

EXPERIENCING QUAKERS



A compilation of stories from *Learning from Experience* to inform & encourage Friends in supporting those who are affected by a custodial sentence

“At last, after all my distresses, wanderings and sore travails, I met with some writings of this people called Quakers ... “

Isaac Pennington (1616-1679) Qf&p 19.14



Learning from Experience: personal narratives from the criminal justice system – Experiencing Quakers

“Justice should be compassionate, forgiving and healing – restorative, not retributive. We want to change attitudes and encourage the criminal justice system to move towards this vision of justice.”

QPSW Crime, Community and Justice Sub-Committee, July 2009

The QPSW Crime, Community and Justice Sub-Committee project *Learning from Experience: personal narratives from the criminal justice system* involved Friends collecting real stories from real people about their experiences of the justice system, and the stories powerfully illustrate what the human cost can be.

They were all collected by Friends during 2010-2011, and they provide instances of real experiences in Britain from the 1970s to today. We are now finding a variety of ways in which both to use what the stories tell us, and share their messages with Friends. This is one of a number of publications arising from that work.

The personal narratives are from adult men and women of varying ages, backgrounds and life experiences. Some are from the person who received the custodial sentence; others are from friends or relatives of someone who has been imprisoned.

Some of the stories are in the person’s own words, others are ‘as told’ to the Friend who collected it for us. All these extracts have been edited to some extent, mostly to ensure anonymity or make them more accessible.

People contributing their stories were asked to tell us the effect of the criminal sentence upon them, the worst thing about the experience, whether there was anything positive about it, and if something or someone could – or did – make things better for them.

We did not ask about the offence for which the sentence was given. Although some people did volunteer this information in their story, we do not always include it in what we publish.

Several of the stories mentioned Quakers, sometimes in response to the question about “whether there was anything positive about the experience”: but not all of the contacts with Quakers were positive. Some of the stories are from or about Friends.

November 2013

Twelve stories

A is a mother, who like the rest of the family, knew nothing about her son's offence until she received a letter that was to be sent if he was jailed. He had been arrested in March and sentenced nearly ten months later.

"I rang a Friend who has been in prison and asked him to talk me through the first 24 hours in jail. He was very informative and supportive, then and subsequently. He told me to ring Quakers in Criminal Justice and when I did that later, I found myself talking to a retired probation officer who had gone back to work part-time because of the huge pressure on the system. She was a mine of information, encouraged me to ring at any time and always found time for me."



B, a Friend, was arrested during a stay in a psychiatric hospital. He was taken to the magistrate's court next day and remanded to the local prison.

"I was visited by the Quaker Prison Minister on my first night in jail. I was eventually placed on the vulnerable prisoners unit. The sentence had a profound effect on me – I could not understand what had happened – it was a great shock – I was not expecting prison. I could not appeal because of the change of lawyers etc. I was greatly helped through this time by the Quaker Prison Minister and the prison chaplaincy in general."

Positive aspects [included] the contact I had through letters I had with so many, and my being embraced by the strength of love of my Quaker family in particular. Ironically the prison officers interpreted all this as highly manipulative behaviour, saying that I should not be recommended for parole. I feel this attitude still prevails even years after my release. I have been clerk of Area Meeting, clerk to my Local Meetings, have helped the formation of a local crime, community and justice group, and have assisted bringing Circles of Support and Accountability to my local community. This I am sure has had the effect of raising my risk profile and brought about more intrusive and frequent visiting by the police."



C contributed his comments on the effectiveness of prison intervention programmes and giving his views on prison reform. He had completed many offence-related and restorative courses addressing: alcohol abuse; cognitive distortions; anger and violence; victim empathy; assertiveness – and was about to begin more.

".... the majority of officers are kind and helpful, the opportunity to change does exist and has helped me. Willpower is all that is needed, prisoners simply need to be more motivated, and the kindness and welcome by the Quaker movement certainly helps."



D gave himself up to police for murder. The Court sentenced him to life, with a 12 year tariff but at the time of writing his story he was in his 22nd year of imprisonment. He described his experience of frequent prison moves, prison life in eight different prisons, and pre-parole preparation for release which was subsequently opposed by the probation service.

