Special Edition
The Transformational Potential of Prison Education

The Dalai Lama, prisons, and prisons research:

A call for trust, a 'proper sense of fear', dialogue, curiosity and love

Professor Alison Liebling is Director of the Prison Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

'Trust is a security question'.

'Begin with yourself as a resource'.

'We have become weighed down by institutions'.

In October 2015 I was invited to participate in the inaugural *Inspire Dialogue* event on the theme of 'Growing Wisdom, Changing People' in Cambridge. The meeting lasted two full days and was hosted by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and current Master of Magdalene College, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama: two giants of wisdom and philosophy. I do not know how I came to be invited, but I was struck by the relevance of the conversation to my most recent work with Ruth Armstrong, Richard Bramwell and Ryan Williams on locating and building trust in high security prisons, as well as to many of the general themes arising in our work in the Prisons Research Centre, including our creative and appreciative methodologies. In this article I try to organise my thoughts about what was said, in part to capture this unique event, but then try to show how these themes resonate with the findings and methods of our programme of prisons research and therefore affirm us in our efforts. The main themes are: the importance of dialogue and the building of trust, the need for clarity and curiosity rather than certainty, and the role of a certain model of education in growing a better future. I begin with trust, since this theme arose throughout the two days, was central to 'growing wisdom', and lies at the heart of our current research.

The importance of trust and a proper sense of fear

The dialogue in Cambridge started with the argument that we are 'deficient in a proper sense of fear'. Those words felt just right, in the light of our reflections on a recent 'return ethnography' in Whitemoor prison during which the prison felt newly 'paralysed by distrust'. Carrying out prisons research without feeling fear had been my instinct and ideology, until myself, Helen Arnold and Christina Straub carried out a return research project in Whitemoor in 2008-10. The first project there had been carried out in 1998-9. This earlier ethnography had been a favourite study of mine, and its description of the work of prison officers became the book, 'The Prison Officer'.[1] Perhaps this unfearful stance had been easy, given my topics (suicides in prison, the work of prison officers, and the prison experience). From the moment I set foot in a prison to do research, in 1986, I had loved the easy intimacy and humanness of talk: prisoners and staff appreciated the research role, and opened up willingly, sharing reflections and problems, and apparently trusting my capacity to make sense of them. Sometimes this took a little time and patience, but almost always, in the end, I could persuade even the more reserved participants to share their account of who they were, and what their experience meant in the interests of better understanding.

In 2008, for the first time, I noticed that this was more difficult. Some prisoners were 'creating distance' and making visitors to the wing, including our research team, feel unwelcome. Or at least that is how we felt, and how people in the prison (and elsewhere) talked about these prisoners and the wing. Anxieties about apparently coerced conversions to Islam, including by White ex-Catholic prisoners, about some Muslim prisoners enforcing narrow interpretations of the rules of behaviour (e.g., not cooking pork or bacon in kitchens, wearing underpants in showers, or not listening to music) on some wings, and the 'radicalisation' of vulnerable prisoners were confounded by a tendency to construct all incidents of violence in the prison as 'faith-related'. These dynamics were complex and difficult to penetrate. Prisoners were reluctant to talk openly about them, or gave radically

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1. Liebling, A., Price, D. and Shefer, G. (2011) *The Prison Officer*, Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.

different accounts of what was going on. We completed that project feeling uncomfortable with our inability to make sense of all that was going on in the prison, despite a year spent carrying out the fieldwork, and with our lack of humanity and courage — that is, our inability to walk through (invisible) barriers and just talk to everyone. This problem of barriers was faced only on one wing, and in relation to a small number of prisoners, but it was the first time in my research life that I had been unable to make the first move, or invite an account from everyone. It was impossible to work out whether the 'fear' we felt was located 'out there' (on the wing) or 'in here' (that is, whether we too were carrying risk thinking into the prison, and onto the wings, for reasons relating to contemporary social and political life and the media). We all now seem to live in an emotional climate of fear.

