

ARTS IN PRISON

Thank you.

It is a great pleasure to be here.

I would like to start by paying tribute to Cathy Eastburn who founded Good Vibrations ten years ago and has been an inspiring advocate for the value of arts in prisons.

When Cathy was establishing Good Vibrations as an independent charity, she inveigled me into becoming a trustee.

To be honest, I was not sure that sitting on the floor banging a drum and getting in touch with my feelings – which was how I first thought about it – was my cup of tea. And, long before I became Chief Inspector, and when I had very little idea about what prison was really like or who most of the inmates were, I wasn't at all sure whether Gamelan could have a credible use inside a prison.

How wrong I was. I have the zeal of a convert now. I really regret I could not continue my connection with Good Vibrations after I became Chief Inspector. Having now seen Gamelan workshops in prisons, talked to the workshop leaders, read the academic evaluations and tried it myself, I think the case for the value of Good Vibrations' work in prisons and the importance of Cathy's inspiration is made.

More than that, through my inspections, I see the value of the arts in every prison I go to.

At its most basic level, go into a man's cell, perhaps one he does not leave for twenty hours a day or more. A cell about this wide and twice as long. Uncovered toilet at the end of the bunks. Sheet draped over the window as a curtain. Pictures of partners and children stuck to the wall with toothpaste. Toiletries lined up in exact, neat rows on a shelf. Daytime telly on. Sealed windows, airless and sour smelling.

More often than you might think, what you also find there is beauty. Something exquisite carved out of soap. An intricate match stick model or decoration painstakingly put together over weeks. A flowering of the human spirit in the most arid landscape.

Walk through the workshops, and whatever else is or is not happening, the arts class will be buzzing. I remember the first Young Offender Institution for children and young people I went to, Cookham Wood in 2010. At the time, it was recovering under a dynamic new governor from a period of very poor performance. She recognised there was a lot more to be done but, "go to the arts workshop", she told me, the best bit of the YOI, and see what these boys, who everyone has written off, can do.

The inspection team had told me about the boy in Cookham Wood they were most worried about. A Traveller boy, illiterate, unwilling to communicate, fighting with the other boys and staff, self-harming, in and out of the segregation unit.

To my surprise, there he was in the art class, head down with his tutor, producing an intricate and beautiful piece. And what else was happening with this boy who wouldn't start talking or stop fighting? He was talking, animatedly but quietly, to the tutor, not just about the piece itself, but what he was feeling and how he was coping - and he was listening too as the tutor talked about how what he was doing in that class might offer sight of what a better future might look like.

Because isn't that what art does? Express what words can't? Help us to a different vision of the world and our place in it.

The first Gamelan workshop I went to was in Eastwood Park women's prison. I went to the public performance at the end of the week. It was before I became Chief Inspector and the first women's prison I had been to. The women edged, some anxious and hanging back, some more confident, harassed staff bustling about. I remember being shocked by the cuts on the women's arms. A local women's choir had been invited in to watch the performance.

It was all a bit mad.

And then the women began to play. Suddenly this disparate collection of individuals became an orchestra and instead of being merely the recipients of whatever the system decided to give them or the instructions it issued, they gave us something through their music and something too that they had absolute control over.

At Parc prison in South Wales they have a Hay in the Parc festival, where the prison co-operates with the Hay Festival to put on its own literary festival.

And here of course in the Royal Festival Hall they have the Koestler exhibition. My favourite Koestler picture. Look at it. The colour and line, the expression. The suspicious officer up here, the awkward visitor down there, the loving couple – they shouldn't be doing that, perhaps that is what the officer is looking for. Fetching something from the tea bar. It tells you more about visits than most inspection reports.

Tolstoy, of *War and Peace* fame, in his essay 'What is Art', said:

"Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity."

I agree with the last bit, not the rest. Art is, I think,

"a means of union among men – and women - , joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity."

Which I think is a pretty good definition of the rehabilitation we all aspire to. But I think it is also a manifestation of beauty, an outlet for creative energy, a means of expressing emotions and it is pleasure. It is all these things.

This is not simply a matter of philosophical opinion – there is a wealth of evidence about how the benefits for participants in prison arts projects of increases in self-esteem, improvements in communication, introduction to education, strengthening of co-operation, all have a positive impact on rehabilitation

So why is it so difficult to get arts projects off the ground in prisons? There are three reasons I think.

First, for the obvious reason, that resources are in such short supply. This is not just a question of paying for the cost of the project but also having the staff available to get prisoners off the wings to wherever the activity is taking place. One prison we were in recently was forced by staff shortages to adopt an emergency regime while we were there. The governor decided he could only keep the prison safe by cancelling all activities and only letting prisoners out of their cells for association. That was an extreme example but we increasingly find prisoners locked in their cells while the workshops and classrooms stand empty.

The second reason is arts projects might actually be seen as allowing prisoners to enjoy themselves. Heaven forbid.

In November 2008 the Sun ran an article about Keith's Comedy School Project at HMP Whitemoor. "Are they having a laugh? Stand up comedy courses for terrorists...." was how the Sun put it.

Jack Straw, then Home Secretary, reacted by telling the Whitemoor Governor to immediately stop not just the Comedy Project but other activities including Good Vibrations. Jack Straw ordered that a Prison Service instruction should be issued to Governors telling them to be "mindful" of the media when deciding what kind of activities to run, and to ensure that everything should be "publicly acceptable". Governors were told, amongst other things, that they must consider, I quote "How will the activity be perceived if open to media scrutiny?" If in doubt, they should refer the matter to area managers.

Now, I do think it is reasonable to expect prisoners to think about the impact of what they do on their victims and to be sensitive to their victims' feelings. Victim empathy is an important part of the rehabilitation process. A degree of common sense is needed.

