

Buddhas or Bad Boys?

Incarcerated Southeast Asian Youth:

Narratives of a group of Southeast Asian youth incarcerated for violent crime in the
Division of Juvenile Justice

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Acknowledgements

For the last two semesters at Pitzer College I have been privileged to participate in the *Pitzer in Ontario* Program. On this journey, my classmates and peers have enriched my life and taught me to believe in my fellow man again. I will miss them terribly as we move on to the next part of the journey. Without their love, support and inspiration none of this project could have held the richness that it now does for us all.

My group at the Division of Juvenile Justice facility in Chino has shared a resilience and strength with me that changed my view of the world. The vision of one young Laotian man to have Buddhist services available for the wards was the driving force behind all of this learning and creating. Johndy will be in my thoughts forever as well as Sao and Kim and all the rest. They have shared their stories with me, their hopes, disappointments, and hours of conversation and laughter. Peace be with them always.

We all missed you this semester Susan, but of course you are in our hearts. I could not acknowledge anything without speaking and thinking of Tessa. Professor, friend, mentor, formidable intellect, and beautiful spirit. I have learned as much about goodness as I have about Qualitative Research from her. Thanks. (May 2008)

Introduction

The Division of Juvenile Justice, formerly California Youth Authority, evolved from several reformatories run by the state in the mid 1800's. Prior to that time, youth offenders were sentenced to adult prisons. These reformatories and "schools" had numerous incarnations, as part of the Division of Institutions, throughout the state until 1941 when the Youth Corrections Authority Act was passed by the state legislature. Three institutions were then passed from the Division of Institutions to the Youth Authority. The first official commitment of a ward under the Youth Authority Act resulted in the transfer of a 14 year old male from San Quentin where he had been sent for second degree murder. Since that time, a number of facilities have opened and closed, the directors of the Youth Authority have changed frequently, and eventually the entire system has been absorbed into the California Department of Corrections and renamed the Division of Juvenile Justice in 2005. All historical facts, demographics, and budget

information found here was readily available on the Department of Corrections website. (cdcr.ca.gov 2008)

The Division of Juvenile Justice's Mission, Section 1700 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, is "to protect the public from criminal activity." It is to accomplish this by providing training and treatment services to youthful offenders, to direct those offenders to participate in community, victim restitution, assist local communities with efforts to control crime, delinquency, and encourage the development of state and local programs to prevent crime and delinquency.

Funding for the Division of Juvenile Justice is incorporated into the California Department of Corrections budget. The 2006-07 budgets, the Governor's Budget Act, is \$530,491,000; the per capita cost per ward is \$71,700.

Heman G. Stark is a correctional facility of the Division of Juvenile Justice located in Chino, CA. The staff roles at Heman G. Stark in Chino and throughout the Division of Juvenile Justice are defined by branches. The Administrative Branch, the Education Branch, the Institutions and Camps Branch, the Legal Office, and the Parole Services and Community Corrections Branch which all have their own roles in the different institutions.

The wards deal with Correctional Officers and Youth Counselors on a daily basis. Youth Counselors are technically Peace Officers but wear plain clothes and carry mace and handcuffs but no weapon. Each unit is assigned YCs that deal with the operational aspects of that unit, such as releasing wards from rooms, coordinating duties, functions of movement and are the first line of contact for wards. Correctional Officers are everywhere on the grounds and move according to institutional needs. The Correctional Officers are structured similar to a military unit with rank hierarchies and they wear military style uniforms. Other staff roles and ward contact with them, such as education, chaplains, jobs, etc. are determined by the Treatment Team Supervisor on each unit based on ward behavior and staff input. The administration is where the real power in the institution resides. Consequently, everyone and everything entering the institution needs approval through the Superintendent's Office and/or the administrative staff in writing or entrance will be denied.

The relationship of Heman G. Stark with the surrounding communities is limited. It certainly is a major employer in the area, and in 1985 Free Venture was formed throughout the state forming a partnership with private industry to hire and train wards. The actual facility is somewhat hidden from the community as it is surrounded by trees and walls and if not for the sign

in front on Euclid Avenue, one would not even be able to identify it as a prison when passing.

