

SHANTARAM'S HEXAGON

A paper presented to the PACCOA Conference; 25-28 July 2005. Throughcare: Myth or Reality. David Jones. Probation Officer, ACT Corrections

“A man can do as he will, but not will as he will.” Schopenhauer.

SIDE 1: SLUM JUSTICE.

Greg Roberts' autobiographical novel Shantaram is compelling reading and as a probation officer I found it fascinating in a number of ways. I wondered, for example, how I would approach Mr Roberts if he was referred to me for supervision.

Greg Roberts was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to 19 years imprisonment in Victoria. After serving about three years he and another man escaped from Pentridge at about lunch time and after a period in New Zealand he arrived in Bombay on a tourist visa. He became Australia's most “wanted” man.

His life on the run included working for the Bombay “mafia” in their currency, gold and false documentation section. He was a member of a group taken by his employer to Afghanistan where he posed as an American, carried five passports and \$10,000 US. They supplied medical equipment and weapons to assist the Afghans in their war with the Russians. Most of those who went to Afghanistan as a part of this expedition died.

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the book from a justice viewpoint were his work as a “doctor” in a Bombay slum and his descriptions of life as a prisoner in Melbourne and Bombay, India, and his reflections on good and evil.

He provides a vivid and provocative account of justice in a Bombay slum. He uses two examples. One involved two boys who were fighting about religion: one was a Hindu the other a Muslim. Justice was administered by the slum leader who ordered that the boys be tied together for a week and made to work in the latrines. At the end of the week they were untied and each had to learn a prayer of the other's religion. After the sentence was delivered the boys walked away holding hands and laughing together.

Roberts' second example of “slum justice” involved a drunken man who was assaulting his wife with a cane. After admonishing the man's neighbours for not assisting the woman the slum leader supervised a community thrashing of the man and ordered that he be plied with alcohol and hashish to the point where he was a very compliant physical wreck. Once this state had been achieved the slum leader told the man that his wife would be cared for by others for three months and if she wished to return to the relationship she could do so however the man would have no contact with her during the three months and it would be her decision and not his. He was then told that for the next three months he was to drink water: no tea, chai or alcohol; he was to work hard and save money and after the three months if his wife wished to return to the relationship he was to take her to the “cool country” for a holiday.

Those who assaulted the man then attended his injuries and took care of him. The woman did return and the slum dwellers all gathered together to wish them well on their holiday. After the death of the slum leader the man was elected to “lead” the slum.

Roberts used these examples to highlight the four key components of this justice system: fairness; punishment; forgiveness; and saviour. If we add the entry into the system and exit from it as the fifth and sixth sides of a hexagon we have a framework for throughcare within a particular justice system. Of course this system has other features including the positives: immediacy and clarity; and the negatives of brutality and autocracy with no right of appeal. Nevertheless it provides an interesting and challenging model to which we could compare our systems.

It is readily apparent that the system within which I work is not a system that engenders throughcare despite our best efforts. We are bureaucratic cogs in an unwieldy “justice” system in which there are many other stakeholders. My approach is to accept these bureaucratic and institutional constraints and make every attempt to empower the client and facilitate his or her exit from the maze with enhanced personal and community awareness.

SIDE 2: PHILOSOPHY

I became a probation officer after 25 years involvement with adult education including more than 15 years as an academic geographer and four years “teaching” adult indigenous males within the Victorian prison system. While I had some understanding of the language and practices within jails I had little exposure to the language and practices of community corrections, particularly case management.

Fortunately, in my first year, I was exposed to extensive and interesting “training” on various aspects of my role particularly case management, cognitive behavioural therapy and the application of “psychological instruments.” Also in that first year I pursued my role as though I was still a teacher and so it continues.

“I’m going to get inside your head.”

“No you’re fucking not. I hate psychs, counsellors, social workers and psychologists. I’ve had’em all my life and I hate’em all.”

“Lucky for you I am none of those; I’m a geographer.” (Quoted with permission)

Geography is an eclectic subject area that familiarises the practitioner with philosophy, mathematics, history, the physical and social sciences. It relies heavily on visual representations. The hexagon is useful because you can consider any issue from at least six sides and you can link the hexagons (ideas) into networks. It is both a human construction and a natural phenomenon. At a fundamental level human geography is about a sense of place and a sense of belonging. I embellish these ideas with the need for a sense of purpose.

One of my reasons for changing from education to corrections was that none of the fellas I worked with in the jails successfully completed parole and most had decided

that it simply was not in their interest to apply. I hoped to discover why this was the case.

