



Project Reconnect: Responding to Women Offenders on a Personal Level

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I recently received an early morning call from a client who was in the hospital emergency room. She said she had been raped and asked if I could come and be with her. I went right there, but I couldn't help thinking how sad it must be for a woman in that circumstance to have no one to call but her probation officer. This speaks volumes, not only about our program and our client relationships, but also about the women themselves. It is not unusual for us to be the persons in their lives whom they can trust and turn to when something happens, either happy or tragic. The day before, I had been visited by a client who learned she would be graduating from college earlier than she thought—and with a 4.0 grade average. Again, the first person she turned to was her probation officer. These incidents speak to the paucity of relationships in these women's lives, and they highlight the importance of what we do.

Providing Humane Contact and Hope

The news is full of reports of the states building new prisons and allotting more money for corrections. I listen to the dialog and justifications with feelings ranging from amusement to outrage. Obviously, for all our time, effort, and money, we are no closer to solving the problem of crime. Perhaps every time we are tempted to adopt a new treatment modality, enact stricter laws, impose tougher sanctions, reduce caseloads, try intensive surveillance, or initiate other responses to address a problem that grows ever larger and more out of control, what we need to do instead is simply go back to basics—to reduce our treatment of women offenders to the lowest denominator, that of human and humane contact.

I am suggesting that the solution may be simpler than we have imagined. All we need to do is begin to see the antisocial behaviors of our clients as a product of unfortunate circumstances, of childhood brutality, neglect, or victimization, and ask what purpose that behavior serves and what needs these women are trying to meet in such dysfunctional ways. Perhaps if we can respond to these needs on a personal level, in a way that engenders trust and confidence and within the context of a relationship, then women offenders can begin to hope again. With hope can come dreams, and with dreams can develop goals. When the goals are achieved, the lives of families can be rebuilt. When we search for the magic answer that is going to motivate the “resistant” client, we often find that it is . . . hope. If people do not have hope, there is nothing to strive for, no reason to change.

Doing business this way is not easier than other approaches. It takes infinite patience, it takes energy, it takes commitment, and it requires belief. It also takes hope on our part. There are as many ways to do these things as there are individuals to do the job. I want to share with you the way we do them at Project Reconnect.