

Alison's talk for 2015 Quaker Seminar on Penal Reform held at Quaker Acres, Whanganui

I accompanied Tony to the seminar that was held here two years ago. Chatting with Don Smart in the evening, he asked what had brought me to the event. I warned that my reason was a conversation stopper: I went on to say I was an alcoholic and that eventually this led to a jail sentence.

Today I have been invited to elaborate on both the condition and my experience of life in prison - as also has Alan who shares this session with me. Then we will try to answer any questions you might have.

I welcome this opportunity, because alcohol and drug addiction is now recognized as playing a destructive part in the lives of so many people. Addiction is a disease with recognizable symptoms that can be arrested, not cured, by a regime of understandable procedures. Otherwise the eventual outcome will be either insanity, or premature death from the failure of major bodily organs.

Although every addict has a unique story, there are common factors involved in the associated deceptions, denials, guilt, loss, pain and suffering that all addicts will understand.

My own path to the sobriety I enjoy now, has been long and convoluted. I became addicted in late middle-age. The disease progressed very quickly, and repeatedly I was admitted to hospital. Periodically I continued to binge-drink, because alcohol was an obedient drug, delivering what I required. It was easy to use, readily available, and affordable!. Eventually I was responsible for a terrible tragedy on the road that brought me a four years and four month prison sentence of which I served fourteen months in Arohata Women's Prison near Wellington, before being released on parole.

Arohata was an institution I knew something about, because previously I had visited the place in connection with Alcoholics Anonymous and had been allowed to take some of the inmates to AA meetings nearby. Those who attended the penal seminar here last year will have appreciated the talk that Superintendent Ann Abrahamson gave about her institution and the problems she faced in running it.

For me, first of all there was the long drawn-out process of appearing in court, being charged, and later being sentenced. Looking back, I found the police humane, and sometimes unexpectedly kind. One officer even called when he was off-duty to reassure me that I too was under his care on his patch. He also warned me that the press was camped at my gate for hours waiting for me to emerge. (The press left me with a low regard for them.) Apart from the policeman, I was far more comfortable with the female support of my lawyer, counselor, and fellow AA members.

The strip searching and questioning started immediately I arrived in Arohata to serve my sentence. Because I had known depression and had experienced suicidal thoughts 40 years earlier, in answering questions about them I thought I had explained that I understood both conditions and was not at risk. But I was wrong: the disclosure

resulted in having all my own clothing and possessions taken from me, leaving me without underwear, glasses, comb or tooth brush. I was issued with a tent-shaped garment of coarse denim so rough that the seams rubbed my skin raw. The tent was also short and wide, so that without wearing undies it was embarrassing, to say the least, when having to leap from a bed facing the door, to stand when guards – male or female - entered the cell. Day and night someone on watch peered at me every 15 minutes through a small window, and then wrote something down. The ‘figures’ shone a torch on me during the hours of darkness.

I was given no kind of explanation for the procedure. No one spoke to me at all at the time I needed human contact. I was permitted only an hour a day out of the cell in an enclosed courtyard. I had no idea what was happening, nor when the solitary confinement would end, nor was I told what to expect when it did end. There was nothing over which I had control: even over the light switch. Meals were passed through a slot in the door on paper plates. I cannot imagine what the procedures set out to achieve. I was so desperate that I deliberately drank and drank water so that I would have to use the toilet frequently to alleviate the unrelenting boredom. I found it impossible to sleep. I even stopped breathing every time the guard checked me, in the hope of appearing dead to spark some activity! If you weren't mentally disturbed, or consumed by anger before such surveillance, you certainly would become so before very long.

To be fair, as Ann Abrahamson said in her talk last year, the policy of Arohata was that the loss of freedom was the punishment, and the guards were not there to make the punishment worse. The staff had to deal with a group of utterly bored women who had nothing to do but plot escape or devise trouble! Most of the guards tried to follow the policy. Their job was not easy, and I'm sure they found strip-searching women before and after receiving visits as unpleasant as did the inmates. Yet I accept that the searches were necessary, because drugs are smuggled into the jail, and the staff has to be as wily as the smugglers to detect and confiscate the contraband.

After about 10 days I was admitted to one of the wings occupied by the general prison population. There I was glad to take part in the everyday maintenance activities of the place. Gradually I made the acquaintance with a number of the other prisoners. Soon I was allocated to run the library, from where I had contact with everyone in the place.

After solitary confinement I was placed in a wing of the mainstream prison. From there I applied for, and was accepted into, the Alcohol and Drug Treatment wing. This was a six-month very intensive program run by an outside agency. It was hard work from 8.30am to 4pm on weekdays, with homework. It culminates in a moving ceremony in which family members were invited to hear the graduates speak of their hopes for a brighter future. Sadly there were only twenty places available every six months for all of NZ's women inmates - a very minor attempt to provide the support needed by most of the prisoners. It is a spiritual and emotional education that provides participants with the tools and ability to find the assistance they will require on the outside.

Finally I spent three months pre-release in a self-care unit to get used to faring for myself once more. There I had two lifers for companions, with whom I made friendships that continue to this day. Getting re-established in the outside world is

easy for no one, and for the ex-prisoner it is especially so when your criminal record takes precedence over steps you have made to make amends and contribute to society.

Now for a few concluding points:

1. I believe that Corrections provided as much training for the guards as they could to enable them to keep humane control.
2. There are a great number of training programmes for inmates, some of which involve working outside in the community. They sound fantastic, but in reality they are available only for a few: they are drops in an ocean of need. The facilities, security and staff are already in place, so that the cost of having more programmes would be minimal. As you might expect, apart from child-care, educational and vocational programmes, I would press for courses on drug and alcohol addiction. Most inmates have an unhealthy knowledge as long-term consumers of both substances. They would, I believe, benefit from understanding more of the negative effects mind-altering and physically harmful substances.
3. I did so look forward to having visitors, and I was very lucky to have a constant stream of them from family and friends – particularly from the roster of Quakers from the Meeting I attended in Kapiti. Other inmates had very few visitors, some none at all – I only wish that Corrections might fund the occasional visit for relatives from afar – the scheme would do much to improve family ties on which reformation and rehabilitation depends.

Over to Alan