

A Mindful Approach to Prison Reform

BY Daniel Labbe

There is a lot of talk about creating a Prison System that is more focused on educating and rehabilitating those that live within its walls. Having spent the last ten years of my life in Prison and having been fortunate enough to have the necessary support and resources to transform my life for the better, I've spent countless hours thinking about what a rehabilitation focused Prison would be like. From my own experience with successfully working through the issues that ~~led to my~~ led to my incarceration, participating in available D.O.C. Programs, and observing my fellow inmates I have a few ideas of my own about the ideal Prison and how it would run.

The first ^{step} must be to replace the Criminal Justice System with a Restorative Justice system. Such a system would define Justice as Victim restoration and offender rehabilitation. It would also place greater emphasis on supporting those recently released into our communities to ensure a more successful reintegration.

In my ideal Prison system each State would designate at least one Prison as a rehabilitation and restoration center. The goal of these facilities would be to educate, train, and empower ~~the~~ ^{their} residents so they can lead lives that reflect their unique core values, strengths and talents in a way that contributes to the health and well-being of their families and communities.

(2)

On the day of their sentencing first time felony offenders are given the option of going to the "RRC" to participate in the one to two year program. Upon completion of the program first time offenders will have their sentences reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$. Second time felony offenders are given the option to go to the RRC but will not receive a sentence reduction if they have already been through the program. Offenders can not participate in the RRC program if they have gone through it twice already.

Those serving natural life sentences and have graduated the program have the chance to remain at the RRC as an inmate facilitator for a period of time (maybe rotate lifers on a 2 year cycle).

So what kind of program would the RRC use? Luckily there is an abundance of research about which kind of programs work well with at-risk populations and reducing recidivism. You guessed it: Mindfulness-based programs, especially those that include emotional intelligence and cognitive training. These programs have been well researched by the medical community and the results are amazing. Fleet Maul (formerly incarcerated for 15 years) and Kate Crisp have created such a program that is receiving national acclaim: The Path of Freedom (featured in August, 2013 issue of Mindful magazine). The Mind-Body Awareness Project has also had great success with its program taught to a variety of at-risk populations. These programs typically include the

3

following Core lessons;

- Mindfulness and Meditation
- Impulse Control / Distress tolerance
- Emotional Intelligence / Emotion Regulation
- Empathy and Compassion
- Personal Responsibility / Accountability
- Transforming Negative Core Beliefs
- Cognitive Therapy
- Interpersonal Skills / Conflict Resolution
- Forgiveness
- Basic Goodness / self-Discovery

Such Programs are often taught over an 8-12 week period, but at the RRC we would include educational and vocational training and stretch the Program over a one to two year period, depending on the needs of the resident.

Programs like these are being offered in a wide variety of settings today because of the amazing results they produce. Chade-Meng Tan, an engineer at Google, created and offered a similar Program tailored to the corporate environment in 2007. It was so successful and created such positive results for Google as a corporation and its employees that dozens of major corporations now offer similar programs (Ford Motor Company, Facebook, Twitter, Target, Harvard Pilgrim Health - just to name a few). Hundreds of schools now teach similar programs in K-12. Hospitals

(4)

in every major city offer similar programs. Why are these programs becoming so popular? It's simple; they consistently create life changing results. To find out more on the abundance of research backing these programs up visit mindful.org.

There is one problem. As an inmate I know that no matter how great ~~the~~ ^{the} program it will have little affect on inmates if they are not properly prepared and motivated. The average offender has a long history of drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and has often been raised in poverty and in abusive, dysfunctional homes. Years of such a life force people to create strong defense mechanisms and survival skills that are not conducive to a healthy life such as being manipulative, identifying with anti-social, pro-criminal lifestyle and beliefs, an inability to experience ~~empathy~~ empathy, control through anger and violence, and so on. The ego-structure that supports these habits is so strong that hardly anyone can just choose to let it go. It's who you are and you don't even ~~realize~~ realize that your beliefs and maladaptive coping skills are a problem. You see them as normal and necessary.

