Puppies and Prisons: Programs for Caring and Dignity

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In many of my writings, including those authored with my colleague Sam Goldstein, I have highlighted the importance of providing children and adults with opportunities to contribute to the welfare of others. The belief that our actions are having a positive impact is a significant feature of resilience, adding meaning and satisfaction to our lives.

I first became impressed with the far-reaching benefits of helping others while serving as the principal of a school in a locked door unit of a psychiatric hospital for children and adolescents in the 1970s. As one might surmise, many of these youth displayed violent behavior and were themselves victims of abuse. I discovered that offering these youngsters activities in which they assisted others (e.g., reading to younger children, serving as a "light monitor" to ensure that all of the lights in the school were working properly, helping newly admitted patients adjust to the hospital setting) proved very therapeutic. I was pleasantly surprised to observe that not only were they willing to engage in these activities, but they did so with enthusiasm, resulting in a decrease in antisocial behavior and an increase in their sense of dignity and their willingness to cooperate. I felt that this approach was more effective in modifying problematic behaviors than constantly meting out punishments (e.g., being sent to the timeout room, losing privileges).

Years later, while authoring *The Self-Esteem Teacher,* a book about school climate, I distributed a questionnaire to 1,500 adults asking them about their experiences in school when they were children. One of the questions requested that they describe one of their most positive memories of school, a memory that involved a teacher saying or doing something that boosted their self-esteem and motivation. The most commonly reported activity involved being asked to help others. Responses included:

"I remember when I was asked to pass out the milk and straws in the third grade."

"When I was in the sixth grade, my teacher arranged for me to help first graders get ready at the end of the day."

"In high school I tutored students who were having trouble with math. I loved it so much that today I am a high school math teacher."

"I often acted up in middle school, but things began to change when I was asked to help paint a mural in the lobby. Each day when I walked in the building the first thing I saw was the mural and I felt more at home. I also received a lot of compliments for my artwork."

These clinical and research experiences reinforced my belief that in each of us there is an inborn need to help. What I was to learn was that this need remains strong even when a person makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. As Sam Goldstein and I emphasize in our book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* the therapeutic powers involved in helping others lasts throughout the lifespan. Several studies we cite in the book highlight that elderly people actively involved in assisting and remaining connected to others are more likely to lead longer lives.

I have advanced the view that an effective strategy for nurturing a sense of dignity, even in those individuals who feel alienated and resentful, is to create an opportunity for them to engage in dignified acts. However, angry youth are often the least likely group to be engaged in acts of kindness given their negative behaviors. In my initial approach years ago, I was basically communicating to these youngsters, "I will give you dignified things to do as long as you first act dignified." Most experienced this as a hollow gesture, almost a bribe, made by a person with whom they had developed little, if any, trust. My lack of success in reaching these youth challenged me to alter my perspective and ask, "Would these children and adolescents begin to act more dignified and trustful if I first gave them dignified things to do?" I found this shift on my part to be effective in reaching many of these at-risk youth.

This past year I have read several articles describing programs in prisons that further reinforced my belief in the power of a strength-based, positive approach to modify negative attitudes and behaviors even among a population of jailed inmates. The programs challenge us to consider strategies for working with this group that are not rooted solely in punitive measures.

An article by Robert Pierre that appeared last June in *The Boston Globe* highlighted The Tender Loving care program that has proven so successful in Ohio that it is now operating in 30 of the state's 33 prisons. Stray dogs, many of which have been abused and subsequently rescued by the Animal Humane Society, are brought to prisons to be cared for by inmates and trained to become family pets. A dog trainer provides weekly sessions in which the dogs "are taught to sit, stay, come, and control their temper—all the things that will be needed for them to be placed with a family."

Pierre describes Aaron Gray, a prisoner at the Mansfield Correctional Institution serving 6 1/2 years for aggravated vehicular assault, working as a dog trainer with Edie. "Edie spent her days on the streets scavenging for food until a property owner, tired of the mixed breed traipsing over his lawn, blasted the dog with a muzzleloader. After the dog received emergency care, Humane Society workers handed Edie over to Aaron Gray, who spent sleepless nights cleaning her wounds and administering medicine. For castaways such as Edie, known as 'death row dogs' because they have been spared from getting put down, prison represents a new lease on life. And working with dogs has given a new lease on life to many of Ohio's inmates."

