



# THE SCISSORS CURE FOR KIWI CRIME

## One Blade Won't Hack It

*John Wareham: Talk to Tauranga Rotary 16 Feb 2023*

### MY LIFE IN MANHATTAN TOOK A SUDDEN TURN.

For eighteen years, as chief of my own human resources firm I'd coached corporate chiefs and their teams. Now, out of the blue, I was invited to create and teach, one day a week, an inmate class on New York's notorious Rikers Island, the world's largest penal colony.

I entered my first Rikers class like the Man from Mars. The first thing I noted was the color of the inmates. Only three of thirty-five were White. The others were mostly African-American with a sprinkling of Hispanic. Yikes! Something was surely wrong with this sepiea picture.

I introduced myself, "I'm John and we're all equals, so please don't call me Mister." Then, I asked each inmate to answer the same question, "Why are you serving time in Rikers?" The first guy rolled up his sleeve and pointed to his arm. "The color of my skin, see." Most everyone agreed. The fellow next to him had a different take: "I'm here because God brought me here." That also won a raft of murmured approvals. Holy Toledo! *Racist Cops and Divine Intervention?* And no mention of criminal behavior? I figured that until I could deactivate rationalisations of race and religion, and focus on issues of criminality, the discussions—and maybe even the program I was hoping to create—were doomed.

I also discovered that a depressing eighty-percent of all inmates released from Rikers were rearrested and returned to Rikers within sixty days



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of their release. Yikes again. Unless I could work with these guys to dramatically reduce that staggering recidivism rate, I should surely return forthwith to the planet of my financially rewarding corporate clients.

In fact, I stayed on for twenty years, and wound up dedicating more than half my time to teaching and developing my prison class, always as an unpaid volunteer. As you might imagine, I wound up with wealth of knowledge. Best of all, however, in the last ten years the recidivism rate for Eagles graduates fell into the single digits. They'd learned to sidestep social quicksands, win the respect they'd been denied, and create the decent, productive lives they yearned for. How did that happen? For openers, let's take a peek through colour-blind lenses.

## **Colour-Blind Lenses**

**Yes, racist cops and unconscious institutional bias really do exist.**

*But*, crucially, when contemplating virtually *any* assembly of prison incarcerated, forget all about ethnicity and colour, and realize that what you're seeing is:-

- a gathering of hope-deprived citizens from broken homes, all stuck on the bottom rung of a socioeconomic ladder where unskilled jobs have disappeared, and semi-skilled workers are being replaced by robots and algorithms;
- their issue is not race or hue, it is *need*—to survive these citizens turn to crime;
- or, to ease their strife and shame they shoot drugs, so what we blithely call 'addiction' is mostly a symptom and not a condition.

## **Deactivating Religion**

**H**appily, I found a way to give the slip to religious dogmas that would otherwise thwart rational discussion of the behavioral reasons for incarceration.

Rikers inmates were of many creeds, including Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, and atheists. Many also shared the evangelical zeal to

proselytize. Initially, I shied from sharing any religious philosophy. But, finally, I gave in.

“Okay then you guys, you all want to know my religion – right?”

They nodded, Yes indeed. “Well, I’m a convert of the Jedi’s: a *Starwarsian*. We tap into the benediction of our Star Wars seer and sage, Obi-Wan Kenobi, ‘May the force be with you.’ We believe in the force because we’ve discovered that when we’re tapped into it things go smoothly and we feel great. And if we fall off the force things go wrong and we feel bad. We’re not looking for recruits, but if you’d like to join you don’t have to give up any other religion. You only need to believe in the force and share our mantra, ‘May the force be with you.’”

And, everyone chose to do just that. Better still, this new creed permitted us to move on and explore the transformational concepts and deeper understandings of modern psychologists and philosophers.

## Defusing Race



**I also tapped into the wisdom of an ancient cynic whose words proved an antidote for racist poison.** Let me explain.

Back in 300 BC, having conquered the known world, Alexander the Great sent for the philosopher and former slave Diogenes, who had turned his back on material possessions, and, at that time, clad in rags, lived in a barrel in Athens Greece.

Unimpressed, Diogenes replied, “If that fellow has a mind to be acquainted with me, let him come hither, for I shall always think Athens as far a distance from Macedon as Macedon is from Athens.”

So Alexander made that trek. Together with his entourage, they surrounded Diogenes as he lay in his open barrel. “I am Alexander the Great, conqueror and now King of the world,” said Alexander to Diogenes. “Your reputation is well known to me and I greatly admire your philosophies. So, I have come to grant you anything you desire, anything at all.”

