

Restorative Justice: It's All About Connections by Ted Lewis

"I don't feel so separate anymore." This line, spoken by a teenage boy, captured the essence of a restorative justice process. It came at the very end of a meeting which included several members of a rural church where the boy had vandalized church property. As the facilitator, I routinely asked every participant to share a final reflection on how the meeting went for them.

By saying he didn't feel "separate anymore," the boy revealed two things: his prior sense of disconnection in the community, and his new sense of greater connection to others. While restorative justice certainly promotes practical reparations for all harms and losses, it goes deeper by promoting stronger relational connections between people.

Connectivity is so important in a justice process not only because it serves to resolve a particular incident, but also serves to prevent future harms. When victims and offenders empathetically connect with each other on a human level, offenders tend to not reoffend. Face-to-face encounters put "a face on crime" in a way that makes it harder for offenders to make disrespectful choices in the future.

Since 1996, my work as a restorative practitioner and trainer has given me many opportunities to witness the power of heart-to-heart connections. Over the years, I have seen how restorative practices can be applied more widely beyond the criminal realm. One extended area of work for me includes reconciliation services for church communities, along with workshops for building healthier congregations.

No matter what the context is, whether violent crime or a workplace dispute, every harm or conflict diminishes the quality of relationships. Yes, a law or rule may have been broken. But something deeper is broken between people. At root is the loss of trust. Without trust, people naturally put up their shields. And when shields are up, communication suffers and sometimes even compounds the problem.

Restorative facilitators, therefore, are tuned into the dynamics of mistrust and rebuilt trust. Without sufficient trust, harming and harmed people will not take the measured risk to move toward joint conversation. Why should they? No one wants to be harmed again, especially after feeling disempowered by an incident or pattern of harm. The art of facilitation, then, is to hold space in which hard but healing conversation can happen where people can reconnect with each other.

I once facilitated a case where two young men burnt down a church, though not intentionally. Their intention was to steal metals that could be re-sold for drug-money. But having lit candles to see their way around, they neglected to extinguish all the flames. As you can imagine, the 'debit of trust' was huge on the part of church members who arrived one morning, only to see their beloved building in ashes.

It took over a year before the church party was ready to meet with the offenders. The offenders also needed to journey through a preparation stage to deepen their capacity for ownership and empathy. When the entire group finally met, you could cut the tension with a scissors. Trust, of course, is slowly earned.

After initial sharing and listening, the victimized members were still wanting better answers. Finally, when pressed, one offender explained how his return from an Iraqi military tour led him into drugs and stealing. The other young man explained how in high school everyone picked on him for being an ethnic minority, and he eventually vented his anger on the community by destroying property.

Hard as it was to hear, this truth-telling built up a 'credit of trust'. It also helped the church folk to make sense out of a senseless situation. One church-goer shared how his nephew committed suicide after Iraq. Walls were being replaced with bridges.

Finally someone said, "Every Sunday we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. We need to walk the talk, and therefore we are ready to forgive you for what you did." The offenders were taken aback. A shift took place. As the mood relaxed, a connection of common humanity helped both sides to release all the pain and shame. Practical reparations were discussed, but the real healing came from the verbal gift exchange which restored trust.

One reason I have stayed with my vocation in restorative justice is due to the way it complements a biblical perspective on justice and peacemaking. A word study on justice and righteousness, in both Hebrew and Greek, shows how they jointly point to the *righting of relationships* for the sake of bringing peace. And as we see in James 3:18, there is integrity between the means and the end: "The fruit of justice is sown in peace by those who make peace."

With this foundational view of justice that is not legally punitive but rather relationally restorative, one can see additional touchpoints between biblical themes and restorative practices. These include:

- Transformation of bad situations into good
- Storytelling as medium for revelation

- God's invitational, non-coercive style
- Dignity of sinner while denouncing sin
- Special concern for victims of harm
- Communal expectation for reparations
- Cognitive dimension of heart-based change
- Atonement as relational unity (at-one-ment)
- Eschatological 'lean' from past to future

Over the years I have enjoyed writing down case narratives with positive outcomes. Many illustrate how new life comes out of the vulnerability that harming and harmed parties embrace. More recently, I have heard echoes of these stories in biblical narratives: Hagar and God, Abigail and David, Zacheaus and Jesus, Philemon and Onesimus. The Joseph story, moving from rivalry to reconciliation, tops them all.

When the brothers came to Egypt, Joseph basically 'facilitates' a restorative process to heal the family wound. By pulling Benjamin away from Jacob, he cleverly makes the brothers re-live the buried pain they caused toward him so they might wake up to their own responsibility. Every victim needs to know that an offender 'gets it' to the extent that they will never repeat the harm again.

Judah exemplifies this maturing consciousness by accepting full responsibility with all consequences. This conveys the remorse Joseph needs to experience directly, and after much dialogue and drama, Joseph discloses his identity and the family is freed up to heal and reconcile. Sometimes you have to revisit the past in order to put the past to rest.

We return again to connectivity. Denial about family abuse led to cognitive dissonance which led to relational disconnection. The first need was for the brothers to connect their actions with the impacts on the family. This gave them the response-ability to open up their hearts. This in turn allowed Joseph to soften and forgive. Through it all, God transformed a bad situation into greater good.

In closing, I wish to give thanks for the rich connections I've experienced through restorative justice. Mennonite connections first gifted me with my vocation. Victims and offenders have gifted me with their courage of being open and honest. Training experiences have gifted me with growing more deeply in the field. And now I am gifted by reading a Restorative Bible that never fails to inspire me to locate my own personal story of wounding and woundedness in the midst of God's meta-story of restoration.

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