The average ward in the Division of Juvenile Justice is 19 and the average length of commitment is approximately 22 months. Most of the population is sentenced to the facility for crimes of violence. The majority of the population is Hispanic, at 51%, followed by African American, 31%; Caucasians, 13%, Native Americans, 1%, and Asians, 2%, and Pacific Islanders, 1% are in the minority of the population. A large portion of the population is gang affiliated and their crimes gang related.

While the mission statement for the institutions claims some idealistic goals, the everyday life at Heman G. Stark does not seem defined by that same idealism. Many of the staff that I have encountered are cynical in their approach to the wards, expressing the belief that we as volunteers are wasting our time. Many of the correctional officers are friendly towards us but clearly see this as a punitive prison and not a rehabilitation center or treatment facility. Their mission is to maintain security at all costs and without mercy. The wards spend most of the day in their rooms unless they are in either high school or college, or have a job at the institution. Many of the wards I have spoken with stay in their rooms by choice. Due to the alarming frequency of racial violence at the institution not much mingling of the wards is commonplace.

Entry into the facility requires a Federal background check for volunteers along with a TB test within the last 12 months. My own personal clearance process began in May 2007 and completed in September 2007. Once cleared a photo ID is issued that must be presented to the guards upon entry. Entry is located in the administration building and is through a metal detector and an enclosed sally port. Visitors sign in and are issued alarms that track you throughout the institution and will activate if you are knocked down. Once through the sally port you enter a lobby with a large visiting hall on the left with restrooms and vending machines and directly ahead is the hallway to administration offices. As you walk through the hallway the personal alarm beeps as you pass each overhead checkpoint. As volunteers we are escorted by either staff or CO's everywhere in the institution. Exiting a building requires a call to the security team notifying them that a volunteer will be on the grounds outside.

Opportunities to discuss roles and potential programs with staff have been infrequent and mostly impromptu. Any interviews that I have had with staff have been opportunities of that particular moment, a moment when the staff member and I had some time to briefly connect and have discussion. Teddy Harder, the Catholic Chaplain, is a frequently involved with our projects and I have conversed with him in an informal manner regarding the institution, wards, and hopes for the programs on numerous occasions. My

interviews with the wards have been in the chapel or dayroom on the unit without any recording devices. I brought a prepared set of questions and we sat apart from the rest of the group and discussed the information with me taking visible notes. First and foremost, I requested permission from the wards previously, as well as checked with Teddy regarding institutional policies regarding this process.

My interviews were with the members of my group that have requested to participate in Buddhist services. Several of the men had previous Buddhist affiliations through family history; a couple of the men had no previous history yet expressed interest in learning and participating. All of the men, except one, are of Southeast Asian descent with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos all represented in their heritages. One of the young men's mothers has scarring left over from the American bombing of Laos. One of the men's families experienced the Killing Fields in Cambodia on their journey to America. The one exception is a young man of mixed race; his father is an African-American US Navy career man who met his mother, a Filipino native, while stationed at the Subic Bay Naval Station. Each of the interviews with the individual wards were approximately 30 minutes, in addition to those individual interviews a substantial portion of our group meeting time over the previous weeks had been in discussion. We had

covered topics that included Buddhism, family histories, racism, institutional life, and more.

My initial choice for a research project at the Division of Juvenile Justice Facility in Chino was to bring forth the narrative histories of the young men in the meditation group that I was asked to facilitate for the wards. That first semester, Fall 2007, brought much interference from a system that is not set up to facilitate or accommodate volunteers bringing Buddhist meditation services to the wards. Consequently, that first project was a reflection of the process of building relationships in the facility encompassing not only the dynamics of entry, but meeting staff as well as wards.

Much of that process has now been worked through and we have succeeded at least in establishing some regular meeting times with our groups. By 'we', I mean my fellow volunteers and me at the facility, that bring art, meditation, and life skills training to the wards. All volunteers in our group are from Pitzer College. They are either current or former students with a desire to be of service. Consequently, this project will be the fruits of the last two semesters: the narratives of a group of Southeast Asian young men serving felony time for violent crimes. In this process I have also researched some topics that I felt relevant to this effort that include: the transgenerational transmission of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, the

Southeast Asian Diaspora, and particularly relevant to men serving hard time, in my opinion, some research on Albert Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy in relation to our process of building what they sought for spiritual and cultural affirmation. I claim this as particularly relevant due to the fact that from the beginning, this project was their project, not mine. I was given the privilege to share this project with them. Part of that journey was rebuilding, through repeated effort, their faith in their own ability to participate in something spiritual, creative, self-directed, and safe from institutional interference.

