

William Chester Minor: Those Judged Criminally Insane Can Make Stellar Contributions

Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad

“Redemption is an age-old concept rooted in many religions. It is a concept that presupposes that we will all make mistakes, and for some, that mistake will rise to the level of being a crime. Yes, there must be consequences and accountability. But after that debt to society has been paid, is it not the sign of a civil society that we allow people to earn their way back?” – Kamala Harris, Vice President of the United States of America

The fact, however, remains that despite the repeated claims of most societies, the overwhelming philosophy guiding incarceration within the criminal justice system is penal; certainly not corrective. The system is devised in a manner that reforms within it are extremely difficult, if not impossible. Very few individuals are able to lead meaningful lives post-conviction and incarceration. Kamala Harris, a committed Christian, enunciates the well-known Christian doctrine of forgiveness. But that does not govern the criminal justice system and judging by the repeated public polls on the death penalty in the United Kingdom, it is not a sentiment that has found favour with the population at large.

Malcolm X, James Nelson and Jimmy Boyle

There have, of course, been some very notable exceptions. Malcolm X grew up in deprivation and was a full-time pimp and a hustler when he was imprisoned. He went through a massive reformation pro-



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cess and came out a much-reformed man. While he continued to espouse violent methods to seek justice, he gave up his petty criminal activities and actually worked with the deprived Afro American children to prevent them from going astray. While in prison, he had come under the influence of Eliza Mahomet, the Nation of Islam leader, and became his ardent follower. He got an enormous shock when he realized that Eliza Mahomet was involved in some very unsavoury activities and went public. Subsequently, he accepted Sunni Islam and continued with his social vocation until he was shot dead at a very young age.

In the later 1970's, when I was working in Edinburgh, I was flabbergasted to learn of James Nelson, someone who had been convicted of matricide and spent nine years in gaol, who was inducted as a Church of Scotland minister. There was a massive hue and cry but the Chief Moderator of the Church of Scotland (a Presbyterian organization) maintained that forgiveness was a basic Christian doctrine and as from all available accounts, Nelson had reformed, he should be allowed to function as a minister. Which is exactly what Reverend James Nelson did for nearly thirty years when he died of cancer; and from all available accounts I have, he did an excellent job and was well loved and respected in his parish.

A few years later, Jimmy Boyle, who was born and brought up in Gorbals, the most deprived area of Glasgow, and who had been convicted of first degree murder, walked out of his prison, a much reformed man, who wrote several books^[1] and became a sculptor of note. His life's mission, according to him, was to help prevent children from deprived backgrounds such as himself from walking into a life of crime. And he is still very active at it.

In other words, corrective reforms are very much possible within the prison system; all that is need-

ed is the political will to see them through. And sadly, we seem to be lacking in that regard. It was the Russian Literateur Fyodor Dostoevsky who had once remarked:

“The civilizational quotient of a society is best gauged by the treatment it metes out to its prisoners.”

And it is here that I take some issues with the great Dostoevsky. I shall substitute ‘mentally ill’ for prisoners. I believe the mentally ill are left to a fate infinitely worse than most prisoners I know of. And unless we can extend compassion to the mentally ill, we really are in no position to regard ourselves as civilized. I have held this personal all through my professional career and those who have followed my columns here and elsewhere would be well familiar with it.

Rehabilitation of an Insane Person in Custodial Care

There is a general belief that once an individual contracts psychosis, he or she becomes irremediable and forfeits the right to be labelled a meaningful member of the society. This medieval doctrine is totally unsupported by any evidence; all the major studies have indicated that more than two third of those with a diagnosis of schizophrenia can lead near normal lives and mood stabilizers have brought out a dramatic transformation in the treatment of a bipolar disorder. And General Paresis of Insane had become a thing of the past with the advent of penicillin. Despite the enormous publicity that came the way of John Nash, who ultimately won the Economics Nobel, despite his repeated bouts of psychosis, the pessimism that surrounds an initial diagnosis of psychosis is demoralizing for all concerned-including the psychiatrists.

