Trial in error

Creating a new theology for ministry amongst drug-addicted people

Rosemary Williams

Sweet peace pipe
That poisons and bites its lover
With a hunger that has me high.

Drug that fulfils the moment
But steals so many future days
Drug of the age
That breathes to kill
Stimulant, soother, lung-eater, heart breaker.

Grief lets me suck away
As the fog thickens
And rots on.[1]

SO WRITES PAMELA, A HOMELESS WOMAN of my own community. Nor is it tobacco alone that claims her concern. She knows the necessity of eking out a living in a meagre boarding house to support her heroin habit:

> When one cried, the dogcatcher threw her hypocrisy and I caught it with the smile of the jailed. Soon our owners sat on their thrown and the whiffs of mockery slung laughter down the banister as their cutlery rang of huge meals while bread and jam lay heavily in my remembrance. But what could I do? I was here for the cat-smile of the junkie with my tale, straight payment for the mad double-wronged.[2]

I begin, then, with the voice of a homeless woman. Yet no one is immune to substance addiction.

The way we treat drug-addicted people exemplifies the way we treat suffering people in general. In this article, I contrast the 'theology of trial' with the 'theology of project', to show how it is the latter which offers hope of healing.

Always in pain

The person who has a substance addiction comes for help always in pain:

> I wish that fish would look at me . . .
> Bestow some sign of watery grace,
> Salute of seaweed,
> Bubble of benediction,
> On this restless creature of space,
> Neither captive nor free
> Of the land or the sea.[3]

Helen aches for a place to belong where she will be seen and known.

> So long have I been running, searching, never staying in one place too long. Feeling like a gypsy, with all that I own . . . all that is precious, fitting in my car.[4]

Maria hits the open road for, when at a standstill, she'll be put on the scales and weighed with all her sins.

> Josephine and I shared a rehabilitation cabin . . . and, when I was greatly troubled, she had the gift of putting things into perspective . . . she had a great big infectious laugh. The day after she left rehab, I too decided to leave. One hour before I left, I was told that Josephine had died of a heroin overdose. Josephine gave me my first deeply honest friendship. We had to get honest: we had been playing with our lives.[5]

Sally-Anne was later to die the same way. A second chance for playing with our lives – there's the illusion. There was never to be but one chance.

> This is a true story of a woman who is an alcoholic. It could be any woman. This woman went to all stages of alcoholism, detox centres, rehabilitation centres – through Hell . . . This woman had it all and lost it all. Not just material things, also her self-respect and the trust in other people. To make it short, she hit rock bottom.[6]

Barbara suspects that her inner longing will never be fulfilled, that it will go on for ever – pushed aside by the press of her addiction – but there for keeps.

> Marie's long days of waiting would end with a sigh and Lena would leave after giving me a clue. Two dollars a day and a packet of smokes for the view of the silence or the smell of the wine as he stumbled past with the eucharist in hand. I had my secret plan to jump ship but Betty's tears stole up on me. So I thought and thought and wrote this dirge to you in the hope it would end ignorance for them.[7]

Pamela, who is poor and waiting for a fix, loves her companions all the same.

These are the voices of homeless women (with addictions) – voices used since they are so seldom heard.

The junkyard of the repressed – stashed-away darkness

The workers who come before these women come always with parts of themselves that are outside their conscious awareness, and that they prefer to keep at arm's length. These unconscious forces are part of the workers' shadow – the despised part of their personality and the junkyard for all their feelings and attributes that they dislike and disown. The workers' shadow land is an obstacle to their full human life and to the proper practice of their profession. In denying its ingredients, workers lose touch with their singular individuality and matchless history. Their complete self is lost to them and they relate within the legacy of that loss.

The women are a symbol of, and a pointer to, the helpers' shadow side. The women reveal the helpers' stashed-away darkness because the issues they bring are also the issues of their helpers. Pamela's grief; Helen's ache to belong; Maria's flight from judgement; Sally-Anne's delusion of a second chance; Barbara's eternal inner longing; and each one's addiction is a pointer to the unclaimed grief, insularity, elusiveness, delusions, yearnings and addictions of their helpers.

