

I want to start off saying what an honour it is to have the opportunity to speak with you tonight. When I first received a phone message from Gordon, asking if I would be interested in being the speaker for the AGM of the Kingston Community Chaplaincy, my initial reaction was to say 'no'. The reason for this, was that I thought it was very presumptuous of me to think that I had anything particularly interesting or inspiring to say about corrections or our justice system, being that I have been working in the field for such a short period of time. Indeed, there are undoubtedly many people in this room who know much more about the subject than I, and have many more years of experience working or volunteering in the field. I have spent a lot of time speaking to people who were involved with the John Howard Society of Kingston in the past, as employees, clients, volunteers, and as interested members of the community, and the sense I have gotten is that the organization has become increasingly isolated over the past 5 or more years, and one of the main objectives that I have tried to promote since taking over as ED a year ago, has been to actively reengage with both the Kingston community, and men serving time in Kingston's prisons. Thus, I saw this invitation as a great opportunity to speak with other people in the Kingston community who are interested and engaged in community and institutional justice.

As Kate mentioned, before returning to Kingston, I worked for nine years with an organization called Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without Borders, in the field of medical humanitarian aid, throughout Africa and Latin America. Although these two organizations seem to be worlds apart in terms of the work they undertake, and the contexts in which they operate, I have been continually surprised by how close the values of the two organizations are, and particularly how similar are the kinds of dilemmas and situations that they face on a daily basis, through the work that they do. I thought that exploring this relationship, and looking at how some of the lessons learned from the work of MSF can be applied to the field in which we work, could make a useful topic for this speech.

When I first encountered the advertisement for my current position at the John Howard Society, I had only the vaguest of notions of what the organization did. In fact, the only contact I had had with the organization, up to that point, was that I had once purchased a futon from its famous, long since closed, wood shop program. As I started reading about the organization, I became consumed by it, reading everything I could get my hands on. In many ways, it brought me back to when I first encountered MSF, and the sense of alignment that I felt between the values of the organization, with my personal values, and also the healthy sense of outrage that I felt over the neglect and marginalization of a given population. What initially motivated me to choose my career path with MSF, was a compulsion to be involved, in some way, with promoting international human rights. I think this is probably Gordon's fault, being that he was my school teacher between the formative years of 6 and 8. What was reinforced to me, over the years that I worked with MSF, was that if one wishes to see the state of our global commitment to human rights and international humanitarian law, we need to go to those places which are most isolated and cut off from the rest of the world, and where there are enormous humanitarian needs, whether they be resulting from hunger, epidemics, conflict, natural disasters or social exclusion. These are the places where we can see whether the myriad conventions and agreements, to which most of the world's countries are signatories, have any serious application, or whether they are merely symbolic efforts which can come in handy when they are aligned with other

interests. In this way, these most neglected humanitarian contexts are kind of a global litmus test which can be used to measure our commitment to human rights as an international community.

Within our national context, here in Canada, I believe that prisons play a similar role, in that if one wants to see the state of human rights, the place to look is inside our penitentiary system. As I imagine that many of you have seen firsthand, prisons are places of immense power, immense isolation, and immense secrecy, characteristics which were pervasive in all the contexts I worked in with MSF. In this way, I recognized an immediate parallel between working with marginalized populations around the world, and working with individuals in our correctional system.

I believe strongly that at its base, the work of both organizations is motivated by the core value of humanity. The value of humanity, is the belief that all life has intrinsic value; that all human beings, irrespective of their race, citizenship, social class, or any other classification are endowed with both negative freedoms such as the freedom from fear, torture, and hunger, and positive freedoms, such as the freedom to associate, move, participate, etc. It is a belief that human beings are richly social, spiritual, emotional, and psychological creatures. Although the language in which MSF and the JHS express their values is different, I think that at the base of the missions and charter of values of the two organizations is the same core value of humanity, and the commitment to be present in contexts of isolation in order to provide care and support with the objective of alleviating suffering.

I think that that this idea of 'presence' is very important, and often, in and of itself is an act of humanity. I remember very clearly working in a village in Northern Colombia, called Saiza, which had suffered successive massacres by both the Farc rebels, and Paramilitaries. The community had been completely abandoned by the residents, who had been internally displaced to urban slums, living in terrible conditions in the big cities, but were now starting to return to their community. Although the medical needs were not acute, we decided that maintaining a small health post in Saiza was essential, in order to be present, to show solidarity with a community which was seeking to resettle, after decades of terror, and still under a climate of fear. The residents of Saiza routinely told us that they only felt safe to resettle as long as we were there with them. When I first started working in Saiza, I have to admit I didn't understand the reason for the project's existence. If there were not acute medical needs, then surely our resources would be better spent somewhere else. After some time, I began to understand that the objective of being present in Saiza, was presence itself. While the limited medical services that we provided were appreciated by the community, to a large extent it was a pretext to maintain a presence with a community which was living in fear. This realization has largely informed my perspective on the work that the John Howard Society does inside of prisons: while I certainly do believe that basing our activities in evidence-based-practice should always be our aim, it is important to also highlight, that in many cases the most valuable action we have to offer is our presence with those who are suffering and living in fear.

