

Keep the Circle Whole

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Do you feel safe here? Do you feel safe at home? Do you feel safe on the street where you live or out on the highway? To answer, yes I do feel safe, is both a political position and a statement of your faith. It's political because it rejects the policies of paranoia, which inevitably rise up as part of our response to danger. And it's a statement of faith, in that it encompasses a spirit of confidence both in the future and in the inherent worth and dignity of human beings. In order to live healthy, balanced, loving lives we need to feel safe. I don't think I overstate the case to claim that only when we live in a state of what we might call, spiritual safety, is real progress possible.

I want to draw a clear distinction here between spiritual safety and the illusion of safety we attempt to create by all our frowning battlements and by our criminal so-called justice system. Auden's great poem "Leap Before You Look" begins:

*The sense of danger must not disappear
The way is certainly both short and steep
However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like but you will have to leap.*

Yet making danger disappear is exactly what we're always trying to do. Any hope we have of meeting, confronting and by grace, transforming the dangers that we face is lost when we attempt make the dangers disappear. When we allow our cities to be stratified places where people mostly meet in segregated settings; when we avoid our adolescent children whose edgy innovative culture scares us; when we allow the prison/industrial complex to continue to posture as a reasonable response to all our social ills we are maintaining the same tragic ignorance Auden warned against. The poem ends:

*A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie my dear;
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.*

Spiritual safety emboldens us to be engaged. We don't deny the danger. We don't turn away. Nor do we delegate responsibility for our collective well-being to authorities entirely outside ourselves. Whenever possible we risk moving into real relationships with those whom we fear, those who have harmed us or done damage to communities we care about. I'm not naïve. I know there are people so damaged and so dangerous that they have to be restrained. And I know that there are times when armed force is the only option left. But spiritual safety

calls for a sea change in our first response, in the way we live and work together and in particular in the administration of justice.

The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich spoke of justice as “the work of love in community.” And he spoke of love as “the longing for the reunion of the separated.” Restorative justice gives form to that longing and to that work by proposing a very different way of responding to acts, which harm or violate the common good. Simple as it sounds the primary methodology of the restorative justice movement is the Circle. Instead of sending people away restorative justice invites people in. It may seem soft—on-crime to you. But imagine what kind of courage it must take to sit down in a circle with someone to who you’ve done serious damage and to have to listen to what they have to say. In their book Peacemaking Circles: from Crime to Community, Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge describe four fundamental shifts inherent in the move from the present criminal justice system to a restorative model.

The present approach is coercive. It hopes to change behavior by threat of repeated punishment. Restorative justice hopes to change behavior through healing. It acknowledges the fact that the people most likely to cause harm are those who have themselves, been harmed. Those who have been abused become abusers. So restorative justice proposes a shift from coercion to healing.

The present system posits that an individual is solely responsible for his or her actions and must therefore be punished for their crime. Without denying individual responsibility the restorative justice movement recognizes the whole constellation of factors, which can lead to criminal behavior. It recognizes that everyone is shaped by his or her environment and takes that fact into account. So the second fundamental shift is from solely individual responsibility to a process, which holds both individuals and communities accountable.

At present crime and punishment is the province of specialists. We rely upon the State to represent us. We delegate responsibility to others whose job it is to make the danger disappear. Restorative justice calls for a shift from reliance on the state to reliance on the community; or, to put it more succinctly, reliance on ourselves.

And finally, restorative justice requires a basic philosophical shift. It is the most fundamental change a society can ever make. Eye for eye...bruise for bruise...wound for wound the old way simply cannot stand, nor should it stand. Instead of getting even, true justice will demand that we get well.

Carolyn Boyes-Watson in her recently published book Peacemaking Circles & Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home, describes the work of Roca, “a feisty community-based youth organization” that serves one of the “most broken and dangerous urban neighborhoods” in the United States. Roca’s mission is “to promote justice through creating opportunities for young people to become self-sufficient and live out of harms way.” It moves and fascinates me that in casting about for a basic methodology to undergird their efforts the staff at Roca discovered peacemaking circles. There’s something magnificent and moving in the fact that is attempting

to cope with some of the most intractable problems of contemporary society they and we have turned to a way of being together, a way of healing together practiced by indigenous culture all around the world from time before time. Some might write off Circles as some remnant of the 60's counter-culture but they have proven their worth as an essential aspect of a restorative approach to juvenile justice that has significantly lowered the juvenile incarceration rates here in Twin Cities and all around the country.