Literature Review

Using the narrative histories of Southeast Asian youth incarcerated at the Division of Juvenile Justice, I will investigate the worldview that brought them to their state of incarceration and/or continues to keep them in an incarcerated state. In the interviews gathered to this point, several of the young men have disclosed information that I, or any of us here at Pitzer, would recognize as the story of racially motivated violence. Understanding that their actions that have led them to incarceration are racially motivated violence compels me to ask the question: Do these young men recognize that their actions reflect racially motivated violence and if so, why do these young men not characterize this violence as racially motivated? The

literature I have selected here at the very least provides a vivid foundation for the breadth of information available regarding war trauma and its effect on families, the transgenerational transmission of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and cultural upheaval experienced with acute (rapid, unplanned) migration.

The first article, Vietnamese Infant and Child Mortality Rate in Relation to the Vietnam War (Savitz, D, Thang, NM, Swensen, I, Stone, E. 1993), does not seem to integrate with the topic at first. What does infant and childhood mortality have to do with my topic? Clearly, to me, starting with the statement that “the potential for war-related activities to adversely affect the health of infants and children is apparent” seemed irrelevant. However, we have sad but revealing information on the very horrific nature of the trauma experienced by the parents and grandparents of my group. While much information is available on Holocaust survivors and other conflicts the information I have selected pertains directly to Southeast Asia. I could not help but envision a GIS (Global Information Software) chart with the infant and child mortality rates in Vietnam overlaid with the KIA ratio of the US forces in comparison.

In selecting an article, The Adjustment of Children of Australian Vietnam Veterans (Davidson, A, Mellor, D), that touched on the effects of the Southeast Asian conflict on the soldiers families we see evidence in the

Australian population, of Vietnam Vets, the transmission of war trauma to offspring through ingrained methods of coping and/or transformed worldviews is not exclusive to us here in the US or to the Southeast Asian population here in the US. Also highlighted in this article, we see the amount of research and information available on these topics.

Interesting to me is the disclosure of the racial stigma of Vietnamese Amerasian children, Vietnamese Amerasians (Bernak, F, Chung, R.). Not only from their peers in the home country, but from our system here in America, which treats them as 'refugees'. One of the young men in my group has an African American military father with whom he does not relate and expressed to me no desire to relate. The information provided in the article highlights some of the reasons for that denial of connection.

As the next article, Family Trauma and its Association with Emotional and Behavioral Problems and Social Adjustment in Adjustment in Adolescent Cambodian Refugees (Rousseau, C., Drapeau, A., Platt, R.), looks at the specific Cambodian experience, it provides me, the cultural background necessary to understand the problems of assimilation into our American Culture. Here again, reference and comparison is drawn from other war trauma populations. In this particular article, the author speaks of Lebanese, Guatemalan, and other Latin American children as populations previously studied, but brings us back to the Cambodian experience under the Pol Pot

regime and the war. Multiple studies provide dramatic evidence of PTSD symptoms recurring years following the events.

Last but not least the article that I find the most interesting compares the relationship of 'perceived' parental trauma, Relationship Among Perceived Parental Trauma, Parental Attachment, and a Sense of Coherence in Southeast Asian American College Students (Han, M. 2005). Negative mental health consequences, the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and negative parental attachment again correlate information in the previous articles on the long term effects of war trauma on families and the transmission of that trauma to the children of the families.

Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (synonymous with PTSD) is a term that we became familiar with after the conflict in Southeast Asia, and are currently learning what complex myriad of factors are brought into the mix when refugees are investigated for root causes and intergenerational transmission of this syndrome. Cultural upheaval, changed and sometimes lost adolescent expectations, gender stereotypes not in accordance with the culture of the host country added to the trauma. In this group we now have a worldview unique in the search for survival, and perception about the world itself, as a violent and unsafe place. Is it any wonder why violence and disassociation from community is observed within this population? Many of the young men in my group have spoken of the respect, sense of

community, and cohesiveness that is available to them as gang members. It is obvious to anyone who is not dismissing them as “animals” that a sense of dignity is found in the personas they have adapted to survive in a world that certainly has offered them no dignity, decency, and cultural respect.

