

Some notes on “Growth to Freedom”*

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GROWTH TO FREEDOM is an account of “Northways” Hostel for homeless borstal discharges (which was very usefully reviewed by J. H. Fitch in PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL, April 1965). Although this hostel is intended to help a rather extreme group of the borstal population, Dr. Miller has a great deal to say that is pertinent to all staff. It is my impression that the book has not been as widely read and discussed as it merits. Staff in residential settings are perhaps able to rationalise more successfully than most as to why they manage to do so little reading, and there is possibly a place in a journal such as this for summaries from recent publications. In this way we can be constantly encouraged to explore the therapeutic potentials of the institution, and at the

same time be warned of the anti-therapeutic and damaging aspects which can all too easily be accepted as inevitable. An obvious feature of Northways, for example, is its very small size. Perhaps the time is approaching when it would be right to take a sweeping look at our physical resources and re-allocate them according to therapeutic needs. For example it might be appropriate for detention centre training to be done in some of our larger establishments and in this way release a number of small closed units for more flexible regimes.

(1) IDENTITY

The expectation that the boys who come to Northways would have severe identity problems was fulfilled. The boys were generally rather sad and depressed and held themselves in low esteem. There had been a lack of good identification figures in their past (in passing, Miller suggests that this is

*Derek Miller (Tavistock Publications, 1964).

perhaps why delinquency is most common amongst low status groups—because of the lack of a good relationship with law abiding supportive parent-figures who are considered valuable).

Miller holds that it is clinically valid to assume that if the disturbed adolescent can firmly identify with an adult one might expect behavioural and attitudinal changes even if the fundamental psychopathology remains untouched. This he suggests is the institution's greatest therapeutic opportunity. By considering the experience of the Northways group he concludes that the opportunity has been missed.

A basic aim at Northways was that the boys should identify with significant staff members' personalities and with the mores of the system as a whole. Thus the staff would have to be people—

- (a) that they could admire and respect;
- (b) perceived by the boys as of high status and felt to be caring for them;
- (c) able to withstand unconscious attempts by boys to be destroyed as worthwhile persons;
- (d) able to allow the boy the amount of responsibility he is able to handle.

Miller also comments that age of staff is perhaps an important factor here. He considers that it

was an advantage having an assistant male warden who was about 10 years older than the boys, since the boys as a group tended to dismiss the standards of the next generation.

Miller also discusses the enhancement of self-control through identification. The sort of delinquent personality who is at Northways has a weak ego structure and, therefore, a poor control over his impulses. "Ego controls require the individual to identify with the socially desirable attributes of the environment in which he lives and the people with whom he has a relationship. This population brought to all their human relationships a distorted perception of others based on their previous experiences. If they were unconsciously, or partially so, to start to behave like the people in their environment whom they perceived as good, or to acquire their characteristics, they had to be able to like them. Thus their feelings of hate (their negative transference) had to be understood and resolved in order that they might use their feelings of love (positive transference). People of this sort in addition have a harsh but weak super-ego (i.e. there is little control, but the individual experiences a punitive lack of satisfaction). Thus when significant figures in their environment are seen as rigid and punitive (even when they are not) any request that

they might make is likely to be seen as psychologically painful super-ego from which escape is necessary."

In another section of the book, after a discussion about helping delinquents to contain internal pain and anxiety (which would otherwise be acted out at society's cost), he makes an interesting point about identification and the insight-giving process. "In adolescents it is difficult to be sure why interpretations about the causation of any set of feelings or actions are helpful, but in fact it appears that gaining understanding of one's own motivations is of use. It may be, however, that in the most disturbed characters the understanding they perceive in other people may primarily assist them to make satisfactory identifications. They mature by becoming like the helpful person whose perceived qualities they appear to take into their own personalities."

Identification with the mores of the social system is also important and cannot be overlooked. As the social system of Northways matured, self-destructive behaviour became less marked. "As the project continued it developed a stability and value in society that was obvious to the boys. As we began to work more effectively with their aggressive feelings, they began to develop a positive relationship with the whole new social system, the staff and the psychiatrist. The fact that these people whom the boys perceived as high status,

were felt to be caring for them, raised the boys' self-esteem. In addition this positive relationship created control by identification. As the boys gave up their aggressive acts against society, they began to develop a feeling of self-respect, and so their basic feelings of inferiority were lessened. It became more likely that the internal conflict between 'I am worthless' and 'I am valuable' was almost automatically resolved."

There is a great deal of comment that would be relevant to include under this section. Amongst the points that Miller makes is the fact that most of the boys had lived in institutions in which the sense of the personal importance of personal property is at a minimum. "A social system, such as a typical penal setting, which does not enhance an individual's feeling of the importance of his possessions probably cannot hope to have such a person respect the property of others. Similarly, if the system does not respect the individual, since he is likely to identify with its attitudes, he himself is unlikely to respect others."

Miller has made the point (which he does not refer to in this book) that an important context in which work in borstal should be seen is the opportunity it allows for identification, and also how work can be arranged to help the boy feel

productive and valuable. (In his address to the Borstal Assistant Governors' Conference 1966.)

(2) THE CRISIS OF SEPARATION

A basic premise was that all the boys have had histories of separation from significant people in their lives. This experience was likely to be felt by the individual as rejection. It was likely, therefore, that they would test out the adults in a new environment to ensure that there would be no recurrence.