“I was then sent to the Scrubs to await a parole board there and I met the Quaker minister, a lady in every sense and a true friend to this day. Over long talks our friendship grew and I was able to talk about my hopes & fears and about my army days and about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The lady has walked the walk and talked the talk for me and is a true friend. I was able to enjoy town visits alone and with my Quaker friend who had offered me accommodation on release till I could find a place of my own.”



E had an addiction to child pornography, for which he had sought treatment. He was charged and pleaded guilty to making and distributing indecent images. He was convicted, sentenced to 39 months in prison, given a Sex Offenders’ Order and placed on the Sex Offenders Register for life.

“I started to attend Chapel services with frequency. The Quaker ‘collective silence’ reminded me of some things used by the 12-step recovery fellowships. This was a real moral compass and emotional support to me. I started education classes in my prison activities. Some sex-offenders still want to do something about their own behaviour, but without someone to explain their own experiences and what needs to be done .I now believe that the Society of Friends could be instrumental in such a mission quest. I would believe a support network and more ready collaboration to help people who need to stop offending [sic].”



F is a person with a long history of mental health and alcohol problems; he is also a type 2 diabetic. For over 20 years he lived and slept on the streets, punctuated by spells in medium secure hospitals for attempted suicide. He was arrested whilst in a psychiatric hospital in London and remanded to prison for reports. The case took a year to come back to court during which time he was kept in the prison hospital wing for mental health issues. On his second appearance at court he was given an Indeterminate Sentence for Public Protection (IPP) order.

“As I’ve zero friends in prison I attend Quaker meeting Thursday evenings. This I find helpful.”



G describes the long journey from imprisonment in a high category prison, to a period in Grendon Prison and eventual release at the end of a ten year period. After a positive experience in a Christian run hostel, he was then relocated to a hostel in his home town from where he sought work in vain and was subsequently returned to prison for another four years.

“Amongst all this pain and confusion I found solace in a quiet corner of the chapel one Tuesday morning – they called themselves Quakers – the quietness and calmness seemed to ground me. That was ten years ago now but I can remember the experience as if it was yesterday, it was like being in the eye of a storm, I had found somewhere I could go and just take a pit stop from life. Previously I’m ashamed to admit I had gone off into a fantasy world and thus doing had hurt others to try and bring stillness to my thoughts. I had found people who despite obviously knowing the nature of the prison, didn’t appear to judge, a concept I found difficult to understand – especially as I thought I was the worst person alive. I have never been an overly religious person so this was strange to me but the Quakers accepted this, they allow you to be you, to find our own way and just support when it is needed. For the first time in my life I reached out and accepted that support without there being a hidden agenda or conditions attached.

There were no Quakers in the second prison but in the third, with the help of the Quaker minister and my prison probation officer, I managed to open up again, regain my confidence to the point where I started having days out and working out of the prison. I was attending regular Quaker meetings outside the prison once a month; again I was reminded of their un-judgemental nature and kindness. I managed to accrue several successful home leaves, spending time with family and loved ones, even attending the local Quakers in my home town after being referred by the Quaker Prison Chaplain, before again being released.

Whilst I had been having my home leaves I attended both the gym and the Quakers in my home town, so naturally I continued to do this on my release. I was to learn this was a fatal mistake. After only two weeks of being released I had an altercation with probation and was, shockingly, recalled to prison, not for committing an offence but for failing to tell probation that I was attending the gym and Quaker meetings – bear in mind only the week before my parole release I had been on home leave and had attended both the Quakers and the gym without any concern or problem.

I couldn’t believe it, all the work I had done and progress made was wiped out in one fell swoop. I was thrown into a local prison which was hell, every day felt like a month. If it hadn’t been for the support of family and the Quakers I genuinely believe I wouldn’t be typing this today. I have now been released, I still attend the local Quaker meeting and am so thankful I found them.”



H was convicted of an offence and imprisoned. When his conviction was quashed on appeal he was released from prison. The Chaplaincy proved a valuable side of prison life and H assisted in the establishment of a Quaker meeting for himself and other prisoners. He benefitted from receiving and sending letters to friends, family and Quakers alike.