Research Methods

The research method and approach I chose for this project is narrative, and the actual data collection was done through participant observation and interview. In choosing a methodology, I used selected Social Constructivism in search of the meaning in the personal worldviews of all parties involved. It will be dependent on the views of the participants to create the final analysis. As the interviewees relate their stories I am expecting to find the underlying patterns that have formed their worldviews. In the retelling of personal histories I expected the men, these wards, to share their varied experiences leading to incarceration and gang involvement. Postmodernism plays a large part in my interpretation of those histories as the accumulation of knowledge held by these youth regarding racism, class, gender, and social stratification will be interpreted through the contextual settings of their lives. The importance of the voices of marginalized groups in deconstructing concealed hierarchies, dominations,

and inconsistencies will be paramount in the analysis of this material.

(Creswell, J. 2007)

The lion's share of the data gathered at the facility was by observational notes. On very few occasions was it possible to take notes as we were in the process of meeting staff, visiting the units to set up meeting times, meeting wards for the first time, and traversing the grounds talking with various staff and/or wards. At the end of the day I would reflect on the experience and jot brief notes of reminder and then transcribe and fill them in at a later time. After six to eight weeks of arranging, renegotiating, establishing guidelines, our group finally established weekly meetings as well as membership (decided by the wards) wherein I was able to obtain some personal interviews.

Discussion

I had no idea what to expect from this project from the beginning. Meeting young men incarcerated for violent crimes in the Department of Juvenile Justice from Southeast Asia and developing a research project was a new venture into uncharted territory. The amount of energy necessary to gain entrance to the facility, meet staff to discuss project possibilities,

establish meeting times, and eventually get together with the wards both on the units and in the chapel was enormous.

As this process unfolded the staff that would be cooperative and assist us on this journey became obvious to us through trial and error. Through experience and effort reaching out for assistance it was revealed to us who among the staff were willing to participate. The wards were cynical, untrusting, and vocal regarding past promises that had been broken, and many of them unruly and hostile. We volunteers kept our hopes up by talking with each other and reassuring ourselves and each other that this could be accomplished with perseverance and continued contact with the administration.

The initial meetings with my group in the chapel that would become the core of this research project were awkward and unsure. I was an unknown making promises that they had heard previously and had historically proved unreliable. The dynamics regarding my position in relation to them took some time to unpack. Initially, they approached me in the manner of a staff member. They would ask permission to use the restroom or any other minor thing that I took for granted. It was a process to allow them to understand that in our group humanity was for everyone.

Initially, they were incapable of believing that they might have a say in how this would unfold. In spite of my assurances that I was just a facilitator

for them the harsh reality of life in the institution guided their belief system. Long before we were to reach a point of personal interviews for this project, we spent the hours getting to know each other. I was tested on many occasions by them regarding trust, reactions to their crimes, and the reliability of my promises. I would be offered tidbits of information regarding behavior that was against institutional policy and then they would wait for my reaction or until the next meeting to see if it would come back to them in any way. I was asked to look for items for them and then when I would access them they would deny having asked. In one instance it was a photo of Hanuman, the Hindu monkey God. I searched out every photo I could possibly find and printed them out for the next visit only to have them rejected.

As we spent the evenings together each week we talked of our lives. I shared my personal history with them as well as with the details of my current life. They were interested to know of my own legal difficulties in my youth, my family history of alcoholism, my son, and my current bout with cancer. Sharing these very personal facts with the young men provided them an opportunity to see me as a human being sharing this journey with them instead of another staff member with an agenda. Slowly the defenses began to come down and we had moments of unguarded conversation. Their comradery and affection for each other was a surprise to me in the

beginning. They were very affectionate physically and at first I wondered what the meaning to that might be, then I remembered my own time in Vietnam and the cultural acceptance of physical affection between men found in that country. It was interesting to watch them change their communication styles when they spoke with each other and then would include myself or another volunteer. Their interactions amongst themselves would be peppered with prison slang and "black" inflections, but when they spoke with me they attempted to show, what they determined to be, respect.

