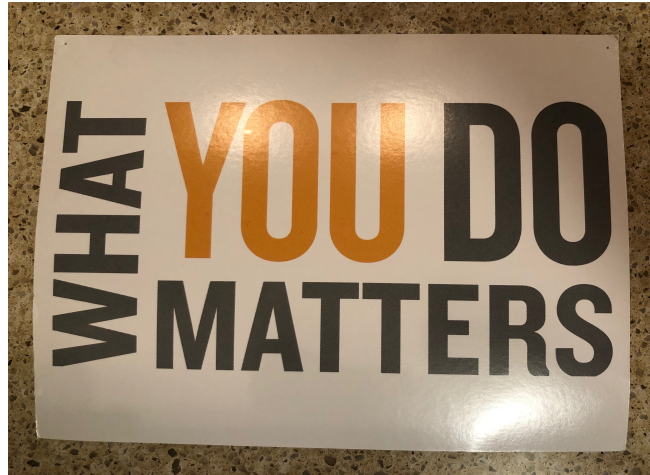


To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #36
Title: "This I Believe" Essay: What You Do Matters

To the guys at Fox Lake--



I mean **YOU**. Yes, I believe that **WHAT YOU DO MATTERS**. It matters *personally...to me*. I not only believe this; I *know* it, because **YOU** have made a huge positive difference in my life.

Until I entered my first Restorative Justice circle, I was under the impression that your life had nothing whatsoever to do with mine. I lived on the "outside," and prison and prison residents (other than the man who had kidnapped and murdered my beloved grandmother) were of no concern to me. I thought I was safe from harm, living on the outside, and I clung to that idea.

But that brutal and inexplicable event had profoundly altered my understanding of the world and of my place in it. And in the 25 years that had passed since the murder, I carried a deep sense of loss, not only for my grandmother, but also for the ordered, stable, predictable, reasonable, *kind* world I had known prior to her murder. Deep down, I had lost trust in my fellow men and women and in the community values that I'd grown up with. And I think I'd been searching for a way to restore those values for all of those years since the murder.

So, twenty-five years later, at the invitation of a neighbor, I went to prison. Needless to say, I was pretty apprehensive about entering that space and sitting in a circle with men who had committed crimes. But it was there, in prison, on the "inside," that I found a community whose members could not only understand the depth and extent of my loss, but also help me reestablish my faith in humanity.

Restorative Justice circle work is hard work. It's painful and difficult and transformative work. It asks us to be more courageous and thoughtful and rigorous and empathetic and honest than any other group work I've experienced in my "outside" life. It asks us to understand that what we do, the decisions we make, the actions we take are consequential. It asks us to lead lives of intention and integrity. It asks us to be real. It asks us to be our best selves.

It holds our experience of pain and harm in a circle of kindness and allows us to acknowledge our vulnerability, and frailty, and accountability...and our mutual responsibility. It affirms that the negative ripples of harm can be answered with positive ripples of compassion, and resilience, and hope. It clarifies that we have a choice in how we conduct our lives—that, in fact, we have the opportunity and responsibility to make numerous choices every day that build lives of purpose and generosity.

And that's where **YOU** come in.

Each time I participate in the three-day, I am restored by your courageous decision to join me as fellow community members. Your stories let me know that I am not alone in experiencing loss and harm. That we have more in common than not. And that together we can all be survivors who make a difference. Your commitment to becoming positive community members restores my faith in possibility and heals my shaken belief in my fellow men and women. When I come to prison, I come with the expectation that you will “show up” and “step up”—for me, personally, as well as for each other and for the other volunteers. And you always do just that.

I can remember vividly the moment I verbalized this belief in prison. It was on day three of the three-day and we were all pretty exhausted. I happened to be sitting next to a man who had committed a murder very similar to my grandmother's. But like me, he had also experienced violent crime in his own family, including the murder of his mother. He turned to me tearfully and thanked me for coming to the circle; and he said doing so had made a huge difference for him—for his healing and his sense of possibility, despite the harm he had caused and experienced. At that moment, I realized that, in choosing to be a member of that restorative justice circle, he had made exactly the same difference *for me*. His choice mattered, *personally, to me*, and I told him so. His kindness, and honesty, and courage made me believe in the power of Restorative Justice to heal the harm and create positive ripples.

The daily choices he and you make after choosing Restorative Justice continue to matter—for him, for you, for me, and for our ongoing mutual commitment to each other. And lest you falter or become discouraged, I include this admonition from the Talmud, which I keep on the bulletin board right next to my **WHAT YOU DO MATTERS** card:

Do not be daunted
By the enormity
of the world's grief.
Do justly, now.
Love mercy, now.

Walk humbly, now.
You are not obligated
to complete the work,
but neither are you free
to abandon it.

~ Ms. Wallace, RJ victim/survivor volunteer