Attention: the average wing at the prison holds 90 young men and usually four officers are on duty at any one time. It is thus impossible for close attention to be given to any one prisoner's individual needs. Prison officers often complain that they cannot spend enough time with individual prisoners and that, as is the case for so many other employees of public services, they are largely desk bound, filling in numerous forms relating to the calculation of key performance targets.



John Bayley is volunteer mentor coordinator for Milestones mentoring project at Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Portland, working for Nacro, the country's leading crime reduction charity. In his previous teaching career, he taught both in primary and secondary schools in the UK, was deputy headteacher at the International School of Helsinki and then headteacher of a school in Weymouth for nine years.



Emotional connection to others: prisoners are, of course, separated from family and loved ones. In the case of Portland, over half of the 600 prisoners come from London and the South East, meaning that a journey of 150 miles must be made to visit a son, brother, partner or husband – very expensive. Many prisoners don't like their families having to go through the very necessary procedure of being searched, which can involve the presence of trained sniffer dogs and babies' nappies being checked for trafficked drugs, as it all adds to what can be a very stressful experience. A significant number of prisoners persuade their families not to visit at all, further adding to a sense of isolation.

Feeling part of a wider community: again, the constraints of being in prison exclude any possibility of this. The community is narrow and exists on one site. Behaviour, attitude and compliance determine classification within one of three regimes (basic, standard or enhanced), which in turn determines whether a prisoner is allowed off the wing to attend classes or courses. Good behaviour and positive attitudes towards staff are rewarded by 'promotion' and enhanced status carries the very worthwhile benefits of being trusted to go off the wing, to another part of the prison, and having additional 'association' time – when a prisoner is out of his cell and can play pool and table tennis and socialise in communal areas with other prisoners. On a basic regime, however, prisoners are restricted to their cells and do not have a television set, which all standard and enhanced prisoners are allowed, at a cost of £1 a week.

Sense of status: this can very often be determined by where an individual stands in the prison pecking order. High-profile criminals hold a prestigious place in the hierarchy and can 'boss the wing'. Any hint that a prisoner is a sex-offender may lead to very quick and violent reprisals. Most young men with a history of sexual offences are housed in a completely separate unit for their own safety.

Sense of competence and achievement: prison, by and large, is not a place where many people achieve much. Indeed, 'success' mostly means getting through the sentence unscathed. Put-downs are by far the most common means of communication, both from prisoner to prisoner and sometimes from staff to prisoner.

Meaning and purpose: opportunities to be 'stretched' are historically limited in prisons. Resources are scarce, access often difficult and large groups of 18–21-year-old men, housed in a prison, are more concerned about conforming and surviving than developing a sophisticated thinking style. Levels of literacy and numeracy are shockingly low.

I asked the visiting consultant psychiatrist, who sees referrals in the prison once a fortnight,

whether he agreed with the Ministry of Justice statistic that approximately 50 per cent of all prisoners in this age group would have a diagnosable mental illness. "No I don't agree," he immediately replied. "It is much, much higher than that." And it's obvious, isn't it? Put a young man in an environment where fear, loneliness and isolation are the overriding elements of each day and take away his privacy, control, sense of purpose, etc, and the result is a young man with mental health problems. Long ago I came to the conclusion that, if I were in the same shoes, I would suffer considerable mental anguish and would probably be one of those whose twice-daily trips to healthcare offered at least some respite.

But – and it is a big 'but' – I had started to come across more and more young men who had one thing in common. To me, at that time, it was as surprising as it was unreasonable. I was working with a significant number of young men *who did not want to leave prison*. Normally, a prisoner about to be released becomes 'gate happy' several weeks before release and can't wait for their release day to come. The happiness cannot be disguised and, although it is accepted that you don't rub other prisoners' faces in the fact you are leaving while they may have a considerable time still to serve, it is difficult for most men to hide their anticipated joy.

But that wasn't the case for Rob, a young man who was on the wing for vulnerable prisoners and who had been accepted onto my mentoring project. I was taking his address details. He gave me the name of a block of flats in Southampton that I know well.

"What number?" I asked.

"No number," he replied.

"I know those flats; they've all got numbers."

"Oh, I didn't have a flat. I lived in the stairwell for a year. It was on the second floor, if that's a help."

