

Chapter 13.

Is MacDonald's Freedom?

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For young people in residential or confined youth care one of the core values of our open Dutch society, freedom, is, to say the least, a challenge. As a chaplain I provide time and a place to wrestle with their current situation, personal history and values. What does freedom mean when you are confined? What does freedom mean when you are addicted to drugs? This article presents two case studies that, each in its respective way, challenge our society's fundamental value of freedom. It will present some dilemmas and show what spirituality can offer young people to deal with these dilemmas.

Ralph, 15 years (confined youth care)

I knew Ralph for about a year before we sat down and talked. He suddenly said: "I would also like to go to MacDonald's with you." I responded by planning an appointment in my diary. When allowed, I take young people to places outside the institution, for instance for a walk in the woods or a talk in a restaurant, of which MacDonald's is their favorite. Ralph did not express a particular question about life, but he really wanted to get away from the group. I consider it part of my expertise to take them out into society and treat them as free individuals and, when necessary, help them express their questions about life.

In Ralph's case I start in with the general questions on how his day had been up to now; who were the members of his family; where he had been living; and what had been the cause of him being put in confined youth care. He does not seem 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 have moved around a lot and never stayed in one place for more than a few months. It resulted in many different homes and many different schools.

By telling these stories about his life, he gives the impression that he does not want to talk about any particular questions or dilemmas of life. He simply answers the questions. He does not start talking when I wait

for him to start. He is more or less “on hold,” which is parallel to him waiting to move on to his next “home” now his treatment has ended. Because he does not want to discuss his past any further (he explicitly tells me so), we explore his dreams and future. He wants to be a Navy Seal. He is even working for that dream by taking swimming exams. To add to his interest in the navy, I talk to him about naval history.

In these interactions, Ralph and I can be silent for a while together, which does not seem to bother him. The silences seem to function as a moment of peace and space. He does not feel a need to start talking, but does make eye contact, looks around and continues to do what he does (enjoying his burger). Twice, in subsequent contacts, we take a walk in the woods nearby. The silence then functions as a space to notice different things about life. For example, I once pointed out the singing of a bird and the rustling of leaves in the wind to him. He said, “Hush, let me hear... Yes, I hear that too!”

Ralph says he finds it difficult to talk and that he is insecure about what he is saying. He seems to be locked up in himself and (not surprisingly) he is not very confident that he can influence the world he has to face. For instance, he looks down and talks quietly about taking swimming exams. For me, the goal of the contact shifts from helping him to express his questions on life to drawing Ralph out of his posture of waiting and to focusing his attention on the beauty, instead of on the fear, of life. By using my own interests (walking, nature, history) and by taking him out into the “real world,” I encouraged him to broaden the scope of his vision and to aim at what he desires.

Two shocking events change our conversations. The first is the death of his grandmother that makes him very sad. Sadness, however, is not an easy emotion for Ralph to live with. He is almost unable to express it. He would rather get angry. By encouraging him to talk about his (happy) memories of his grandmother, saying that it is safe to express what he thinks and that his feelings are of the utmost importance, it becomes possible for him to also express words of grief and to admit that he is missing his grandmother.

The second shocking event is a cerebral hemorrhage of his father. His father lives a three-hour drive away and Ralph has not seen him for a long time when that happens. Only recently has he reconnected with his father by talking to him over the phone. Ralph visits his father the day after the incident. His father is a lot better then, but Ralph is worried and shocked (as I can see in the expression on his face). He keeps talking to me about this incident each time we see each other, whether I ask about it or not.

These two events trigger Ralph to express his feelings. Maybe for the first time there is a time and a place in which someone listens to what he wants to express. The counseling makes him aware of the different feelings he has: anger and grief, worries, shock and happiness and make him confident enough to take the initiative to express himself. Afterwards he reports the fact that he now can talk about things as the main result of our contact. He says: "I say and explain more to others. I talk about the things that worry me. Now, I speak out, whereas I kept it in me before."

What would have happened if I had not gone to MacDonald's with him because he did not express a particular question about life? Would he have found the freedom to express himself? More likely, he would have expressed his grief in anger. I think two factors contributed to his freedom. First, there was time, space, silence and genuine interest in Ralph that made him feel free to talk about anything. Second, the repetition of sitting at the same table, eating the same burger, drinking the same coke, talking about the same topics created predictability, confidence and courage to use his newfound freedom. Not long after I asked him to cooperate in the Case Studies Project, he moved to his next group. He was not only free to express himself, but also free of confined youth care.

Richard, 17 years (self-support training)

Richard has two sisters and a brother. His father is a driving instructor and his mother a traditional housewife. They adhere to a strict Christian lifestyle. He has had many fights with his father, that never seem to end. His sisters blame him for the fights, while his mother always tries to mediate. He does have a good relationship with his brother. He romps around with him and they like to spend time together. One of his grandparents died when Richard was five years old. That had a profound impact on him. He then felt anger with God for the first time. When I speak to Richard, his grandmother is quite ill, and she must be cared for in a nursing home. Richard visits her weekly and sees his grandfather there too. They are very important to him as a positive counterpart to the fights with his father, his anger with God and the strict religious context, although they belong to the same church.