Miller maintains that often there appears to have been a failure on the part of borstal staff in this respect. Little or no attempt having been made to help them to work through aggressive feelings about the forthcoming separation involved in their discharge. This failure in part, adds Miller, resulted in their inability to identify with the positive aspects of the institutional system. Miller says that he understands that this need is now stressed in training.

At Northways there was an attempt to help the boys verbalise their feelings about their discharge from borstal. This was to prevent acting-out that would lead to their return. Much thought was also given to the crisis involved in leaving Northways. A major goal was to help them to tolerate their feelings of loss without acting out their rage on the community. There was an attempt by the staff to under-

stand their mixed feelings about leaving and boys were given the opportunity to keep in touch.

One of the criteria for deciding when a boy was ready to leave was when it was considered that he would not react-out. It would be stated to the boy that he would be ready to go out in three months' time. "Our basic attitude was that however much a boy acted-out his anxiety in the house he had to leave at the end of the time stated." The decision would, in the first instance, be conveyed by the psychiatrist. In the boy's eyes this made the psychiatrist both responsible and "bad", a situation which could be dealt with in the transference relationship; the warden was more likely to be perceived as "good" and thus could continue to give direct emotional support in what was, for the boy, a period of great anxiety. Miller considers that had they not stuck to the date of discharge there would have been so much gain from anti-social behaviour in which the boy might become involved, that we would have created in the community the attitude that all that was needed to stay was to "mes up" in some way.

In his evaluation of the Northways' failures Miller considers the way that they responded to the separation crisis. All three boys who left the project promptly and without any working through of the feelings involved were reconvicted within three months.

His comments on separation are of all the more current importance if the increase in the borstal population means pressure in the direction of earlier discharges.

(3) AGGRESSIVE FEELINGS

A prime need of the boys was to defend themselves against the emergence of primitive feelings of disintegrative rage. A hierarchy of psychological defence mechanisms could be seen in the boy's attempt to contain his anxiety and anger:

- (1) Displacement and projection.
- (2) Perceptual anomalies (in an attempt to control the breakthrough of aggressive impulses).
- (3) Verbal confusion.
- (4) Acting-out in order to make external figures control him. Or to provoke situations in order to become the injured person that needed to be rescued. Or would injure others and need to be punished in order to make reparation.
- (5) When all else fails destructive aggression was possible.

A main goal of the project was to help boys to find more sociologically appropriate expressions for their aggression. One result of not acting it out on the community was that it would be turned—

- (1) against each other, through stealing or damage;
- (2) against themselves:

(a) there were three suicide attempts during Northways' more unstable period. There were none after the

hostel's self-esteem rose;

- (b) psychosomatic complaints. These have remained high;
- (c) relationship with girls—here there was a clear example of externalising their aggressive feelings;
- (d) economic affairs. They all experienced great difficulties in saving;
- (e) work. Firstly, they had never been trained. Secondly, they had not come to terms with themselves as productive young men. (Due to their shocking experiences in their relationships with their mothers they had never come to terms with their feelings of envy of women's productivity and their own masculinity.) They used their work inability as a self-destructive technique.

The staff attempted to offer effective as well as intellectual insight into boys' aggressive feelings. An interpretation was likely to be most meaningful at the time when the aggressive action is taking place. "It would appear that if borstal staff are to fulfil a therapeutic role it is necessary for boys to be able to express anger directly to staff in an individual relationship." Miller adds the point that a staff member must avoid this in group situations as a successful attack would render him valueless.

On occasion the psychiatrist would direct the anger onto himself and allow the boy's "good-bad" approach to continue and, therefore, continue to see the warden as good. This would give him the needed emotional support to get through the crisis. This technique has already been discussed in relation to the separation experience and it was used on the occasions when boys had to leave because of unacceptable behaviour.

(4) WOMEN STAFF

For the main part of the hostel's history the warden has been a widow with two teenage daughters. Throughout the book, illustrations are made of the invaluable work that a trained mature woman can do with psychiatric over-sight. "All the boys had suffered from early deprivation of maternal love, thus they found it extremely difficult to trust anyone, but particularly was this a problem with women."

Maturity often took place as a result of a relationship being established with Mrs. D. She had a most difficult task having to tolerate the attention seeking greed of most of the boys. On occasion she was able to interpret a boy's unconscious hostility with ultimate markedly successful results. Part of her role, therefore, was to help the boys to come to terms with their aggressive feelings towards women.

Miller does not discuss the implications of this for the institutional situation. Perhaps they are too obvious.

(5) PSYCHIATRIC SUPPORT

In some detail Miller discusses his own role of providing psychiatric support to the project. He is very emphatic about its importance. Without it the staff are likely to leave, to emotionally withdraw or to project their own difficulties onto their charges. In fact the staff would not have been able to work with the sustained involvement which was necessary for the project to be successful.

Miller states that the "expert" needs to have a clear understanding of social dynamics, a wide knowledge of psychotherapeutic techniques, both group and individual, and a thorough understanding of psycho-analytical theory and practice, in particular with application to the problems of character disorder and delinquency.

He stresses the need for more psychiatric support in the Prison Service. One wonders how many people there are with the qualifications he outlines above.

The book contains numerous illustrations of the value of such support. The impact of his support was all the greater because of the small size of the hostel. He has discussed elsewhere his role in staff training and support in a senior approved school. (*The Howard Journal*, vol. XII, No. 1, pp. 50-52.)