

### III Angel Words Inside Prison Gates: Participatory Action Research as an Action of Restorative Justice

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*when you screwed up once  
you don't get another chance  
where's your hope?<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Scenerio: Angel Words**

Angel cards are passed from one woman to the next, each participant choosing a word at random. Celebration. Healing. Play. Surrender. Discernment. Joy. Listening. Learning. One by one, we speak to what our word means to us, experientially, narratively, relationally, spiritually, metaphorically. Voices around the table express hope, loss, desire, ambitions, regrets, all encapsulated within a single word. There is a richness of language and thought, story and expression that surprises and delights.

A group of women seated in a cement block room—some of us researchers from the university, some of us residents of the correctional centre—listen intently as each woman speaks to the card in her hand. Angel words are springboards to action, they draw from us the hope of new beginnings, a reciprocation of tellings and compassion that awake new possibilities.

What conversation might we have, we wonder, if one of the cards drawn was “restore”? What meaning would the word ‘restore,’ or its derivatives, ‘restoration’ or ‘restorative’ evoke? How might we understand our evolving relationships and interactions together? Could a participatory action research project evoke restorative justice and learning inside the prison gates?

1 The quotes in italicized Arial font are from women inmates who participated in the research team at the correctional centre and who will be referred to as peer researchers.

## Introduction

This chapter explores restorative justice and learning enacted within a correctional centre through a participatory action research project.<sup>2</sup> The notion of restore has its roots in giving back, or taking back something lost. The word 'restore' calls attention to what matters, what is absent, and invites new ways to engage that enable new relationships. A restorative action is one that allows an individual to perform within a communal space of respectful engagement and reciprocal learning. Action, as Hannah Arendt (1958) argues, is an invitation to new beginnings, to engage with hope and promise in the world with others. She writes,

To be isolated ... is to be deprived of the capacity to act ... It seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement by which many join by "bearing" and "finishing" the enterprise, by seeing it through. (pp. 188-189)

In 2005 we participated in a participatory action research project in which women inmates were invited to undertake research in their gated community, the ramifications of which are still being experienced by participants and university researchers. Our learning through this research project calls us to new beginnings, a restorative engagement that requires renewed attention to the women's plights and societal responses within and beyond correctional sites. Originally designed to focus on improving the health of women in prison, the research project engaged women as in-house researchers (i.e. peer researchers) in an exploration that empowered them as they worked and learned alongside university researchers. This project proposes possibilities of justice that can arise when new ways of engagement emerge within difficult locations.

Restorative justice is a commitment to shared learning, reciprocity, compassion, and understanding through engagements of dialogue and action. Commonly understood as a practice that precedes sentencing or as an alternative to conventional routes of dealing with persons found guilty (or accused) of a crime, practitioners of restorative justice invite us to reconsider the relationship between those accused or guilty of crime and the individual(s) and society to whom and within which those crimes were committed. Restorative justice within prison walls

2 The title of this research project is *Community-based participatory action research: Collaborating with women in prison to improve their health*. This project is funded by the B.C. Medical Services Foundation, Vancouver Foundation, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CHIR), Ottawa, Canada.

seems contradictory. Yet, in the process of establishing an in-house research group composed of inmates, this research project created a new understanding of what restorative justice and learning might mean when enacted within the prison gates.

### **Participatory Action Research as an Action of Restorative Justice**

*feeling better about yourself is wanting to succeed  
we have no control over anything  
we need to be empowered to succeed  
as a holistic approach that is about every part of your life*

Participatory action research (PAR) engages participants in their own learning, to address their situation and needs, and to propose solutions. To create spaces of dialogue, and to invite inmates to actively research their situation in order to improve their health and wellbeing within a prison setting, represents an institutional shift from a prison as a site of punishment and rehabilitation to one of restoration. Participatory action research offers participants the opportunity to speak to their experiences and imagine something new. According to Kemmis & McTaggart (2005),

At its best, then, participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions. (p. 563)

Our question, based on our experience, becomes whether participation in a participatory action research project located in a correctional centre can be in and of itself a form of restorative justice? Through shared inquiry, all participants are invited to acknowledge, recognize, and address factors underlying the incarcerated women's overall wellbeing and propose new ways of engagement that seek to readdress their situation and recurrent incarceration in terms of shared responsibility—individually and communally. Might engagement in a participatory action research project, such as ours, provide a venue for individuals to perform differently, not as inmates or university researchers or correctional officers, but as individuals all vitally engaged in and concerned about the ongoing recidivism currently plaguing the penal system?

