

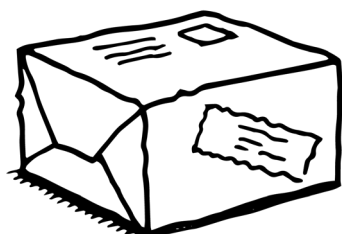
FOLLOW MY LEAD



“To me it felt like it was a very small gesture of restoring some dignity to her.”

I can think about a time where I had a client who was in and out of prison a lot. And whenever she was in prison she really detested being there for many different reasons, but one was that she didn't have any control over her diet or exercise and she often put on quite a lot of weight and felt all the pressures of being in a system that was obviously really complex, and made more complex by her feelings of self-worth and her physical appearance really contributed a lot to that.

She was also a woman who was remarkably astute and resilient, and always took a lot of pride in her self-presentation. And when she wasn't in custody she was very, very proud of her Culture and her background and also very proud of how she presented herself. And when she was in prison all of that... Obviously prison strips away from you, strips you away from your community, places you in a uniform, gives you a number. And I really understood that being branded and labelled in that way was a real constraint on her self-esteem and it was so gruelling and damaging for her to be there for so many different reasons.



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One of the things that I tried to do for her during that time was to go and see her quite a lot because she was obviously away from a lot of family and community. And when she was in prison, all of her jewellery had obviously been taken. And she had her nose pierced and that was something that was

of a huge pride for her. So, I started on her request to sometimes send her nose rings with my mail when I sent her a letter in prison. And I would attach it to the top of the letter where the staple was. And I never knew what happened once it went through the mail scanner but when I would go back and see her after that, she would always be wearing the nose-rings that I sent her. And it was this humanising and connecting way in which we could exchange something. And for me, I feel like it was a very small gesture of restoring some dignity to her, meeting her request to be seen as a person who had needs. And it was a very small and possibly insignificant gesture in the scheme of things.

And I can see that sending gifts to a client in prison is technically something that should have been declared. And definitely as a lawyer, as with so many professions giving a gift to a client crosses a number of professional and ethical lines. But I found that and on reflection that, that line is really conceived by our professions in a way that avoids the context of us as emotional and relational beings. And it creates an imaginary barrier for us which is a challenge to us as empathetic people who sometimes want to make gestures of gifts, as a way of seeing each other as human in the context of who we are. I think it also reinforces the kind of power hierarchy between us who have knowledge and who are professional and those who are not. And I definitely see for her that it was a way that we could connect and hopefully created some meaning and connection between us. And prisons do that in such a way to strip those things away from her. So to create that human connection and reconfirm her as an individual and to give her a small sense of her strength and value is something that I think really goes to that question of you know, skirting around the rules and giving somebody back some dignity.

I guess it is important to mention as well that prison really robs people of that sense of community and the isolation they experience is so damaging, especially for Aboriginal people held off country in prison away from their community and the things they really need for their wellbeing. Every time I went to see that client, her nose rings were always proudly worn, and we would comment on that in a kind of knowing way when we would be together. So, that tiny piece of dignity for her, and the connection between us, I hope, might have been a small gesture of humanizing her and giving her some dignity and "being seen" in what was an otherwise dehumanizing place.