

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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Creating Positive Meaning

© Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D.

The other day I received this email, which is reproduced here with permission.

It was May of 1988. The H.R. department called me and offered me a job as a Correctional Officer. I was 20 years old and I thought, "This is cool, I get to be the police." I got my uniforms, and started on shift the next night. No basic training, not for another 6 months. They just told me to show up for work at 2300 hours. My second night on the job, while conducting a shakedown of a common inmate area, I found a freshly sharpened 10 inch shank. I thought to myself, "What am I doing here?" 20 years later, 2 great supportive parents, 2 awesome kids, 2 divorces, the loss of 5 fellow correctional officers, God only knows how many shift changes (I think 16 times), 4 promotions and numerous inmate on staff assaults, including 5 on myself, and to add to that, high blood pressure and PTSD, and I still ask myself, "What am I doing here?"

Over the past 20 years, I've been constantly asking myself why I do what I do. Do I do it for the money, the prestige, the notoriety? I sure don't do it for the glory because there ain't no glory in this line of work.

I come to work every day and put up with verbally assaultive inmates, physically assaultive inmates, hard-to-deal-with unhappy co-workers, and then there's my family who wants me to stay home with them because they miss me and don't want me to leave them, or there are days when I just dread coming to work because I know it's going to be another one of those days. I again ask myself, "What am I doing here?"

As the writer of the above email poignantly explains, one of the most challenging aspects of corrections work is the maintenance of a sense of meaning. Communicating with corrections staff across the nation I often hear them ask, *What am I doing here?*

The negativity of the workplace, inherent dangers, violence, pervasive hopelessness, and the revolving door are just a few of the reasons why corrections workers have to strive to see the positive in what they do.

Positive meaning is derived from the sense of achieving a worthwhile purpose, from "becoming all we can be," and from helping others. To create positive meaning in corrections, you must seek to highlight every act of courage, civility or integrity, and to celebrate even the tiniest shred of progress in both offenders and staff.

I once asked a correctional veteran how many offenders he knew who had turned their lives around after their release. He told me he knew of only one in his 17 years of service, but that that one mattered to him as he had invested time and energy guiding that offender. This employee was wise not to look at numbers. In corrections, each individual impacted positively is a huge success. When we consider how many people that individual will impact, we'll be amazed at how much "one" matters. So aim to influence offenders positively through your professionalism and your ethics, even if you think that the return on your investment is low. Even one success story gives your life meaning.

As an outside observer, I can tell you that, to me, the skillfulness required of corrections professionals is staggering. At any point in your shift you may employ skills related to psychology, social work, public health, education, motivational speaking, mentoring, law enforcement

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IN MEMORIAM
CO Sandra Grondin
Wisconsin DOC
November 7, 2008
Motorcycle Accident

DWCO MISSION
To increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of staff of all disciplines within the corrections profession.

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THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

866-YOU-VENT

youvent@desertwaters.com

Profanity in Corrections: Is It Really Necessary?

by Billy S. Humphrey

Jerry Clower said it best when he proclaimed, "Profanity is a public announcement of stupidity." Mr. Clower was a comedian from Yazoo City, Mississippi. He believed that comedians could be funny without being vulgar. He never used profanity and suggested that *people who did were simply lazy in their attempts to emphasize a particular message*. Jerry Clower was a true professional.

I obtained permission from him to use his "Profanity is a Public Announcement of Stupidity" phrase before he died in 1998. We painted it on huge signs and strategically placed it in the center of Texas Correctional institutions during my watch as facility administrator. The majority of the staff understood the expectation and responded in a positive manner, but many of them were resistant. Over time I began to understand why.

Profanity has been condoned and accepted as part of the business throughout our history, almost becoming the norm. There are practitioners who rationalize our use of profanity, arguing that the use of vulgar language in Corrections is a justifiable approach to offender management. They view it as a form of corruption for a noble cause, an undesirable means to a necessary end. These practitioners are convinced that profanity is the only form of communication that the majority of offenders respond to, and that it is necessary to speak to them in this manner to obtain swift compliance.

If we accept this as the truth, however, then we are saying that the only way to achieve compliance from most offenders is to direct profanity towards them. This is totally not true. There is no situation where anyone is required to be unprofessional and vulgar in order to obtain compliance from offenders. *We use profanity only as a matter of habit or as a result of losing control of our emotions.*

It is unjustifiable to conclude that profanity serves a legitimate purpose in support of our official responsibilities. In actuality, the mere use of vulgar language usually complicates most situations in a secure penal institution.

I remember receiving complaints from offenders after staff members would lose their composure and use profanity towards them. The offenders would always end the complaint by reminding me of the sign posted in the center of the compound!

Tom Turner, in his text titled *Why People Obey the Law*, suggests that legitimacy induces compliance, and illegitimacy induces noncompliance.

There is indeed a legitimate response in Corrections to any situation we are faced with. The use of profanity to respond in like terms to offenders is not one of them. We as employees realize that this type of conduct is inappropriate, and our offender populations realize this as well. This is precisely why we oftentimes have to utilize force after we become angry towards offenders and use vulgar language when reacting to them. The situation then escalates because offenders realize that as professionals we are prohibited from using this type of language. It is this perceived illegitimacy of our choices which almost always causes additional problems for us.

We must ask ourselves if this type of behavior is really necessary, or if indeed there is a better way of conducting ourselves on the job.

I suggest to you that the answer to this question is a resounding "YES!" There is a better way for us to achieve our desired results than the use of profanity. It is called being a professional. If we truly wish to control and correct others, we must first be willing to correct and control ourselves. There is never a situation where it is necessary for any one of us to utilize profanity. What we need to do instead is issue direct and firm instructions to offenders.

