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Helping Defiant Men to Recognize their True Potential

Terry Bianchini
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Terry Bianchini
I had to put an angel to bed, but first felt the need to read him a story. The story would offer an insight into the work I have been involved in for the past twenty years, and some advice and guidance I believe we can all benefit from. That story has grown into this book.

Dedicated to Jack and his angelic friends
AS PROMISED

Love Mum and Dad
I would like to take this opportunity to thank my beautiful wife Adua and daughter Ann-Lucia for their love and support while writing this book. Also, to friends and family for reading various drafts of chapters and offering me constructive feedback.

Special thanks to Nick Luxmoore for his generous foreword, Dave Jones for his ceaseless encouragement and the artwork, Sandra Hemming for believing in my book and making my illegible grammar legible. And Jacquelyn Ogden, who never tired of reading numerous drafts, sat patiently listening to my ideas and anecdotes and, occasionally, passing comments that were usually criticisms but always invaluable.
This book is about more than prisons and prisoners. It’s about understanding human beings who are stuck and about helping them to unstick themselves. As such, it’s implicitly a book about people in many settings – schools, pupil referral units, youth work and social work. It describes the way ‘prison’ is never just a place with padlocks and high walls; it’s also a place in our heads. It describes how, in many ways, we become our own jailers, enforcing and re-enforcing self-inflicted ‘sentences’. By understanding these metaphors, ‘prison’ can become a learning opportunity for everyone, provided they’re ‘listenin’.

Terry Bianchini describes what prison life is like. He does so with compassion and humanity but never condones crime or apologizes for people in prison whose early, formative experiences in life may well have been appalling. He doesn’t believe in complaining or wasting time because he believes that everyone has the capacity to turn their lives around. By itself, this would be no more than a laudable belief but Bianchini describes how it can be done, practically. He may be compassionate and humane but he’s also a hard-nosed pragmatist.

His book isn’t necessarily about stopping ‘defiant men’ from being defiant. Defiance, stubbornness and anger may well be ways in which a man keeps himself safe, defending himself against a world he perceives as hostile. The problem is that these defences, often learned early in life, become habitual and persist even after the original danger has passed. They become the only ways in which a person can relate to other people. The challenge for professionals, friends and families is never to strip away a person’s hard-won defences but to notice them, understand them, question them and help to
temper them so that new responses to the world can develop alongside the old ones.

But this involves trusting people who say they want to help and trusting people can be dangerous. From the very beginning of our lives, even as we lie curled up in a balmy, harmonious womb, a promise is implicitly made to us; a promise that we’ll be loved and kept safe in this lovely world. We’re born and our parents are quick to make this promise explicit, ‘I’ll always be here for you,’ they say. ‘I’ll always love you. I’ll do anything for you.’

For many sons and daughters these promises are quickly broken – broken cruelly and broken repeatedly. And people react to broken promises and betrayal in the same way that they react to other losses, becoming wary of people, plotting revenge and resolving never to trust promises again. Defiance, stubbornness and anger become ways of expressing underlying hurt and disappointment.

Prison makes a practical kind of promise. It promises secure boundaries and a reliable, safe regime. This limited promise is attractive for some people. To trust another kind of promise, an emotional promise, a promise of respect, kindness and love between human beings is much harder.

So working with prisoners and with people who are emotionally imprisoned isn’t for dilettantes and promise-breakers. Bianchini tells a story in this book about wanting to abandon a messed-up teaching session but, at the same time, not wanting to let the prisoners down because then they’d be sent back to their cells for the rest of the day, disappointed yet again. The experience of professionals not breaking promises allows people slowly to trust again, suggesting that the world isn’t necessarily out to get them and that they don’t therefore have to get their retaliation in first. This remarkable book describes a promise made by one professional with integrity who persists, listens, doesn’t give up and remains utterly reliable – a promise kept to people who have learned never to trust promises, a promise that things can be different. Terry Bianchini begins by dedicating this book to his loved ones as promised.
As a child I was told that men do not cry. Having worked in prisons and the community for the past 20 years, I have heard many men cry for a variety of reasons: the length of sentence they have received, the loss of a loved one, despair of the life they lead, loneliness, frustration or anger. Every time the cry sounded the same.

It was never my intention to write a book about prison procedures or identify specific individuals who have served prison sentences. For this reason, throughout this book I have changed the names of the people I have worked with and not identified the prisons I have worked in.

It was however, my intention to write an honest book that would reflect my observations of prisons and the people who frequent them, detailing the comparisons I observed between the physical incarceration of an individual and the mental state of incarceration we can all place ourselves in and, most importantly, what we can learn from these observations to improve our quality of life.
A day in the life of a personal adviser

I unlocked the outer wooden door and then the inner iron gate that leads to the prison wing. I then turned around and locked the door and gate. The smell of communal eating at the long tables and disinfectant on the floor greeted me. Breakfast had just finished and everyone was on ‘bang up’ (locked in their cell) waiting for their daily routine to begin. The wing was quiet as I browsed through my notes. I was looking at the university responses I had received for a prisoner I had been working with for the past few months.

As a personal adviser, I work with people whose self-esteem has taken a beating for a variety of reasons: a prison sentence, a lost job or simply life not going to plan. I have been involved in this type of work for the past 20 years, working with people from a variety of backgrounds both in and out of prison.

The person I had come to see was Paul, an entrepreneur who had set himself up in Holland trafficking drugs. He had quite a lucrative business until he was lured back to England by a police sting (an organized police operation to apprehend a specific person or persons), where he was arrested and sentenced for five years. Paul, like a lot of people I have met in prison, made you wonder why he had decided to lead a life of crime. Why had he chosen a life that required victims for him to profit from? Ultimately, how much of a victim was he in his world of deceit? Paul had applied himself to changing his ways and recognizing his true potential. He had achieved good ‘A’ level grades and was now looking for advice on university placements. All reports identified an individual who was keen to take a second chance in life and make a real go of it.