However, the consequence of that instruction, issued in the midst of a media furore to a disciplined service was to make governors ultra-cautious with a consequence that it became much more difficult to get any kind of prison arts project in through the prison gates.

The general understanding was that running arts projects and anything else that could be construed as "fun" and therefore vulnerable to tabloid criticism was to be avoided.

Thanks to some very good work by the Arts Alliance, the position was eventually softened and a new instruction issued.

The new instruction stated in plain terms that the previous version had:

“Created some concerns among some intervention providers, particularly in the Third Sector and among those offering interventions of a creative nature, who have felt that it has made it very difficult for some of them to continue to provide some tried and tested programmes. **In fact, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) recognises the valuable contribution that creative activities can make, particularly with those prisoners who are hard to engage in other types of programme,** in tackling offending behaviour, in ensuring their engagement with the regime and the offender management process, and in improving prisoner behaviour and tackling safer custody issues. The appropriate use of such activities is perfectly acceptable.”

However, members of the Arts Alliance tell me that they still come up against prison governors, senior staff, and officers who talk about "is this publicly acceptable" when considering running arts projects.

Indeed, just the other day I was in a prison talking to a governor about a project he wanted to run. He was nervous though and had consulted his area manager. “It is OK”, he was told, “provided you don’t use the word ‘fun’ anywhere in the publicity material”.

So, whatever you do today, don’t look like you are enjoying yourselves if you get involved in activities. Gamelan? It’s the same sort of thing as sewing mailbags and breaking rocks, governor.

I want to end by talking about the third reason why I think the climate is unfavourable to prison arts projects.

There are fashions in criminology. Theories come and go. I think rehabilitation is more of an art than a science. I feel that is very much swimming against the prevailing tide.

We are about to move offices but where we are now is just round the corner from the site of the old Millbank Prison. It was opened just over the river from where are now in 1821 and closed in 1890. It was going to revolutionise the prison system, bigger and more cost effective than what went before.

Now, where have we heard that recently?

Of course, the prison quickly ran ashore on the rocks of reality. The then marshy banks of the Thames were a breeding ground for disease that got so bad that at one point the prison had to be evacuated. And after a while, Australia decided it no

longer wanted to take convicts transported from England – ‘Prisoners of Millbank or POMS’ as it was stamped on their chains.

The regime in Millbank was heavily influenced by Jeremy Bentham and his ‘separate system’ the idea that prisoners should be prevented from any communication with each other and thus they would reflect on their crimes and come to true repentance. The thinking seemed to be that if only you could apply the system exactly, results would follow. Bentham was a philanthropist. Well meaning.

But Charles Dickens witnessed such a system during a visit on a tour of the USA. He wrote:

“In its intention, I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who devised this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.”

I am not suggesting that we have anything in our system now that is like that but as we know, we do have prisoners spending very long periods isolated in their cells and there are very precise theories of offender management that are applied in a context where sometimes anything else that does not fit the theory is seen as without value, and as a consequence the regime that prisoners receive is impoverished.

This is a world where a prisoner’s risk of re-offending and hence, if they are on an indeterminate sentence, their eventual release, is given as a very precise percentage score. You will read that a man’s risk of committing a further serious offence on release is, say, 51%. I just don’t believe it. I don’t think human behaviour and motivations is susceptible to that very precise degree of analysis of predictability.

I have no problem with the drive to make prisons more efficient. There is a ‘benchmarking’ process going on at present that aims to measure precisely what tasks each member of staff needs to do in a given prison and then provide resources accordingly.

The problem if you take this approach too far, is that the time for an officer to stop and chat, so they build the relationships necessary to be warned that so and so had not come out of their cell this morning, and perhaps they had better put their head round the door and check he is OK, or something is likely to kick off on the wing this evening - the time it takes to build the relationships on which good order and safety depend is squeezed out.

In a nutshell, like the Victorians, we are in an age where the prevailing view seems to be that rehabilitation can be achieved by the exact application of pseudo-scientific processes and what matters is what can be measured. Of course the processes we want to apply are different but the mindset appears not so dissimilar.

And that is a real problem for arts projects. By their nature they are difficult to measure, their impact is harder to describe. But in a world of benchmarking and measurable outcomes, will there still be the time for a tutor to use art to get through to a troubled boy nobody else could reach? How do you measure the value of the increase in self-esteem in a bunch of women enjoying a Gamelan course? How do you describe the benefits for the safety of a prison when a group of serious offenders enjoy themselves and communicate together in a comedy school project?

When he was Home Secretary, Winston Churchill said this:

We must not forget that when every material improvement has been effected in prisons, when the temperature has been rightly adjusted, when the proper food to maintain health and strength has been given, when the doctors, chaplains and prison visitors have come and gone, the convict stands deprived of everything that a free man calls life. We must not forget that all these improvements, which are sometimes salves to our consciences, do not change that position.

The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country.

A calm and dispassionate recognition of the rights of the accused against the state, and even of convicted criminals against the state, a constant heart-searching by all charged with the duty of punishment, a desire and eagerness to rehabilitate in the world of industry all those who have paid their dues in the hard coinage of punishment, tireless efforts towards the discovery of curative and regenerating processes, and an unfaltering faith that there is a treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man.

These are the symbols which in the treatment of crime and criminals mark and measure the stored-up strength of a nation, and are the sign and proof of the living virtue in it.

“A treasure, if only you can find it, in the heart of every man’

How to find it, that is the question.

I do not believe you can find it just through offender management programmes and risk assessments. I think for prisoners, like the rest of us, art can unlock the treasures within. You in know the impact a painting, some music, a play can have on you, as audience or participant. Prisoners need the same.

Thank you.