Like Onora O'Neill's concept of 'intelligent trust' ('aligning the placing of trust with trustworthiness'),[2] the Dalai Lama argued in our deliberations together that we need to distinguish fear-with-reason ('intelligent fear') from false ('insane') fear. Intelligent fear is felt for the right reasons, and in proportion to the risk. Conflict arises out of misplaced fear. It leads to pre-emptive acts against others. When the prison system acts in this way, taking pre-emptive action against those whom staff or 'the system' fear, then punishment turns to violence. We should all guard against irrational fears of the 'other', and understand the roots of fear (and of other disturbing emotions) better, in ourselves and in society. Do we understand what produces them? Where does distrust begin? These are important sociological questions. Physiologists can tell us that anxiety, anger and fear eat away at our immune systems. One prisoner, in a high security prison, put it like this:

> *You know something, living bitter and twisted in prison, it eats you up. It takes away… saps away your energy. Physically, it takes it out of you. Sitting there sharpening knives in your head, it's just… draining'* (Prisoner 2015).

This is also the case socially. Fear, anxiety and exclusion make violence more likely, and sap the energy

needed for positive change. We are 'creating terrorists' by distancing those we disagree with, instead of building bridges. 'We should not isolate the terrorist', the Dalai Lama said: 'Invite them, the hard-liners in, to the table'. 'Deep inside, they are the same human beings as us'. 'Something has made their emotions get out of control'. None of their behaviour is about religion: 'Religion is the practice of love'. 'Any bloodshed, or urge to bloodshed, means this is not religion or religious practice', he said, with confidence (and some laughter). 'Jihad is 'the holy war against oneself' and has nothing to do with violence'. All religions strengthen the message about the value of compassion, and are means to help human beings become 'better, more refined and more creative' ... of 'developing the awakening mind' — the 'field in which all positive qualities can be cultivated' or the 'ground on which everything else rests'.[3] His Holiness talked of his wish to visit Mecca, to show respect. He showed how humour, care and love can burst through fear. 'Good morning, my Muslim Terrorist', he said to a young participant, who had asked a good question the day before. His uncontrolled laughter communicated the affection he felt, and the poignant truth that this unjustifiable thought is so often silent, but real in its consequences.

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The key question arising from this dialogue became, 'can we turn around the political discourse on *security*'? The very term 'security' has a power of its own: it is the last word and cannot be questioned. Its meaning seeps out everywhere, capturing much that is irrelevant in its wake. 'Trust is a security question', he said. We only have to think about security departments and their role in many prisons to see the value of questioning this all powerful discourse. Prisoners of all varieties talk fluently and with frustration about the 'pursuit of security' and its effects on their lives and families, and lack of progression. It over-reaches, and trumps all else. Of course it matters, but it should be balanced by other important values, like humanity and freedom. Social theorist Hans Boutellier describes our utopian desire for complete security, 'generated by dissatisfaction with the complexity of contemporary society', as a dangerous illusion.[4] As the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Williams agreed, 'The most insecure community is a

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2.   O'Neill, O. (2002) *A Question of Trust*, UK: Cambridge University Press.
3.   HH The Dalai Lama and edited by R. Mehrotra (2011) *In My Own Words: An Introduction to My Teachings and Philosophy*, India: Hay House, 73, 76 and 113.
4.   Boutellier, H. (2004) *The Safety Utopia*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, x.

gated community, where we try not to think about the people outside'. It may feel like the easy route. They referred to the 'slog of becoming less fearful day by day'. This is linked to the distinction identified in prisons research between fragile forms of order (imposed, and without assent) versus more sustainable or legitimate forms of order, which tend to have spaces for challenge and uncertainty.[5] As prison sociologist Sykes said, 'you have to lose some control in order to gain control'.[6] Security cannot be secured via anti-terrorism measures. Violence is always a short-term, short-sighted solution. We should fear certain *thoughts* more than we fear other people. Concern with safety, rather than security, 'unites'.[7] There was much wisdom in this discussion, and many links between the trust-fear, trust-risk tensions inside prison and those in the broader community.

The importance of dialogue

The two day event was all about dialogue, and embodied its power to potentially transform the world. The bringing together of 80 people from all generations, backgrounds and traditions, of folk singers, artists, musicians, poets, philosophers, scientists, political figures, leaders of industry, academics, and photo journalists, among others, made things happen. Friendships were formed, new networks were created, and commitments were made to do things differently. Above all, in the process of organised conversation, much common ground was identified, intuitions were shaped and given meaning, and creative solutions were found to both small and apparently intractable problems. The process of meeting in this organised way was energising and constructive. Every participant agreed to do one thing differently as a result of their attendance. More ambitious dialogues were planned for the future — parallel meetings could be held all over the world, including in prison, where so many of those affected by the world's social and economic problems want to engage in moral-philosophical reflection and the reshaping of justice.

