

## The 7 habits of institutional radicals

Between '90 and the summer of '92 I trained to be a Roman Catholic Priest. Two marriages and five children later it's clear that that was not the life for me.

I've always taken the view that the word 'celibate' was a typo, they- whoever they are- really meant to say 'celebrate'. It was a view that didn't wash with my confreres, and so I left.

On the day of leaving an older Priest said to me: "You know the great ones die, the good leave, and here we are... go well." And he smiled, as did I, and that was that...

The experience taught me a lot about the limits of institutions, and so by the age of twenty I learned that the words 'institutional', and 'radical' do not easily sit together, nor should they. With the addition of a further twenty years and more to figure out what that might actually mean, here are some early thoughts (in the hope I have at least forty more years to mull on this).

### Jerome G. Miller, A Bone Fide Radical

In thinking about radicals who are themselves within the bounds of an institution, the person I would hold up as one of the most radical is Jerome Miller, I was first introduced to his work by John McKnight, who also considered Jerry to be a bone fide Radical.

"Putting them in a Reformatory is the worst thing you could do to prevent kids from being recidivists. At its best it was still the worst thing. And so he came to realise that all this institutional reform misses the point. Radical thinking gets beyond institutional reform.

Jerry decided that the reformatory was the worst of all possible solutions so he closed down the state's reformatories one by one, very quickly." John McKnight (Extract from an interview in my upcoming book).

In the late '60s Jerry Miller was an Associate Professor of criminology in the School of Social Work at Ohio State University. He was well known for his radical views on reforming penitentiaries and reformatories for young people and adults alike. He was at his most vocal around the same time a series of scandals were breaking about the child abuse and brutality going on in the eleven reformatories for young people in the State of Massachusetts.

The State Governor Francis Sargent took the view that what was needed was a 'root and branch' reform of the whole system, and in 1969 after interviewing a number of likely candidates his people settled on Jerry as the best reformer for the job.

The thing is, Jerry wasn't a reformer, he was a radical.

Jerry was quick to introduce best practices from the world of criminology into Massachusetts' Reformatories – he stamped out brutality, heralded in a wide range of new training programmes, and employed some of the most talented professionals in the State. You might say for the first two years of his tenure as head of the juvenile correction system he reformed the reformatories, and consequently they were among the best in the United States.

After two years of reform Jerry was keen to assess the impact of these changes on the lives of the young people they served, using the level of recidivism as a baseline. When he compared levels during the regime of abuse, which pre-dated him, with those under his stewardship and disruptive innovation he discovered, that with the exception of the reduction in abuse, little had actually changed for the young people. He rightly recognised that the absence of abuse is not an outcome, and he also recognized that there were few if any tangible positive outcomes to speak of.

All of the institutional reform, the professionalising of the staff and so on, had done little to change the reality for these young people. Reform of the institutions was not the answer.

*Last One Over the Wall: The Massachusetts Experiment in Closing Reform Schools* is the book that recounts Jerry's experience as a reformer turned radical, and is in my view essential reading for radicals who find themselves in the gap between the systems worlds and community worlds.

His baseline comparison provided him with empirical evidence that systems reform produced few actual dividends when it came to reducing recidivism. Therefore, given that he could not think of anything else he could do to improve the system, it began to dawn on him that perhaps the solution was not in reforming the system, but in finding community alternatives to the system.

Jerry eventually came to believe that placing children in a reformatory is the worst thing you could do to prevent them from being recidivists.

He had brought these reformatories to the apogee of their competence and still they proved impotent in the face of the challenges they purported to address. Echoing Ivan Illich, Jerry came to believe that the juvenile justice system "at its best was still the worst thing that could happen to these kids". Faced with the realisation that reformatories were at best ineffectual and at worst



harmful he systematically closed them down. In doing so he set his face against systems reform and began to seek solutions outside the world of systems completely.

Up to that point, year on year the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) were spending in excess of \$70,000 USD incarcerating and failing each of these young person in the State of Massachusetts. Jerry began actively seeking out community alternatives to these wasteful and failing institutional programmes.

