

Keynote Presentation  
State of New Mexico Corrections Department  
Statewide Staff Development Conference  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

## A Commitment to Service

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March 9, 1995

I found it impossible to prepare for this presentation without reflecting on my 29 year relationship with the criminal justice process. Particularly the series of exponential changes required to span the distance from a solitary cell to this podium. This is not a journey that can be calculated in miles or years; perhaps better in light years or life times.

I will do my best not to bore you with personal testimonials or war stories. But in order to put my remarks in a useful context, I need to share a few realities. Since 1966 I've struggled with three major demons: my own interpersonal dysfunction, my conflicting views and emotions as an inlaw/outlaw, and my role as a practitioner in the correctional field. It has been a long, lonely path involving 16 car loads of internal dissonance, alienation, and distress. Not to mention the seething rage that too often threatens to take command of my mind and heart. My greatest challenge has been to transpose an ocean of negative subjective experiences into a source of positive, objective insight and action. In short, to create a mind set which enables bonding rather than isolation, encourages inclusion rather than exclusion.

Frankly a day never passes that I don't battle my demons, along with the burdens and distress that come with participation in the punishment industry. In the process I get sick and tired...down to the very marrow of my bones! It was a breakthrough for me when I came to realize that I am not alone in the weariness and disgust that sometimes overtakes me. In fact I believe that each of you fights this same battle in your own unique way. So our purpose here today is to look at some of the major problems we all face and then review the issue of commitment as a means to better cope with our daily challenges as service providers in a very harsh, painful social arena.

People come to training activities for a variety of reasons. To learn a little, play a little, meet and greet old friends. But today we gather with a different agenda, to search for a fresh source of power---power needed to re-commit ourselves to our often harsh function as practitioners in the arduous world of human captivity and punishment. Of the many challenges we face, none is more critical than understanding the perspective of our clients. While there are those who would have you believe they understand "the criminal mind" and ways to modify a laundry list of "thinking errors", it is my experience that they don't have a clue as to the alogical journey into the realm of madness and back again! If it were really a nice rational academic process, don't you think it would be common knowledge after 6,000 years of recorded human deviance and social dysfunction?

If you want to understand your clients, you must learn to view existence through the frame of reference of a social alien: powerless, fragmented and disconnected. Toward this end, I would like to read you the following poem, *A Door With No Handle*, composed in a cold dungeon of the Louisiana State Penitentiary on Christmas Eve of 1966.

### A DOOR WITH NO HANDLE

For the losers of our world  
Life is a door with no handle.  
For the convict, the cripple, the unwed mother,  
For the rejected Jew, the junkie, the old tired whore,  
For the alco, the gypsy, the geriatric waiting for the lights to go out,  
Life is a door with no handle.

For slaves of countless systems breeding madness in the name of order,  
For the transvestite bewildered by the duality of perception,

For a sea of believers who give all but find only echoes,  
Life is a door with no handle.

For those of broken spirit exiled to an island of abuse,  
For culturally deprived children unwanted and unloved,  
For those with no place to go and no way to get there,  
Life is a door with no handle.

For the incest victim fragmented by unspeakable violations of trust,  
For every woman battered into bloody unconsciousness,  
For each human deprived of the ability to grow and to contribute,  
Life is a door with no handle.

For the poor, the deranged and the deformed,  
For the faceless recipients of man's inhumanity against man,  
For all lonely souls who will this very night extinguish their own flames,  
Life is a door with no handle.

Prisoner #64498, Solitary Cell #3  
Louisiana State Penitentiary  
Christmas Eve - 1966

Please consider the impact of this nihilistic attitude on the author's ability to relate to himself, to you, and to the world. Unfortunately, no one remembered to tell him that he was rehabilitated! So as a government-certified outcast, he started doing things after release consistent with his negative social and self-image, like using and selling drugs and emulating the actions he had witnessed in prison. This led to three subsequent convictions and the dubious label of "habitual criminal": just one more re-tread like you deal with day in and day out.

You see, I was only 23 when I wrote this poem. And over the many years since, I've been granted the trust, resources and support required to seek a better path. The same behaviors today would surely result in the brand of "career criminal," making me a prime candidate for three strikes. In a place and time where a person can get 25 to life for theft of a slice of pizza as Jerry Dewayne Williams did in LA last week, it's improbable that I'd be available for this presentation!

Now, at 52, I can vividly recall when I first glimpsed the handle I was so desperate for. After all vestiges of traditional living were stripped away and the last shreds of ego lay scattered on the floor of a filthy cage in north Louisiana, the reason for my existence became crystal clear. I exist to render service...pure and simple. With this insight came a fundamental commitment. And over the almost three decades which have passed, I have never doubted for a moment the wisdom of this decision or the worth of the path I choose to follow.

