

- Sincere, reforming repentance: "Sincerely feel remorse for the wrong you have committed; return any right you have usurped to its owner; beg the pardon of those you have offended; and resolve not to commit again the wrong you have committed."
- Danielle Sered wrote that "...if we hurt someone we have an obligation to face that pain, to face the person who felt that pain, to answer their questions, to hear how it affected them and their loved ones, to sit in that fire."
- Your life matters and you are loved. You each have your own unique gifts to offer others and the universe.
- If you are among the people who get caught for what you do, the one person who is formally on your side is your defense attorney and the first thing that lawyer tells you to say is "not guilty."

During the guilt-innocence phase of my trial for the murder of Daniel Branch, the prosecution displayed photos of the crime scene on a large screen mounted high in a corner of the courtroom. Situated so as to be visible to everyone, including Daniel's family. As one of those images appeared on the screen, Daniel's mother began to sob and wail. Later that evening, in a cell-like attorney visit booth, separated by a glass panel, my mother asked through her own sobs, "Why did they allow her to do that in front of the jury? Why did she do that?"

I replied, "Mom, what if it had been me in those photos, how would you have felt?" On that day I got a glimpse of how much pain my actions caused.

Restorative justice is a relatively new phrase in my vocabulary. After arriving on death row in 2004, things seemed to move fast and though I remembered the sound of pain and loss from Daniel's mother during the trial, I was overwhelmed by executions taking place at that time and an introduction to the appeals process.

Meeting with attorneys, investigators and psychologists was common and exhausting those first several years and left little room to reflect on much outside of prison walls. And even though I'd confessed to the murder of Daniel, there was no one willing to listen about how I felt. The attorneys and specialists representing me were focused on legal issues that could grant me some form of appellate relief and weren't interested in hearing me talk about guilt and in fact, advised me against it. Even family members were reluctant to hear me out, some of them refusing to believe I was guilty.

However, a few things happened around this time that made me aware of some of the concepts of restorative justice, though not in those words.

Studying a book about my Islamic faith, I came across a definition for repentance, specifically, a "sincere, reforming repentance." Some of the criteria are: "sincerely feel remorse for the wrong you have committed; return any right you have usurped to its owner; beg the pardon of those you

have offended; and resolve not to commit again the wrong you have committed." After reading this, it became my obligation to fulfill this criteria to the best of my ability.

In late 2005 Elias Syriani was given an execution date and through the media I learned he'd been convicted of killing his wife in a domestic dispute and that the remaining victims were his adult children.

When a condemned prisoner's appeals are exhausted in N.C., he or she typically petitions the governor for clemency. In this case, the living victims of the crime petitioned governor Mike Easley to spare the life of the man who murdered their mother, their own father, Elias Syriani. They asked the governor not to revictimize them. He refused to grant clemency and their father was put to death.

I wondered how his children felt to have had to deal with the tragic loss of their mother and then to have their wishes, perhaps their chance for healing, brushed aside by a state who chose to ignore the needs of the true victims and callously make itself the arbiter of "justice". To my knowledge there was no further mention of the children in the media, as if to say, "Justice has been done, everyone move along". The desire of Elias Syriani's children no longer mattered when it ran counter to that of the state.

Not long after this I came across an article about a mother who visited the

man who murdered her daughter. She spoke about having unanswered questions. About how she wanted to sit across from him and tell him how he'd torn her family apart. To be reminded what her daughter had gone through was difficult, but she was able to get her questions answered which helped her begin healing.

The experiences of these people, combined with the requirements of a sincere repentance in my faith compelled me to do something. I'd acknowledged my guilt from the beginning. I had no right to assume what Daniel's family did or did not need. If their healing required something from me then it was my responsibility to step up. I just didn't understand how such a thing is done.

In early 2015, I along with six other death row prisoners took part in a restorative justice circle led by Campbell law professor and restorative justice facilitator Jon Powell. To participate, we had to be willing to acknowledge responsibility for the crimes we committed and speak openly about what we'd done. We all agreed.

For three months, we met once a week in a small multi-purpose room of Central Prison's death row. Each week one of us would use the time to talk about the actions that led us to commit murder. We were able to start from as far back in our lives as we wanted, but we had to discuss our crimes.

