The Forgiveness Project

Activity Report, Dr. Lois Edmund
July, 2009

Background

Marina Cantacuzino, Director of The Forgiveness Project (TFP), invited me to work two days per week in June and July, 2009. She specifically requested assistance with evaluation of the TFP workshops which had been conducted in Her Majesty's Prisons for eighteen months during 2008 and 2009.

Method of Analysis

Several types of data were used for the analysis.

a) Written workshop materials included Cell Books (evening reflections) retained from approximately 220 male participants of eighteen TFP workshops; approximately 240 workshop evaluations completed by TFP participants; and staff reports submitted at the conclusion of each TFP workshop.

b) I consulted with several staff members, including Ms. Cantacuzino.

c) I viewed collected video materials produced by selected TFP participants subsequent to the workshop.

d) I made a visit to the Downview Prison for Women during their two-week "Seeds of Forgiveness" event which included "The F Word" exhibition.

e) I viewed part of "The F Word" exhibition, read the published exhibition booklet, read organizers' evaluations and public responses to the exhibit, and read a collection of press materials, mostly relating to "The F Word".

Materials were received and compiled. They were then analyzed for content themes. These themes were presented to ten staff members and discussed all round. These same themes are presented below with some input and feedback from TFP workshop staff.

Findings

1. Perpetrators - three general motives underlying participants' past criminal behaviour were discovered. These patterns do not include or address issues resulting from mental illness or from terrorist actions. It is important to note that these categories are not strictly distinct; rather, any particular individual likely reported a mixture of two or more of these motivations.

a) Reactive - These criminals experienced traumatic experiences, usually during childhood, often associated with the family of origin. This usually involved at least neglect or abandonment, but often also involved frank abuse and violence. Many of these criminals grew up in environments which included incarcerated individuals and everyday violence. In response to their own hurtful experiences, they react in their current relationships to act out their hurt, anger or shame. In effect, they unknowingly repeat the patterns they experienced.

b) Affiliative - These individuals engage in criminal behaviour because their primary attachments (family and/or friends) do. The motive is often to gain or retain acceptance, to belong. When these individuals are in strong, healthy relationships, they tend to do quite well in school, sports or employment; when their primary affiliations are with destructive, violent people, they also become destructively violent.

c) Socialized - These people are taught, directly and indirectly, the antisocial values which underlie criminal behaviour. Violence is normalized in their environment. They are taught through parental or sibling guidance, through modelling, gradually being shaped toward the criminal behaviour patterns and then receiving the 'rewards' of criminal behaviour. Many criminals who recall this type of socialization also recall individuals in their past (one parent or grandparent, a teacher, a neighbour, for example) who taught them positive, prosocial values which competed with the negative influences.

2. TFP Process - Although TFP specifically avoids prescribing any feelings, thoughts or behaviour, TFP uses a model of education which encourages the exploration of interpretations of experiences (called a "worldview") which differ from participants' received or habitual interpretations. Although the TFP process includes traditional teacher-student education (transmissional education), the strong emphasis is to rely on students teaching each other (transactive education), and students facilitating each others' reexamination of past thinking (transformative education). When transformative education is used, participants' entire worldview can be challenged and this begins the process of personal change which results in the longterm in new, creative development.[1] The central method of TFP transformative education is story - victims', family, offender, and personal stories which are irrefutable, credible, and address deep emotively issues in oblique, permissive ways.

Participants often react by saying that the workshops raised issues they were already thinking of but had few handles for working through. Transformative education results in gradual, sometimes precarious movement from states described as "unaware" to "aware", to "engaged" and finally to "committed". The TFP workshop process, though unpredictable, results in no observable insight for some participants, incomplete change in progress for the large majority of participants, and dramatic worldview change reported by a few participants.[2] It is difficult to precisely quantify these outcomes, as the TFP workshops are admittedly just a beginning, and ultimately participants may "slide" between the categories.

3. Forgiveness - The Cell Books and the evaluations completed by the TFP participants are surprisingly genuine, disclosive and moving. Themes which emerge from their writing are as follows:

a) Offenders often long for an opportunity to make things right, through apology or explanation
b) Many offenders fear that apology would be inadequate, and could never repair the harm
c) They have grasped the concept that forgiveness is particular and yet universal
d) The need for forgiveness reaches in many directions and into many relationships
e) Revenge and forgiveness are contradictions
f) There is a surprising logic to forgiveness
g) Forgiveness is difficult and requires commitment, but is possible
h) Forgiveness brings real relief and healing of painful feelings and broken relationships
i) The inward learnings of forgiveness lead to changed actions

4. Learning - Although TFP does not focus on behaviour or changed behaviour, several developments are evident in the writing of the workshop participants.

