

# *Crime, Punishment & Culture*

*Sid Jacobson*

**Note: This article originally appeared in *Anchor Point*, November, 1994.**

Here's a fantasy; I'll guide. Imagine you live in Miami. New Orleans, Houston, or San Diego could work too, but Miami is more perfect for this exercise.

Miami is a pretty city. Very warm and tropical; temperate, pleasant most of the year. It's location makes it a great port city. It opens up to foreign countries, and people, across a great gulf and an even greater ocean. Partly as a result it is highly multi-cultural. It is bi-lingual (or more than "bi"). Also, as a result, it is a great commercial center, not only of its own country, but a larger portion of the hemisphere itself. A more strategically advantageous location would be hard to imagine. It is a city of great variety, excitement and beauty. Tourists come from all over the world for the Miami experience.

It is also a city of tremendous problems. The levels of drugs, crime and violence are staggering. The cultural clashes are becoming legendary. The poverty is crushing. Tourists are routinely warned of the dangers. Miami can be a very scary place; on the flip side of its charm and beauty.

Why such horrific problems? The pointing of fingers seems never-ending. Certainly the economy of one city, and even the surrounding area, is not always able to handle the great influx of immigrants. The toll on the already taxed educational system is enormous, especially with the additional need for multi-lingual education. The increased needs of a poor, disenfranchised immigrant population can overwhelm any social, economic or educational system. These press on the community and its social structure in countless ways that create seemingly insurmountable problems. It is not enough to point at individuals or groups (social, economic or ethnic) as the source of these societal ills. It's all much larger than that.

For fun, and hopefully some enlightenment, let's pretend we can magically repair the social ills, one at a time. First, we'll insure that everyone has access to a quality education (a pet hope of mine—the only reason it is first; this is *not* an exercise in linear thinking). Why stop there? It should be a state-of-the-art education (things like lateral thinking skills and other cool stuff taught in primary grades), after all, this is just a fantasy. Next, we'll make sure everyone has a decent place to live. And access to a job—we'll eliminate unemployment. To do that, of course, we'd have to provide safe and reliable mass transit. Subways, busses and taxis that are clean and affordable to everyone so they can get to work, or wherever they need to go. While we're at it, we'll tackle health care by making sure everyone gets it, and it's worth getting, when they need it.

Two of the most crucial economic needs people have are housing and retirement and these are probably the two most expensive as well. How about a forced savings plan that works? Let's say a portion of everyone's income goes into a personal fund, carefully administered by the city, for retirement. But we'll make it all right—in fact we'll encourage people—to take an early withdrawal to buy a home. That will take us a bit of the way toward solving the problem of poor elderly people with no home or financial security.

There is always the matter of the financial health of the city, as well. Let's give the city the opportunity to run itself like a business. In fact, let's mandate it. And encourage businesslike practices by allowing the city to actually *make a profit* to invest in the future. Not only that, let's go a step further and give it a *history* of having done so in the past. That way it will already have taken care of basic infrastructure needs. We'll make everything from municipal buildings, to roads and bridges as perfect as possible. Modern, clean, up-to-date. As long as we're fantasizing, let's make the whole place sparkle. Like a brand new shopping center, or bank. Lots of money to make everything beautiful.

As for racial and cultural intolerance, well, that's a tough one. How about if we "gift" the community with a couple of generations of *experience*; a history of contact with one another to draw on. That usually lessens the tensions, though it probably won't ever eliminate them. At least people will have experience dealing with each other without the "strangeness" factor clouding things too much. In fact, what if we could instill a sense of the importance of community itself. One that is actually culturally based, built into everything people believe; a core value, a sense of something much larger and more important than just the individual.

What about crime? Well, how much would there be in a Miami like the one we just built? Just to be sure, let's take away the guns. No social problems. No lack of opportunity. No disenfranchised. No guns. A nearly perfect community.

Some fantasy. Unfortunately, just a fantasy of a Miami we probably won't see for many years to come. But not *entirely* a fantasy. Such a place does exist. It's called Singapore.

In the wake, and even before, the caning of American teenager Michael Fay, people in our country were asking themselves if this punishment might be just some cruel medieval torture practiced by a backward third world nation; or a good idea we ought to try out ourselves. But most people lack a historical, geographical and social context in which to ask the question intelligently. I've been working in Singapore for the better part of a year, on and off, so I've been making the inevitable comparisons in my own mind. I've come to the conclusion that we've been asking the wrong questions. Since we NLP'ers like to take pride in our general ability to ask *better* questions, I'll take a shot. The real question, I think, is not what caning would do for us in this country, but rather what does it actually do for the society of Singapore? What is its function in *that* context, *now* (not in the 1960's when they were designing and building their society)? Is it the reason they have one of the lowest crime rates in the world, or just a leftover from an older, less friendly time?

One way to begin to get an answer is to repeat our earlier question: "How much crime would there be in the fantasized Miami we designed?" Didn't we remove most of the conditions that *create* wide-spread crime and a sense of lawlessness? This is an old argument, to be sure. We have never come to grips with the conditions that create crime in this country. The easy political answer has been to point fingers at the "bad guys" and loudly scream that we need to get "tougher on crime," build more prisons and the rest. It's understandable. It's a natural response to fear and the sense of helplessness many of us, especially in large urban areas, feel. Lashing out at (or lashing) the criminals is easy. It's also stupid, because it doesn't work. The "wars" on crime and drugs (largely the same war) have failed utterly, in every sense. We have more crime, more drugs and less safety. Because we haven't faced the causes effectively, we have exacerbated the problem, not alleviated it.

Singapore is a beautiful, ultra-modern, frighteningly clean (some would say "anal retentive;" perhaps "anal destructive" would be accurate as well), efficiently run, successful country. It works. The reason they have so little crime, in my view, is in large part because they have removed most of the social conditions that create it. Caning has as close to *nothing* to do with their low crime rate as I can imagine (I'm told by knowledgeable people there that they expect a review of the policy in the next couple of years, and possibly a final farewell to the practice).

As long as we have the conditions for crime—the ones that produce criminals—we'll have crime regardless of the punishments we come up with. Think about that the next time you hear someone, including yourself, in a fit of pique or fear, pronounce the "cure" for crime to be a few good whacks. (Anyone who has ever worked in a prison knows the guards beat "troublemakers" routinely anyway.) Think rather about what could be done to encourage change in the social system that produces criminals (read *disenfranchised*).

I think we can lock up, cane, execute, torture, beat, or whatever, all the criminals we can find. In my mind I hear only Jay Leno's voice in that ubiquitous corn chip commercial: "Crunch all you want—we'll make more!"