

Volunteerism as Peacemaking

It is a privilege to share with you this evening. I have entitled tonight's talk:
Volunteerism as Peacemaking.

Twenty-seven years ago, in 1974, at about exactly this time of the year, I took volunteer training with the agency I serve now, M2/W2, to become for the first time a prison visitor at Lower Mainland Regional Correctional Centre (otherwise known as Oakalla Prison) in Burnaby. This volunteer recruit was very doubtful at the time about the prospect of visiting someone in prison:

- He was raised middle class in a narrowly religious upbringing
- He knew nothing about "street" language, let alone prison lingo
- He had no experience reaching across cultural barriers into prison

But he made one discovery over the next eighteen months or so of visiting that first guy in prison:

- It matters little what the culture, what the ethnicity, and what the life experience of the volunteer. What does matter, supremely, is: *heart*.

That lesson learned, he has remained a prison volunteer visitor for all these past twenty-seven years.

I moved away from the Lower Mainland for a few years after my "match" was discharged. A few years later, after having returned to the Lower Mainland, I ran into "Ron" again. The good news was, he had stayed clean on the outside.

In the intervening years, I have visited hundreds of people inside, many at great cultural removes from mine. And *heart*, I'm convinced, is still quintessentially where it is at.

Let me take you on a brief tour of some of my prison visitation memory lane.

Metro

Metro had sexually abused his daughter. After his release from prison, he lived in the Lower Mainland, picking up odd jobs here and there. He never reconciled with his family, nor with his daughter, though wished and tried to. But over the next seven or eight years, until his death from a brain tumor, Metro won his way into the *hearts* of our family: our kids grew to care for him greatly, my wife too, and my sister-in-law.

Metro eventually moved into an apartment belonging to a church member, and became "Johnny-on-the-spot" trouble-shooter for an ex-prisoner apartment a church group ran in conjunction with M2/W2.

I don't think Metro lived a day where he did not feel remorseful about the sexual abuse. But he was realist enough to know that some chapters just were closed, in his case, forever.

To this day, there is a special place in our hearts for Metro. He taught me about remorse and longing for wholeness that keep instructing even now many years after his death.

Metro above all modelled ever yearning for *personal peace*.

Patrick

By the time Patrick was 12, he was an alcoholic, and both his parents were dead of violent causes.

I first met Patrick in jail, and usually only reconnected when he landed back inside. His whole life was taken up with living downtown, panhandling, getting caught in petty crime, landing in jail, getting out, and repeating the process all over again.

Patrick wouldn't harm a flea! But one day, he was charged with murder, and, according to his gifted lawyer, he was going down! A native guy was dead, and Patrick, who was native too, "admitted" to an undercover cop that he had done the deed. He even showed all the *karate* kicks he had done to take the guy out before killing him. Only one problem. Patrick was bragging big-time. He wouldn't harm a flea. And in this case, he hadn't hurt anyone, as his lawyer convincingly demonstrated to the Judge.

About a year later, Patrick was stabbed. He lived at our place upon release from the hospital. But he soon moved on.

Most of the time, Patrick lived behind a garbage bin in downtown Vancouver. He could never keep a job, could never settle into an apartment even.

Patrick's lawyer, whom we met thanks to him, went on to win the first-ever case against returning an FBI-wanted American Indian chief to the States. She was able to demonstrate convincingly that the chief's life would be in danger from the law officials in the States, should he be returned. It was a landmark victory.

One night, Patrick phoned us while out. He had met a runaway kid he explained, and wanted us to talk to her. That began an interesting number of visits by phone, and later at our house, from Evelyn Lau, now a famous Canadian author, whose first book, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, became a bestseller, and later a movie.

Patrick put us in touch with many other interesting people while we knew him. He was, in his own way, a peacemaker, even in the midst of great life pain.

Some years ago, his lawyer and we lost touch with Patrick. I wonder whether his liver finally gave out, or whether another knife attack did him in, or.....

