

Can human beings flourish in prison?

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[1, 2]

‘The difference between the atmosphere in Workshop 10 (a music room) and the rest of [this maximum security prison] was like the difference between *life* and *death*..’ (unguarded words at an Arts Alliance Conference, 2010).

One of the things that makes a human life go well is the recognition by the person who lives it that he (sic) is fully human, and the social forms in which that recognition is expressed (Kraut 1999: 329).

Law is in effect no more than a form of psychology, since it is really a symbolic expression for the fact that the human mind responds in particular ways to certain kinds of social pressures (Lloyd 1969, p. 217-8, in Taylor, 2003: 211).²

I have offered to talk about the question of whether human beings can flourish in prison this evening. The concept of flourishing is a strong one [3]: it is broader than well-being or pleasure, and it includes the development of character and potential, and participation in community:

‘That human persons are flourishing means that their lives are good, or worthwhile in the broadest sense’ (Pogge 1999: 333).

The answer, I propose, is: *sometimes*, or *under certain conditions*. It is not common. But what are those conditions? To develop my answer, I need to touch on the difference between ‘human flourishing’ and ‘languishing’, deterioration and suicide. The first of these quotations (above) is my response to a question about the potential role of the arts in prison. I was observing that in a generally bleak environment, made bleaker by a political determination not to be seen to be ‘pampering long-term prisoners’, one area stood out. We – a small research team – found ourselves gravitating towards it, for light relief when the days became difficult, or words were becoming hard to find. In the music room, prisoners shared their lyrics and compositions with us, passing us the headphones, and asking us to listen to particular tracks, expressing longing, love, frustration and regret. The experience we had in that room (within moments of entering it) was of trust flowing, deep communication, creativity, pride, and authenticity. It was life affirming, for the ‘actors’ and for us ‘observer-participants’. It could be contrasted with the atmosphere in the rest of the prison, at the time.

We all know when our experience feels life affirming. We forget time, forget ourselves, and yet we *become* ourselves, in encounters with others, or an activity, or the environment. We are energised, renewed, and made stronger. This can happen for just a moment, it can be a single point of connection with the universe, but we know it. It is the sort of feeling that rules out the question of whether we want to carry on living, because we can take life for granted. It embodies meaning and hope.

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² ‘Human rights are not legal rights, on which one can insist in a court of law, but morally binding elementary needs that ought to be fulfilled under any social institutions we design or uphold’ (Pogge 1999: 353).

The second two quotes say something more: that human beings need recognition, to be known as who they are, and not as others imagine (or fear) them to be; and that legal rules (such as human rights) often express morally binding elementary needs – to be treated decently is a fundamental psychological need as well as an important moral principle.

The paper I want to give this evening constitutes an attempt to make sense of the findings from a recent comparison of seven quite different prisons, in the context of a longstanding interest in human survival in prison. I have been interested in conceptualising and trying to measure the most important dimensions of prison life, with colleagues, for many years, and in our most recent study, the dimension 'personal development' began to play an important role in the results. I have also promised to say something about yoga ... and will do so later. Those of you who practise it may have detected, of course, that I already have.

I am proposing the concept of personal development as a 'bridging concept' between an internal model of prison quality, arising mainly from a study of suicide prevention, and a more outward facing model of prison quality with relevance to the developing field of desistance [4]. That is, the study of what helps offenders stop offending. Shadd Maruna, Fergus McNeill, Tony Bottoms, and other 'desistance scholars' talk about values, relationships and the individual change trajectory in a way that resonates with my understanding of what goes on in prison. Paternoster and Bushway say that 'theorizing and research about desistance from crime is one of the most exciting, vibrant, and dynamic areas in criminology today' (Paternoster and Bushway 2009: 1156).

Studies of the effects of imprisonment on reconviction, however, rarely examine the prison environment thoroughly. They focus on specific accredited programmes, or a single initiative, and on outcomes. This is inadequate, and means that when we find better outcomes, we can't explain them, or reproduce them elsewhere. The prison itself is a 'black box' in evaluation research.

