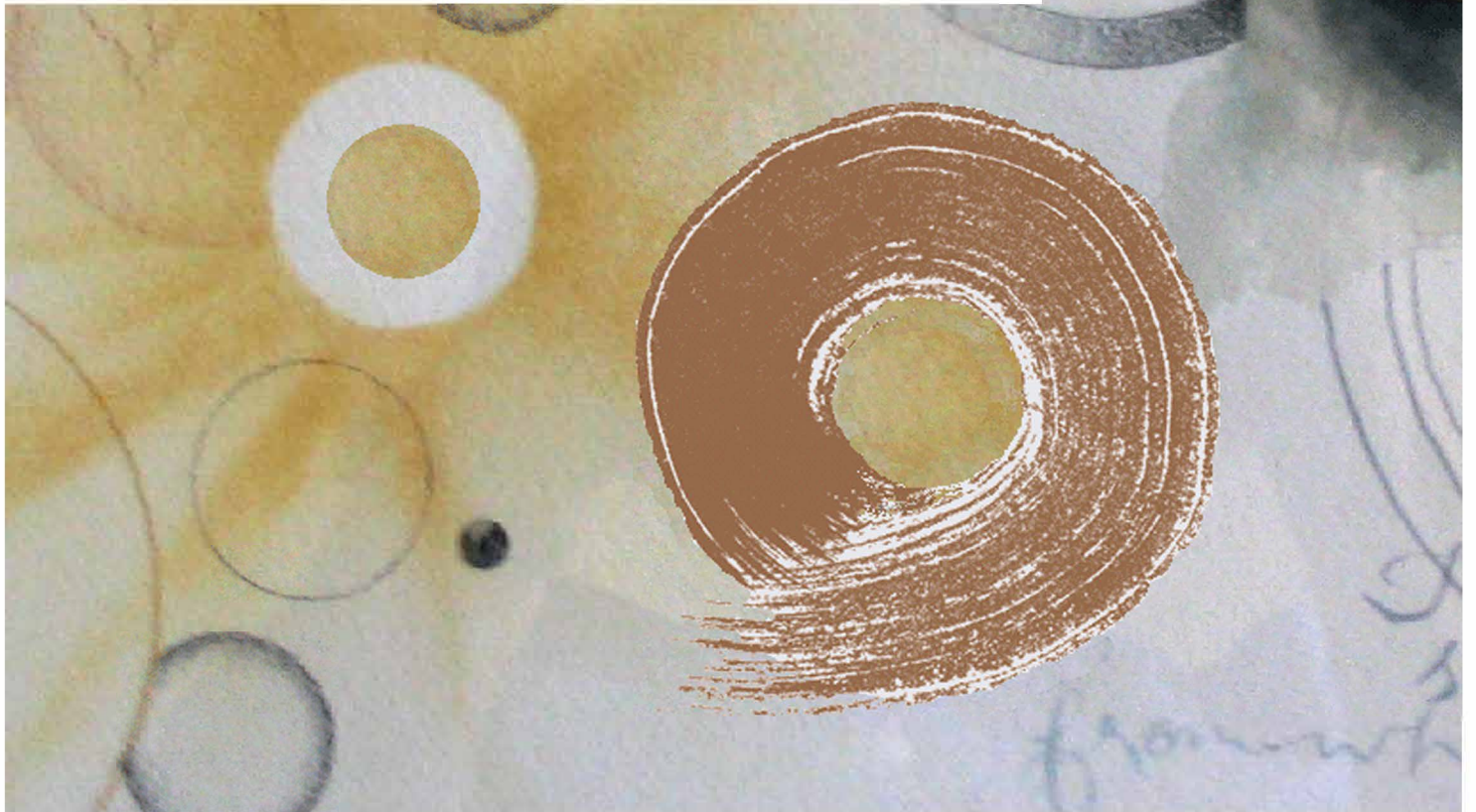




The Circle Keeper

A Story of Restorative Justice in Prison



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Introduction

Fifteen years ago I was in prison. I had been invited to go inside the hundred year-old walls to be part of something called restorative justice. That was all I knew. I stayed for three days, and those three days changed my life. I sat in a circle with thirty inmates, twenty volunteers and three survivors of violent crime.

Over those three days, we talked openly and honestly, not about crime, but about harm. Restorative Justice brings together perpetrators, victims and the community to heal the harm caused by crime. This was vastly different from my experience as a lawyer who had spent thirty-five years in criminal courtrooms. In those courtrooms there was precious little concern for the victims, the accused, the families and the community who were all affected by the ripples of harm that spread from the crime.