Initially, he actively pursued arrangements that he felt might work well for the young people within these reformatories. For example, at the University of Massachusetts, he trialed an initiative whereby a previously incarcerated young person became room mates of college students and lived with them for an extended period of time. The logic was pretty straightforward as they got to know each other it became clearer to each of them what they could do together. This was just one of a range of initiatives that emerged.

Jerry's radical nature showed itself most clearly in how he was able to invite innovation from others. He was far less interested in designing creative initiatives, such as the one just mentioned, than in creating the context within which people could come up with their own community alternatives to systems based responses.

Essentially he invited regular people to think about what they would do to help these young people recover and get more deeply connected, but that didn't involve incarceration. Significantly he had some resources that he was prepared to invest. So the message also contained the addition: "And I'll pay for it".

One of the standout stories involves Pan American Airlines and a 'round the world' ticket. Pan Am were one of the first airlines to offer a round the world ticket in the early 80's, and it triggered an idea in the mind of one of the college students who was rooming with a kid from a reformatory. He convinced Jerry to pick up the tab for his both his and the kid's tickets he was roommate to, plus travel expense, and they both disappeared for a year travelling around the world. Can you think of any other senior public servant who would have said yes to such a proposition? Jerry did, and it was cheap at twice the price, the tickets cost around \$3,000 USD each and about \$5,000 USD in spending money, so for \$11,000 USD two people's lives were transformed, on average \$60,000 USD cheaper than incarceration and considerably more successful and humane.

Not surprisingly the idea did not take off. The resistance was mainly located around the belief that such radical approaches would have made a significant number of professionals redundant. Of course it was not so plainly articulated, instead other 'industry experts' argued that the risks of such an approach were intolerably high. It is always the case that mistakes made in community are more apparent and less acceptable than those made by the system.

### Here is what John McKnight had to say in interview about Jerry Miller:

“So Jerry made clear to me that Ivan Illich was right, that institutions start out doing something constructive and then they level out, decline and then reverse themselves and become crime-making reformatories.

People who want to reform reformatories are therefore the great ‘misguiders’ of society. The progressives, the institutional reformers are the final authority for keeping what doesn’t work going – or as Mike Reed would say, “They’ve never figured out that doing more of what doesn’t work won’t make it work any better.”

Being involved with Jerry’s story, with him directly and seeing how he thinks, is the most practical, applied radical experience I’ve ever had. It also affirmed every idea that I had, that Illich had and others like us had.

He had two rules.

Start with those who are deepest within the system – the most disempowered, the most disabled, and the most violent. If you can show that you can do better for them outside the institution then inside, then it’s all downhill after that. He didn’t do what most people do and cream off the people who are the least problematic.

You never make a plan, because that in itself will stop you. They’ll figure out what you’re going to do and because they’ll be against it they will mobilise the forces that want to keep the system going the way it is. So act quickly and then act in a way that mobilises the community’s resources.

Those are his two rules.”

Of course Jerry is not the only institutional radical the world has ever known, like many others he made a habit, or a practice you might say, of doing certain things. He, like other radicals, practiced the seven habits of highly effective institutional radicals.

**7 Habits of Institutional Radicals.** Here are some of those habits:

### **Habit #1: Get Out of the Way**

There are certain things that only communities can do; beyond a certain point institutions become useless, and a community response is the only viable one. When community returners leave an institution after a period of incarceration, the shock is not how many repeat offend, but how few. Little or no intentionality of practice goes into thinking about the return to community life for these young people; in fact a considerable amount of barriers are placed in the way of family, friends and community by the system that make it nearly impossible to sustain interdependence between the person that has been incarcerated and their community. I am certain that the level of interdependence between these young people and their community is directly linked to their potential to re-offend, or not. Institutional radicals understand that institutions forget that they have been hatched from the nest of associational life, and, through arrogance and an over eagerness to help or regulate, often get in the way of community alternatives.

Radicals heckle and disrupt their systems, like protective lionesses they patrol the boundaries between institutional life and community, and snap at the heels of those who would seek to grow the influence and hegemony of the system. To achieve this they lead by stepping out of civic space, and not doing for individuals and communities what they can do for themselves. In simple terms they get out of the way.