To reimagine our social, political, and professional roles is to create new roles of responsibility, opportunity, and engagement. To create

conditions and an environment that invite interruption to the *status quo* requires an inquisitive and questioning perspective. As Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) explain,

PAR [participatory action research] aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints embedded in the social media through which they interact—their languages (their discourse) their mode of work, and the social relationships of power.... (p. 56)

To initiate a participatory action research project within a prison requires that all participants—prison staff, university researchers, and women inmates—learn to relate and listen to each other in constructive and meaningful ways that in turn allow them to re-engage differently. The task at hand is not “rehabilitating” the women inmates *per se*, but rather to find ways to invite all participants into a meaningful dialogue and action that in turn improves the physical and mental wellbeing of women, both in and out of prison.

It was supposed at the beginning of this research project, that if women inmates knew the dangers of poor eating and hygiene and drug abuse, or how AIDS was transmitted, a healthier prison and ex-prison population would be the result. And in fact, for example, after a research questionnaire, dietary changes were made by the canteen supplier<sup>3</sup> in response to the peer researchers’ request to expand the choice of healthier selections. What was not anticipated by the university researchers was that membership in the research team itself would become a restorative endeavour, actively engaging individuals in speaking to their experiences of the challenges they faced both within the correctional centre and that accompanied re-entry into their communities. It was through the sharing of individual experiences and recognition of the overlapping narratives that enabled the peer researchers to identify the barriers of resistance that continue to exist to prevent successful re-entry.

What was startling in this research project was how quickly the peer researchers shifted the focus of the original research project from issues related to prison health to identifying and addressing the barriers outside the prison gates, those social, economic, educational and

3 Women inmates are allowed to purchase items from the canteen which stocks a variety of supplies including food snacks.

systemic conditions that discourage successful integration into the community. Primary among these were the lack of housing, limited educational and job training opportunities, and most significantly, unresolved issues of sexual and drug abuse. As one peer researcher wrote in response to a conversation around the challenges facing women inmates,

*Most of the women in the prison system are uneducated, from financially challenged families who because of failures in our system wound up on the street, losing themselves in the use of drugs....*

In this project, our understanding of community is multi-fold. There is the correctional community of the prison (prison staff, administration, inmates, community workers), the “insider” community composed of women inmates including those with membership on the research team (peer researchers), and of course, the larger community (i.e. society) in which the correctional centre operates. In such a complex environment, engaging women inmates actively in research to address the issues concerning themselves becomes an act of intervention, interruption, and invitation.

In any institutional setting there are power differentials. Notably, in this research project, conventional power dynamics were disrupted. University researchers effectively took their cues from the peer researchers on the research team, who over a period of time developed rituals and practices, and determined choices of action, based on their perceived needs and desire to “make a difference for others.” Theirs was a proactive agenda that sought to readdress the challenges women who have been incarcerated face upon returning to their communities. Equally important was the learning that emerged, as life narratives, experiences, and concerns that were shared. The original research project had, in hindsight, modest ambitions. Placed in the hands of the peer researchers, the project took on an educational component that sought to engage in restoration both within and beyond the institution.

The process of placing the research agenda directly into the hands of the peer researchers involved a shifting of identities and responsibilities. The willingness of the university researchers to be guided by the peer researchers necessitates, “respect for the community’s knowledge that requires researcher humility” (Grant *et al*, 2008: 598).

As researchers, the university members on the research team continually reassessed their role as the peer researchers took greater ownership of the activities of the research team and the direction of the

research. Members on the prison research team, peer researchers, and university researchers, began to connect with each other in meaningful ways, learning side by side, allowing the voices of the peer researchers and their understanding of their own experiences, and those of their fellow inmates, to shape the research and guide the process.

As Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) state, "... PAR researchers are embarked on a process of transforming themselves as researchers, transforming their research practices, and transforming the practice settings of their research" (p. 575). This experience of "letting go" to see what would emerge during the process was exciting; a willingness to undertake new roles was liberating and educational for all involved:

... participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005: 563)

### **Restorative Justice Within a Prison Setting**

*You got no one  
Cause of the life you made  
Because of the choices you made*

We need to discover a philosophy that moves from punishment to reconciliation, from vengeance against offenders to healing for victims, from alienation and harshness to community and wholeness, from negativity and destructiveness to healing, forgiveness and mercy. That philosophical base is restorative justice. (Consedine, 1995:11 as quoted in Hadley, 2001: 8)

