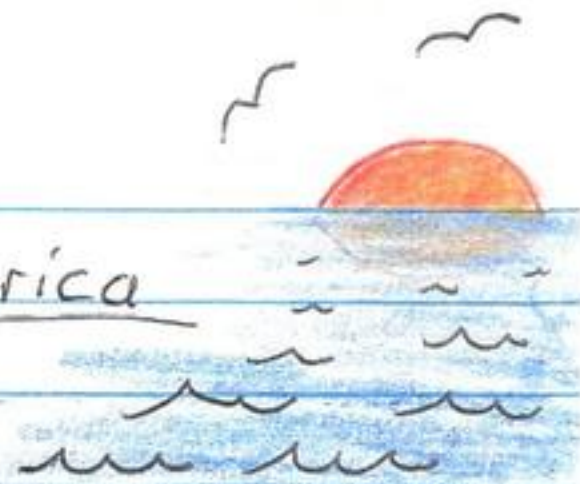




Justice:

A dish served hot in America

By Daniel Labbe



With the world's largest Prison Population, cities brimming with gang violence, drug addiction, and homelessness, and ever-increasing acts of catastrophic violence it is obvious that the United States, land of opportunity, freedom, and the American Dream, is in desperate need of some soul-searching,

There is no way we can continue to keep our Patriotic heads buried in the sand chanting, "Everything's all right. Everything is fine." Just take a look at tonight's news broadcast. You will see that everything is certainly not fine.

So what's wrong? Well, for many Americans personal safety and the safety of their families and friends is becoming a growing, and even urgent, concern. In the past America has addressed this issue by creating stiffer sentencing laws, beefing up police forces, and building more prisons ~~and~~ ^{while} stripping those prisons of rehabilitative programs (they were viewed ^{as} luxuries that inmates did not deserve). This has been our response to violence and crime for over 25 years now. How bad do things have to get for us to realize that this strategy isn't working?

So if our current policies aren't working why do we persist in using them? One reason is that we are still reacting to the issue emotionally rather than rationally,

The elephant in the room is now crushing us, will we still ignore it?

Policies based on emotional rhetoric are dangerous and manipulative.

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When someone violates our safety, property, or rights we get angry and fearful, which is natural, but then we want payback. With a sense of hostility and vengeance we demand our pound of flesh. This is the emotional base currently supporting our sense of justice in America today.

If we look at individuals who react to events emotionally we find out how dangerous and ineffective this approach is. In fact, our prisons today are filled with such individuals. If we look at our own lives we can see how problematic reacting emotionally is, so why would we base something so idealistic and impactful as our sense of justice on something so base and volatile as hostile emotions?

our cultural sense of justice sets limits on what we will allow and reach for.

So what does this mean in practical terms? Today we are fortunate enough to have access to a wide variety of extremely effective models for criminal rehabilitation. These programs have been shown to significantly reduce recidivism rates and increase the overall health and well-being of participants, which is good news for the communities they return to. The problem is that these programs are not being put to use. Instead they are tested ^{as} pilot programs then once the results are analyzed the program is dropped. This happens over and over again across the whole country. The most common reasons cited are "there isn't enough funding", "it's a luxury the offenders don't deserve", and "it isn't based on punishment." You will hear variations of these reasons as excuses why rehabilitating criminals is not a priority. But the cost to our communities is enormous

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and unacceptable in a Society that claims to lead the world in human rights, democracy, and freedom.

Because the programs and models for effective criminal rehabilitation are available, the next step for creating a safer, more humane and evolved America will have to come from its citizens (of course, the offenders have to take responsibility as well. For more on this see my article entitled Prison Reform; True Change begins with us). As a culture we need to examine our definition of justice and own up to the emotional, and even barbaric, components comprising it. Once seen for its primitive and damaging effects we can redefine what justice means to us. We can create a sense of justice that is nobler, based on reason, and results in a justice system that reflects our highest values. Until that happens politicians and law-makers will not be able to (or motivated to) make use of the amazing models and methods for rehabilitation available to us today. There just won't be the necessary support to ~~the~~ create ^{the} systemic changes that are needed.

So what would a healthier, nobler, definition of justice look like? I would like to introduce the idea that the only true justice is a truly rehabilitated offender. Think about it. When someone commits a crime against me the primitive part of me wants revenge, wants to see the offender suffer. But how does this equal true justice? If after the offender does time in a harsh, punishing environment, a place full of hate, hostility

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Listening to the Primitive Side of myself is what landed me in Prison, why would I allow this Part to define my sense of justice (or any of my values)?

and violence, he is released to the streets angrier and more likely to commit new crimes... how is that justice? Should I now feel that justice has been served? But if the offender is sentenced to a program where he is encouraged to take responsibility for his crimes, is given the chance to address the issues causing him to act out in criminal ways and comes out of it a better person much less likely to commit more crimes and even contributes to his community... wouldn't that allow me to feel justice has been served? Of course, not all inmates can be rehabilitated, but wouldn't there be a much higher rate of rehabilitation if such an outlook and approach was embraced? Also, regardless of results, wouldn't we as an "evolved" society rather say that this is the approach we take toward criminal justice rather than ~~the~~ ^{the} approach based on emotional reactions, on hostility, vengeance, and exacting our pound of flesh?

As a culture, it's time for our ethical and emotional progress ^{to} equal our technological progress, because emotionally and ethically we're still a primitive society, and the cost is ~~not high~~ killing us - literally.

If we take the time to examine and redefine what justice means to us we would then have the support to create a justice system that reflects that new definition. Until that happens all the great programs and models in the world will do us no good, ~~because~~ because we'll have a system based on vengeance, hostility and the ~~the~~ ever-delicious pound of flesh.

Bon appétit!