The fact is, this is true for everyone, only most people's maladaptive coping skills are not so dysfunctional that they end them up in prison (think over-eating, over working, the "control freak", co-dependence, and so on). The military developed boot-camp to break-down this ego structure and build up a new one to fit its

(5)

needs, prisons tried the boot-camp approach - break them down and build them up, but it didn't work well.

Luckily there is a mindful way of helping a person see the maladaptive part of their ego structure: a ten day intensive meditation retreat. Sounds too far out, doesn't it? But such a retreat has been held in multiple maximum security prisons with great success. One such prison is in Alabama, over twenty men attended the first retreat. These were the most serious offenders in Alabama and guess what? ~~Over~~ Most of them successfully completed the retreat and experienced remarkable personal transformations as a result. It was so amazing a documentary and a book ~~was~~ were created about it. Both are named Dhamma Brothers, check it out for yourself.

Why would a ten day intensive meditation be so helpful? During such retreats you are meditating for over eight hours each day (walking, sitting, and Body Scan meditations). As emotionally wounded people, many of us formerly addicted to drugs and alcohol, ~~and~~ we do not tolerate emotions and impulses well. We react to them in all sorts of destructive ways and have become so good at suppressing certain ones that we've forgotten all about them. Also, we can't see our own patterns for what they are. ~~And~~ Intensive meditation forces us to sit through all kinds of emotions and impulses to react to them, we also ~~have~~ ^{get} a real good look at our thought patterns, and there's no escaping it.

(6)

Often times meditators come up against serious emotional wounds and it can be overwhelming. At such times it is the role of the facilitator to compassionately listen to the meditator talk about what he (she) experienced, then to encourage him back to his meditation seat, assuring him that he is doing well and that this is exactly what's supposed to happen.

For some ~~retreaters~~ participants, it may prove too much at first. For such people they can leave the retreat, engage in some intensive counseling, then try the retreat again later, maybe after 30-60 days of counseling and preparation. All participants will be strongly encouraged to complete the ten-day retreat, and most will be able to (as shown by the many prison retreats that have already happened). The few that can't make it through a second try at the retreat can participate in the rest of the program if they ^{they} show ~~that~~ ~~they~~ are sufficiently motivated.

The retreat, the curriculum I described earlier, educational and vocational training, and assistance in returning to society would make a great rehabilitation program as long as the RRC promotes a healing and resident-affirming environment rather than a punitive environment. These offenders are engaging in the best possible course of action ~~and~~ - the work of healing and empowering themselves to lead healthy lives. Let's support such efforts rather than sabotage it by treating them as rabid animals ~~like~~ ^{like}

7

The now infamous ALEC group promotes longer sentences and less programs for inmates to increase recidivism and inmate populations in hopes of forcing states to create more privately owned prisons. \$

the current system does.

Remember; most inmates have a release date. over 700,000 people are released from jails and prisons every year. Who would you rather have move into your neighborhood? A person who spent the last 5 or 10 years being treated like an animal in a hateful, violent, and abusive environment adding to his rage and hatred or someone who has gone through the RRC program? There are no guarantees of success, but I am confident about which choose you would make.

There would be a lot of details to work out, of course. My intention here is to show that it wouldn't be too hard to figure out how to create a justice system that significantly reduced recidivism rates. So if it isn't all that hard to do ask yourselves this: what interest does the D.O.C. and state politicians have in not creating such a system? (Hint: \$\$\$)

If an inmate with a 10th grade education can figure it out, what's stopping them?

If this article interested you leave a comment and email it to your friends or anyone of interest.

To find out more about mindfulness programs that incorporate emotional intelligence checkout these web-sites:

SiYbook.com

Prisonmindfulness.org

mindful.org

mbaProject.org