As the former Archbishop said during the course of the event, Dialogue is an *attitude* and a *skill* the world needs to embrace. Its essence is learning. In any true dialogue there has to be a level playing field, so that all participants have an equal voice, and there needs to be some humility. There is no other alternative to solving the world's problems. We need to create communities that promote conversation. I reflected on how prisoners in Frankland 'campaigned' for 'another Dialogue group' when we arrived to carry out fieldwork there in 2014. Some of these prisoners had participated in our Whitemoor discussion group ('Cambridge Dialogue')[8] and had appreciated this approach, feeling reassured about the potential value of consultative and participatory research projects. As we said in a reflective article on the use of Dialogue in research following the Whitemoor projects:

> The method permitted several values and practices to exist in an environment where they were typically constrained, feared, suppressed or denied: it promoted trust, respect, honesty, individuality and a sense of identity; it was humanising and thought-provoking; it was full of emotions (laughter, pain, anger, frustration, and disappointment). It provided a voice; it allowed for talk in an environment where talk was cautious and policed ... generat[ing] considerable insight, [it] sensitised us to important and unexpected themes, in the prisoners' own vocabulary, and helped us to devise meaningful questions for the interview phase of our research. We were aware that feelings and attitudes are not always expressed in reasoned responses to direct questions. However, it was common for prisoners to return to issues arising in the Dialogue group during interviews, and to continue to illustrate them with detailed examples.[9]

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5. Liebling, A. (2011) Distinctions and distinctiveness in the work of prison officers: Legitimacy and authority revisited, *European Journal of Criminology* 8(6): 484-499.
6. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
7. Boutellier 2004, as above.
8. See Liebling, A., Arnold, H. and Straub, C. (2015) Prisons Research beyond the Conventional: Dialogue, 'Creating Miracles' and Staying Sane in a Maximum-Security Prison, in D. H. Drake, R. Earle and J. Sloan (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 59-80.
9. Liebling et al. 2015, 73, as above.

Prisoners responded warmly to many aspects of the Dialogue group, and looked forward to it each week. They felt intellectually stimulated, supported, and pleased to be part of a reciprocal exchange. The same appreciation has been expressed by prisoners participating in other educational (e.g. 'learning together' courses)[10] and 'philosophy in prison' groups.[11] There are other related organisations promoting dialogue for reasons unrelated to research (e.g. the organisation, P*rison Dialogue*). It is clear that these kinds of conversations are productive, affirming, and educational. Inspire Dialogue, the organisation that hosted this event, is committed to 'growing wisdom' and 'changing people' through bringing people together in open dialogue. Supported practice and the development of an 'undominated speaking voice' are essential. There is always much pent up creative energy among participants in these kinds of forums or events, which can become energy for change. It is also clear that there are strongly held and widely shared values among participants, linked to better visions of the future. Boutellier argued that 'utopian yearnings' can give us hope and 'society new impulses'.[12] It was uplifting to realise just how much energy for change there is around us.

Clarity, certainty and truth

How do we become 'transparent to the truth', to 'what is real'?

An important theme underlying the conversation, and constituting a key component of Buddhist wisdom, was the distinction between 'certainty' and 'truth'. Certainties are dangerous, and lead to clashes with other certainties. Certainties get in the way of truthfulness. Confidence, on the other hand, is the holding of a position or the comprehending of a meaning after reflection, exploration and analysis, and is quite different. Disciplined introspection and mindfulness help us to identify 'delusions' — for example, the belief that any individual or 'self' is independent from others. A 'part of our prison' is the perception that the problem is 'out there'. These delusions give rise to anger, pride, anxiety, hatred and jealousy. Wisdom (clearer and sharper thinking) helps us to tackle the problems caused by these disturbing emotions. So often, we misunderstand things. As philosopher Iris Murdoch argued:

> *What so often keeps us from acting morally is not that we fail to follow the moral rules that tell us how to act; rather, it is that we misunderstand the situation before us [emphasis added]. When we describe the situation to ourselves, we simply get it wrong.*[13]