H now uses his experience of sentencing, court of appeal and imprisonment to contribute to groups such as Quakers in Criminal Justice in seeking reform of the justice system and an end to meaningless and destructive ways of dealing with the perpetrators and alleged perpetrators of crime.



J, a Friend, described his experience of pre-sentence bail, prison, and life afterwards. He spent several months on bail in the homes of two Quaker families who took him in. J had been brought up to regard a prison sentence as something inflicted on people when all else had failed. *“My parents shared the shame part of the sentence, and tried to hide from their Meeting what had happened. They were taken to task over this.”* The Quaker Prison Minister *“came faithfully every week to visit me”*.

In debt from the low-paid jobs he was able to get, but unable to get properly paid employment, J was advised to ‘find something else to do with the rest of your life’: He says this is, in effect, what he has done, and : *“I have served on more Quaker committees than I care to count. My own meeting accepted me back without comment, except for one Elder who gave me the feeling that everything I said was wrong; in the end I moved to another Meeting more on my wavelength. My Monthly Meeting had a loan fund which helped me on many occasions; my credit remained good because I did in fact pay the money back.”*



K's 23 year old daughter was stabbed to death in 1990 by an acquaintance who was on drugs . He was arrested few days later, convicted of the murder and given a life sentence with a 13 year tariff. He has been released twice on parole and recalled twice. K has had great difficulty getting to the truth of what happened to her daughter.

“K’s fortitude meant she was going to find all the deliberate obstructions by the authorities to get to the truth of what had happened. She had become a Quaker a few months before the murder and involved herself further in Lifelines, restorative justice, visiting prisons and in “prison-no way” an organisation started by prison officers. K has also met her daughter’s murderer in prison. She still remains troubled by her experience of the prison and Home Office procedures, notably over parole. K has used her experience to work in positive ways for true justice as Quakers feel it should be.”



L maintains innocence of the offence for which he was convicted, yet came to welcome the prison term as an opportunity to sort his life out and subsequently became a member of the Society of Friends.

“The 19 months I actually served allowed me to do lots of things. It gave me time to reflect on my life and where I was going with it. I chose to look at my spiritual faith and I looked at all different religions until this Lifer introduced me to Quakers. What a lovely experience. I knew I had come home when I went to Meeting every week, only 2 of us there plus the minister. I have never looked back. Prior to prison I did not really know what Quakers were about. The consequence of my going to prison is that it steered my life in another direction. I am a Quaker member and a trustee of a Quaker charity; I work with Circles of Support and Accountability and I do a shift on the mobile library. These things I would not be doing if I had not gone to prison.”



M was staying with one of her sons when he was arrested. She took him back to her own home the next day where he stayed for seventeen months during which time there were several magistrate court appearances, a trial and a re-trial resulting in a four year sentence. He had been in two prisons at the time of M's personal narrative.

“The imprisonment of my son has been a very painful episode which has left me with a profound distrust of the police, the justice system as a whole and grave doubts about the usefulness or otherwise of the prison system. A Quaker Prison Minister in one prison was very helpful indeed but this was not the case elsewhere when I made contact for guidance. I have since joined Quakers in Criminal Justice and have attended two of their conference. I have also, more recently, joined a Prison Fellowship group in this area and have worked with them for about eighteen months. I am too old to be able to serve as a Quaker Prison Minister, which is annoying as there is a prison in the town centre

One painful episode was when Friends warned that details of the case (including our address) has been printed in a local paper. .. I was heartened to receive quite a number of cards and letters of support from Friends and friends following the publication – it was this which decided me to remain in the town.”



This is one in a series of publications arising from the “Learning from Experience personal narratives from the criminal justice system” project of the Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) Crime, Community and Justice Sub-Committee (CCJS) QPSW is part of the central organisation of Quakers in Britain, and CCJS supports and represents Quaker concerns in the area of criminal justice.

*QPSW Crime, Community and Justice Programme
Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ
T: 020 7663 1036 (direct line + voice mail)
E: paulah@quaker.org.uk
W: www.quaker.org.uk/crime-community-justice*

November 2013