

Hidden Voices: The Prisoner's Child



As I consider what I would like to share in this blog I am reminded that I have chosen to write it anonymously. This is not from shame – though I have felt shame through my label of being the “Prisoner’s Child” – this is out of respect to others involved.

Growing up in the 1970s in a small village when your father is in prison is no easy task. Societal values are important to maintain social structures. However, when there is stigmatising of a child from fear-based reactions then the society is in effect negating the child’s own right to prosper and develop.

The judgement I felt and experienced of being made to wait at the gates of friends as I wasn’t welcome in their houses, impacted me for many years. The police’s attitudes to us as a family – banging on the door asking the whereabouts of my father – and my memories of my mother re-explaining that he no longer lived here as they had divorced – is etched into my mind. An intrinsic fear associated with feeling that I had “done something wrong” followed me through many years. If I am fully honest it can still reoccur at times of stress.

I first met my father in prison at visiting time. He was incarcerated whilst my mother was pregnant with me. The socioeconomic fallout and homelessness due to this, impacted my early beginnings. This was his second time in prison and I grew up with hearing his labels of being a “bad-un”. His crimes are his and I will not share them here. I will share though my own experience of the constant judgement that comes with being a child whose parent has been incarcerated.

Society expects less of you, you become marginalized and indeed academic research suggests that you will not achieve academically. I am slightly defiant at such responses. Proving such opinions and research are not a foregone conclusion – as I am studying for my doctorate. Though despite my defiance and determination this has been a tough path to follow.

As a young child when we moved to the next small village, I am taught that we must keep my father's criminogenic behaviours a secret. This is the fresh start that we as a family will supposedly benefit from. Yet, whilst the local community do not know – I know. My shame is further embedded in the secret I am asked to keep. The striving for acceptance is challenging and I learn to people please.

My character is fundamentally happy, funny and forthright – yet my personality has been formed in response to experiences and actions of others in my attempt to fit in. I overtly showed my happiness as a necessity of attachment – if I smiled and was friendly then I would not be ostracized. The stigma of living in the last village assisted in this adaptation.

I am taught by my mother that I must be the politest child in the village – her need to be seen as acceptable is placed on my tiny shoulders. Response to my politeness offered an outward acknowledgement of acceptance however inwardly I remained the “prisoner's child”. It was a heavy burden of shame and something that took me years to balance.

Perfectionism associated with past memories followed me through the first three decades of my life. I counteracted my feelings of inadequacy with a defensive humour. Humour is a positive character trait of mine yet I relied on it as an adaptation of my personality to seek connection.

Society and belonging often felt at a distance for me which impacted my sense of safety in the world. As I consider the conversation of the present day relating to those children and families that are affected by a parent in prison, I have heart that there is change occurring. That the safety I craved as a young child is now being recognised as an important part of support to those affected by incarceration.

Whilst I have written this from my perspective, I do also recognise that my father's choices and subsequent actions were based on his experience and life patterns – invariably trauma affected him as it has me. Trauma begets trauma and is often intergenerational. This is an important message that societal judgement often has no true understanding of. None of us are totally independent – crime doesn't happen in a vacuum – and the importance of interdependence and supportive systems are integral to offer all the possibility to thrive.