Diogenes reply was one for the ages: “Could you kindly stand out of my sunlight.”

Amazed by a response he’d heard from no citizen of any country, Alexander drew a deep breath and asked, “Wherever are you from?”

Another answer for the aeons: “I am a citizen of the world.”

Alexander slowly shook his head from side to side. “Were I not Alexander,” he said, admiringly, “I would be Diogenes.”

“And if I were not Diogenes,” said the near-naked philosopher, “I too would choose to be Diogenes.”

This story resonated with every inmate. It perfectly shows why Diogenes shunned labels, and defined himself a ‘citizen of the world.’ Nowadays, research has confirmed that we humans all have the same genetic makeup. No matter our country, creed, color or culture, we are, first and foremost, all humans and, as such, all global citizens entitled to enjoy decent lives as equals on the planet we share.

Every prisoner acquired a new respect for himself and everyone around him the moment he realized that he is a citizen of the world, and entitled to treat himself as such. So, let me give a call-out to Diogenes:

*I’m proud to say, my friend, that it was your big idea that shone a light that led to the ultimate success of our Eagles programs.*

## Cosmopolitanism



Prof. Anthony Appiah

**Happily, in this 21st century the legacy of Diogenes has overtaken most of the free world.** Indeed, his avowal of democratic global citizenship has brought us the philosophy of *Cosmopolitanism*, notably championed by Ghanaian born, Cambridge educated, Princeton professor Anthony Appiah.

In three words, Cosmopolitanism is *universality plus difference*. To be a cosmopolitan is to recognize that we are all equal citizens of the cosmos. *After* that we are shaped by our culture and our geography. Sure, it's natural to revere our personal cultural inheritance. But we must respect the beliefs and values of other cultures, too. Everybody matters.

Many values and beliefs can and must be local. BUT some values should be universal. So toleration requires a concept of the *in*-tolerable. I mean, in a modern, multi-ethnic, liberal democracy, some ideas are just plain insufferable, right?

### **The Kiwi Gangland Miracle**

**Word of our prison successes spread, and I was invited to run a weekend retreat for Black Power and Mongrel Mob.** After a decidedly perilous Friday beginning, at the Sunday closeout, the two gangs formed concentric circles and embraced as blood brothers. The *New Zealand Herald* declared that outcome 'a miracle'.



If so, what was invocation, the abracadabra? Well you might ask. All over the world, prison rehabilitation is a political hot potato. Politics has been defined as the 'art of the possible', and so . . .

- Conservative politicians typically favor outsourcing corrections to private prisons. Alas, these are run for profit, so 'return on investment' is maximized by operating prisons as warehouses for human cargo. The net result is that ex-offenders are delivered back into their communities, angrier than before, but with improved criminal skills. Another favored method is to embed the national religion into prison programs. So, here in New Zealand the National government installed the fundamentalist Christian 'Sycamore Tree' prisoner program created by America's infamous Chuck Colson, following his conversion to Christianity while serving prison time for his role in the Richard Nixon Watergate burglaries.

- Progressives are caught in a similar bind. They want to be perceived as rehabilitating inmates and reducing criminality. But they cannot afford to be seen as soft on crime, and truly serious rehabilitation programs can seem akin to kryptonite. So, alas, they fall prey to fallacies and labelling. Which has happened here in New Zealand. I'll get to that in moment. First, let me share a confession.

## Bleeding Hearts and Right Wing Racists

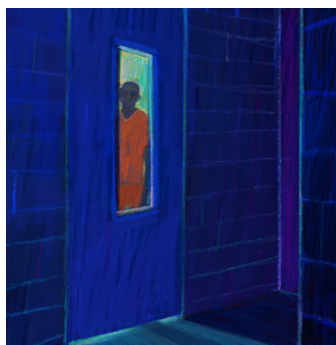
**Back in New York, as an unpaid prison volunteer teaching a rehabilitation class to Rikers inmates, I was regarded as an avante garde, idealistic, left-wing progressive.**

"Oh, John, you're such a bleeding heart liberal," said my good friend, hard-nosed, hard-line Federal Judge Richard Owen, who for personal safety, wore a six-gun strapped to his calf inside his trousers.

"You've got me all wrong Judge," I replied. "I'm a *pragmatist*. I just want prison programs that *actually work*. So what I think is that our criminal population should get *your* brand of justice first, *then* my brand of rehabilitation next."