In prison those three days, I saw a way that people could come together, hear each other's stories and rediscover empathy. But the key to the experience was the person establishing and maintaining the trusting, open and loving circle. In Green Bay, that person was Janine Geske, the former Supreme Court Justice who left The Court to become the godmother of Restorative Justice in Wisconsin.

Restorative Justice has become the primary focus of the Prison Ministry Project. We have done a version of the program I saw in Green Bay in prisons around Wisconsin, and more than a thousand people have participated in these programs. What was true in Green Bay is true in our programs: success depends on the person keeping the circle. We have been blessed with Susan, a remarkable circle keeper who has brought strength, compassion, humor and unyielding commitment to the work. This is her story.

Susan told her story to another amazing woman. From the earliest days of the Prison Ministry Project, Betty Hasselkus's insights about the nature of the work we do, the meaning in the details of the work we do, and the everyday lives of the people in prison has been foundational. Giving meaning to the story of our circle keeper was Betty's great gift to this project.

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“...this sacred community called the circle...”
(Offender, R.)

For the past 10 years, Susan has been a volunteer in Restorative Justice Programs in state prisons. I interviewed Susan four times in the fall of 2017, with the aim of creating a narrative of her involvement as a volunteer in the prisons and coming to understand her lived experience. Restorative Justice (RJ) is a program built on the idea of a triangle composed of offender, victim, and community. All three components of the triangle have experienced harm -- often referred to as **ripples** of harm. The RJ program seeks to heal the harm; as Susan says, “*This [RJ] is not the criminal justice system, it is the restorative justice system... We don’t talk about what they did, we don’t talk about punishment. We talk about reconciliation and healing. This is a group of people who are just people and they want to change. They aren’t what they did, they just are.*”

Restorative Justice in Prisons

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was an early proponent of restorative justice, and it was he who brought forward the power of reconciliation. Susan described Tutu’s message this way: “*There is an essential humanity and goodness in every person, we are all children of God; never give up on anyone, don’t just throw people away. All can be salvaged.*”

The Restorative Justice Program consists of once-a-week two-hour meetings that are planned to offer the offenders in prison an opportunity to come to grips with the ripples of harm created by crime. The weekly sessions run for 10-12 weeks. An intensive three-day session, focusing on harm and victims, is held sometime around the middle of the weekly series.

The **circle** is the basic configuration for the people in the RJ sessions (20-30 offenders, a few staff people, and a few volunteers) throughout both the 10-12 weeks of the weekly meetings and the 3-Day intensive session. It is the circle that encourages people to share, to forge connections with others, to feel safe. Susan speaks of “*the power of the circle,*” of the need to “*trust the circle,*” and of the “*circle process.*” She refers to many kinds of circles: “*the response circle, the processing circle, the harm circle, the end circle, the one-word circle, the one last circle.*” She talks of being “*in*” the circle or “*not in*” the circle. She refers to herself as the “*circle keeper.*” Not the circle leader, not even the circle facilitator, but the circle *keeper* – the person who helps maintain the “*integrity*” of the circle and the circle process, and who “*makes sure all in the circle get what they need.*”

For all the Restorative Justice sessions – weeklies and the 3-Day – the guiding rule in the circle is that each person talks only when the talking piece has been passed to him or her. At that time, no one else talks, but everyone else listens. It is also understood that, while the circle process is occurring, no one gets up to move around, or talks to the person sitting next to him, or creates any other kind of distraction. Everyone **listens**. And **listens**.

Susan's Search

After retirement from years of working in human services and in teaching school for young children, Susan searched for a meaningful way to engage as a volunteer in interesting and challenging ways. She wanted to find opportunities to interact with people on important issues and to use her job skills of program leadership, group facilitation and workshop planning. One of the ministers at her church invited her to participate in a prison ministry program. Susan says she just thought, "*Bingo! This is what I want to do.*"

At first, Susan attended hearings at the state capitol, prepared news releases, went to rallies, got involved with issues at the local and state levels. But before long, the church minister met with her for lunch one day, and during their conversation, he said, "You've got to go to prison!" He invited her to attend an upcoming Restorative Justice graduation at one of the participating prisons in the state. Susan says that, on that very first visit, she felt the prison "*calling*" to her; she remembers thinking, "***This is what I really want to do.***"