Murdoch argued that 'the most crucial moral virtue [i]s a kind of attentiveness to detail, a wise, trained capacity for vision, which could see what was really going on in a situation and respond accordingly ...'.[14] The main moral value of careful and painstaking research is this kind of authentic description, as I have argued elsewhere:

> *To get the description* right *[emphasis in original]* — *to accurately grasp the nature of the motivations at play, to see the relevant individuals in their wholeness and particularity, and to s*ee what, morally speaking, is at stake — *is to grasp the 'shape' of the situation ...*[15]

This is difficult to achieve, whether in research, where we have accepted methods, or in our lives. Some prison officers do something like it, and then act on it, in their professional work. Seeing clearly (and then 'naming the elephant' in the room) takes *courage*.

Not seeing 'what is going on', on the other hand, creates major difficulties, for us as individuals, and for institutions. Our research report on Whitemoor 2 described a kind of unwillingness to see, following some shifting prisoner population demographics, and newly arising conflicts over faith.[16] It was greeted with anger by those who 'did not recognise the prison you

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10. See Armstrong, R. and Ludlow, A. (this volume) Educational Partnerships Between Universities and Prisons: How Learning Together can be Individually, Socially and Institutionally Transformative.
11. Szifris, K. (this volume) Philosophy in prisons: Opening Minds and Broadening Perspectives through philosophical dialogue.
12. Boutellier 2004, x, as above.
13. Jollimore, T. (2013) Godless yet good, *Aeon Magazine*, paras. 16-17, https://aeon.co/essays/rules-and-reasons-are-not-enough-for-an-ethics-without-god
14. Jollimore, 2013, para. 16.
15. Dancy, J. in Jollimore, 2013, para. 17.
16. Liebling, A., Arnold, H. and Straub, C. (2011) *Staff-Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor: Twelve Years On*, London: Home Office.

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have described'. Others did recognise the description, and defended our attempts to report what we found. Research is about being able to find ways to *see more clearly*. This is extremely difficult work. One way of achieving this, and of 'sharpening our minds', is to practice the making of distinctions: 'it is this, it is not that'. So in the prisons context there are good and bad forms of safety, right and wrong uses of authority, good and 'right' relationships, and so on.[17] These distinctions are helpful, as we sometimes assume we know what important words mean, but can be mistaken, or unclear. In our trust project we have become interested in the concept of 'political charge' — a kind of anger and alienation generated by experience, and politicised, or directed at the state. If it is to be a helpful term to think with, we need greater clarity and precision about its precise meaning. This is always difficult, but productive, and fundamental to the process of research.

Education and love

We need 'scientists who think like poets' (John Wood, ACU).

The long-term solution to our social, economic and environmental problems is education. But this prescription is for a certain kind of normative education, 'with compassion'. Education should encourage the development of warm-heartedness (affection creates a sense of community), open-mindedness, honesty, and emotional balance. Participants agreed that we have instrumentalised education, and linked it too firmly to 'wealth and material value', and 'the production of economic producers': a narrow goal. We have elevated 'compliance' and the passing of exams over the encouragement of initiative and critique, in both teachers and pupils. We need to reimagine its purpose. Education no longer 'teaches us how to live' (as it once did, in the time of the Classical Greeks). We should educate the whole person: mind, body and heart (or soul). The true purpose of education is *to awaken us* (as a prisoner recently demonstrated in his spontaneous

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'diversity awakenings' essay, stimulated by our conversations on trust). What would a *vital and life giving* educational system look like? Education is about inducting human beings into human conversation. It should include thinking with our bodies or reflecting on how we relate bodily to the world.[18] We should not be afraid of others' creativity, but should grow budding critics in our schools, and resist being shaped into passive, unthinking consumers. Shame and fear are the biggest enemies of education. Creativity and courage are related to each other and to the growing of human potential. There is an important and neglected relationship between love and knowledge, or love and education, as those of us who feel passionate about our research lives agreed.

One of the key findings from our 'trust' project ('locating and building trust in high security prisons') has been to identify an important distinction between prison regimes or climates based on 'containment' and punishment (which are based on *I-It* relations, or relationships that regard prisoners as experienced objects) versus those based on what we could call a concept of 'rehabilitation', or more philosophically, emergent personhood (which are based on *I-Thou* relations, or relationships regarding prisoners as experiencing subjects).[19] These differences are profound, and they are related to outcomes.

