

Journey to Belonging
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“Journey to Belonging” – The cadence of this title I’ve been assigned feels strangely familiar. Maybe it’s because it brings to my mind the title of an American movie “Trip to Bountiful,” and that would not be inappropriate. “Trip to Bountiful” is the story of an elderly woman’s journey to overcome loneliness and alienation by re-connecting with the past and with others. Like the trip I want to discuss here, it involves a route that’s often risky and circuitous; like the trip that is our topic here, its completion requires that the traveler depend not only on her own resources but also on the kindness of others.

I’ve been given a somewhat risky assignment: to explore in the same talk the journeys of both victims and offenders. So I must begin with two warnings. Some will inevitably find this problematic, perhaps even offensive. And at least some of what I have to say here should be understood as exploratory and suggestive rather than conclusive. I’m on a journey here too.

This assignment and title (Journey to Belonging) implies that alienation as well as its opposite – belonging – are central issues for both those who offend and those who are offended against. The journey metaphor also suggests that the goal – belonging -

requires a search or a process and that belonging is not simply binary – you do or you don’t – but rather might fall on a continuum.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the journey to belonging often involves a journey to identity – the two are deeply intertwined, like a double helix. Identity is defined in relationship to others; in Michelle Fine’s words, it requires us to “work the self-other hyphen.”ⁱ

These concurrent journeys – the journey to belonging and the journey to identity – are journeys we all (not just victims and offenders) must make, and then re-make. We make this journey as we move from childhood to adulthood, and sometimes we make parts of it again as we go through the stages of our lives. But when we experience insecure or traumatic or other life-changing situations, we often have to make these journeys anew, almost as if we were starting over.

Such journeys may be made along safe and healthy routes, but they can also be made along routes that are unhealthy. Racism, extreme nationalism, delinquent gangs, the conflicts we have seen in Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia, the process of “othering” that we do when we label offenders as outsiders – these are some of the sidetracks which occur when our desperate need to belong is resolved in unhealthy ways.

To explore this journey, I suggest we use the lenses of tragedy and of trauma. When we use more common shorthand terms like “crime,” we trigger a host of stereotypes and assumptions that condition the subsequent dialogue. What they have in common, however, is an experience of tragedy. The lens of tragedy may allow us to explore this reality with more empathy and understanding. In fact, psychiatrist James Gilligan – whose important book, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*, I will

cite again later - argues that the perspectives on tragedy applied in the domains of literature and drama sometimes provide more helpful frameworks than do psychological approaches.ⁱⁱ

I will use the second concept – trauma – a bit loosely, as a continuum extending from very high levels of ordinary stress on one end to traumatic and post-traumatic stress on the other. Such trauma is a core experience of both victims and offenders. That victims of crime experience trauma is widely recognized – although the trauma of so-called “minor” crime is often overlooked. What is less understood is that offenders often experience forms of trauma as well, both as a precursor to their offenses and as a result of their experience of “justice.” Much violence may actually be a re-enactment of trauma that was experienced earlier but not responded to adequately. Unfortunately, society tends to respond by delivering more trauma in the form of imprisonment. Prisons, in fact, are some of the most powerful trauma factories I can imagine. While these realities must not be used to excuse, they do help to understand and they must be addressed.

Several years ago I completed a book based on interviews with and photographs of men and women who were serving actual life sentences as a result of having participated in the taking of a life.ⁱⁱⁱ Now I am working on a similar project with survivors of severe violence. My dialogues with those who have offended and those who have been offended against have convinced me that issues of belonging – of connection and disconnection – are intimately connected both to the *causes* of trauma and also to the *transcendence* of trauma. A core element of the trauma is disconnection and the road to transcendence of this trauma is through re-connection.

All of this suggests, at minimum, that the journey to belonging may encompass a number of “legs” or stretches along a route that often twists and turns, looping back on itself like a mountain road. Given my brief timeframe, I want to briefly explore only a few of these legs.

