

My Soul Said To Me

An Unlikely Journey Behind the Walls of Justice

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AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. What about the victim who is afraid of being victimized again?

- That is the best reason to focus on public safety as our goal rather than punishment.

2. What would a good prison look like?

- A prison that is safe and models every behavior and virtue we want to see in the offender upon his/her release.
- A prison with a correctional program designed not just to protect persons and property against offenders of the criminal law, but also to render treatment to offenders with the goal of achieving their successful return and participation as citizens of the state and community, to foster their human dignity and to preserve the human resources of the community.

3. How can you know when a person is rehabilitated?

- You can't.
- You can minimize risks, though by:
 1. assessing risk factors and control factors, and
 2. providing services and treatment, etc., needed the last time the person was released that he/she didn't get.

4. Do you think there are some who will always be a safety problem?

- Yes, there is a small number of offenders who are beyond our understanding and ability, perhaps too damaged to save. But they are a small percentage of offenders.

5. How do you really know when someone is not going to murder again?

- You cannot know this. However, murderers make up the smallest percentage of all recidivists.

6. Under what conditions do you think someone should stay in prison for life?

- When that person is beyond our ability to help. This does not mean he should be treated with cruelty for the remainder of their lives. He should simply be prevented from perpetrating further harm.

7. What kind of offender should be in prison for life?

- Someone who is beyond our understanding and ability to heal.
- I do not present myself as an expert.
- An expert panel of providers should make these decisions because we all have blinders.

8. Why are more people incarcerated in the US than in other countries?

- There are many reasons:
 - Longer sentences on drug offenses
 - Mandatory minimum sentencing laws
 - Belief in punishment vs. rehab/treatment
 - Throw away mentality - Helen Prejean
 - Lack of opportunity - It is more important to redistribute opportunity in this country than it is to redistribute wealth.

9. Do you think victims should have a say in parole decisions?

- No more than those of us who are potential victims. Parole must become a matter of public health and safety, not justice.
- Professor of Law Emeritus at Paul M. Hebert Law Center, Robert A. Pascal – Victims of crime must be shown compassion by society, helped to bear their material, Spiritual and emotional losses and encouraged to become reconciled to those who have hurt them. But they may not be allowed to participate in sentencing, parole and pardon. Their suffering frequently tempts them to seek retributive punishment, even the death sentence, and to abject to parole and pardon even though the offender has been rehabilitated and reasonably may not be considered a serious threat to the safety of anyone. Vengeance cannot be condoned.
- Karl Menninger - So long as the spirit of vengeance has the slightest vestige of respectability, so long as it pervades the public mind and infuses the statute books of the law, we will make no headway toward the control of crime. We cannot *assess* the most appropriate and effective penalties so long as we seek to inflict retaliatory pain.

10. “Doesn’t anybody care about the victim?”

- This childish outcry has an appeal for the unthinking. Of course, no victim should be neglected. But the individual victim has no more right to be protected than those who may become victims. We all want to be protected.

11. Do you think victims should have a say in death penalty/clemency decisions?

- See above

12. What if your son was murdered?

- There is no way I can answer that unless it happens. Surely, if I witnessed it happening, my first impulse would be to retaliate with the full force of my being. But I hope I would not remain there. There are examples of every response. We have all heard the call for retaliatory death. But, here is an example of a different call:
 - "Concerning the claim of justice for the victim's family, I say there is no amount of retaliatory deaths that would compensate to me the inestimable value of my daughter's life, nor would they restore her to my arms. To say that the death of any other person would be just retribution is to insult the immeasurable worth of our loved ones who are victims. We cannot put a price on their lives. That kind of justice would only dehumanize and degrade us because it legitimates an animal instinct for gut-level, blood thirsty revenge."
 - ☞ **Marietta Jaeger.** Marietta's daughter was kidnapped, raped, and murdered

13. What kind of people do you not take in your program?

- When there are more applicants than places, we accept those at greatest risk for committing new crimes and returning to prison – in other words, those who need us the most. Our only requirement is that they have been incarcerated and do not want to return.

14. What happens to those people?

- Each week participants spend approximately 12 hours in GED/academic coursework, 8.5 hours in Addictions Education, 6.5 hours in hands-on computer training, 4.5 hours in Employability Skills training, 4 hours in Communication Skills, and 2 hours in Community Building. A stipend of \$5.00 per hour is paid to each participant during the sixty to ninety days he/she is in the program prior to job placement.

15. Why do so many people return to jail?

- **Risk Factors:**

What we call a “second chance” typically means leaving prison pretty much the same way as one enters:

- Addicted to drugs
- Fifth grade reading level (average)
- No marketable skills
- Little hope of finding even menial employment
- Less hope of finding meaningful employment
- Certain rights denied in some states for life – i.e. right to vote
- Housing denied
- Unfavorable family dynamics – i.e. drug use