My case management style is conversational, reactionary and supportive. It is based on a belief in empowerment and information and a search for strengths upon which change can be structured. Theorists argue that empathy, respect and the building of a relationship are the pillars of effective case management. Case plans are at their most useful when they are the product of negotiation and discussion.

“I’d like you to think about your life in six parts. I’ve got six here but I would like you to think of some yourself before I show you my list.

Work-experience-skills

Achievements

Interests-hobbies

Personality-identity-family-community

Weaknesses

Needs-likes

SIDE 3: PRACTICE

I was discussing our role with a new client. She had no previous involvement with “corrections” and I asked her had the terms supervision and reasonable directions been explained to her. Not surprisingly and typically they had not and she had no idea what they meant. Directions she associated with the compass and supervision she associated with “looking after children.” Her responses were not unusual and it is one reason why I spend a considerable amount of time clarifying what the terms generally mean within a corrections context and then explaining how I interpret the terms.

Dictionary synonyms of “supervise” are oversee, direct and manage and the context is generally linked to work, workers or a project. There is an implicit expectation that the supervision will be “hands on,” consistent and continuous. Dictionary synonyms of “direction” include the act of directing, management and supervision so we are faced with some circularity and, as I explain to the clients, it is a little like trying to separate time and space.

If possible I introduce new clients to the supervisory triangle at our first meeting. One side of the triangle is the Court Order; another is my commitment to assist the client complete the order; and the third side is a commitment to help them solve problems as they arise. These problems may or may not be related to the Court Order. I explain that for this model to have any chance of success we both have to be ‘inside the triangle’ and it requires a “degree of honesty” by both parties. This exercise immediately establishes a relationship that is interactive and not directive. It provides an opportunity to discuss the Court order in detail and how the other two “sides” of the triangle might work. It elicits information about the client’s circumstances and abilities. I attempt to impress upon the client that it is in both our interests to have a good relationship and I utilise various strategies to achieve this.

Best practise training in ACT Corrections includes another triangular arrangement.
(Parker, R)

Find something you like or admire about the offender.

Focus on what is “good” and try and grow it.

Build rapport. Move on to criminogenic needs only when the offender is ready.

When the client is resistant or a little overwhelmed by the conditions and their ability to comply I may say:

Don’t believe everything you think (Anon), or

**“You cannot jump over your knees and it is absurd to try and kiss your elbow.”
Gurdjieff (1974)**

A great expose of the importance of humour within human consciousness is Koestler’s The Act of Creation. You don’t however need to read anything to appreciate the value and sensibility of humour. It is such an integral part of my psyche that I find myself using it consciously and sub-consciously to diffuse and ignite situations.

“Have I bored you to tears with the A words yet?”

“No, OK What are some words beginning with the letter A?”

“Awesome, argue, aggression, against.”

“Great, now here are mine and I am not looking for answers but I would like you to take these away and we’ll talk about them and your words when you are ready.”

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|----------------------|------------------|
| activities | attitude |
| associates | authority |
| addictions | abilities |
| accommodation | ambitions |
| adrenalin | aims |

These words permit in depth discussions and provide both the client and the officer with opportunities to strengthen the relationship and by implication enhance community safety. They also provide a platform for the here and now and what choices clients have available to them and what they can do about changing their circumstances positively. The conclusion to this discussion might be:

If it is to be it is up to ME.

“There is no experience but past experience. What you know, what you are actually aware of, is just what is happening at this moment, and no more.” Watts 1951)

I express this idea as: **the difference between the past, present and future is one tenth of a second.**

During my time working in the jails I attempted to implement a Year 10 course developed by Indigenous educators. The course was called Coorong Tongala and had subject headings such as: Stand up you fellas; Where are you going? and Who’s the Boss? Adapting this course to a jail setting opened up new ways of approaching education and it was my most satisfying educational experience.

I developed the following exercise to facilitate thought and responsibility. It is another exercise in which there are no “correct” answers.

Trace your hand on a sheet of paper and beginning with the little finger write who, what, where, how and help on the “thumb.” I then talk about the value of the hand without a thumb and the need that we all have for help. These words represent Who am I? What am I? Where am I going? How am I going to get there? and What help do I need?

In the jails I used a hand drawn over a map of SE Australia in which the prisoners, on their release were metaphorically travelling upstream; against the flow. One of the first guinea pigs was a young fella serving a short sentence and I explained that the answer to the question **Who am I** could not be his name. (With a name like David Jones this is an easy point to make) I then told him I would see him in a week and we would talk about his answers.

“That question: who am I? It has made me crazy. I spent hours looking into a mirror trying to work it out. All I can come up with is that I am a young fella who has daughter who loves him.