Presence is closely related to what was perhaps the most important innovation which MSF introduced to humanitarian work, and for which it received the Nobel Prize in 1999, *temoignage*, which is loosely translated as 'witnessing' or 'bearing witness' in English. MSF was founded during the Biafra War in Nigeria, in 1971, by a group of young French Doctors and Journalists who were working for the French

Red Cross. They were outraged by the unwillingness of the Red Cross to speak out about the atrocities they were witnessing through their work, and decided to found MSF, which would be based on two equal pillars of medical action and temoignage. Their belief was that bearing witness to suffering, generated a responsibility for the humanitarian to speak out about what they had seen. The temoignage which they envisioned, and which continues to be one of the pillars of the organization is very nuanced and involves an almost passive recounting of what the practitioner witnesses through their work. While it can express outrage or condemnation, it does not involve proposing solutions, making political proclamations, or trying to sort out who is right and who is to blame, and tries to always avoid presenting MSF as being the expert or authority. It normally involves either recounting individual testimonies of patients attended to by the organization, and/or speaking about the kinds of medical or psycho-social conditions the organization has encountered. In this way, the maxim is to only speak about what we have the authority to speak about, which is specifically what we have observed or encountered and what we have done. The only occasions where MSF may decide not to engage in temoignage, is when it is thought to put the organization's beneficiaries at direct risk for retaliation or further harm.

I believe that this concept of temoignage is very relevant to working with people who are involved with our criminal justice system, and especially in prisons, and should form the basis of how we communicate about what we do. As you all know very well, debates regarding justice and our penal system are most often rooted in opinion and moral judgement. As those working within the field, our communication is most powerful when it is rooted in what we have the legitimacy to speak out about, which is essentially what we do, what we bear witness to through our work, and the testimonies of those who are suffering and are living in fear. I will return to the question of communication later, as it is a particularly contentious topic, which MSF and the John Howard Society have grappled with significantly and continue to grapple with.

I would now like to look at the concept of neutrality, which is one of the central values of MSF, and to some extent of the John Howard Society as well. At first neutrality may seem like a very straightforward concept to understand, and probably also seems very contradictory to the concept of temoignage or bearing witness. Surely, if an organization speaks out, it has chosen a side, and therefore loses its neutrality? Furthermore, certainly in situations of conflict and mass violations of human rights, MSF cannot remain neutral to what is going on? These are both very valid questions, and not incorrect, but the concept of neutrality as it is understood by MSF, requires some explanation. I think that part of this explanation can come from differentiating what we could call an operational value from a fundamental or core value. For example, impartiality, another value of MSF, which states that, as humanitarians, our activities are led only by need, irrespective of other classifications, and should be proportionate to the need identified, is what I believe is a core or fundamental value. Neutrality, which means that in situations of conflict or disagreement, MSF does not take sides, I would classify as an operational value, meaning a value which allows us to work, rather than a core value of the organization. Of course MSF was not the first organization to adopt neutrality as a value, as this goes back at least as far as the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, by Henri Dunant in 1863. Dunant argued that neutrality was essential in order for the Red Cross to be granted unfettered access to populations across

the world, particularly to prisoners of war. The Red Cross maintains this stance to today, that neutrality, and most often silence, are the keys to gaining access to individuals and populations in conflict zones. It is important to emphasize, that even in the case of the Red Cross, neutrality is an operational as opposed to a core value. The organization accepts that neutrality is necessary in order to work as an unarmed actor in situations of conflict, but it does not believe that neutrality, by itself is 'virtuous'.

MSF's conception of neutrality is very similar, but with some differences, stemming from its commitment to *temoignage*. Certainly, MSF does not go as far as taking sides, in conflict situations, but, as mentioned earlier, it limits its communication to relaying testimonies of those who are suffering and living in fear, and relating the medical and humanitarian needs that it observes. For MSF, communicating in this way means that the organization acts on the one hand as a conduit through which those who are suffering can make their voices heard around the world, and on the other, a medical professional, relaying data and providing a scientific diagnosis of the humanitarian consequences of a given situation. By attempting to communicate as a disinterested party as opposed to an expert or authority, the organization manages to dance along the line of retaining some degree of neutrality.

