

Chapter 7: “Ain’t Gonna Study War No More”

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Restorative Justice and Prison Ministry

Bobby Oatway² was a horrific sex offender. Some 15 years ago, when released on parole, he was run out of a B.C. city before he’d even moved there, and landed in a halfway house in Toronto. He was eventually run out of there by local town councillors and “upstanding” Torontonians.

Every day outside his halfway house, those fine citizens, one leading with a megaphone, chanted, “Go away, Bobby Oatway! No one wants you, Bobby Oatway!” He spent, by choice, the rest of his sentence in a B.C. prison.

Upon his release, a small community of Christians spoke to the prison chaplain and said they would watch out for him if he moved to their interior B.C. town. He did. But about a month later, a newspaper article exposed his whereabouts.

Leaders called a town council meeting. The death threats to him in *absentia* were chilling. Afterwards, about 300 people walked to his motel (he was not there) and began chanting, “Die Bobby Oatway, die!”

Bobby slipped out of town the next morning.

A few days later, my wife, daughter, and I accompanied him to introduce him to a “Circle of Support and Accountability,” consisting of several men and women, who buffered his presence in a new B.C. community — arranged with the police to keep his location secret — and held him accountable to not reoffend.

My wife and I went back to that community many years later. Bobby and his wife had just moved and were holding an open house for all their neighbours. The juxtaposition was dramatic. He’d left three other Canadian communities, rejected and in fear, but was welcomed and welcoming in this new community. He still holds down a job, pays his taxes, and is a contributing member of society.

When violence and the threat of violence were removed, Oatway blossomed.³

Justifying Violence

There are many who would say that Bobby Oatway got what he deserved after he was released from prison. Indeed, very few voices have denounced violence by the state since the era of Constantine in the fourth century.

“The history of punishment is in some respects like the history of war, says Deirdre Golash⁴ in her book *The Case Against Punishment*.

It seems to accompany the human condition almost universally, to enjoy periods of

¹ See: <https://mbherald.com/>, accessed August 23, 2024.

² His name has been changed.

³ Esther and I once more since were his guests for a significant milestone birthday. He was *fêted* and praised for his skills and great neighbourliness. We still get together a few times a year. He has been a good friend.

⁴ See: <https://www.american.edu/spa/faculty/dgolash.cfm>, accessed August 23, 2024.

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glorification, to be commonly regarded as justified in many instances, and yet to run counter to our ultimate vision of what human society should be.⁵

She goes on to say that punishment of crimes is as old as written records of humanity, then adds:

Indeed, it appears likely that punishment in its earliest forms was not distinguishable from warfare.⁶

Most Christians in the West — often elsewhere — have supported violent solutions to crime and terror. According to an April 2003 Pew Charitable Trusts poll, 87 percent of white American evangelicals supported President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. One could find similar statistics about Christians in support of mass killing and violence repeated throughout the entire sweep of Western Christianity.⁷

Jesus' Example

But when we study Jesus' example, it runs entirely counter to any idea of violence. James, the likely half-brother of Jesus, reflecting the Sermon on the Mount, wrote,

But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. . . Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of justice.⁸

Jesus said simply,

Blessed are the peacemakers.⁹

Why do so few Christians accept Jesus' ethic of nonviolence?

One reason that the world finds the New Testament's message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless, writes New Testament theologian Richard Hays.

On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry.¹⁰

Restorative Justice Ministries

Advocates of Restorative Justice seek to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus. Their cry echoes the refrain of

⁵ Golash, *Case*, 6.

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⁷ An updated Report (2021) states:

According to a Pew Research Center survey from April 2021, a majority of adults in the United States support the use of the death penalty for individuals convicted of murder, but these views tend to vary by religion. Approximately two-thirds of atheists and six-in-ten agnostics are at least 'somewhat' opposed to the use of capital punishment for those convicted of murder, while 60% of U.S. adults favors the death penalty. For particular religious groups, this support is even higher: roughly 75% of white Evangelicals and Protestants favor capital punishment, as well as 61% of Hispanic Catholics. For Black Protestants, capital punishment is a divisive issue, with 50% supporting its use and 47% opposing its use. This division reflects the overall lower support for the death penalty among Black Americans, regardless of religiosity. (See: <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/religious-statements/opinion-polls-death-penalty-support-and-religion>, accessed August 23, 2024.)

⁸ James 2:18; 3:18. (Incidentally, the next series of my writings will bear the title: *Justice: The Harvest of Peace* — based on the second verse.)

⁹ Matthew 5:9.

¹⁰ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 343.

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a wonderful Negro spiritual:

*Ain't gonna study war no more!*¹¹

Restorative justice offers an alternative to war — including *war on crime*. Its goal is to see offenders like Bobby Oatway return peacefully to their communities and become productive citizens. It embraces, rather than excludes, the victim, offender, and impacted community. It's a peacemaking, rather than war-making, response to crime.

According to Henk Smidstra,¹² chaplain at the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women in B.C.:

. . . Restorative Justice can be regarded as a cluster of values, beliefs, and attitudes that determine how the viewer defines the situation and determines its solution. . . Call it the lens of the heart and mind that can see conflict as either bad, or as an opportunity to grow and heal; as an event that breaks the law, or as an event that has harmed people.

