

## **Sunshine and Fresh Air: Drawing Connections ...at the edges, HMP Whitemoor,**

May - August 2018 - an Embodied Experience.

When approached with the idea of going to work at the High Security Prison, HMP Whitemoor, I had little idea of what to expect. Particularly as the areas in which I was to engage prisoners were the Close Surveillance Centre (CSC) (F-Wing) where men were held because they were considered to be dangerous to themselves, or other people; and on the Fens Unit (D-Wing), for Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorders (DSPD) undergoing a Five Year Therapy Programme. Visions of Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* bubbled up, closely followed by other films, such as *Pierrepoint* and *Capote*. Tungsten in weight & density, a succession of unclear images of these largely unseen environments hung in the hallways of my mind.

Having been brought up in the military, the environment wasn't unfamiliar: 'watch towers', perimeter fences topped with razor wire; high, blank walls and uniformed people didn't present an issue for me, nor did the security checks, or stringent rules on what you can & can't bring in; in many ways being without a mobile phone was a liberation. Which begs several other questions about the use of mobile phones in prison, Liberty, surveillance, society and the current concept of imprisonment, but that is a separate issue for another time.

My previous experiences of these environments, apart from my work with Just Is Learning Together and Sing Inside, had been at HMP Springhill, a lower security, open conditions, Cat. D prison. It was here that I ran my first *Drawing Connections ...at The Edges* project, bringing students from the local Art College to work with men in a series of Artist led sessions. Being in the last years and stages of their sentences, the aim was to use art and creativity to broaden perspectives as a vehicle for positive engagement. To develop the self-esteem of the participants (all) and enable skills, particularly to help Prison participants with their reintroduction in society, leading up to and upon release.

HMP Whitemoor on the other hand was a high security prison for Cat A and B prisoners. These men were nowhere near release. What was I doing here? It's a question I frequently asked myself in the first weeks of the residency.

I think I'm a good person, but I do know what it is like to be plagued by negativity and dark imaginings, to be in isolation and to suffer trauma, to feel ignored and silenced: like so many before, I know that through creativity I have found my voice. I have been able to weather the storms and find peace in a world of torment. Post Trauma, on the voyage of recovery I have found release in play, discovered joy in my suffering and dedication, discipline and balance where little is to be found around me, through the simple practice of Qigong. This is what I hoped to bring to these areas of Whitemoor, was it possible to shed a little light in the darkness and help enable the best in these people?

### **F-Wing**

F-Wing was an unusual experience, the dynamic constantly shifting according to the general atmosphere: positive aspects one day and then negative the next, particularly given bad news; ongoing challenges in the struggle to find the correct medication, or general apathy and frustrations with the environment they have come to be in. Following my first visit before the residency began, I was left with a sense of claustrophobia: of an oppressed, confined space.

However, this contrasted a lot with the first day of my placement there. The sun was shining, which made a huge difference. The space felt larger, airier and whilst some were wary in their own ways, prisoners and staff were all polite and welcoming. Eager to help, if not participate and happy to see a new face around. I was only a visitor though, and can well appreciate that the confines of the same space, day-in-day-out over a number of months, or even years could lead to immense negativity.

My first few sessions were spent in observation mode, assessing the people and environment. Although my time (approximately one hundred hours over a course of twelve weeks) was limited and only afforded a snapshot of the people and place, and certainty doesn't enable me to fully understand F-Wing, I scratched the surface enough to comprehend the struggle encountered (by all) on a daily basis. A large central space containing a pool table, fish tank, puzzles, several chairs and a table, opens up to two spurs set off at right angles to one another, with all cells, one per man, looking on to the exercise yard; a contained, outdoor space which hosted a green house, plots and a grassed area, a ball court and a couple of benches.

The facilities available to the prisoners in the wing were comfortable. Cooking and laundry facilities, a tv room or two for communal viewing, a gym and reasonable sized exercise Yard for ball sports, with an area of beds for growing crops, as previously mentioned; an activity room with a computer for educational use, but also reasonably well equipped for creative endeavours such as painting, drawing, clay work, matchsticks model making, knitting and crochet. Provided there were enough members of staff, cooking sessions were also made available, facilitated by willing and able prison officers and oftentimes in good weather men and staff spent time sat on the benches in the yard 'putting the world to rights'.