Listen now to the words of Penny Beerntsen, attacked as she jogged on the beach, dragged into the woods, raped and beaten and left for dead:

“You have to reconfigure [your world]. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle where there’s more than one way to put the pieces together. Maybe that’s part of the reordering. I used to think there was one way. There was logic in the world and there was one way that things fit together, and when they didn’t fit that way, the world was out of alignment. But now I think it’s like the piece doesn’t fit real good here but it feels important to me that it might fit somewhere else. The key is trying to find where that piece of the puzzle fits.”

Like many of the victims and survivors I have interviewed, Penny describes a world knocked out of alignment, a logic destroyed. One victim has described his experience as "a profoundly political state in which the world has gone wrong, in which you feel isolated from the broader community by the inarticulable extremity of experience."^{iv}

In this disordering lies one of the primary roots of trauma. When we become victims, the experience calls into question our most fundamental assumptions about who we are, who we can trust, and what kind of world we live in. These include our assumptions about the *orderliness* of the world; our sense of *autonomy* or personal control; and our sense of *relatedness* – where we fit in a web of social relationships. Our lives rest on these three pillars. We built these pillars as we built our lives, from childhood to adulthood, and now they have been knocked out from under us. The core trauma of victimization might be called the “three d’s” – disorder, disempowerment and

disconnection. The journey from trauma to healing thus may mean revisiting issues we thought were long settled; empowerment, order and connection.

Paradoxically, perhaps, offenders must travel a parallel road. I am convinced that offending behavior often arises out of unhealthy ways of coming to terms with these same “pillars” of autonomy, order and relatedness. For a variety of reasons – one of which is trauma experienced as children – we may construct a world in which we establish a sense of *autonomy* by domination over others, an *order* based on violence and force, and a sense of *relatedness* rooted in distrust of others and kinship with fellow “outsiders.” As with victims, the journey to healing for offenders means re-constituting these pillars, often in new ways. For offenders as well as victims, until these issues are settled, we cannot belong; for offenders as well as victims, the process of settling these issues is a journey to belonging. Since it involves relationships with others, the journey cannot be made alone.

To put it in other terms, trauma involves the destruction of meaning; transcendence of trauma involves the re-creation of meaning. It is no accident that both victims and offenders who are on healing journeys have mentioned to me that Viktor Frankel’s book entitled *Man’s Search for Meaning*, based on his experience in the holocaust, was important for them.^v Tom Martin, who is spending his entire life in prison because of a murder he committed, put it like this:

“A thinking man wants each day to matter. Maybe that’s one of the dilemmas. Too many of us think in here. So you face each day, not by saying, ‘How do I just struggle through?’ but ‘What can I do to make something of this day?’”

Penny Beerntsen, the survivor who I quoted previously, describes the journey with a metaphor reminiscent of the looping mountain road image I used earlier:

“It’s like an “S-curve chain...where the links don’t go all the way around but hook on to one another. At first I thought it was serendipity, all these different events happening, and they all seemed to be connected, and now it really seems like it’s Providence. It’s like you start at the bottom - that’s not how you build a chain, but this is how I image it - there’s a curve, and you can’t see what’s at the end of that link. There are obstacles along the way. Then you get to the end, and Wow!, there’s another link there. And you keep going.”

Our identities are embedded in our stories, so the re-creation of meaning requires the “re-storying” of our lives. Those who created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa recognized that healing comes by facing one’s past, coming to terms with it, drawing boundaries around it, incorporating experiences of hurt and wrongdoing into a new story. Repressed memories are dangerous; painful experiences cannot be denied but must be incorporated into who we are. Sharon Wiggins was sentenced to death for a crime committed at 13 or 14, and is now serving a life sentences. She knows she cannot deny her violent and tragic past:

“I have a hard time believing I am the same person who came to prison 27 years ago. But I realize that if it were not for those experiences, I would not be the person I am today. So I hold on to that part of my past in order to recognize this part of me now.”

Several weeks ago at a conference I met Khallil Osiris, an ex-offender who had spent many years in prison. He had completed a master’s degree and was now living successfully on the outside. Under his shirt he was wearing his prison t-shirt with his stenciled inmate number – so that he would not forget where and who he had been.

