

Restorative Justice help victims recover

Open Letter to Bill O'Reilly About Restorative Justice

Thanks, Bill, for bringing up "restorative justice" on Oprah's program recently. But Bill, you've got to get your facts straight. Restorative justice is not about short prison sentences and permissive rehabilitation programs. It's about helping victims and reducing re-offending.

I know you are a big supporter of victims of crime, Bill, and this is exactly what restorative justice is all about: giving victims a voice in the criminal justice process! Restorative justice puts victims at the center. In the courtroom, victims are secondary. At best, a victim may be called to testify, which itself can be a humiliating revisit of a crime.

Many victims are left emotionally (as well as physically) scarred, even when offenders are penalized harshly. They may fear reprisals when offenders are released, even with long sentences. And many victims have very basic questions that never get answered in court, like "Why did you do this to me and my loved ones?" Victims never get to express how they feel about what has happened. Anger, sadness, fear and hurt have no outlet.

Restorative justice offers an outlet. There are many programs, but a common feature is offering victims, if they want, a chance to meet face to face with those who have done them wrong. An offender's admission of guilt is a pre-requisite, and other precautions are taken to ensure victims' safety. The meetings can be very powerful

for all involved, and offenders have to face up to what they have done: real accountability.

The healing effects of such encounters were documented in 2006 by Dr. Caroline Angel of the University of Pennsylvania, who found that restorative conferences reduce post-traumatic stress in victims. A comprehensive study, *Restorative Justice: The Evidence*, was published in February 2007 by Dr. Lawrence Sherman and Dr. Heather Strang, also of UPenn. It surveyed two decades of research from around the world and found that restorative justice not only is preferred by victims, but that restorative justice also reduces re-offense rates when compared to conventional forms of justice, including prison.

Restorative justice is neither "liberal" nor "conservative." Many of the pioneers of restorative justice are Christians and clergy who find historical support for restorative justice in the Bible. Many restorative justice service programs are offered by faith-based groups.

Growing numbers of police, judges, prosecutors, corrections officers and, most important, victims and their supporters around the world are backing restorative justice programs for a very simple reason: They work.

Let's go with the facts, Bill. We all want to see evil people brought to justice and criminals held accountable. If punishment alone worked, I'd say do more of it. But restorative justice helps victims and reduces crime. When you learn the facts, I hope you'll become an ally.

Restorative justice programs offer greater promise for positive reform of our criminal justice system than anything we've ever tried.

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