

Violence, Trauma, Healing, and the RJ Way

Reflection by Dr. Martha Hurley

Last week I was on my way to Chicago when the Highland Park shooting happened. The shooter had [passed background checks and purchased the gun legally](#). Unfortunately, mass shootings are not uncommon occurrences. Since the start of the year, there have been 329 mass shootings in the United States (see [Gun Violence Archive](#) for data). The majority of those shootings never made it to national news. They happened and most of us were none the wiser. Thus, to say that I felt troubled while in Chicago is putting it mildly.

As I thought about the violence that had occurred, faith was front and center. I was also reminded of the potential for restorative practices to help with healing.



When people think of restorative justice and the circle process, what typically comes to mind is the bringing together of the harmed, responsible party, and others to resolve conflict and right relationships. People are often less familiar with the value of restorative justice practices for healing in the aftermath of violence in the community.

Circles can be used to address collective trauma. Being a victim of or witness to violence, even if vicariously, can harm well-being. Feelings of isolation and/or hopelessness, interpersonal difficulties, questioning of values, loss of sleep, anxiety, irritability, exhaustion, anger, etc. are common side effects. Restorative justice practices can help people process and come to grips with the trauma caused by having violence front and center in our lives whether as victims, survivors, or vicarious observers.

Healing circles, for example, can help reduce the resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, feelings of hopelessness, and isolation that all too often follow in the wake of tragedy or community harms. In healing circles, each participant has the opportunity to share personal experiences of being a victim or witness to violence, explore the impact of violence, express our emotions, and connect with others to help cope with and heal from trauma. In circle, participants can name the harm that was experienced, listen to the stories of others, rebuild connections to the community, and sometimes be impacted by a message that they didn't even know they needed to hear in order to heal.

After the Buffalo shooting, the [National Federation for Just Communities of WNY](#) and the Just Buffalo Literary Center held racial healing circles for youth in the community. In Washington, [Collective Justice](#) offers Community Heal Circles to those who have lost a loved one to gun violence. At Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Chicago, women dedicated to healing from the traumas of violence and incarceration come together in circle "...to share stories of our loved ones, laugh and cry, and journey together toward healing" ([PBMR](#)).

It is my hope that more people will embrace the use of restorative practices to help with healing in communities.