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From Restoring Justice Susan Conrad Quest for Meaning may 2012

"Instead of reconciliation and rehabilitation, we as a nation have chosen to inflict increasing levels of suffering." This statement catches the essence of the Prison Injustice system. Our prison system is not a separate social structure from the larger Society in the United States. This system of rules and practices expresses commonly held beliefs about human nature and the role of all of us in creating a just community. The prison system reveals to us just what our hearts hold as our deepest fears. Our hearts are filled with suffering and we impose that on those who are in our care.

To use a title from a popular prison rehabilitation program, what could be "houses of healing" encouraging both the reconciliation and the rehabilitation of the prisoner, in its place we substitute punishment and retribution. We as a society choose to inflict violence instead of compassion.

Our choice of violence and punishment is not a necessary response to the violence of the inmate. The violence of the system reveals what it is our (society's) hearts not their's. We believe that prisoners are incapable of responding to any other stimuli then the stick.

Within this context of structural violence, human beings live and work. Staff and inmates interact in ways outside the organization culture of violence and punishment. Because humans have a range of capabilities that include all the possible emotions and actions a person can express, humans push the boundaries of the system to humanize it.

Conrad gives an example of one such organization Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation. This organization creates space for both family members of victims and prisoners who have harmed people to hear each others pain and loss (not the exact same pairs of offenders and victims). The process of listening is healing and liberating for both the victims families and the inmates. Unfortunately these times of restorative justice interactions come in the margins of our criminal justice system. Brought in from outside the organizational structure and not from within criminal justice system.

Our criminal justice system is a retributive justice system which asks: "How do we punish the offender?" Restorative Justice asks "How do we repair the damage of this offending?"

Native tribes have a long history of this type of justice (1st Nations of Canada and the Mouri in New Zealand, for example). In Burlington Vermont a community Justice center has since 1998 overseen 5 panels of citizens who meet weekly to review cases including assault, drug possession and theft. Unlike traditional courts, the process helps offenders see the mental pain their behavior caused and this makes them less likely to reoffend.

At my facility, prisoners meet together to create a human space for our healing and liberation. Our twelve step program is one such space. It provides an honest environment to face the consequences of our actions. We address those who have harmed (as long as the communication will not cause more harm to the recipients). By healing past wounds, we lay the foundation for rehabilitation and future liberation. I know I have just started the process (step 1), but reports from those further along say the process of communicating with friends and family about the consequences of their criminal behavior has been transformative.

Our long term goal is to incorporate structures of restorative justice within our criminal justice system. In the short term, we need to provide spaces of healing in the margins in the local prisons, jails, half way houses, transitional housing, courts and police departments. By creating spaces of healing we can create transformed lives not only in our inmates but in our larger community as well.

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