The Strengths Perspective: A Paradigm for Correctional Counseling

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"In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again."
—James Agee

At the heart of the strengths perspective is a belief in the basic goodness of humankind, a faith that individuals, however unfortunate their plight, can discover strengths in themselves that they never knew existed. No matter how little or how much may be expressed at one time, as Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt (1989) explain, people often have a potential that is not commonly realized. The Biblical injunction from *Matthew* 7:7 sums it up in a nutshell: "Seek and ye shall find." This cardinal principle is implied in the opening statement of the social work Code of Ethics: "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients" (National Association of Social Workers, 1996, p. 1.01). The first step in promoting the client's well-being is through assessing the client's strengths. A belief in human potential is tied to the notion that people have untapped resources—physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually—that they can mobilize in times of need. This is where professional helping comes into play—in tapping into the possibilities, into what *can be*, not what *is*.

The view of humanity underlying the strengths approach is that humans are unique and multifaceted beings (Kelley, 1996). In clinical settings, however, simple labels based on pathology, often highly pejorative in connotation, tend to take on a life of their own. Clients come to be seen as unidimensional, their very being tailor-made to the therapist's special needs. Years ago, Dennis Wrong (1976, p. 112) chided social scientists for this very flaw: "We must do better," he wrote, "if we really wish to win credit outside our ranks for special understanding of man, that plausible creature whose wagging tongue so often hides the despair and darkness in his heart." His words are especially relevant to the treatment process, a process where the search for root causes of problems often blinds us to underlying strengths.

Deficit, disease, and dysfunction metaphors permeate treatment at every stage of the process, from intake to termination (Cowger, 1994). In the criminal justice system, clients often find their very selfhood defined by their crimes. For such persons, whose views of therapy and of all authority figures are apt to be decidedly negative, a positive approach is essential to establish the one crucial ingredient of effective treatment—trust. Sometimes one encounter or one supportive relationship—whether with a teacher, social worker, or priest—can offer a turning point in a life of crime.

Who can forget the thief Jean Valjean's about-face in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, when the kind priest, the victim, tells the police that the stolen candelabras were not stolen but a gift from himself? Or even the cold-blooded killer in the film *Dead Man Walking*, who grows personally and, to some extent, spiritually through his relationship with a caring nun. These two examples—one fictional, one based on fact—illuminate a theme of personal empowerment. One of the major tasks of the professional helper is to facilitate such change. Within the justice context, the challenge consists of promoting personal power in people whose lives have become circumscribed to varying degrees and whose very existence has been devalued and even criminalized.

A second major challenge to correctional social work is the challenge of viewing causality reciprocally. With criminal behavior, the locus of the problem is not the individual alone but the individual and society in interaction. To study the person-in-the-environment is not enough; one also needs to study the environment-in-the-person. If we conceive of the environment as the prison, we can view the new recruits as bringing into this milieu all of what Irwin (1980) calls the "cultural baggage" from their social background. And then we can view aspects of prison life—the social control, the convict norms—as internalized within the prison inmate. Both the person and the environment can be seen to be in continuous and dynamic interaction in this way. If we come to frame the inmates' confinement in a political sense, then we have moved toward a linking of the personal and political levels of existence (Lee, 1994).

More than any other population, correctional clients are the failures of the failures. Not only have they publicly been labeled through some kind of court action, but their encounter with professional counselors usually relates to some kind of punishment. Work in the correctional realm, then, with all the negatives stacked against it, is an excellent testing ground for a framework of strengths. In contrast to a diagnostic, pathology-based therapy, direct practice from this multidimensional framework looks beyond a client's diagnosis or offense—for example, borderline personality or drug possession—to positive attributes that can serve as an important resource even in the most desperate of circumstances. The challenge of the present article is to discover to what extent an approach that is geared toward individual resourcefulness and health is relevant for those who have been identified by society as criminal. To put this more graphically, the challenge is to discover if an approach, a model, that is successful in helping battered women suffering from low self-esteem also would be effec-

tive in work with their batterers or if a framework effective in therapy in cases of rape trauma also could be of any use to the rapist.