– **Control Factors:**

- **The trees said to each other when the woodsman entered the forest, “The ax is one of us.”**
- **Judge Dennis A. Challeen**, in his book, *The NORP Think Factor*, offered his opinion on the subject of our “rehabilitative” methods.
 - ✘ We want offenders to have self-worth, so we destroy their self-worth.
 - ✘ We want them to be responsible, so we take away all responsibilities.
 - ✘ We want them to learn to be part of our community, so we isolate them from our community.
 - ✘ We want them to be kind and loving people, so we subject them to hate and cruelty.
 - ✘ We want them to quit being the tough guy, so we put them where the tough guy is respected.
 - ✘ We want them to stop hanging around losers, so we put all the losers in one state under the same roof.
 - ✘ We want them to be positive and constructive, so we degrade them and make them useless.
 - ✘ We want them to be trustworthy, so we put them where there is no trust.
 - ✘ We want them to be nonviolent, so we put them where there is violence all around them.
 - ✘ We want them to quit exploiting us, so we put them where they exploit each other.
 - ✘ We want them to take control of their lives, own their problems and stop being a parasite, so we make them totally dependent on us.
- **Vermont Legislature 1971** - the traditional institutional prisons fail to reform or rehabilitate, operating instead to increase the risk of continued criminal acts following release.
- **Karl Menninger** - Our current prison system is not only overcrowded and expensive, it is an ineffective, barbarous, and often law-breaking method of dealing with violence that produces only more violence. The senseless cruelty of our current correctional system does not correct, it destroys all hope of correction.
- **Jerome Miller**, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (for 10 years) and the author of *Last One Over the Wall* - the current system of corrections in the United States "is probably the single greatest threat to our national well-being...the single greatest contributor to crime and mayhem on the streets."

16. What are the main factors that keep someone from getting a job – barriers/risk factors

- _ Most corporations operate with a policy of not hiring anyone previously convicted of a felony.
- _ No work history
- _ No marketable skills
- _ Fifth grade reading level (average)
- _ Untreated drug addiction

17. Having 3 hot meals a day and a bed, no worries, low stress, - what's so bad about prison?

- _ Menninger - I suspect that all the crimes committed by all the jailed criminals do not equal in total social damage that of the crimes committed against them in our nations prisons.

18. What makes Project Return unique?

- _ Community building
- _ Staff of mainly former offenders
- _ One-stop services
- _ Training Wage
- _ Accept highest risk participants

19. Are people forced into your program?

- _ We avoid this whenever possible.

20. If not, aren't you taking a very select group?

- _ Everyone is motivated to try and not to return to prison.

21. How old is the average person in Project Return?

- _ Twenty to thirty something

22. What special issues do women offenders have coming out of prison?

- _ Children mostly, but more difficult to place in a job.

23. How much do you think drugs factor in crime?

- _ Half of all domestic violence cases are related to alcohol abuse.

24. What kind of rights should or should not be restored to a former offender?

- _ Any rights that restore their participation as citizens of the state and community

25. We've all got childhood wounds. Aren't offenders just using it as an excuse?

- _ **Samuel Butler** - In quiet, uneventful lives, changes internal and external are often so small that the process of fusion and accommodation between changed and unchanged surroundings produces little evidence of strain. In some lives there is great strain, but also great power of adaptation. And in some lives there is great strain with less accommodation power, fewer resources, greater fragility.

- _ The strain resulting from attempted adaptations with inadequate powers may reach the point where it is a choice of breaking or being broken. For some persons the former seems the lesser evil. Is not self-preservation the first law of life?

26. What challenges do ex-offenders face?

- _ It is difficult or impossible to reenter a society whose doors are locked.

27. Are there any people with crimes that you would not take into the program?

- _ No. People who have committed the "worst" crimes and/or the most crimes are the ones I want off the street - not just for another five-year prison term, but permanently in a job.

28. **Don't most offenders say they're innocent?**
- _ That has not been my experience.
29. **Have you ever been a crime victim?**
- _ Carjacked
 - _ Home burglarized four times
30. **What did you want to have happen to your perpetrator?**
- _ Stopped
 - _ Transformed
31. **Why do you think you're attracted to this work?**
- _ I think the reason I came to this life to was do this work.
 - _ See James Hillman - *The Soul's Code*
32. **What laws would you immediately change if you could?**
- _ Mainly mandatory minimums
 - o Cannot control prison overcrowding
 - o Convert them to mandatory maximums and you regain that control
33. **Don't you think keeping people in jail longer will keep them off the street and make crime go down?**
- _ This concept has led us to over reliance on incarceration to reduce crime and has only resulted in an overcrowded system that devours and wastes both fiscal and human resources.
 - _ There are alternatives that are more cost effective, more practical, realistic, respectful and forward-thinking that stress the rebuilding of lives and the reclaiming of human resources.
34. **Do you think juveniles should be tried as adults in murder cases?**
- _ The most fundamental and essential understanding of children's behavior gets completely ignored thousands of times a day in juvenile courts across the country. The understanding is that children learn their behavior from the adult world, not from their own. Although psychologists are very clear about this, we descend on our children with extreme prejudice for emulating us in ways that we do not like.
 - _ The indigenous cultures around the world, which we call primitive, understand this concept very well. Martín Prechtel taught me that in the Mayan culture, the children are called the "conscience of the village." This means that when the children become upset, disruptive or violent, the elders come together and ask themselves, "What are we doing wrong that our children are becoming violent? And what do we need to change about ourselves that will restore their harmony with the village?"
 - _ I do not imply that people should not be held accountable for their actions; but accountability, by my definition of the word, must be shared.
35. **What should a juvenile prison be like?**
- _ A prison that is safe and models every behavior and virtue we want to see in the offender upon his/her release.
 - _ A prison with a correctional program designed not just to protect persons and property against offenders of the criminal law, but also to render treatment to offenders with the goal of achieving their successful return and participation as citizens of the state and **community, to foster their human dignity and to preserve the human resources of the community.**
36. **What should happen to the two boys who killed their father? Appropriate punishment?**
- _ See question 35.

- Whatever, it should be based on restoring and protecting the public safety, not vengeance.

37. Where is your program? Who are your neighbors? How do they feel about your presence in their neighborhood?

- Not in my back yard

38. What is right and what is wrong about prisons?

- They remove dangerous people from the public so they cannot harm others.
- According to the Vermont Legislative statute of 1971 governing correctional facilities, they fail to reform or rehabilitate, operating instead to increase the risk of continued criminal acts following release.