Here in New Zealand, I'm customizing and advocating precisely the same policies and programs. *But*, paradoxically, I now find myself damned by lefties as an unenlightened ally of right-wing racists. *Goodness me!* What to say?

## The Kiwi Prison Problem



Well-intentioned Kiwi prison reformers pointed to the fact that 4000 Maori make up half the Kiwi prison population—and that a further 2500 are shackled in their homes by electronic GPS bracelets. So, Labour replaced the fundamentalist Christian Sycamore Tree cure favored by a former National government with a supposed elixir of Race *and* Religion. Yikes! *Really?* Yes.

Maori inmates are currently separated into ‘decolonisation’ programs embedded with the *Te Ao* world view, the *Te Reo* language, and an aggrieved underpinning of ethnic entitlement. And, yes, they’re also trained to wield the *Taiaha* fighting staff.

Call me a right-wing radical if you must, but let me nonetheless share, loud and clear, what I think about all that:

- it is *racist* to suggest that innate human differences determine different cultural outcomes;
- it is *demeaning*—to everyone—to suggest recidivism will decline if a particular group is segregated from the rest of the prison population;
- it is *xenophobic* to suggest that the cure for criminal behavior is to teach any particular ethnicity to see themselves as better or worse than any other.

Even worse is that such race-based programs, routinely exclude *the essentially secular truly life-altering concepts of modern psychology*.

With little but folklore and fables to fall back on, decolonisation ‘graduates’ suffer depression, anger, and the level of alienation from society that surely fuels ram raids and crime sprees.

So what to do? For openers, bear in mind a few facts:

- that total of 6500 Maori prisoners is less than one percent (.7%) of the total Maori population of 875,000.
- To put it another way the other 99.3% of Maori—868,420 people— are law-abiding Kiwi citizens.
- Yes, of course, Kiwi citizens of European origin have a lower rate of incarceration. But surely that’s because they hail from a higher socioeconomic status; they are infinitely less needy.

Happily, the failures of current Kiwi corrections programs have showcased the need for new way forward. So, let’s address the plight of *all* our prison residents, of *every* ethnicity, creed, color or culture. Here goes . . . .





## THE SCISSORS CURE FOR KIWI CRIME

Pioneering psychologist Carl Jung noted that ‘the patient begins to get well when he gains an understanding of his predicament; only then can he begin to see a way out of it.’

But, truly understanding the true predicament can be problematic:

- Prisoners imagine their quandary is that they got caught and incarcerated; in fact their conundrum is *serial* incarceration—*they keep coming back to prison*.
- Gang members imagine their predicament is that society excludes them; in fact the conundrum is that *they routinely exclude themselves from society* (and then complain they’re not included).

In both cases, they succumb to what Freud called *repetition compulsion*; an unconscious need to engage in antisocial activity.

Bear that in mind as we now examine our twin scissor blades.

### BLADE #1: Hard Times for Hardened Criminals (GVI)

After the killing of his son, criminology professor David Kennedy developed the **Group Violence Intervention (GVI) program in Boston in the nineties**. After the program was introduced the city’s youth homicide rate fell 63%, and that success was called ‘The Boston Miracle’.

Based on the Pareto Curve, GVI comprises crime deterrence strategies focused on the 20 percent chronic offenders and gang-involved youth responsible for 80 percent of homicides and violent crime.

The police mostly know who these malefactors are. The key strategy is to ‘call in’ a gathering of law enforcement officials, locals, former gang members, and young men attending as part of their probation or parole.

Essentially the police offer the stick of serious prison time, or the carrot of serious help, saying . . .



- *If any one of you maims a person, your whole group will be targeted. Even if you weren't there, we will come after you with swift justice and lengthy sentences in hard yards.*
- *Stop the violence and a whole range of assistance will come your way: nappies for the kids, the right paperwork for a job, even help with relocation to get out of the damaging environment in which you live.*
- *Take this message back to your communities and your gangland friends.*

Upon release virtually all former criminals become our neighbours, so a second blade is crucial to the scissors cure.

## **BLADE #2: Taking Wings with Straight Thinking**

**Some people, academics and idealists notably, say that ‘education’ is the key to curing crime.** What they *don't* say, however, mostly because they don't know, is (a) *what* to teach, (b) *how* to make a set of big new transformational ideas stick, and (c) *upon release* of an inmate back into society, how to ensure that those lessons are practiced.