This is a powerful image and one that inevitably leads to serious contemplation and discussions around responsibility and what the client can do to change their lives positively. Generally it is at this point that I make a distinction between needs and wants. The latter are best avoided and the former can facilitate profound change.

SIDE 4. LANGUAGE – RESPONSIBILITY- AUTHORITY

The language of corrections derives in large part from French and dates to the Norman invasion of Britain. Bragg (2003) lists many of these words and explains how words such as: arrest, bail, blame, crime, fine, fraud, pardon, verdict, felony, warrant, justice, judge, accuse, acquit, sentence, prison and gaol infiltrated the English language and the English people became enslaved by those who controlled the language. “From that short sample a new world emerges. We know who is in charge; those who have the language.”(Bragg 2003:37)

One of the least useful aspects of academia is the way each subject area develops a language that excludes or tries to exclude people from other disciplines. This

exclusion is, in my opinion, deliberate and perpetuates elitism. The language of power is different from the language of suppression. It seems to me that the language we use is often incomprehensible to our clients and it perpetuates detrimental social relationships. How many times have people come from Court with no idea of the outcome? I attempt to break down these barriers by carefully avoiding words such as offender and direction and most psychological or psychiatric labels.

“They reckon I’m a psychopath.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know but I know it is bad.”

“Well, I rarely use the word because it doesn’t seem to lead anywhere positive. This is what I think about you. You are in many respects amazing, you have had a horrible childhood and since you were 12 you seem to have looked after yourself. Your various criminal offences may indicate psychological deviance or resourcefulness and where you go from here is up to you. You know enough about the law to realise that any further involvement by you is likely to end up in a prison sentence and there you will probably be befriended by others labelled as psychopaths and you can read up on what it means and make a good job of it when you are released.”

Labels rarely empower and are often matters of convenience rather than substance. Recent press reports have described both Ivan Milat and Steve Vizard as psychopaths.

Another example: how many sheep begin a conversation with: “And what do you do?” and expect you to tell them how you derive your income. Your employment label becomes a universal descriptor.

Strange Language: The Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R).

It is a compulsory practise within ACT community corrections to “administer” the LSI-R. Despite six years of ponder I have no idea why it has such a convoluted and meaningless title and I have ceased attempts to explain the meaning of the words “service inventory” to clients.

I decided I would need to develop ways and means of interpreting the LSI-R so that it made sense to the client. I always complete the LSI-R with the client and I introduce it by saying: **“this is called a psychological instrument and it is going to reduce your life to one number and this number may or may not provide us with some indication of the likelihood of you not re-offending.”** I then go through the forms and explain each grouping of questions within a context of situational and dynamic factors. I do this because I wish to highlight those areas where the client can change positively.

I have been somewhat bemused by the ways this instrument is used and misinterpreted. Many of these arise from the ColorPlot Profile Forms which, for some reason, highlight the cumulative frequency (for male prisoners). I have heard trainers and practitioners say, for example, an LSI-R score of 42 for a male means there is a 99.2% of recidivism. The “correct” answer is 76% or as I present it, a 24% probability that the client may not re-offend.

I present the LSI-R as a dynamic opportunity rather than a static descriptor and some clients relate to it positively because they can identify those areas of their life that they can change. I sometimes reflect on its applicability with, what newspapers now call, the nine to five psychopaths.

Responsibility

While a university student I had the privilege of listening to “Nugget” Coombes talk many times about social justice and the concept of Noblesse Oblige. This is the “inferred obligation of people of high rank or social position to behave nobly and kindly to others.” (Webster’s Dictionary)

Community corrections officers have a responsibility to the Court to manage their order, a responsibility to the community to reduce the likelihood of the client returning to Court and a responsibility to the client to assist them through the process. This expose of my perceived responsibilities assists the client to articulate their responsibilities and implement decisions. I believe one of our responsibilities is to translate and interpret, if necessary, the language of corrections. Another responsibility is how we use our authority. Some may believe we have significant authority while I accept that our authority is fortunately quite limited. Ultimately all we can do is refer recalcitrant clients to the authority of the Court. In that sense we have limited authority however we can have a significant influence on the client.

Marcus Aurelius, born 121AD, was a general and Roman Emperor who wrote extensively about authority (and a lot of other things).

“Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good and evil. But for my part I have long perceived the nature of good and its nobility, the nature of evil and its meanness, and also the nature of the culprit himself, who is my brother (not in the physical sense, but as a fellow-creature similarly endowed with reason and a share of the divine.)

Arthur Koestler’s final book: Janus: A Summing Up reviewed, among other things the psychological experiments of Milgram and others to assess the levels of deference to authority and the impact of hierarchic structures. Milgram asks: “how is it that a person who is usually decent and courteous acts with severity against another person within the experiment?” Koestler argues that this submission to authority is “normal human behaviour” and we, in authority, should be wary.

