Nott To Be Forgotten

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For a number of years I had the privilege of teaching conflict resolution and interpersonal skills in a NSW correctional centre. Much effort and careful research had gone into the instructional material and course work and, it seemed to me, the course was worthwhile. Yet what was even more apparent was that the course ‘worked’ better for some students than it did for others. Some students engaged in the course with enthusiasm, looking for answers to problems they struggled with in their lives. They appeared to derive great benefit from the discussions and the learning material. For others, only the certificate at the end seemed to matter.

Realistically and within expectations, my efforts to rehabilitate offenders were only partially successful. I was standing at the frontier of more than two centuries of attempts to correct people’s behaviour either by deterrence (punishment), attempts to reform through religious training, work, and the Separate and Silent systems of the late 19th century, or through the targeted criminogenic programs of more recent times (Blake, 1988, O’Toole, 2006). My experience was new to me, but I was not the first to note that what offenders bring to the change process makes a profound difference to the success of correctional programs.

Almost sixty years before I began teaching in a prison, Mr L. Nott, was approaching the end of a long career with the NSW correctional system. His successful working life had led him to become the Comptroller-General of NSW Prisons. A century of efforts to reform prisoners had preceded him. During that long period, some observers had remarked that efforts to change prisoners were largely unsuccessful. For instance, in response to the strict regimen of “hard labour, hard fare, and a hard bed”, the Gladstone Committee’s 1894 report to parliament was that “conditions of imprisonment at that time did not lead to any moral reform or change in behaviour” (DCS, 2008).

In his 1943 report to the NSW Government, Nott expressed his summation of the efficacy of prisoner reform. His insights are noteworthy: “It is a truism that no person can be reformed if he does not want to be reformed and is not prepared to co-operate to that end……reformation can only be achieved by the offender himself: externals will often aid and occasionally inspire, but the essential stimulus must spring from within” (cited in Blake, 1988, pp 13-14).

Nott provides us with an important critique of how the NSW prison system has attempted to change prisoners in the past. Taking his comments at face value, one could believe that the combined efforts of the ‘system’ may ‘often aid and occasionally inspire’ offenders to change, but do no more than that. It may be that that is enough. There is, after all, a growing body of evidence to suggest that targeting criminogenic needs does aid offender rehabilitation (Adams, 1994, Cecil, 2000, Hollin, 2002), if not often, at least ten percent of the time, according to Hollin. Perhaps aiding and inspiring is the most we can do.

One of the legacies of the Martinson era was positive: the need to conduct better research. Over the past thirty years researchers in the field of correctional rehabilitation have focused on determining ‘what works’ in a desire to get our part of the rehabilitative ‘formula’ correct. Now that we have the Risk/Needs Model (Andrews, 2006), we know what offender traits we are meant to target and how intensive the intervention should be. We now have evidence-based programs that are supported by the ‘what works’ literature. We have the Good Lives Model (Ward, 2002), an understanding of ‘primary human goods’ and the importance of life plans. But in the rush of everything we now have, have we remembered the insights of Nott?

The insights of Nott still resound, albeit faintly, from his time six decades
ago. We still need to consider the implications of what he said back then. What are the implications of his observation that, after the ‘system’ has done everything in its power to change prisoners, the essential stimulus for change must spring from within them?

As we stand in the early years of a new millennium we should think carefully of what Nott would say to us. In the midst of our confidence in rehabilitative programs and our awareness of the complexities of change, Nott calls our attention back to the question of where the power for change actually lies. If it is true that offenders will not change unless they want to change and are prepared to co-operate to that end, if it is true that the essential stimulus for change must come from within them, how might these truths affect our practice? What difference should they make to what we do?

The purpose of this article is not to provide answers to these questions, but to draw our attention back to someone who has gone before and ask whether what he said should shape our practice today. Is it enough to direct our focus on rehabilitative programs when there may be a potent resource for change welling up within some offenders? If we are to take account of this resource, how should we allow it to shape our thinking and our practice?

Nott is not to be forgotten…. “no person can be reformed if he does not want to be reformed …. the essential stimulus must spring from within”.

References


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