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Restorative Justice in Ourselves

**New Perspectives
on Crime and Justice**
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Restorative Justice in Ourselves

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“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to those in prison.”

These words from the prophet Isaiah commissioned me as I began my ministry as a prison chaplain in September of 1984.

It was my first day on the job at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston, Rhode Island. I was one of a team of four Catholic chaplains who would minister to the incarcerated men and women in the seven different correctional facilities within two miles of one another. One of the other chaplains was taking me through the men’s medium security facility. We were visiting Cell Block South, a segregation unit in the basement where men were kept in individual cells. They were being punished and isolated from their dorm of sixty. I think some considered living with sixty other men in a small room more of a punishment.

As I made my way from cell to cell, I met Philip. I will never forget him. He was twenty-two years old although he looked younger. He sat cross-legged on his bed. I introduced myself and he asked me to bring him some religious material. When I visited him the next day he sheepishly gave me an envelope with my name on it. This letter was to inaugurate me into my prison ministry. Standing on the other side of the iron bars, I read the following:

“I don’t really know if I can write you without you or myself getting into trouble. See, I’ve been here for two years and ten

months and all of the time I never talked to anyone about my problems because I am scared to get close to anyone in here.... I can write my problems and my feelings down on paper better than I can talk about them. Because I am so used to it and after I write them down I read it over and then I throw it away so no one will find it. Some of the time I feel like crying but I hold it in, and hide it. And now that I am down here in lock up, I can think a lot better now because I'm alone and if I don't want to talk to anyone, I can just lie here and pretend like I'm sleeping.

"I don't really know why I am writing you this letter cause I've been here so long! Have you ever heard of the saying that when you get hurt so many times you put up a wall so no one can get in? Well, my wall is up so high that it even scares me because if I don't open up to someone, then when I get out of here, I'm still going to have everything still inside of me, and believe me, I don't want to come back to this place. I guess I do know why I am writing this after all. I guess what I'm asking is 'Will you be my friend?' I know it won't be easy at first, and it will take time, but all I can do is try, right?"

"Your new friend, Philip"

When I began to work in jails and prisons as a correctional chaplain, I quickly began to realize that the work of binding up broken hearts and setting the captives free is essentially an inner work. The more I listened to those like Philip who were incarcerated, the more I began to realize that there is an inner prison as well as an outer prison. I realized that I needed to touch the inner prisoner, the one who was locked up inside, who felt rejected, ashamed, unloved, worthless and guilty.

The more I listened, the more I experienced how the outer prison environment mirrors the inner prison environment of each inmate. The outer prison environment, with its control through guards and isolation,

mirrors how an inmate needs to guard and isolate what has been rejected within himself. As the outer prison environment is abusive, with no mercy, compassion or respect, so also is the inner prison with its incriminating voices of self-hatred and shame. The outer prison system as we experience it in our society feeds on the inner woundedness of the inmate and reinforces his or her inner imprisonment. I realized that if the inner prisoner was not reached on some level, then when he or she was released, unconsciously that inner prisoner would draw the person back into a jail or prison environment. Even though the prison environment is incredibly dehumanizing, it is also safe and familiar. It is what the prisoner experiences within himself or herself all of the time.

All of us would agree that the criminal justice system, as we now experience it, does not bring healing. It does not restore! It is designed to pursue security rather than peace. It promotes isolation rather than reconciliation. The National Associations Active in Criminal Justice in Canada has expressed this familiar understanding of criminal justice well: "It is a defensive concept that stresses withdrawal behind protective barriers, with no commitment to seek solutions to basic personal and community problems." Instead of concerning itself with equality, love and harmony, it concerns itself with power, order and control. It is concerned with punishment rather than healing. It exacerbates the woundedness of all.

Restorative justice, however, seeks to address all of the victims of crime - in and out of prison. It seeks to address and redress the injuries experienced by all parties affected by the crime. Its goal is to restore shalom, to bring harmony and balance back into the relationships. In so doing, it is justice which is pursuing peace rather than security. It is justice which seeks to bind up the wounds caused by crime.

In my current work, I have found myself listening to the woundedness on both sides. As a senior counselor at an addiction recovery center, I have heard with horror the stories of alcoholics and addicts who have been the victims of sexual abuse and family violence. I have witnessed

the devastating effect that crime has had on both their lives and psyches. As one who ministers to the incarcerated in prison, I have also listened with reverence and compassion to the deep inner wounds they carry. Often these wounds have been the very source of their crimes. The system of criminal justice, as it is now practiced, does not address these wounds. If justice is to be restorative, then these inner wounds must be addressed as well.

