

THE OUTSIDERS

By PETER McVERRY

WHAT IS THE HARDEST THING about being a homeless young person? It is not being without a bed for the night, nor being hungry, nor being cold. The hardest thing is to know that if you disappeared off the face of the earth, no one would even notice, no one would care. Of course, your mates would say for a day or two, 'I wonder where John is, or Mary is – they must have gone to London'. Your very existence has no more relevance or significance to anyone than that.

The hidden pain inside is far harder to live with than the visible pain outside

John is now serving his third prison sentence for robbery. He was the eldest of nine children. Both his parents were alcoholics. John's early childhood and schooling were frequently disrupted due to the eviction of his parents from their local authority housing for non-payment of rent. Each time John settled into school, got to know the teacher, made friends in class, suddenly he was pulled out and moved to another school in another area. John learnt how to defend himself against the pain of parting – not to make friends and to keep his distance from the teacher. Eventually the family were re-housed in the most run-down housing available, in an area where no one wanted to live because of the many 'problem' families who had been 'dumped' there and the consequent myriad social problems which existed in the neighbourhood.

John frequently went to school without breakfast as there was little food in the house. Each night he waited for his parents to come in from the pub, drunk, and frequently they would argue and fight till the early hours of the morning. During those fights, all the children were awake and sometimes got hurt. By the age of nine, John's attendance at school was very poor. A fierce alsatian dog kept police from calling too frequently! By the age of twelve, John had simply dropped out of school and no one noticed. John spent his days and most of his nights on the streets in the company of older boys who were robbing.

By the age of 14, John was well known to the police. He went to live in a hostel where he got on well with the staff and other boys and did reasonably well. From time to time, John would disappear for several

weeks; he was out doing what he was good at, robbing; sometimes he was just too depressed to stick the discipline and order of the hostel and he went back to the streets. But they were the happiest and most positive days of his life. They just came too late. At the age of 17, he left the hostel, now too old for the – to him – childish rules and requirements which were intended for younger boys. Nowhere to go except the overcrowded home of his alcoholic parents or back to the streets; either way it was back to robbing, starting on drugs and into jail.

John is now living with his girl-friend in a very neglected local authority house in a very deprived community and has two children. All the evidence suggests that these two children will follow a pattern of life similar to the one that John himself lived.

From the story of John above, I would sketch the following process by which some young people start their lives.

Seriously dysfunctional family. Blaming the parents may not be the appropriate response and indeed may make the situation even worse. In John's case, the parents went through considerable periods of sobriety, especially when intensive support was available to them. If we blame the parents, we have to pass blame back to the grandparents, and back further to the great-grandparents, and so on, in a useless exercise.

Poor education. It was impossible for John to succeed at school when he was often arriving tired, hungry and late, often not being woken for school in the morning at all, always trying to cope with what had happened the night before and worried about what was going to happen the night after.

Low self-esteem. By the age of nine, John felt he was a failure. He was a dropout, different from the other boys who went to school each day.

Failure to integrate. It was only one short step from John's belief that he was no good to a belief that no one liked him, no one wanted him, no-one cared about him, no one was interested in him.

Sense of alienation. John came to live in a different world from the majority of others around him, a world apart, a world of alienation. The aspirations, hopes and values of John's world had little in common with the world around him.

Anti-social and offending behaviour. John's interaction with the larger world around him was primarily one of conflict – on both sides.

The above characteristics of a young delinquent's life, in varying degrees, are part and parcel of many young people's lives on the margins.

What I would like, first, to focus on is what John was *feeling* as he grew up. The dominant experience in his life was not being wanted. The message that he was constantly receiving was that he was no good, of no importance, of little value. His parents were so busy with their own problems that they were very effectively, if unwittingly, communicating to him that they had little time for him. His school, unable to cope with him, communicated to him that he was not wanted by them. His futile efforts to find an employer who might risk giving him a job communicated to him that employers too did not want him. The police constantly stopped and searched him, took him in for questioning, a primary suspect for everything that happened in the locality; they too communicated to him that they did not want him around and that they would be much happier if he was locked up and out of the way.