As this article will make clear, the answer is a qualified yes. A treatment approach that works for the victim also can help foster desirable change in the victimizer, at least in some persons who have abused or even murdered others.

Of special relevance to criminal behavior, and without which change is unlikely, is the taking of personal responsibility for one's actions and for one's life. The treatment relationship can serve as a powerful tool for helping the client change cognitive misconceptions that result in self-destructive thoughts and behavior. Even in a life most crushed by circumstances of time and place, there nevertheless exists the potentiality for actions other than those characteristically taken. This belief is at the core of the therapeutic relationship.

Given the motivation to change, a necessary ingredient is the development of personal resources. A sense of control over one's life and relationships is crucial. McWhirter (1991, p. 224) captures the essence of empowerment in her inclusive definition:

> Empowerment is the process by which people, organizations, or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon rights of others, and (d) support the empowerment of others in their community.

The purpose of this article is to introduce a strengths framework as both a systematic model of behavioral/attitudinal change and an integrated method of offender treatment. Two professional literatures will be surveyed—first, correctional literature with a focus on the offender as a redeemable, reputable being and, secondly, clinical literature utilizing a strengths approach for work with offenders. As will be apparent shortly, however, it is as rare for contemporary correctional literature to focus on strengths of criminal offenders as it is for the strengths literature to direct attention to the criminal justice field.

Following this brief literature review, we will move on to a detailed discussion of the basic tenets of the strengths approach, currently in the process of evolution. The specific relevance of this framework to the field we euphemistically call corrections is described. Particular attention is given to the paradox of employing a positive, client-centered orientation within a system characterized by coercion and despair and for clients who are often less than amenable to treatment goals. Finally, a discussion of professional implications concludes this article.

Literature Review

We are dealing here with the literatures of two separate enterprises—criminal justice and mental health counseling. The orientation of both is respectively different. Whereas the criminal justice emphasis is largely on the state enterprise and legal prerogatives, social work has as its first focal point the individual within the system. Yet, the two literatures share a commonality; both reflect the social and political movements of the day. Prison reform, innovative rehabilitation programs, and generous social services tend to go together. Preparation for war, mandatory sentencing laws, and welfare cutbacks tend to go together also. The way criminals are regarded in a society, in short, reflects the ethos of the culture.

Rarely is the strengths or empowerment perspective articulated as such in the criminal justice literature. A computer search of the criminal justice abstracts index (as of February 1999) reveals no listing for articles under the heading strengths approach or strengths perspective. The empowerment concept, however, does appear to be widely used as a descriptive term for progressive work with juveniles, female victims, and occasionally female offenders, according to the computer index. The gender difference in the use of an empowerment approach is striking. For example, Harmsworth (1991, p. 135) offers the following description of a criminal justice program in Victoria, Australia:

> The components of this approach include unit management in correctional facilities, high-security units, treatment models for violent men (including individual therapy, anger management programs, group programs, and sex offender treatment). The Victorian Office of Corrections is also establishing a range of strategies to provide support and empowerment to women offenders.

Despite the absence of a comprehensive strengths formulation for treating adult male offenders, Michael Clark, a senior juvenile court officer in Ingham County, Michigan, offers a sophisticated formulation of strength-based practice for work with youth (Clark, 1998). In contrast to a problem-solving approach, the strengths, solution-based paradigm is emerging and gaining ground in juvenile justice, according to Clark. Instead of a focus on owning up to the guilt of transgressions, argues Clark, the focus under this newer model is on dynamic behavior change. Interviewing questions center on the progress clients have made since their encounter with the authorities. Youths in trouble with the law are viewed not as delinquent but as healthy, capable, and able. Clark's innovative writings in such mainstream criminal justice journals as *Federal Probation* and *Corrections Today* (Clark, 1997) are a promising development in a field noted more for punitiveness than empowerment. Several earlier works on correctional counseling, nevertheless, did infuse principles of a positive, client-oriented treatment philosophy throughout the chapters. Noteworthy among them are *Correctional Treatment: Theory and Practice* by Bartollas (1985), which discusses numerous model programs offering meaningful experiences for offenders—the instillation of hope is seen as a key ingredient in such programs—and *Correctional Counseling and Treatment* edited by Kratcoski (1994), which offers "practical" readings on basic therapy techniques to help the correctional client become a functioning member of society.

