

The call of restorative justice - tapping & sustaining the moral energy

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I.

“I died on November 4, 1995.” On that day, at 4:40 in the afternoon, Jackie Millar was shot in the head at close range with an exploding bullet. Two boys broke into the friend’s house where she was resting while waiting for him to return from working on his tree farm. They took her car keys, then debated which of their guns they would use to shoot her.

“I died,” she told me with quiet conviction, “and then I got resurrected. The Lord told me, ‘maybe you can stop one youth if you tell your story....’” Today she is legally blind, her right hand is paralyzed, and she walks with difficulty and talks slowly. But Jackie visits prisons, talking with young men like those who shot her - including in fact those who did shoot her, doing “hug therapy.”

She insists that Craig, the one who pulled the trigger, is like one of her sons (she also has two biological sons). A long-time prisoner recounts how she transformed his life when she told him, “You are a human being, and don’t let anyone else tell you differently,” then gave him a hug.

Most of us don’t experience the “call of service” - the call to do justice, to build peace - this dramatically. Many of us may in fact be uncomfortable with the term “service,” but my sense is that each one of you who is involved in restorative justice has experienced a call or a pull in some way. Only such a call can explain the time and devotion you are giving to work for which there is so little financial remuneration.

Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker described it this way: “There is a call to us, a call to service - that we join with others to try to make things better in this world.” Even though our motivation may not be religious that is, I think, what motivates much of restorative justice.

I’ve taken the phrase “the call of service” from the title of a book by Dr. Robert Coles of the Harvard University Medical School. Cole has tried throughout his life, using the method he calls “attentive listening,” to

understand the “moral energy” that activates his heroes. He notes that the call to service is “a call to a new chapter in life:” that’s how Jackie sees her life, and perhaps that is how many of you see this work: as a kind of call, an invigorating mission.

At least that’s what I pick up in so many of my interactions such as these in the past year:

- On a speaking tour in Brazil, where I met with judges and community volunteers who were highly energized by restorative justice.
- Similarly, at gatherings of RJ practitioners in New Zealand, Denmark and Norway
- In inner city Oakland where RJOY (Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth) is having a profound impact on schools and the surrounding community.
- In Medford, Oregon, where community members and leaders joined for a day to explore the implications of restorative justice for their communities.
- Through the “Koru project” at my own program – the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. In June we brought together 25 of our graduates from around the world who are implementing restorative justice to hear what they were learning and what motivates them to do this work.

We’ve been talking about RJ as a field of practice, but I want to end by talking about you, about us – for if we can’t hang in there, none of this will happen.

II.

Coles subtitles his book, “A witness to idealism,” but he isn’t naïve. Idealism too often becomes weariness, which in turn becomes cynicism, which can lead to self-righteousness or despair, and that road ends in depression and burnout.

“Burnout,” he quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, “is a surrender.... We have just so much strength in us. If we give and give and give, we have less and less and less – and after awhile, at a certain point, we’re so weak and worn, we hoist up the flag of surrender. We surrender to the worst side of ourselves, and then we display that to others. We

surrender to self-pity and to spite and to morose self-preoccupation. If you want to call it depression or burnout, well all right. If you want to call it the triumph of sin...well all right. Whatever we say or think, this is arduous duty, doing this kind of work; to live out one's idealism brings with it hazards."

Shrillness, moodiness, humorlessness, a tendency to take oneself too seriously - these are among the signs of an idealism in serious trouble.

Those of you who were here last year may remember that I quoted from American environmental advocate Edward Abbey some advice to help us ward off this deterioration of idealism: be a half-hearted fanatic. It's an image that means much to me. Here's the longer quote:

"Do not burn yourselves out. Be a reluctant enthusiast .. A part time crusader, a half hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. So get out there and ... breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely mysterious and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive and I promise you this much; I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk bound men and women with their hearts in safe deposit boxes, and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this; You will outlive the bastards!"

