

Life on the Inside

A bold project at San Quentin teaches prisoners to confront the feelings that drove them to crime. By Tijn Touber and Helene de Puy | October 2007

When she comes in, the room is full of prisoners—many of them doing time for murder, many already having served 25 years or more. She’s very nervous and sits down without shaking anybody’s hand. More than 10 years ago, her 12-year-old son was abducted, raped and stabbed to death. “I want to know,” she says, “did he ask for me? Did he cry for me? I need to know what happened, so I can stop imagining.”

But today, Maria—a five-foot-tall woman in her fifties who works as a cashier in a supermarket—will not be facing the offender. She’s meeting a group of men dedicated to helping heal victims at California’s San Quentin State Prison. That’s what Maria is looking for: healing. Because she cannot live with the fact that she doesn’t know anything about her son’s last moments. “Perhaps I can ask them what I would have asked my offender,” Maria reasons.

And so Maria, supported by another mother whose son was murdered, starts talking about her loss. She sheds her tears, collects herself and then asks the men, gathered in a circle of chairs, some tough questions: *What went through your mind when you killed your victim? What do you remember about your victim at the time of the crime? Was it worth it?* One by one, the men answer her. They don’t get upset and don’t turn away. They keep their eyes on Maria and tell her the truth, and nothing but the truth, without justifying themselves or evading her questions. This truth-telling slowly fills the room with an awe-inspiring power. Perhaps never before has the accounting of these horrendous acts been such a gift of healing to someone hearing it. “Thank you,” Maria whispers, again and again.

Slowly, the room lightens up. One of the men asks Maria to share some fond memories of her son, and she responds eagerly. She also shares that while she is glad her offender has been prevented from causing further harm, she bears no ill will toward him. She knows a thing or two about the challenge unresolved pain poses. “I’m tired of coping,” she says. “I want to live again.”

Jacques Verduin, who facilitates this group process at San Quentin prison, has thoroughly trained these men to handle this kind of meeting. Ten years ago, he started the Insight Prison Project (IPP). Through it, some of these tough customers have acquired gifts they can share with other prisoners as well as everyone else: counselling; conflict resolution and mediation; victim/offender education; violence prevention; yoga and meditation instruction; parole planning and addiction recovery. As many as 300 inmates a week attend the programs.

Although Verduin hardly stops stressing the team effort inherent in his organization, you could say he has planted seeds of peace and reconciliation among people for whom that might seem impossible.

But in his case, the seeds were probably tulip bulbs, for Verduin is as Dutch as they come: blonde hair, blushing apple-red cheeks and bright blue eyes with the steadfast determination of Hans Brinker, the archetypical Dutch boy who stuck his thumb in a dike to save the country from flooding. And the 47-year-old Verduin, who calls himself a “recovered psychotherapist,” has needed every inch of Hans Brinker’s courage to deal with California’s troubled prison system.

The inspiration to start self-rehabilitation programs in prison came when Verduin realized modern society was destroying its members’ sense of community and connectedness. According to Verduin, the spirit of kindness, compassion and caring was gone. He resolved to build an organization that would hold up a lamp in one of the darkest places in our culture, a place where

human beings are discarded, labeled as prisoners and forgotten. Where better to start than inside the walls of San Quentin?

Opened in July of 1852, the oldest of California's prisons is home to some of the most dangerous men alive. That's where the state's death row for men is located, as is its only gas chamber, now used to perform lethal injections. The cells in which the men live take up only 35 square feet (a little more than 3 square metres), and are double-occupied.

"It's a tough place," acknowledges Verduin as we wait for our IDs to be scanned at the prison gate. "When I started, it was just about as difficult to get into San Quentin as it was to get out. The first time I sat with a group of prisoners was quite intimidating. I was so green. One of the first things they said was, 'Hey man, what are you driving an ambulance for?' It took me a little while to figure out that this was slang for, 'Why are you trying to save us?' Then they wanted to know how much drugs I had used and of course, I could not impress them."

This cat-and-mouse game went on for a little while, but Verduin decided to stop playing when one of the inmates told him he looked pretty uncomfortable, sitting there trying to save their sorry asses. "At that moment I took a deep breath," remembers Verduin. "I said 'You know what? I am uncomfortable, but I want to make this a group where it is okay to be uncomfortable. Let's cut the bullshit and get real.' That did it! At that point they all started to buy in. That's how we started our first group."

If a rehabilitation program for prisoners sounds like a waste of time and money, consider this number: In California, almost 70 percent of those who leave prison return within 18 months of release.

For the past 30 years, in the wake of California's legislation asserting that "the purpose of imprisonment for crime is punishment," rehabilitation has been largely absent from the state's penal system. Despite its recent comeback, the number of inmates in California has increased. The average cost to house, feed and guard an inmate in California exceeds \$40,000 a year.

In other words: California's "punishment" system has been as expensive as it has been ineffective. Verduin sees signs of change, in San Quentin's new warden Bob Ayers, for example, who Verduin believes is one of the strongest proponents of programs to "support public safety and prevent re-victimization in society."

The property on which San Quentin stands is one of the most beautiful spots in the state, just north of San Francisco in Marin County. It must be hard for prisoners to see surfers and boats gliding by all the time, we conclude as we stroll along with Verduin into a large courtyard where prisoners are walking, talking and working out. "That's why the motto of our program is 'Leaving prison before you get out,'" he answers promptly. "It is the only way to stay sane in a place like this."