So having personally spent more than 20 years in 'the black box', as it were, looking at a set of related questions about what kinds of prisons are survivable, I am starting to look outwards. My question about the survivability of different types of prison environments could become more future oriented: is it possible to describe, and run, a prison that assists in the desistance process? Policy-makers, and perhaps the public, assume that this is already the case, but most informed practitioners know that this is far from what happens in practice.

First let me say something about prison suicide, or those who never make it into the desistance statistics, because they are never released. Others are prevented, in the high surveillance environment of the prison, and others still only think about it. About 18 per cent of prisoners in several of the studies I have carried out say they have thought about suicide whilst in prison (Liebling 1992; 1993; 1999; and Liebling et al 2005). The feelings precipitating these thoughts include wanting to escape, a feeling of crisis or panic, avoidance, sanctuary search, and psychic pain. [5] Diekstra wrote that:

Suicide is an attempt to end a situation felt to be unbearable, committed in a state of mind in which it does not matter any more whether all is really lost..' (Diekstra 1987: 55).

He cited Klaus Mann's autobiographical novel, *Turning Point*:

Why does someone kill himself? .. Because one will not, cannot go through the next half hour, the next five minutes. The limit has been reached ... (Mann 1940:)

I want to come back to this feeling – of hopelessness and unendurable feelings – later. Note that they do not have to last long to be fatal (a tragic fact that also indicates hope – if we can get you through the next half an hour, then your feelings may pass). Diekstra points out that the feelings precipitating suicide attempts are almost identical to the factors that are responsible for other types of behaviour, such as aggression and delinquent acts (Ibid.: p. 55). This has always been my hunch – that offending and suicide have common causes, as well as common preventive mechanisms. Durkheim was the first to propose that lack of integration was a major cause of suicide. We have learned since that status inequality is another. The basic message here is that how we feel connected to, and treated by, others in the world makes a difference to our willingness or capacity to live in it. Procedural justice scholars have been demonstrating for many years that how we feel treated makes a difference to how likely we are to cooperate with authority. Defiance and distress are more closely related than we think.

Some relevant aspects of the prison experience, including indifference, humiliation, deliberate taunting, inactivity, unfairness and unpredictability can precipitate feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and despair, particularly among the already vulnerable. Their opposites: dignity, recognition, respect, humanity and kindness, can protect individuals from such feelings.³

So let's state my agenda in the form of two linked questions: what kinds of prisons are 'survivable', and can there be a role for the prison in desistance? Both are essentially about human flourishing. [6]

Dan Nagin and colleagues concluded in their thorough review of the US evidence that:

The great majority of studies point to a null or criminogenic effect of the prison experience on subsequent offending (Nagin, Cullen and Jonson 2009: 178).

A 2010 Australian study has showed that offenders imprisoned for assault were more likely to reoffend than matched offenders not sent to prison (Weatherburn 2010).

Nagin and colleagues are at pains to point out that there are some important exceptions, and that the state of our knowledge about the prison and its effects is poor. The effects of imprisonment may differ in high sanction versus low sanction regimes (Nagin et al 2009, p. 179). In other words, the prison may have different effects, depending on whether we use it sparingly, or excessively. The authors conclude:

The scientific jury is still out on [the prison's] effects on reoffending (Ibid: 178).

Even where clear statistically significant results are found, the mechanisms producing these results are usually unknown.

The state of our knowledge – of both outcomes and mechanisms is poor.

We have conflicting and often unstated hypotheses. [7] In Figure 1, The Effects of Imprisonment on Reoffending, I have filled in the gaps. In hypothesis or model 1, the prison has a criminogenic effect, making offending more likely. Antisocial and damaging prison experiences, stigma or labelling, unfairness, the weakening of social bonds and other negative experiences lead to anger, defiance, isolation and increased reoffending.

³ Kraut usefully distinguishes between types of questions we might ask about experience and justice. So for example, 'if being unemployable is a source of shame', then job training constitutes an aspect of justice. 'The question is not psychological (how does it feel to be unemployable?) but *sociological* (are the unemployed treated as a caste?)' 329, fn 13.

In hypothesis 2, the prison deters via negative experiences, rationally leading to better choices. In hypothesis 3, the prison rehabilitates by providing education and skills, therapeutic interventions, insight, and opportunities for identity change. There is evidence that each model might apply differently to sub-groups or types of offenders. Models 1 and 3 seem more likely on current evidence than model 2.