Any lasting cure for crime begins with understanding the psychological and sociological forces that lead to needy self-soothing and mindless serial incarceration—and then, with open eyes, seeing a viable path to creating a whole new trouble-free life.

*To make this happen we need to share, discuss and catch the initially blinding light of big, new, truly life-altering ideas.*

What inmates do *not* need is a university degree. What they *do* need is fun to learn and faster to apply. They need to shelve dogma, get an injection of rational, life-altering ideas, think critically, and hone a marketable skill. So, our Eagles *Taking Wings* program comprises two elements:

- *A clear head and a clear heart.* Truly understanding one's predicament means waking to the realization of having been trapped inside a prison of the mind and heart. To achieve this, prisons need to offer an essentially *secular* program grounded in cutting-edge concepts of modern psychology and an inclusive,

liberal democracy, where—on both sides of the wall—every human is an equal citizen.

- *A marketable skill.* Too many prisons are akin to universities that teach how to become a successful criminal, mostly by selling and distributing illegal drugs. A better way is to teach inmates to become cooks and carpenters, fork-lift drivers and furniture movers, artisans and electricians, *and, where those citizens turn out to be natural leaders, hire them as corrections instructors.* Don't take my word for that last nugget. Listen to actual formerly violent criminals tell you how that works on our Pulitzer nominated podcast series, *The Breakout Plan.*<sup>1</sup>

## NINE TAKEAWAYS AND AN INVITATION

Thanks for staying with me. It can be a lot to absorb. So let me leave you with what I'm hoping might be key takeaways<sup>2</sup>:

1. We are all equal citizens of the same world;
2. Prison corrections programs are political hot potatoes.
3. Retribution mostly wins more votes than rehabilitation;
4. In fact, the mere prospect of hard time for hardened offenders is a significant deterrent;
5. Upon release former criminals become neighbours;
6. So we need programs that truly rehabilitate;
7. Programs based on Race and Religion are myopic;
8. Secular programs are universally acceptable;
9. Effective rehabilitation needs to be grounded in modern psychology and straight thinking—and vest a marketable skill.

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1. If you're short of time, two episodes encapsulate the wisdom of our sharpest Eagles: *Episode 7, How to Extract Diamonds from a Mountain*, and *Episode 8, What If You Stumble?*

2. If you'd like more information, a good place is [www.eaglesgather.org](http://www.eaglesgather.org); there's also much material—and you can contact me—at my authors guild site [www.johnwareham.com](http://www.johnwareham.com).

Right now, upon release from Kiwi prisons, anxious, angry, unchanged former inmates are effectively pushed off a cliff to a waiting ambulance attended by ingenuous parole officers. This is madness. We can't do *everything* at once. But I'd like to invite you to do at least *something* at once.

Based upon the proven, color-blind prison programs, which resulted in our single digit recidivism rate, come help us advocate a cost-effective pilot Eagles program for lost Kiwi souls currently languishing in prison cells.

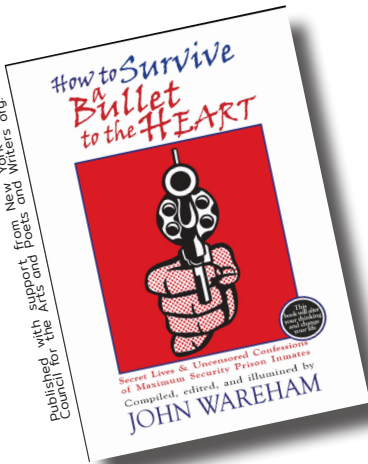
Let me close with a poem from our Eagles anthology by Downstate prison poets, *How to Survive a Bullet to the Heart*. This one, *Rainbows*, is by Eagles Graduate Moises Colon:<sup>3</sup>

*I am black, I am white, I am brown,  
and to that rainbow I never frown.*

*I welcome every color in me,  
all that I am,  
and all that God  
has made me to be.*

*The conquistador, the soul, and the heart,  
I embrace every aspect and live every part.*

*Yes that's me—all entwined,  
I can never see black or white  
for I am color-blind  
when my eyes prevail  
—and color-blinded  
whenever I fail. •*



3. Like everyone else in that maximum-security Eagles class, Moe had never before attempted to write even a line of verse. Ever since his release he has been a proud, gainfully employed New York citizen of the world.

*'Transformational—stunning and engaging; the solid experiential and evidential based material should shake many of both sides of the fence to the core.'*  
Tony Taylor, Professor of Psychology,  
Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

JOHN WAREHAM

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