

THIS IS WHO I AM¹

Allan Weaver: Scotland

In no particular order, I am a Criminal Justice Social Work Team Manager in Scotland; I am also an ex-offender and former prisoner; I am also a son, a father, a grandfather, a husband, a brother, a friend and colleague. In what follows, I intend to offer an experiential view of my own pathway to desistance and in so doing I will discuss what led me into an early life of crime; what this lifestyle entailed; that whole process of becoming an ex-offender and the realities of trying to move away from this lifestyle.

I am now 52 and I was born and raised in a seaside town in Ayrshire, the third youngest in a family of six children. Due to the loss of traditional employment industries in the 1970s, the town has never really recovered economically and has remained a rather desolate town with numerous social problems and large pockets of deprivation, crime and unemployment which essentially formed the backdrop for my childhood. My father was bricklayer to trade although he was an in and out of work over the years. My mother stayed home and took care of all of us. It wasn't a loveless environment; my mother smothered me with love and she was always there for me and my brothers and sisters. I also had a good loving relationship with my siblings although I never felt close to my father. Our relationship was a very distant one. He was raised in a very macho, aggressive, male orientated environment and in many respects this was passed down to me from an early age. This was not particularly unusual in this era and in this area it must be said. Most males and adult males in the west of Scotland tended to inherit and share this same macho culture. In fact, an elderly uncle would often take me out to the back garden and teach me how to fight 'like a man' when I was just six years old. Despite this aspect of my upbringing and socialisation, I considered my childhood to be relatively normal until the age of 12 and this was when I first witnessed my father beating my mother in an uncontrollable, brutal drunken rage. Even at

¹ This article was previously published as part of the article Weaver, A and Weaver, B (2013) Autobiography, empirical research and critical theory in desistance: a view from the inside out. *Probation Journal* 60(3): 259-277. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the editors of the Probation Journal

that early age, this proved to be a major turning point in my life. My father's violence or the threat of his violence cast a long shadow over the family home. In many ways I lost part of my childhood and I became quite a resentful and bitter child.

As the violence in the home intensified it affected my family in different ways but despite my young age at the time, I seemed to adopt that main protective role towards my mother. I wouldn't let her out of my sight at times. I insisted on being directly by her side when my father was due in from the pub. I could never settle at school knowing she was home alone. Yet at that age, I couldn't do anything to actually prevent the violence and I always remember feeling an incredible sense of failure, as if somehow I was continuously letting my mother down. It was around this period of early adolescence that I progressed from what could be described as sporadic acts of offending and/or anti-social behaviour in the community, to more sustained and serious incidents of offending behaviour which included vandalism, housebreaking, assault and just general mayhem in my own community. By the age of 15 I was what could be termed a classic prolific or persistent offender.

To understand why I was propelled into such a sustained and troublesome lifestyle there are a number of factors which must be considered. Due to the turmoil in the family home and each one's individual coping strategies, I was being left to my own devices for long periods of time. I was, by then, opting out of school, rebelling and truanting with no particular questions asked of me. I suspect that the teachers, who appeared to have no specific interest in the source of my dysfunctional behaviour, were just glad to see the back of me. I was also becoming more involved and reliant on like-minded friends and as a result of this we quickly formed into an informal street gang, creating our own subculture within our neighbourhood. It must be equally recognised however, that this lifestyle also provided me, and my friends, with a sense of belonging. It gave us an identity and a status that we would not have got anywhere else. I also learned during this period that violence was an effective form of communication. It certainly made people listen, and it made them sit up and take notice of me. I wasn't alone in this; many young men from traditional, deprived, working class communities in the west of Scotland where I grew up embraced this distinct macho culture and admired and celebrated the 'hard man'. Indeed, aggression and violence remain

an expressive means of communication for many young men who lack any form of power or status or indeed other resources.