Luckily, the sun shone most days of my visit and I liked to start the day practicing a form of Qigong Tai Chi, called Shibashi. It helped me to feel relaxed, balanced and enabled me to master my interactions within this challenging space. I was keen to share this practice with the men on F-Wing and on occasions, I was joined by prisoners and staff alike. With the benefit of sunshine and taking inspiration from a poem written in the first project at Springhill by a participant prison officer, I worked in the exercise yard with a large roll of paper and oil pastels, working with people and their shadows. Generally, engagement was at best 25% and this for a short period of time only, except for one member who was consistently engaged. There were a few exceptions however, when we had a good turnout, as the following paragraphs illustrate:

There were occasions when both staff and men (prisoners) were sat around the table in the activity room. On one occasion, whilst working in Terracotta with visiting artist Lisa we had as many as eight people in the activity room. Given that the prison issue mugs were made of plastic, we thought giving the men the opportunity to make something, which they could ultimately use over and over (every time they made a drink no less), would give them a positive sense of achievement. We also took inspiration from Antony Gormley and his work Fields, in the possibility we might be able to fill a cell with little figures... Three prisoners, myself and Lisa, a visiting chaplain, and two members of staff sat around the tables and as we worked, talked loosely about children and motherhood. This conversation led to a discussion about childbirth and some of the men opened up about their partners and experiences when their own children were born. The session was a revelation, all those in the room I believe turned a corner at that moment, in the name of humanity.

Another session with profound outcomes came through working with Soapstone. At this point I should extend much gratitude to staff members who were instrumental in enabling the activity to proceed. The tools required were not without hazards and could be compared to medieval torture instruments; barbed rasps to cut in to the soft, chalky stone and finely worked 8" rods of metal, for finishing. It doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to consider any number of horrendous outcomes, but in my mind what was of more value, was enabling the trust and respect to work with the men and these tools in the same space. All necessary measures were made and taken by myself and staff to create an environment whereby we all felt safe to explore and reveal the wonders of this simple, but miraculous material.

Presenting people with a raw piece of stone, small enough to fit the palm of the hand most will remain uninspired. Encouraging them to spend a few minutes with the stone, rinsing it under the tap to remove the dust and reveal its natural hue, then turning it and observing the shapes and contours, sparks of imagination began. Like starrng at clouds, wall paper, or flooring tiles, people were led to see, to observe; this, fundamentally is the first lesson to any creativity. Whilst some had very fixed ideas about what they wanted to create, some were moved to create something that revealed itself as the Stone was cut. All were transformed by the experience.

With John a Developmental Therapy (DvT) Practitioner from Converse Theatre and a Tai Chi enthusiast, we took the opportunity to consider a screen play, or at least a scene from a film, this presented the men (and staff) with an exercise of the imagination. Though this foray had been brief, many were taken aback and entertained to discover quite how active their imaginations were when given the opportunity. Another turning point in the road.

On my last, and most recent visit to the Wing, measures were being taken to renovate the flooring and one of the men, who was instrumental in helping me paint the exercise yard mural, was grabbing every opportunity to paint. Whether it was the gym, or a cell he was a man on a mission, painting was his new pastime and he did so, as I understand, to break the monotony.

Interestingly, on the train down for this particular visit I spent the journey talking to a Dominican monk, who informed me that they too had cells, rather than bedrooms and this was in fact where Prison cells took their design from. I explained to the monk, that one individual on F-Wing appeared monastic in his daily routine...

In spite of his initial interest in the residency and some of the concepts presented for the project, this individual made it quite apparent that I was unlikely to gain his participation, particularly as he was observing a non-engagement policy with the prison at that time and didn't wish to entice written records of his interactions with me. On a daily basis his routine was almost like clockwork, and unless an element of his routine was disrupted by an inconsistency in his environment, he was a very placid and polite individual to me, whatever his differences.

Certainly though, the culture of 'us and them' held with some people and sometimes stained the air. This sour taint, projected by a minority was quite apparent when I began, and on occasions permeated the air and affected the environment of the wing. However, with time it did seem to lessen, though it may have been an illusion. Notably, it turned out, that my placement was not to be just about the prisoners, but also the staff on F-Wing. Prison staff on CSCs are required to work with the most difficult prisoners in the system and as a consequence have to be guarded. I was confronted with questions about my motivations and on occasion, suggestions were made I should take my practice to deserving and well-intentioned individuals who would appreciate my visits.

