



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Faces behind bars

I visited people at Corradino Correctional Facility (CCF) innumerable times over the years. I have been to the male and female divisions and also the young people's sections both when located at Paola and now at Mtaħleb.



Walking into this regime feels dreadful. In fact on a side note I need to share my deepest admiration to the people who work in that establishment. The melancholy of that place is confounding. The clanking of the heavy doors, the constant surveillance, the dim lighting and claustrophobic feeling, the walls that trickle frostiness, the barren surroundings, the keys dangling from the prison warden belts make it feel so surreal.

Mind you I am not one to defend the behaviour of the convicts and even more so excuse them for what they did to (by and large) blameless citizens. They have done wrong to the victims but not only. Every time fear is fashioned, it generates a spillover into the community. So not only is wrong done to the respective individuals but also to the rest of society. In other words, people need to be answerable to their actions.

Let's face it, I don't know of many who have ended behind bars after the first slip-up. Prison time for most represents a never ending list of wrong doings, people who have repeatedly let down their communities, friends and family. Even though I do not always understand the rationale used when delivering a verdict but I for one respect the judiciary because once again it's not an envious job they have.

Having said that, the hardened criminals who have turned their

lives into a criminal career, the sociopaths and psychopaths, rapists and abusers, thieves, paedophiles and murderers and most of the people residing in that complex were once upon a time very ordinary citizens who have messed up when things could have taken a different twist. Some responsibility needs to be shouldered by our schooling, our non-formal education, NGOs and statutory community services that failed these people or let down our communities by not identifying the 'prospective' offender. We know through empirical research that crime is attributed to particular zones in Malta, specific socio-economic backgrounds, poverty and family dynamics. It wouldn't solve it all, it wouldn't mean that all will be as clear as crystal but I believe that we would be struggling with less unlawfulness and having to spend much less on treatment and security if we had to take cognizance of this. But the petition repeatedly being made by our criminologists seems to fall on deaf ears.

Anyway, I will not defend the indefensible but I still need to be persuaded that time behind bars serves inmates any good. Many have endeavoured and are still trying to make our prisons a better place to live in. Kudos to people at policy and service delivery levels who do try hard. Some still believe that within incarceration there is an opportunity for redemption and reform but the reality is that if there is no decent family waiting

for you, no employment, ghettoised housing and a police conduct hanging round your neck I feel that there is no way that ex-inmates can be redeemed.

Much as they try the prison is founded on the principles of lack of trust, disbelief and suspicion and I see no silver lining anywhere soon. Mind you prisons do help our communities get alienated into believing that all evil is behind the high walls in Paola and that all those roaming around and about are as pure as angels!

Back to the prison visits.

One of the things that doesn't cease to amaze me is the facial expression of the inmates. We can go on with the tirade that these people deserve to be there. We can rant till we turn blue in the face that they merit to sit and stare themselves into emptiness.

What I encourage people to do is to go find someone they know, a distant relative maybe, someone who is serving time and visit them at CCF. There are so many people who would appreciate a call and someone to talk to, to know all about what is happening outside those steep walls bedecked with barbed wire. But in the process look at the inmate's face. Please care to study the weight their eyes carry and the glazy look that seems to separate them from the rest of the world.

Because prison shuts people's souls down, it creates melancholy and misery. It breaks the spirit and leaves emptiness and blankness. It almost sways emotions into oblivion.

The gloom and unhappiness shows on the faces of those residing there and needless to say on the countenance of those who visit them. In fact, some time back I got lost on my way out of CCF after having visited a friend. I came across a mummy with her two very young petite daughters, possibly seven and nine years of age respectively who had come to visit their daddy who was seeing through a sentence. They were sombre and dejected with their gaze fixed to the floor. The saddest part of it all was that they were the ones to show me the direction to the guard house – indeed disturbing and upsetting.

Solutions are indeed complex but what we need to see as a starter is that more people are granted parole, more inmates reading courses preferably outside the prison and provided with the opportunity to work and do community service. We need to review our drug laws that seem to forget that most of the traffickers are addicts themselves. We need to find alternatives to incarceration for people who do not pay taxes or are caught with fraud, we need alternatives for those youth who were silly enough to get involved with the wrong crowd.

But as happens most of the time when the imprisonment issue is raised the same drivel crops up again and people will say 'they' got what they asked for. My appeal is a simple one – find some time to visit someone, you might see something different.

"Ghandi_xi Nghid"

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