As I got to know Rob better, he explained that he really didn't want to leave prison. He had lived on the streets for some time before his stairwell. He hated the way he lived on the outside. His drug taking was just a way of dealing with 'my crap life'. His cell was immaculate. He had not had a room of his own before and he spent hours tidying it and cleaning it. In addition, he had made good friends with the wing officers. He was polite and friendly, and their response was to give him all the privileges he was allowed. He became the wing orderly and, as such, had status and even more privileges. He had a real sense of identity. The wing ran more smoothly because of him and the staff appreciated his work. He thrived. As his release day got nearer, he became more introspective and more unhappy. He was 19 and his time in prison had been the happiest time of



Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Portland

his life. He was fed three times a day; his washing was done for him; he had a roof over his head and slept in his own room; He received £6 a week in pay, enabling him to order some sweets and tobacco from the prison canteen. He got to play pool with his friends every evening. He had a TV. He was clean and could shower once a day. He was on a par with all those other young men on the wing.

I came across a number of prisoners who exhibited exactly the same feelings. One young man on the same wing, who had significant learning difficulties, had actually tried to bribe an officer to allow him to stay beyond his sentence, not understanding that it is not possible to stay in prison after release date. He said he had made more real friends in prison than at any time in his life. He was working every day in the department that dealt with allocating new kit to arriving prisoners. Folding T-shirts and jeans, organising shoes in size order, collecting kit from prisoners about to be released – this was the first proper job he had ever had.

Needs met inside but not out

I began to suspect that, for some prisoners, their needs were being met to a far greater extent inside prison than they were outside. In the last 12 months, I have become aware of more and more prison staff saying the same thing – that life inside prison was preferable to life outside for some. It is sobering to think that, in 2009, a judgement can be made by a 20-year-old young man that life in a Victorian prison is better than life outside it.

And, in the light of their lives outside, it starts to make sense. The first young man I ever worked with in 2002 was Steve, a frightened 18-year-old, who wouldn't come out of his cell for fear of being beaten. His mother had put him into care at 12 but not his brother, and he had never understood why. He had been living on the streets of London and Bournemouth for two years, since running away from a children's home. He was epileptic but had had no medication for two years because he hadn't been to a GP. He hadn't been to a dentist for four years. He was using Class A drugs. Finally, he decided enough was enough and tried to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge into the path of an oncoming train. He missed and landed on the roof of the train, breaking both ankles. The train had had to be stopped for several hours, while police and ambulance crews dealt with the incident. Steve was sentenced to 18 months for criminal damage!

By the time he left prison, he was unrecog-

nisable. He was confident and had achieved a certain status by working every day on the wing serving, serving out the hot meals. He had gained a certificate in catering hygiene and had made some friends. He had started to look at Christianity as a faith he could possibly identify with. Life outside looked bleak to him and, not surprisingly, he struggled to cope.

Every action has a reaction and it appears to be the case that, increasingly, we are in the unenviable position of offering more in prison, to a proportion of young prisoners, than they can envisage for themselves on the outside. It has been for me a real insight into just how relevant the organising idea of the human givens approach can be, despite the environment. We can get our needs met in the most unlikely of places. To tip the balance and make the prospect of life outside more attractive than life inside, we have to put in place opportunities that mean young men can see genuine, practical solutions to problems such as nowhere to live, no skills, no work, family breakdown, alcohol and drug addiction, and physical and mental health problems. This is what creates a sense of hope.

More opportunities

I am fortunate in working with one of the Prison Service's most forward-thinking resettlement department teams who, from the time a young man arrives here, to the time he leaves, are working to put in place practical solutions to his problems. In addition, we have benefited from the leadership of a governor who is willing to take risks introducing new projects within the prison. The prison is now offering more and more positive opportunities through vocational qualifications, such as in bricklaying, railway track repairs, painting and decorating, as well as

workshops with professional musicians, art programmes, and a soon-to-be-released TV reality football academy programme, with a possibility of working with professional clubs in London. There is a sense of a genuine possibility of bringing to a stop the ever-revolving door of offending – prison–reoffending. The prison has a catchy but sincerely meant slogan – “Unlocking potential” – and, increasingly, it is succeeding in doing that. Ninety-five per cent of prisoners released from

here go back to secure accommodation. Although that might mean hostel conditions, it means not being on the streets. Seven years ago, that figure was just 50 per cent. In addition, the chaplaincy team work together, in a truly multi-faith way, to be part of the process of solving individual, often practical, problems, by arranging contacts with a



church, mosque or temple post-release or helping to find accommodation.