It is the responsibility of Correctional supervisors to model this behavior. Supervisors must lead by example, being accountable and civil to all people. This is what I call leadership that is respectable. It is only through high quality supervision that we as a profession will be able to continue to evolve and facilitate positive change in Corrections.

This is what ought to be considered a noble cause for all who are truly committed to our mission in Corrections. Remember, people are our business! We need to treat them like we'd like to be treated, with decency and respect.

Billy S. Humphrey began his career in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1989. He has served as Warden and Director of Training / Staff Development in Adult Corrections, and as Deputy Director of Juvenile Corrections. He is currently Assistant Director of Correctional Managed Care.

Creating Positive Meaning

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and waging war. This degree of skillfulness does not occur overnight. You achieve it through years of immersion in the system, instruction, motivation, self-reflection and self-control. Becoming good at your work is an impressive accomplishment. I admire and respect you for what you do and the price you often pay to do it. Whenever you notice that you are becoming more skilled in your job think of how far you've come. Whenever you face your fears and stand your ground, doing the right thing, you are admirable. Whenever you assist offenders within policy, you impact them positively and you remind yourself that they are human beings, with needs like yours. Whenever you exercise self-control in the face of provocation, you are commendable, acting truly as an adult. Whenever you choose to see the silver lining in the cloud, you are winning the battle of the mind, remaining in control of your attitude. Whenever you support colleagues in their struggles and help them do a better job, you offer them gifts of teamwork and compassion, and you reinforce why you are an asset to your profession. Whenever you choose to not return evil for evil, you are winning the most important battle of all—the spiritual one. These are all noteworthy achievements that give life precious meaning.

In a nutshell, to create positive meaning in corrections you must seek to live according to your highest values, and to strive to promote progress in yourself and others. Spell out your ideals: What do you want your life to be about? How do you want to be remembered after you're gone? How do you want to impact your world? In what

ways do you want to make corrections a better profession? What kind of a partner/spouse/friend/parent do you want to be? Who/what do you worship? What do you consider worth living for? Worth dying for?

The time to begin fleshing out the vision for your life and for your profession is *now*. Keep applying yourself consistently to the pursuit of developing your "best self" according to your highest values. Keep seeking input from others who have what you want. Keep helping others. Yes, it is hard work, but it's also exhilarating. Every step in that direction brings you the joy of a meaningful life and career, and makes you an inspiration to others.

In closing I want to share the thoughts of an ex-corrections worker on the value of corrections work:

Yes, I do think about my old job with pride. Sometimes I really miss it. It was a unique profession and now that it is behind me I think of all the valuable lessons I learned there, the very special people I worked with, and the very important work that is accomplished in a job where at times it feels like you are doing nothing. I truly respect Correctional Workers. No street Police or any other type of Law Enforcement profession is like Corrections. I know that when I was there I didn't feel that way. Many who work in that environment don't realize that what they do and what they experience is unlike any other job out there. Correctional Workers deserve a lot more respect than they get, and they deserve a lot more pay than they receive. The reason why so many folks on the outside barely know that they exist and what they go through is because they do their jobs so well. They should claim their "invisibility" as a sign of a job well done. I pray for their safety and happiness.

The Old Screw

The Doors Are Closed

The doors are closed now at my old alma matter
The tunnels are quiet, no movement on the tiers
The cellblocks that used to have so much life
And yes, way, way too much death, are now quiet
Missouri State Prison has closed its doors now
Nothing left but ghosts and memories, quiet
Oh, so quiet, the sound of quietness so loud it almost
Hurts the ears, the eyes playing tricks, quiet
I think of all the people I knew and how I felt

New to this life of violence and mayhem, death
I never knew a man could be killed over anything
A small debt, an afro comb, a wrong look at them
And although I know it's crazy and very weird
I would like to walk the tunnels and cellblocks
Walk them one last time, one last memory
Where it all started 48 years ago, when I lived.
Take care,
The Old Screw

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization
for the well-being of correctional
staff and their families*

Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D.
Executive Director

**P.O. Box 355
Florence, CO 81226
(719) 784-4727**

DESERTWATERS@DESERTWATERS.COM

WWW.DESERTWATERS.COM

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MANY THANKS!

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From the DWCO Board

Investing in the Well-Being of Corrections Workers

Daily there are many worthy organizations appealing to you for funds. As we ask you to consider a year-end tax-deductible contribution to DWCO, we want to remind you that we offer many of our services to corrections staff across the nation at no charge. The 24/7 *Corrections Ventline*, consultations with a mental health provider, the *Correctional Oasis*, and some trainings are provided to corrections staff and families for free. The salary of DWCO's one employee is a fraction of what that person would be earning in the private sector. Our 40 or so volunteers give of their time freely to DWCO's mission. The vast majority of your investment in DWCO goes to support our services to you and your colleagues. If every person who receives this publication contributed \$1/week, \$4/month to DWCO, we would meet our obligations plus hire much needed additional part-time staff. The requests for DWCO's services keep growing and we need more office help. Help us so we can continue to help you and yours. Commit to a monthly donation or offer a one-time gift. Buy a membership for yourself or others. *We are thankful for every donation, no matter what the amount.* Someday you or someone you care about may benefit from DWCO's services.

Upcoming Booklet with Wellness Strategies for Corrections Staff

The Billy Graham Center—The Institute for Prison Ministries is publishing a booklet written by DWCO's Executive Director, Caterina Spinaris Tudor, on wellness strategies for corrections staff and their families. The booklet, entitled *Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff*, is expected to be available to the public in December 2008. For more information and to order copies, please contact DWCO at 719-784-4727 or at desertwaters@desertwaters.com.