

Restorative justice for me is not defined by contrast with retributive justice. It is a vision in its own right of a way of being in relationship with another. It includes guidance for how to work through those experiences that violate that way of being in a relationship. It begins for me with an assumption that all humans have an innate desire to be in good relationship with others and that there is a shared set of values among humans that characterizes that good relationship.

Relationships are thus at the heart of being a human. Restorative justice offers a conceptual framework for understanding harm to relationships and steps that move toward repairing the harm and healing the relationships.

There are a number of significant shifts that result from the focus on understanding harm and promoting healing in a framework that assumes an innate desire for relationship and deeply embedded shared values. One that interests me is the shift from external to internal guidance. Most of our institutions and collective structures use external judgment as the primary method of achieving desired behavior. We use a system of rewards and punishments based on satisfying some standard that is external to ourselves. We are not encouraged to know ourselves deeply in order to follow the internal guidance of the shared core values that define being in relationship with others.

The external standard, which can never be satisfied, creates a culture of fear – fear of failing the standard, fear of ridicule, fear of isolation. Out of fear people create masks and protective layers that separate them from their own core values.

One of the most important contributions of the restorative justice movement is that it is stimulating extensive dialog about values. Among many of the practitioners I know that conversation about values involves a journey of discovering an internal compass that does not require rewards and punishment to point in the right direction.