I believe strongly in this conception of neutrality, and think that there is a lot that we can learn from it at the John Howard Society, and for other not-for-profit organizations working in the justice field. We too, can dance along that line of not taking sides or outright criticizing a particular political figure or party, but still bearing witness, and recounting what we see through our work, and the stories of those that we encounter, when appropriate. Of course engaging in public communication is always very delicate, and requires a careful study of the risks and rewards at every turn and great care must always be taken with the subtle nuances of language. However, I think that in our field, there is a tendency to overestimate the consequences of public communication, while minimizing the consequences of staying silent. The choice is often set up as communicate and endanger your organization or stay silent and protect your organization. I think that this is a false choice, and that on almost all occasions, there are ways to communicate while greatly reducing risks to an organization's funding and institutional access. The other side of the coin, which is often ignored by organizations, is that remaining silent is also a choice which has its own consequences, most important of which is the perception of complicity with the status quo.

While I am a strong believer in the values of humanity, impartiality, *temoignage*, and neutrality highlighted thus far, what I came to realize, in my years working with MSF, was that humanitarian work exists in the tension between our ideal conception of these values, and the reality of the contexts in which we operate. This clash between idealism and realism was the key debate that MSF grapples with on a daily basis, and I would say what the John Howard Society also faces through its mission, values, and the work that it develops with individuals who have been in conflict with the law. In every conflict zone where MSF operates it has to negotiate access with all of the actors involved. In Afghanistan, this means negotiating with the Taliban, as well as the Afghan government, and US forces. In Somalia, this means negotiating with El Shabab, Somali warlords, and the government. These negotiations always involve trade-offs, and force the organization to constantly define and redefine what it is willing to give

up in order to gain access to populations in need of emergency medical care. I believe that this tension between our ideals and the shifting context and reality in which we work is the central dilemma of every values driven humanitarian organization: hold too rigidly and steadfastly to a narrow conception of one's values, and your organization will likely end up isolated and irrelevant; stray too far from your values and your organization will lose its soul and core purpose for existing, beyond bidding on funding contracts.

MSF has managed to thrive, growing to become the world's largest and perhaps most well regarded international humanitarian organization by constantly evolving, and striking a healthy balance between on the one hand, embracing this debate and providing arenas for it to be woven into the fabric of the organization, and on the other, by always keeping the focus squarely on the beneficiaries of the organization's work. Around a decade ago, there was a raging debate in the sphere of international humanitarian aid about the question of accountability. After considerable debate and reflection, MSF made the decision that its accountability always lies first and foremost with its beneficiaries. Of course, there is also a high degree of accountability *vis a v* donors, governments, staff, and the wider community, but this distinction of defining that the highest level of accountability must always be to its patients, has been instrumental in keeping the focus squarely on the organization's original mission and mandate. I can remember countless meetings, debates, and discussions, in which at a certain moment, we paused, sat back and asked the question, who are we really focused on here? Is what we are proposing or discussing really for our patients, or we just navel gazing or looking to grow our organization at any cost?

While defining accountability in this way is essential for keeping the organization focused on its mission, I am convinced that heated, contentious, passionate debate is an extremely important ingredient of all strong and vibrant organizations. I remember in my first week working with MSF, overhearing two old timers talking about how the organization was currently in a state of crisis. Organizational crisis was a term I continued to hear all throughout my first year with the organization. In my second year, I continued to hear about a crisis, and that there was probably another crisis on the horizon. The reasons for these crises were many: governance, funding, mission drift, operations, etc, etc. I would say that by about the third year of my MSF career I also became one of those who spoke constantly about the current and looming crisis inside of the organization. It took me a while longer to clue into the fact that crisis had simply been the status quo since the organization was founded in 1971, and furthermore what gave the organization its dynamism and innovative spirit.

I consistently hear from friends and acquaintances who work for valuable not for profit organizations in Canada and abroad, about how infighting, egos, and profound internal disagreements hold their organizations back or, in some cases, even lead to the dissolution of their activities. I think that their inability to embrace debate as part of their organizational culture, and create safe spaces to open up the belly of the organization for criticism and change, is a shame, and it is this culture that I hope to foster in the John Howard Society, as we look at how we can best meet the needs of men and women who have been in conflict with the law in this region.

I want to end by again stating how humbled and honored I feel by the opportunity to speak with you tonight. I believe that especially here in Kingston where Corrections is so ingrained in our community,

we need to open up spaces to discuss and debate what we bear witness to through our work, and how to promote more humane and just responses to crime and its consequences.