The junkyard of the repressed – stashed-away gold

The workers' shadow also holds the vein of pure gold that lurks in their personality, submerged because it's difficult to find a place for it on the level playing field our culture insists on maintaining. People sometimes resist the noble aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide their dark side. Paul Jennings in his children's book, *Unseen*, has Mr Image scream 'a drawn-out, horrible cry . . . pitched . . . high' as he claims the warmth, kindness and friendliness that make up his shadow side.[8] So the women reveal the stashed-away gold of their helpers.

Pamela's willingness to love, while weighed down by her poverty and addiction, invites the helper to own that side of themself that cares deeply for others in the midst of their own limitations.

The junkyard of the repressed – stashed-away darkness and gold

Let me give another example from my psychological practice. John, in recovery from an addiction, struggles with a life-threatening psychotic depression that has been masked by his heroin habit. His urge is to kill himself. He has hallucinations: seeing people dying on Melbourne's trams. I observe a fear in me as John's psychologist. I recall that, over the last months, I have been depressed myself, and John is a pointer to that side of myself that wants to give up on life and love. This is a side of myself that I would prefer to disown. Yet without it, I am not my full self and I relate to John with the fear that is the legacy of my self-rebuff. Yet, like John, I battle on with resilience – the gold of my shadow side.

Moving towards wholeness

If helpers are willing to respond to the pointers to their shadow land, they can begin to move towards wholeness, and a quite substantial gift is thereby bestowed upon them. Mr Image says, 'Everyone has a shadow . . . We all have a mixture. Strong and weak. Kind and cruel. Generous and mean.'[9] Here, I am taking Mr Image a step further, for helpers can develop a spirituality that is deep, enriching, paradoxical and carefully nuanced by accepting the apparently opposing elements of their psyche and enduring their collision in full consciousness. The two opposing forces will then teach each other something and produce an insight that serves them both. For example, generosity and meanness, each drawn up to a place of equal dignity and worth, may bring about a generosity that stops short of exploitation. Kindness *and* cruelty may result in a softness that calls a halt at overindulgence. Strength *and* weakness may deter us from Russian roulette.

The ideology of trial

If helpers decline these symbols of their shadow land, it is likely that they will locate all darkness in the addicted person seeking help. More than any other field, that of drug addiction can trigger a response in helpers in which blame, censure and reproach come subtly to the fore, and thereby shut the door to a place in which suffering can find shelter. The drug-addicted person is often perceived as lying, manipulative and

poorly motivated. He or she is mad or bad, a junkie, cokehead, crackhead, pill-popper, speed-freak, a loser, tripper, smackhead, chain-smoker, sot, swiller or tosspot. I call this process of perception and evaluation an ideology of trial. Like one of Kafka's characters, the addicted person is 'tried', tested and found guilty.[10]

The theology of trial

In Christian ministry, helpers must be particularly alert to the influence of a *theology of trial* that has permeated Christian thought and that links suffering with sinfulness. Last year at the Museum train station in Melbourne, Australia, a colleague of mine was handed a question-and-answer pamphlet, from the Presbyterian Reformed Church, entitled 'Does God love you?':

> *Q. I sometimes wonder if God loves me. If He is a loving God, why is there so much suffering and sorrow in the world?*
> *A.* In His book called the Bible, God shows that our sins are the cause for all the suffering and sorrow . . .[11]

The equation of sin with suffering has its prototype, its dubious trailblazer, in the doctrine of original sin. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, the human race suffered a demotion of its constitution to that of a second and fallen nature, subject to suffering and death. This theology, which presents humankind with a humiliated image of itself (Camus), persists in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*[12] As my young niece, Alex Williams, says, 'When I was a baby, while my eyes were still shut, guilt over my suffering crept into me'. Under this theology of trial, suffering human beings are 'tried' and tested, their task being to avoid sin in order to reach heaven, the bliss of eternal life in the future. Under this theology, God wants our first concern to be the sidestepping of sin.

An unforeseen transfer

Christianity's tendency to blame the sufferer has found a place in psychological and economic thought – an unforeseen transfer. The addicted person's pain is intensified by questions, implicitly put, that neatly turn the blame back on to the sufferer: 'What are you not facing in your life by your drug-taking?' 'What are the psychological flaws that you are evading – your unresolved issues and defences and the conflicting elements that constitute your psyche?' The addicted per-

son's pain is further intensified by the transfer of the ideology of trial to the corporate world in which everything is measured in terms of performance in the marketplace: 'What do you consume?' 'What contribution do you make to the economy?' 'Do you know the latest fashion brand names?' 'What criminal activities support your habit?'