As we shall see shortly, for victims as well as offenders this involves not only retelling their stories but transforming these stories of humiliation and shame into stories of dignity and courage. This process has a public as well as a private dimension; that’s why Judith Lewis Herman, in her seminal book *Trauma and Recovery*, prefers the term

“testimony.”^{vi} Stories are shaped in the telling and retelling; they need compassionate listeners to hear and to validate their “truths.”

For both victims and offenders, the journey toward meaning requires them to make moral judgments about what happened and their responsibility in it. Like it or not, they often find themselves struggling to understand and explain what happened in order to take an appropriate level of responsibility. Victims tend to blame themselves, taking far too much responsibility for what happened. For them, a key need is to be vindicated: this includes acknowledgement that a wrong was done to them and recognition that someone else is responsible, they are not ultimately to blame. Yet as Herman has pointed out, most victims do not find it realistic to be totally absolved of all responsibility for what happened and/or how they responded to the trauma. Rather, the process of recovery requires locating an appropriate spot for themselves on the continuum between total responsibility and total blamelessness.

The same can be said for offenders who are on a healing path; they too must acknowledge those hurtful things that were done to them while at the same time taking responsibility for the hurt they have caused. Health does not lie in relying on the traumas of one's past to explain away responsibility for wrongdoing, but neither is health possible without acknowledging and validating the harm that was experienced. As Gilligan and others have pointed out, most offenders have been victims or believe themselves to have been victims; most violence is a response to a perceived violation. According to Gilligan, violence – like the criminal justice system itself – is an effort to undo injustice. This sense of victimization may not be a valid excuse for their victimization of others, but neither can it simply be ignored as if it didn't exist or didn't

play a role. The journey for meaning requires moral judgements and here apology and forgiveness may play important roles.

As I suggested a bit ago, the journey to meaning incorporates another journey, the journey toward honor and respect, and that brings us to the topic of shame and it's close cousin, humiliation.^{vii} These are relational phenomena, experienced only in relationship to others, so this journey too is intricately intertwined with the journey to belonging.

Since the publication of John Braithwaite's important book, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, the topic of shame has become highly controversial within restorative justice circles.^{viii} Many fear its misuse; they worry that what people will learn is not that shame must be removed, but that it should be imposed – that shame will be used as a verb rather than a noun. Others, like my friend Rosemary Rowlands from the First Nations community in northern Canada, argue that their people have been so distorted by shame that they cannot imagine a positive use of the concept. Yet, while acknowledging the legitimacy of these concerns, I am convinced that it is essential to explore this old and universal theme.

Those of us enmeshed in contemporary western culture are used to hearing the concepts of humiliation and honor applied to cultures and eras distant from our own. However, I am coming to believe that they continue to operate in powerful but often subterranean ways. In fact, I want to test a hypothesis with you: that they provide an important lens for understanding crime, justice, and the responses of victims.

I am intrigued by the role of shame and humiliation and the search for their opposites – honor and respect - in 1) the origins of offending behavior, 2) the ways offenders experience justice, 3) the trauma of victimization and 4) the ways victims

experience justice. I am convinced by Gilligan's argument that shame - along with the desire to avoid, remove or transform shame - motivates much if not all violence. I suspect that shame - along with the desire to avoid, remove or transform shame - is a crucial component of victims' trauma and thus drives and shapes their needs for justice. Unfortunately, I also have no doubt that justice as we know it often does little to remove or transform shame, for either offender or victim. In fact, the process of justice often increases shame and humiliation for all parties. The result: offenders may re-offend and victims may demand vengeance.

If it is true, as Gilligan and Braithwaite suggest, that shame and the desire to remove it motivates much crime, then our prescription for crime is bizarre: we impose more shame, stigmatizing offenders in ways that begin to define their identities and encourages them to join other "outsiders" in delinquent subcultures. Guilt and shame become a self-perpetuating cycle, feeding one another. In fact, psychiatrist Gilligan argues that punishment decreases the sense of guilt while at the same time accentuating shame, the very motor which drives offending behavior!