Since I was there to be the Buddhist Liaison for the group much of our conversation was about Buddhism and religion overall. They were curious to know my own religious history and/or training. Also, what qualified me to be the Buddhist Liaison? Many interesting conversations developed regarding the different schools of Buddhism. We spoke of my own interest in Soto Zen, what the different schools of Buddhism taught, and shared our interests in religion. Johndy was once, as a child, in training to be a Wat Lao monk and had very strong ideas about what Buddhist services should be at the prison. Those ideas led to a discussion to uncover what I might be able to provide. I am not a Buddhist monk nor am I a student of the Wat Lao tradition. When I informed him I was familiar with the Theravada school of Buddhism of which Wat Lao was a part, he was not impressed. I finally suggested to him that

maybe I was not the one to work with them on this journey due to my lack of skill in his tradition. Johndy did not want me to leave so we spent more time in discussion to uncover what we would be able to create.

On one occasion Kim asked me if I believed in God. Did I pray? How did I become interested in Buddhism? We spent most of that evening sharing our thoughts on those topics. Kim had been raised Christian and had read the Bible while in prison. His curiosity in how Buddhism compared to what he knew of Christianity was as revealing to me of who he was as any of our previous conversations. He actually laughed at me a couple of times in that conversation when I spoke of my own Christian history and my subsequent study of Eastern Religions. What I derived from that search was of considerable interest to him.

We began a simple meditation each week. I provided them with some very basic instruction in meditation, all things that I had drawn from other teachers, especially Jack Kornfield (Kornfield, J. 1993), which they would be able to implement immediately. We started with how to sit comfortably and stable, then what to do with the breath, then we spoke of our thoughts and what to do when they intrude. We had a number of conversations regarding the benefits of meditation and what the goals were if any. Initially, they were like children at a playground, laughing, talking trash with each other, looking to see what the others were doing, and almost unable to sit still for

more than a minute or two. Over time they began to develop some ability to sit quietly in meditation for as much as 15 minutes. Their reactions to that accomplishment were joyful and hopeful. They wanted to know more and try more. They kidded each other when one would give up and the others were still in meditation. They were like children wanting to succeed at something they defined as spiritual or worthy, unsure of themselves but eager.

In choosing a narrative approach I felt that the cultural history of the men being reflected through their own experiences, and words, would be invaluable to my understanding. A group of young men from a land torn by war throughout their parent's generation, and before, bring forth experiences that most of us here in the United States could not possibly understand. Because of my personal history as a US Army soldier in Vietnam I also held some personal fascination with the humanity of these people. Were they or their parents the villains that young men of my generation were led to believe? Here I offer the stories of three of the initial members of the group and my observations on the subsequent members to join after the parole of two of the originals.

Johndy

Johndy is Laotian, slight of build, and speaks with "black" inflected prison slang. His parents left Laos in the 70's for Thailand. He claims his mother has burn marks on her back from US bombing of Laos. Previously,

he has both claimed and denied this fact. He claims his father was a refugee assistant at the refugee camp working to help others immigrate. His parents met in America, his mother migrated to Kansas, and his father to Arkansas. His father was a traveling musician at the time and met his mother in Kansas. They moved to San Diego and lived in a mixed community of Latino's and Asians. His brother is 23 and his sister is 22. His brother lives currently in Arkansas and is involved in the gang life. His sister lives in California, holds a job and he says leads a normal life. His father found work in California as an Air Conditioning installer and makes what he claims is a good living. His parents believe they are living a good life in America and now reside in Laveen, Arizona. He claims that his uncles and cousins were all gang affiliated and he looked up to them. He insists that he was always hardheaded and went his own way in spite of his parent's efforts to give him a good life. To him, the drugs, guns, cars, and power that he identified with the gang lifestyle were attractive. He claims he looked up to the "OG's" or old gangsters. He loved the street life, loved to smoke pot, loved the fast money, and cut school regularly. His first lockup was at 13, the second at 14, and the current term started when he was 16. When questioned regarding racism he stated that it was not a factor in San Diego, but is one of the predominant factors of life at "YA." He claims that gangs are everywhere, not just the ghetto, even in "good" neighborhoods. He claims to be determined to be a new person after he is released this time. He says his

college courses, which he is taking at the institution, will provide him with opportunities. He also claims he is the first in his family to attend college. He questions me about the interview and my project and then again insists he will aid me in any way possible. He questions me about our Buddhist group and the progress we have made and what is intended for the future. He is both concerned that he will not receive a meditation cushion and elated that he will. It seems difficult for him to believe that good things are possible. Immediately after our interview I interview Jamie. After the interview with Jamie we visit again for a short time and just converse about different things. Jamie is braiding his hair as he likes it braided when he is going to have visitors the next day.