The observations of Robert Riddle, deputy warden for special services at Mansfield, are very revealing. He acknowledged that he was initially opposed to the program. "I thought the dogs were going to come in and bite people. But the guys have done a great job. The dogs allow them to be more human. The dogs have had a quieting effect on the inmate population." Pierre writes, "For Gray, the program has stoked a love of animals that he felt as a child, when he constantly brought home strays he had found. Several dogs he has trained in prison have gone to other owners, but he is so attached to Edie that his family has decided to care for her until he is released. 'It's brought me closer to my family,' Gray said. 'We have something to talk about.'"

Pierre notes that many of the inmates in the program have been convicted of murder, but still respond positively to taking care of the dogs; very importantly, "no tax dollars go to the program, officials said, and the dogs' food is donated or brought with the $100 adoption fee."

I became aware of another program using puppies in prisons while reading an article by Mary Alice Kellogg that appeared in the February, 2005 Delta Airlines *Sky*

Magazine. The article highlighted a program titled "Puppies Behind Bars," which I learned has been featured in numerous newspaper and magazine articles and has a website (www.puppiesbehindbars.com). The program was founded in 1997 by Gloria Gilbert Stoga, who at the time was a member of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's Youth Empowerment Services Commission. The program teaches inmates to train dogs to become guide dogs for the blind or explosive detection canines for law enforcement agencies.

Stoga had heard about similar programs in which inmates teach dogs manners and obedience prior to their being trained as guide dogs. She observes with much insight, "As the puppies mature into well-loved, well-behaved dogs, their raisers learn what it means to contribute to society rather than take from it. We choose inmates who are serving long sentences because we want them to be able to train multiple dogs. Most of these men and women have been forgotten by the outside world, abandoned by their families, and this gives them a connection. For many, it's the first time they have truly taken responsibility, the first time they've thought of something outside of themselves." Inmates are selected with good disciplinary records, at least two years to serve, and an interest in working diligently to train the dogs. They receive supervision once a week from a member of the Puppies Behind Bars staff.

The program has 83 dogs in three women's and three men's prisons in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Sixty inmates have graduated to work with dogs, which requires that they take written tests and essays. One of the inmates says, "The class makes us work with each other as a team, helping one another to train the dogs, and we've focused on positive things. The program brings caring back. And once you get caring back, you can never let it go again." In other articles reporting about "puppies behind bars" prisoners noted how the program helped them to "rise above their circumstances and feel good about themselves, to become someone when they get out of prison, and to develop trust since somebody trusted them."

As an example, an inmate John trained a dog named Rudy and is currently training another dog, Raisa, to be an expert explosives-sniffer. John states, "Rudy's now a guide dog for a graduate student studying philosophy. So Rudy's still in class every day." Kellogg writes, "John's pride is evident, and reflective, too. He's eligible for

parole in two years and plans to take his next dog to the hearing." John adds, "This program gives back to society a little bit, and eventually we are going to be a part of that society. And I've got to tell you that there's nothing greater in the world than puppy breath."

Kellogg concludes, "Or, for that matter, a program that uses the same to give hope—inside and outside prison walls."

I appreciate that the two programs highlighted in this article may not be suitable for many inmates, a fact recognized by those in charge. I also realize that involvement in the program is not a panacea, an elixir likely to re-direct the lives in a positive direction for all of the participants. However, as one might gather from the inmates' observations, while working with the dogs they experience a re-awakening of feelings that have long been buried, namely, a sense of caring and hope. The more these emotions are brought to the surface, the less likely that anger, violence, and antisocial behaviors will prevail. Even if just a few lives are impacted in a positive way, the program can be deemed successful. Introducing opportunities for caring should never be underestimated as a dominant force in changing the life journey of many individuals.

In a past article I used a quote by Goethe to capture the power of expectations. I believe it is a very appropriate way to end this article:

"Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they were capable of being."

These are words well-worth considering even if the people in question are housed in prisons as a consequence of past behaviors. Hopefully, the philosophy espoused by Goethe will encourage us to consider interventions for enhancing a sense of decency, accountability, and responsibility in those who have experienced little worthiness or dignity in the past.

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