

BOOK REVIEW

Howard Zehr, *Restorative justice: insights and stories from my journey*. Lancaster: Walnut Street Books, 2023, 218 pp., ISBN: 978-1-947-59752-5 (pbk), 978-1-947-59753-2 (ebk).

Howard Zehr is a huge figure in restorative justice. He is sometimes referred to as the 'father' or even the 'grandfather' of restorative justice (terms which he dislikes). And yet this book does something special. It is about Zehr, and about restorative justice, but it is also about the many people and experiences that have shaped Zehr's thinking and, indeed, the restorative justice movement. In this way, it manages to be about both one man and many people.

The format of the book is rather unusual. It is part memoir, part essay, part tribute. It is a patchwork of past essays, speeches and interviews, with updated commentary, autobiographical accounts, photos of Zehr himself, as well as the photos he has taken, and testimonies from many people who have been touched by the man himself. The book can be read cover-to-cover, as I did, which provides a good sense of Zehr's journey, his views and understanding of restorative justice and a notion of how he affected the lives of others. Equally, each chapter could easily be read in isolation.

For example, Chapter 12, 'Beyond crime: a vision to guide and sustain us', provides a compelling account of the need to think and respond differently to crime. It covers Zehr's work photographing and interviewing people harmed by crime and people serving life sentences in prison; discusses trauma, violence, racism and inequality; provides an account of the principles and practices of restorative justice; and outlines Zehr's personal approach to life, all illuminated by individuals' stories. The breadth, ease and thoughtfulness of the piece is breath-taking. I found myself folding down the corner of every page for later reference.

One of the aspects of restorative justice I have always valued is its ability to cut through the 'victim-offender' dichotomy. By this I mean the way of placing people in one of these two categories, assigning a moral hierarchy (with 'victim' on the top and the 'offender' at the bottom) and defining their whole identity in relation to a harm that took place. In this book, Zehr addresses this, and most explicitly in Chapter 2, 'Journey to belonging: what "victims" and "offenders" have in common'. Here, the linking concept is 'trauma'. He uses the notion broadly, suggesting that criminal harm can cause trauma, but that there is a wide range of other traumas people experience, including those caused by racism, discrimination, war, conflict and 'othering', and that those who commit violence often do so out of dealing with unresolved trauma themselves. He states: 'A core element of trauma is disconnection. The road to transcending trauma is through re-connection' (34). In this way, he sees that everyone seeks belonging and that trauma is something that disrupts this journey and requires us to reconnect and 're-story' our lives. He also suggests that shame and humiliation are part of what can drive us to hurt others, and yet standard criminal justice responses tend to compound rather than resolve these.

Indeed, he describes prisons as ‘some of the most powerful trauma factories I can imagine’ (34). He argues that to move beyond this cycle of trauma and shame we need to transform trauma, and one way to achieve this is through restorative justice approaches that restore respect.

What is very evident from the text is that Zehr seeks to humanise people and encourage people to engage with openness, respect, humility, wonder and awe. Although the book is wrapped in testimony from people who have been influenced by Zehr, and it includes photographs of him meeting influential people – including Pope John Paul II and Mother Theresa – the man himself comes across as very humble. Partly this is achieved through the tentative way in which his ideas are presented. They always suggest that there is more to know or understand. In his words, ‘I am much more concerned about the true believer than the skeptic’ (113). Partly it is a product of the many acknowledgements of the role that others have played in his life and his learning. For me, it came through most strongly in the self-deprecating humour he applied to himself, such as the doctored photomontage of Zehr meeting Gandhi, St Thomas Aquinas, Flannery O’Connor and Shamu the Dolphin (108). It is also clear in his approach to learning, where he suggests that wonder and awe are attitudes that can help us to develop and make connections.

Regarding his personal development, Zehr refers to being the ‘first White graduate of Morehouse College’ (199), before studying at Talladega College, both historically Black institutions. In his words, ‘I was forced to become aware of how fundamentally our values, our world-views, our approaches to education, are shaped by culture and ethnicity’ (199). He explains that these experiences were formative for him and increased his understanding of racism and inequality while leading him into engaging with justice issues, such as working with prisoners. He also acknowledges his privilege as a ‘gray-haired White guy’ (166). Here, and throughout other references to inequality and othering, he attempts to give due recognition to those who are disadvantaged in the world and the important work that many others do to respond to injustice. Moreover, he emphasises that our biography shapes so much of ‘What we think we know, how we come to know it, how we use what we know’, meaning that we need to remain humble about everything we come to believe as true.

A question often asked in the field is what exactly is restorative justice?¹ There are many definitions and uses, including seeing it as a process, a mechanism, a range of practices, set of principles, a mind-set or a movement. Here we have another candidate definition: *restorative justice is a way of being*. Although the book provides several descriptions of doing restorative justice and living restoratively, it is done in such a way that opens up possibilities rather than closing them down. In this way, it encourages reflection rather than dictates what should be done. In Zehr’s words, restorative justice is a ‘compass more than a blueprint’ (173).

One of the images that stayed with me was sujatha baliga’s description of how Zehr cuts apples: ‘I love watching how he carefully, lovingly makes slices that preserve every bit except the stem and the seeds, which, of course, he composts’

1 Note from the editors: a question, by the way, that inspired this whole special issue of *The International Journal of Restorative Justice*.

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(156). Indeed, the image comes back to me every time I cut an apple. It also speaks to what he has done in this book. From photographs to speeches, reflections to accounts of his time spent as an amateur radio operator, everything is preserved and given value. What we have here, then, is a text that provides some insights into Howard Zehr, the man, and restorative justice – the idea, practice, principles or way of being. Through its content and form, it encourages the values and approaches that are its focus: dialogue, perspective taking, humanising others, humility, wonder, awe. Whether you are new to restorative justice or an expert in the field, coming to this text to learn about the concept or the man, you will find something in here of value.

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