The mentoring programme

As I write, there are plans for yet more opportunities, including yoga, street dance and writing courses. But not everyone can benefit. We have 600 inmates but only 12 can do the excellent six-month bricklayers' course, for instance. This is why the new, extended, mentoring programme is so valuable. My initial thought, when asked to find volunteers from the community, was, "Who is going to want to work with a violent, 21-year-old crack addict and do it for nothing?" That was my first big miscalculation. After advertising through the local press, radio, volunteer bureaux and Southampton, Bournemouth and Portsmouth universities, I was inundated with applications. The problem was not who on earth I could get interested but how on earth to choose from all those that applied. We had people from all walks of life, including ex-offenders, with ages ranging from 21 to 65. We questioned them very thoroughly about why they wanted to work with us. Older people tended to say, "I want to put something back"; younger people, "I just want to help". (We rejected those who just thought it would look good on their CV.)

Wedding invites

We planned for our volunteers to work with young men who were less needy than those my two fellow mentors and I work with. I put together a training package that covers the practical things, such as requirements of a probation licence, signposting to agencies that can help with drug or alcohol abuse, how to handle homelessness or family breakdown, etc, but includes this underlying premise: to respond to mentees with a non-judgemental attitude and to develop a professional relationship, but one based on trust and friendship. (My own experience of a hugely positive response to that has been our mentors' experience too.) Helping sort out practical needs such as acquiring secure accommodation, applying for work or training, and registering with a doctor and dentist; creating a close relationship; making sense of a scary world and being around to listen when a mentee is dumped by the girlfriend or there's a big row at home – all these are aspects of the mentoring role, some of them almost invisibly so. Our volunteers have a tremendous commitment to their role. We ask them for two hours of their time a week but most choose to go well beyond that. They text or speak on the phone to mentees regularly throughout the week and, although the plan is to see a mentee through their first six months out of prison, in practice mentors often become part of mentees' lives and even get

invited to their weddings.

What has been interesting is mentees' complete lack of concern about the age of their mentors. It had been felt by some that we should recruit only young people, as they would 'connect' with the young men leaving prison. However, this proved to be totally wrong. I have mentors of 65-plus, who have amazingly positive mentoring relationships. The mentees appear to be focused not on age but on what a person can do for them, both practically and in terms of being able to relate on a very personal level. ("I've had a crap day. I'll phone my mentor and talk about things.")

Three highly successful years later, we have been given the additional funding to replicate the project in South London. Eighteen more volunteers have just been trained and are in the process of working with their mentees. Our slogan for the project is "Your history is not your destiny", words I once saw on a wall on a visit to a rehabilitation centre. It rang so many bells for me personally and in respect of the young men in prison, who very often think that they have no future whatsoever.

Different endings

For Rob, the young lad who was living on the stairwell, history has definitely not been his destiny. He ended up going to a hostel in Southampton on his release, hugely relieved to avoid the dreaded NFA (no fixed abode). We helped him get a job as a kitchen porter. He was proud of his kitchen uniform, which gave him a sense of identity, and he proved to be an able worker, reliable and keen and always on time. Soon he was being trained to chop vegetables and make puddings. He even waited on tables, if required. He has blossomed because he is respected. (In fact, his boss said to me, "He's bloody wonderful!") He has saved his money and now pays rent for a room in a house he shares with other young working men, having replied to an advert in the paper.

Not all cases end so well, and I cannot paint a rosy picture in which all young men on this project succeed – they don't. It is as if there is a need to jump on the roundabout a few more times to realise that it is not a worthwhile roundabout to be on. Some may become reliant on even the fastest and most uncomfortable of roundabouts, because they are at least familiar. But, if nothing else, I sense there are a few seeds sown, which may bear fruit a little later down the line.

And notably, once it seems that needs can be met and a genuine sense of optimism and hope for life after release has been engendered, there is clearly a reduced need for medication. My dearest hope is that the queues for antidepressants and antipsychotics will become the exception rather than the norm. ■



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