It was evident from the beginning that though we may have discussed our crimes with family and friends, we'd never talked about them with such honesty and account-

tability as the circle demanded. As each person spoke, it seemed like we all felt responsible for the lives lost and after each of us concluded, everyone present was able to comment on what they just heard.

After several weeks, with only a few of us left to speak, we were introduced to Lynda Simmons, a new member of our group. Lynda was there to share her experience and listen to ours. She told us how her son Brian was on leave from the Coast Guard and that he'd slipped into the house so that she would be surprised to find him on the couch the following morning. She talked of how they'd spent the following day together and she even remembered the conversations they had.

Later that evening, Brian and his brother, Chris went out with some friends. Brian was shot to death as they walked down a city street. Through tears Lynda described the phone call she received from her son Chris' girlfriend in the predawn morning. As she was told of one son's death, she heard Chris wailing his grief in the background.

She told us of funeral arrangements, burying her child and the physical and emotional trauma suffered by her family as a result of their loss.

In court she looked at James, the man who murdered her son and told him he was more than a murderer. That she did not hate him and she forgave him. She even wrote to James a few times expressing concern for him.

As she spoke, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Listening to her, I felt responsible for her loss. I imagined her to be Daniel's mom speaking to me about how I had altered her life and more than anything, I wanted to ease her pain.

Creator of Common Justice and author of "Until We Reckon" Danielle Sered wrote that it is her belief "...if we hurt someone, we have an obligation to face that pain, to face the person who felt that pain, to answer their questions, to hear how it affected them and their loved ones; to sit in that fire." Lynda offered me an opportunity to see what it feels like to "sit in that fire." She also showed me what compassion and forgiveness looks like.

Later, in a letter she sent to the circle participants, she wrote, "If I could leave you with one thought it would be that your life matters and you are loved. You each have your own unique gifts to offer others and the universe. May the God of your own understanding bless you and keep you always in His amazing grace and loving mercy. Thanks you for being a blessing to me." This superwoman who had lost so much yet had so much more to give had more of an impact on my life than anyone else since my incarceration.

There are a number of hurdles that have to be overcome for a victim-offender dialogue to occur: First, prison policy prevents offenders from initiating communication with those they've harmed. The prison policy manual states, "Death row inmates are not allowed to have contact with their victim(s)' surviving family members unless the family members consent to contact in writing." "Contact" also

includes arranging for a third party to forward communications from the inmate to the surviving family members."

Second, offenders who wish to accept responsibility for their crimes typically lack support from their attorneys. Defense and appellate attorneys aren't trained in restorative justice. As our representatives in a daunting legal process we tend to defer to their advice, so when they tell us not to engage the victims or discuss remorse, we obey. I've been to court numerous times throughout my appeals and wanted to just say "I'm sorry" to the victims, only to be prevented by attorneys. Danielle Sered mentions this when she writes, "If you are among the people who get caught for what you do, the one person who is formally on your side is your defense attorney, and the first thing that lawyer tells you to say is "not guilty."

Third, if someone who has been victimized reaches a point where they want to meet with the offender, the Policy and Procedure manual states, "Visitation decisions involving adult crime victims shall be made on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the warden." Thus prison officials have the final say in whether a victim can engage in restorative justice.

Fourth, even professional restorative justice facilitators meet with resistance from prison officials when they attempt to coordinate victim-offender dialogues. Fortunately, Jon Powell has had some success in this arena. Professor Powell was recently given the go ahead to establish a victim-offender dialogue program within North Carolina prisons. Officials are currently developing a protocol for the program, which could

eliminate most of the hurdles I mentioned and provide an avenue for healing.

I am hopeful for the field of restorative justice. I am grateful for Lynda Simmons, Jon Powell, Danielle Sered and others who have shown me what it means to recognize the hurt I've caused Daniel and the Branch family. I'm sorry for the many ways my crime has negatively impacted society. I hope others like me will find meaningful opportunities to voice their remorse as well.

May this "justice" system which impacts us all in some way begin to see the value in restoration over retribution.

Thank You.