I'm not sure it is helpful to see things in such an adversarial framework...but we do need to take care of ourselves, and the organizations with which we work need to encourage us in that direction. To take time to experience and enjoy life. To remember that the world will go on without us, and we aren't responsible for fixing everything. To take time to just "be" as well as do.

So my first point is that for many of us, RJ is a kind of calling. Second, a sense of call or mission isn't enough to sustain us – we need to take care of ourselves and each other – to “have a life.” And that leads me to a third point:

III.

We'll be less lonely, and more successful, if RJ can become a true social movement – but let's not get impatient.

I am drawing here from a talk by Lawrence Sherman at the international RJ conference in Winchester, U.K year or so ago, and from a follow-up analysis by Soula Pefkaros, one of my graduate students.

Sherman asks, “Why, given the ample evidence that RJ is effective, hasn’t RJ taken off yet?” He goes on to argue that it hasn’t reached the “tipping point” and that is because it hasn’t become a real social movement yet. The key is becoming a “mass social network.” He makes some interesting analogies with the American “revolution” and the anti-slavery movement in Britain.

Whether RJ has “taken off” depends on your perspective. In many ways it has (certainly given my expectations in the 1980s), but not in the sense of becoming a dominant perspective. It is a kind of movement, and has come a long way in 30 years, it but not a full social movement in the sense, for example, of the civil rights movement in the US.

Soula Pefkaros isn’t sure the anti-slavery analogy is all that helpful. RJ isn’t as easy to condense into a specific, focused demand – to convey in a simple slogan. And although slavery was embedded in an industry, it may not have been as deep and prosperous as the current corrections-industrial complex. She’s worried about changing policies without a larger cultural change to make sure it is rightly-focused and sustained. (Thus risks of co-optation are high).

She goes on to argue for developing a social movement, but one that shares a bias of mine: a “home-grown” movement, (“produced in one’s own garden – local, native, indigenous”) – ie. from the community up, engaging people at the grassroots level. (or the “flax-roots level”). This connects with our theme: engaging the community. She points to the role of the Highlander Center in the civil rights movement – a popular education model. So she’s not sure we should actually be pushing RJ to the tipping point yet – we have a lot of work to do in our gardens first.

In many ways, that is what we are doing, and need to be doing. We do need to build a social movement; we do need to strengthen our social networks. We need that for the movement to grow, we need that to sustain ourselves and to engage the community – not only in the practice of specific cases, but

in the dialog overall. But maybe it is okay that we aren't at the tipping point yet.

IV.

We'll be sustained long-term if we can be clear about what we advocate, and take our work home with us – if RJ can be a clear moral compass (but not a blueprint or map)

I summarized a short version of the principles and values of RJ earlier; let me do this briefly again.

3 basics of restorative justice. A just response calls us to

- acknowledge and repair harm
- accept responsibilities
- engage all in addressing the needs of all

3 underlying values provide the foundation:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Relationship

3 aspirations -- the desire to live in right relationship:

- with one another;
- with the creation;
- with the Creator.

Increasingly, for me: RJ is not just about crime, or addressing wrong: it's a way of approaching life, and life together. It's about taking our work home with us. It's why I'm energized by testimonies about how people have found ways to apply RJ in their daily lives.

V.

So: Let's be clear about what RJ is, find ways to apply it to our lives beyond our work, retain our idealism – but let's be half-hearted fanatics in another sense: don't let our idealism and enthusiasm blind us to our shortcomings and challenges.

All social interventions have unintended consequences. All good things will be misused. All approaches have built-in and hidden biases and implications. Our duty: be aware and mindful of them. This is often hard for

idealists...but essential. So remember: our critics are often doing us a service. Let's balance idealism and realism; let's be realistic idealists. Let's be as accountable to our principles as we ask our "clients" to be.

