

Is MacDonald's freedom?

For young people in the residential or confined youth care the core value of our open Dutch society, freedom, is a challenge. As a spiritual counsellor I provide a sanctuary to come to grips with that. What does freedom mean when you are confined? What does freedom mean when you are addicted to drugs? Together we overthink their life in hope to find trust and courage to carry on from the ashes they were put up with.

Ralph (15) was put by a judge in a confined group of Jeugdhulp Friesland for his safety, aggression issues and him skipping class too much. He hadn't been to school for over a year and didn't want to go back because of the many migrations his mother after her divorce with his father had made. He was in care for over a year before he asked me to have a talk with him too.

Richard (17) was fighting drug abuse and a restrictive home environment when he came to a residential setting to be trained in self-support and living independently. I was asked by his coach to support him because of his loyalty to his restrictive religious family and his wish to shake off those strict values and feel free.

These two Case Studies, each in its own way, challenge our societies fundamental value of freedom. In this presentation of these case studies I will show what dilemmas we are talking about and what spirituality has to offer children and institutions to deal with these challenging dilemmas.

Ralph (confined youth care)

I had known Ralph for about a year before we sat down and talked. He asked for a meeting when I came back with someone else from his group and said: 'I would like to go to MacDonald's with you too'. I responded by planning an appointment in my diary. I often take youngsters to a restaurant, of which MacDonald's is the favourite, to talk. In our facilities are not many rooms that have a relaxed atmosphere to discuss what matters in life. Ralph had no particular question about life, but he really wanted to get away from the group. Everyone knows I take them out, when allowed, and everyone knows it's a something to eat and drink with a talk.

In Ralph's case I started with the standard questions: how his day had been up to now? How his family is composed? Where he had lived? And what had been the cause of him being put in the confined youth care? He wasn't very talkative. Nevertheless he tells about his divorced parents, his two brothers and little sister, his grandma that cooks deliciously and his memories of warm family gatherings.

When I ask him more about his mother and father he explains that because of the divorce he and his younger brother and sister moved around a lot and never stayed put for more than a few months. It resulted in many different homes and many different schools.

Talking through these stories of his life he doesn't give the impression he wants to talk through questions about life or dilemmas. He is more or less in a waiting position. His treatment has finished and he is waiting to move on to his next 'home'. Because he doesn't want to discuss his past any further, we discuss his dreams and future. He wants to be a marine. He is even working for that dream by taking his swimming exams (most Dutch children pass them in primary school), though he could swim already. To add to his interest in the navy I talk to him about naval history.

In these interactions Ralph is never very talkative. We can be silent for a while together which doesn't seem to bother him. He never makes nervous or restless impressions when we don't talk. The quietness seems to function as a moment of peace and space. He doesn't feel the need to start talking, but keeps on doing what he is doing, like eating his hamburger or looking around. Twice we take a walk in the woods nearby. The silence then functioned as a space to notice different things of life. For instance the singing of a bird or the rustle of leaves in the wind. I pointed the bird out to him once. He said: "hush, let me hear.... Yes I hear that too!"

Ralph makes contact by looking at me and answering the questions. He says he finds it hard to talk, and is insecure about what he says. He seems to be locked up in himself and not very confident in the world he has to face (not surprisingly). For me the goal of this contact became more and more taking Ralph out of his waiting situation and drawing his attention to life in general and his life in particular. I used my own interests (walking, nature, history) to broaden the scope of his vision of life and my way of taking these youngsters out to encourage him to take on the life he wishes for.

Two shocking events change our talks. The first is the death of his grandma. That grieves him very much, but grief is not an easy emotion for Ralph to live with. He is almost unable to give expression to grief. He rather becomes angry. By talking about his memories of grandma and encouraging him that it is safe to say what you think and that his feelings are of the utmost importance make it possible to say words of grief and missing his grandma. The second shocking event was a cerebral haemorrhage of his father. His father lives a three hour drive away and he hadn't seen him for a long time when this happened. He had reconnected with his father only recently by talking to him on the phone. Ralph goes to his father the day after the incident. His father is a lot better than, but Ralph is worried and shocked. He keeps talking to me about this incident each time we see each other. Even when I don't ask about it.

