

## How to fix the broken Kiwi prison system permanently

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Critics say the privatization of New Zealand prisons has been an abject failure. For sure, during the past decade the New Zealand prison inmate population rose from 6000 to almost 10,000, stretching existing resources to breaking point, and raising the spectre of “double bunking”. Drawing on twenty years of prisoner rehabilitation successes, in the following pages I describe my proposal for a way forward

Long-term cat burglar and stick-up man Kenny Johnson was forty-four years old when we met. It happened at New York’s infamous Rijkers Island Jail on the first day of the first prison rehabilitation class I ever ran. Kenny weighed 136 kg, his skin was bad, his eyes bloodshot, his front teeth missing. As an habitual recidivist his initial application to join the group was rejected, but he found another interviewer, turned on the charm, snuck in the back door, and spoke right up.

*“I’m an atheist,”* he said. *“Anyone gotta problem with that?”*

*“None whatsoever,”* I replied, stepping into the silence.

*“But you believe in God, right, teacher?”*

*“That’s big subject, Kenny. Why don’t we all talk about it next week?”*

Before getting involved in prison work, I’d spent a lifetime helping corporate leaders select and develop teams, and writing about my adventures. That’s how I came to be asked to give a talk to a class of Rijkers inmates. Then to my surprise, I was invited to create, develop and teach a one-day a week program. I did that as an unpaid volunteer in New York prisons for the next twenty years.

Like so many natural leaders, Kenny was also a contrarian. And, like so many others in the class he’d been raised in fundamentalist home. Perhaps he merely detested the God he professed not to believe in? Prior to the next class, I arranged distribution of a Jean Paul Sartre reading on Existentialism for class discussion. *“So, Kenny, what do you make of what this guy has to say?”*

It was a hot, steamy summer day. Sunlight streamed through the barred Windows, casting shadows on the cigarette pock-marked vinyl floor. The stale air was tinged with the scent of disinfectant. Nineteen green-suited inmates, fifteen African-Americans and four Hispanics, were sitting in beaten-up, red plastic chairs, hanging on his answer.

Kenny seemed miffed “He says there’s no God!”

“So he’s agreeing with you, right?”

“Well yeah, but he’s got it written down!”

“And a lot of people believe him, too. But if there’s no God, what is there?”

The silence was palpable. Then he broke it.

“There’s, uh, us.”

“Right—there’s you and me. And, I’ll be out of here in 90 minutes”.

So is the Governor of New York figuring out a way to get Kenny Johnson the life he wants? Or maybe the United States President will come to your rescue? Who’ll it be, you think?”

Kenny changed that day. He became a regular in the gym and lost the excess weight. He had the prison dentist replace his two front teeth. His skin and eyes sparkled as he contributed to every discussion reading. On graduation day he was elected class valedictorian, and delivered a great speech, looking for all the world like Sydney Poitier.

After he was released we went to lunch. He was depressed. “I take this dirty suit to every job interview,” he said.

“You look great—what suit?”

“All anyone sees is an old black criminal.”

“You need a business card.”

We went back to my office. I created one on my computer, and he grabbed it.

“‘Kenneth Johnson—Educator, Poet and Performer.’ I’m none of that!”

“Yes you are—and I need you to help me teach my Rikers class. And I’ll pay you for your time.”

Next week, we showed our photo ID at the Rikers gate; I my driver’s license, Kenny his food stamps card. The class was delighted to have him sit in. Then to much applause he delivered a couple of his poems.

Two Monday’s later, I’d forgotten my Photo ID and was denied gate entrance. “So, Kenny, you’ll be on your own. The reading is Plato’s Cave, and you know all about it.”

Most prison inmates are decent, intelligent people. They respond positively to big, life-changing ideas, rarely to shaming and blaming, mindless punishment and 3-Strikes programs. The Catch 22 is that

corporatized prisons pursue profit by eliminating care, health and rehabilitation, and creating long-term, cost-effective warehouse operations. But this just worsens the real problem, which is that societal and family issues create individuals who see no way to succeed within the law.

“We’re looking to add a new full-time teacher,” said the program director.

“Kenny Johnson’s your man!”

“No, no. He’s too old. And he’s uneducated. And has a violent criminal history.”

“Exactly! So come to my class and see him in action.”

On release, inmates are discharged into the same society that created their core predicament. But now the communities and families of shamed and rejected ex-offenders are more broken than ever, and economic hardships now seem totally insurmountable. So the same old self-defeat syndrome comes into play. Gangs and drugs seem the only way out. And, then, of course, it’s back to prison again.

“You’ve got your own class, now, Kenny, and your effect on these guys these past couple of months has been amazing.” We were sharing a pizza in the Rikers inmate staffed cafeteria. “So “what’s your take on what’s making such a big difference?”

“New ideas—that’s what changes people,” he said. “You know that.”

“Yeah, but these young guys need to hear it from a big, black ex-offender like you, not a skinny little white bookworm like me.”

