



Jeremy Irons recommends...

Jeremy Irons doesn't shy away from unpopular causes. In the early 1990s, the actor was one of the first celebrities to wear an AIDS awareness ribbon. For the last ten years, he has been a patron of The Prison Phoenix Trust, a charity that encourages prisoners to take a deeper look inside themselves through yoga and meditation.

The charity I feel most passionate about is...

The Prison Phoenix Trust, which teaches yoga and meditation to prisoners and prison warders around the UK. It's such a simple idea and relatively cost-effective because most of the teachers are volunteers.

I first got involved in the charity because...

I like to support local charities and the Prison Phoenix Trust is based near Oxford, where I live. Many years ago, I met Sister Elaine McInnes when she was starting to build up the trust and she asked me to become a patron. I was keen to find ways to be hands-on with the trust as I don't like just being a name on a letterhead.

Working with prisoners is important because...

I'm a rogue and a vagabond so have a natural empathy for prisoners! No seriously, I always think there's a very thin line between being in prison and being on the outside—there but for the grace of God, and all of that. It's clear that poor reading and writing skills, appalling childhoods and child abuse have a huge part to play in landing people in prison.

When you meet prisoners you realise that many of them are damaged and also deeply ashamed. At a fundraising event we held recently in HMP Wandsworth, we put some of the prisoners' names on the programme but they wanted us to Tippex them out because they felt so ashamed to be there.

The charity changes lives by...

The Prison Phoenix Trust gets to the root of the problem. It turns the negatives of prison life—the spare time and isolation—into a positive. Helping prisoners practise yoga or meditate can help them build up their sense of identity and deal with the anger that often led them to prison in the first place. It can also bring a sense of calm and this is something they can take with them when they leave—they don't even need to pack it in a suitcase.

The most impressive thing about the charity is...

I admire their understanding of the culture that they're working in. They realise how alien yoga and meditation can be for prisoners and prison staff. They often have to battle with prison governors but they persevere anyway.

The most interesting person I've met through the charity is...

Sister Elaine is one of those people you're grateful to have met. She's a Catholic nun and a Zen master and is non-judgemental, has a depth of understanding and wisdom that is so rare. I don't do yoga or meditate much myself, but I did get to one of Sister Elaine's meditation sessions once, which I loved.

I support unfashionable causes because...

They're just the causes you should be supporting: I like to be a flag waver and to stir up trouble! But once a charity has got under way, I tend to take a step back because I have the rest of my life to focus on. You need to be careful about your role because there is this feeling that actors don't know what they're talking about. I feel embarrassed when I'm put in a situation that I feel I am not qualified for and I don't like it. I'm a do-or really.

One thing I've learnt about supporting charities is that...

Sometimes the solutions that charities offer are really simple and it just takes a few people. I like what Margaret Mead said about not doubting whether a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has. ■

Lucy Heady and Sue Wixley

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