What this means is that in aggregate studies of the effects of imprisonment the possibility that for some offenders, the risk of reoffending is exacerbated by the experience of imprisonment, whilst for others, it is reduced, leads to what looks like a nil result overall. [8, 9] In Figure 2 we see this represented – these Figures are based on the findings from a longitudinal study carried out in Germany.⁴

This problem of the aggregate masking of effects and outcomes differences may also be true for individual prisons, some of which we find to be more psychologically ‘survivable’ than others. So prisoners ‘do better’ in some establishments than in others. I will illustrate this in a moment.

We should bear in mind when looking for positive effects that the prison is primarily a place of punishment and exclusion. But it is often misrepresented as *simply* this. Close empirical scrutiny tells us something different: that prisons differ, over time and within jurisdictions, as well as between jurisdictions. Some are more ‘survivable’ than others. Some permit a ‘feeling of personal development’ where others do not. I want to illustrate these findings in particular this evening, and talk about what might explain them, and whether they have any significance for our question about human flourishing. There are many problems in making the transition from what seems to be a fairly clear picture of what goes on in the case of prison suicides, to the problem of reoffending. But the concept of personal development may provide something of a bridge. [10] As Porporino has recently argued:

[P]ositive emotions broaden one’s awareness and encourage novel, varied and exploratory thoughts and actions (which build skills over time). Negative emotions, on the other hand, mostly prompt narrow survival-oriented behaviours. When we go out of our way to make offenders miserable, both they and we suffer the consequences (Porporino 2010: 80).

I do not claim to be an expert in desistance (although I read the work of, and talk to my desistance colleagues often). But my interest in prison suicide was motivated by an interest in individual human survival, and in the ‘missed’ vulnerability offenders show when their lives and relationships disintegrate, as they so often do.

I want to show how we arrived at a particular conceptual model of the prison experience⁵ used in our most recent suicide prevention evaluation. This conceptualising and measuring the quality of prison life work is developmental and ongoing (see Liebling et al 2005; and Liebling et al. 2010). I will very briefly recap on it, so that I can move on to our current preoccupation with ‘personal development’.

I want to make 6 points about this work:

1. A method called Appreciative Inquiry [11] – which seeks organised conversation about peak or best experiences, was used to identify what matters most to prisoners when talking about their experience and the quality of life in prison. A consensus emerged

⁴ The Hannover Prison project on the Developmental Consequences of Imprisonment, led by Daniela Hosser; see, e.g., Windzio 2006; and www.kfn.de.

⁵ A conceptual model of *the prison experience* may be different from a conceptual model of *prison quality*. Elaborate/discuss.

about what the most important dimensions of prison life were. Most related to the nature and quality of interpersonal treatment, safety, and fairness. We used an extended qualitative or conversational start to devise a detailed but highly structured questionnaire about the quality of prison life – what we call its moral performance - that is now used by NOMS routinely their auditing of prison standards, as well as by us in continuing research.

2. In shaping the dimensions and giving them titles, prisoners chose the term 'personal development' in preference to terms like rehabilitation and resettlement, because the term reflected a less limited emphasis on growth and 'becoming'.⁶ It was also the case in our statistical analysis that personal development and humanity were highly correlated: the concept of humanity, as used by prisoners, included some kind of opportunity for growth.

3. The dimensions identified *matter* because they are, in the words of philosophers, virtues that human beings need (MacIntyre 1999). As 'vulnerable dependent creatures', we depend on acknowledgment, truthfulness and justice as a condition of human flourishing. Their opposite, disrespect and indifference, cause pain and damage [12]. A prisoner who was 'not entitled to a pillow' argued that indifferent treatment 'can turn you into a different person'. Prisoners make outstanding political philosophers, it turns out. They know and can talk coherently about what kind of social arrangements damage and what kind of social arrangements permit growth and survival.

Poor treatment leads to negative emotions. It is distressing and damaging for individuals. Prisoners in small units have described 'being treated fairly', and 'as a human being' as the most significant factor in their progress.⁷

4. These dimensions of prison quality were rated differently in prisons of the same type [13], although there were some patterns, so that fairness and personal development were always rated lower than order and decency.