Kim

Kim is Cambodian. He doesn't know his father and does not know anything about him. His mother came through the Killing Fields experience and relayed to him that it was a do or die experience. She tells him she is fortunate to be alive. He has one brother and two sisters, they are ages 35, 31, and 25 respectively and he is 23. The two oldest are his half-siblings as they had a different father who died in Cambodia. They also survived the Killing Fields with their mother. His grandmother died in the Killing Fields and his mother talks of the scarcity of food during that experience and even

of eating dirt. He claims that his grandfather was a wealthy landowner in Cambodia prior to his death and his family was unaccustomed to hardship. His family escaped to a refugee Camp in Thailand and stayed there until they were sponsored into the U.S. Kim was born in Santa Ana, CA in 1984. His family lived in an Asian community in Orange County. His mother still only speaks Cambodian and he did not learn English until he was in the third grade. He claims he struggled in school as a result of his language needs. The school he attended was largely Latino and he says that he was in many fights, but does not attribute that to racism. He says his mom always just told him to do his best, claiming America was far better than what they had experienced in Cambodia, that the poverty and racism here still left them better off. His mother does not work, but survives by running a gambling house. Apparently, in his neighborhood there is constant gambling and he always enjoyed being at the center of that action. He relates to me that he met interesting people in the gambling life and learned to hustle for money at a young age. His family is poor, even with the gambling, and has no car or phone. He relayed a story to me of when he was younger, a time when he wanted to take a girl out on a date and had no money. He was able to make \$170 at the gambling shack, as he calls it, and buy himself some new sneakers and still have enough to take the girl out on a date. Kim smiles hugely when he tells me this story and is obviously proud of this accomplishment. He spoke at length about how he wanted to date this

young woman and would not have been able to afford to do so any other way. He spoke highly of the gambling atmosphere and his admiration for "hustlers." He was locked up for the first time at 14 and in his mind the idea of a career is non-existent. When I asked him if he had ever held a "real" job he laughed and said, "Yea, for one week at Togo's making sandwiches, but I couldn't stand the customers." He is 23 and sentenced to 7 years for a crime that I did not ask about. He claims that when he is released he is going to rob and steal, and sell drugs to survive. When I suggested to him that that information might not be something he ought to disclose publicly he claimed he didn't care. What he is stating to the parole board is that he will be installing Direct TV with his brother. He is very friendly with me, insists that he will do anything to help with my project, and is always animated. He claims that he has not stopped getting high or smoking cigarettes during his time at DJJ. I did not ask for the details regarding those issues. Kim has been paroled since our interview. He is living in Orange County attempting to work with his brother. The other men spoke with him and relayed to me his struggle with employment as the cable company is not comfortable with his criminal record.

Jamie

Jamie is black and states his race as Asian. His father is a career Navy man once stationed in the Philippines. His mother is Filipino and he was born

in the islands and lived there until he was 2. His family lived in Chicago for a short time and then moved to San Diego where they live currently. He has an older brother, 31, who lives in the Philippines and is involved in the gang life. One sister who is 20 and not in the gang life, and a younger brother in the gang life, who are both in San Diego. He is 19 and claims he was "jumped in" to a gang at 12. He states he did not get along with his father and did not want to be like him. His home was nice, his school was predominantly Asian, and gangs were everywhere. He also reiterates that claim stating they are not just in the ghetto. In his neighborhood he claims if you were not in a gang you would either be a street racer or a "raver." To him the gang life meant respect, a reputation in the hood, excitement, and provided his life with some organization. He claims the violence is exciting to him, gang fights, beatings, etc. He also claims that gang life is a means to attract women. His time spent in school was not good, he got into lots of fights, was eventually sent to continuation school, and skipped out on that frequently. Jamie tells me he does not care for responsibility. He was first incarcerated at 12 and claims he is now used to being locked up. He tells me that when his parents first discovered the direction of his life his dad was "trippin", they asked him lots of questions, but finally have accepted that path as his journey.