The dynamics of shame also help to explain why shame is ultimately ineffective as a deterrent to those at the fringes of society such as racist groups or paramilitaries: it feeds into shame/rage cycles and forces those who are ostracized to come together more urgently. It often strengthens the very phenomenon we hope to discourage. I remember vividly the reflections of a participant in one of my courses, a former paramilitary ex-prisoner in Northern Ireland: it was not shame that caused him to change – indeed, efforts at shame had strengthened his resolve and his solidarity with his compatriots - but rather it was a new vision of meaning and belonging.

The experience of shame and humiliation is a thread that runs through victims' experiences as well, and the struggle to remove or transform it is a central element in the journey to heal and belong. Why? One reason is that in western society, which values power and autonomy, it is shameful to be overpowered by others. When we are victimized, our status is lowered. We are humiliated by that event but also often by the ways that we respond to that event – the things we did or didn't do at the time, the ways it affects us afterwards. Shame is further heaped on us when our versions of what happened are not validated by others and when we are forced to keep our experiences secret.

But I have suspected that there is another layer to this as well. Ellen Halbert was brutally attacked in her bedroom by an enraged man in a Ninja suit who had hidden in her attic all night. When I interviewed her recently, she tied the sense of shame felt by victims to the fingers of blame pointed not only by others but by oneself. Here we connect to what I said earlier: recovery involves moral judgments set in stories of resilience, validated by others..

Whether we have victimized or have been victimized, the journey from brokenness and isolation to transcendence and belonging requires us to re-narrate our stories so that they are no longer just about shame and humiliation but ultimately about dignity and triumph. Questions of meaning, honor and responsibility are all part of this journey.

The process of justice can contribute to or detract from this journey in a variety of ways. I want to explore just one of justice's important functions: vindication.

William Ian Miller has argued a sense of reciprocity is deeply imbedded in our psyches and cultures: we have an inherent drive to pay back what we owe and to be paid

back what is owed to us, both the good and the evil. The exchange of gifts and the need to reciprocate honor and shame are closely related. “The failure to reciprocate,” he says, “unless convincingly excused, draws down our accounts of esteem and self-esteem.”¹ He goes on to show that honor and humiliation are ultimately tied to this concept of reciprocity. I would suggest that this need for reciprocity, for a righting of the balance of honor and humiliation, is tied to the need for vindication.

If Gilligan is right, violence itself is often driven by a need to reciprocate, to vindicate oneself, by replacing humiliation with honor. Similarly, the criminal justice response to this behavior may be seen as an effort to achieve this reciprocity. A motivating force in both violence and in justice, in other words, is a drive for vindication. Crime and justice both may be viewed as reciprocal systems for the exchange of humiliation and honor.

My work with victims suggests that the need for vindication is indeed one of the most basic needs that victims experience; it is one of the central demands that they make of a justice system. I’ll go out a limb, in fact, and argue that this need for vindication is more basic and instinctual than the need for revenge; revenge, rather, is but one among a number of ways that one can seek vindication.

What the victimizer has done, in effect, is to take his or her own shame and transfer it to the one victimized, lowering them in the process. When victims seek vindication from justice, in part they are seeking reciprocity through the removal of this shame and humiliation. By denouncing the wrong and establishing appropriate responsibility, the justice process should contribute to this. However, if we vindicate the victim by simply transferring that shame back to the offender, we are repeating and

intensifying the cycle. In order to progress on their journeys, both victim and offender need ways to replace their humiliation with honor and respect. Shame and humiliation must at least be removed and ideally be transformed. This does not easily happen within the retributive framework of our criminal justice systems.

I have often drawn a sharp contrast between this retributive framework and a more restorative approach to justice. But hold on here: philosopher of law Conrad Brunk has argued that in theory, retribution and restoration may not be the polar opposites that we often assume.^{ix} In fact, they have much in common and we do all of us a disservice when we ignore these connections. A primary focus of both concepts is to vindicate through reciprocity; where they differ is in what effectively will right the balance.