“The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far reaching consequence of submission to authority.” Koestler 1983:89)

SIDE 5 : LISTENING, ANGER AND OTHER DIVERSIONS

“Effective listening is more than simply avoiding the bad habit of interrupting others while they are speaking or finishing their sentences. It’s being content to listen to the

entire thought of someone rather than waiting impatiently for your chance to respond.” (Carlson 1997:75)

Sometimes you reach a point where listening and nodding is counterintuitive so when I feel I need to interrupt and challenge the client’s thinking I use one of the following expressions as a circuit breaker.

Oscar Wilde said that the only thing you can do with good advice is pass it on.

If you don’t know where you are going any road will take you there. (Anon)

The fates lead him who will-him who won’t they drag. (Seneca)

I do not expect anything from others, so their actions cannot be in opposition to wishes of mine. (Swami Sri Yukteswar)

People cannot discover new oceans until they have the courage to lose sight of the shore. (Anon)

Yesterday is but today’s memory and tomorrow is today’s dream (Kahul Gibran)

Yesterday’s history and tomorrow’s a mystery (Movie: Blackfellas)

You can’t jump into the same river twice (Heraclitus)

Many of our clients recognise their apparent inability in dealing with anger.

If the client is a man who has assaulted his wife I tell him that while some boys may hit girls if you want to call yourself a man you never hit women and I have absolutely no sympathy for him if he attempts to justify his behaviour. I then explore other cues such as:

The next time you clench your fist to punch, open your hand and slap yourself across the face. This will, in most cases, diffuse the situation and give you time to think.

I also give them at least two “interpretations” on anger.

“Anger is an emotion that we experience when we perceive that something is bad or unfair.” (Edelman: 2002)

“Anger stuns. It frightens. It makes people feel bad about themselves...the more anger you express, the less effective your anger becomes, the less you are listened to, and the more cut off you may begin to feel from genuine closeness.” (McKay quoted in Edelman)

If the client is sprouting “victim mantra” I tell them about Jean-Dominique Bauby and Augusten Burroughs. The former developed “locked in syndrome” and dictated a book by using a code based around the only part of his body he could move: one eyelid. The book is called *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*. Burroughs began a radio

broadcast on the vexed question of normality with :”When I was twelve, my mentally ill mother gave me away to her psychiatrist. A man who dressed like Santa, told fortunes with a toilet and handed out pills like they were candy.” (ABC RN 10 June 2005)

SIDE 6: HAPPINESS

Metrodorus, Epicurus’ first disciple, entitled one of his chapters:

“The happiness we derive from within ourselves is greater than that which we obtain from our environment.”

Schopenhauer’s response is...”**and it is manifestly obvious that the most important thing altering a person’s well being, and, in fact, their whole existence, is what exists or takes place within themselves.”**

Lord Richard Layard, a professor of economics at the London School of Economics has recently completed a study on happiness. “If you ask: ‘what makes people happy?’ the most important things are relationships.”

I infer that happiness engenders pro-social behaviour and I explore it by discussing their relationships.

In response to a question about the relevance of his work for public policy Lord Layard imagined Tony Blair walking into a cabinet meeting and say: “I’m going to have an agenda for happiness; I’m going to fight this election on making Britain not a more secure country necessarily, not a more educated country, not even a richer country. I’m going to make Britain a happier country...and I would start by looking for who is the least happy, and the answer to that is the mentally ill. We now have more people who are on incapacity benefit by virtue of mental illness, than we have unemployed people in this country. And the services for them are pathetic, unless they are schizophrenic or manic depressive. Otherwise they just go and see a GP for 10 minutes, and he puts them on a pill, and this is a complete disgrace...depression is something deeply serious and we do extremely little about it.”

Unfortunately Australian jails appear to be the preferred destination for our mentally ill and we as probation officers are caught between a rock and a hard place when trying to “oversee” their court orders. The fact that there are so many mental health sufferers in our jail system is the most obvious evidence that our system is not interested in throughcare.

Fairness, forgiveness and saviour are compassionate expressions of humanity and without them throughcare within corrections is, in my opinion, extraordinarily difficult. A friend once said to me: “When you break the law you lose some of your power and that is why I never break the law.” (Heather Powell) One of my principal goals is to try and restore the client’s power over their lives.

There has been revealing and thought provoking research recently into the role of genetics, consciousness and imagination in life experiences such as addiction and

happiness or a sense of well-being. I am endeavouring to incorporate these into my role as a “corrections” officer.

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