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Why Go There?

by Peg Wallace

That's the question that arises most often when I mention my visits with inmates in Wisconsin's prison system. Why go there? Why would I, who lost a beloved family member to violent crime, want to "go there"—emotionally, let alone physically? Why do I spend three consecutive days of my discretionary time locked in intense conversation with convicted felons, many of whom have committed violent crimes? Why would *anyone* want to do that?

My own journey to prison began over 25 years ago, when my 88-year-old grandmother and her two elderly friends were kidnapped after attending a charity event in my home town. Their kidnapper drove them to an isolated, wooded location and brutally kick-boxed them to death. Within days, he was captured, and within months, he was tried and convicted.

My father and his father before him practiced law in that town and the trial took place in the same county courthouse that I'd visited numerous times with my dad. I had grown up in the 1950s seeing justice prevail in the *Perry Mason* episodes I watched on TV with my family each week, and, as a teenager, I had worked summers in my dad's law firm, answering the phone, filing papers, and helping to do title searches. In my family, we had great respect for the law and for the justice system.

But, having experienced the justice system first-hand through this tragedy, I was acutely aware of its limitations and inadequacies. Although I am very grateful that the murderer was caught, convicted, and incarcerated, the system did not directly or adequately address the damage to our family and our community. The murder of a beloved family member is intensely personal, and the crime raised profound personal questions for me about the nature of justice and about individual and community responsibility.

Over twenty years after the tragedy, at the invitation of a friend and neighbor, Jerry Hancock, who was conducting a Restorative Justice program at Columbia Correctional Facility in Portage, I first attended a three-day Restorative Justice "talking circle." It was there in prison, for the first time, that I found a venue strong enough to hold and acknowledge the painful reality of what had happened to my grandmother and her two

friends, to me and my family, to the other victims' families, to our friends, and to our community.

That restorative justice circle was not the adversarial courtroom setting I'd experienced, concerned with side bars and procedures and prosecution. Nor was it the sensational national press coverage that reported all the sordid details of the crime. It wasn't the shocked, embarrassed silence that often accompanies discussion of personal tragedies of this magnitude. Instead, it was a group of people—a "community," if you will—who either knew from personal experience, or were willing to honestly acknowledge, the incomprehensible cruelty and terrible damage that violent crime visits on all of us, a community comprised of victims, survivors, offenders, jailers, lawyers, social workers, chaplains, teachers, and others who were willing and able to address that cruelty and damage--openly, bravely, personally--from the heart. That "talking circle" felt to me like arriving home after a very long journey.

Since that first circle, I've "gone there" on a regular basis—to sit in circles with prisoners, survivors of crime, and community members (the three essential components of the Restorative Justice healing process) and wrestle with the hard reality of crime. It's fulfilling and exhausting work, and it's transformative. We look at the ripple effect of crime. Who was harmed? How were they harmed? How can we address the harm? How can we heal? The questions are inescapable and very difficult. They require a degree of honesty, empathy, vulnerability, and trust that's rarely found *outside* of prison, let alone inside the walls. They require commitment and courage and mutual respect. They require rigorous thought and they encourage thoughtfulness.

Restorative Justice raises the bar beyond retribution and punishment and asks us to think harder. I "go there" because I am healed by these discussions. I go there because the offenders are healed. I go there because I believe our communities can be healed. I go there because, after all these years, it's the most constructive and hopeful and effective way I have found to acknowledge the hard realities of violent crime and to reconstruct my world. I go there because it makes a difference for me, because the offenders say over and over again that it makes a difference for them, and because I believe that the willingness to address these questions mutually can make a profound difference. Jerry Hancock's goal for the program is to offer the men the opportunity to lead lives of integrity in their communities whether or not they leave the prison. That opportunity is present and available to *all* of us in the circles—to all of us who "go there."

Years ago, at the end of the murderer's trial, my father approached his mother in the courtroom and clasped her hand, acknowledging their mutual grief; and, afterward, he sent a letter to the offender's family members, telling them that he regarded the murders as tragedies for all of our families—victims and offender alike. My dad knew that victims and offenders—all of us--are members of the same community. Participating in Restorative Justice circles has deepened that understanding for me.