

Using Restorative Practices for Community Building

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the land and waters and animals of this place. And to remember those who have walked before us on this land. We are in relationship to all that is around us both past and present.

I would also like to give you some sense of my lens – the assumptions I make in my reflections. I understand restorative justice in a broad sense as a healing response to harm or pain. I hold a core belief that community, that is, connection with others, is essential to our survival as a species and, therefore, an inclination to be in good relationship with others is embedded in our genes. I am influenced by Mary Clark's assertion that meaning and belonging are the most fundamental human needs. Through that lens I see crime as an opportunity to build community.

Why are we talking about 'community building' in relation to crime? What does our response to crime have to do with community building?

There is a cycle associated with crime that destroys community. And our response to crime often contributes to that cycle of destruction of community. The cycle is as follows: crime leads to fear in the community broadly, not just those who are victimized; fear leads to isolation, community members pulling away from one another (not just the victim or offender but all members of the community e.g. more locks, not speaking to strangers, building walls, etc.); isolation creates disconnection and weakened community ties; disconnection and weak community ties are conditions that result in more crime continuing the cycle of fear and isolation. So generalized fear, our natural response to crime in our community, often results in behavior by us that makes crime more likely.

The response of the justice system frequently makes it even worse. Victims feel disconnected from their fellow human beings because the victimization is a betrayal of human trust. In addition, in the justice process they feel not supported and sometimes blamed. Their voice and their wishes are not heard in the justice process and they feel isolated and disconnected. So the justice system inadvertently adds to their feelings of disconnection. The offender by his actions has disconnected himself from the

community and then the justice system adds to that disconnection through shame and by sometimes removing him from the community. So the justice system response increases the conditions of disconnection and isolation that make crime more likely.

The community fabric is the interweaving of all the relationships in the community. Each time a crime happens one or more relationships in the community is broken – leaving the community weaker. The response of the justice system often breaks more relationships – making the community even weaker.

The place with the greatest opportunity for interrupting this cycle is the criminal justice response. Since the justice system response is an intentional response after a crime happens we can choose to use that response to strengthen community rather than weaken community. The removal of a member of the community does not make the community stronger – just as the removal of a broken thread in a fabric does not make the fabric stronger. The fabric may look neater, but it is in fact even weaker than it was with the broken thread present. The way to strengthen a fabric with a broken thread is to re-tie that thread just as the way to strengthen the community with broken relationships is to rebuild those relationships.

The ultimate measure of any intervention by the justice system could be: Does the intervention leave the community stronger than it was before the crime happened? Does the intervention tie up some broken threads?

There are numerous ways to evaluate whether an intervention leaves the community stronger than it was before the crime happened. How do we measure community building? Here are a few examples:

- Did the intervention create new healthy relationships or strengthen existing positive relationships?
- Did the intervention increase empathy and the ability to understand the impact of one's behavior on others?
- Did the intervention increase the skills for conflict resolution or problem solving by ordinary citizens?
- Did the intervention increase commitment to the common good of the community?
- Did the intervention increase the capacity to envision and work toward a positive future for

individuals and the community?

- Did the intervention increase the community capacity to create respectful and reflective spaces for community dialog?

Those are the dimensions of a stronger community. It may seem a daunting task to create interventions that produce a YES to those questions, but indeed it is possible. The philosophy and practices of restorative justice achieve those things described above. Restorative practices can create new healthy relationships and strengthen existing relationships. Restorative practices can increase empathy. Restorative practices can increase conflict resolution and problem solving skills. Restorative practices can increase the commitment to the common good. Restorative practices can increase the capacity to envision and work toward a positive future. Restorative practices can increase the community capacity to create respectful and reflective spaces for community dialog. Restorative practices provide ways to respond to crime that leave the community stronger than it was before the crime happened.

Complex relationship between community and crime

The community has a complex relationship with crime. The community is a victim – every crime harms the community fabric. And the community is a responsible party – the community is responsible for the well being of all of its members and most crime has elements of community failure in its causes. So the community needs to express its pain and fear as a victim. Amends need to be made to the community for the harm to the community. At the same time the community must understand its role in the commission of the crime and take responsibility for community conditions that contributed to that crime happening. The community must seek reconciliation with all of its members. The victim may choose to not reconcile with the offender, but the community cannot choose to not reconcile with the offender. The community must work to re-establish a healthy relationship with those who cause harm. If a community does not reconcile with the offender it is creating the conditions where that offender is likely to create another victim. Even when a victim does not want a face-to-face process with the offender, the community may need to do a face-to-face process to re-establish a healthy relationship between the community and the offender.

