

# “eye for eye” makes the world blind

*This is a record of interviews with people who have taken part in a process of restorative justice. Building on a theology of reconciliation and healing, it brings the possibility of change and a fillip to reintegration in the community.*

Cathy Harrison

*“He was very overwhelmed having me sit there confronting him with stories of how his crime had had a serious impact on my family and me over many years ... I faced him ... Restorative justice has enabled me to get my life back ...”*  
(The victim of a serious offence)

Cathy Harrison spoke with Chris Nolan, co-ordinator of the Edmund Rice Justice Trust (ER) and a conference facilitator. “Defined simply”, said Chris, “Restorative Justice (RJ) is healing the effects of crime — the bigger the crime, the greater the potential for healing.”

High-end, post sentence crimes including murder, rape, manslaughter and drink-driving causing death, are referred internally to ER for conferencing.

How can healing possibly occur after such crimes? In this article an authoritative answer is provided by two recent participants of RJ Conferences — the victim of one crime and the offender in another. Both crimes occurred some years ago. Identities have been withheld for privacy purposes. Grounded in their own reality they recalled the meaning and value of the RJ process. This was the focus of the interview.

Concealed in their stories is the extraordinary capacity of the human spirit to exceed expectations of self and society. “In spite of its brutality and destructiveness, trauma has the power to open victims to issues of profound existential and spiritual significance,” claims Trauma Psychologist Robert Grant.

This is evident in the three heartfelt RJ narratives which follow — from the perspectives of a victim, an offender, and a facilitator.

## victim's perspective

I heard about RJ through the Parole Board and then Victim Support. I couldn't have done it without support.

I walked in and thought I can't do this ... No, I thought, this is the right time. I faced him. I have been in the same room and looked at him. Everything, all the hatred and suffering I had held for all those years gathered into one, in that room.

He was very overwhelmed having me sit there confronting him with stories of how his crime had had a serious impact on my family and me over many years. I was surprised I could sit there and do this without crying. I spoke and then he spoke.

He took responsibility. He said sorry. I felt he was genuine. He was overwhelmed. He cried.

He no longer has power over me. I had felt that I was the one in prison all those years.

Restorative justice has enabled me to get my life back ... The timing has to be right. It wouldn't have worked earlier. My family wanted to come but they still have hatred in their hearts. It wouldn't have worked with them there. I needed to do this on my own ...

There was much preparation. The process was very good. I felt very emotional as it got closer, crying alone at night ... but I knew that I had to be strong for my family.



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Doing it has made me not only stronger, I'm feeling freer ... I wasn't expecting that. I had been carrying a great weight for many years. But after facing him I came out and felt so much lighter — because I put it back to him and gave him the responsibility. I felt the weight lift when I walked out ... I couldn't believe it.

There have been anti-depressants for many years — I didn't like it but it helped me cope. Now I'm off them and feel good about myself.

Nothing can change what has happened, but through RJ I've been able to go back and can now go forward. This is a spiritual thing for me. It isn't forgiveness — I just had to move on, to be in a better place.

For a long time I haven't had the confidence I have now. People comment on the change. They say I'm lighter! I have sowed new grass and planted trees. The sky is bluer ... I see all life differently.

It's important not just for me but my family. I hope it will teach them also to move on.

## offender's perspective

I heard about RJ in the late 90s. I was approached then and refused ... no way I would ever do this ... it was far too tough. In time, my conscience developing, I let it be known that if any of my victims wanted RJ I was willing. But no one was interested which was a bit of a relief.

After 15 years of my 18-year sentence I was approached to consider meeting a member of my victim's family. She said she had to do this because she'd had enough.



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is bluer . . . I see all life differently."*

I met with facilitators and went through process. How did I feel? ... Any reservations? ... Did I want to go ahead?

I feared doing more harm than good. I was scared my victim would turn up and leave not having the answers she was looking for, or feeling even more distraught.

I take my hat off to the lady. She had to come to the environment where I was, prison, intimidating in its own right, and sit in front of me with my tats and missing front teeth — and I'm not a small lad.

This is probably the scariest thing I ever faced. I didn't want to escape but as I got closer it was the slowest walk I ever did.

I've faced multiple people who wanted to cause me bodily harm and did not find it as scary as this. Every flaw in my character felt magnified. At the end of the day all that is considered flawed or bad about you is presented to you.

Ten years ago I wouldn't have given a shit but counselling and group work helped. I'm a father myself. I ask myself, if that was my daughter, my sister, or mum, how would I feel? I guess I've learned empathy.

To help her understand how I became so bitter and twisted she asked about my personal background. I answered her questions. At first the atmosphere was real heavy, very anxious, very nervous. She got seriously emotional. I just had to stop ... and regather myself.

She asked why I hadn't contacted her family. I replied that we are not allowed to make contact with victims ... This was the first she knew of it. I couldn't believe no one had ever told her that.

She told me what she went through and how it affected her family. You just don't hear that stuff inside.

This was what she needed to do for her to end her suffering ... It was emotional for both of us. I was holding back tears, coming from the old school — big boys don't cry.

It was real healing. She asked me questions and I was open and honest. I came away feeling better as a man ... a hard thing. It gave me my dignity back.

At the end a massive weight lifted off — it was humbling.

Now there are supportive people around me and I have a job. The tats are coming off. It's like shedding my skin ... I am having Christmas for the first time in 20 years with my daughter ...

### **facilitator's perspective**

It's a hard process for everyone — for victims facing offenders and for offenders fronting up to those they've harmed. There's a lot of preparation. The safety of participants is critical. This means "No Surprises!"

There are victim and offender initiated referrals. Preparation includes assessing motivation, suitability and readiness of both parties. Facilitators visit each participant and establish principles and process as well as the 'why' and hopes of the meeting.

Some people believe healing isn't possible. I've encountered healing in the most dire circumstances. Forgiveness isn't a requirement but it's often an outcome — it's amazing when it happens. For example:

... By the end of a conference a victim came to an understanding of where things were at for the offender — the cycles of violence he initiated throughout life — she realised that his view had totally changed and she now supported his release into the community. This was quite a shift. I was blown away.

Initial anger often leads to a truly transformative process. Once victims get what they need off their chest and have their questions answered you see a shift to a greater acceptance.

It's the same for offenders. They feel that fronting up and taking some responsibility for what they did is rewarding and serves as a reminder of the harm they caused. This is a powerful motivator for change and helps their reintegration into the community. ■

### **Cathy Harrison comments:**

It is with deep gratitude I acknowledge each participant for their courage and insight. Chris Nolan spoke of the privilege of being involved in RJ processes. Society is privileged to have prophetic individuals and networks like *Te Kaupapa Whakaora*. Oh for the same transformative moments in our retributive penal system and indifferent society.

***Blessed are those with an eye for Restorative Justice.***