In fact, I propose that restorative justice needs to be operative within us, in our own inner world, before we can implement it within the criminal justice system.

Through my work in the area of inner healing, I have discovered that our psyches, our inner worlds, can mirror either a justice which is punitive and seeks security, or a justice which is restorative and seeks healing. Justice which seeks only security is based on fear and results in inner imprisonment. Justice which seeks shalom and reconciliation is based on love and results in inner healing.

I would like here to present these two different inner world views. I would first like to talk about the inner world which holds security as primary. This world closely resembles the values of our own prison system. The criminal justice system as we know it isolates what is most threatening in our society. It exiles and locks up behind bars or steel doors those persons who threaten the security of our society by breaking the law. It assigns guards to keep perpetual watch so that the criminal cannot escape. The prisoner is controlled by the power of the guards and the unfeeling system. The prisoner is held in contempt and is often treated abusively by other inmates and those in power.

In the same way, when an aspect of our own personality is threatening to us, we lock it up inside ourselves. For example, if we are ridiculed or accused of being too aggressive, we will tend to repress that aspect of our personality because of our fear of being rejected. We put away those parts of ourselves that are not considered acceptable because those parts of ourselves threaten our ego. The intention of our psyche is

to protect us from feeling the pain of what has been hurt. We fear that if we let ourselves feel the pain of the hurt, then it will overwhelm us and be a danger to our entire ego system. So based on our fear of not being accepted or loved, our psyche will isolate what has been hurt within ourselves and guard it with a protective wall.

This wall is made by holding the feelings, by freezing them. When our feelings are frozen, then the hurting part of ourselves is protected. But the price of this protection is the imprisonment of whatever is hurting inside of us. We will employ any protective device in order not to be hurt again. As the prison system in our society is abusive, with no mercy compassion or respect, so also is our inner prison with its incriminating voices of self-hatred and shame. Just as the outer prison values control and security, so also does our inner system when it is based on fear.

I discovered this when I began to work with the incarcerated, when I began to listen to the inner prisoners who were trapped behind walls of frozen feelings. I discovered that an inner prisoner was locked up within the inmate, a prisoner who felt rejected, ashamed, unloved, worthless and guilty. The pattern was that the inmate experienced deep hurt or abuse as a child and quickly vowed never to experience that type of hurt again. What was vulnerable was put in protective custody within the inmate. A protective wall of frozen feelings kept away the hurt but left the child on the other side isolated and lonely. The child, with all of its energy and passion for life, was safe in protective custody but was unable to be set free. The prison system simply reinforced and fed on the inner woundedness of those who were incarcerated.

As the prison system in our society is abusive, with no mercy, compassion or respect, so also is our inner prison with its incriminating voices of self-hatred and shame. Just as the outer prison values control and security, so also does our inner system when it is based on fear.

As prison chaplain, I was constantly encountering this pattern in inmates. To my discomfort, I began to recognize the pattern in myself

as well. I began to recognize how fear in my life had held me captive: fear of rejection, fear of feeling the pain.

Inner healing is not just for the incarcerated or for their victims, but for ourselves as well. Each of us has experienced deep emotional cuts and internal bruises as a result of experiences of emotional or physical abuse, rejection, loss or abandonment. Even if we grew up in the most loving of family environments, these experiences could not be avoided. People we loved died; we grew attached to them and then they left us. Others that we trusted sometimes betrayed our trust and we were left with feelings of anger and hurt.

All of us have experienced moments of rejection, loss or abandonment. All of us, not just inmates, have aspects of our personalities that have been hurt and locked up. We have parts of our personalities that we have hidden out of fear of being misunderstood or rejected. We have silent pain or secret shame. We are not yet totally whole and free persons.

We still judge ourselves harshly and sentence aspects of ourselves to life without possibility of parole. Our own fear has created inside of us the same dynamics that we now witness within the criminal justice system itself, where security is primary. Failing to find the source of love within us, we still seek acceptance and security outside of ourselves. There is still so much for us to defend because there is so much locked up within us. There is so little that is free inside of us.