5. Careful thinking about the moral climate of a prison included paying attention to its value balance [14], and to important distinctions between lazy concepts of 'the good' and the concept of 'what is right'. Prisons, like people, tended to prioritise either relational or security values, and are not good at prioritising them both or being 'moral dualists'. Prisoners, on the other hand, are 'moral dualists': that is, they value both respectful treatment, and the efficient delivery of safety and control. This conceptualising of prisoner evaluations of their prison environments as both 'humane' and 'well policed' has led us in some interesting directions I shall come back to. Let me just say for now, it is significant that Don Andrews, one of the 'What Works' scholars includes staff use of authority as one of the significant non programmatic factors in effective criminal justice interventions (Andrews 2011).

6. So, low levels of respect and fairness have many consequences besides the loss of cooperation, as identified by 'compliance scholars', including damaging effects on individual well-being. This was graphically illustrated in a before-after evaluation of a suicide prevention initiative in 12 high-risk, local prisons [15]. We found that mean levels of distress among prisoners were significantly correlated with institutional suicide rates. This meant that we could use 'mean distress' as a dependent variable in the remainder

⁶ 'What man actually needs is not a tension-less state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him' (Frankl 1964: 107; see also Allport 1955; Liebling, with Arnold 2004: 311-24). But, see also Liebling 2012.

⁷ A number mentioned specifically that they came to see staff and themselves in a completely different light as a consequence of their time in the [Barlinnie Special] unit' (Scottish Prison Service 2002a: 4; see also Bottomley et al. 1994).

of the study. [16] Holding imported vulnerability factors constant, we could identify which aspects of the quality of life contributed most to variations in levels of distress across 12 establishments.⁸ The results were: relational variables, including respect and fairness, perceptions of safety (which were linked to perceived fairness and experienced as a kind of trust in the environment), contact with family, and, importantly, participation in offending behaviour courses, were all linked to lower levels of distress. In other words, this was the study that led us to argue that some prison environments were more psychologically survivable than others. Those aspects of a prison's social or moral climate that make the difference were in the domain of fairness and relationships. They work via safety [17] – so that what made a prison feel safe – the most important determinant of levels of distress – was responsive, approachable, professional and respectful staff.

So two interesting but unexpected findings in these studies so far were that prisoners are enthusiastic participants in moral conversations, and that well-being is higher where offending behaviour is being addressed as well as where prisoners feel treated with respect.

There have been further developments of these themes in our recent research [18], including a study conducted with my colleagues Ben Crewe and Susie Hulley, exploring the extent to which the private sector operation of prisons play into the dynamics of prison life and quality, to what effect. We made some significant revisions to the original MQPL instrument, capturing important 'stability, safety, policing', and 'use of authority' dimensions as well as relational and fairness dimensions. Our new framework consists of four groups of dimensions: 'harmony' or relational dimensions, 'professionalism' dimensions, 'security' dimensions and 'well being and personal development' dimensions.

MQPL – Revised.

Figure 3 [19] shows the results from 7 prisons on this recently revised version of 'MQPL'-Revised. The prisons are divided into four quality quadrants – from 'poor' to 'very good'. The study was an independently funded comparison of public versus private sector prisons, but in our analysis, the differences within the private sector were so great, that we explored our results by quality rather than by ownership (see further Liebling et al 2011). This is a limitation of public private sector comparison studies of reoffending. The variation in quality within the private sector is so great that putting them together in a comparative study masks important differences between them.

The Figure shows only the dimensions, or aspects of prison quality, scoring a mean of 3 or above. A score of 3 is neutral and anything above it is positive. This figure does not show the actual scores, but shows anything evaluated positively, however small the distance above this threshold. The scores tend in general to become more positive as we move from the poor column, A to the 'average' column, B, and so on. We use the term 'average' for column B because our estimate, based on considerable research of our own, as well as oversight of this data collected by NOMS Audit and Corporate Assurance Directorate from all prisons, is that most prisons scores would look similar to those in this column. Column C, 'good' consists of two high performing public sector prisons, and column D contains two unusually high performing private sector prisons.