I believe my visits were appreciated, perhaps not by all present every time, but after my first few weeks I felt comfortable enough to wander down the Spurs (always under observation) to say good morning to the men and ask after their well-being, they responded warmly enough and sometimes called me a ray of sunshine. 'It was a breath of fresh air to be asked, genuinely' they said.

Reflecting on my time in the Wing I am reminded of Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival (a travelling spectacle of caged animals, rendered as mythical creatures both surreal and threatening through dark magic from the film *The Last Unicorn*,) or any zoo for that matter. Many people would be quick to say the men in these places are animals caged, and they wouldn't necessarily be wrong. Albeit, these are not for entertainment, but for the protection of society. However, human they are. Putting aside their crimes -hideous though they may be- I cannot help to wonder the reason for, or circumstances that led to the behaviours they have displayed and consequently the crimes. I'm far from being a Therapist and this was not my reason for being there, and curiosity aside, it is not my job to find out the reason for their actions. I know they had done bad things, but I was and still am, reluctant to call them bad, or evil people. They have already been judged.

## **D-Wing**

If ever there was to be two more contrasting spaces, it was F-Wing and D-Wing:

D-Wing's layout was more like a conventional prison as many are familiar with seeing on the screen, if not first hand. From the entrance landing, beyond staff & activity rooms, three Spurs stretched out from a central office, as a cross. Each spur comprising three floors, cells off landings, one man per cell (although generally the third floor was for clinical staff and administrative offices).

My weekly session here were attended on average by eight men plus an officer, or two if available. All those attending were eager to participate and it provided a welcome opportunity, many said, to relax in a community of like minded individuals, for positive purpose.

Mostly, activity sessions differed to F-Wing, although in good weather we did take the opportunity to work in their exercise yard; the first session working with shadows and on another occasion exploring painting techniques, Jackson Pollock style. Generally though, our sessions took place on Friday afternoons in the activity room, which was smaller than the one found on F-Wing; for the first few sessions, I covered the tables with Brown Kraft, parcel paper which we sat around. Why brown paper? because it is less intimidating, as one of the men clearly observed 'it was warm and friendly'; we chatted and the men were encouraged to draw, doodle and write without restraint.

We worked from a Learning resource book from Kettle's Yard *How to Make a Creative Community*. I talked about my work there and the concept of space and light which is hugely significant. I also talked about the space in terms of Art Therapy, as it had been instrumental for me in finding myself and a much needed confidence in my artistic perception, as someone who has suffered a TBI (traumatic brain injury) and the life I have led since. This is a particularly interesting area for me and one I feel is particularly prescient given the people I was working with and much of the literature I have read around trauma victims. It was important for me too, to show the men that it is possible to gain enjoyment in simple past time and creative activity.

As with F-Wing I gave the men an A3 sketchbook and explained that this was theirs to write or draw in, as they should wish. I was not intending to mark, or look at their books unless they wished to show me and that they shouldn't be concerned about what they do; this was entirely for them. This was not an exercise to be considered as part of their five-year therapeutic programme, but an opportunity for them to explore, 'voice' their minds workings and still the noise. I have always carried a sketchbook, which invariably I fill with as much writing and ideas as I do drawings. I find it is an essential practice to help me make sense of the world; to understanding my own thoughts and feelings, and moreover, I believe could only help anyone else who might need to 'find peace in the noisy confusion of life'.

A few weeks in, once I felt the men in both areas were comfortable with my presence and some level of trust had been established, I brought in a fellow Artist/Creative, initially in May, Charlotte Synge joined me. Firstly to offer some friendly advice on F-Wing in all matters horticultural, in respect to the green house and planting area. Then the Friday on D-Wing we repeated an activity we first did together at HMP Springhill the previous year.

For many years Charlotte has worked in gardens investigating and implementing Permaculture activities: thinking about networks in nature and about the competition and support therein, we took the biodiversity of trees as a starting point; a series of facts about trees and their environment were delivered (reduced to 22 points for the sake of the activity) each time a Connection was made, a ball of wool was thrown between us, at random around the table where we sat.

Visually, this created a web of connections in wool, which when lowered down on to the paper, created framed areas upon the surface. Reflecting on some of the points made in Charlotte's talk the men were encouraged to draw, or write in the frames. Introducing the idea to the group at the start, many of the men quietly though it was childlike, but afterwards whilst reflecting on the session, all agreed they'd had fun and surprisingly too, we had laughed.