These two events made it possible for Ralph to express his feelings, maybe for the first time. At least it made him conscious for the first time to what different feelings he had: anger and grief, worries, shock and happy memories. Afterwards he reports the fact that he could talk about anything as the main result of our contact, he says: 'I say and explain more to others. I talk about the things I am worried about. I do say that now, before I kept it in me.' I think two factors contributed to this result. One: in our talks there was no therapeutic goal, there was space to talk about anything. Second: we repeated a lot of our topics several times and there was an iteration in our going about. We sat most of the time at the same table, eating the same burger, drinking the same coke, talking about his grandma, father, future and past. That caused a certain amount of confidence. Not long after I asked him to cooperate in the case-studies project he moved to his next group. Finally out of confined youth care.

Ralph's story made me wonder why we 'lock up' youngsters like that? Did his anger issues leave us no choice? Did his home situation make it necessary? Weren't there other possibilities? From this case study I cannot answer all these questions and knowing the system he wasn't in confined youth care for nothing. What is clear from this case study is:

- that therapy had helped him with his anger issues;
- that he feared life and his feelings about life, which is very understandable from his story;
- that understanding made space to talk about what happened in his life and expressing the feelings those events generated.

Could that understanding, space and expression have been possible before his treatment in confined youth care? Who would have understood him? Did he ever feel understood? Was that even possible before treatment in confined youth care? Ralph did not complain about the restrictive environment of confined youth care, but didn't feel free. He felt unfree in the decisions his parents made as well as in the confinement of his group as well as in expressing himself.

Intermezzo

In our society we highly value freedom. We want to pass that on to the next generation. We express freedom in terms like: 'feel free to do what you like and be who you are'. Our youngsters are daily bombarded with images of freedom in raps full of angry lyrics and lots of nudity, games where lone heroes shoot down everyone, and series where youngsters seek their way in life without the help of parents or other adults. These images of freedom are mostly not what we mean by our words. But it is the dream many youngsters grow up with or the example they look up to. When is that image corrected? Are we able to communicate what it really means?

Within confined youth care they don't feel they can 'be who they are' and 'do what they want'. This is experienced as a great discrepancy. The pedagogical staff asks them questions on what they want with their life. They try to motivate them and help them discover who they are. But at the same time

they have to enforce restrictions on their behaviour and treat them in therapy for who they are. I know from their stories that it doesn't feel like freedom to those youngsters. They often conclude that society with its images of freedom is right and the pedagogical staff is wrong and obstructing their freedom. Not seldom youngsters feel trapped in a conspiracy and are affirmed every time they fight the system and are put 'behind bars'. That point of view is most unhelpful. It gets them into fighting with the pedagogical staff instead of working with them for their own good. How do we resist that? Make that fighting spirit profitable for the futures of these youngsters? How can we turn from confinement to freedom? Physical confinement can sometimes generate a freedom of expression. That happens in my opinion when somebody is listened to, understood, given space and peace to talk about anything and is confirmed that that is real freedom, the real you. Closer to who you are and what you want than the images of rappers, games or series.

What happens when these fighting youngsters don't get to that point and keep fighting society as the conspiring against them and they start doing what they want and imitating the images they know? Let me take you to my next case study.

Richard (self-support training)

Richard is 17, has two older sisters (19 and 22) and a younger brother (15). His father is driving instructor and his mother a traditional housewife. He has had many fights with his dad, which never seem to come to a close. His older sisters blame him for those fights, his mother always tries to mediate. With his brother he does have a good relationship. He romps with him and likes to spend time together. Besides that he has a grandpa and two grandmas. His father's father died when he was five. That had a profound impact on him. He then felt for the first time anger with God. With his mother's parents he has a very good relationship, even to the point that he lived there for 3 weeks, but he always visited them regularly. This grandma is quite ill at the moment and has to be taken care of in an nursing home. Richard visits her weekly and sees his grandpa there too. Because of his fights with his dad, the strict religious context of his family and his anger with God, he started to use and abuse drugs. That made him drop out of school and unwilling to undertake anything to improve his situation. He went to rehab because his parents wanted that and he tried to fulfil all their wishes, but felt they were never satisfied and he had no space. He felt like the black sheep of the family and wanted to get away and get his own life. The self-support training provides that perspective.

His coach approached me because she saw him getting stuck on what he wants. On the one hand he wants to break with his family and the accompanying strict values, on the other he wants to be accepted by his family and be loyal to them. This conflict also makes him insecure about what he wants for his future. He starts a lot of things, but never seems to be able to finish anything. When we speak with each other for the first time (his coach, the therapist, Richard and I) it is clear he wants to talk, wants to discover who he is and how to manage the expectations of others, especially his parents'. In the first talk Richard and I have together, it is clear he is fed up with all those expectations. His story is sometimes quite incomprehensible, he can't follow all his thoughts himself and needs clearing his mind. It makes him think of suicide even because all seems so complicated. I let him talk and talk and talk and bit by bit I see and point out the connections between his feeling of being the black sheep of the family, him not believing in God anymore, which makes him a black sheep even more, his fights with his father, his seeking for relief in drugs, his restlessness in his head, him feeling depressed, him doing nothing and the feedback he gets on that from his family. It is like a roundabout without an exit. It puts things in perspective and Richard finds it helpful.