Sao

Sao is also Cambodian. We were unable to complete a personal interview due to erratic schedules during the holidays. This fierce young man obviously commanded the respect of his peers. He was covered with tattoos and had long black hair that he wore in a braid down his back. His moods would swing between jovial banter and dark somber reticence during our sessions. On more than one occasion he spoke with me regarding very personal thoughts regarding his ability to successfully transcend the life path he was following only to be withdrawn and evasive the next time I would see him. I could only suggest to him that it was possible, very difficult, and he would undoubtedly need to seek help in some form to maneuver it successfully. He seemed somewhat doubtful at that suggestion. Sao has also been paroled recently after 7 years in the system this time. He has headed home to Fresno to be with his family and I have not heard any news of him since that time. I wish him well.

David

David was a new addition to our group, joining after Kim and Sao were paroled. He apparently had heard of our group and was eager to participate in what he clearly thought of as a privileged group. Word was out that we had some freedom, even if limited, from institutional authorities, on several occasions I and other volunteers would bring in food from outside or order pizza, and it was a safe place for Southeast Asians to mingle. Immediately,

he began to speak of his family, his son, and his desire to have his picture taken during visiting hours with his son. He also is Cambodian and was discussed as a member by the others in the group before being invited to join.

Conclusions

It would be impossible to speak of the paradigm that holds these men in this lifestyle without speaking of the Department of Corrections. I am not denying that they are convicted felons, or that they can be dangerous. What I am going to unpack is the reality of their existence in the Division of Juvenile Justice. Much of the initial reaction to us, by both wards and staff, as volunteers was based on past disappointments. We heard stories of gifts undelivered, broken promises, programs promised and not delivered and many more. What I witnessed personally were strained and often hostile relations between the Corrections Officers, staff, and the wards. Not being there full time I cannot define why things are that way, just observing that they are currently.

Albert Bandura's Theory of Self Efficacy speaks to the fact that it is near impossible for someone to effect change without the internalized belief that they will be able to implement and sustain the effort. (Bandura, A.1977) I observed on one occasion an African-American Correctional Officer walk through my group and make racially hostile comments about the group. On

more than one occasion I witnessed derogatory comments, by staff, about the ward involvement in my group. Many times we were interrupted by CO's intentionally to see if they could catch us violating the rules. The obvious interruptions actually became somewhat comical. On another occasion one of my group relayed to me that the Treatment Team Supervisor on his unit suggested that they were tattooing during our time in the chapel and insisted that they uncover their skin for inspection.

Why this is relevant to this topic would be that obviously the men receive no affirmation of success in any endeavor from the institution. The efforts to build and sustain creative or affirmative programs seem doomed to failure by the nature of the institution. Survival for them requires a profound disbelief in the system to minimize the pain and disappointment. In their article "The Development and Evaluation of the Harm Reduction Self-Efficacy Questionnaire" Phillips and Rosenberg (Phillips, K., Rosenberg, H. 2008) they determine that providing IV drug users the information to reduce harm to themselves is not nearly enough. For the participants in this study to be able to withstand depression, withdrawal, and peer pressure an internalized belief in the ability to implement and sustain the program was essential.

On the other side of that dynamic is the illicit system developed by the men to survive. Letters are kited (sent secretly) to one another, food is also kited, tobacco and drugs are smuggled into the prison, as well as cell

phones. While all of this is entirely illegal it obviously meets the needs of the men as well as providing them with a sub-culture that forms affirmative bonds and security. Opportunity for mastery of the system comes from outside the system. It would seem that for a young man to retain any sense of esteem and/or self-efficacy the only place to do so would be illegal. Here again, we refer back to Bandura's Theory that posits mastery of actions will be the guiding force in the development of Self-Efficacy (Bandura, A 1977). Consequently, the institution that is protecting society from these men is the place where they are developing a sense of self-efficacy in illicit activity while positive and rehabilitative programs are regularly denied success.