A surprising find in the literature search is a book written by former probation officer and criminal justice professor Paul Haun (1998), *Emerging Criminal Justice: Three*

Pillars for a Proactive Justice System. Calling for reinforced community corrections and punishments for crimes that allow for nonrestrictive environments, Haun proposes a restorative approach to criminal justice. This approach is built on the concepts of community healing, social support, and innovative community-based programming. Implicit in Haun's conceptualization of restorative justice is the notion of the virtues of kindness, mercy blended with justice, and forgiveness. The aim of restorative justice is to restore the torn fabric of community and of wholeness to all those affected by crime—victims and criminals both. The key role of religion is recognized in helping offenders develop and maintain internal controls and resolving feelings of guilt.

Writing on probation and parole in a criminal justice textbook, Joseph Rogers (1992) utilizes a client empowerment model for female offenders. According to Rogers' empowerment model, women are helped to be more assertive and to achieve their potential through casework, group treatment, family therapy, and community involvement. Significantly, however, the majority of references for this article are taken from social work literature.

Literature from the Helping Professions

In the tradition of Carl Rogers, counseling psychology promotes the professional skills of empathic listening, genuineness, and nonpossessive warmth, skills which are compatible with the strengths paradigm. Yet as Riordan and Martin (1993) acknowledge, little exists in the counseling literature about the treatment of court-ordered clients.

Within the social work practice literature, a focus on client strengths has received increasing attention in recent years. Unlike related fields, moreover, social work has come to use the term, "the strengths perspective" or "the strengths approach" as standard rhetorical practice. The strengths perspective, as Kirst-Ashman and Hull (1997) note, assumes that power resides in people and that social workers should do their best to promote power by refusing to label clients, avoiding paternalistic treatment, and trusting clients to make appropriate decisions. Two popular textbooks, for example, *Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach* (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 1998) and *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice* (Lee, 1994) incorporate the principle of strengths into every phase of the helping process. Although the literature consistently articulates the importance of a stress on clients' strengths and competencies, social workers must be cognizant of the reality of standard clinical practice built on a treatment problem/deficit orientation, a reality shaped by agency accountability and the dictates of managed care. Third-party payment schemes mandate a diagnosis based on relatively serious disturbances in a person's functioning (e.g., organic depression or suicide attempts) and short-term therapy to correct the presenting problem. Furthermore, the legal and political mandates of many agencies, the elements of social control embodied in both the institution and ethos of the agency, may strike a further blow to the possibility of partnership and collaboration between client and helper (Saleebey, 1997).

What you have in social work, in short, are two contradictory elements. On the one hand is the thrust to help people and, to paraphrase William Faulkner (1950), to help them not merely to endure but to prevail. "It is writer's privilege," declared Faulkner, "to help man endure by lifting his heart." We could consider this the social worker's privilege also. Social workers are members of a profession that aspires to help people become more loving and less embittered, more trusting and less competitive, more responsible and less irrational.

Countering the idealistic element in social work is the on-the-job, gut-level reality—the resistant clients, cynical workers, and tediousness of problem-based case management. (The British counterpart of care management is much more positive.) Thus, as novice social workers and students become socialized into professional norms, they often are inclined to try to separate theory from practice, all too willingly moving from what they perceive as the academic ideal to the bureaucratic imperative. Invariably, however, years later, they will attend a workshop oriented around some aspect of client centeredness only to momentarily rediscover their and social work's roots. And, once again, they will echo the truism enunciated by Kurt Lewin that "there's nothing so practical as good theory" (cited by Polansky, 1986). An essential premise of this article and one that, as Turner (1996) suggests, is a major tenet of the profession is that theory and practice are inextricably linked.

