

What the World Needs Now....Restorative Justice

Tom Williams

In the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., our African American community in this country has been rising and taking to the streets to cash a check. They have suffered unspeakable harms and marginalization at the hands of a nation that had provided every American a promissory note of equal access and protection under the law. This urgent demand for justice we hear from our streets today should not be met by city leaders with confrontation and stagnation, but with an eye toward restorative justice, which we have examples of in our community's recent past—and during these protests.

While Dr. King saw that the arc of the moral universe is long, I believe it bends toward, and culminates with, a restorative justice. While in college, I had one professor who summarized the progress of this moral universe in a simple three-step process.

First, before Moses, he said, if a member of my tribe injured a member of your tribe, it would be appropriate for your tribe to destroy my tribe. The scales of justice would not be balanced, the scales would tip toward revenge.

Second, with Mosaic law came the notion of proportionality—an eye for an eye. Here, the scales of justice would balance. If you hurt me, I would hurt you back in equal proportion.

Third, with Jesus and other spiritual teachers, came the concept of loving one's enemies and transforming the

pain of injustice so it was not transmitted. This love was a form of protest that invited the one who did harm into a new way of relating.

With this third step, the scales of justice would balance because the injustice would be absorbed and transformed—reaching beyond my tribe to people we might call the “other.” This love, however, would not address the systems that made the harm more likely. It would dramatize the wrong but would not change the system that may have increased its likelihood.

If step one was overwhelming revenge, and step two was proportionality, and step three was loving the enemy, what is step four I thought? I asked myself this question for years until I came upon restorative justice.

In my view, restorative justice is a systemic way of tipping the scales to a generative love that holds everyone involved accountable. In fact, under restorative justice, the binary image of the scales of justice is replaced with a trinitarian image of a third way. This trinity is a better image because wrongdoing impacts not only the one who was harmed and the one who caused harm, but also the community as a whole.

As we have seen, true justice is relational and involves the entire community. Restorative justice, however, is nothing new. It is an ancient, indigenous form of justice quietly being used in our Commonwealth as we speak creating effective and gener-

ative outcomes with our youth. It is, in my view, a systemic way to create generative love.

The principles of restorative justice have even taken to our streets. I have now witnessed what might be called “pop-up” restorative justice twice in Louisville.

The first example involved hate speech. A few years ago, the Islamic Cultural Center of Louisville on River Road was vandalized with hateful graffiti. The leaders of the mosque called for a community cleanup and for accountability and forgiveness for the one who caused the harm. This call for community-based justice was a call for restorative justice.

In answer to that call, more than a thousand people appeared for the community cleanup of the Mosque. Painting stations were created near the graffiti to let everyone there participate in the cleanup. New relationships were formed, waves of love and support poured forth. It was a generative day where the one who caused harm was utterly defeated. If the purpose of the one who caused harm was to divide the community, he did the opposite. He brought the community together and he strengthened its resolve because the community chose to use his ignorance as a catalyst for greater good—not as a basis for simple revenge or binary justice.

The second “pop up” example of restorative justice principles in action was at an early day of the Louisville protest.

You may have seen the image: a police officer was alone in the crowd and fearful for his safety. Five strangers came together and created a human shield around him. In the words of one of the protectors, they wanted to hold their fellow protestors accountable to non-violence. This officer wore the same uniform as those who had caused harm, but the protectors looked beyond the uniform to the man who was someone's son and a fellow human being. The essence of restorative justice is to not objectify the soul in front of you, but to look for ways to welcome him into your circle.

Perfectly modeling what they wanted from the police as a whole, the protecting protestors welcomed this officer into their newly formed circle of protection. This circle they created within the protest came from a deep, courageous and ultimately generative love. The circle they created probably changed the life of the officer who, to some, may not be deserving of protection simply because of the uniform he wore. This circle was an object lesson for the police saying, in essence, "Do unto others as we have done unto you." This circle said to the police when a fellow officer has his knee on someone's neck, break ranks and protect the human under that knee.

It has been said, if we practice an eye for an eye, we will all go blind. With an eye for the human behind skin color, or the human responsible for the hateful graffiti or the human underneath the police uniform, we will all begin to see.

Restorative justice dictates that those who create harm have an obligation to set things straight. The police,

as an institution, must set things straight in this community and the country. The systems that make the police blind to the people they serve must be held accountable. The individual officers who cause harm must be held accountable. But we must never forget the human underneath the uniform and we must welcome them into our circle—like the protestors did in Louisville.

Restorative justice looks for a way to re-integrate the one who caused harm back into community — with accountability. Everyone belongs. In my opinion, it is this kind of belonging that the world needs now.

A few blocks from the protestor incident on Second and Main this week, the mystic, Thomas Merton, had a vision of the people of our community walking around shining like the sun. Merton saw that these people were not alien to one another. That no one was a stranger. That the spark of the divine was within each of us. None of that has changed.

We simply need a justice that provides us with a new lens so we can learn to see again anew: to see beneath the things that divide us to a deeper well of courageous love so ably demonstrated at the Mosque and by the protestors. Any other form of justice will not create the healing our world so desperately needs.

If you want to learn more about the restorative justice in Kentucky, reach out to Volunteers of America at (502) 585-9920 or www.voamid.org.

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