Most of us would agree that we can be our own worst enemy, harder on ourselves than anyone else. We can reject again the parts of ourselves that have previously been rejected by others. We can refuse to listen to the parts of ourselves that are crying to be heard. We can continue to rationalize away our real feelings by telling ourselves how we think we should feel. We can continue to shut out the parts of ourselves that have been locked away because they were threatening to others and are still threatening to ourselves.

We ourselves are still in need of healing. We are, in fact, wounded healers. To the degree that we allow God to heal our own woundedness, to that degree we are sources of healing to others.

So what about the restorative model of justice? What would the experience of restorative justice look like when applied to our own inner world? What would it mean to have love rather than fear as primary in our inner system? What would it mean to replace inner isolation and punishment with acceptance and healing?

Inner restorative justice, as I envision it, is about love. It is about loving ourselves from the inside out, which is exactly what God does. The love of God meets with tenderness and compassion whatever is hurting inside of us. To paraphrase a passage from the servant song in Isaiah, God's love does not break the bruised reed, or snuff out the dimly burning wick. (Isaiah 42:1,3)

The love of God tames whatever is threatened or threatening inside of us. Rather than silencing or ignoring what has been put away in us, the love of God encourages it to speak and listens to its story. Rather than rejecting any part of us, the love of God accepts all of who we are. When love makes its home in our psyche, the captives within us can be set free. The exiled parts of ourselves can come home because God accepts the exiles.

But how can we do this? How can we tap into the love of God that dwells within each of us? How can we experience compassion towards ourselves? How can we begin to listen to the stories of those parts of ourselves that have been unacceptable to us? How can we face the pain within us? After all, most of us are held hostage by our fear of feeling. We are afraid to feel the emotional cuts and bruises that each one of us carries inside of us. We are afraid to get close to our inner wounds. Fear has dominated our inner world.

Love is stronger than our fear. Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Love heals. As people of faith, we can begin to approach the

world within us, and consequently the world around us, in a different way. We can begin by first acknowledging and honoring the woundedness within ourselves and then we will be more sensitive and compassionate toward the woundedness in those around us.

Honoring the wound takes time. It does not mean just feeling it once and then moving on. The wound is usually surrounded by layers of feelings. There may be layers of anger that need to be felt, or layers of fear that need to be faced, before the pain of the original hurt can be reached. It will take time to build a trusting and honest relationship with the part of ourselves that has been wounded. It will take time to really hear the story which only this wounded part of ourselves can tell.

If we are willing to feel our feelings as they surface, we can be sure that our feelings will carry us right to the wound within us that needs honoring. If we are willing to be patient and gentle with the one who is hurting within us, his or her story will eventually be expressed. If we are willing to honor our wound consciously, our psyche will no longer need to hold that wound for us.

You see, if we do not first face the pain that we each carry, then we will unconsciously live our lives in tribute to what has not been felt within us. This is a very important reality. Our psyche is so wise that it continuously takes us to our wound and keeps us there until we honor it. It keeps presenting us with situations in our life that seem to duplicate the circumstances of our woundedness. It is as if we have to keep replaying that same old story in our life until we acknowledge the damage that was first inflicted.

For example, a woman who is abandoned by her father at an early age may keep playing out that story of abandonment by men until she recognizes that early wound and pays tribute to the devastated little girl within her. She honors the wound by listening with compassion to this little girl's story. The old story will be ready to be released only after she has honored this wound. Only then will she no longer have to keep living out that story of abandonment in order to keep the girl's pain alive.

I see this all of the time when working with the incarcerated. In fact, I developed a series of guided imagery meditations in order to help honor the inner woundedness.¹ Instead of moving directly to the wound, however, it became important to ground people in a sense of love and safety. Inmates were encouraged to create an inner safe place that they could often return to in their imaginations. Once established, this inner safe place provided the safety that was needed in order for the inmate to begin to feel again. Once a base of love and acceptance was established, the inmate could begin to encounter the pain and hurt that was imprisoned within.

Larry was a young man who was incarcerated with a history of sexually molesting young boys between the ages of seven and ten. Using the process of guided imagery, Larry imagined that he could get in touch with what was hurting within himself and take it to a safe place. As he did this, he encountered himself at age ten, blonde haired and blue-eyed. He could even picture the striped T-shirt he used to wear. He began to cry as he retold what it felt like to imagine himself as an adult embracing this inner ten year old. He felt so much warmth and wholeness.