The experience of not being wanted created in him feelings of anger, suppressed anger, which was liable to explode if the wrong button was pushed. The anger was not logical, it was just a feeling over which he had little control. One day, when he came with me to a fee-paying school where I was collecting something, he told me later that his first reaction on seeing these 'posh' college boys was to get out of the car and thump them. The very sight of them brought to the surface his suppressed anger.

Those feelings of anger were just as likely to be directed at himself as at others. Cutting his wrists, overdosing and ensuring that the predictions of others that he would fail would come true were all expressions of self-hatred. For part of his anger was his belief that he was unwanted because there was something wrong with him. Just as the AIDS victim is often marginalized because of their physical illness, so too John believed that he was not wanted because there was something ill, or inherently wrong, with him. He was basically a bad person and so nobody wanted him. He was angry with himself and with others. He was angry too with God, for it was God who had made him this way. Why did God not let him be born into a nice middle-class family with plenty of money and opportunities? Why did God impose this suffering on *him*? To him the answer was obvious: because he was a bad person. God was punishing him. Even God didn't want him!

Even God couldn't love him. And so life was that little bit more bearable if you didn't believe in God. There is no afterlife, there is no eternity to go through where he will continue to be made to feel unwanted and unlovable; death is the end of the pain and that is his only consolation.

The only people who made John feel wanted were his mates who were in much the same position as himself. He did not feel that he was an outsider when he was in their company, he didn't feel judged by them. The only place where John felt comfortable was in the criminal sub-culture where everyone felt they were outsiders. It was their very feeling of alienation from the society in which they were not wanted which brought them together and kept them together.

John has taught me in a very real way the link between believing in yourself and believing in God, between loving yourself and knowing that you are loved by God. In our hostels for homeless boys we are not just providing food, clothes, accommodation and so on for those who need them; our hostel seeks to communicate that they are just as important, just as valuable, just as lovable as any other young person of their age. If that message is not being communicated through the relationship between the staff and child, as well as through the provision of food, clothes and accommodation, then the provision of those material necessities is of little value. If the hidden pain inside is not being addressed, addressing the external pain of cold, hunger and homelessness is of little value in itself. And so restoring their sense of their own value, their own self-image, their own lovableness through the care that is given to them, is just as 'spiritual', just as God-focused an activity as saying mass or hearing confessions, because believing in themselves is the pre-condition for believing in a God who cares for them.

One young man who had lived in our hostels for several years but who subsequently served a prison sentence for robbing wrote to me from prison. In one of his letters he said: 'Peter, I have learnt one thing from you; I have learnt that I am not such a bad person after all'. I have cherished those words and used them to try and summarize what my life and work should be all about.

In our work with homeless boys, the relationship we build with many of them enables us to get behind the superficial façades and external circumstances of their lives to understand a little better what is going on inside them. This privileged viewpoint allows a glimpse of vulnerable, confused and traumatized young people masquerading as macho, aggressive, anti-social and criminal youngsters.

Jimmy was twelve when I first got to know him. His father is the local 'hit-man', whose violence is renowned in the locality, and his mother is a prostitute. Jimmy was allowed to run riot when growing up and became the local 'hard-man' whom everyone feared, as any offence to Jimmy resulted in a beating up from his father. Jimmy was very loyal to his parents, though he got little real care or attention from them. He lived more on the streets than at home and eventually came to live in our hostel. One Christmas Day, Jimmy went home in mid-morning full of delight at seeing his parents again and returned a half-hour later to say 'My Ma is drunk and there is no food in the house'. The illusion of loving, caring parents was shattered in that half-hour.

Pat, aged eleven, turned up one night at our hostel door, stoned. He was in tears. I offered to drive him home but he was reluctant to go. After a lot of persuasion, he agreed to take a lift. I drove him to his door, but he refused to go in. He asked me for £20, which I refused to give him. After a lot of tears and a little talk, it emerged that his 'guardian', with whom he was living, was his pimp and he was unable to return without at least £20 'wages' or face a beating. I felt so powerless, so hopeless, so shattered that I gave it to him. Pat, now seventeen, is a drug addict and in jail.

