Transforming Corrections

Humanistic Approaches to Corrections and Offender Treatment

SECOND EDITION

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Mike Arons and Richard Asarian.

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Foreword

One of the most convincing testimonials to human obduracy is the care most of us take to preserve our repertoire of off-putting stereotypes—our conscious and unconscious assumptions about persons and groups who we have concluded ought to be condemned, shunned, rejected, or repudiated. Unfortunately, unflattering preconceptions have a way of being reciprocated by their targets. The result in the aggregate is a world divided into factious enclaves from which we warily scrutinize each others' camp fires in the twilight separated by protective moats.

Few human borders are more assiduously patrolled than that between incarcerated offenders and their keepers. Among the best-selling offerings of the American Correctional Association (ACA)—proudly listed under their *Management Resources*—are a "Con Games Inmates Play (Second edition)" video, a "Working with Manipulative Inmates" course, and assorted books with titles such as "Games Criminals Play," "The Art of the Con," and "Strategies for Redirecting Inmate Deception." The ACA as a rule does not market managerial books or videos by inmates, but if it did, these would no doubt bear titles such as "Initiating Prison Litigation (in Five Easy Lessons)," "Coping with Guard Sadism, Corruption, and Brutality," and "Why You Can Never Trust a Screw."

A sure-fire prescription for engendering reciprocal mistrust is to avoid disconfirming information by refraining from human contacts by preventing their occurrence. The consummate application of this strategy happens to be imprisonment, and its crowning achievement is that of "special housing" or segregation units (up to and including the "supermaxes" described in chapter nine) with regimes that completely isolate prisoners and separate them from prison staff members. These contemporary high-tech dungeons are environments designed to ensure the perpetuation of prisoner-staff estrangement. The inmates who survive such settings emerge seething with righteous resentment, while the guards who have been monitoring the prisoners feel confirmed in the view (which they volubly assert) that incarcerated men or women are the lowermost scum of the earth.

The perpetuation of offender stereotyping in prisons must not be considered the domain of correctional officers. Despite predictable disclaimers to the contrary, mental health workers can function as prime sources of rejection for prison inmates. In fact, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or nurses who work in detention facilities are particularly well situated to act as agents of dehumanization. "Therapeutic" encounters with inmates can be experiences almost calculated to reinforce the denunciatory message of confinement or to accentuate the deprivations of imprisonment. As a case in point, delivering "mental health services" through the door of an isolation cell can nicely convey indifference to pain and suffering. As an example of an even less ambiguous communication, I know of no more effective way to advertise paranoia than to demand that some inmate be shackled while one builds "rapport" with him across a solid bullet-proof plastic partition.

For clinicians to pay homage to the demands of custody while they engage in custodial overkill may be a deception that adds insult to injury. The evidence suggests that most professionals in prisons are accorded a measure of respect and authority in their domain—if nothing else, to preempt litigation—and thus have more discretion in doing their work than they elect to exercise. The hesitance to take ameliorative initiatives is often a matter of choice or policy, and the mantra "custody made me do it" can be an alibi. Assigning blame to custody or the administration becomes a convenient way to preserve self-respect while one colludes to keep anxiety-provoking offenders at a distance. The avoidance behavior is apt to be transparent and it can cement the cynicism of the offenders one has avoided. Rejection happens to be the response offenders mostly expect and they have learned to react in kind. This response of the offenders can be self-servingly deemed to be "ingratitude," and one can of course point to their resistance as evidence of their imperviousness to treatment (chapter seventeen). The offenders thus conveniently become the bad guys in the transaction, and this adds buttressing to one's anxieties in dealing with them. Along the way, correctional staff has made sure that no change could possibly occur: no reappraisals will have been called for, either on the staff member's own part, or on the part of the offenders the staff has taken exquisite care not to engage.

Psychological reappraisal in general becomes an issue in human intercourse where encounters with previously stereotyped "others" provide intimations of the shared humanity we have been schooled to ignore or suppress. At such serendipitous (and discomfiting) junctures, there are potential opportunities for discovery, growth, and development. Unsurprisingly, in real life (unlike in some fiction), such opportunities are rarely utilized. What mostly takes place

is a salvaging operation in which miniscule adjustments are enacted to preserve one's endangered world view. In other words, challenges to stereotypes tend to be responded to with exercises in remedial tweaking.