Community responsibilities in responding to crime

As both a victim and a responsible party the community has several responsibilities in the response to crime. The community must:

- Rally around the victim - support the victim, hear the victim's story, acknowledge that what happened to the victim was not right
- Express to the offender the hurt caused to the community in a respectful way
- Participate in a process to determine what steps need to be taken to repair the harm of the crime to both the victim and the broader community
- Support the wrong-doer in making repairs
- Provide opportunities for the wrong-doer to make changes toward a better life style, e.g. education, treatment, counseling, jobs
- Establish and maintain effective community norms that support non-domination, inclusivity and respect
- Notice and address patterns of community conditions that contribute to crime happening

Relationship in group as fundamental to healthy community

Healthy relationships are the fabric of community. That fabric is the weaving of connections – it is not just pairs of people in relationship. It is the weaving of those pair relationships with other pair relationships in a web. As humans we need not just interpersonal relationships – we also need group relationships. We need to belong to a group. Restorative practices, especially circles, teach us and help us practice how to be in healthy group relationship, balancing individual and group needs. Restorative practices help us practice emotional literacy which is essential for healthy relationships.

Healthy community requires many skills related to taking care of the self while also attending to group needs. I am most familiar with circles so I will talk about how circle, as a restorative practice, helps build those skills.

In circle we are practicing:

- self regulation without oppression, without being silenced
- self awareness – awareness of our own emotions, desires and fears

- empathy – understanding how something looks or feels to someone else – something different from what it is to us
- awareness of the impact of our behavior on other individuals and on the group
- self expression – speaking for ourselves – not relying on someone else to speak or act for us
- respect for others across differences
- nondomination

These are critical skills for healthy community. These skills are practiced over and over and over in restorative practices.

Change in relationship between professional systems and the community

The work of relationship development and community building necessary for community health CANNOT BE DELEGATED, CANNOT BE OUTSOURCED. Professional services cannot build community. Radical change in the community/professional relationships is required for our justice interventions to be effective in building community. Restorative practices help us move in that direction.

Professional systems have an important role to play. There are at least two important dimensions to that role 1. Professional systems have an oversight responsibility to make sure that community processes adhere to larger social values such as non-domination, inclusivity, respect. 2. Professional systems have a responsibility to facilitate opportunities for community members to build relationships. That might include training in community building strategies and techniques, convening community members for sharing stories and information and providing technical information and support. The role of the professional in this new relationship with the community is:

NOT decision making on behalf of the community

NOR primary implementer on behalf of the community

NOR providing answers to the community

The new role of professionals is to ask the questions that support exploration, curiosity and creativity toward new forms and solutions discovered by those closest to the concern or harm or difficulty.

Restorative practices nurture an attitude of curiosity and creativity. All restorative practices depend upon strong questioning techniques – using genuine questions – questions to which the questioner does not know the answer in order to discover new possibilities. (If you already know the answer it is not a question.)

Restorative processes give us practice in these new roles. In the restorative processes the professionals do not make the decisions and they do not provide the answers to the group struggling with the questions of making things right. The participants who were most affected make the decisions about how to make things right, about what the obligations are for the offender and for others in the process.

Everyone is needed.

Community building is a journey we all take together – guided by our values – open to discovery – non-linear – emergent – responsive to what is coming up.

All of this can occur in the context of any events that draw our attention to harm. It is not just about the justice system and the harm we happen to call 'crime'. This applies to all kinds of harm, large and small, past and present.

There is a deeper level of community building that is possible out of a restorative justice framework. A major impediment to healthy community across the US is the legacy of racism and historical harms. Distrust and fear across race and culture make enduring relationships difficult. Community is easily fragmented along these lines when challenges or competing needs arise. Restorative justice is inspirational and instructive around how we can begin healing from historical wrongs. We are not helplessly trapped by our history as victims or wrong-doers. That is a big lesson of restorative justice – we are not trapped in these roles. Transformation is possible.

We know from the work in restorative justice that victims need to have their story heard and their pain acknowledged; they need validation that what happened was wrong; they need either literal or symbolic amends. All of those steps are possible today, even for harms that happened tens or hundreds of years ago. The stories can still be told by descendants of those hurt and listened to by descendants of those

who caused harm. And the community at large can acknowledge the harm and validate that it was wrong. From this perspective it is possible to begin thinking about how we heal the deep wounds of past harms.

Community building, learning to know and trust one another, is very hard work – healing is very hard work - but we are not alone. We have collective wisdom to guide us. It turns out that ordinary collective wisdom in a reflective, inclusive space is very reliable. It can help us through any difficulty. We all have it in us to be part of the collective wisdom. Opening up the wise space within each of us takes courage and patience. I wish each and every one both courage and patience on this journey of learning to be human with one another.

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