“We’re like the black and white keys on a piano, Johnny, they need us both.”

Pioneering psychologist Carl Jung said “the patient only begins to get well when he understands his predicament, and can see a way out of it.”

Here’s the predicament: a rotten upbringing confers emotional damage and creates imprisoning beliefs, such as “I’m inadequate and will have to steal to get what I need.” Self-defeating behaviours—like taking and/or selling drugs—follow inexorably, as does a prison sentence. So what’s the best way for a hapless victim to escape the syndrome?

Would-be reformers typically wave index finger and proclaim, “You made the wrong choices—so you just gotta stop that.” But, to paraphrase famed individual psychologist Alfred Adler, such admonitions are

hopeless, because anyone unable to perceive a viable option to a self-defeating behavior has no choice—merely the illusion of choice.

Given the same upbringing, situation and mindset, anyone, including you and me, would have made that “wrong choice.” So what to do? Nietzsche said, “A thought, a line, even a word, can shatter and transform us.” I applied that advice when creating the Taking Wings Eagles Foundation prison program.

Taking Wings is an intense one-day a week, 13-week course in life-altering ideas. I developed it while working as an unpaid volunteer in New York prisons. The goal was to highlight—quickly and dramatically—both the individual and social pathologies that result in incarceration. The core of the program is a set of broad but pithy and focused discussion readings, a blend of philosophy, psychology and sociology, drawn from the likes of Plato and Shakespeare, Christ and Buddha, Freud and Adler, Sartre and Christopher Hitchens, and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

We only pay attention to the things that we discover for ourselves, so the readings were often ambiguous and the presentation mostly Socratic, forcing each participant to offer an interpretation, then following up with a group cross examination. Some prison authorities scoffed that inmates were “too dumb” to handle such sophistication, but they were wrong. In fact, it is easier to process big ideas than small ones—and an expanded mind rarely shrinks.

Participation was intensified by the inclusion of parliamentary-style debating and the requirement that everyone produce a weekly poem on the big idea of the week. The goal was not merely to educate. The program provoked serious self-examination, and the skills of critical thinking and communication.

So, how did all that go down? Upon his release, formerly violent criminal, Hassan Kingston said, “Those readings and discussions were electric. We learned to stop and think, and we discovered we were good at it. The ideas generated long conversations. Lights went on in our heads. We became self-assured, serious about changing our lives, and confident that we could.” Hassan has been a productive citizen for seven years now, teaching these very same ideas in a drug rehabilitation center. And, I’m proud to say, during the last ten years, no Taking Wings graduate has returned to prison. So let me offer a modest proposal.

My initial foray into the prison world was serendipitous. I brought to bear the skills I learned running a successful international organization helping corporate chiefs select and develop leaders. I'll confess, too, in my youth I was also a Price Waterhouse chartered accountant. Drawing on that experience here's my modest 6-Point Proposal for prison reform:

1. Make our prisons government owned enterprises and discard the warehousing model. Storing and punishing human animals is at best a short-term route to immediate profit. In the long term, it merely produces more criminals.

2. Treat prisons as income streams not cost centers. Recognize that the full cost to society of incarceration includes a massive but invisible item, lost tax revenue.

3. Change the mission to the creation of productive, tax-paying citizens. Most inmates will be released back into society, so this is the outcome we'd all like—right?.

4. Impart intensive life-changing ideas. Implant the big concepts that underlie the mostly invisible social and individual forces that create the special predicament of the prison inmate. Then focus on helping inmates acquire critical income-producing skills.

5. Treat offenders and ex-offenders as assets not liabilities. The untapped talent of prison inmates is astonishing. They are an effectively free source of teaching personnel. The best prison teachers are hard-nosed ex-offenders who have been liberated intellectually and emotionally. So embrace the Taking Wings mantra, it takes an ex-offender to render an offender an ex.

6. Increase the return on investment by changing the prison reward system. Benchmark success in terms of taxes paid by returning ex-offenders, and award bonuses to all prison personnel, including inmate teaching staff, in terms of their success in creating tax-paying citizens.

All of the above can be achieved at minimal cost. We already own the prisons, and they are crammed to the bars with raw talent and potential teachers. It would just take is a new way of seeing things. That's the message of Kenny Johnson, anyway. And, by the way, Kenny was just one of countless inmates I met who had deep yearning to change the

world and the talent to do so. I know that because I recruited so many of them to join me as unpaid volunteers working with ex-offenders.

Their enthusiasm was overwhelming, and they're still out there changing lives. Which is just as well, because after teaching his own class, "Reality Check", at Rijkers Island for five years, Kenny died of a sudden heart attack at age forty-nine. The church was packed for his funeral and the New York Times wrote a long, laudatory obituary.

And now a producer wants to make a movie about his life—the life that began in my first class with a question about an idea in a reading by Jean Paul Sartre. Maybe, in Kenny's memory, a pilot program right here in New Zealand is worth a shot.