Restorative justice challenges the mainstream concept of correctional institutions as venues to punish and/or rehabilitate women accused of crime, and calls our attention to the relationships, practices, and values that guide and influence human encounters. As criminologist Liz Elliott explains, restorative justice requires a coherency of values for the greater good (Dec 4, 2008, personal conversation). Restorative justice also calls for reflective change: "The hallmark of Restorative Justice is ongoing transformation: of perspectives, of structures, and of persons" (Hadley, 2001: 8-9). Restorative justice, as we are defining it within the parameters of this research project, invites participants to engage in a communal

process in order to address the resources and/or lack thereof within the community that enables individuals at odds with the law (and society) to successfully reintegrate into society. (Or to integrate, as one peer researcher pointedly countered, as many women inmates are victims of child, physical, emotional, family, institutional and/or sexual abuse, and had never been “successfully integrated” within their community.)

The workings of the correctional system, as experienced by the peer researchers, disempowered them, often leaving them outside the gates with little more than bus money and the clothes in which they had originally arrived. Conversations with the peer researchers highlighted the disconnect between what was expected from women inmates by society and its institutions and the reality of their situations. As Peter Gabel tells us,

Our problem is ... finding a way to heal the cultural alienation that has disabled us from creating a loving and caring society ... we need to envision a new kind of legal culture that preserves individual liberty against group-sanctioned injustice but that also understands the legal arena as a moral environment within which to build greater empathy, trust and solidarity. (1997: 8 as quoted by Hadley, 2001: 7)

As newcomers to institutional incarceration we were amazed by the gaps that exist within systems and practices of engagement: educational, correctional and societal, that fail to address the actual needs of women inmates, gaps that the peer researchers drew our attention to through their narratives and the recommendations that emerged through their research. At one critical juncture, our experience gave us pause as one peer researcher invited us to reimagine correctional centres (i.e. prisons) as locations where opportunity for success would be the key focus of engagement:

*Can you imagine a woman coming to jail, finding out what her real desire is, choose a career, educate, get a place . . . can you imagine a better system outside the box—  
imagine that!*

Restorative justice requires that society—institutions, communities, individuals— collectively take responsibility for the creation of a viable environment to enable the return of an individual to his or her life’s journey within the community. This process must be one that is respectful, caring, and pro-active, and yet one that also requires that the individual acknowledge responsibility for his or her role and choices of action, and that both the institution and community engage in a willingness to partner

with the individual to help him or her to create a responsible life. The question then becomes: what processes, practices, and relationships may be created within the prison walls to enable and empower men and women inmates to come to a place of ownership and wellbeing for their current and future endeavours? To ask women inmates, as this research project did, to actively identify and engage in ways that provide them and their peers with the necessary tools, information, and opportunities to research and share their learning with each other and members of the immediate and outside community is in itself an action of restorative justice.

The implementation of a participatory action research team within prison gates has given us a glimmer of the learning and healing and restorative contributions possible when women inmates are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful ways with their situation, and to address what matters to them and how the community might be invited to respond. What arises is a reciprocal relationship that requires mindful attention and participation by all parties involved and a sharing of leadership in practices that invite inmates and communities to reimagine ways of engagement.

The section that follows shares a few of the PAR practices that emerged through the period of the research group, and some of the activities that engaged the peer researchers with their immediate community within the prison and with members of the community outside the prison gates. These activities evolved through the initiative of the peer researchers, and were encouraged by the prison family physician (i.e. principle investigator) and recreation therapist, who with gentle guidance assisted the women as they assumed positions of leadership and responsibility for the decisions and activities of the research group.

### **Restorative Justice through Practices of Inquiry**

“... We got together, and we decided that as a group we would kind of make a few changes and sort of go with the ball. We’re gonna do some workshops on proposal writing so that we can take to the guards proposals of the different things we want to do to better, the health inside the facility. So we are gonna do resumé writing, proposal writing, public speaking presentations, maybe the weekend before we could get together and we could help present.” - peer researcher, prison research team meeting April 7, 2006

The correctional centre’s family physician initiated the participatory action research project in collaboration with the warden, recreation therapist and a group of medical researchers. As the project progressed,

four educational researchers from the Faculty of Education of the same university were invited to join the research team, as it became evident that this project was educational in nature and practice. The learners were the members of the research team, both those within and outside the gates. However, it was the peer researchers who offered the greatest insights into the educational responsibilities and possibilities of correctional centres, and the research project itself became an example of what becomes possible when learning is self and group-directed.

