

Getting ready for culture change; a personal narrative.

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This contribution attempts to both expand and sum up on the impromptu speech I gave at the Perrie Lectures in June 2023 as the proud recipient of the Perrie Award.¹

As a former prisoner and now prisoner activist in matters of social justice and imprisonment, I write here as an advocate for change, leaning into my own embodied and lived experience of imprisonment alongside my learned and practice experience as Head of Prisoner Engagement at the Prison Reform Trust.² This is a personal narrative of how change has happened in my practice and why it has been important in shaping my work.

For those of us who work in this field, we often feel our knowledge and wisdom is constrained and confined within both physical and literal prison walls. Working as a changemaker in the prison and justice field may often feel like living on an isolated island; forgotten and obscure, separate from the rest of the world. A world that is not really interested in what goes on in prison and is not willingly engaged in broader and more sophisticated philosophical and policy debate about crime and punishment. It is a world which is invariably satisfied with singular and facile depictions of good and bad and fascinated with sensationalism and the voyeurism of true crime stories. In our work we can react to these constraints by making ourselves and our ideas smaller and less radical, fearing the 'Daily Mail test' and even deeper potential marginalisation. Self-suppression as defence against ridicule.

Our key political leaders, and seemingly our wider public, cling to a deeply held belief in the power of punishment (and prison) for transformation of people and communities. In so doing, they demonstrate an apparent disregard for the broader evidence base of what works, and what clearly does not work, to create deep public safety and community harmony. Those who express alternative views are often categorised as 'looney lefties', 'bleeding heart liberals', derided as members of the 'woke' generation or naïve idealists.

Against this backdrop of apparent stagnation of political thought and leadership, the task of changing culture about imprisonment and affecting change in prison can seem like an uphill and thankless struggle.

The physical separation of prisoners creates a sense of safety for the wider public; they are 'out of sight and out of mind'. But this is a dangerous delusion; most prisoners are coming back to the society they left, to be someone's neighbour, someone's work colleague, once more. Prisons and prisoners are intricately woven into the broader societal ecosystem. Prisons serve as a reflection of the values, policies, and systems of the societies they exist in. They are a manifestation of how a community addresses issues of crime, justice, and restoration.

We are undeniably faced with the fact that incarceration is our chosen methodology in the UK for dealing with crime. We do not just punish individuals alone; the impact of imprisonment cascades through multiple aspects of the eco-system, affecting families, communities, and social structures. The health and effectiveness of the prison system profoundly influences societal well-being, shaping the trajectory of individuals who re-enter society after incarceration, and their families, and their intersections. It is a grave decision to send someone to prison.

So, why have we and, do we, over and over, chose imprisonment? The use of prison as a response to crime is deeply rooted in historical, social, and cultural factors and these influences, either overtly acknowledged or unconsciously absorbed, are required to be under the microscope as we seek to clarify what we actually know and think and disentangle our thinking from that which hinders us.

When we are harmed, our immediate response is that we seek to redress the harm. The principle of retribution seeks to balance the scales of justice by punishing wrongdoers proportionally to the harm caused. Imprisonment is viewed as a way to exact retribution for the harm caused. The punitive tradition

1 www.perrielectures.org.uk

2 <http://prisonreformtrust.org.uk>

cites punishment as a means to deter criminal behaviour and seek justice by isolation and infliction of loss of freedom and autonomy. In terms of public safety, imprisonment is justified by the belief that we all are safer by the removal of those who have caused harm, and finally imprisonment rests on the principle of deterrence, that the idea of imprisonment will deter people from committing crime.

If we put these reasons for imprisonment under our own individual and personal microscopes, do we agree? Are they defensible positions to hold? Do they make sense to us? Are we convinced? What does our own feeling and knowledge about the world say to us in the quiet of our mind? If I answer from my own embodied knowledge, then I am hesitant to get behind these reasons; I do not believe punishment universally deters; it depends on what the circumstances and conditions a person finds themselves in. Retribution and damage are not always proportionally reflected in sentence duration, and deterrence only works when a person is making choices based on fear of imprisonment; in my own case I was not thinking about that whilst using illicit substances; it was hidden away from my consciousness in a normalisation of substance misuse at the time, for instance.