Even worse is the fate endured by those with a mental illness who have committed crime; and who, in most countries, fall into the no man’s land between the mental healthcare system and the criminal justice system. *Mens rea* and M’Nagten’s rule are to be found in every statute books now - whether they are adequately and appropriately applied is another matter.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had several interactions with late Dr. Murray Cox during my early years of psychiatric training. Murray was the Consultant Psychotherapist at the Broadmoor Special Hospital in Britain which lodges those with mental illnesses who could not be held guilty of criminal actions because of diminished responsibility. Murray had trained as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist and his

life’s mission was to deal with these individuals and instil hope in them. Most of the residents at Broadmoor or other special hospitals remained there because the society was unwilling to accept them back within their fold.

Murray was a committed Christian but he was equally respectful towards other religions and even the ardent atheists tended to see him as a friend. His books are still regarded as classics.^[2] In his contact with dangerous mentally ill patients, he found that almost all of them had very fragile self-esteem. This leads to a sense of spoiled identity which is what he tended to focus on. And he was responsible for the remarkable transformation that began to be seen in several of the inmates.

Murray had already acquired the status of an international icon by the time he succumbed to cancer and died a very premature death. His wife Caroline, herself one of the foremost nurses in the world (and the daughter of McNeil Love, author of the foremost textbook in surgery) was elevated to the House of Lords which is where she sits. And Murray’s younger brother, John, was a psychiatrist colleague of mine who later on became the President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Murray was unable to witness the highest honours that were conferred upon two people he was extremely close to.

William Chester Minor

It was Murray who inspired me to train as a barrister and work on the interface between psychiatry and law. And it was Murray again who initially introduced me to the case of a remarkable inmate of Broadmoor to whom all of us owe a very deep debt of gratitude. His name was William Chester Minor.

Minor (1834-1920) was born in Sri Lanka to Christian missionary parents who were American nationals. He was sent back to the United States for education where he excelled in studies and graduated from Yale Medical School. He then joined the Union Army as a surgeon. It was at this stage he was known to have developed a severe psychiatric illness. He was discharged from the Army and moved to England. Simon Winchester, his biographer describes:

“On February 17, 1872, at two o’clock in the morning outside the Lion brewery, (Fig 5) he fatally shot a man named George Merrett, who the deluded Minor believed had broken into his room. He was tried before Lord Chief Justice Bovill and, under the McNaghten rules of the 1840s, was deemed insane. He was there-

fore not hanged but sent to the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum in the village of Crowthorne, Berkshire on 17 April 1872, where he remained for thirty-eight years."^[3]

As he was not considered dangerous, he was granted access to a library. He learned that the Oxford English Dictionary was inviting contributions for its very first edition and decided to devote himself to this task. According to Winchester:

"To this laborious task he devoted most of his life. From 1882 over two decades, he focused mainly on sixteenth and seventeenth-century texts, making notes on more than 12,000 slips, mailing them to Editor's scriptorium. Often tormented by delusional figures at night, he barricaded his door with furniture to prevent attempted entry. Aside from these nightly terrors, he was mostly rational by day and proved to be one of the OED's most prolific volunteers. Minor also sent money to Eliza, the widow of the man he had killed, and she visited him in Broadmoor bringing him books. Minor kept secret his hospital address, but many years later Murray learned of Minor's background only when he visited him in January 1891."^[3]

The Editor of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, James Murray expressed his gratitude with the following words:

"The supreme position is . . . certainly held by Dr. W. C. Minor of Broadmoor, who during the past two years has sent in no less than 12,000 quotes [sic]. . . . So enormous have been Dr. Minor's contributions during the past 17 or 18 years, that we could easily illustrate the last 4 centuries from his quotations alone."^[4]

Minor's condition worsened and in response to his delusions and hallucinations, he cut off his penis in 1902. The Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary campaigned for his early release but the then Home Secretary by the name of Winston Churchill decided to deport him to the United States in 1910 where after a prolonged period of incarceration, he died in 1920.

Dr. Minor's case demonstrates very clearly that those who have been declared not guilty by reason of insanity are entitled to our understanding and certainly not the hostility that usually falls into their lot. We definitely need humane and committed psychotherapists like Murray Cox, but as a society we have to be able to sustain a special hospital like Broadmoor in India where they can be treated and rehabilitated.

Goodness knows how many William Minors have been unable to register their contribution to the society they live in which refuses to understand them.

Acknowledgements

I must express my very sincere gratitude to Murray and Caroline Cox who acquainted me with William Minor's case and convinced me that given a propitious environment, many of those adjudged insane can make stellar contributions to the society.

Note: The views expressed in the article are the author's own.

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