### **Habit #2: Reduce Dependency**

Their mantra is clarion: if we are to reduce dependency on our institutions, we much increase interdependency in community life. They are driven by the belief that extended time in their institution, whatever it might be, is time lost making a life. 'Get a life, not a service' is their motto: they see services as only there in reserve, while they believe community and free association is the preferred front line of social change and well being. They do not therefore, measure their success by the number of clients they have in their programmes, but the extent to which they have built community, and, accordingly, reduced dependency on their services. This may seem counter intuitive, and so it should, it's radical!

There are many ways of increasing dependencies on services. From the outset needs analysis is about the best, since it confuses service categories with human needs and simultaneously convinces those that are being analysed that their capacities are irrelevant, only their needs matter. And so the most disruptively innovative step a radical takes is to move from needs analysis to a participatory asset inventory that is led by communities themselves. Radicals know that we can't know what people need, until we and they first know what they have.

### Habit #3: Increase interdependency

Deinstitutionalisation is not a new concept. Today I spoke at the Swedish National Social Care Convention. I addressed an audience of some 700 social workers, many of whom led the drive to close institutions across Sweden over twenty years ago. But they tell me that for many, community care is tantamount to lonely living. Radicals don't just shut down institutions, they are intentional about promoting a great level of interdependency between the people they serve and the community at large.

### Habit #4: Be Authentic about the limits

Systems and institutions are not designed to care; people care, systems produce services to a standardized format and are structured to enable the few to control the many. Radicals get this, accept it, and move on; they do not try to reform the system to do what it can't. A radical is also a pragmatist who accepts that institutions have functions, and so do communities. They are clear, that institutions cannot and should not replace the functions of individuals, families and communities.

What is the service for loneliness? There isn't one! If you think that befriending schemes are the answer, then I hate to break it to you, but you're not a radical.

### Habit #5: Clear and vocal about what Community can do

Radicals understand that communities have irreplaceable functions that if not done by them, can not be done by any other. They are clear, therefore, around what it is they believe communities must do to be the change they seek. Their voice is a revelatory one, they often see what is invisible to most, and invite it into expression.

### Habit #6: Do no Harm

Radicals understand the harm they can do; they know that helping hurts as well as heals, and they see clearly the iatrogenic effects that their systems regularly bring about. Their prime directive is, therefore, to do no harm to the individual agency of the people they serve, and the community capacities that can serve to grow interdependence beyond institutional boundaries.

## Habit #7: Don't reform, re-function

Radicals are not invested in reforming their institutions and its systems. They understand that form follows function and that most institutions have never figured out their function, and therefore are formless. Many public sector institutions and some civil society organisations have lost sight of their function to serve the public good. Local governments throughout the world, for example, have become so focused on the provision of statutory services that they have failed to attend to their functions as stewards of local democracy. Consequently they have come to treat people as clients of their services, and not as citizens with authority; at the centre of local democratic life.

Hence we do not need reform, we need re-function. Institutions, which were once hatched from associational life, have become bloated and arrogant. Their function is simply to do what we cannot do in associational life, no more, no less. Yet they regularly colonise our lives and our neighbours, attempting to manage, regulate, curricularise and otherwise control free space. Restoring the function of our systems is the work of radicals, and in essence is an effort towards halting the expansion of the systems world into the associational world. Another motto of the radical is: Institutions, know your place.

### Imagine

Imagine a world where every institution, whether within the spheres of commerce, government, or civil society, had an active policy to reduce dependence on their service, by increasing interdependence in community life. If such a world were ever to exist it would be radically different than that which we currently occupy.

As in every walk of life, there are outliers in the institutional world; people for whom life's challenge is the growth of community alternatives to their system based responses. They are people deserving of the name radical, and some even manage to bring their institution with them, or, should I say, get them out of the way.

They understand that authority needs to be relocated to communities, and they are inventive enough to play the field between their systems and the communities where they hunt for hope. Imagine what would happen if they more consistently teamed up with highly connected people in community life. Together they'd eat the 'status quo' for breakfast. And you know, that's not so radical a proposition.

Cormac Russell.