The need for remedial tweaking is particularly acute where the "other"—e.g., the offender who looks to be human—also appears to be an impressive, congenial, or likable human being. To deal with this eventuality the safest course of action is to invoke the principle of exceptionality. A staff person admits that the offender is an interesting and attractive person, and further credits him with the fact that he is interesting and attractive despite the fact that he is an offender. The fact that the offender is a distinctive offender can then be used to argue that he is an obvious exception to the rule.

If a correctional staff member wishes to relate to an offender as a gesture of humanistic good will, the safest candidate for adoption is one who stands out in some non-offense-related fashion, which facilitates his differentiation from other offenders. If the staff member then needs to defend against the charge that it is elitist to single out an offender-novelist, inmate-poet, or prisoner-playwright for sponsorship, it is helpful if one's protégé has a long prison sentence, and has thus been certified by authorities as an offender of substance. To be sure, hybrids are wildly unrepresentative in both their worlds, but being exceptions they are safe to adopt—at least, until they re-offend.

Humanism is a broadly encompassing category—the approach comprises a great deal of activity, as a reading of the ensuing chapters demonstrates. It, at a minimum, connotes the effort (and capacity) to fully understand others in the sense of intuiting the world as others perceive it. The skill is one that Carl Rogers consistently prized and labeled as the capacity for accurate empathy. The capacity is not a tool designed to serve one's predilections or convenience. To know a person in this sense means to know the whole person rather than select congenial attributes. Accurate empathy is in fact best deployed where it is most difficult to exercise, where the distance to be bridged is greatest. It is of least consequence where the experience of knowing others is most inviting, where we deal with the amenable or familiar, as in caseloads of hand-picked clients.

It is preliminarily enticing to suggest that one should distinguish between the offender and his or her offense; however, an offense-less offender is fiction and an offense committed by others becomes a different offense. Lastly, the offender's offense-related dispositions must be the subject of our professional concern, and they must certainly be a subject of concern for the offender. In some (restorative) paradigms, the offender's motives are also of interest to those who have been victimized (chapter eleven).

Humanistic approaches ideally are open minded and ecumenical. What should matter is the achievement of consequential relationships (chapter ten), not the technology whereby they are achieved. To accentuate or belabor sectarian distinctions strikes me as unhelpful. For me, for example, the embodiment of a humanistic approach happened to have been that of Fritz Redl, who was a Freudian psychoanalyst. Redl had a regulation Viennese accent, with which he colloquially described the doings and perspectives of Detroit juvenile gang members. No one I know worked with institutionalized delinquents more skillfully and authoritatively, and with more insight and love.

For my money, Redl was the Complete Humanist. He may or may not have imbibed the requisite philosophical sources (he did have a doctorate in philosophy), but Fritz Redl walked the walk. And what Redl had in spades is Rogers' third desideratum, which is that of genuineness. It is difficult to precisely define genuineness—it was so even for Rogers—but we know it when we see it. More to the point, the offenders with whom we propose to deal know genuineness when they see it. This matters, because when we approach an offender—no matter how highly we may rate the nobility of our intentions—we embark on an act of intrusion. To earn access we must gain trust, and we earn trust by making ourselves genuinely accessible and having the offender respect what he sees.

A book subtitled *Humanistic Approaches to Corrections and Offender Treatment* manifestly does not mirror prevailing practices in corrections, nor reflect the dominant ethos of the times. Such a book instead gives some of us heady sustenance and support in the goals that we secretly aspire to—it gives us a sense of what might be achieved in the distant future, and what might already have been accomplished. The book is an invitation for us to "hang in there" and persevere. "If you are not quite burned out, have not given up, and are still fighting the odds," the message of these chapters is, "you are not nearly as alone as you sometimes feel out there on your limb." The reassuring fact is that there are enclaves of humanistic activity in correctional settings, and as these experiments demonstrate their effectiveness, they are bound to ensure the long-term survival of the approach.

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