The clergy's power to interpret God's will has been replaced by the psychotherapists' power to interpret lived and felt experience and to point out psychological flaws. Instead of being judged sinners by priests, suffering human beings are at risk of being accused of a kind of psychological immorality. In the corporate world, a cloud of economists judges economic errors in the name of that dismal science that measures all in terms of failure in the marketplace.

So clients with drug addictions are often 'tried' and tested – not only to avoid sin, but to avoid psychological limitation and economic failure; in this way they may reach heaven: the bliss of eternal life in the future; the paradise of a life now freed from drug addiction and the psychological difficulties involved in being human; or the bliss of a clean, prosperous life in a corporate nation with a triple-A rating from the American economic rating agencies.

While Christian commentators rightly deplore the bleak trial of the drug-addicted person by economic rationalists, we would do well to keep in mind that the theology of trial had already run riot in Christian thought. In the Catholic Church, the Pope's apology, on the edge of the third millennium, for wrongs committed in the past – against the Jewish people and by the Crusades and the Inquisition, for example – can heighten our awareness of that theology of trial that has existed down through the centuries. As Kafka complains:

> 'But I am not guilty,' said K . . . 'How can any person in general be guilty? We're all human after all, each and every one of us.' 'That's right,' said the priest, 'but that's how guilty people always talk.'[13]

Trial in disguise

I have been asked: 'How does the person ministering deal with the tension created between offering compassion and the need to encourage proper personal responsibility in the addict?' Disguised in this question is the notion that it is the practitioner's task to subject drug-addicted people to a trial over their 'proper personal responsibility'. It is as if the helping professions must be moral police instead of companions setting

out on pain's pilgrimage shoulder to shoulder with those who come before them.

Besides, it is compassion that *encourages* personal responsibility. There *is* no tension. In 1992, I injured my back in a pushbike accident. The resulting pain over the years that followed was harrowing. To ease it, I began taking prescription codeine and I became addicted to it. I tried to relinquish the drug and failed. One day a colleague, a psychiatrist, said to me: 'Perhaps the codeine has been all there's been to help you'. The effect was instant: my sense of guilt fell away and I easily cast the codeine to the winds. What did the psychiatrist do? He entered into the darkness of my pain, put himself in my shoes, and not only made no hint of judgement, but justified my addiction for me. *The paradox is that so profound and complete an acknowledgement enables people to move beyond their present predicament.*

Negative or positive freedom?

The question, 'How does the minister . . . encourage proper personal responsibility in the addict?' raises the issue of the sort of freedom a drug-addicted person should have within the helping relationship. Should it be positive or negative freedom?

Negative freedom is non-interference by the practitioner and the right of clients to make their own choices in life, regardless of how disastrous they may be and regardless of how disastrous they may be known to be in advance by others who are further from the problem. If freedom is conceived in the negative manner then the enemies of freedom are manipulation and strong influence exerted by the practitioner on clients. The *locus classicus* of the negative concept of freedom is to be found in the writing of John Stuart Mill (1859). The object of his essay, 'On Liberty', he says,

> is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or in the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is that the sole end for which (humankind) are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection.[14]

The practitioner who has an allegiance to negative freedom scoffs at an ideology of trial.

In contrast to the right to make one's own choices embodied in negative freedom, *positive* freedom is rational self-direction and realization. It is the view that clients are free only in so far as they exhibit rationality and, therefore, make rational decisions. While manipulation and strong influence are the enemies of freedom conceived in the negative manner, in the second case – that of positive freedom – they might be the very pre-conditions of freedom. Under the concept of positive freedom, if a client is in the grip of an addiction, then influence or coercion by the practitioner may secure his or her freedom.