Joe grew up with a father who sexually and physically abused him for fifteen years. The abuse was never disclosed. His father also regularly beat his wife but she always withdrew the charges of assault, refused to take out barring orders against him and always took him back home. Joe's hatred of his father was intense, made even more intense by the repeated assaults on his mother, of whom he was very protective. He knew his mother was powerless to prevent the physical and sexual assaults on himself but he found it hard to accept that she constantly took his father back in. As he saw it, she was choosing her husband over her son. Joe left home as a teenager but constantly returned to make sure that his mother was all right. He would often stay outside the house all night in case his mother would come to any harm. He started taking heroin to dull the pain. He has attempted suicide several times and has convictions for assaulting adult men.

Peter was fostered at a very early age. His father is in jail, serving life for murder, and his mother is a drug addict. Although his foster parents were wonderful people and gave him all the attention and care they could, Peter grew up with a serious personality disorder. Psychiatric assessment showed him to be extremely dangerous to himself and to others. His foster parents were eventually unable to control him and had to return him to the care of the social services. No hostel was able to manage him and, now sixteen, he is living on the streets.

Jim is sixteen and was physically abused by his father until he left home at the age of twelve. He had also been sexually abused by a neighbour. He passes the neighbour on the street from time to time. He has taken to carrying a knife when outdoors; presumably he feels more secure with it in his pocket, and of course has been repeatedly charged with possession of an offensive weapon. He has also started to take heroin, in order to keep away the pain of the memories of abuse. He says he cannot cope without it. He has been for counselling from time to time, but says he cannot trust anyone enough to persist with it. He has a number of convictions for larceny and has served one prison sentence. He will not press charges against his abuser because it goes against the criminal culture in which he lives to involve the police. There is a real fear that he will either kill himself or kill his abuser or seriously injure someone with the knife if he gets into a fight on the street.

Of the five young men above, one is dead from a drug overdose, two are in jail and two are homeless living on the streets. In each case, society would be afraid of them, unable to cope with them and anxious to keep them at arms length. In each case, there has been very considerable trauma involved for the young people concerned and a strong sense of having been failed by the caring agencies and social services during their early years of crisis. In each case, the result is a sense of being a 'nobody', of being of no value, of being a bad person – their sense of their own dignity is zero.

Lacking any sense of their own dignity, these young people constantly seek to affirm that they do have dignity. They seek how to say 'I *am* somebody, I *am* important, I *am* a person'. Often the only way they know of doing so is through wearing the best of clothes (which they cannot afford and have to rob to buy), driving flashy cars (which they have to steal), becoming pregnant, asserting themselves (which may lead to violence). Their crimes of violence or theft are attempts to affirm their dignity, not only to society at large but also to themselves.

They have taught me not to judge. We do not know what has gone on in the lives, hearts, feelings and experiences of these young people. John, whose story I told above, while living in our hostels, has tried to change his life. He has made a greater effort to change his life than I have ever had to do to change my life. But he was so damaged that he was unable to succeed very well. But God sees the effort and God rewards the effort. And so John, the robber, the drug user, will have a higher place in the kingdom of God than I will ever have. I know that if I had been born into John's family, and John into mine, then he would

be the priest coming up to visit me in prison. And so, if I judge him, I am really judging myself.

‘Do not judge and you will not be judged; because the judgements you give are the judgements you will get’ (Matthew 7:1–2).

If feeling inadequate, feeling bad about themselves, feeling unloved and unlovable is the core problem, then how do we address that problem?

Clearly, we have to affirm the dignity of the person by the way in which we relate to them. In our own personal contact with them, they have to feel assured that we, at least, are not writing them off, rejecting them, wanting them out of the way. That is the minimum we have to do. Even that minimum can be very difficult. Faced with damaged, manipulative, perhaps abusive, untrusting, ungrateful young people, we have to reach out again and again. We have to avoid being judgemental in order to create the conditions in which they can come to trust and learn to love and respect themselves because someone else loves and respects them.

