

Psychotherapy for the Offender

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ONE OF THE hallmarks of a civilised society is its readiness to share its resources with "useless" members—looking after the sick, the infants, the unemployed and the aged. A further step in society's development towards greater humanity is extending its care even to those who actively injure law-abiding citizens. Both the Christian and Jewish faiths see in the criminal a human being, but their noble precepts were seldom applied in practice. Only in the last 200 years have civilized nations begun to take a serious interest in the welfare and mentality of the offender and develop humane approaches to crime prevention. The prime motive of all prison reform, of probation, rehabilitative measures as well as of offender therapy is humane compassion. Our ancestors had an effective and cheap method of dealing with criminals. They executed them, often on the spot; if they were merciful, quickly. Harsh

though their solution was, at least they were spared the problem of recidivism.

Our generation falls between two stools. Conscience forbids us to execute or grossly ill-treat criminals, yet we have not decided whole-heartedly on rehabilitation. However, the fact must be faced that all who are unable or unwilling to support themselves, are supported by others. Financially, it does not make much difference to the community whether such "non-workers" live on social assistance, are supervised by probation officers, looked after by social workers or are maintained in prisons or mental hospitals. The number of criminals who have to be supported, is unfortunately not insignificant, and with the increasingly higher expectation of life most of them will live to a ripe old age. In addition, their families must also be cared for, and not infrequently, their children grow into maladjusted or delinquent personalities who constitute yet

another burden for the next generation. Thus, for humane as well as for practical motives we should face this problem squarely and tackle it rationally. The more prisoners are effectively rehabilitated, the better for the community, financially, socially and morally.

Offenders vary greatly, but one factor stands out. Few among them have a steady work record and vocational qualifications, and obviously a man unable to earn his living by honest means, is likely to become dishonest. But more than that: satisfying work roots a person in society. Without this, it is hard for him to find a decent wife or make desirable friendships. Unable to earn, he is bound to suffer from a sense of inferiority and will be exposed to hurts and slights, and is therefore likely to become maladjusted and possibly delinquent.

Good vocational training in youth helps to prevent delinquency, and the training or retraining of prisoners is an essential aspect of rehabilitation. Prison should provide a routine of work and a mode of living comparable to the efforts necessary in the competitive world of freedom.

Thus if we really mean seriously to rehabilitate offenders, we must train or retrain those who need it. This does not solve all problems, but it goes a long way. Continental countries of Western Europe are ahead of us with their systems of apprenticeship and training for the

young: the retraining programmes for redundant workers, prisoners and others. They also have excellent workshops in their prisons. Their aim is not merely to keep inmates "busy" but to prepare them for competitive life outside. Industrial firms co-operate by placing orders in the prisons, and often even send a foreman to supervise and train the men with the blessing of the trade union. How else can they be prepared for gainful employment in freedom? We all know the great difficulties discharged prisoners encounter when looking for employment, and caution on the part of employers is understandable. Obviously, if these men are well qualified the employer will more readily overlook a man's record.

Muscles atrophy through disuse. An interesting experiment was made by keeping a healthy young man in bed for two weeks, allowing him neither to move, nor even feed himself. In this short span his muscles deteriorated 20 per cent. The same applies to mental faculties: initiative, memory, will-power, concentration, judgment and attention develop through example, training, practice and competition, but atrophy through prolonged inactivity.

The prisoner can only face the hard life after discharge if he is physically and mentally fit. He will certainly need all his resilience. Every start requires effort, even for a normal and healthy man,

whether he emigrates, moves to a different city or takes on a new job. It is still harder for people who have been sick or led abnormal lives in mental or penal institutions.

Considering the heavy odds under which a discharged prisoner labours, it is remarkable that the rate of recidivism is so low. If so many ill-prepared prisoners, given only very little help on the outside, manage to go straight, then surely a considerably higher proportion should do well, if they have been adequately prepared and if the after-care is more realistically planned.

It shows that most offenders really would prefer to belong to normal society and even many of those who have failed have struggled hard. The community will have to decide whether it genuinely wants rehabilitation and if so, plan it carefully, or prefers to return to the barbaric but logical solutions of our forbears.

Living conditions and feeding in prisons have steadily improved, but this is not enough. These should be such as to make the man really fit. Fruit is not a luxury, but an important source of vitamins. Fresh air is a necessity, and the more inmates can be employed on the outside, the better.

All prisoners suffer mentally from the artificial conditions, from the disgrace, the removal from normal life and worries about their family. Prison officers who live with the men are well aware of

this. Suffering is inevitable, in fact society regards this suffering as inherent in the sentence. However, even apart from humane considerations too much suffering leads to mental deterioration and consequent maladjustment when discharged.

A healthy routine, purposive work and recreation, and some hope for the future will go a long way towards creating a better atmosphere and lessen the tension in prison. Much has been written about helping the families of prisoners, but little is being done. If the family can be kept intact, the returned prisoner has a far better chance of going straight, and moreover, his children are less likely to become maladjusted. Timely help often prevents a second generation of delinquents.

Offender therapy is a new concept, and it will take a generation to work out its details and precepts. It is in fact still a new thing even for law-abiding neurotics, and existing services for the community are grossly inadequate. This should not deter us however from providing therapy for prisoners who badly need it.

Prisoners must get used to the idea of therapy, the staff must learn what to expect from the therapist and work out methods of co-operation; the therapist himself has much to learn. Work in mental institutions, diagnostic work for the courts, private practice do not equip him for the situations he is

likely to encounter, nor help him to fathom the prisoner's mentality and problems.

Most offenders are unwilling patients on the outside, but in the isolation of prison, lonely and depressed, they are usually glad to talk to anybody sympathetic. It is a relief and a welcome change from monotony. But the therapist must be realistic in his approach and avoid patronising. He must also develop the right balance between inmates and staff. If he is indiscriminately on the side of the prisoners, he is bound to have trouble with the staff; if he has no sympathy with the prisoners, he cannot make contact. Certainly he should listen to their grievances, which are often justified; but self-pity is not constructive and he should keep a sense of proportion and not raise false hopes or make promises he cannot keep. Nor does it help to dwell too much on the past; the therapist must, without being unsympathetic, remind the patient of the fact that many people coming from equally bad conditions, with an unhappy childhood and poor family life, have managed to grow up into law-abiding citizens.

The patient must learn to adjust. After all, he is in trouble, because he could not get along with people and keep society's rules. Modern criminology has stressed, rightly,

that too good an adjustment to prison is no preparation for normal life. On the other hand, neither is too much rebellion. As prisons are gradually becoming more of a community and the staff increasingly understanding, prisoners who get on with the officers are also more likely to get on with employers on the outside. It is both an advantage and a disadvantage to the therapist that he has no disciplinary authority. In the long run his influence on the inmates and the staff depends on his own personality and his ability to get on with people.

Psychoanalytic approaches are not suited for offenders who suffer from a lack of inhibition rather than from excess of it. "Ab-reaction" must be handled very cautiously in prison or it may cause explosive behaviour. Dwelling on the past is of less use than preparing for the future and coping with present difficulties. The approach should be a socialising one, the prisoner should learn to consider others and develop his own ability within given limits and possibilities.

Since the most difficult phase is the return to freedom after discharge, it is then that therapy and help is most needed. There should, if possible, be a continuity of treatment and after-care so that the same therapist can treat the prisoners after discharge.