The strengths perspective has been applied to a wide variety of client situations: work with the mentally ill, child welfare clients, homeless women in emergency rooms, the elderly, and African American families. The concept of strength is also part and parcel of the growing literature on empowerment, feminist therapy, narrative therapy, client/person centered approach, and the ethnic-sensitive model. In his comprehensive overview of social work theory, Francis Turner (1996) perceives two common threads unifying contemporary theory. These are the person-in-the-situation conceptualization and a holistic understanding of clients in terms of their strengths and available resources.

Correctional Case Management (Enos & Southern, 1996) is a textbook written for students in criminal justice and co-authored by clinically trained writers. Although the book is organized around a behavioral-cognitive approach to the problem-solving process, the basic skills of social work consistent with Rogers' acceptance of the person as a person are described in depth. The authors even define acceptance in terms of what the Quakers refer to as "that of God in every person." There is no attention to strengths-oriented therapy, however, and the terminology is largely centered around problem solving and behavioral classification schemes, the standard negative fare in their field.

In their article "Empowering Female Offenders: Removing Barriers to Community Based Practice," Wilson and Anderson (1997) provide a prime illustration of a strengths-based approach to correctional treatment. A key component of their practice model is the placement of competence and coping within a sociopolitical context.

Empowerment practice with female inmates entails intervention directed at the economic, educational, social, and political structures of society in addition to strengths-focused individual and group therapy with the women.

Berger and Andrews (1995) describe an empowerment group that they, as two college professors, conducted at the women's prison in Minnesota. A short-term discussion group format was adopted to help raise the consciousness of a small group of women inmates. Videos concerning women's roles in society were used to stimulate discussion. Abandoning the role of expert, the facilitators engaged in co-learning with group members. After a slow start in early sessions, several group members actively and eagerly participated. The feminist perspective provided by the group leaders was not well received by a couple of the participants. Nevertheless, progress was made toward reduction of self-blame as a group consciousness developed.

We are talking here of literature from the strengths perspective in the writings of North Americans. European studies, although they use a different phraseology, are distinctly more humanistic in every regard than their American counterparts. Parker (1997), for example, marvels at the optimism of the Danish probation officer corps, who consistently express confidence in their ability to help their supervisees get on the right path. Similarly, Singer (1991), applauds the "non-punitive paradigm" of British probation practice, which is currently under threat, however, by new government initiatives.

From Strengths Approach to Strengths Theory

Much of casework failure, as Bricker-Jenkins (1997) reminds us, results not from poor practice but from poor theory. To exclude certain characteristics from practice theory, for example, strengths and environmental assets, as Bricker-Jenkins further suggests, may be the critical factor in casework failure. From the perspective of the client, being able to grasp one's potential contributes to helping not only in the immediate situation but in offsetting future difficulties as well. From the point of view of the worker, tapping into the client's strengths and support systems helps build rapport and even appreciation in contrast to a more traditional, problem-centered approach that may tend to provoke resistance.

In his essay on the aspects of theory, Polansky (1986) describes theory as a kind of mental map, as the thought that guides action. Theory affects one's perception and directs the worker to attend selectively to certain phenomena that otherwise might be overlooked. Without firm grounding in theory, notes Polansky, caseworkers are at the mercy of their gullibility and uncertain of direction.

For all the vast literature focused on strengths, no fully integrated theory has yet emerged to shape practice. The majority of the conceptual writing on this subject has come from the university, not from practitioners in the field. Moreover, students schooled in a strengths orientation, in fact, often are retrained by agencies to use assessment schemes based on the documentation of individual inadequacies (Cowger, 1994). The rift between philosophy on the one hand and agency/management models on the other leads to inconsistency between the ideal and the real and abandonment of some very powerful techniques.

Built on a solid knowledge base, theory provides a viable explanation for why people behave as they do. Theory is validated in terms of predictions that can be made concerning human behavior under certain circumstances. In connection with social work, one can predict what the likely result of a certain intervention is to be. A good theory, notes Polansky, lets one go beyond known facts. Good theory generates new ideas, which, in turn, generates more theory.

