

A visit to the high security department in prison

Some time ago, a touché colleague called me to ask whether I could counsel some of her clients during her absence. At the moment, some of them stay at the AIBV department (Afdeling Individuele Bijzondere Veiligheid – Department of Individual and Special Security), popularly called “high security”.

At touché we have a good internal communication and we brief each other well. So, well informed I left for Bruges, where I would see the clients. Of course: the AIBV has a reputation because of its social mission “for prisoners who repeatedly demonstrate extreme behaviour problems and who are aggressive towards prison staff and/or fellow prisoners”.

In short, all the prisoners in the AIBV perfectly correspond with our target group, i.e. people who get into trouble because of aggression.

When I arrived at the Penitentiary Centre Bruges, I removed all my personal belongings, passed the metal detector after several attempts, showed evidence of not bringing in drugs or bad intentions and climbed the stairs to the first floor, where the “lawyers’ rooms” are and where we see our clients (For I scheduled some counselling sessions prior to my visit to the AIBV).

I reported to the PB (penitentiair beamtbe –prison officer) who arranges the visits and took place in the lawyers’ room they had booked for me. It was equipped with brownish fitted carpet, cosy wall decoration of irritating stucco, an isolation chipboard ceiling, neon light and furnished with a cigarette proof table and three orange plastic chairs. In short: the perfect scenery for Stanley Kubrick fans.

After some ten minutes a phone call takes place between the prison warder and someone on the other side of the line. I understand only fragments. A problem. The timing, the arrangements.

Armed with my prejudice about “high security”, I’m on edge and pace up and down, waiting for the sequel to the story. It does not take long: a friendly “high security” prison guard leads me to her working space. We walk through a number of wide corridors and our steps echo between the white bare concrete walls. The highways of bare utilities pipes and wires against the concrete ceiling do not muffle any sound. Each footstep counts.

During our walk, the officer briefs me about the clients I am about to meet. Words like

“bizarre”, “strange”, and a number of hypotheses about possible psychiatric pathologies from the DSM passed. Adrenal glands of all countries unite!

All of a sudden: a door. We walk down the stairs and descend into a space that feels like a cellar. This is not the case though, but we know that in prisons cosiness is remains a faraway cry. Another undecorated corridor on the ground floor, all the way to the door of the “high security” department.

Report, a click, the door opens. A small doorway, artificial light, another door, a barred space. Reporting again. I see a delegation of prison officers. Video screens, monitoring, a short bare corridor, closed doors on either side. I’m welcomed by examining eyes. Trust is something you have to deserve.

Someone unlocks the visiting room. Apparently, the white paint supplier must have clocked a record year in this prison facility. I observe the room. It is about five metres high, six metres square. In the middle a table and two small benches, secured to the floor with strong bolts. I can see concrete where once utilities pipes and wires were attached. Frustration has clearly been vented here in the past. In the right corner above: a camera. I am prepared.

I will meet “him”, “the bizarre, unpredictable and aggressive one”.

Some “chiefs” guide him to the visiting room. Handcuffs, a marked face. Hands are being pushed through the hatchway to remove the handcuffs. I find myself in one room with ‘The Danger’.

Once the handcuffs removed, we meet for the first time. Informal, feeling out, speaking.

A surprising openness. A conversation about powerlessness, frustration, addiction, the walls, the image... "After a conversation like this, I tend to feel good for some days, until something happens and I blow my top". When I ask him how this situation could be changed, he answers that only more frequent ordinary human contact could lead to a solution. I see propinquity. The distance disappears, the tendons relax, the face is in peace. The "danger" appeared to be an engaging personality, with injuries, minor offences, but with a "they don't know how to handle me" attitude. He has already spent half of his life in prison, because of punishments he receives during detention; for detention does not suit his personality.

He has enough insights, but it is impossible to work on his behaviour in a constructive way in a prison environment.

After one hour we say goodbye. A normal handshake and then all of a sudden I feel an arm on my shoulder and he thanks me. He pushes his hands through the hatchway again, is being handcuffed again and led away.

I have seldom seen such basic humaneness in one hour, such lack of ego or complex defence. What I saw was what I got: deep humaneness in a place that is designed to take away humanity.

Ever since this conversation, I wonder why it is always us who acknowledge what is different and never finds its way to a broader social debate or to the organs of the judiciary.