In philosophy, the *locus classicus* of the positive concept of freedom is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1743), who argued that to be free is not to be left to do what you want to do but to be enabled to do what you ought to do. Because this view consists not merely in the absence of constraints,

> but in a positive ideal of human behaviour as rational, constructive and socially cooperative – these being among the qualities thought to be characteristic of liberated human beings – it is regarded as a positive concept of freedom.[15]

Practitioners in Christian ministry appear to be more likely than those without commitment to a religion to express an allegiance to positive freedom, because freedom in theology has been seen as having its source and goal in goodness and God.[16]

The notion of positive freedom holds within it the ideology of trial. Consider this comment from a social work practitioner:

> It does sometimes happen that the client is either inappropriate in his or her decisions or is unable to see clearly the problems and in these instances worker action becomes appropriate until the client can assume appropriate and productive control. In situations of drug abuse, I may exert pressure on clients to undertake detox and actively dissuade them from criminal activities supporting their drug habit.[17]

Contrast it to negative freedom:

> A 23 year old female with a 5-year history of intravenous drug use – an only child whose mother and father had just died within three weeks of each other and who had no significant supportive family members; she had a history of abortive treatment programmes as well as a history of several probationary periods in three States in Australia. Her parents could no longer supply her with money to support her habit and she

was terrified of going to jail if she was caught stealing either drugs or goods to sell to obtain money for drugs. She had a poor employment record and was limited in what work she could obtain. Her options, as she saw them, were to enter a massage parlour, engage in street prostitution, continue obtaining legal prescriptions for certain drugs which were not her 'drug of choice' (all of which would expose her to possible law enforcement) or to enter another treatment programme in this State (with the possibility of another failure or success?) or leave the State for a country where she would both not be known and would not know anybody. As a surrogate-mother figure to her, we explored the possible consequences of all her options but she made the final choice, viz, to enter a massage parlour and, if she got close to being involved with the police, she would leave the State. She has now left the State and is alive and still following a lifestyle she considers is satisfactory to herself . . .[18]

The theology of project

It is possible for negative freedom to sit comfortably with Christian thought when there is an allegiance to the theology of project rather than the theology of trial. Last year, the Regina Coeli Community for homeless women received a letter from Steve Sinn, a Jesuit, who works at St Canice's parish in King's Cross, Sydney. Here is part of what he wrote:

> You may have heard that the Wayside Chapel up the road has opened a T(olerance) Room for addicts. It has been a circus up there with more cameras than users. As a consequence of all the publicity the addicts have fled to Canice's. Paul Smith walked into the toilets this morning and there was Melissa, one of the trannys, with all her gear lined up in front of the mirror ready to inject. 'I'm having breakfast', she said to him. You've got to laugh.
>
> We are now putting up people in the hall under the church for overnight accommodation. I don't know if we are taking on more than we can cope with but every time I have doubts something happens that makes me sure this is the way to go. Last week I was thinking it was just pandering to people who were using this place. That night I listened to one of the girls who works on the streets talk to a group of retreatants. She said we didn't know by a quarter how important it was to those on the streets to have a place that opened its doors rather than locked them out.

> Then I was worried about volunteers and that day two people came to me and said that they would like to help. Last night there were thirty-six in the hall, all finding nooks and crannies, some snuggled up together, some behind the stacked chairs away from everyone. It was pretty smelly but there was something incredibly beautiful about those sleeping bodies.[19]

I hesitate to comment on a letter so utterly compelling. Yet it reveals a theology that is as different from trial as night from day. I would call it, after Segundo, a theology of project. This theology is not primarily concerned about judging people, with deciding who the good are and who the wicked are. Rather, it starts right out with those who suffer most, with those who are most marginalized, and it holds a conviction that they are our finest teachers.

> Last week I was thinking it was just pandering to people who were using this place. That night I listened to one of the girls who works on the streets . . . she said we didn't know by a quarter how important it was to those on the streets to have a place that opened its doors to them rather than locked them out.

The theology of project has suspicion that there are theologies, like the theology of trial, that oppress those who suffer most and that are rendered anti-Christian as a result. It refuses to put those in pain on trial.

> Paul Smith walked into the toilets this morning and there was Melissa, one of the trannys, with all her gear lined up in front of the mirror ready to inject. 'I'm having breakfast', she said to him. You've got to laugh.

The theology of project also has a suspicion that society's structures and practices oppress those that suffer most:

> . . . the Wayside Chapel up the road has opened a T(olerance) Room for addicts. It has been a circus up there with more cameras than users. As a consequence of all the publicity the addicts have fled to Canice's.