Along the way I've concluded that the job of correctional practitioners is to help offenders define and construct their own handles---and to then encourage them to apply these solutions in rewarding, pro-social ways! For a few minutes let's analyze some of the social, systemic and client-based obstacles we must clear to meet this goal. Then I will shift from a negative analysis to a more positive outlook.

Socially, we must contend with traditional knee-jerk political responses to crime that strive to placate the punitive whims of "public opinion." For 200 years our system of justice has been driven by political pandering to the lowest common denominator of our social order. Today we insist on basing public safety policy on blind emotionalism, political expediency, and the junky's tendency to take the easy way out. It is painfully ironic that we hypocritically demand accountability from children, the homeless, the disenfranchised, the mentally ill, indeed from everyone except government officials, politicians, and big business. Is there a message in the fact that the crime of "official oppression" by police is defined in the penal code as a minor misdemeanor, just one step up from jay walking? It is said that justice is blind. Ladies and gentlemen, nothing could be further from the truth!

Next come the complex, conflicting demands of the correctional experience itself. Punishment, by its very nature, is a most unnatural business: no one is born to live in a cage, or to keep a person in one. It is

therefore intrinsically artificial, arbitrary and painful for everyone, the keepers right along with the kept. The artificial division between the institution and the community creates a deadly no man's land for trainers and students alike. While the moment of release is a dividing line for practitioners, it is only a mid-point in a long, complex journey for the client. Where is the potential for continuity and follow through? Where is the chance to provide encouragement and support for the application of newly acquired insight and skill?

On the systemic level, we confront the glaring lack of a positive universal service objective! Without a system-wide commitment to a positive goal, inordinate amounts of time and energy are squandered on make-busy tasks having little or no bearing on client improvement or the public safety of the community. Moreover, since the first jail opened in 1789, punishment has been king and treatment only an ugly step child. This has resulted in:

- low to no concern for client improvement,
- totally inadequate budgets,
- token, ineffectual service delivery, and
- virtually no sense of meaningful job satisfaction.

So, here we are, surrounded by hypocrisy and injustice, absent a positive mission, lacking adequate support, and devoid of the essential resources and the specialized training needed in this unique social arena. At the same time we're expected to be professional educators, social workers (better yet, miracle workers), and role models, but whose first priority and overriding duty is the safe and orderly operation of the institution.

What's wrong with this picture? From a systems perspective, this array of limits and conflicts equates to programmatic paralysis. And how in the world can we go home at the end of the day feeling good about our function?! In short, we work in a state of perpetual conflict and unending inertia, having to constantly sort out and justify who we are and why we are.

Now...as if you don't have enough problems, we come to the extreme demands attached to interacting with your often pathological clients. Have you ever suspected that your students are actually Martians disguised as criminals? Human beings, you may reason, could never act so irresponsibly and then concoct so many absurd ways to justify it!! So after your daily administrative burdens, most remaining time is spent coping with the psycho-social confusion and learning disabilities that come with the turf.

Every teacher and counselor has a student who wants to be an astronaut...if only he or she could read! As you well know, the level and degree of creative delusion our clients adopt can seem infinite. I've worked with 25,000 or so offenders and without exception the biggest single problem in dealing with cons and ex-cons is false expectation. And the family or loved ones of prisoners go through much the same trip. In the end, many buy into the "last lifeboat" approach, the fallacy that there is only one major problem and that will be resolved the day of release.

In fact, we often encounter folks in this crazy business who view themselves as set apart from the universe! Their world view is the polar opposite of what we normally expect. This is part of a process of evolving alienation--an inherent, automatic distancing process that takes place between the powerful and the powerless and that leads to widely divergent values and goals. After 15 years tracking the dynamics of alienation, its roots and impact, it frightens me to admit that I'm actually beginning to understand it! And from the position of a trainer and counselor, it's hell trying to function in an environment where illogic is often the most logical course of action!

As teachers, we all know the vital importance of building positive, healthy relationships with our clients. We must have the trust and respect of our students to impact their values and inspire growth. And that means fostering that unique exchange of energy that best encourages and expedites positive reflection and change. In short, applying the special skill that makes a teacher unique. However, the psychology of alienation that abounds in prison makes any sincere relationship-building almost impossible. The pathology of prison too often acts to twist and undermine the ability of a teacher to relate to his or her students. As a matter of fact,

anything that hints of cordial person-to-person interaction may be strongly discouraged as a matter of policy.