In the early days of "*going to prison,*" Susan feels she tried to do too much. She took part in the weekly sessions at more than one prison at a time, attended the 3-day sessions and graduations, plus helped with the coordination, scheduling, carpooling and recruiting guest speakers and other volunteers. "[The minister] *jokingly referred to me as his 'right hand man.'*" But, there were times when she "*felt like there was too much going on ... stretched too thin ... trying to find solutions... feeling worried, anxious, angry ... I had difficulty having enough time to recruit and properly train volunteers*"

Eventually, Susan settled into being the circle keeper for the intensive 3-Day sessions. To Susan, "*The 3-Day is the heart and soul of the whole program.*" Also, by the time this new plan for herself fell into place, the scheduling of the Restorative Justice Programs had been scaled back and reorganized into RJ sessions at two medium security prisons in the fall and spring, plus one more in the summer at a facility for offenders with mental illness.

The 3-Day

The "3-Day" consists of three consecutive full days of intensive involvement for offenders, victims and community. It occurs near the midpoint of the 10-12 total weeks of RJ, replacing, for that one week, the usual once-a-week 2-hour session. "*The 3-Day – I want to talk about that, because that's really my thing!*"

A strong focus on the **victim** part of the RJ triangle is present in the 3-Day program. Each of the days has its own specific agenda. Day 1 is "*the most strenuous*" with its focus on using the circle to more deeply share and connect with each other, and to explore and more fully understand the harm experienced by the many layers of crime victims. Day 2 focuses intensely on the ripples of harm. Two victims of violent crime (not victims of crimes committed by any of the men in the circle) are present to share their stories, and the whole group – offenders, volunteers, staff – participate in a response circle after each story. "*I check in with the volunteer victims on that morning, see if they are okay ... The stories are very hard. The emotional impact is huge for the men.*" Day 3 is planned to foster ripples of healing as the men reflect on their own experiences related to the victims of their offenses and explore what changes within themselves have taken place in the three days. The third day ends with one last circle in which each participant is asked to share one concrete thing that they are going to change or do because of the Restorative Justice

3-Day program; *“That’s fascinating. As an example, one offender said he was going to telephone his mother; he had not had any contact with her for nine years!”*

As it is in the weekly RJ sessions, sitting in the circle is the primary way of being together in the room for each day of the 3-Day. The circle formation is at times broken up for small group work such as small group discussions about the many kinds of victims of harm or small group skits (on the last day) that can be kind of a spoof about persuading someone else to go to RJ (*“Some are hilarious!”*). But being in the circle is the dominant configuration for much of the three days. As the circle keeper, Susan strives to be sensitive to the participation and needs of all people in the circle.

Throughout the 3-Day, *“We’d meet in a circle with a talking piece [Susan uses a kachina doll that she purchased in Arizona; it reminds her of the native American circle traditions.] When you have it, you can talk without being interrupted...and you can say whatever you want. And when you don’t have the talking piece, you need to listen to **all** of the people. It’s a different kind of attention, a way that lets you **really hear** what the person is really saying...And when you are speaking, you know that every word is being heard. We want them to know that the circle is for sharing and it’s a safe place to share.”*

“The context makes it work. You can go as deep as you can in a more authentic way than you might in other kinds of conversations. You find that people are more the same than different... We find a connection and a commonality...the ways in which we have common backgrounds and interests... ‘I want to know who you are’. The power of the circle is, it lets you find those connections.” *“I’ve made connections with hundreds of new people in prison. I’ve met some of the most kind, caring, compassionate, loving people who are in prison. They’re not all tough and rough. Just from going to prison these past 10 years, I **know** people can change, I’ve **seen** people change.”*

“There was one guy, burly and tattoos everywhere, motorcycle gang guy. On Day 1, he was so belligerent, grouchy and crabby. He sat with his arms crossed, the whole body-language thing of, ‘I don’t believe a word of this shit and I’m not going to listen to you grannies.’ And I sort of made a project out of him, I was kind of watching him out of one corner of my eye.

“The emotional impact of the second day for the offenders is, in general, huge -- listening to the victim’s stories, with some of the stories being like the crimes some of them have committed. This motorcycle guy said later, ‘It blew my mind.’

“He wrote me a thank-you letter that he asked the chaplain to pass on to me; I will always keep it with me. He said that nothing before had been able to change his mind about the prison system...but, in the letter, he said, ‘You have changed my world.’ At the graduation day program, I could see tears in his eyes. The graduation document is the one document that shows that people do change and they recognize that they are changing.

