

Interview with Khalil Peterkin Clinical Supervisor of the Key Program of Sussex Correctional Institution.

This is a transcript of an Interview between author Paul Perry and Khalil Peterkin, at Union Market in Washington DC.

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Union Market, Washington DC

Melvin, Doc, from his own mouth, felt he needed to be there, for the work with the prisoners.

As a therapist, I know that substance abuse and criminal behavior are symptomatic of underlying issues. We see someone having constant relapses or recidivism, there are end results of other deeper issues. I have a Master's in therapy but also know this from working with prisoners for over seven years, at Sussex Correctional Institution in Sussex County, Delaware.

95% of inmates have fundamental anger issues, resulting from trauma. That's the common thread.

Almost all the inmates have a desire to change. Even those with mental health issues, although less commonly. The criminal justice system does not target how we should treat criminals so they will not reoffend.

Doc was a leader in the program, he was well respected. The inmates gravitated to him because of his achievements in the world, they respected him and found a common humanity with them. He saw them no differently than anyone else.

His being in the program really opened my eyes as to the potential that criminals have for change.

People who are locked up should not be labeled criminals. 95% of the people have addictions or made a mistake and keep making the same mistake again and again.

By the time that these individuals come to the Key Program, it is clear that trauma, not addiction is their problem.

Khalil brought spirituality and meditation into SCI's Key Program, which was not designed for either. It resulted in many transformations in those who have learned them.

Khalil is of the Muslim faith, believes that meditation is prayer. The prophet Mohammed regularly meditated, often for 4-5 hours. Khalil meditates himself 45 minutes every morning.

Meditation is the quickest and most powerful way that incarcerated individuals can change their lives. It is time that the men can use for self reflection, can use their prison time to improve themselves, make the changes that they want to make. The men want to learn to think differently, it is not true that they have a criminal mindset, almost all the men want to change but do not have the mental tools to do so.

Meditation is a powerful tool. I have often told the inmates, and seen it happen, that for men who do not know the root cause of their problems, learn to meditate, and the answer will spontaneously come to them. This was the greatest advice that I could give to the men.

Meditation even works in the prison environment, which is not conducive for rehabilitation. I personally prayer five times a day, and meditate in addition to that, as the prophet Mohammed taught and practiced. When Mohammed received in his first revelation, he was in a profound state of meditation.

(note: The Quran often uses the term “contemplation” which is simply an English translation for what might better be translated as “meditation”. This is because the Christian tradition of meditation is termed “contemplation”.)

Page Two Interview with Khalil Peterkin Clinical Supervisor of the Key Program of Sussex Correctional Institution.

The spiritual element of the creation is an important part of Islam. The Muslim tradition is to reflect deeply, and ponder upon creation, which is an important part of meditation.

With true humility, I have come to work with hundreds of men over the years. I bring my spiritual tradition to them, to help them to understand love. Love ultimately heals the trauma which is creating the addictions and criminal behavior of these men. Most of their behaviors are not something that they want to do, but don't know how to stop behaving in criminal loves.

They are men who are filled with love, but do not know how to get at it, it is encased in trauma and anger. I believe that every human being is endowed with the creator's love within him or her. What can we do to help them to connect with that?

The first thing is not to consign them to the hell that often is prison. They have already suffered rejection, they are already traumatized and abused, they need to be taught how to love, how to be human again.

Doc understood this. He could connect with them on a spiritual level. They learned a lot from Doc. He was open to them. They respected him, he was willing to share himself with them, and they called him the “Doc”. The administration did not want him called Doc, they wanted to dehumanize him, but the inmates respected him and called him Doc.

His knowledge he brought into the prison and shared it with the other inmates. He was a good example, and often the prison didn't want good examples for the men. The men have nothing to do all day, they simply sit around and do nothing. This is hell for many of the men. they are eager to learn meditation, to improve themselves, it gives them something to do. They often confront each other, saying “you ain't working on nothing” meaning that they are not trying to improve themselves. The men do not want to keep coming back to prison, no one is happy being an addict, but they do not have the spiritual tools to improve themselves, they don't know what to do.

Most of the inmates were working on a GED, certainly had nothing more than a high school education. Many of them do not know how to read. However they are often very intelligent, read the most sophisticated texts, their lack of education does not reflect their intellectual potential.

I remember that Doc often wrote letters for the men who could not read or write.

Inmates were meditating before Doc got there. Doc introduced it to the men, his example of talking about it, and practicing it, he was a trail blazer for it in the prison. He was a full practitioner of spirituality and taught it to the them.

The prison culture drives negativity, the prison often was threatened by the inmates who developed a sense of self discipline, who wanted to improve themselves. This is not an exaggeration.

This is what it meant when the men told Doc to tell (the outside world) that they are not animals. Doc was a great example and a leader in the Key Program. He showed them how they could improve themselves with meditation.

Let me give you a truth. Islam is prevalent in the prisons. So is Christianity. But what is important is whether the man can work on themselves. We often don't think of prisoners as men who want to work on themselves, but they do. I have seen profound transformations.

Page Three: Interview with Khalil Peterkin Clinical Supervisor of the Key Program of Sussex Correctional Institution.

More than 70% of the men want to work on themselves. They want to work on themselves, but they have no tools. They are working on their own treatment plans, they are becoming roll models for other prisoners. I saw it all the time.

The problem is how they can get past the struggle when they get out, they need support systems when they get out, or they fall right back to the way of thinking they had when they went in.

I have seen dramatic changes, but those changes have to be supported on the outside. You have to work with them to get them to be honest. If you can get them to stay open, to keep up their honesty, then they will be okay. This is where mediation comes into play, it helps them to be honest with themselves and to keep up that honesty.

Mediation can often cause euphoria, and it is so pleasurable, that the man does not want to go back into the dysphoria of a dysfunctional life. The trauma, the criminal behavior. They need to return to the euphoria and connection with the divine seen with prayer and meditation.

If you can get the man to talk about his trauma, his childhood issues, the shattered life he led, the men have to be honest, anytime you can get a person to talk about their abuse, their childhood trauma, and accept it, then they have a 90% chance of not returning to the negative behaviors that caused them to end up in prison.

In meditation, they find the nonjudgmental state so they can honestly look at who they are and what they have done and why they did it. You have to get to the nonjudgmental state. They have already been judged and found lacking by trauma, it creates in them a state of self judgment which leads to criminal behavior. Being able to be honest, to look at one's issues, is the key to prevent recidivism.

They need to think, to ponder and meditate, to think "what the hell is wrong with me", to look at the deep emotions that create their negative behaviors.

These men are full of love, they are not at all the sociopaths and anti-social personalities that people and society feel that they are, but they need the tools, they need the inspiration.

One guy was doing 45 years, he came to the Key Program. It gave him new lease on life, a deep awareness of what his problems were, after years of incarceration and negative thinking, he became a new man with a deep understanding of his crimes.

When the men come out, the vision that I have, the book that I am writing about my own successes of working with the men, the transformations I have seen and been a part of, I want people to know that there is information that is a blueprint that we can use to alleviate recidivism.

We need to use the information that we already have, that is known, to save lives, to prevent these men from reoffending, from going back to prison. When these men come out, we have to have find a way to

teach them these tools, so that they do not victimize others again, otherwise they will keep repeating the same problems again and again. We have the knowledge of how to prevent recidivism, and it is a spiritual solution that is needed and can be implemented. We have to have the will to do it, and we have to care.