Viewed as theory, the strengths approach has the power to explain both why people perform at an optimal level and why they do not. While some individuals thrive when faced with obstacles, drawing on both inner and outer resources, others face life with a kind of fatalism. Their survival skills are diminished accordingly. There is nothing very new about this theory certainly; the parallels with the self-fulfilling concept and "the-power-of-positive-thinking" dogma are obvious. Yet, as a framework for treatment intervention, the strengths approach can offer a mental map, as Polansky suggested, to operate as a reminder when we as therapists get off course. In corrections, for example, viewing clients solely through the lens of the crimes they have committed can obscure our vision and impede treatment progress. Interestingly, Bricker-Jenkins (1992, p.137) draws on the literature of Norman Polansky to illustrate how negativism can color social work research. In his classic studies on child neglect, Polansky viewed the neglectful mothers through a "convex pathological lens." If we are to develop theory for competent and sensitive practice, concludes Bricker-Jenkins, then we must replace our pathological lens with a "concave, health-oriented lens."

Shaped by a framework of empowerment, conversely, the therapy process is informed by an assessment of assets and resources. This kind of assessment operationalizes the strengths concepts and directs practice. The strengths approach, then, is not only a model but a method as well. Listening is the method—listening to the client's story, not passively, uncreatively, but with full attention to the rhythms and patterns—and then, when the time is right, observing, sharing, until through a mutual discovery, events can be seen in terms of some kind of whole. The challenge is to find themes of hope and courage and in so naming to reinforce them. Thus, one can discover qualities of goodness in a life otherwise defined by crime. This is how strengths theory gets played out in practice.

The strengths perspective, of course, is not intended to apply solely to individual strengths. Consistent with the person-in-the-environment and empowerment-in-the-person conceptualization of social work, the focus is on multifaceted intervention. The general expectation is that social workers should be able to intervene at any point—individual, family, neighborhood, or within society (Butler, 1996). Social workers, moreover, see themselves as ethically

required to work to change social policy affecting themselves and their clients; this is one of the major precepts of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 1997). A call has gone out for NASW to acknowledge each practice setting, including all aspects of the justice system (Lynch & Mitchell, 1995).

A presumption of health over pathology, a focus on self-actualization and personal growth, and a recognition that the personal is political and the political, personal: these are among the key tenets of the strengths approach. Pertaining to groups and communities as well as individuals, the strengths perspective can help reveal the light in the darkness and provide hope in the most dismal of circumstances. As informed by strengths theory, the therapeutic goal is to help people discover their areas of strength so that they can build on them in an ever-spiraling movement toward health and control. More specific therapeutic goals geared toward work with offenders relates to the discovery and reinforcement of areas of moral strength and the finding of alternative ways of coping with stress other than through violence or drug use or other illegal activities. Despite the constraints of the criminal justice system and the daily humiliations engendered in the system, correctional clients still can be helped to find an inner pride in themselves and their accomplishments. Within the constraints of the coercive bureaucracy, a little goes a long way, and minor accomplishments can become major triumphs. It is all a question of context.

Correctional Practice

Filtering out the major themes from the strengths perspective relevant to correctional practice, the following guidelines emerge:

Seek the positive in terms of people's coping skills, and you will find it. Look beyond presenting symptoms and setbacks and encourage clients to identify their talents, dreams, insights, and fortitude.

Can a psychological diagnosis be approached positively? A refutation of pathology need not preclude an affirmative use of diagnosis. The secret is in how the diagnosis is used. As the traditional saying goes, knowledge is power. Knowledge of one's medical condition, if accurate and meaningful, can bring tremendous relief. A leading psychiatrist, John Ratey (1997, p. 76), for example, describes what an eye-opener it was for him to understand why he is as he is:

> A diagnosis by itself can change a life. My own father suffered from manic-depression and I used to wonder if I had inherited the same disorder. When I learned I had ADD (attention deficit disorder), that fact alone made a huge difference to my life. Instead of thinking of myself as having a character flaw, a family legacy, or some potentially ominous "difference" between me and other people, I could see myself in terms of having a unique brain biology. This understanding freed me emotionally. In fact, I would much rather have ADD than not have it, since I love the positive qualities that go along with it—creativity, energy, and unpredictability.