And so, I hung out with this gang from early adolescence and I emerged as a persistent and increasingly violent young offender, and these behaviours and this lifestyle shaped and largely defined my life for the following twelve years or so. It should also be noted perhaps that throughout this period of my life and even during the initial stages of my offending, I was well known within the system. I hadn't slipped through any kind of net. For example, I was well known to the police. The police had attended my house on a number of occasions due to my father's violence. My teachers at school were well aware that I was a dysfunctional and troubled child in many ways. I even had a Social Worker and attended Children's Hearings on a regular basis. So was this, on reflection, a gap in provision? I don't know but certainly there was a gap somewhere – maybe in communication, maybe in understanding, maybe, even, in interest. I think it is also important to say at this stage that I did not enjoy my offending lifestyle. In fact, for the most part I hated it. I hated the way it made me feel about myself and since mid-adolescence I felt increasingly trapped and I felt as if I had no way out. So much of the violence I was involved in was down to fear and the fact that I felt I had no alternative way of dealing with things at the time. This life basically meant that I was excluded from most of the activities that other young people were taking for granted. Admittedly, I was committing offences on a regular basis and, yes, violent offences, but I lived a life where I was also a victim of repeated violence and sometimes from so called professional people. In addition to this, however, and perhaps more painful in a lot of ways, most decent people just didn't want to know me at the time.

When discussing my past, people often wonder and sometimes question the role of my parents in my offending behaviour as a child. Well I think it's safe to say that my father never had any influence over me, or, at least, not in a constructive sense. When I was young, my mother, as I indicated earlier, became quite reliant on me emotionally, financially on occasion and certainly for protection, which despite my best efforts I generally failed to safeguard. Although my mother's love and commitment to me was unquestionable, my mother had her own troubles to deal with. She was a broken woman who struggled to feed

her six children at times. She was downtrodden and battered on a regular basis. She couldn't cope with her own life, let alone influence mine.

Due to my continued involvement in offending behaviour and being deemed 'outwith parental control' I was sent to an approved school at the age of 15, which essentially heralded the beginning of my journey through the juvenile and adult penal system culminating in a three year sentence in Glasgow's notorious Barlinnie Prison. Over the years I really struggled to cope with these places. For me they were certainly not the flagship of reform they claimed to be with the emphasis being predominantly focused on control and containment. Likewise, these facilities, and in particular the approved schools and young offenders institutions, were plagued by bullying, aggression, intimidation and violence which is hardly the environment in which to promote change and rehabilitation. Moreover, I was removed from my community, from education, from friends and family and processed through a number of these places, only to be returned to the exact same problems, fears and battles that I had left behind. I still remember vividly getting off the train on my way back from various periods of custody and my mates would be standing at the train station to welcome me home, laden down with bags of alcohol and tales of recent offending exploits. Absolutely nothing ever changed and the cycle continued unabated.

So what *did* change for me? How did I manage to overcome the barriers and eventually break the cycle of offending? Stopping offending for me was related to a number of factors. Like most offenders moving on from this lifestyle, it was a process and it was at times a long, lonely and difficult process. It wasn't - and rarely is - a sudden event.

For me there were two significant relationships which in different ways gave me hope, determination and the courage to change. Firstly, when I was aged 22, I met an older guy in prison who was nearing the end of a life sentence. He was previously involved in organised crime and had credibility in my eyes. During our time together he spoke about earlier beliefs, values and experiences that all conspired to result in his life sentence. More importantly, perhaps, he also spoke about the stark realities of crime and his 'wasted life' and he basically gave me a framework to examine the futility and destruction of my own offending behaviour and the effects this was having on my life and the people who cared about me. Given his

past experiences, no-one else would have held so much sway over me in the same manner. Indeed, this was my first experience of a positive male role model; a convicted murderer.

The second relationship came in to play when I was released from the same prison sentence and involved the social worker I had had since childhood. On reflection, her value for me wasn't necessarily in her profession, but her personality. She was a lovely, caring individual who believed firmly in the concept of change and rehabilitation and she never lost sight of me during all those years of bedlam. She was also both supportive and respectful to my mother, which of course meant a lot to me. While I was still on Parole Licence, my social worker got me involved as voluntary group-worker in a programme for young offenders. Working with these children was difficult and demanding but totally energising and it gave me an overwhelming feeling of self-worth and self-respect. It also reinforced to me at the time that this was a career I wanted to pursue. It also proved to me for the first time perhaps that not everyone saw me as just being an offender or ex-offender. In my social worker's case she was willing to give me a chance and knew that I had much more to offer, long before I could see it.

