



SOCIAL IMPACT: THE CHANGER OR THE CHANGED?

Years ago in 1986 I began working with a group of women in Phoenix House. They were there out of choice, to rehabilitate from drug use; the other option being prison. I was 2 years out of university and, despite, on the face of it, having a stable life and secure job, I was having my own personal, emotional struggles. Fear and shame dominated my life. I was lonely, emotionally insecure and yet was somehow still able to offer something to these young and not so young women – many of whom were older than me. One day, I was sitting on the steps of the big house waiting for the group to join me – ready to head out into the countryside for one of our outings. I remember waiting quietly in the sun reflecting on ‘how lucky they were’. An odd thing to think, under the circumstances.

They had something I believed I did not have. They had a group of people ‘looking out for them’; taking care of them; believing in them; trusting that they did indeed have the capacity to turn their lives around. Although consciously I was focusing on the other people around them (poor me, I didn’t have anyone!), in hindsight, I can see that, subconsciously I was tuning into something far more vital. The key to their potential transformation was founded on a bedrock of un-sanitised truth-telling. Every Friday, they would gather in the living room in a vast circle. There was a fog of cigarette smoke and the atmosphere was always tense – camouflaged by coarse banter and strained hilarity. This was the weekly meeting, held together by a few simple behavioural rules: *Tell your truth in whatever way you need to; Listen to everyone in turn without answering back; Strictly no physical contact and Stay seated throughout the meeting.* On the wall in this room was a piece of writing that captivated me; this is what held the focus of these meetings:

Phoenix House Philosophy

We are here because there is no refuge finally from ourselves; until we confront ourselves in the eyes and hearts of others, we are running. Until we suffer them to know our secrets, we can know no safety from them. Afraid to know ourselves, we can know no others.

Where else but in our common ground can we find such a mirror?

Here at last, we can appear clearly to ourselves, not as the giant of our dreams, nor the dwarf of our fears, but as people, part of the whole with a share in its purpose.

Here together we can take root and grow, not alone as in death but alive in ourselves and in others.

I asked for a copy because it touched me. I recognised that it was talking to me, about me. I was not a drug user; I had never prostituted myself for money to feed a drug habit. But I had my own forms of self-deceiving ‘addictions’ – not drugs, not smoking, not alcohol but food. I was 5 years into literally making myself sick. Bulimia. I was running from myself and others; I had secrets about which I was deeply ashamed; and I was afraid to know myself and to look at myself in the mirror. I was so very different from these women and yet in so many ways, I was so very similar. It may have appeared to them that I was holding together a well-adjusted existence; but they could not see beyond the veneer behind which I was hiding. Yet through them, slowly, it became possible for me to see myself without the vitriolic disgust that usually stained my internal conversations with myself.

I was in awe of their courage to admit who they were and what they had done. I was inspired by the tireless, bold challenge and forgiving support they received from their key workers. And through my connection with them all, I became bolder and kinder in facing myself; in telling my truths and in sowing the seeds of compassion that would ultimately help me recover. Accompanying and supporting them on their journeys, helped me on a path towards my own healing. I cannot make any claims on the social impact I might have made long-term on any of their lives, but I know that through them, I was changed – more than that, being with them probably saved my life. 1986 was the year I chose life. It was the year I began to come out the shadows, to reclaim myself and to simply accept – to live with what it meant to be me. This was not the contract nor the social impact I was meant to ‘make happen’ in the context of my work. I was supposed to be **The Changer**, yet found myself **The Changed**.

It is easy to see from this story that ‘impact’ is complex. It can be helpful, damaging, neutral or all three; making it impossible to map and track with confidence. Anyone connected with an action, directly or indirectly, will be affected in ways that will not be contained in simple, cause-effect relationships. There will be infinite and unknowable consequences. Acknowledging this makes it harder to ignore. To ignore it, requires a denial of reality. To be paradoxically so powerful and powerless at the same time, means accepting that we cannot control outcomes/impact. Where does that leave us? Perhaps the best we can do is to seek to act with good intention – to ‘make good causes’ for the good of all, trusting that good will come of good?

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