Both retributive and restorative theories of justice acknowledge a basic moral intuition that a balance has been thrown off by the wrongdoing.” Consequently, the victim deserves something and the offender owes something. Both argue that there must be a proportional relationship between the act and the response. Where they differ is on the currency that will right the balance or acknowledge that reciprocity. Retributive theory argues pain will restore a sense of reciprocity, but the dynamics of shame and of trauma help explain why this so often fails to achieve what is wished for either victim or offender. Retribution as punishment seeks to vindicate and reciprocate, but is often counterproductive. Restorative justice theory, on the other hand, argues that what truly vindicates is acknowledgement of victims’ harms and needs combined with an active effort to encourage offenders to take responsibility, make right the wrongs and address the causes of their behavior. By addressing this need for vindication in a positive way,

restorative justice has the potential to affirm both victim and offender and help them transform their stories.

I have used here the language of humiliation and honor. Parenthetically, I might note that last time I was here in New Zealand I used the language of disrespect and respect. The journey to belonging is also a journey from disrespect to respect.

My friend Hal Pepinsky recently sent me a paper he had written in which he concluded, “Shame is my prime suspect for what makes us punitive.”^x If he is right, then this journey to belonging is not just for victims and offenders but for all of us.

In the world of criminal justice, prison walls are overwhelming realities. Within these walls of concrete and razor ribbon we keep people locked up out of fear, pointing fingers of blame and shame, guarding others from them. But the outer walls of prison are mirrored by inner prisons. Within each prisoner - and within each victim – and indeed within each of one us – there are parts of ourselves that we keep locked up in segregation, pointing fingers of blame and shame, guarding these parts from others. All of us have traumas; all of us have inner wounds, parts of our personalities that we hide. We are apt to sentence these parts to life without parole. We all need healing.

I have referred to two concepts of justice – retributive and restorative. Kathleen Denison, who leads healing workshops in prison, has argued that these two approaches to justice in fact mirror inner world views.^{xi} The retributive approach to justice reflects walls that have been not addressed; the restorative approach is only possible when our wounds and traumas have been acknowledged. The outer world reflects the inner world. If we don’t deal with our traumas, we are prone to re-enact them. If our inner world is

governed by fear, so is our worldview. If we maintain these inner walls, we cannot truly feel we belong.

How do we remove these walls? The biblical story of marching around the walls of Jericho, blowing horns until they fell, sounds dramatic but may be a tad impractical for many of us. Breaking them down seems too violent. Indeed, this must be gentle work: we have to remove these walls tenderly, as articulated by the prophet Isaiah, speaking of the suffering servant: "...a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice." The key is not in silencing the pain, building walls and posting guards but in giving voice to our pain, telling our truths; the solution is in what long-time peace advocate Eloise Boulding calls "prophetic listening" to one another.

Crime is a symbol of our woundedness and alienation. So also is the retributive approach to justice. The outer reality mirrors the inner reality. Only love and compassion can remove these walls. Only when these walls are addressed will we reach our destination. Only then will we belong.

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ⁱ "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research," Denzin, Norman and Lincoln, Yvonne (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1994), pp. 70ff.

ⁱⁱ (New York, New York: Random House, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Doing Life* (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: 1996).

^{iv} Bruce Shapiro, "One Violent Crime," *The Nation*, 3 April 1995, pp. 444-452.

^v (New York, New York: Pocket Books, 1984).

^{vi} *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1992)

^{vii} I will use the terms shame and humiliation somewhat loosely and interchangeably. However, while they are in the same family of emotions, there are actually significant differences between the two. See William Ian Miller, *Humiliation* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

^{viii} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

^{ix} “Restorative Justice and the Philosophical Theories of Punishment,” paper presented at the Workshop on the Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice, Sorrento, BC, Canada, August, 1998.

^x “Shame and Punishment, Democracy and Anger,” forthcoming in *Postmodern Criminology*.

^{xi} *Restorative Justice in Ourselves, New Perspectives on Crime and Justice*, Occasional Paper No. 11 (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1991).