In addition to this I was beginning to find regular employment on building sites, which of course added to the feeling of purpose and self-worth and I was beginning to feel that I had some sort of place in the world. Of particular significance for me in the change process during this period was the birth of my first son Paul, followed the next year by the birth of my second, Allan. With this brought a steely determination that my sons would not experience the upbringing I had experienced as a child. In many ways I had to hit the ground running in terms of fatherhood. I had to learn it as I went and I had to learn it fast. I knew I had to break that cycle of offending for my own two sons. I had to break that intergenerational pattern of the hyper masculine, hard drinking abusive father. I did; both of my sons are law-abiding young men we have always had a strong loving relationship. Paul is a residential child-care worker and Allan is a social work student.

Despite my initiation into fatherhood, many of my old friends and indeed my brother were still actively involved in offending behaviour and violence due to an ongoing feud with a notorious family in the town with whom we had once been friends. Necessarily, there was

an increasing expectation on me to become involved. However, committed to change, I no longer had the will or indeed the heart for this lifestyle. I had commitments and purpose in life and I no longer wanted to be part of this. As a response to this chaos, this threat to the new me, I moved to London, England with my wife and sons where we remained for several years. London at the time afforded me a degree of anonymity as well as regular and well paid employment. It let me relax and embrace fully the concept of fatherhood and these factors combined allowed me to nurture and develop this change in my identity.

Due to a family bereavement we decided to return to my home town after four years, albeit with some degree of trepidation. However, life there had continued without me. The particular troubles I had left behind some years earlier had long been replaced with several other destructive conflicts. Many of my mates had not changed and were forced to make way for the younger guys in the town; they had since drifted into lives characterised by tenuous relationships, heavy drinking, sporadic work and occasional trouble.

With the recession in the construction industry biting hard in the early 1990s I decided to return to school in a local secondary school to complete my education. I was into my thirties at this time and this entailed attending classes at school with 4th and 5th year pupils. As the only adult in the class and one with a large battle scar emblazoned down my face, I felt torturously out of place. For the first month I really struggled to adapt to this environment, feeling awkward, embarrassed and painfully out of place. I was also conscious of the fact that the first and only other exam I had sat was when I was in prison. As a result I was always worried about being ousted and escorted from class in the event that any Police checks were undertaken, given my extensive history of offending. With a dogged determination however, I stuck with it and grew to really enjoy the academic challenge.

Having gained the necessary academic qualifications, I applied for and was accepted to university where I gained a BA in social work. On completion of my study I was employed as Criminal Justice Social Worker where I have worked for the last 18 years and I have been a Team Manager for the last 11. I also went on to complete my MSc in Criminal Justice and obtained a Practice Award in Advanced Criminal Justice Studies. I am also a qualified Practice Teacher and have supported a number of students through their placements. In 2008 I had

my autobiography published *'So You Think You Know Me?'* and recently I played the narrator and protagonist in the documentary film *'The Road From Crime'²*.

My own process of change was long, lonely and at times extremely difficult. Yet, in some respects, I am still held accountable for my offending behaviour. At times I am still identified as the person I was and the reputation I had over 30 years ago and this evokes mixed emotions in me which sit sometimes comfortably, sometimes less so. Through my offending lifestyle I have caused some people great pain, and for that I will always feel remorse. Simultaneously however, I do not and cannot regret that particular period of my life. If I did this would unravel the multiple identities I embody and, after all, this is who I am. This ongoing journey of reconciliation with my former self and the law abiding husband, father, grandfather and social work manager I now am, has made me who I am today.

² The Road From Crime can be viewed at: <http://vimeo.com/43658591>