At this minimum level security correctional facility, women are held prior to sentencing, and/or have received sentences ranging from a few weeks to two years less a day. There are several programs available (alcohol and drug use counselling, secondary-school make-up courses, anger management, emotions management) including a work requirement of six hours each day, five days a week, in which women may choose or be assigned to kitchen duty, horticulture, living unit maintenance, laundry or doggy day care. Joining the in-house participatory research team became one of the work requirement options. Some women joined for as little as one week, others extended their membership of the research team up to and beyond the date of their release. In total, almost 200 women inmates participated in the 23 months of prison research.

How did we come to implement a participatory action research project in the correctional centre? The prison physician has worked part-time in prison medical clinics since 1994. Over the years, she has listened to many stories told to her by women who come for medical care in the prison clinic as they cycle in and out of the system. She has listened to women tell her what does *not* work for them, and what *would* work for them; she has listened to women tell her that they *want* to lead healthy and meaningful lives but that they just face too many hurdles when they leave the prison. She has listened to their desperation and lack of hope. In the past, she led traditional medical prison research to determine health issues such as the rate of abnormalities on cervical cancer screening and the rate of illicit drug use. However, when she learned about 'Action Research' while taking an online course in the Spring of 2005, she knew immediately that *this* was the type of research needed; if women are invited to participate in research processes as equal partners, they may start to create the solutions for themselves.

The peer researchers developed an orientation package that new members joining the research team were invited to complete. The orientation package was revised with minor iterations over several months as new women joined and shaped the group's processes. The final orientation package (available at [www.womenin2healing.org](http://www.womenin2healing.org)) included:

- a 'welcome to the women's health research team' work placement questionnaire including questions about a member's computer skills and skills they wish to acquire;
- a new member questionnaire including a demographic self-survey and health-related questions;
- a 'paragraph of passion' exercise which asked women to write a response to: What area do you want to learn more about in order to improve your health and the health of others?;
- a drug of choice paragraph and survey which asked peer researchers to describe their illicit drug use;
- an optional life story exercise in which women were invited to write about meaningful life events; and,
- a peer researcher confidentiality agreement and consent form.

The peer research team developed a daily routine for themselves that included beginning each meeting with 'angel words' (each person in turn randomly selected an angel card from a closed bag and shared with the group what the word meant to them that day) and a reading from a spiritual reflection book. These routines often led to discussions related to their spiritual and emotional healing, which in turn fostered an atmosphere of peer support within the research team. In addition, the peer research team developed organizational processes that provided opportunities for participants to develop leadership within the group in terms of: administrative and organizational skills, public speaking, liaising with correctional staff, and peer mentoring in computer, language and writing skills.

The research team and prison staff engaged in a variety of health and education activities. These included:

- educational and research presentations created and given by peer researchers at conferences;
- hosting and presenting at prison health research forums with academic researchers, community agencies, funders, and policy makers
- developing a library of Powerpoint health education presentations; and,
- visiting a local high school to inform and share their stories about the harms of drug and alcohol use.

Peer researchers also created and conducted several surveys on health and healing topics about which they felt passionate, such as housing, dental care, nutrition, and exercise. They also took the lead on several prison interventions, such as:

- hosting participatory qualitative analysis workshops;
- engaging in writing workshops and research discussions with academic researchers;
- designing a Webpage that would communicate project findings; and,
- providing community resource information for women leaving prison.

Each new woman joining the prison research team was encouraged to write what the peer researchers called a paragraph of passion. This short paragraph detailed the interest that the woman had in a topic of her choice, whether it was on drug abuse, self-abuse, babies in prison, housing, co-dependency, indigenous spirituality. A peer researcher's paragraph of passion identified the reasons why she was interested in her topic and provided a springboard for research, information gathering, and eventually, the production of a Powerpoint presentation to be presented to the correctional centre's population of women inmates.

Monthly community forums hosted by the peer researchers were held in the prison gymnasium to which all the women inmates in the correctional centre were invited to attend. The peer research team explained the participatory action research project, invited others to join, and presented their Powerpoints on the topics they had chosen to research. The forums were simultaneously pedagogical and celebratory events.

The experience of being engaged in new dialogues empowered the peer researchers, offering them new ways of engagement within the correctional centre as they endeavoured to improve the conditions faced by themselves and their fellow inmates. The emergent rituals, conversations, and practices of the research team in action and interaction with others, and the respect and attention received by the women from the university researchers, prison warden, and outside community members, played a viable role in building self confidence and self-worth.