All of our social practices and institutions — from prison work, and research, to education, have underlying them a particular concept of the person. For any of these institutions or practices to be humanistic, affirmative and generative, they depend on a concept of human persons as beings with depth and complexity, who are irreducibly socially constituted, and *emergent*.[20] Christian Smith, in *What is a person*, argues that our many capacities (he lists 30) function and develop in interaction with other persons; these capacities can be negatively as well as positively charged in reciprocal cycles. We can see the effects of these negative and positive cycles all around us. We

17. Liebling 2011, as above.
18. See, for example, the work of Zenon Bankowski and colleagues on movement, dance and how we 'share and negotiate space with others': Bankowski, Z. (2007) Bringing the Outside in: The Ethical Life of legal Institutions, in T. Gizbert-Studnicki and J. Stelmach (eds.) *Law and legal Cultures in the 21st Century: Unity and Diversity*, Poland: Wolters Kluwer, 193-217; Bankowski, Z., del Mar, M., Maharg, P. (2013) *The Arts and the Legal Academy Beyond Text in Legal Education*, Surrey: Ashgate.
19. See Buber, M. translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (1958) *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; Liebling, A. (2014) Description at the Edge? I It/I Thou Relations and Action in Prisons Research, I*nternational journal for crime, justice and social democracy* 4(1): 18-32.
20. Smith, C. (2010) *What Is a Person?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

either flourish, or we become 'broken'. Our social, psychological, emotional and moral capacities are the same, lying dormant within us, but they have different opportunities to develop. A 'central purpose of sociology as a discipline', he argues, should be 'to help achieve the human good by providing reliable knowledge and understanding about what kinds of social institutions and structures tend to lead toward the thriving of human personhood, on the one hand, and that tend to obstruct and diminish it, on the other …'.[21] Paying attention, 'suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object' matters as part of this process.[22]

The distinction is evident in other processes — in 'learning together' courses led by Amy Ludlow and Ruth Armstrong.[23] Or in two 10 week philosophy classes in Full Sutton led by Kirstine Szifris,[24] one of my PhD students: a considerable challenge, during which, eventually, Muslim, TACT, Catholic and other prisoners discussed stoicism, justice, what is society, what is knowledge, what makes us who we are today, what are our moral foundations/ideals based on, and what are their implications for their own lives and behaviour? This kind of mutual exploration, grounded in a certain vision of personhood, is transformative because it works with the naturally emergent nature of the self.

Although this was not explicit in our discussions, it felt to me that the whole dialogue event was founded on a concept of the person as emergent, and on a desire to create communities in which the thriving of human personhood is possible. Seeing and connecting is an important part of this process, and of the ethical life.

Conclusion

This was an important two days, not least because it helped me to recognise more explicitly that some of what I have learned in several decades of prisons research about the importance of humanity, respect, safety and order, and of 'seeing and connecting', are applicable to societies more generally. There were some broader topics about the world we live in: how would we like to see capitalism change? Could we all do a bit of voluntary simplicity? We should see ourselves as global citizens, as part of a human family — patriotism and our concept of the state is out of date; resources are for *living* rather than *growth*. We should redefine what we mean by wealth —including inner richness rather than increased material richness. How do we now create the sharing economy (particularly as technology could make 'living well' possible for all)? If education is the key, there needs to be greater access to it, as well as to the results of research. The resonances were everywhere — we need to build safe schools, safe homes, fewer prisons, which should be ordered legitimately, and we need more recognition that 'elsewhere is here'. We need to learn to recognise and manage the conflicts within ourselves that get in the way of these important aspirations. We cannot promote 'research within borders' (the competitive model) and we should beware short-termism, whether in research or in policy. It was obvious that there are many people from all backgrounds and cultures with the energy and willingness to work hard to make the world a better place. Dialogue is inspirational and creates the energy and vision for change.

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21.   Smith 2010, 487, as above.
22.   Weil, S. (1951) *Waiting for God*, New York: Putnam, 111-112.
23.   Armstrong, R. and Ludlow, A., this volume, as above.
24.   Szifris, K. (this volume) Philosophy in prisons: Opening Minds and Broadening Perspectives through philosophical dialogue.