Last, let's face it, you have a major credibility problem! The kept don't trust their keepers, from top to bottom. Resistance is strongly influenced by the proximity of your efforts to the core value system of the offender. If you are teaching methods of brick laying, that's one thing. But if you are trying to demonstrate why it's in the best interest of the student to be ethical on the job, that's a whole different story! Trying to impart values and ethics to people who view you as the enemy can feel like that "final straw" that breaks your back.

A colleague once described the task of spanning the inlaw-outlaw continuum as "two blind men signaling with flags on opposite sides of the Grand Canyon on a moonless night." But above and beyond all the frustration and anguish we must often confront, building bridges constructed of positive ethics and behavior is at the heart of the challenges we face as correctional educators. And I KNOW from direct experience that it can be done! There ARE handles for the door!! Since '85 I've focused on developing inmate self-help materials directed at reducing this often overwhelming gap. Some of the resulting works are described in a flyer in your registration packet. If you wish to speak directly to offenders about why it is in their best interest to take control of their lives in legal and ethical ways, you may wish to review these materials.

In terms of impact on you and me, all of these issues can combine at times to bring us to our knees. One of the most destructive effects is the damage to our minds, bodies, and hearts...which often seems immaterial to anyone but ourselves. Through it all, Saint Peter would be hard-pressed to derive any job satisfaction based on a need for tangible, immediate results. So after a few years, most folks take one of two paths:

1. They simply burn out and get out...or
2. They burn out and develop a jaded, insensitive protective armor - your own prison! The lights are on but nobody is home. You do time on the installment plan: 8 hours a day while counting down to retirement, just as the inmate counts down to release.

So...why Bother? Why bother to go through all this? WHY BOTHER?? I am addressing your core motivation, the very foundation of your vocational purpose! You cannot leave this conference without a clear, distinct answer to this question! You must return to your homes, families and daily schedule with a higher, stronger reason to persevere and contribute!!

**Story:** Ten/zin Gy/at/so, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, in his book, *Kindness, Clarity and Insight*, suggests that our primary mission in life is to become spiritually perfect and that the path to this goal is SERVICE to mankind.

I found this immediately appealing because it supports an identical conclusion I reached in a north Louisiana isolation cell in the Summer of 1974. In fact, this singular focus has served as the foundation for my past and present involvement in corrections... and the reason I am here today.

A few years ago I had the great honor of participating in a group meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and was able to ask him a question of burning importance to me which I think is pertinent to this address and its topic of commitment to service:

"What if a person accepts service as his or her mission, but ongoing efforts seem to end up doing more damage than good... or at best no good at all?!"

His response:

1. "Look with honesty into your own motives and methods of service. You will find a great deal of ego-driven intent and less than adequate skills because they have been developed for the wrong reasons. Strive to purify your motives: to render service because you believe it's right, not for honor or glory, or even the recipient's response or appreciation. Then improve your skills and rededicate yourself to your efforts.

2. Next, look to the motives and methods of the person you are trying to aid. Just as you have done with yourself, attempt to help him or her purify their motives, focus on positive ends, and apply useful, ethical methods.
3. Then, after doing both of the above, try again, remembering to be patient and not attaching your ego to the results.
4. If, after a sincere and reasonable effort, you continue to do more damage than good, quit immediately!"

He then leaned forward and said in English, with great kindness and compassion, "But don't get discouraged."

All this was from a man who since the early 1950's has lived in exile in India as he has watched his ancient civilization destroyed and over a million of his countryman and followers tortured and murdered by the Chinese. All this from a man who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his world-wide practice and teaching of loving service.

I would like to respectfully make the following recommendations:

- Above all else, review your true motives! What drives you?
- If you find that your sense of worth is dependent on public or political recognition, there will never be enough forthcoming to sustain you!
- If your level of achievement is based on magical turnarounds by your clients, you are pursuing an illusion. Your job is to model and mirror personal growth; it's a long term investment and resistant to instant gratification.
- If you are driven by the hunger for money and power, forget it---you are in the wrong place at the wrong time!!

These superficial, fleeting rewards will never be adequate to sustain the scope and intensity of the challenges we face, ladies & gentlemen, and in a strange way that is a great blessing because it forces us to look to a deeper, far more meaningful cause - the nature of service itself.

What the challenges of corrections offer us as practitioners and as individuals is an invaluable opportunity to define and confront our personal sense of duty. I have grown to believe the advancement of personal development springs from the formation of a sense of duty to self and others. In this context, I define duty to be "a fundamental cause or reason for which a person aspires to exist and to make progress in life." It is what each of us owes to ourself to justify our existence; duty is the dues we must pay to achieve true significance and quality of life.