Maybe the idea of RJ as a way of life is too lofty or too cheesy for you - maybe it doesn't connect to call it a way of life - but RJ is nevertheless at best a value-oriented and principle driven way of approaching life's situations. I raise two challenges:

- i. Can we be consistent in our application of restorative values, even when we hit a roadblock in our practice? Catherine Barga points out that too often, "RJ values are worth committing to, until the practitioner ... hits significant roadblocks." Too often, then, we fall back on punishment, fear, domination to deal with those who are difficult. Can we be consistent and creative enough to find restorative approaches, even in difficult situations?
- ii. Will we "take our work home with us," practicing what we preach - in our homes, the workplace, our relationships generally? Can we be compassionate with ourselves and others when we fail to do so?

If we can do these things, even imperfectly, then perhaps restorative justice can, as Barga hopes, be part of a larger cultural change that will create a healthier, safer society - not only for ourselves but for future generations.

RJ is like a river with multiple sources and tributaries.... flowing into a delta where it spreads out in all directions, feeding a much larger ocean. Perhaps the restorative river will help feed an ocean of healthy relationships.

To summarize my argument so far:

- *Restorative justice, for many of us, is a calling*
- *But idealism isn't enough - we need to take care of ourselves & each other in order to avoid burnout*
- *We'll be less lonely & more successful if RJ can become a true social movement- which calls for engaging the community*
- *And we'll be sustained long-term if RJ is our moral compass*
- *But let's not let our enthusiasm blind us to our shortcomings.*

VI.

My final point is this: I suggest that is to view justice work with the eyes of an artist.

And this allows me to quote another book I picked it up in a used bookstore. Steven Meyers, in *On Seeing Nature*, is talking about the art of seeing, but it applies equally to the art of doing justice.

Meyers reminds us that us that "...one's knowledge must never overcome one's awe." "As long as there is awe, there is seeing," he says, and then continues:

"Seeing is a process, partly, of replacing our arrogance with humility. When we respect the reality which fills the abyss of our ignorance, we begin to see."

Let me read that again, rephrasing it: Doing justice is a process, partly, of replacing our arrogance with humility. When we respect the reality which fills the abyss of our ignorance, [only then do] we begin to work toward peace & justice.

"Seeing begins with respect," he says, "but wonder is the fuel which sustains vision."

Meyers goes on to outline some key "components of aesthetic vision" that, he says, help to keep this all-important wonder alive: These might as well have been written for the justice worker. They include:

- choosing specific problems to work on (ie limiting the possibilities, not trying to do everything)
- finding pleasure in the process as well as the product/outcome
- drawing upon metaphor (very important in justice)
- relaxing conscious effort and letting the unconscious have its place (including importance of intuition)
- accepting accidental and unexpected experiences. (This is certainly true of RJ in my experience!)

Finally, Meyers talks about mystery and ambiguity: "...the presence of ambiguity allows visual representations of nature to create a broader range

of responses in a viewer than a careful and obvious articulation of details might.”

Ambiguity and mystery are crucial for restorative justice as they are for the artist.

Mystery and ambiguity (along with respect) allow space for the unexpected and for differing visions and perceptions to be expressed.

In a class years ago, spiritual director Pat Koehler said something that I’ve never forgotten:

“Growth depends on openness to mystery. We are called to openness, and sin is closing ourselves from mystery.

Humility, respect, awe, wonder, - these are key words for the justice artist. If we stay rooted in them, we will ward off the wolves of despair, we will be able to heed the call to service. Basic to all, perhaps, is an appreciation of the profound mystery of the human spirit.

Chet Raymo, in *Honey from Stone: A Naturalist’s Search for God*, comes to the same conclusion. “Description is revelation,” he says. “Seeing is praise.” “And knowledge is an island surrounded by a sea of mystery.”

My challenge in this work - and perhaps its yours - is not to build dikes so that we can reclaim land and enlarge the island of knowledge.

My challenge - and perhaps it is yours - is to learn how to float - and to float comfortably - in a vast sea of mystery: a sea of mystery that can only be approached in an attitude of awe and respect.