

Contemporary Comment

Speech by Julie Telfer at the launch of her late husband Jon Telfer's book, Duty of Care: A Brief History of Correctional Practices in South Australia Adelaide: SA Institute of Justice Studies Inc, 2003

Jon Telfer never ceased to be amazed and pained by the harsh realities experienced by those whose lives were in any way affected by crime. Jon's keen sense of social inclusion had caused him much grief as a young probation and parole officer, as he struggled, as so many do, to reconcile criminality and harm-free correctional responses by, and for, the community.

Like others who share such concerns, he watched, and worried and wanted what worked for the sake of all parties. Professionally he worked hard and definitively in his contribution to that cause and the promotion of intelligent reflective practice.

Jon sublimated his personal issues with crime as a function of human nature, and the irony he considered inherent in the terms 'criminal', 'justice' and 'correctional service', by researching, writing and speaking about the issues of cross-subcultural experience in the field of adoption. He closely examined oppositional social forces, marriages of personal and social need and the processes of cross-subcultural migration, especially where parties were damaged, disadvantaged or marginalised in some way.

In doing so, Jon came to realise that many of the issues that he encountered in acquiring his internationally recognised expertise as an anthropologist in the adoption field, bore a remarkable resemblance to the issues he encountered in his everyday working life as a correctional social worker.

Over twenty years ago, Jon talked with correctional social workers in Hong Kong. He was impressed, yet terrified of the thought of the same applying in Australia, that rehabilitation of offenders was considered there to be a true relationship-based partnership. Such was the acknowledged importance there of mutuality and reciprocity as the vehicle for law-abiding behaviour, that correctional social workers were held as accountable as their clients for an offender's relapse to crime. This was aside from the universal unavailability of magic wands and crystal balls, and despite incredible constraints on their expected intervention, such as it being illegal at that time in Hong Kong to even discuss certain matters with clients.

He was also impressed to learn a few years later that, in Korea, correctional social workers were regarded by their peers, and generally in that society, as the cream of the social work crop --- seen as superior in Korea simply because of their preparedness and ability to work at all in this field of the profession. Correctional social work, on behalf of the broader community to which offenders and non-offenders alike belong, can be immeasurably sensitive and quite often involves individual success being measured in small and seemingly insignificant, proportions. At times the work is with some of the saddest, maddest and baddest social outsiders, perceived generally as being at the very

bottom of humanity's pile — people who have dramatically sought attention to their problems, needs and issues through self-expression at the extremes of the socially acceptable limits and levels of tolerance — people for whom even informed compassion, let alone forgiveness by their nearest and dearest, and society, is difficult to muster.

In the process of adopting his two beautiful Korean-born daughters, Jon felt for the first time the full weight of the value in a blemish-free police record. A relatively minor court appearance, for a relatively minor charge, arising from a relatively minor traffic accident, as a young and inexperienced driver, threatened the prospect of parenthood. Jon also experienced the powerlessness of having a social worker's assessment and recommendation to the authorities carry with it the potential to make him a victim of his own desire.

Jon saw the desire for freedom and the desire for responsibility as springing essentially from the same seed. He likened this to the power he had wielded when pre-sentence reports were prepared on offenders, or when prisoners applied for parole, or parolees' behaviour was called to account before the Parole Board, as a by-product of offenders' most basic of desires.

Jon also experienced the powerful drive to conceal his deficits and project a confidence in an untried future, not unlike the endless situations when criminals had told him what they thought he wanted to hear, most often more from desperation than actual denial.

Jon was required to experience the intrusion of the authorities into his personal and social functioning and twice defend his right to parent, during a long period of supervision, before finally being declared fit, in a court of law, to take his place legally as a bona fide father.

Jon came to understand through first-hand experience as a client how it felt to have case notes written about him and a file kept on him. When he returned to view the file with his children later, he could not bring himself to read what had gone permanently onto the public record by this means.

Jon also gained first-hand knowledge of the experiences of the nearest and dearest onlookers who were watching him experience this process — just as the families and friends of both criminals and victims of crime share the private pain of public issues as participant observers. The frustrations of dealing with social change and evolving constraints within the criminal justice system, combined with this fresh insight into his work, caused Jon to extend his research into the concept of cross-subcultural gaps and gulfs.

He began this by initiating and overseeing several qualitative research projects within the Department — notably 'When Success Means Goodbye -- the experiences, needs and perceptions of consumers in corrections' and 'Response Ability -- Interpretations of "responsibility" in the criminal justice system and the community'. He continued by deciding that an analytical historical account of correctional practice was sadly lacking as a foundation to the hindsight: insight: foresight paradigm. Today, that foundation text, albeit as a work in progress, will begin its journey into the wider knowledge-base of society.

Jon dedicated this volume to those with whom, and for whom, he worked in the cradle of Community Corrections — a place called 'Mill St.' The original values and ideals of those pioneers struggle to retain their importance untarnished, in the complicated climate of competing, and sometimes conflicting, policies that necessarily govern modern correctional practice. Nevertheless it is to the traditional values and ideals Jon felt we must cling and return unerringly. Times, people and events may change, but positive values and fundamental ideals do not.

Jon never forgot that ‘there but for the grace of God go we’. Also, that the misery of others unable to choose the circumstances of their birth, the nature of their upbringing or whether they realistically possessed an equal capacity to cope with, and appropriately overcome, the harsh realities of what it is to be human, enabled him to have the advantage of legitimate employment and all that flows from it. This was due entirely to the sad reality of the politically unpopular growth industry of crime — an industry with socially significant links to many other wholly or partially dependent legitimate industries.

Jon would repeatedly make the point that, whilst it is no justification for crime, and that crime’s glorification should not be countenanced in the slightest way, the cost of crime to society is often counted and loudly vaunted, but is rarely honestly, openly or willingly weighed against the paradoxical benefits reaped within the ranks of the non-criminal community.

Next year will be the Golden Jubilee of the precursor to Community Corrections as we know it today — the Adult Probation Service. Fifty years of largely unrecognised and undervalued dedication to the principles of minimal harm, social inclusion and restorative justice will have passed. It is sad that Jon will not physically be in attendance at next year’s planned celebration of the work of Community Corrections, or be able to extend his research into a fascinating analysis of the evolution of Community Corrections.

However, Jon died in the knowledge that, by reviewing the past, he had made a meaningful and positive contribution to the future of corrections, and that the launch of his book could perhaps formally mark the commencement of a fresh process of raising public understanding, appreciation, and resourcing of community-based correctional social work.

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