Since many offenders share the ADD diagnosis, this example is highly relevant to correctional work. The bulk of strengths literature, in the tradition of client-centered therapy, it should be pointed out, is highly critical of the use of diagnoses and other labels for reasons that are understandable. Cowger (1994, p. 267), for example, states that diagnosis is incongruent with a strengths perspective. "Diagnosis," he suggests, "is understood in the context of pathology, deviance, and deficits" and furthermore "is associated with a medical model of labeling." In response, I will make the case that the naming of symptoms often alleviates blaming. As we learn more and more about how brain chemistry affects our moods, cravings, and other behavior, such knowledge, far from being destructive, can be liberating to the individual. The process of assessment, however, should be a collaborative, explorative process; it is not imposed from above. With offenders, the use of negative, catch-all labels such as antisocial, borderline personality, and histrionic should be avoided. Addictions treatment centers apply the word codependent with a wild abandon (see van Wormer, 1995).

Listen to the personal narrative. Hearing the client's story, the client's personal and family history , is an excellent source of data for discovery of latent strengths. Through entering the world of the storyteller, the practitioner comes to grasp the client's reality, at the same time attending to signs of initiative, hope, and frustration with past counterproductive behavior that can help lead the client into a healthier outlook on life. The strengths therapist, by means of continual reinforcement of positives, seeks to help the client move away from what van den Bergh (1995, p. xix) calls "paralyzing narratives." Patricia Kelley (1996) discusses how narrative therapy can help clients reauthor their lives. Through careful questioning, the therapist introduces alternative ways of viewing reality and thereby of providing hope.

The concept of *suspension of disbelief,* borrowed from studies of ancient Greek literature and adapted by Saleebey (1997) as one of the key concepts of the strengths perspective, has special relevance for work with offenders. In contradistinction to the usual practice in interviewing known liars, con-artists, and thieves, which is to protect yourself from being used or manipulated, this approach would have the practitioner temporarily suspend skepticism or disbelief and enter the client's world as the client presents it. To the extent that involuntary clients may "have us on," as Saleebey acknowledges, this should be regarded as a reaction to their loss of freedom, a form of resistance that may be abandoned once trust is developed. A willingness to listen to the client's own explanations and perceptions ultimately encourages the emergence of the client's truth.

Validate the pain where pain exists. Reinforce persistent efforts to alleviate the pain and help people recover from the specific injuries of oppression, neglect, and domination.

Loss and pain and, in all probability, anger, are staples of the offender experience. Typical losses include loss of freedom of varying degrees, court sanctions, relationship adjustments, and forced abstinence from use of alcohol and other drugs. Strengths-oriented treatment helps clients to grieve their losses and to achieve some degree of acceptance of

things they cannot change. The therapy process engages the client and helps the client find ways of coping that are alternatives to chemical use or destructive behaviors. The focus is on enhancing the client's sense of control and ability to make decisions in a situation of legal constraints and entanglements. "To heal our wounds," as bell hooks (1993, p. 39) tells us, "we must be able to critically examine our behavior and change." As clients begin to take responsibility for their lives, the healing process can begin. Generally, this involves recognizing how past events influence present feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Women's and men's healing may involve a journey to childhood or early adulthood where traumas occurred. Healing may require a working through of guilt feelings whether they are justified or not. Inner change often comes through identifying irrational thoughts and concomitant feelings and reframing unhealthy assumptions and beliefs.

David Goodson (1998), youth shelter worker and himself an ex-convict, says it best:

> I deal with a lot of cultural pain. The same issues come up again and again, and the issue of race always comes up, the issue of Who I am. Who am I as a black man? In a lecture I heard recently, the speaker said the only thing that keeps people clean is the fear of dying of an overdose. But in my work we have to go beyond that and acquire a love for life, a love for yourself, a love for your family, and so on. Sometimes we preach a message of running from rather than a message of salvation. My point is we have to go beyond fear to the positives. As black men we have to view this (drug use) as self-destructive behavior due to cultural self hatred.

Similarly, in her book on black women and self-recovery, bell hooks (1993) connects the struggle of people to "recover" from suffering and woundedness caused by political oppression/exploitation with the effort to break with addictive behavior. "Collectively, black women will lead more life-affirming lives," she writes (p. 111), "as we break through denial, acknowledge our pain, express our grief, and let the mourning teach us how to rejoice and begin life anew."