[Restorative justice] puts emphasis on restoration, and on healing the harm of all those affected by conflict or crime. In fact, offenders and victims all become collaborators in looking for solutions that will creatively address the obligations created by the hurtful incident. . .

*Restorative justice focuses on relationships, not on controlling or punishing others, but empowering others to flourish and be active participants in restoring and maintaining community well-being.*¹³

Many Christian ministries, such as M2/W2 Association — Restorative Christian Ministries, work as advocates of Restorative justice.¹⁴ Founded in 1966, the vision of M2/W2 is

. . . to recruit and empower people to reflect God's restorative and inclusive love within the criminal justice system and wider society, to foster healthier communities.

¹¹ See: <https://youtu.be/lt8zkoYJIDo>, accessed August 23, 2024.

¹² Henk for years had been a dear friend, who often contributed to writing projects I was doing. My friend Ron Dart (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Dart, accessed August 23, 2024), who, together with me, walked with him during his battle with cancer, and I were able to round up and publish a collection of his (unedited — no time for that) writings found on *Clarion Journal* (<https://www.clarion-journal.com/>, accessed August 23, 2024). I think they are no longer there. The book was titled (Ron's idea): *Huguenot Gadfly*, with a nod to that heritage. He would have been honoured for the reader of this book to read his as well. There are some fine reflections along the lines of my series. See: https://www.amazon.ca/Huguenot-Gadfly-Henk-Smidstra/dp/1549537237/ref=sr_1_1?crd=TX8R945RL19L&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.bKhqu3ntyL_eLaPT0PBOTTkPrVemdhpbceX69YWMv4qUZGqkUBXZftWZkYNzJvk2.zG_ZvSDoaEWbPJj1U8v0i4rmZ8HA8Qfs9qqqIFP4iHc&dib_tag=se&keywords=huguenot+gadfly&qid=1723093818&sprefix=huguenot+gadfly%2Caps%2C140&sr=8-1, accessed August 23, 2024. The photo was taken in his last months.

He died of a brain tumor just a short time after having seen copies of the book in the Hospice where he spent his last days. His wife said that was the only thing Henk had published, and it helped give him release into his death. . . He is sorely missed. I wrote in my “Reflections” about Henk:

Henk you are one of the gentlest persons I know. When I saw you dealing with difficult times, you were invariably calm, caring, patient. . .

It has been neat that we share the same birthday; that our journeys but for five years have covered the same span of years. It is also heartening that we ended up sharing similar perspectives about faith, politics, life. In that way, there was a unique bond amongst only a few of us — in my experience — and I believe in yours. I trust that your strong faith, your gentleness, and your hope will continue to sustain you, and know they will be ongoing inspiration for me on the journey ahead. With deep gratitude.

See also: In Memoriam: Rev. Henry “Henk” Smidstra (1943-2017):

<https://www.thebanner.org/news/2018/06/in-memoriam-rev-henry-henk-smidstra-1943-2017>, accessed August 23, 2024.

¹³ I've lost the source.

¹⁴ That vision was developed by me during my 16-year ED work (until retirement in 2014.) Then it was, sadly, tossed.

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Peacemaking. "Jerry" was abandoned by his parents after a bitter divorce. He went to live with his grandmother with whom he really bonded. She suddenly dropped out of his life when she returned to her home country to remarry.

Jerry went from foster home to foster home, deeply wounded. He became an expert in martial arts and trained police professionally. He also meticulously planned and carried out rapes against women, acting out of deep rage toward them.

After his life sentence, two of his victims arranged to meet him face-to-face through an agency that operates a "Victim Offender Mediation Program" (VOMP) for serious and violent crime in Canada's federal Corrections system.

Both women, after their separate meetings with Jerry, stated at a press conference they organized, that they had been enormously freed towards putting the rapes behind them. Jerry remained in the program and felt he had been significantly changed through his victims' generosity towards him. He remains crime-free many years later.

The essence of peacemaking, according to VOMP, is a "therapeutic dialogue" however arranged, including face-to-face encounter when appropriate, safe, and properly mediated. This enables and helps facilitate, though never guarantees, reconciliation.

Embrace. Because of sex offences against minors, "John" has a lifelong ban on being in a place where children are, under 18 years. His sex crimes are horrible. He's the ultimate pariah — a social outcast.

John is also a human being with enormous artistic talents, mechanical, and all kinds of handiwork skills. And he's a very hard worker. His CoSA¹⁵ Circle of five volunteers just celebrated with him two years of crime-free life outside prison. He's a vivid storyteller, full of exuberance about life, and totally committed to CoSA's mission: *no more victims!*¹⁶

Conclusion

The essence of embrace in response to crime is holding the offender accountable to never reoffend, and to affirm the offender in a life path of no more victims. It also means commitment to community and having fun along the way.

M2/W2 Association — Restorative Christian Ministries is committed to peacemaking. This means embracing the criminal enemy, while simultaneously holding out for healing of victims and the community (and the perpetrator!) impacted by the crime. It's a tall order. But we can attempt no less as we continue to follow Jesus' example!

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¹⁵ See much more about CoSA here: <https://waynenorthey.com/2022/03/22/circles-of-support-and-accountability-2/>, accessed August 23, 2024.

¹⁶ We still (2024) remain in touch often, and he has led an entirely crime-free, fulfilling life, ever since his release. In our early years of CoSA in this province, he often shared about his life.

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