

Transforming the Restorative Justice Journey

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The death of George Floyd has catalyzed in our nation a deeper discussion about racial injustice and our criminal justice system. I asked myself this question: “What can restorative justice and restorative practices (RJ/RP) add to this discussion?”

The answer is complicated. Edward Valandra, Ph.D., who was born and raised on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation and has taught at both Native and non-Native colleges and universities, has researched and written about RJ/RP for almost two decades. Recently he wrote:

The contradiction between restorative practices and the Western, white supremacist, settler societies in which we practice them is inherent. We People of Color and Indigenous Peoples have not created the contradiction. It is there. But we collectively experience this contradiction in ways Whites do not. We feel an urgency about addressing this contradiction that our White settler colleagues seem not to perceive or express. We also feel an urgency about critically informing communities of color and Indigenous communities that this contradiction, while not of our making or choosing, is one we negotiate in restorative justice.

Valandra’s comments are part of the introduction to a timely new book, [Colorizing Restorative Justice: Voicing Our Realities](#), containing eighteen essays by restorative justice practitioners and scholars.

One of the essays, “Calling Out Whiteness,” is by Sheryl Wilson, director of the Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution; she is also the president of the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice. The publisher says that Wilson

poses a leading question for this book: How do People of Color (POC) survive in hyper racialized White systems? She exhorts readers to be acutely conscious of all-White and White-dominated spaces; otherwise dismantling them is exceedingly difficult. As she explains, failing to name and dismantle such realities, which POC face daily, subjects POC to harm. Black Lives Matter, now internationally famous, shows that the most basic daily activities, like driving or walking, can have lethal consequences for us.

Wilson outlines a path to authentic, meaningful conversations in the restorative work. First, she makes clear that POC and Indigenous Peoples need accomplices more than allies. Wilson draws on Dr. Jalane Schmidt’s differentiation of the two – a differentiation that, with some soul-searching, invites Whites to check their fragility. In the vernacular, whereas an ally is like a fair-weather friend, being an accomplice demands moral muscle and resolve from Whites who aspire to join the struggle for justice.

I am a White American male who is increasingly aware of the privileges associated with each of those attributes, especially in combination. I also have a mobility disability which makes me even more aware of the concept of privilege – in this case the privileges accorded to people without disabilities. For example, I recently called a pizza restaurant that I had never tried and which did not deliver to my address. I explained my situation – that traditional carryout was not practical – and asked if I could pull into their parking lot and have an employee carry it out. She (rather brusquely) said, No. **The point is that privileges are real; their presence or absence has felt consequences.**

As a White person I may benefit from certain privileges in dealing with the criminal justice system. As a White person serving on an Issue Team promoting RJ/RP, I have to ask myself some questions: “Am I an ally or an accomplice? Do I have the ‘moral muscle and resolve’ needed to join the struggle for justice? Can our Team promote RJ/RP to others in ways that acknowledge these challenges?”

A sober but hopeful note comes from Harley Eagle, a member of the Whitecap Dakota First Nations Reserve and a consultant in restorative justice and other conflict management strategies, anti-racism and anti-oppression, trauma informed practice, and cultural safety trainings and initiatives. Eagle wrote:

This book in many ways represents a journey. The journey of the modern RJ movement, now decades old, sadly, as a collective, has for the most part missed, watered down with romanticism, and in many cases intentionally and sometimes unintentionally excluded the voices represented here. It's not that the voices—so profoundly expressed in this collection – were silent over the years. In many cases, they were shouted, then lost in the winds of oppressive patterns normalized. The older voices, still circulating and revolving in the wind, and now joined with new ones are collected here. It is my hope they land on ears willing to hear their wisdom that will enrich and perhaps even transform the RJ journey, even when the wisdom is uncomfortable.