Participants describe themselves, before the workshop, as entitled but powerless, having poor cause-effect reasoning, and perceiving punishment (retributive justice) as an insult or injury, or as a waste of time.

After the workshop, participants notice revisions to their own thinking and understanding, and often express surprise about these developments. Participants describe themselves as able

to
* face and accept myself
* name the wrong and accept responsibility for it
* feel remorse and sorrow
* desire to correct or set things right
* acknowledge my own life losses
* empathy for victim's losses
* more realistic expectations

One glaring gap in the current TFP data is in longterm followup. Although TFP staff follow some, at the participants' initiative, little is known of the longer term impact of the workshops.

Conclusions

1 Almost all of the participants in the TFP workshops could be seen as both perpetrator and victim of violence.

2. The damage experienced during the conduct of criminal behaviour presents opportunities for deeply exploring forgiveness, even for those unaccustomed to the concept. The TFP workshops facilitate this exploration without suggesting or leading participants in any particular direction.

3. The transformative education model used by TFP results in:
a) the beginnings of Transformative Justice
b) challenging, difficult process for all participants
c) dramatic insight for many participants
d) the beginning of a longer process for some participants
e) what could we discover about those who experience blockages to insight?

3. When forgiveness is found, it can be dramatically transformative, of individual's identity and worldview, of relationship patterns, of society. There is no reason to expect that this transformation would be anything but positive and prosocial. Only some participants experience this type of forgiveness.

4. Transformative education is psychologically costly to all involved, notably the facilitators and the participants. Facilitator costs can be mitigated by careful and thorough debriefing after workshops, ongoing training, affirmation and support from others. At this time, TFP has little ongoing access prisoners to help relieve their costs.

5. Further work is needed to evaluate the longterm learnings of the participants

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Footnotes

1. For more extensive description of transformative education, see "Transformative Learning, Transformation Theory and Transformative Justice" by Lois Edmund.

2. Sample data - some of the participants' own comments which typify observations of learning are below:

Dramatic Change of Worldview (a few participants):

- I am aware that my actions over the years have created victims where there were none. I did this, and I will always carry the guilt. I am moving toward a future that is the opposite of my old life. I will not be someone who creates victims.

- I am certain that I am going to achieve my aim of being a changed man. I now realize that I will have to look at myself ... and delve deep within in order to do that.

- Forgiveness knows no bounds. It allows one to cease old behaviour and move forward without resentment which, in my personal way of thinking, sets out new avenues that will allow me to achieve my aims and reach my goals.

Worldview shaken, changes in progress (most participants):

- I am sorry for not understanding what I am meant to be getting out of this course. I am sorry if you think I have been wasting your time. I tried hard to understand and have not had any joy yet. I want to say thank you for your time and I have enjoyed my time spent on this course. I am sorry for myself for not understanding.

- I'm new to this forgiveness thing. I can forgive people for normal things, but what you are asking us to do today just made me feel that it was way out of the box to forgive [a serious crime]. It was like you were asking too much too soon ... But I am hoping to understand forgiveness more.

- I've had mixed feelings the last two days. It's like everything is coming forward in one go. My feelings and emotions are all over the place. I want to forgive and move on, but I don't know if I can. I don't want to say it and not mean it ... I'm still trying to find a way to ask for forgiveness.

No Insight (some participants):

- Forgiveness is not for me. Why should I forgive? That's how I grew up - an eye for an eye. That's what I know.

- There are several people who I have seriously hurt along the years, but I don't feel I owe any of them an apology. They would rather get revenge on me than hear me apologise. They were people who, given the chance, would inflict the same damage to me, but I got there first.

- I do not feel anyone I have wronged is owed an apology, as I have no innocent victims. All my actions have been cause and effect, and my victims knew what to expect.

- I need to forgive my father, but I know I never will ... My heart just won't let me do it. I find it difficult to forget what he put us through. The pain is just too deep. For me to forgive is just impossible. I'm sorry, I just can't do it.