The Figure shows that in poor and average prisons, not many 'dimensions that matter' make it over the threshold. Respect does, but this is a fairly narrow version of respect –

⁸ The prison quality measures explained 45% to 50% of the variance in distress; imported vulnerability variables explained 8% to 15% of the variance in distress (see Liebling et al 2005).

what prisoners describe as politeness. Safety is there, but again, this is safety of a certain sort, and at fairly low levels. There is a bit of 'care for the vulnerable', and at Forest Bank, a prison of average quality overall, staff professionalism appears. This is Staff confidence and competence in the use of authority, and it includes items like, 'Staff here treat prisoners fairly when applying the rules' and 'Staff in this prison have enough experience and expertise to deal with the issues that matter to me'. Once appearing in the Figure, these dimensions can be 'taken for granted' as prisons move up the quality scale, from poor to good. In other words, the next dimensions to appear seem to build on these basic accomplishments. So in good prisons, cluster C, we see 'policing and security' appear, 'humanity' for the first time, and at last – 'personal development'.

It is only in one good public sector prison, but in both high quality prisons, that the dimension 'personal development' appears, and also, again for the first time, well-being. Personal development consists of 'generative' or 'capability' items, to do with growth and development, as well as offending behaviour work. Prisoners seem to be saying that once a prison has accomplished respect, safety, good staff-prisoner relationships, professionalism, and organisation and clarity, then it becomes a place in which personal development – or engagement with the self - can take place. But this is rare, and only takes place in the very best prisons. Where it happens, well-being is higher.

Personal development [20] is defined in our study as 'an environment that helps prisoners with offending behaviour, preparation for release and the development of their potential'. It is linked to, but not synonymous with, 'making progress', which is succeeding formally in negotiating one's way down risk scales and into lower security conditions. The 8 items in this dimension are:

Personal Development ($\alpha = .875$). An environment that helps prisoners with offending behaviour, preparation for release and the development of their potential.

Item no	Item	Corr.
rq25	My needs are being addressed in this prison.	.690
rq87	I am encouraged to work towards goals/targets in this prison.	.689
rq17	I am being helped to lead a law-abiding life on release in the community.	.683
rq146	Every effort is made by this prison to stop offenders committing offences on release from custody.	.660
rq133	The regime in this prison is constructive.	.650
rq114	My time here seems like a chance to change.	.655
rq46	This regime encourages me to think about and plan for my release.	.592
qq65	On the whole I am doing time rather than using time. (<i>removal $\alpha = .877$</i>)	.477

We have been struck by this finding, and we are now pursuing a better grasp of how prisoners describe and experience 'personal development' and how it might be linked to, or facilitated by, better and more 'professional' prison climates, in which care *and* power are flowing more adequately than elsewhere.

Some dimensions rarely or never appear [21] (that is, reach a neutral or positive rating). The dimensions with the **lowest scores** are:

Organisation and consistency (p)	2.23 - 3.08	.85
Bureaucratic legitimacy (p)	2.35 - 3.97	.62
Fairness	2.46 - 3.15	.69
Well being (w)	2.57 - 3.19	.62
Personal development (w)	2.69 - 3.28	.59

Entry into custody (h)	2.78 – 3.21	.43
Humanity (h)	2.79 – 3.27	.48

The dimensions with the **most significant variation** between prisons [22] are:

Staff professionalism (p)	2.62 - 3.53	.91
Organisation and consistency) (p)	2.23 - 3.08	.85
Staff-prisoner relationships (h)	2.74 - 3.45	.71
Fairness	2.46 - 3.15	.69
Decency	2.72 – 3.38	.66
Help and assistance (h)	2.74 - 3.37	.63
Bureaucratic legitimacy (p)	2.35 - 3.97	.62
Well being (w)	2.57 – 3.19	.62
Personal development (w)	2.69 – 3.28	.59