We miss Patrick. I learned from him much about wanting peace for others. Even when he could never find it for himself....

Glenn

“Glenn”, not his real name, is still serving life for a triple murder. The story is horrendous.

In fact, a year ago, a book was published that tells the whole sordid tale. It is hardly light reading, though compelling.

Through meeting “Glenn”, I have learned greatly about murder victims’ family survivors’ overwhelming pain and suffering. And I have also walked some distance with “Glenn”. He is on a path of healing justice, though his surviving victim family members deny that, and he himself has taken many dips and turns.

At one point though, his victims’ dad and husband, and the husband’s new wife, met together for reconciliation! On their own initiative, permitted by the Institution. It was unprecedented, and, at the time, greatly therapeutic. But the reconciliation on the part of the victims’ family has since fallen apart. The book chronicles why.

Justice in this case for all concerned is anything but straightforward or restorative, anything but *easy* peacemaking. But it *is* peacemaking – even though the journey is torturous. More than both parties realize, they are on a course that keeps on propelling them towards transformation and peace, even though their paths right now diverge dramatically.

Volunteering is Peacemaking

None of these stories had fairy-tale beginnings, certainly no fairy-tale plot lines, nor do they have such endings. They are rather like life for most of us: disjointed, uncertain, fragile, and a great mixture of success and failure, hope and pain, joy and sorrow, and just grinding “everydayness”. This last is especially so in prison.

Into all that, the prison volunteer introduces an irrepressible dynamic that is often profoundly absent in this world: *peacemaking*. For volunteering oneself in the prison setting is always *bridge building for peace*. A peace that is multidirectional eventually for all. Volunteer acts are like the miniscule organisms that join together over time to form great coral reefs. And in one great spiritual leader’s words, those of Jesus: “*Blessed (happy) are the peacemakers.*”

Volunteering is an unstoppable power because *it is a movement of caring and forgiveness across all the painful divides of the world*: cultural, ethnic, gender, sexual, criminal, and

so on. Volunteering ever says: “I *still* want to be your friend”. And with that, new seeds of peace are sown that threaten to undo completely all the hatred and violence the world can throw in its way.

In the third chapter of a book entitled *Embodying Forgiveness* the author asks whether in the end violence is the master of us all. He then tells the true story of a Catholic priest, Maximilian Kolbe, who on July 30, 1941, in Auschwitz Concentration Camp, stepped forward to offer himself for punishment of starvation by death in place of one of ten who were so sentenced. His was an ultimate act of volunteerism.

As the days ground on, the priest consistently responded to fellow captives and captors alike with unwavering love and forgiveness. His actions increasingly inspired his fellow prisoners and unnerved the captors. His refusal to submit to, and thus reproduce, violence, became recognized as a growing threat to the Nazi authorities. On the 16th day, the Nazis killed the priest, since he was so subversive of the good order of the Camp. In the fictionalized novel about this true story, entitled *Orbit of Darkness*, one character says: “Those who give up their lives, at least in principle, become more dangerous to the Germans than planes or tanks. *They become the ultimate weapon* ([p. 249], Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Eerdmans, 1995, pp. 91ff, italics added).” Interestingly, Kolbe has since been canonized – made into a saint – by the Catholic Church.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian author, wrote of a great discovery after serving ten years in Russian *Gulags*:

“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of hearts, there remains . . . an un-uprooted small corner of evil.” (*Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, “The Ascent”)

In other words: *Every “saint” has a past; every “sinner” has a future!* Prison volunteers know *that*, and therefore *themselves*, well.

Conclusion

So I salute you, the prison volunteers amongst us tonight! You help, by your very self-giving activities, to make peace and hope rise out of the chaos that right now again, as so often throughout history, threatens to engulf the world in senseless holocaust.

And I say to you: *“You who give up your lives, at least in principle, become more dangerous to those who do violence. You become thereby the ultimate weapon. That weapon is peacemaking.”*

Keep it up! To you belongs the future. Thank you!