However, we have to be clear that there are limits to how effective such personal intervention can be. Many of these young people have been failed by their families and communities, have been rejected by the education system, live in drab, dreary housing estates with high unemployment and multiple social problems, are unable to get a job, are in regular conflict with the police (seen as the custodians of a society that has rejected them) and have a lifetime of experiences that tell them that they are no good, not worth much, not wanted. The attention of a maverick priest or innovative project cannot adequately compensate for such overwhelming experiences. Yet that attention is important. For some of the very damaged young people who come to us, who will go on to jail or an early death from drugs or suicide, it is our hope that at the very least they can look back on some good experiences, some happy moments, that they can know that somebody did care. Maybe that is all that we can do for some of them, but it is important enough to make it worthwhile.

To restore dignity to such young people, we have to be involved in the lifelong challenge to the social and economic structures which have played such a large role in making them feel unwanted and unwelcome. We have to challenge an educational system which serves as a selection mechanism for employers and third-level institutions and which creates a sense of failure in those not chosen, and even more so those who have dropped out. We have to challenge a housing policy which isolates the unemployed and the non-economically active into housing ghettos

where people are imprisoned, not by walls, but by lack of opportunities. We have to challenge economic policies which fail to reduce the high level of long-term unemployment. We have to challenge policing policy where it discriminates against minorities or hassles the young and unemployed.

To challenge such structures may well result in us being marginalized, written off, ridiculed by those in authority who resent such challenges. And thereby we affirm the dignity of the marginalized in the most authentic and most effective way. By allowing ourselves to be marginalized because of our stand for the marginalized, and not abandoning them when we ourselves share in their plight, we affirm their dignity.

This triple commitment to those who have been marginalized mirrors the experiences of Jesus. He too reached out in a special way to the outsiders, the poor, the prostitute, the tax-collector, and affirmed their dignity by his own willingness to enter into a respectful relationship with them, in defiance of the attitude of society around him. He too challenged the attitudes and values of that society and its rulers which allowed them to justify their exclusion of certain groups in that society. And he too suffered the same fate as those whose dignity he defended.

The Church has a prophetic role to play in responding to those on the fringes. Not only should it reveal the compassion of Christ but it should challenge society to judge, value and respond in a very different way.

But those on the fringes have a prophetic role as well. Outsiders can be our teachers. They teach us a lot about ourselves and the society we live in. They reveal the darker side of society, its failure to care, its readiness to judge, its greed, its unwillingness to change. They reveal so much about ourselves, the values we live by (as distinct from the values we say we live by), the prejudices we hold, the securities we cling to.

Perhaps the comment that is echoed universally by those involved with people on the margins identifies their prophetic role and their privileged place in God's heart: 'I have received far more from those I am working with than I have ever given to them'.

I can share my thoughts with him . . .

I GO TO CHURCH but not very regularly. I like to pray at home and I go to quite a lot of youth meetings. I find God everywhere, in church, of course, and in creation, but more in people. God is a great and good Lord, a creator, a provider, somebody you may not perceive with your senses, but I experience his presence all the time. I think of God as the author of life, therefore he is a guide to my life. But I find it easier to relate to Jesus, especially in a statue or picture.

The best chapter in the book of my life was an experience of God when I was having a crisis at home. I was born again into the kingdom of God when I asked my Jesus to come into my heart. He accepted me as I am and gave me new life, hope, peace – everything. I find I can share my thoughts with him.

I have friends who are not Christians. There's a Hindu boy I know who prays to Jesus and reads the Bible. To me they are good people who practice what they believe. Yes, their religion is okay. It's what they feel and believe. I relate to them as a human being. Nothing else comes between our relationship. Sometimes they call me a Jesus-freak. They think of me as a holy Joe. I think most of them know in their hearts that Jesus is God. But I have to talk with them. It's true that I have met real fanatics. It's difficult. I just try to avoid confrontation and leave the rest to God. I explain that I respect them and their religion and expect the same from them, but sometimes I do retaliate.

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