So what does this tell us? Several things. First, that these are key areas of prison life where practice varies considerably. And that the difference between good and poor practice is likely to be related to at least some desirable outcomes. We saw earlier that a version of the model predicted variations in levels of distress and suicide in establishments. We have not focused on distress in this study, but on the overall prison experience. So what is going on in these results? One note of caution here. We have not explored yet whether a ‘feeling of personal development’ is empirically related to relevant changes in in-prison or post-release behaviour, but according to Porporino and others, ‘desistance intentions predict reoffending’ (Porporino 2010: 72). We do know that a reported ‘feeling of well-being’ is related to decreased risk of suicide. In poor prisons, preoccupations with safety and survival dominate; opportunities are few, and negative emotional states are common. In better prisons, more goes on; prisoners describe having the psychological and emotional resources to think about the future, and help or support is available. In more decent environments, a *feeling* of positive change is possible. [23] The dimensions most highly correlated with a feeling of personal development in our model are: help and assistance, feeling treated with humanity, staff professionalism, bureaucratic legitimacy, and organisation and consistency. The scores for these dimensions are generally not high – the highest scores in the study, and definitions of each dimensions, are included in the figure. They are also among the dimensions that vary most between prisons. Three of the five dimensions in the model are from the ‘professionalism’ group of dimensions in our framework, and the other two are from the ‘harmony’ group. These dimensions explain 69 per cent of the variation in personal development, controlling for prison function and public/private ownership and management.

Figure 4 – Personal Development: An In-Prison Model – here

Procedural justice scholars tell us that offenders, like others, have legitimate expectations of justice. Developmental psychologists tell us that healthy development is interrupted by trauma, discontinuity and the symptoms of poverty, and that emotions and mood states are related to and sometimes drive attitudes and behaviour (Porporino 2010; Teasdale 2010). Moral philosophers tell us that the virtues are necessary to human flourishing. If all three disciplines are right, then what we have in prison is a population whose capacity for human flourishing and inner stability has been damaged. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 5:

Figure 5 - Values, Stability and Human Flourishing – here [24]

When I use the term 'vulnerable', I mean vulnerable in this kind of way – without sufficient emotional stability, resources or integration of self to thrive, except under non-threatening conditions. As Allport argued:

[Individuals need] a basic rapport with the world before proper growth can start (Allport 1955: 32).

Security and affectional relationships are, according to Allport, 'the ground of becoming' (p. 75).

Unfairness, lack of respect, lack of dignity, inconsistency and threats to safety in prison make a turbulent inner life all the more so. What some criminologists miss out in otherwise promising theories of desistance is the emotional turbulence underlying lack of self-regulation, although there are exceptions (see Porporino 2010). Many offenders have 'fragile' as well as 'spoiled' identities (on the latter, see Paternoster and Bushway 2009: 1107) and powerful 'needs' that distort decision-making. A 'conception of the self in a better future state' (1113) is only possible when trauma is not present (or reactivated). A non criminal identity might be highly attractive, but if one cannot get through the next hour, it is irrelevant to immediate behaviour. This is not a lack of will but a kind of emotional chaos that makes 'making the right choices' exceptionally difficult. Those who self-harm tell this kind of story. It is a desperate and precarious act of self-regulation, even when it looks like a loss of control. It *is* almost loss of control. My point is that imagining, forming and living up to a new identity is a gradual and tentative process, and that certain kinds of feelings – like hopelessness, powerlessness, isolation and anger - disrupt the process. The process requires environmental support. Traumatic experiences – like a return to prison, may precipitate the decision to change, but if the trauma continues throughout the sentence, 'human flourishing' is unlikely. This model, and our emphasis here on the concept of human flourishing, is consistent with the recent work by Bottoms and Shapland on desistance, in which they describe the process as 'desirable but difficult' (Bottoms 2011), 'obstacle-strewn' (Shapland and Bottoms 2011) and related internally to a process of 'learning to live another life' (Ibid.: 20). Their desisters describe wanting to be a certain kind of person, living in community with others. Shapland and Bottoms describe this process as 'gradually acquiring' – we might suggest also strengthening – 'a set of more virtuous dispositions' (1011: 21). This is a kind of moral and emotional journey requiring considerable reflection on the self. If the sentence itself is experienced as illegitimate – a new complication of the longer and indeterminate sentences in use, and of recall and breach procedures – this is also likely to lead to more negative evaluations of the prison experience.

