

BIG CHANGES START WITH LITTLE STEPS

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PAPERS

A couple of years ago, I met a 14-year old boy who tried to convince me that he was not a criminal, he was just someone who got into trouble. At that time, I used to hear this quite often because of my work as a psychologist in the biggest reformatory school in Hungary. But the story of this boy was a little different. He came from a good family who was proud of his accomplishments, his appearance on local radio, and his wide range of interests. At Christmas, he got a book about the 'Whiskey Robber', whose story fascinated him.



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A couple of weeks later, he committed the 'perfect crime', just like the successful robber who wrote the book. He picked a small post office, waited for the right time, and with a toy gun he accomplished something unbelievable, something that could only happen in a movie. He went home feeling satisfied and a little bit surprised by the reality. When his sense of achievement disappeared, he decided to take all the money

back and end his successful action. But the post office was closed and was surrounded by the police. He was most surprised when he realized that the police officers didn't appreciate his act of taking the money back. Instead, they were talking about the robbery and the crime. All of a sudden he had to face the consequences of his act. Incomprehension, anger, and shame enveloped him. His court trial went unusually fast, and soon he was sentenced to eighteen months in reformatory school.

When I met this boy, he expected me to help him. He wanted to prove that he wasn't what others thought he was. He couldn't think of anything but his own problems. He felt self-pity, anger at the system, and shame before his family and friends. When I asked him what had happened since the post office robbery, he was surprised by the question; he couldn't answer it.

When we met again a couple of days later, he had brought the phone number of the post office. He wanted to try to find out what had happened and repair the harm that he had caused, by calling the post office and telling them that he was really sorry and that he had gotten the punishment he deserved.

The real feelings of regret and guilt came when he learned that the lady bank teller whom he'd forced to hand over the money to him had had to seek psychiatric help, because whenever she saw young boys coming into the bank she felt like collapsing. Finally, she'd had a nervous breakdown and had to be taken to the hospital.

The boy desperately tried to explain that he hadn't wanted things to turn out this way. After the boy learned from the lady's husband how this event had changed their lives, he wanted to make up for them really badly. He wasn't angry anymore because of the sentence. He didn't care about the strange routines of the reformatory school or what the counsellors thought about him. He didn't blame his parents anymore. He only cared about the person he had made to suffer and how he could repair what he had done. He started to write letters to the lady and her husband. He offered his help after he had served his punishment, and he felt that this was his real task. A few months later he talked to the lady on the phone, genuinely expressing his remorse and how grateful he was to be able to talk to her. This opportunity proved to him and to the victim that he was not a bad person, but rather someone who had made a bad choice.

This boy opened my and my colleagues' eyes. Until this point, we had used different methods to help kids change and go back to their community. We had worked out for them new rules and better circumstances. We had come to realize that this process of education based on our rules, schedules, punishments for bad behaviour, and rewards for compliance was unrelated to the reality of the world outside the institution and did not produce long-term positive results.

Seventy to seventy-five percent of the juveniles reoffended within a few months after their release from the institution. Strangely, those who were viewed as model students got into trouble sooner than others and committed more serious offences than they had before. The causes are too complex to be presented now, but one of them is very clear: Even if a young person had demonstrated good behaviour while a student at the institution, that fact was unknown to those in the community where he returned. He was still labelled an offender in his home community and felt powerless to change this perception.

But this boy made us search for new possibilities. After I shared the story of this boy with my colleague Gyöngyi Kökönyei, who was studying the development of empathy and altruistic feelings, we began to experiment with what I later learned might be called 'restorative practices'. We asked students to share their feelings about their offence by writing an imaginary letter to the victim of their crime. In almost all of the letters students expressed that they were sorry, and often they also expressed the wish that the victim would forgive them. A great many of the letters included a need to meet with the victim to express their regret and to repair the harm. I would later realize that our results were consistent with the restorative paradigm: that the students wanted to shed their offender label and be accepted as good people whose behaviour had been unacceptable.

When Mária Herczog invited Ted Wachtel to Budapest to do presentations about restorative practices and a Real Justice conference facilitator training, I realized that this is what we all needed to learn. I am extremely thankful to them for the chance to participate in a one-year-long internship in Pennsylvania, USA, where I learned more about Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy and its school sites, group homes, and programmes for delinquent youth, all based on restorative practices. Working day by day in the restorative milieu

of CSF, I began to see how individuals and groups could become their own experts and how very effective it was to give them a significant say in what was going to happen. From the first day students enter the programme, they begin to work with their own parents, foster parents, other family members, or sometimes a caseworker, to develop a plan for what they need to improve about themselves. Treatment is not imposed as a punishment for bad behaviour or as a result of a diagnosis by some expert. Instead the plan for action comes from a thoughtful self-examination of what the student needs to do to get his or her life back on a positive path, with assistance from people who have a relationship with the student. No one was going to give the young person or his family the answers. Rather, it was our responsibility as professionals to facilitate the kinds of processes that helped the students themselves find the solutions for their own problems. What resulted were meaningful behaviour changes beyond anything I had ever seen at our institution in Hungary.

Why I am here now? Because of a few small but strong steps we started to take after this experience. Things like this: Three years ago I received a phone call from a school in Budapest, which had enrolled a student who had successfully finished our experimental day-treatment programme at CSF Hungary. The school's social worker was wondering what we had done with this boy, because when entering the classroom and seeing the teacher struggling to make his class behave properly, our student said to the teacher, 'Let's sit in a circle and start to work on finding out what is happening and what we all need to do to make this class a better place.' Then, quoting the top movie from that time, he continued, 'The power is with us.' From that moment I knew that we had achieved real changes.

Since then, schools, childcare agencies and similar institutions in Hungary have learned and experienced similar small but positive steps, and the expression 'restorative practices', although still a bit strange, is not unfamiliar. For many of us, today is a special day: The conference has brought together all of us who have contributed to developing restorative practices. I would like to express my thanks for Ted's support and to all of you, who believed that changes can start with small steps, and invite you to enjoy and continue with us, through this conference, the journey of changes.