After one of the classes he pulled me aside and reminded me again what his crime was, a crime that he continued to keep secret from the other inmates. He said, "I just realized why I have always become involved with little boys who are blue-eyed with blonde hair. It's as if I have always been seeking myself! When I first encountered these children, my advances were not sexual, they were comforting. It then became sexual. It was as if I have always needed to comfort myself." I asked him if he himself had ever been sexually abused. Like the majority of cases he answered "yes." When asked how old he was when he was first abused, it came as no surprise that he was age ten.

1 A workbook and audiotapes for these meditations, entitled *Finding Healing From Within*, are available from G.A.T.E., 176 Visitacion, Brisbane, CA 54005 (415/468-0197).

Something deeper dawned on Larry as we talked. We talked about his own sexuality that in a sense was robbed from him when he was ten, and how he has been acting out a way to reconnect with it. He began to realize that he no longer has to try to connect outside of himself with what has resulted in tremendous guilt, shame, imprisonment and deep woundedness to others. He can now reconnect with the sexuality within him that got frozen at age ten and pay tribute to that wound within himself. Through compassion towards himself he can begin to restore what was wounded. His psyche will no longer have to demand his attentiveness to the wound by recreating that same old story in his life.

This example, and many others, begin to make me look at crime as a symbol of what the woundedness is within one's psyche. The outer reality mirrors the inner reality. The criminal act is a re-creation in a symbolic way of the inner drama that is unhealed. It is as if the crime itself points very directly to what needs to be restored within the person. We only need to learn how to interpret the language.

Restorative justice, practiced inside of us, honors the wound in need of healing and seeks to bring healing to what has been locked up in our psyche. It seeks to bring shalom to the parts of our psyche that have been victimized and the parts of our psyche that have been the perpetrators of inner violence and self-hate. We begin to learn how to listen to the stories of what is hurting within ourselves; we begin to learn to relate with compassion to what guards that which is hurting within us as well.

We honor not only the wound but the protection we have placed around the wound. We learn how to meet our own inner walls with compassion rather than trying to get rid of them once and for all. If we attempt to bulldoze our walls down (our walls being whatever keeps us from our pain), then our walls will only get bigger. They are designed to protect what is hurting. So if we attack the part of ourselves that doesn't feel, or force ourselves to be more open, it will never work. We'll just shut down more inside and retreat more inside.

The ideal is to relate to our walls not as the enemy but as a loyal servant who has devotedly protected the parts of us that were hurt so that these parts of us could survive. The ideal is to form a relationship with our wall so that we have a choice as to when it is up and when it is down.

For most of us there is no choice. Out of fear it is always up. But as we relate more lovingly and consciously to how we protect what is hurting within us, healing can begin to happen. The warmth and power of love is able to melt the wall of frozen feelings. We can begin to listen with real compassion to what is hurting on the other side of our wall.

If we apply restorative justice to our inner world, then all parts of who we are have value. All parts of who we are deserve to be met with respect, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness.

This need for self-forgiveness was brought home to me recently in a very powerful way. In one of my classes on inner healing, a group of us listened in tears as a man in the class told his story.

When Jim was six years old, he was hit by a drunk driver and dragged under the car. As a result, he had to undergo many painful operations for skin grafting until his early twenties. When Jim himself was 28 years old, and heavily into his own alcoholism, he hit a six-year-old boy while driving intoxicated. The boy had permanent brain damage as a result of the accident. That boy is now a paralyzed man of 28 years. Jim was in recovery and went often to visit the crippled man but he could never forgive himself for what he had done. During a guided imagery meditation on having compassion towards himself, he imaged himself when he was six years old. Unexpectedly another six year old showed up in the visualization. It was the six-year-old boy he had struck with a car when he was drunk. Both boys were totally accepting of one another. The other boy forgave him and the six-year-old boy inside of him was able to receive that forgiveness. His own inner six year old understood what it was like to have been harmed by another.

What a powerful story of inner and outer reconciliation. What a powerful example of reparation between victim and offender! These are stories of hope.

The good news is that God is alive and well inside of each of us. Restorative justice is possible because God is love and love transforms.

Applying restorative justice to our inner world is essential if we are to implement it in the world around us. We need to start with ourselves.

Only love can bring the inner and outer restoration that is so desperately needed in our world. Only love can heal. Fear and the need for protection will isolate. Love and the need for healing will set us free.

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