Three times a year all men on D-Wing have a week of non therapy, to take a rest from the routine. This is known as Therapy Break and I was asked to do activities with each spur of the Wing; 1 spur per day, mid-week I paid a visit to F-Wing to maintain some consistency. Then on the Friday (after 2 years of talking about the possibility) we painted a community mural, near the exit to the exercise Yard, on the 'ones' in D-Wing.

We led up to the mural by doing the wool activity on each spur and I repeated Charlotte's talk, this worked two fold as the men of eight were a selection from across all Spurs and when the activity took place on their respective spur, they knew what to do and were able to assist and advise. Suitably inspired by the talk, the community mural was a large tree! On the Friday morning with the group of eight we painted a 7ft trunk and branches, then in the afternoon members of the Wing were encouraged to come, spur by spur to contribute to the mural by creating the canopy of leaves with their hands. This was truly an exceptional day, for not only did the men participate, but prison officers, clinical staff; the entire D-Wing community (or about 80% of it). The mural is a little miracle in the making, every time I see it, it is always better than I remember.

Spirited on by this experience, men and staff alike have been encouraging further creative activity and I dare say, the atmosphere has changed on D-Wing. The men were keen to do another mural, this was to go on the Laundry/Servery corridor; this is the area all new men arrive on the Wing and eventually depart through. With this in mind I asked the men to think about what they might say about the Wing: in their experience, then going back to their respective Spurs, talking to fellow residents about their experiences, they design a square for the wall. The three squares sat along side each other, suspended in a spectrum of light: going from Yellow through to Red via orange; Blue to Green, touching Turquoise and then back to Yellow, through shades of Lime.

## Reflections

Two months since the residency ended at Whitemoor, I still find myself wondering about my experience: it was without a doubt rewarding. Truly to work in such an extraordinary location, albeit challenging, has given me much appreciation of the time and work required by all those associated with a prison.

Given the lessons held within the walls of Kettle's Yard, another space I have had the great pleasure to work in, I found my time in prison to be quite profound. I had the opportunity to view the prison as an outsider, not completely unaffected, but with considerable distance. The Light, or absence of it, in some places was remarkable. A frequent journey from F to D-Wing was along the trolley run. These dark passages were a sanctuary on a hot and bright day, bearing a striking resemblance to the paper walled corridors of an Imperial Japanese Palace, a space of contemplation; the dark heavy metal Railings and gates casting grid like shadows across the floor as a Charles Rennie Macintosh Design.

### Light and Darkness, in balance.

Once more, reflecting on both spaces, I am reminded of Jim Ede's placement of damaged and repaired objects around the cottages at Kettle's Yard Gallery. Wabi-sabi is a Japanese aesthetic focusing on the concept of transience and imperfection. It could also be translated I believe, as seeing beauty in the broken. It strikes me how society stands to gain so much, in overcoming fear of the other and embracing individuals in spite of their differences.

"Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves." - Henry David Thoreau may have been talking about getting lost in trees, but it is surely true of life and the experiences we live through, oftentimes metaphorically, 'hitting rock bottom'. Many individuals in prison have been and are lost. Committed crimes possibly as a result of this because they perceive it to be their only choice. Those judged and found guilty, sentenced and consequently paying the price. Once those who are ready and prepared to 'turn over a new leaf', society needs to be there to support them in this, not alienate them.

The participants, collectively responded positively, with many stating they felt encouraged and able to overcome fears. Relieved of paranoia and insecurity, able to express and be themselves. Working together and having the courage not to be afraid, seeing the good in others. If being creative once a week has enabled this much, started a shift in personal perception for the individuals involved, enabling them to move forward, then we are obliged to encourage them in more of this activity.

The irony of wearing a wrist band throughout the residency which I got from a Philosophy and Music festival attended earlier in the year, never wore off for me... For yes indeed, the words of Leonard Cohen rang true for me here;

'Through every crack, that's how the light gets in'.

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Always an observer, socially and environmentally minded, Rebecca has worked and explored creativity through interdisciplinary subjects, illustrating merging concepts in mixed media. Now her own practice is one of transformation, working with people, gaining experience and insight by enabling those she works with to realise their own potential through creativity.