From that clearance I concentrated on supporting Richard in his self-explanation. It should help him find out what he wants and shape his identity. The crisis made to use. In relation to his family and parents, especially his father, I attempted with circular questions like 'what would you do, if you were your father?' and 'how would your father respond if he fully understood your position?' to find out what Richard felt he lacked from his family. Clearly the story of the death of his grandfather was a big trauma that had lacked a lot of attention. When he talks about it, the anger is still tangible. Richard likes to talk and it helps him clear his mind, but it also makes him tired. His moods are sometimes cheerful, at other times dismal. We speak every week.

Once we speak while he is stoned. He forgot our appointment (not for the first time) and had smoked a joint. He couldn't stop talking about his worldview and the noise in his head. I took good notice and at our next appointment we spoke through this worldview and noise. He could hardly remember he had said all I gave back to him, but he did recognise it. For example he said that he had lots of images in his head that stuck there and couldn't be erased at will. Reality seemed like a TV screen: he watched and could not participate. We talked about these images and how he handled them and the connection with his identity. In January we closed our talks after 9 sessions. He seems to know clearer what he wants and is much more clear in his head. We decide to see each other after six weeks again. That last talk we make an overview of how far he is. He is less talkative and more clear about what he wants, though he still uses drugs and is bad at finishing things. He has no suicidal thoughts anymore and his relations within his family seem a little better.

Conclusion

From Richard's case study it is clear that he is looking for freedom. He feels he hasn't had any and is denied his freedom by his family. Very different from Ralph's case where his family life and school were diffuse and chaotic. Ralph was put within clear boundaries at the confined youth care. Richard was put in a self-supporting environment and developed his sense of will and identity. From that point of view you could claim that our way of dealing with these youngsters worked. And to some extent I agree. But... we forget that Ralph developed a suspicion against society's claims of freedom and that Richard was caught up in drug abuse and is still unable to hold a job or education and starting over every now and again. That is not freedom, is it? This makes me wonder where we went wrong?

I see a big gap between the images of freedom we as society are communicating towards our youngsters and the reality they have to face. Can they handle reality with these ideals they get from rap, games and series? Reality as they experience it doesn't look like any of the advertised freedoms. They don't seem to be able to be who they are or do what they want. Freedom seems to be a lie. It is only human to stand up against that. Then the raps of anger and protest against society's claims speak more truth to them than any pedagogical worker does. But the truth of protest is combined with the lies of just following your own desires. When they discover that those images of freedom are itself a lie, or at best a dream that is unreachable for them. What does freedom mean then? I believe we, as society, let them lose before a bunch of predators without any support. How can convictions about the world that were built up in years change in 6 months of treatment? How can our treatment that focusses on changing their behaviour erase suspicion? Youngsters need sufficient help with understanding themselves and the world. As a spiritual counsellor I help them reflect on their convictions and beliefs about themselves and the world. That is something totally different from telling them what they should believe or be convinced of. It takes showing them what their beliefs originate from (their experiences), how these beliefs have been and still can be helpful, how they can be an obstacle and what beliefs and convictions are alternatives to that. Furthermore it is helping them add convictions and beliefs, especially about their own worthiness. That might bridge the gap between experienced freedom and freedom communicated in raps, games and series.

I know that much treatment is focused on them feeling worthy and of value too. I am convinced that our pedagogical staff wants nothing less and experiences the gap of freedom communicated in society and personally experienced freedom as a dilemma too. It would help very much if we communicated our own struggles with freedom and shared our life-experience with those youngsters. That is what I do as a spiritual counsellor. I further more reflect and explicitly talk about these things from spiritual traditions and philosophy. But talk is only talk and how can that compete with a system which communicates only half truths about freedom? I practice what I preach by taking them away from their youth care residence (even from the confined groups when possible) into society. We walk and talk in the woods or sit and talk in restaurants (their favourite is MacDonald's) like other people do. There they can find true attention to their philosophical and spiritual needs to really be able to feel free because they are treated as free individuals that are part of us. So is MacDonald's freedom? I would answer: it can be.