There is another way; one of alternative responses, such as restorative justice, diversion programmes, community-based sentencing, and prevention initiatives, and reimagining prison as a place of therapeutic interventions if needed. We could also plan redistribution of wealth and the building of equitable futures. These approaches are driven by, embedded by, practised by, and adopted by culture change agents who go against the grain, who learn as they go, who believe in the art of the possibilities. People who use creativity and imagination, who are open and inclusive. These are the thought leaders who open the path to the future, and they are here in our collective.

Within our midst today we have talent, we have ideas, we have imagination, we have skills, we have persistence, tenacity, and focused intention to create anew. This work is lifelong, for it occurs both within us and outside of us simultaneously. The work is also the critical introspection; for you cannot give away and teach something new to a critic if you have struggled to contend with the learning yourself. Our ideas and

examples to others live and breathe in our own authenticity and self-integration. Without doing this work, we are mere performative actors, speaking lots but transforming little.

Who does not remember the iconic Bob Marley telling us to 'free ourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind'. He is calling for liberation of the imagination, liberation of creativity, and the ignition of desire to move into liminality; to be comfortable with unknowingness as we seek to find creative and refreshed ways of being and doing. We hold onto the old because it has familiarity. Even when we know it does not work. For the alternative is to face our fear that what we believe to be the answer, is not the answer; and in this lack of courage, we condemn ourselves to being less than we should be.

To be effective we must dig deep to excavate that which we both feel and want to believe in. We must find that which we hold to be true, and to work hard to disengage ourselves from limited narratives and beliefs. We must interrogate ourselves relentlessly. Talking and thinking about imprisonment, talking about prisons, working in prisons; none of these things are morally neutral spaces nor endeavours, and it is necessary for us to be aware of this and be alert to gain clarity of thought and action.

Discussions about imprisonment inherently involve complex moral considerations related to human rights, justice, inequality, rehabilitation, and

social responsibility. Recognising and addressing these moral dimensions is crucial for developing a deeper and more just response to crime. Often in the public sphere, conversations about imprisonment are emotive. They trigger deep-seated feelings based in archetypes about 'good' and 'bad'. We can encounter feelings of fear of repulsion, compassion, desire for safety, revenge, and retribution all at the same time. But developing a vision for our work in the deepest sense means we cannot and should not gloss over these difficult conversations.

Imprisonment involves the deprivation of individuals' freedom and autonomy. As such, discussions about prison inherently touch on fundamental human rights and dignity. The debate about justice and punishment centre on the purpose of imprisonment: whether it should be primarily retributive, rehabilitative, or restorative. Different views on punishment are rooted in moral beliefs about

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accountability, rehabilitation, and the nature of justice. Discussions about prison inevitably bring up issues of social inequality and discrimination. The overrepresentation of marginalised and minority communities in the prison system raises questions about systemic biases and unequal treatment. Imprisonment not only affects individuals serving sentences, but also has significant impacts on families and communities. These discussions involve moral considerations about the broader social consequences of imprisonment. Moral considerations also come into play when determining how to strike a balance between the two objectives of public safety and human rights. And finally, there is also a moral conundrum to be resolved in thinking about the existence of profit-driven incarceration. Even alternatives to incarceration are bounded by moral considerations as they relate to the balance between punishment and restoration as a methodology for restitution/ retribution. Clarity of our own position on these matters is like body armour on the battlefield; we are strong because we hold opinions which are defensible and well-argued, we know what we think and thus who we are and where we stand.

And from my experience, unearthing the answers to these moral questions is a critical step on the journey to reimagining justice.

We also ought to examine whether the stories we tell ourselves stand up to critical examination and whether dominant narratives stand up to the evidence. Do our own beliefs stand up to the evidence? And it is important to reflect on whose evidence counts; for in the knowledge production process there is a hierarchy of knowledge that can obscure alternative views and experiences from emerging. For instance, my own lived experience and evidence of imprisonment is an embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge refers to the wisdom and understanding that comes from lived experiences, practical skills, and direct engagement with the world. It is acquired through subjective experiences, cultural practices, and interactions with others. Emphasising the value of embodied knowledge acknowledges that not all forms of knowledge can be easily captured in traditional academic settings. By recognising and respecting this type of knowledge, we open avenues for individuals from diverse backgrounds to contribute their unique perspectives to the collective imagination.