If we return to our hypothesised models in Figure 1 [25], the difference between models 1 and 3 may be the moral quality of the regime, including staff orientation, skills and professionalism, the sentence, and the availability of programmes, work, education and other opportunities. When the moral environment is right, human beings can start to grow.

So what might all this have to do with yoga? Now I am drawing on personal experience. I took up yoga just over a year ago, as it happens whilst facing some personal challenges, but also because I had hatched a plot with a PhD student in my department to bring yoga to our workplace. Despite some obstacles (health and safety concerns, room availability, becoming established, and so on), we now have a regular yoga session for an hour and a half, once a week, in our workplace. We have a fantastic teacher, and there is a small but regular group, with occasional newcomers coming and going. In the same way that once I was introduced to Appreciative Inquiry, I have become converted to its practice. I now consider myself a yoga enthusiast, albeit a struggling, erring one, who often lets it slip.

There are some surprising prejudices about it, I have found, as well as a general underestimation of its potential benefits. Ryan Giggs credits yoga with prolonging his Manchester United career: bringing him strength and flexibility. That kind of sportsman's endorsement will certainly help raise its profile. My yoga group at work reported fluidity, improved posture, learning relaxation, organising the mind, raising awareness, improving focus, a sense of achievement, motivation to get fitter, better coordination, and noticing and therefore addressing tensions, as among its many benefits.

One of the phrases that clinched it for me was the concept our teacher used, of 'strengthening your core'. I am rather proud that despite writing this off as not even worth trying at the beginning, I was pretty quickly able to, at least usually, manage a headstand. When I can't, because I'm being impatient, or kicking my feet up too hard, I tell myself to 'rely on your core'; 'let your core do it'. When I listen to that advice, I can do it. There are some lessons here about the central significance of that core. In my prison suicide work, I returned again and again to the conclusion that vulnerable people rely on external sustaining resources – activity, contact, and distraction – more than others. They don't carry around with them a stable core, a reliable inner identity, or a set of resources they can draw on when alone. In the practice of yoga, there is a reaching inwards, not a reaching outwards, that is strengthening. That it is taught, or practised with guidance, is experienced as a form of care. But the care is directed at self-reliance, and self-trust. Finding one's way to a position requiring balance, and breathing, builds something in us.

When I wash my own car, I feel like I know it – I can see and take care of all the bits of rust, and it feels to me like it goes better when it's clean. Our bodies are a bit like that. When we get to know them – the bits that have stopped stretching, or that resist movement, noticing them is a bit like oiling a bicycle. At about the time I was considering taking up yoga, I saw my Dad no longer able to reach one of his shoes; he was having difficulty putting them on. I thought, time to do some preventive work here. I did not anticipate the emotional and psychological effects of yoga. What I have found, is that there is something profoundly life affirming and soothing about noticing the breath, slowing down thought, and just being. There is connection with others, but there is also a connection with the self, and the world we belong to, that can be experienced when alone. What could be more appropriate, in a prison cell? That modern technology (and staff cooperation and assistance) allows the use of a CD, with Sam's voice offering gentle encouragement, makes it all the more possible to turn a bleak cell into a place of meditation. Learning to 'be' supports all kinds of 'becoming'. It is an aide to survival, and a link to ancient practices we have undervalued in our fast-moving, competitive and often brutal economy.

There are others here who understand better and know much more than me about the practice of yoga. I know more about prisons, prison suicide, and the need for greater emphasis on personal development: what I would like to call human flourishing, but that language is too strong for NOMS. It is not the only practice leading to trust in self, and in others, to hope, and to growth ... there are others, like the creative arts, education, sports, some work projects, acupuncture, and so on, and there are some inevitable limits to its use in prison. I like doing it in the sun, outside, listening to the birds in my garden, and with others, and with a teacher. The Prison Phoenix Trust can do all that, except the bit with the sun (as far as I know...). But the practice of yoga, whether together or alone, offers something profoundly healing and supportive. This can be complex to evidence, because each individual journey is distinctive, and the benefits so varied. We all need these healing and supportive experiences, from time to time, but prisoners need them more. I am not an advocate of the too frequent use we are currently making of the

prison. But I am an advocate of prison yoga. I would like to see much more of it, albeit in fewer prisons. Thank you.