

JAVIER STAURING

# Healing the Broken

Thoughts on serving 25 to life, side by side

In more than two decades of working with incarcerated children, their families, and victims of crime, I have seen a lot of change in American crime and punishment. Recently, the chant of “tough on crime” has become “smart on crime” and a bipartisan issue. It is now politically safe to advocate that those with nonviolent and drug-related offenses be released from prison. I am profoundly grateful for the positive changes that allow some of our brothers and sisters to come home. However, some of these people should never have been in prison in the first place. Passing laws to give them a better chance of being released from prison is less an act of generous humanitarianism than an attempt for society to regain its sanity and correct some terrible legislation.

The United States is the only country in the world that sentences children to life in prison without the possibility of parole, but that horrifying practice is beginning to wane. Over the past five years, state and federal Supreme Courts have ruled that mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles is unconstitutional, and California has enacted legislation that allows most of those sentenced to life as juveniles to petition for a new sentencing hearing. The hope generated by these efforts, giving a second chance to those who committed serious crimes at a young age, is transformational. This pendulum shift is the hard-won result of the organizing and advocacy efforts of passionate, resilient people who have lived with the ramifications of the gross failures of our justice system.

When a teenager is sentenced to life in prison with no chance of ever securing release, it is a signal that society has given up on that person. But what good does that do the wider community from which he or she came? It creates a new family destroyed by crime, ripped apart by loss. When you consider that most victims and perpetrators of crime come from the very same communities, it compounds the tragedy. I have met

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Photograph of Javier Stauring by Joseph Rodriguez/Redux.

too many moms who visit one son in prison on Saturday and another son in the cemetery on Sunday. Instead of inflicting further injury on already traumatized communities, we must find a way to help them heal. This has been my life's work, first as a chaplain at Central Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles, then as a minister at the Office of Restorative Justice of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and finally as executive director at Healing Dialogue and Action.

In our society, some try to reconcile a fixation on extreme punishment by making simplistic claims such as, "I stand with the victims." The implication is that, in the name of justice, we should pick a side: the victim or the offender, the good person or the evil one. But it's not that simple.

At Healing Dialogue and Action, we bring together the families of murder victims and the families of youth who were tried as adults and given lengthy adult prison terms; the two groups that every written and unwritten rule says should never meet. Every convention asserts

that they have nothing in common; the criminal justice system reinforces the belief that they have only opposing interests.

Healing Dialogue and Action starts with the idea that families of victims and families of offenders have experienced loss, violence, trauma, disenfranchisement, and being voiceless in a system that affects their lives. We believe those experiences harm people emotionally and physically. Our model is grounded in the concept that both personal interaction and the opportunity to act for the greater good through advocacy create pathways of healing.

At a recent Healing Dialogue and Action gathering, I sat in a small circle with six mothers who shared stories of loss, pain, and the desire to heal. Three of the mothers had children who were murdered, and the other three had children who were sentenced to life in prison for participating in a murder. Juana described the unimaginable day in which her life changed forever when her twenty-three-year-old

daughter and four-month-old granddaughter were murdered. Next, it was Monica's turn to share, although she could barely speak after listening to Juana. Monica said, "I feel like I don't deserve to cry because my son murdered someone; you, Juana, deserve to cry because your children were taken from you." Monica went on to talk about the paralyzing guilt she felt, which made it impossible for her to leave her house for two years following her son's trial. Juana then got up, embraced Monica, and said, "Of course, you deserve to cry. You lost your son as well, and I want to do whatever I can to help you bring your boy home one day." Two mothers, connected by shared pain, listening to each other with open hearts, leaning on one another and finding a piece of themselves in each other to become the best version of human beings we could all aspire to be.

Despite the inconceivable pain shared by Monica, Juana, and our brothers and sisters in prison, I have hope. My hope comes from accompanying young children who grow to realize they are more than the labels placed on them. It comes from attending to the families of homicide victims and being inspired by their ability to transform their loss and help others heal. It comes from accompanying resilient men and women who have spent decades in the most dehumanizing places ever built and who refuse to give up on their humanity. It comes as a product of the many lessons learned from the people who've taught me who God is.

These lessons include a number of principles that have shaped my work in seeking justice in California among both victims and offenders, so called. They may indeed serve as theses for our future as we seek a more just California.

- Crime plus punishment does not equal justice. While vengeance and retribution might show the measures of our resolve, compassion and love are the measures of our humanity.
- The greatest impact crime and our systemic response to crime have on our society is immense human suffering.
- The severe effect of our justice system on both the offender and the victim parallels the pain and trauma that is endured by family relationships and communities of both.
- Communities cannot regain health simply by throwing people away when they violate laws.
- The government is responsible for maintaining order; it is the communities' responsibility to build peace. The moral turf of justice cannot be left to law enforcement and politicians.
- The cliché is true: hurt people hurt people. But similarly, healed people also heal people.
- To build a justice system that promotes healing of people that are hurt by crime, we need to move into closer proximity to the individuals who are wounded.
- There is no "us" and "them." There is only us.

In closing, my greatest hope comes from praying that our society will one day realize the gift that people who have suffered the most have the greatest potential to teach us about our own humanity. If crime hurts, justice should heal. **B**