"So I guess, kinda what my job right now is I'm going to do research on doing a workshop on resume writing, cover letters, how to help women figure out how to pay bills; because of previous meetings that we've had women were saying that they forget how to do that stuff because they are incarcerated for a long period of time. This can also fall into the first and second stage housing and I think that it is important, I have a little bit to offer so I am really excited

about doing that.” -peer researcher, prison research team  
meeting April 7, 2006

A prevailing question preoccupied the peer researchers as they worked on the research project: How am I going to succeed outside the gates? The project offered them opportunities to engage in meaningful work, to inquire critically and constructively about their collective and individual needs. The project initiated restoration on the inside of the gates in anticipation of new beginnings on the outside. A shared ambition amongst the peer researchers was the desire to “give back,” of engaging in relevant work, of working together towards the wellbeing of themselves and others.

Learning how to research, designing and conducting surveys, identifying issues, speaking to possible solutions, and presenting Powerpoints to their peers, prison staff, researchers, and community service workers (in group gatherings of over hundred women) and at international and national conferences gave the peer researchers a multitude of new skills and renewed confidence, and the ability to discern what matters. The learning was reciprocal as the peer researchers learned side by side with the university researchers, their peers, volunteers, and staff. As one prison guard commented following a presentation on cocaine by one of the peer researchers at a staff training session, “After 25 years of working here, I have learnt more from your presentation than I have learnt from all previous staff training sessions about drug use.”

Undertaking research activities through PAR provided opportunities for new skills in leadership, technology, analysis, and public speaking. Informal peer counselling occurred as women shared their life stories, recognized the commonalities, and by listening and responding, created a space for women’s narratives to be heard and acknowledged. Most importantly, the project allowed the peer researchers to make a meaningful contribution to the prison community in which they lived; furthermore, their research and insights offered new possible solutions to address the challenges women inmates face within the communities to which they are returning.

Our understanding of restorative justice then has been one lived through new practices that do not fit into the conventional practices of a correctional centre, and which instead, challenge the penitentiary system and the community at large to reconsider its practices of justice within the prison gates.

## Performing Restorative Justice

*I think most women in here are women who have gone through trauma  
we're being punished for being abused  
killing the pain with drugs  
getting the help you need  
the only way we know how to deal with pain  
it's a band-aid.*

Restorative Justice...requires all of us to come to grips with who we are, what we have done, and what we can become in the fullness of our humanity. It is about doing justice as if people really mattered: it addresses the need for a vision of the good life, and the Common Good. (Hadley, 2001: 9)

What did this research project, which operated for 23 months within the prison gates of the correctional centre, teach us about restorative justice? What have we learned during this time that continues to encourage us in our work with women who seek to reform their lives outside the gates?

In our conversations, the women expressed their desire to help others, to contribute to society, to give their lives meaning. We learned that if given the opportunity, space, support, and guidance, women incarcerated in prison can take an active role in redefining their environment, in questioning what is, and opening up, through their actions, new ways of engagement with those co-existing within their community inside the prison gates.

Their queries turned the inquiry back upon the community at large outside the prison gates: what is our role as a community, within a society driven by its economic, social, and political agendas; how might we engage in meaningful ways that release us from our habits of engagement, to awaken and see the world anew as if for the very first time? In acknowledging our complicity, our vulnerability, our willingness to learn, we may in working together with prison inmates enact new conversations and engage in new practices that extend beyond the prison gates. This is the promise of restorative justice practices.

The gift of our experience of working with the women in the prison research project is that our expectations were challenged; those of us new to correctional environments had to, through this experience, reconsider popular misconceptions. These women are smart. They know what they need. They have the courage and ability to take on meaningful work if given the opportunity and support to engage in ways that

recognize them not as inmates, but as valuable and contributing members of a community.