Don't dictate: collaborate through an agreed upon, mutual discovery of solutions among helpers, families, and support networks. Validation and collaboration are integral steps in a consciousness-raising process that can lead to healing and empowerment (Bricker-Jenkins, 1991).

Correctional counselors, such as probation officers, for example, find themselves in a position of extreme power imbalance that, if handled incorrectly, can be the death knell of a therapeutic treatment relationship. Workers can minimize this imbalance by stressing the importance of the client's perceptions and meanings. The fundamental social work value of self-determination is reified as practitioners entrust clients with rights and responsibilities to make decisions in each phase of the treatment process. To be effective, the process must redefine traditional roles, insofar as is possible, to reflect the status of clients as active partners (Miley et al., 1998). The long-standing social work principle "begin where the client is" has profound implications for the path that individual therapy will take. In partnership, workers and client map out an area of where to go (the goals), how rough a road to travel (issues to address), and the means of getting there (intervention and exercises). Instead of a philosophy of the treatment guide as the expert and teacher, the notion of this type of journey is simply that two heads are better than one to figure things out.

Related to the concept of collaboration is the notion of *interactionism*. Interactional relationships are reciprocal exchanges in which the teacher is the learner and the learner the teacher. The opposite of interactionism is the model of cause and effect, a linear concept in which an action at point A causes a reaction at point B. The added dimension here is that A affects B and B affects A simultaneously. The effect is not merely additive but synergistic, for when phenomena including people are brought into interrelationships, they create new and often unexpected patterns and resources that typically exceed the complexity of their individual components (Saleebey, 1992). The whole is more than the sum of its parts, in other words.

In a relationship, because of the synergy involved, moods are transmitted, often unintentionally. The effect is as much on the therapist as it is on the client. Thus, the depression of one becomes the depression of both and likewise with joy. We learn from Zeldin (1994, p. 185) of a positive meeting of the minds between a criminal justice volunteer and her work at a French home for prostitutes:

> "I knew nothing about them, paying no more attention to them than stray dogs in the street, but when I discovered this home by chance, I became very interested by how one becomes a prostitute, a double person. I look after two of them, and learned how parents kick their children out when there are too many mouths to feed, knowing they will end up in brothels. I treat these prostitutes as people, I do not judge them. One of them said to me, 'You have laughing eyes, and that does me good.' That is because I am conscious of being happy. Many people have reason to be happy, but do not know it." The voluntary work, says Mauricette, has transformed her appearance. "I have an austere face, but now I smile in the street."

To help people be more than what their criminal records would have us believe they can be is the goal. We know that some offenders emerge from their experiences with the criminal justice system redeemed and full of love for humanity while others are embittered and full of hate. People throughout the world were moved by the transformation of 35-year-old Karla Faye Tucker from brutal axe-murderer to repentant, hymn-singing Christian whose courage and deep religious faith she carried to her appointment with death by the State of Texas (see *The Economist*, 1998). Tucker not only was able to forgive her tormenters, those Texans cheering on her execution, but, more strikingly, she was able to forgive herself. Tucker's heroic strength presumably came from solitude, Bible reading, and a close relationship with a prison chaplain who guided her on her journey. It would have been difficult for this convict to achieve any level of reconciliation without help or inspiration from outside herself. Turning to religion besides gave her a sense of connectedness, both with humanity and with a power higher than herself. Above all, it provided her with what Zeldin (1994, p. 142) terms "spiritual dignity." The pains of imprisonment, the humiliations of death row inflicted upon those whose every private act is under surveillance, the insults of the mass media, all would have seemed less intolerable when a person found an inner conviction or peace.

Draw on every ounce of your social work imagination to reach people who at first may seem unreachable and who, for the most part, have been "written off" by authorities for their bad behavior and attitude. The process of uncovering strengths for persons "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" is fraught with difficulty. Additionally, there is the paradox of using a positive, client-centered orientation within a system that is highly punitive and the paradox of using creative and imaginative techniques in a setting bound by legislative rules and mandates and apt to be dominated at all levels by persons whose abilities at critical thinking sometimes appear to be lacking. This is where the challenge comes in, to somehow find a way to help people who do not want to be helped in a system not noted for compassion much less treatment innovation. Clearly, adding more darkness to the darkness will not further the cause of social justice.

