

## THERE'S THE RUB

### (Chapter Eight)

Vocational Training, Education and Programming are a necessary component to the rehabilitation process. One such program "Alternative to Violence Project/USA" (otherwise known as AVP), has helped thousands of prisoners deal with their anger in a pro social manner. The program began in 1975, where an inmate group in the NY State prison system, felt the need for nonviolence training. For some years the focus was on prisons and the major effort was to help prisoners reduce the level of violence in prison. However, as time passed, AVP training extended beyond the prison walls and into outside communities. Today prisons around the world sponsor these three day outside volunteer facilitated workshops.

In March of 2006, while attending one of these workshops I encountered a man who called himself, "Peaceful Pat". A name he ascribed to himself after participating in one of the many AVP exercises which requires you to choose an "adjective word" that best describes your positive attribute(s) and it must begin with the same letter as your name. Henceforth, that is the name you go by for the duration of the workshop. The two other facilitators chose the names, "Radical Ron" and "Positive Petra". Since no one, aside from my uncle and mother called me Shawn, I chose the adjective name, "Friendly Fish."

Now I want to preface the fact that all prison volunteers who come into prison are of extraordinary character (as I explained in chapter 4), and deserve a lot more recognition than my limited skills could ever put into words. However, Peaceful Pat made a lasting impression not just with his testimony as a facilitator but his validation of my growth. But to understand the latter, we must first understand why his words had an impact by delving into the former.

In 1996, Pat was involved in a car crash when a driver made an illegal turn. The accident resulted in him sustaining both a broken neck and kneecap. Within days of hearing about the accident, a reporter with the Lowell Sun contacted him and wanted to interview him about the accident. A few days after the article was printed Pat received a call from a man named Richard, who said he was "impressed" by what he read in the article and would like to speak with him over lunch.

Two questions emerged from that luncheon which would impact Pat's life forever. First, he was asked, "have you forgiven those who caused the accident?" "Why not," he answered, "I'm not angry it was an accident." "Have you shown him mercy yet?" was the next question. Considering Pat had four screws holding his head to a "metal halo" and a cast on his leg which extended all the way to his hip, the answer to that question was not quite so obvious — "hmmm," he said, there must be a lot more to this thing called forgiveness than I thought..."

These were some deeply personal and introspective questions to ask someone let alone someone you hardly know. So, who was this guy that he could ask such questions and better yet, what did he know of forgiveness and mercy? The answer to that is something few if any people on this earth could ever do. Twenty years earlier Richard's daughter was raped and murdered in Washington State. The man who committed the crime was arrested and subsequently convicted. At some point, it was arranged so that he received a phone call from the man who was convicted of this heinous crime. He told the man on the other end of the phone, "I forgive you." "I don't give a fuck," came the reply. "Fuck you and your forgiveness." Richard still forgave the man but it was the prisoner's reply and Richard's continued forgiveness that haunted Pat.

As time went on it was becoming more and more apparent that this accident was changing his life in more ways than one. Prior to the accident, he was hell-bent on a career but now his focus was on his relationship with his family and making a difference in the lives of others. He began learning more about corporate management and systems thinking. He even spent a year studying dialogue and the roll it plays in both mental and systems models. Equally as important, if not more was his relationship with Richard that had now evolved into a bond of friendship. And that is where the story of Pat and his calling to prison became one.

Richard was the coordinator for AVP and was responsible for bringing it to MCI Shirley. Richard felt Pat would be a great asset to AVP and talked him into coming to the prison as an AVP facilitator. Pat decided that if he was passionate in his study of dialogue, what better place to practice it than in a prison setting. Thus began his experience as a prison volunteer. When he arrived in the lobby of the prison, any reservations he had set aside quickly came back as he entered the trap. The officer checked under his tongue, in his hair, under his collar and asked him to take his shoes off. "This was serious stuff," he thought to himself.

As he entered through the prison gates, each one locked behind him like the startling clang of a gym locker being slammed shut. By the time he passed through the fourth gate, he found himself wondering, "what did I get myself into." They finally reached the classroom where 20 prisoners were sitting around waiting. Unbeknownst to him, the two volunteers he was with and the C.O. had left the room to get more chairs. He soon found himself alone, standing at the front of the classroom...scared. "Shouldn't they be in restraints or something," he wondered. He didn't say it, didn't show it and did his best to hide it. But why the fear? It was a reflection of a lifetime of Cagney movies, TV shows and locker room banter. The stereo types of a prisoner being a caged animal came rushing back. The more he thought of it, the more ashamed he became: "Here I am looking at them—judging. What are they thinking of me?"

He looked around the room and saw an empty chair right beside a prisoner. He swallowed his fear, sat down and started talking and has been ever since. He became a regular volunteer on AVP weekends, as did his wife. He volunteered at several different

prisons and made a difference at each one he was at. Pat was blessed with the gift of teaching and with his background in learning generative dialogue, prison provided him with the perfect storm for students. What he did not account for was that the work changed him, not him changing others (although it has).

For over a decade Pat continued to teach AVP until the opportunity arose for him to become a Department of Correction employee as a vocational skills teacher. He took the job and is now teaching prisoners basic computer skills. In an environment where prisoners don't even know how to use a washing machine, learning how to navigate around a computer has a tremendous impact on a prisoner's rehabilitation. It empowers the individual with confidence and lessens the technology schism that exists amongst prisoners and society. It also provides the prisoner with the vocational skills necessary to obtain a job upon release.

They say, "a teacher effects all of eternity because you never know when their influence ends." In my opinion, Pat's influence as a teacher go far beyond any expectations he may have placed upon himself. The reality is, lives are being saved because of him. If one of his students succeed upon release, that's one less murder, one less drug deal, one less robbery and one less victim. And there in lies the rub, from that haunting statement made to Richard by one prisoner, to the sincere gratitude of another, no one could have predicted that it would take one prisoner to exercise the demons of another.

**As Told To: Timothy J. Muise**

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

**Richard "Radiant Rich" Nethercut**

**"SELFLESS DIGNITY PERSONIFIED"**