As the children of war refugees these young men carry unique interpretations of what survival means. In the telling of their parents stories I heard horrors that were perpetrated, then assimilated, and the life skills necessary to survive those horrors were then passed on to the children as a method for living. As a veteran of that very same war I am profoundly aware what skills I learned there that did not translate to living in the United States. I am still recovering from those memories. Research on War Trauma (Drapeau, A, Platt, R, Rosseau, C, 1999) indicates that a family is entirely transformed by this experience. Subjected to uncommon stress, trauma, and societal upheaval the lives of this group, and moral development, cannot help but sustain powerful lasting effects from the experience.

The Transgenerational Transmission of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome is documented as effecting problem solving and appropriate emotional responses in war veteran's children. (Davidson, A., Mellor, D. 2001) In this research Holocaust survivors, USA veterans, as well as Australian veterans were studied to determine the long term effects of war on subsequent children of survivors. Here again, we see a unique perspective forming the worldview of these young men. One that posits violence as a way of life, survival at all costs, lack of morality, and a lack of dignity, concern, or regard for human life.

As a group these men are minorities in the prison system. Outside of the prison system they are also minorities. I often heard stories of families not speaking English and living in exclusively Asian communities. Not once did I hear of any cultural or spiritual affirmation of their culture or history. When questioned regarding that fact, one young man said "Moms told me it was better than the Killing Fields." How do these young men find the need for self-actualization in communities that do not respect their heritage or culture? It seems that they have sought out the gang life-style to provide needs that they are not even able to articulate. Frequently, the men spoke of the respect earned from the gangs, acceptance from their peers, and a sense of accomplishment that certainly was not offered nor earned in the neighborhoods of their youth.

Eisenruch (Eisenruch, M.) introduces the concept of “cultural bereavement” as a natural part of transition for refugees, but claims western medicine labels that process as maladaptive. This particular group of refugees faced the horrors of war at home, many fleeing for their lives. Upon arrival in western countries where the welcome might or might not have been warm, they are then forced to assimilate into our culture denying their traditional spiritual and cultural heritage. All of these factors are then transmitted in to the rearing of their children. As people of color separated from their spiritual or cultural heritage they are readily identified by many of my peers as former enemies, leaving them without much promise of accessibility to services that could assist or create the things necessary to meet those needs. While all of these refugees, and their children, do not turn to crime or violence clearly there are those that are still dependent on survival skills developed in a war torn homeland.

When racism is mentioned in relation to this project I initially perceived it as toward Southeast Asians, but what I have discovered is that with that particular group much derision is directed towards those children of American servicemen. As a sub-group within a minority they have been labeled as the unfortunate bearers of mixed blood. One of the members of my group identifies as Asian despite an American father and African American features. His prison identification also is Asian denying again

membership in the larger African American community in prison. A choice that must be motivated by powerful feelings, that some might call risky considering the survival needs of incarceration.

The majority of factors contributing to the worldview of these young Southeast Asian men, sustaining the violent lifestyle, are found in other transplanted and/or marginalized groups as well. Our institutions are full of minorities, immigrants, and the poor. Certainly the argument has been made that we are not responsible for the sins of these men and women. What we as a society are faced with is what the direction of our corrections system will be. Is incarceration to be strictly punitive warehousing? If so then evidence ought be found explaining the effectiveness of this type of justice be it economic or social. What we have instead is evidence that alternative methods of rehabilitation that address therapeutic needs, education, and spiritual development are not only successful, but more cost effective to us as taxpayers. (Gilligan, J.,Lee, B.)

In the last 15 years as I have worked as a volunteer in the California Department of Corrections on more than one occasion I have encountered persons that our society incarcerated justifiably for our protection. Many more times I conversed with lost, confused souls who did not know there was any sort of solution to their existence. Often these folks have been in the system for years for minor offenses and have no life skills for what we

would call a normal life. Programs that address these needs are the first to be cut when budget cuts are mandated. I suggest that a commitment to rehabilitation be at the forefront of our consciences when we make decisions regarding the future of these lost souls. In these last months, and the last years before this project, I have been witness to the reemergence of humanity in a population that is labeled violent and dangerous. It was not magic on my part, it was time and kindness.

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