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Part of the work of changing the world as we understand it, is to challenge oneself as to what knowledge we value, how we value it, how we hear it, and how we act upon it. We should reflect on the ownership, modes of production, and hierarchy of knowledge production. We should reflect on how all knowledge is set within an ecology of knowledge in the first instance. We would do well to see diversity of experience and expressions of knowledge as part of a flat ecosystem of knowledge, rather than a hierarchy of knowledge. This principle of knowledge equity, for me, is at the heart of the deconstruction of what is and sets the scene for the construction and reimagining of what can and will be. By embracing knowledge equity as a principle, we listen more deeply and with more respect

to those who have often been silent. We enable a more diverse range of perspectives, experiences, and ideas to be shared and valued. Diverse perspectives challenge conventional thinking and provide fresh insights, sparking creativity and innovative ideas. This, in turn, enriches the collective pool of knowledge available to society, nurturing an environment where imagination can flourish. Embracing diverse ways of knowing allows for unconventional ideas and solutions to emerge, fostering a culture of creativity and innovation. This will lead to the liberation of previously

suppressed ideas and narratives and has the potential to reframe our collective understanding and vision for change.

Knowledge equity and appreciation of embodied knowledge are powerful forces that unleash human imagination. By creating inclusive spaces where diverse forms of knowledge are respected and valued, we pave the way for innovative ideas, creativity, and social change. This collective imagination becomes a catalyst for a more inclusive, compassionate, and forward-thinking world.

I have also been strengthened in vision and purpose by the study of quantum physics; for such study reveals the intricate and interconnected nature of reality at the subatomic level. Quantum physics emphasises that everything is connected and part of a vast, intricate web of existence. This understanding can challenge the simplistic belief that locking up more individuals will automatically lead to increased safety. Instead, it encourages us to explore multifaceted and integrated thinking that addresses the root causes of

crime and disorder and focusses on social well-being. Again, good to reflect that at the quantum level, events are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Similarly, metaphysical philosophies often propose that reality is not fixed or preordained. This concept challenges the notion that the future is entirely predictable and controllable, encouraging us to question the effectiveness of punitive measures as a sole means of ensuring safety. In conclusion, it is good to challenge ourselves to investigate and absorb approaches and philosophical positions which directly challenge that which we thought we knew; being open to quantum physics and metaphysical philosophy can lead to a transformative shift in our understanding of safety and justice. It encourages us to move away from a rigid, fear-based mindset that relies solely on incarceration and punishment, and opens the door to more compassionate, holistic, and effective approaches to building safer communities through the appreciation of interconnectedness and human relationships.

There are so many enquiries to make of the self in the work of preparing to create change, not least understanding of and sensitivity to power, to relationships and equitable practice. But again, and again, imagination is also key. It is important to seek out methodologies and approaches that create a space for imagination to thrive and to be released. Imagination practice supports us to envision new possibilities, process complex problems, and to see through them. It allows us to scan for the future to anticipate future challenges. It trains the mind in flexibility and adaptability. I make space for meditation purposely, make space for silence to find a route for insight, creativity, and sparks to connect. Spending time in the imagination can sometimes feel like a luxury,

especially when we feel demoralised and anxious and in reactive mode to things that have not been going right. We may be in resistance and not emergence, we may feel we are needed at the front line fighting the fight, or in organising for the fight. But we should see imagination practice as part of organising for the fight, part of the weaponry that we should have to hand to deliver compelling arguments that inspire and motivate us. Imagination guides us to an ultimate vision and purpose. Stagnation is not an option in change work; we must keep moving and adapting, for there is a deep truth in 'For those that do what they always did will always get what they always got.'

And vitally there is cultivation of courage and belief in our own collective destiny; it is the courage of Moses who could not see the Promised Land but kept going, nonetheless. It is the courage of the Aneurin Bevan as founder of the 'free at point of access' National Health Service, and it is the courage of Fidel Castro to lead Cuba to a socialist revolution in modern times. He famously spoke of the power of commitment and not numbers: *'I began the revolution with 82 men. If I had to do it again, I do it with 10 or 15 and absolute faith. It does not matter how small you are if you have faith and plan of action.'*

And finally, I think we must draw continuous inspiration from our vision and purpose and, in citing Castro once more, recognise the power of a shared idea:

'The fact is, when men carry the same ideals in their hearts, nothing can isolate them — neither prison walls nor the sod of cemeteries. For a single memory, a single spirit, a single idea, a single conscience, a single dignity will sustain them all. Long live the revolution!'