[Did he show that in other ways, too?]

“He has a different facial expression even, he stands up straighter, he smiles, and he’s signed up for things he never would have done before. He makes tiny paintings. He has done hundreds of them that he donates to the volunteer program as part of the volunteer appreciation dinner organized by the prison. He greets all the volunteers by name. The 3-Day was for him what it took to change, to open up. It was like a door opening. Or like a flower opening.”

At the end of the second day of the 3-Day, the participants are given an assignment. They are asked to create a “contribution” overnight to share with the group in the circle on the morning of the third day. The contribution is meant to be a kind of personal expression of all that they have experienced in the prior two days. *“Anything goes. I tell them, ‘We are not restricting you’ So, skits, poetry, drawings, fabric pieces, bead work, songs, collages, paper puppets. Sometimes they recite something they already know, and that’s okay -- there are no bad answers. To the men, it’s great to be able to say, ‘I made this’ and ‘I did this in response to those stories’ [the victims’ stories on Day 2]. It helps them process some of the things that meant something to them.*

“We started making booklets out of the contributions in about 2013. Each of the groups is really a community, so each booklet is unique...I love the booklets. They remind me of what we did with the men and the impact it had on them. There are some just amazingly talented people in prison. It’s really transformative.”

Following the Rules

To volunteer in a prison is to follow rules. No touching or hugging the offenders. A one-handed handshake is the allowable exception. Only one-handed, though; *“I guess a two-handed handshake is too much like a hug.”* No wristwatches allowed beyond the security entrance because some watches provide access to the internet and that’s not allowed. To accommodate this rule, Susan simply sits in a place where she can see the clock on the wall -- *“No big deal.”* One prison uses first names only, one uses last names only. The chaplain at one prison hand-picks 23-24 participants for each RJ group, the ones who are most likely to succeed; at another prison, the chaplain wants to admit as many as possible, maybe 40 participants, all offenders who are deemed to need the RJ program and need it badly. *“We said to her, ‘That’s too many.’ She said, ‘No it’s not.’”* [Susan grinned.]

Even the circle has some rules as noted above. No getting up or moving around when in the circle, no talking except when holding the talking piece.

“In one Restorative Justice group, there were two gang guys [leaders] – from two different rival gangs. We all kind of realized this was something we needed to keep an eye on. I think it was during the second day of the 3-Day, one of the gang guys stood up and then he walked across the open circle. That’s a big no-no. I was alarmed, I was thinking, ‘Who has the body alarm?’ I was ready to bolt. So, he walked across the circle to the other gang guy, bent down, shook his hand and quietly said, ‘Peace.’ Everyone was stunned!”

“The hardest part for all of us [volunteers] is leaving at the end of the 3-Day. We leave and they [offenders] can’t leave. You think about them. And we can’t write to them, that’s against the rules. Once we’ve been a volunteer, we aren’t allowed to contact them again. The idea is that they could manipulate us, that we are somehow weakened by our empathy and closeness to them, and we are more vulnerable to their manipulation.”

“One time at [medium security prison], when we were touring the grounds a bit with our volunteers, we suddenly came upon five prior RJ participants and they got so excited to see us! Calling out ‘Hi’ to us, waving, it was like old home week. That was so much fun when they saw us and got so excited.” [A chance meeting, outside of the RJ room, totally unscripted, a happy surprise, a moment of spontaneity for everyone – in other words, a dramatic departure from the usual daily routine in prison.]

“Some prisons allow past graduates to attend a graduation event, and it’s fun to see them again and that they’re doing okay. Some prisons don’t allow that; too many inmates in one space, I guess. And some prisons let other outside people come to the graduation and some don’t. That’s how I first became a volunteer in prison, I visited a graduation day. You just have to go with the flow. The main thing is we’re here. We want to keep coming. We do whatever we need to do to stay in their good graces. But you have to go by their rules.”

“Leaving at the end of the 3-Day is also hard because the men have to go back to their cells where it isn’t ‘safe’ to share. The inmates have to decide if there is anyone back in the unit that they can connect with. We talk about that a lot. Maybe a previous RJ grad, maybe their cellie, maybe not. I worry about them going back to the unit, I worry about them being taunted for being ‘soft,’ too touchy-feely. It’s hard. We introduce them to a new way to communicate and they can’t go back to the unit and talk like that. We did have an ‘alumni’ group one time, some past participants in RJ who continued to meet and had a project to work on; they [the prison] had to shut it down; ‘not enough staff.’”