As a devoted practitioner of meditation, Verduin knows that being locked behind steel bars isn't the worst kind of prison. As far as he is concerned, getting out of the other prison—the one into which we lock ourselves—is the main priority. But breaking free from the chains of trauma and unresolved hurt has proven to be at least as difficult as breaking out of a maximum-security prison. The reason why many people, even those who have never been behind bars, don't attempt an escape is that their prison can look so good. As long as there are iPods, televisions, computers, houses, careers, money, food and drinks, why bother about freedom?

That is the difference between the prisoners inside and outside San Quentin. When you are inside the penitentiary, your world and your prospects don't look so good and not much distracts you from yourself. That is why Verduin loves to work with these men. "When they are

'sick and tired of being sick and tired' and want to heal, there is an immediacy, an urgency, that's hard to find outside, which is very refreshing."

Walking into the shabby building where IPP's so-called Katargeo Group "holds the space" is like walking into a monastery or an ashram. The atmosphere is solemn, sobering, humbling. No fashionable clothes, no cell phones, no pretense. The main purpose of the meetings is to "sit in the fire" and face the deep-rooted pain that led to crime and murder. The men come together to remind one another of who they really are, as human beings, humble and imperfect, but deeply soulful and wizened as well. Most men have been at it for several years and have become masters in their own right. When you've been to hell and found your way back, you conduct yourself with a natural authority.

They have learned the hard way how to look within. Verduin explains, "One of the main priorities in the trainings at IPP is on something called 'impulse control.' You do this by learning to be able to witness your own experience. That's why we make space for contemplation in each class. This technique can make the difference between committing a crime and not."

Today the group topic is forgiveness. One of the inmates, who prefers to stay anonymous, says he's willing to forgive just about everyone, except the guy who murdered his wife. The inmate was in prison when she was stabbed. He had been utterly powerless, not only to defend his loved one, but to be there for his 4-year-old son who witnessed the murder. "I'll never be able to forgive that guy. I will always hold onto that anger."

Another prisoner, Eric, has plenty of reasons to be angry too. As a kid, he was molested and raped by eight people on a regular basis. It had become so commonplace that he began to think the sole purpose of his life was to be used. One day all the anger exploded, which resulted in a tragic loss of life. Eric has learned to forgive, but, he explains, "I'll never assume I'm done forgiving and being forgiven."

Listening to stories like this, it becomes clear that each man here is a victim as well as an offender. In this light, it seems cruel that men like Eric are punished throughout their lives for something that happened in a few minutes. Of course, the victims and their families are dead or traumatized forever too. Still, in meeting these men, one can't help but think that if they could take their places in society and share their hard-earned wisdom with the rest of us, we would all be the better for it.

When we ask Eric, PJ and Ali after the session what they would do if ever they got out, their eyes begin to shine. They would go back to their neighborhoods to help build community based on the principles they have learned in IPP programs and other classes. Stories of prisoners who have done this are told and retold, like the one about former group member Sterling Scott, who now works in juvenile detention facilities across California. Sterling had been behind bars for 23 years.

Meanwhile, Verduin dreams of raising enough money to set up what he calls "The Ambassador Initiative," in which former prisoners who have learned job skills on the inside go into their communities to serve as salaried youth counselors and violence-prevention facilitators par excellence.

In these victim/offender programs developed and taught by IPP Restorative Justice Manager Rochelle Edwards, inmates write about how they killed or hurt somebody, and learn to understand their own histories. Each class ends with naming the victims and doing something in their honour. Each prisoner also writes a letter to his victim. It does not get sent, but as Verduin says, "they still go through it." All this is done in preparation for a group dialogue with family members who lost loved ones in crimes like those perpetrated by these men.

One of the first such meetings, just before the program started, was with Radha Stern, a woman Verduin met at a dinner party and whose son had been murdered. “I asked her if she would talk to me about this. So we met a couple of times and she took me through the whole process: the pictures; the newspaper clippings; the poems the family wrote; how she lost all fluids when the sheriff came and told her that her son was killed, everything. She taught me about the other side of the crime. When we were done, she said, ‘Now I want to see what you do.’”

Verduin asked the men if it would be okay to bring Stern in. They assured him she was welcome. “The first time she brought pictures of her son,” he says. “The second time she brought a quilt, which she had made for every year of his life: his favorite food, his pets, his friends... All the men touched the quilt, which was very special. Imagine the hands that had taken a life touching this quilt that belonged to a mother whose son’s life was taken.” After a few meetings, Stern became like a mother to the members of the group.

Then, Verduin says, something beautiful happened. He managed to get approval for a home-cooked Thanksgiving meal, to be held in a dank basement that doubled as a classroom, just past urinals you could hear flushing. Verduin had asked all those invited to come in suits and fine clothes. “After all, who ever does that for these guys?” So Verduin bought a tie and Stern prepared a delicious meal.

“By the time all the food was cleared through security, it was cold,” Verduin says, “but Radha had thought about this and brought a thermos bottle of hot gravy.” He stops here to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Every time I talk about this it gets me, because that’s love, right? Hot gravy!” After a moment, Verduin continues. “Everybody wept when they spoke of what they were thankful for. It was beautiful.”

A couple of months later, when the 10-year anniversary of Stern’s son’s death was approaching, the men wanted to do something in honour of Stern and her son. They decided to make a quilt. “One of the guys,” Verduin says, “used the pocket of his favourite visiting shirt—the best piece of cloth he had. There were also napkins, and pieces of mattress. Some guys drew on it; some actually embroidered on it.”

After Stern was given this quilt, she took her husband and daughter to meet the guys. She’s now preparing for a dialogue with her son’s murderer.

“Healing wants to happen,” Verduin says, “if you let it.”

Find out more: insightprisonproject.org