At some point Richard started using drugs, which caused him to drop out of school. He went to a rehabilitation clinic because his parents wanted him to. He tried to fulfill all their wishes but felt that they were never satisfied and that he was not allowed to make his own choices. He felt like the black sheep of the family and wanted to get away to live his own life. With permission of his parents, he started to work on that perspective at a self-support training. His coach approached me with a request for

counseling. He indicated that Richard gets stuck on what he wants. He has been raised in a family with strict values which he does not share; on the other hand, he is loyal to them.

When we (his coach, the therapist, Richard and I) speak with each other for the first time, it is clear that Richard wants to talk, wants to discover who he is and how he can manage the expectations of others, especially those of his parents. In the first conversation that Richard and I have together, he is fed up, tired and sometimes quite incomprehensible. He cannot even follow all of his own thoughts when I ask about things. It even makes him think of suicide, because everything seems so confusing. In the conversations that follow, Richard loves to talk. One question (What about your family?) is enough to get him talking.

Bit by bit I see the many elements that cause him to feel confused. At the age of five, his grandfather, with whom he felt at home, died. From early on he did not feel at home with his parents but felt more like the black sheep of the family. His not believing in God anymore, because of his anger, made him a black sheep even more. He fought with his father and sought relief in drugs. The restlessness in his head made him respond to the pressure of his family's expectations to make something of his life with passiveness and depression. That only increased the pressure he felt from his family. I respond by comparing his situation with the metaphor of a roundabout without an exit. Pointing that out acknowledges the confusion and Richard finds the image helpful.

In the conversations on his relation to his family, especially his father, I reverse the questions and ask, "What would you do, if you were your father?" and "How would your father respond if he fully understood your position?" The questions help Richard to discover what he is missing from his family. The death of his grandfather was clearly a major trauma that had not been talked about enough. When he talks about it, the anger is tangible. Richard likes to talk, but talking also makes him tired. His moods are sometimes cheerful, at other times gloomy. We speak every week for about an hour. After nine sessions, we end our weekly conversations and decide to see each other again after six weeks. In the last conversation we look at how far he has come. He is less confused and clearer about what he wants, though he is afraid of falling back into confusion and still uses drugs. He no longer has suicidal thoughts and his relationships with his family are better. He is able to talk to his father without fighting. When I one day met his father, he says: "You are the person that knows how to talk to my son." Richard's coach says she sees the positive effects that the conversations have had.

Challenges to freedom

From Richard's case study, it is clear that he is looking for freedom from the constraints his family has imposed upon him. The situation is very different from Ralph's case, in which family life and school were diffuse and chaotic, more fearful than free. Ralph was put within clear boundaries at the confined youth care and experienced a reliable environment. 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 they were treated well and at the right place. To a great extent I would agree. But saying only that would neglect the facts that Ralph was so suspicious of life that he could not express himself and that Richard was caught up in confusion and drug abuse. Basic freedoms of speech (in our society particularly valued) and of choice were effectively blocked for both young men, not by our systems, treatments or dealings with them, but by our lack of understanding of the convictions on freedom that young people cherish.

In our culture, we see many expressions of freedom in terms such as: "Feel free to do what you like," and "be who you are." Commercial products, like the Big Mac, are advertised as if they give a feeling of freedom. In rap songs freedom is cheered with angry lyrics and lots of nudity. In videogames, there is freedom in shooting down everyone, and in TV series, young people seek their way in life without the help of parents or other adults. These images of freedom communicate to our youth, who have to deal with reality in all its graveness, "You have to do it on your own," and "anger and money make you free." This first message is what Richard felt as a heavy load put upon his shoulders by his family. This second message was picked up by Ralph, who did not have another way of dealing with grief, for instance.

On top of that, many youngsters within (confined) youth care do not feel they can "be who they are" and "do what they want." The pedagogical staff asks them what they want to do with their life. They try to motivate them and help them discover who they are. However, at the same time they have to enforce restrictions upon their behavior and treat them in therapy for whom they are. I know from many stories in which that is experienced as a great discrepancy. The conclusion is often that the pedagogical staff ends up deliberately obstructing the freedom of the young person. When trained for self-support, many young people discover the large gap between the public images of freedom and the reality they have to face. They see that those images of freedom are a lie in themselves, or at best an unattainable dream. No one can have that kind of freedom without money, so you are subjected to expectations of others, parents,

teachers or bosses (either criminal or not) to make money. That is not really freedom.

Those convictions about the world cannot change in treatment when that treatment is only focused on altering behavior and character. Such treatment does not erase suspicion but fosters it. Therefore, young people need adequate help in understanding themselves and the world. As a chaplain, with the knowledge of spiritual traditions and philosophy at the back of my head, I help them reflect on their convictions and beliefs about themselves and the world. It means talking through the questions that life is throwing at them: Who am I? What is freedom? Why is all this happening to me? Where am I going? It requires showing them how their beliefs, experiences and social environment interact. It also means showing them in what way those beliefs are helpful and in what way they are an obstacle. I search with them for alternative beliefs and for hope, courage and trust. Most important is helping them be convinced that they are worthwhile.

I explicitly talk about these things. However, talk is only talk. How can talk compete with a system that communicates, at best, half-truths about freedom? I practice what I preach by taking them away from their youth care residence into society. We walk and talk in the woods or sit and talk in restaurants as other people do. There they can find true attention to those probing questions of life and really be able to feel free because they are treated as free individuals who are a part of society. In Ralph's case, silence was essential; in Richard's case clearing his mind was the issue. So, is MacDonald's freedom? I would answer that it can be.