The Circle Keeper’s Life Back Home

“At the end of the 3-Day, I’m absolutely toast, useless to do anything, so I go home and plan something really fun, like a movie or gardening. I let it settle. These men get under your skin, you know them so well. Yes, you are in the presence of a group of men who have been convicted of all kinds of felonies – murder, rape, armed robbery, assault. I’ve never been afraid of them, they are just people.”

“You don’t become friends, but you do make a really deep connection with each of them, you share on a more intimate level than people you may know at church, or school or job. The power of the circle is it lets you find those connections.”

*“In prison, I had to learn to listen better and talk only when it’s my turn, and now I think I interrupt less in life generally. And I’m paying a different kind of attention in an accepting way that I **really hear** what the person is really saying. The talking piece changes the way you wait for your turn to talk. I found myself doing this in other groups, like committee meetings. I used to jump in all the time. I was the leader of a team before, and used to being more directive – that changed.*”

“I have had a change in how I view other people, a very profound change. I think before I went to prison, I was a lot more judgmental. Before, I viewed people by what they had done, or did – what they brought to the table. Now I think I’m more compassionate, more empathetic, viewing people as people. Not their education, socioeconomic level, what they did – I got rid of that attitude early on. I used to think, ‘Oh, I wonder what this guy did.’” Now I focus on who they are, rather than what they’ve done. I think I have become much more a person who accepts people for where they are right now.

“And my conversations more generally changed a lot. People want to know, ‘What do you do?’ and I’m better at explaining the issues like solitary confinement, racial disparities in sentencing and releasing, sentencing restructuring. After going to prison, I could speak with some authority about these issues, which are huge.

“I was walking one day with a new friend who didn’t know much about what I was doing and she was looking for a volunteer job. So, I told her about going to prison and blah, blah, blah. She looked at me and said ‘There is no way I could do that.’” So, I thought, maybe it’s not for everyone. Some people want to help, but they don’t want to actually go to prison, and that’s fine, there are plenty of ways to help without going to prison. For example, we need someone to go to men’s clothing stores during big sales. We stock a ‘release closet’ for inmates for when they get released, so they don’t have to wear their prison greens. Some don’t have anything else to wear. So that’s a way to help that doesn’t require going to prison.

“My family has been very supportive. My husband thinks it’s great, important, good work. The 3-Day really throws me into a tailspin. He puts up with my fatigue, he gets an earful when I come home, and he goes out for carry-out. He went to graduation a couple times. One of my sons doesn’t want to hear about it. He worries about my safety, and worries about its impact on me as a person. His wife, on the other hand, is very interested in hearing about it. My other son, loves to hear about it.”

A World of Paradoxes

To volunteer in the prison system is to be engaged daily with paradoxes. **For Susan herself:** *“At the end of the 3-Day, I’m so drained -- and so filled.”* **For the offenders,** who end their Restorative Justice participation with a new sense of self and hope, and new skills for connecting with the people in their prison lives: *“Then they have to go back to their cells where it’s not safe to share.* **For all volunteers:** *“I’ve made new connections with hundreds of people in prison. We find a connection and a commonality, the ways in which we have common backgrounds and interests. We can’t touch each other, and yet we share something very personal. It’s a fine line. You don’t become friends, but you do make a really deep connection with each of these people.”*

For volunteers, staff and offenders, to be in prison is to exist in a world of two realities. The world inside the walls is one of hope and bitterness, group-ness and isolation, safety and risk, deep connections without friendship, feeling both fulfilled and drained. The prison inmates are assaulters, murderers, and yet they are also kind, caring and compassionate. One could say that such dual realities exist to a greater or lesser extent in all of life -- for all of us. True enough. But in the daily life of prison, the paradoxes seem magnified – more visible and palpably present. The life space inside the walls is small, there is a day-to-day sameness in the people and occupations of daily living. The Restorative Justice Program offers the opportunity to live out

the belief that, “There is an essential humanity and goodness in every person, we are all children of God. Never give up on anyone -- all can be salvaged.” And, trust in the power of the circle.

**“The circle has taught me that I am more than a DOC number,
a mistake, unworthy, a waste of time”.**

(Offender, R.)

**“The healing power of the circle has restored
Hope in a dark place that harm once lived and
I’m moving towards transformation and self-discovery...**

One day I’ll be whole....”

(Offender, Mr. P.)

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