Greene (1978) warns us that to be half-awake is to be susceptible to the norms and practices of conventional ways of being. It is critical, she admonishes, that we be wide-awake, and cognizant of who performs us, and how we are performed:

If individuals are wide-awake and make decisions consciously ... to participate in some type of social inquiry, they are choosing to abide by certain standards made available to them. *In doing so, they are becoming acquainted with what it means to choose a set of norms.* They are not only creating value for themselves, they are creating themselves.... (p. 49, italics inserted)

By becoming aware of the institutional and social roles and norms that shape our relationships with others, we can begin to trouble them, and in doing so, to engage differently, such as our research team did during the participatory action research project. Gavenata & Cornwall (2008) speak of participatory action research as a viable vehicle through which we may investigate and reimagine how and with whom we engage:

... what is empowering about participatory research is the extent to which it is able to ... create more democratic forms of knowledge, through action and mobilization of groups of people to act on their own affairs, in a way that also involves their own critical reflection and learning. (p. 182)

Brought to the forefront are the ethical choices we make as a society, in relationship with others, requiring a willingness to engage in new paradigms of justice and restoration.<sup>4</sup> Turning to Fine & Torre (2008), we propose that our readers might substitute the term participatory action research with that of restorative justice:

Participatory action research [restorative justice] provides a vital way of resuscitating and maintaining a questioning and participatory democratic practice, one with the potential to unleash a diaspora of radical struggle, hope and possibility across generations. Participatory action research [restorative justice] is a strategic tool [of reciprocal learning] by which research collectives [institutions and communities] can interrupt the drip feed, engage critical questions, produce new knowledge, provoke expanded audiences and ask, in

the language of the poet Marge Piercy (1973) how can we  
'be of use'? (p. 417)

As our research project unfolded, we began to recognize our project as a possible model of restorative justice that might occur *within* correctional institutions. Is it possible, we wondered, as our practices unfolded through the duration of the project, that we had found a way of enacting restorative justice in collaboration with the peer researchers who guided our learning?

We began to ask questions about the relationship between our in-house research team and the correctional centre in terms of a practice of communal engagement and restoration. Who negotiates, who facilitates, who mediates the journey of the individual from prison back into community? Who is present in the decision-making process, how are the incarcerated invited into the process? What dignity, acceptance, responsibility of engagement is allotted to the prisoner by a correctional institution and its staff? What acknowledgement exists with the prison system that recognizes the inmates' knowledge, personal narratives, experiences, pain and abuse, "on the street" expertise, and personal courage as an opportunity to learn together—how are these narratives, ways of knowing and survival, acknowledged, accepted, and addressed by the institution and community within which the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated live?

Does the justice system and the communities that it serves recognize its own complicity in how those who have been incarcerated are perceived and how they are treated both within and outside the prison walls? Reciprocity through restorative justice requires acknowledgment of one's own role in crime and punishment, recognition of the underlining reasons for criminal activity and recidivism, and shared responsibility in the success or failure of an inmate's re-entry into her or his community.

"As you realize we came together as a group and did it and I am proud of us and I hope that if we only touched one person it was going to be something that anyone of us said ... and they are going to remember it for the rest of their lives I hope they looked at those pictures, heard what we said and are going to think about it ... Our stories were very reality based and I feel a sense of pride of our group as a whole."

- peer researcher, debriefing presentation to high school

The implementation of a PAR team within prison gates has given us a glimmer of the learning and healing and restorative contributions possible when women inmates are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful

ways within their situation, to identify and address what matters to them, and to reflect on how the community might be invited to respond. What arises is a reciprocal relationship that requires mindful attention and participation by all parties involved, and a sharing of leadership in practices that encourage inmates, correctional institutions, and communities to reimagine ways of restorative engagement.

What is interesting and ultimately disheartening in the final analysis, however, is that the prison system due to internal pressures turned against the women inmates by shutting down what was to have been a five-year research project. The repercussions of change in management and the loss of the research project along with the resignation of the prison's recreation therapist and discontinuation of other key programs have been palpable. Thus the correctional institution reinforces the punitive and enacts questionable rehabilitative actions of "correction." To understand the response of the correctional system to the research team's work, and its eventual closure, requires an understanding of the systemic influences and constructs that inhibit emancipatory and restorative action.

Performing restorative justice requires that we pay close attention to how we are performing practices of institutional incarceration in relationship with others; that we engage each other in meaningful and respectful dialogue and action; and that we recognize the emergent gifts and healing that comes from recognizing each other, not by our labels, or our crimes, but by our humanity. Performing restorative justice through a participatory research project such as ours requires that individuals step out of assigned institutional roles, and learn how to engage in meaningful ways that bring new light into locked rooms. Nestled within our angel word, 'restore,' is an invitation to embrace an understanding of reciprocity, of learning side by side, of renewal, of compassionate action, and new beginnings. Restorative justice is, we propose, a commitment to the pedagogical opportunities that arise when we sit together at a table and share angel words.

*if you had some hope  
if you choose a direction that would heal you  
if you had some support  
... I want my place back*

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