Elsewhere, the *social work imagination*, a term comparable to C. Wright Mills' concept of the sociological imagination, is used to refer to that combination of empathy, suspension of disbelief, insight, and resourcefulness that makes for exceptional social work practice (van Wormer, 1997). Social workers need to be intermediaries, to open up the world to another, even as they gain a new or altered perspective from the same source. The energy of mutual discovery feeds on itself, recharges itself. Social work imagination makes it possible "to perceive the congruities in the incongruities, to discern the false dualism between the private and the public, to experience the beauty of social work against the bureaucratic assaults, and to see the past in the present" (van Wormer, 1997, p. 205). To have a new vision of the future, so important in work with court-ordered clients and other offenders, it is helpful if not absolutely necessary to have a new vision of the past. The mind is a refuge of ideas and images, many of them unhealthy, some distorted.

In counseling female offenders, the worker can begin by entering the world of these women, hearing the pain, anguish, and confusion and drawing on the women's own language and concepts to become the dominant mode of expression. An understanding of how sexism, racism, and class oppression affect this highly stigmatized group of women is essential to effective work with them. A history of victimization in abusive relationships, addiction, inadequate support systems, and severe economic problems alternates against glimpses of inner resourcefulness, daily survival skills, concern for children, and family loyalty. Through reflective listening and reinforcing revelations of strength, social workers can establish pathways to possibility when even the most convoluted life stories are offered. The feminist/strengths approach is especially effective in helping people reclaim a degree of personal power in their lives if, indeed, they ever had any, and in helping them gain a sense of it if they did not.

Conclusion

A clear understatement is to say that the empowering and rehabilitative goals discussed in this article are not the goals of most correctional systems or penal institutions in which social workers are employed. With job possibilities in the correctional field growing at an unprecedented rate, social workers can do one of three things: uphold social work values of self-determination by refusing to work in an authoritarian, politically driven system (see O'Hare, 1996); knuckle under to the demands of the system and come to adopt a distrustful, pathology-cased approach to the criminal population; or work within the system to change the system, advocate on behalf of clients, and help offenders get in touch with their own inner resources, however limited these may seem at the time. The social worker choosing this field of work will be confronted with the difficulty of needing to adapt social work skills and values to the correctional milieu (Severson, 1994). Yet, as Johnson (1995) urges, social workers should not relinquish their role here. To relinquish their role would be to cave in to more punitive forces and to deny inmates and other offenders the mental health counseling and support they desperately need. Professionals who, like me, harbor strong moral objections to the incarceration mania that is gripping this country can resolve like Quakers to "be in the world without being totally of the world." Idealistic workers can work to change the system when the time is right and meanwhile help a few individuals along the way.

The sudden recognition of the substance abuse/crime link (80 percent of prisoners have been found to have gotten into trouble because of alcohol or other drug involvement) and of the role of substance abuse in the high reoffending rates has been headlined in the media (Fields, 1998). Meanwhile, President Clinton's call for drastically extended drug testing and treatment for inmates and parolees has been well received (Associated Press, 1998). Under the circumstances, social workers can request to continue to be called on to provide clinical services to this population. However, at present only 10 percent of accredited social work programs even offer an elective course in correctional or justice social work much less a full concentration in offender rehabilitation (McNeece & Roberts, 1997). This is sad. One should never underestimate the power of an approach based on strengths and on possibility rather than probability. It may not do much to change people. But, in the final analysis, it is the only thing that will.

In any case, whether they choose to work within the justice system or on the outside, members of the social work profession inevitably will be working with persons who have violated the law. If contemporary trends continue, social workers will be called upon to provide substance abuse intervention, AIDS counseling, sexual offender treatment, anger management work with batterers, and juvenile offender counseling. For this kind of work, a strengths orientation will stand in good stead.

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