From another view, duty can be defined as action toward a positive "core purpose." It need not be some lofty, unattainable quest! In fact, the ultimate statement of duty is to make the very best of the hand you have been dealt.

The scope and nature of this self-defined purpose or "duty in life" becomes a foundation upon which subsequent ideas and actions are built. In fact, all thought and action takes on greater significance when it in some way supports this higher-order "reason to be." I must admit that it is hard, as the civil rights song said, "to keep your eye on the prize" but we must constantly take stock of our motives and be ever ready to make in-flight corrections.

In this regard, I offer the following suggestions relative to your function as correctional trainers:

1. Call for and promote in a strong, determined voice, the creation of a universal service objective. Take back to your institution the formal recommendation that policy be developed and implemented which brings every aspect of institutional life, security and treatment alike, to bear on helping the offender develop the will and skill needed to stay arrest-free for 5 years. If a person can remain

arrest-free for 60 full moons, we know it is highly probable he or she has adopted a positive and constructive lifestyle.

This is a task worthy of a crusader's zeal! For persons with a release potential within ten years, the overall goal is to foster offender preparedness from the very day of entry. From entry to exit, everything should be directed to achieving the competency required to complete five years of arrest-free life in the community.

For persons with extended or indeterminate sentences, we must offer specialized coping skills training for everyone with 10 years and beyond.

2. In the classroom, do everything possible to promote migration of decision making from a subjective to an objective level: raise the student's level of awareness and promote introspective examination. The most useful way to do this is to teach and constantly reinforce the principle of cause and effect!
3. Strive to empower: insist that the client is the final arbiter of his or her own fate! Help your clients view themselves as worthy of the effort and discipline needed to confront and overcome their demons. Express support and sincere faith in their ability to defeat their dependencies, grow beyond past mistakes, and have positive, productive futures. And then wish them well!
4. No matter how profane the daily grind, never lose sight of the cosmic reality of CHANGE. Have total and absolute faith in the fact your clients are in perpetual change and that your energy and efforts must impact their direction.

The goal of human development is fundamental to our quest to realize our maximum potential as teachers and as human beings. This is equally true with our clients as they strive to meet their needs for security and significance. We advance best by defining our function as that of seed planters and dedicating our skills to the performance of service...independent of observable results.

In closing, I encourage you to re-dedicate yourself to the principles that drew you into teaching! Although one can easily rationalize that any help is better than no help at all, we nevertheless carry a fundamental obligation to develop and deliver the most useful service possible. This responsibility is based on a multifaceted duty to ourselves, our clients, employers, and the community at large.

Everything must be built on good intent! Monitor the quality and depth of your performance with a commitment to do it even better next time. Sharpen your skills, improve your methods, search for new, creative ways to impart positive change. Be ever mindful that the SERVICE you perform is invaluable to your clients and to the community...but most of all, to yourself! Only in this way do we stand to achieve the pride, satisfaction, and overall sense of significance we all crave. Indeed, only through persistent dedication can we find the energy and will to survive daily combat in the trenches of the corrections industry.

Remember: the concept of treatment is predicated on the underlying belief that people can benefit and that we can, in fact, render meaningful aid toward this goal. Maintain absolute faith that it really **is** possible for ex-offenders to grow beyond their pasts and to define and access positive futures. It **is** possible to find a handle to the doors which open forth into a productive life.

Ten years ago I worked with an ex-convict by the name of Bill McCaslin, who had a long history of criminal behavior, incarceration, and helping others recover from their involvement with drugs. Before he died in 1987, Bill wrote the following poem as a symbol of his faith and achievement...and it is, in an important way, a fitting corollary to *A Door With No Handle*.

## **IN MY WORLD**

Bill McCaslin

I'm thinking...my life has had its ups and downs  
Of both I've had my share  
But looks as though I've finally found  
Someone who truly cares  
How sad...seems caring is a quality

Possessed by oh, so few  
For some it comes their way but once  
Rejected, took wings, and flew  
Flew away...to search for someone else  
To offer, nay, insist  
They take the tender loving care  
No better gift than this  
Thinking...of course I'll still have my ups and downs  
But it's okay, you see  
Cause the care I've found will stay around  
The one who cares is ME!  
Just thinking...in my world.

I encourage you to emerge out of this training with a new commitment of your mind and heart to the function of service to yourself, as well as to others. Take home a new sense of energy and focus as to who you are and what you exist to contribute. Keep this sense of duty and service clearly before you and refuse to let anyone or anything break your will, your focus, or your heart!!

The lasting *rewards* are the glow of competency, the rush of contribution, and the pride of a job well done! Above all, do it for YOU: to be the best you can be.

I wish you well.

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