This theology does not value suffering as such. Instead it calls for human beings to be collaborators with God in a project of the utmost importance for all its participants: the successful rescue, on earth, in history, of suffering humanity, especially the poor. 'And it is with this

attitude, with this sympathy for those who suffer most, an attitude and sympathy like God's',[20] that we make our commitment:

> Last night there were thirty-six in the hall, all finding nooks and crannies, some snuggled up together, some behind the stacked chairs away from everyone. It was pretty smelly but there was something incredibly beautiful about those sleeping bodies.

Conclusion

The helping professions come before drug-addicted clients with a demeanour that understands that the latter come bearing gifts – that they will be a pointer to our shadow land: to our stashed-away darkness and gold, which we need to claim if we are to become whole. We discern that these clients, more than any other group, are put on trial and that this trial has its origins partly in a long-standing theology of trial that has transferred itself to psychological and corporate practice. The power of the clergy to interpret God's will has been replaced by the power of a pack of psychological practitioners to point out psychological flaws and by the power of a cloud of economists to measure all by marketplace norms.

Instead of putting the client on trial, profound acknowledgement enables the client to move beyond their predicament. This paradox has close ties with a philosophy of negative freedom and with a theology of project.

The last word I will leave to Brian Stoney, who heads the Cana Communities in Sydney, Australia. He captures the essence of so much of what I have wanted to say to you:

> Harold Russell, a very badly brain-damaged, homeless, alcoholic man living on the streets of Melbourne, was my first teacher back in 1969 . . . One day I was praying for him: 'God, You love Harold, please change his ways'. This day, however, I heard Jesus say quietly, but so strongly: 'Yes, Brian, I love Harold – that's so true. But more than that, I enjoy him because he's my friend.'
>
> Harold – a friend of Jesus! Jesus enjoys him! 'Friend!' 'Enjoy!' But what about his mess – he's a violent alcoholic! He doesn't even want to change. And then Jesus said such a scary thing to me: 'I enjoy you too, Brian. Go and enjoy Harold; actually meet him; become friends with each other. Harold will show you why I enjoy you, Brian.'[21]

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NOTES

1 Pamela, 'Cigarettes', *Taking It Like a Woman*, the newsletter of Regina Coeli, no 7 (June 1991), p 7.
2 Pam, 'The special accommodation house', *Taking It Like a Woman* no 7 (June 1991), p 7.
3 Helen, 'Fish', *Taking It Like a Woman* no 2 (March 1990), p 11.
4 Maria, 'Believing once again in the human spirit', *Taking It Like a Woman* no 26 (March–June 1996), p 27.
5 *Taking It Like a Woman* no 31 (September 1997), p 6.
6 *Taking It Like a Woman* no 1 (December 1989), p 6.
7 Pam, 'The special accommodation house', *Taking It Like a Woman* No 7 (June 1991), p 7.
8 Paul Jennings, *Unseen* (Puffin Books, 1998), p 129.
9 Paul Jennings, *Unseen*, p 130.
10 For a detailed analysis of the ideology of trial see Franz Kafka, *The trial* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).
11 Presbyterian Reformed Church, 'Does God love you?' (North Ringwood, Melbourne, 1998), p 1.
12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 396–409 (Homebush: St Paul's, 1994), pp 100–103.
13 Kafka, *The trial*, p 213. For a more detailed analysis of the transfer of the ideology of trial from one discipline to another see Rosemary Williams, *Recasting the stone: human suffering and the business of blame* (Melbourne: HarperCollinsReligious, 1998).
14 J. S. Mill, 'On liberty' (1850) in *Utilitarianism. Liberty. Representative government* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Pty Ltd, 1910), pp 72–73.
15 J.-J. Rousseau, *The social contract* (1743), trans Maurice Cranston (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968).
16 This assessment is based partly on research I undertook in the 1980s. See Rosemary Williams, 'Client self-determination in social casework: fact or fancy? An exploratory study', *Australian Social Work* vol 35, no 3 (September 1982), pp 27–34.
17 Williams, 'Client self-determination', p 31.
18 Williams, 'Client self-determination', pp 31–32.
19 Steve Sinn, 'Letter from Sydney', *Taking It Like a Woman* no 38 (June 1999), pp 13–14.
20 Juan Luis Segundo, *Signs of the times*, ed Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p 122.
21 Brian Stoney, 'The dance of love', *City Streets* (March 1996), p 3.