Through the work Restorative Justice Community Outreach Team, Peacemaking Circles have become part of the life of our church. The simple elegance of the Circle approach in which, one person speaks from the heart as everyone else listens with that particular quality of attention we try to bring to those we care about most, is the essential structure of the recovery movement and of what have come to be called small group ministries. One way to experience power of the Circle is to participate in a covenant group. New groups will be forming in February. If want further information about this basic opportunity to deepen your life sign up at the Welcome Table in the Parish Hall.

In addition to our own small group ministry, our church uses Circles when we need a way to move through conflict in respectful and creative ways. With our longtime partner, Amicus we sponsor a Monday night Circle of Peace made up of elders from the church and the neighborhood who join Amicus staff members and young men from Boys Totem Town, the Ramsey County Reform School, who are trying to find their way home. The Circle may well be the one place in their lives where they can say what's on their minds without fear of reprisal. Everyone needs such a place, everyone, even and especially those we see as dangerous, those who have been truly dispossessed. The group has met for forty weeks. Slowly and steadily trust is being built. Hope is taking hold.

I could find no better way to end this sermon than to read a long letter from a death row prisoner in Texas. It was published in the Dallas Fort Worth Star-Telegram by columnist Bob Ray Sanders. It appeared in April of 2004. And the State sanctioned killing continues. Each time an execution takes place in our Nation a member of our Restorative Justice Team tolls the tower bell. Sanders writes:

After Napoleon Beazley was executed in May 2002, I used this space to print his entire final statement in order that readers might get to see a little bit of his humanity.

Many people throughout the country, myself included, had fought hard trying to stop Beazley's execution, partly because he was a teen-ager at the time of the crime.

The other day, state Rep. Terri Hodge of Dallas sent me a letter from another Death Row inmate that gives us even more insight about the person the state killed almost two years ago.

Luis Ramirez, convicted in the death of a 19-year-old San Angelo man, gives the following account of his first day on Death Row:

"I'm about [to] share with you a story who's telling is long past due. It's a familiar story to most of you reading this from death row. And now it's one that all of you in 'free world' may benefit from. This is the story of my first day on the row.

"I came here in May of 1999. The exact date is something that I can't recall. I do remember arriving in the afternoon. I was placed in a cell on H-20 wing over at the Ellis Unit in Huntsville, TX. A Tsunami of emotions and thoughts were going through my mind at the time. I remember the only things in the cell were a mattress, pillow, a couple of sheets, a pillow case, a roll of toilet paper, and a blanket. I remember sitting there, utterly lost.

"The first person I met there was Napoleon Beasley. Back then, Death Row prisoners still worked.

"His job at the time was to clean up the wing and help serve during meal times. He was walking around sweeping the pod in these ridiculous looking rubber boots. He came up to the bars on my cell and asked me if I was new. I told him that I had just arrived on death row. He asked what my name is. I told him, not seeing any harm in it. He then stepped back where he could see all three tiers. He hollered at everyone, 'There's a new man here. He just drove up. His name is Luis Ramirez.'

"When he did that, I didn't know what to make of it at first. I thought I had made some kind of mistake. You see, like most of you, I was of the impression that everyone on death row was evil. I thought I would find hundreds of 'Hannibal Lecters' in here. And now, they all knew my name. I thought, 'Oh well,' that's strike one. I was sure that they would soon begin harassing me. This is what happens in the movies after all.

"Well that's not what happened. After supper was served, Napoleon was once again sweeping the floors. As he passed my cell, he swept a brown paper bag into it. I asked him, 'What's this'? He said for me to look inside and continued on his way. Man, I didn't know what to expect. I was certain it was something bad. Curiosity did get the best of me though. I carefully opened the bag. What I found was the last thing I ever expected to find on death row, and everything I needed. The bag contained some stamps, envelopes, notepad, pen, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, tooth brush, a pastry, a soda, and a cup of Ramen noodles. I remember asking Napoleon where this came from.

