

READ ALL ABOUT IT

In the early part of the 17th century, the poet John Donne said that "No man is an island". No one, in other words is, by themselves, produced and active, separate from the rest of the world. Or some parts of it.

In some ways I would disagree. There are in some ways too many islands. Too many people who are isolated in an ocean of their own.

They may make contact with the world. They may visit parts other than their own parts. But they are still caught in separateness, unable to join the continent of human potential.

They may look connected, but something holds them back. They lack a bridge, over which they can cross. They may be held back by their island-like existence from getting the most out of life. And because of that, having a bridge is the one thing they could do with.

I was reminded of the need for bridges when I went to do a talk at Stratford-upon-Avon. The talk was for a group called Playing For Success (PFS). In 10 years they have helped 200,000 people to get literacy skills. Each year they now help about 50,000 people who would otherwise be left on their island. An island where they are impeded from making changes in their lives.

So what is this great bridge that PFS have developed? Funded by the Department For Education And Training, this is the Blair government thinking creatively, and putting money to constructive ends. The bridge is sport. But sport with a different purpose.

PFS is not about playing sport. It is about taking people's interest in sport and using it as a means of developing their literacy and numeracy skills. Dozens of football clubs and sports clubs have become the centres for PFS to run their literacy programmes.

Therefore, Fulham, West Ham, Manchester United etc have opened their doors to PFS so that they can draw people in to learn while enjoying their subject. How do you write a match report? How do you describe a player? How do you write essays but in a form that makes it exciting and interesting for you?



photo: © Eric Venus

PFS is solutions-led. It is about breaking that island existence that not being literate keeps you in. Taking the enthusiasm of an individual and building on it is the basis of all good education. And all good social training.

If you don't have a bridge then there are goods chances that you will remain on your island. PFS have done wonders; they have been the key that unlocks the door of chance for many people. They should be praised and supported. And the Department Of Education And Training should be praised for their thoughtfulness about this particular kind of bridge.

I had to ask the big question, though: couldn't we have PFS in our prisons? A few weeks ago I went to another prison, Wandsworth this time. And once again, the big problem seemed to be an underfunding of resources to CHANGE people! That, as usual, all the big money goes on

keeping them there and not changing them while there.

I am always astonished at what a little bit of leadership can do in a prison. At the joy people have when you tell them that they can have a different life. And that because they have done wrong, it does not wall off and close down the rest of their life.

My recent visit to Wandsworth prison, and then Wormwood Scrubs later, shows me that if anyone needs change and the PFS programme, it is the inmates of these places.

People need bridges to get off their islands. And the prison wrongdoers island can be successfully bridged if we could only get the tools to do so.

The Stables Market in London's Camden Town has something so bright about it that I wonder that I have not been going back there again

and again. Last week I was there for the opening of a new shoe shop and had not visited the place since the last time I wandered around with a French tourist, many years ago.

The place is a serious outpost of design, restaurants and dance and exercise. I was astonished at its vitality, once again. I hope it goes on forever. Because it feels real. It does not seem forced and artificial. Much of the fun parts of London are beginning to appear as though they were planned and fine-tuned on some smart architect's draughtboard, and then actualised in bricks and mortar.

But Stables Market is the real McCoy. You must visit it.

You also must visit it because of the Jinga shoe shop that has just opened. Jingas (left) are the lightest, bestest, cleverest trainers you are ever going to wear. To call them trainers limits them. They are more like a tonic to your feet, a dance shoe, a light-of-foot shoe.

Well, that's how I see them. I was given a pair last year and as soon as I put them on I was astonished at the feel of them. Trainers they were. But they weren't cloggy. They didn't feel as though somewhere below me was some earth. They felt in touch with mother earth. I am not known for my lightness of foot, but Jinga is all about lightness of being.

And, yes, they are also a social shoe. They are also a useful shoe. For they are made in Brazil by people who need to sell stuff. And they help get people an independent life. Jinga support an education programme in Rio and a programme for volunteers.

Yes, lightness of being and a good social idea echo around the feet. Now isn't that a great story? If you want to know more about Jinga visit their website (www.jingando.com) and visit their shop at Stables Market. It's just opposite the main entrance. Buy the shoes, they are only £35. I have a bright yellow pair I wear in the privacy of my bathroom, and a black pair for the park and the street.

Jinga is a real social success story. Oh, yes, they also organise ethical holidays in Brazil. So get on their website now.