"He told me that everyone had pitched in. That they knew that I didn't have anything and that it may be a while before I could get them. I asked him to find out who had contributed. I wanted to pay them back. He said, 'It's not like that. Just remember the next time you see someone come here like you. You pitch in something.'

"I sat there on my bunk with my brown paper bag of goodies, and thought about what had just happened to me. The last things I expected to find on death row was kindness and generosity. They knew what I needed and they took it upon themselves to meet those needs. They did this without any expectation of reimbursement or compensation. They did this for a stranger, not a known friend.

"I don't know what they felt when they committed this act of incredible kindness. I only know

that like them, twelve 'good people' had deemed me beyond redemption. The only remedy that these 'good people' could offer us is death. Somehow what these 'good people' saw and what I was seeing didn't add up. How could these men, who just showed me so much humanity, be considered the 'worst of the worst'?

"Ever since Napoleon was executed for a crime he committed as a teen, I've wanted to share this story with his family. I would like for them to know that their son was a good man. One who I will never forget. I want them to know how sorry I am that we as a society failed them and him. I still find it ridiculous that we as a people feel that we cannot reach or love our young properly. I'm appalled at the idea that a teen is beyond redemption, that the only solution that we can offer is death. It's tragic that this is being pointed out to the 'good people' by one of the 'worst of the worst.' God help us all.

"What's in the brown paper bag? I found caring, kindness, love, humanity, and compassion of a scale that I've never seen the 'good people' in the free world show towards one another."

It's time for us to take our children back. And we know there are no other people's children. Though we still must struggle with the systemic realities of racism and economic disparity, ultimately both politics and faith require personal commitment. It all comes down to this, beloved friends. What are we willing to risk in pursuit of justice? There is another way. Shall we be among those who bring our faith to life in the by circling round to do the work of love? May it be so and amen.

Come, you who are blessed of God, inherit the beloved community prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink ; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer Him, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink ? And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you? The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, anything you did for the most humble among us, you did for me.

Matthew 25: 34-41

A Wasp Woman Visits a Black Junkie in Prison

BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

After explanations and regulations, he

Walked warily in.

Black hair covered his chin, subscribing to

Villainous ideal.

“This can not be real,” he thought, “this is a

Classical mistake;

This is a cake baked with embarrassing icing;

Somebody’s got

Likely as not, a big fat tongue in cheek!

What have I to do

With a prim and proper-blooded lady?”

Christ in deed has risen

When a Junkie in prison visits with a Wasp woman.

“Hold your stupid face, man,

Learn a little grace, man; drop a notch the sacred shield.

She might have good reason,

Like: 'I was in prison and ye visited me not,' or—some such.

So sweep clear

Anachronistic fear, fight the fog,

And use no hot words.”

After the seating

And the greeting, they fished for a denominator,

Common or uncommon;

And could only summon up the fact that both were human.

“Be at ease, man!

Try to please, man!—the lady is as lost as you:

‘You got children, Ma’am?’” he said aloud.

The thrust broke the dam, and their lines wiggled in the water.

She offered no pills

To cure his many ills, no compact sermons, but small

And funny talk:

“My baby began to walk... simply cannot keep his room clean...”

Her chatter sparked no resurrection and truly

No shackles were shaken
But after she had taken her leave, he walked softly,
And for hours used no hot words.



Etheridge Knight (1931 - 1991)

BIOGRAPHY

Etheridge Knight began writing poetry while an inmate at the Indiana State Prison and published his first collection, *Poems from Prison* in 1968. "His work was hailed by black writers and critics as another excellent example of the powerful truth of blackness in art," writes Shirley Lumpkin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. "His work became important in Afro-American poetry and poetics and in the strain of Anglo-American poetry descended from **Walt Whitman**." Since then, Knight has attained recognition as a major poet, earning both Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award nominations for *Belly Song and Other Poems* as well as the acclaim of such fellow practitioners as **Gwendolyn Brooks**, **Robert Bly**, and **Galway Kinnell**.