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About Jennifer Larson Sawin, Discussion Guide Author

Restorative Justice—Insights and Stories from My Journey

by Howard Zehr

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About the Book

Howard Zehr, widely recognized as one of the founders and early pioneers of the Restorative Justice field, has just written *Restorative Justice—Insights and Stories from My Journey* (Lancaster, PA: Walnut Street Books, 2023; 218 pages). As a curated collection of his essays, public speaking engagements, and insightful reflections over decades of work in the field, the book offers never-before-seen photos and anecdotes with a long-view commentary on how the field has grown, where it's been misunderstood, and its application in a variety of contexts and cultures, institutions, and communities. Reinforcing Zehr's influence, the book serves up tributes and notes of gratitude from more than 40 individuals ranging from a Nobel laureate, attorneys, researchers, nonprofit leaders, and practitioners—many who have studied under Zehr’s tutelage.

Suggested Audiences and Structure

With an eye on the book’s use, the publisher offers these free, downloadable Discussion Guides for three main audiences:

- **Restorative Justice practitioners, peacebuilders, and students** in the field who may already be familiar with Howard Zehr’s writing and work, or who may have experience applying Restorative Justice principles with individuals, in communities, or within institutions;
- **Book study groups** who are interested in autobiographical writing or who are curious about Restorative Justice as a concept to guide everyday living; and
- **Faith communities** reflecting on how restorative principles may apply in congregations and as an aide to bring about healthy and connected communities.

Within the Guide for each audience, four parts correspond to the outline of the book itself. Groups may consider using the Guide with each part as the focus of conversation for four successive meetings. Alternately, a larger group may self-organize into four sub-groups to lead discussions on the main themes of each part. While there remains much thematic overlap in the questions for each audience (e.g., the topic of forgiveness applies across the board), the prompts are designed with the audience’s specific context in mind. Questions use boldface to highlight the main idea in the question; page numbers are in parentheses for quick-find referencing in the book.

We want to hear how you’re using the text, especially if your applications are creatively diverging from these suggestions! Contact us to share how you’re applying it!

How to Contact the Publisher

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Introduction

Maybe you and your peers just sailed through a series of gripping novels, and you’re now ready to turn to a subject matter of social relevance and currency. You’re in luck, because not only is this text applicable to nearly every headline in the news these days, but it also contains traces of personal story. Don’t worry if the field of Restorative Justice (RJ) is new to you because the book starts with a brief primer on the concepts.

The book examines the idea of “justice” and how our society has come to equate it with “punishment” while also relegating those affected by harm (victims/survivors, offenders, a community) to abstract roles, acting in a highly choreographed, mysterious—and often mystifying!—system.

By turns humorous, self-deprecating, and hopeful, Howard Zehr as “grandfather” of the field of Restorative Justice includes personal stories of the people and social forces that sculpted his thinking and beliefs. Paired with tributes and endorsements by those his work has touched, Zehr’s writing may invite you to consider questions of influence, to identify your standout teachers, and to think about questions of identity and legacy. Who knows? After turning the last page here, you may reach for a journal to start scribbling your own life story.

So divvy up the four parts of the book, or its chapters, among book group members as you see fit. We offer these questions to get the juices flowing.
Preamble, Part I: What Exactly is Restorative Justice?

1. Some people think visually. How would you diagram the principles of Restorative Justice as Zehr describes them in Chapter 1? What concepts are embedded in, or related to other ideas? Who are the main actors and where do they fit? What are their relationships to each other and their larger context? How would you depict the element of time? Compare your diagram with others in your group.

2. Many concepts of justice—at least in the global North—include the notion that punishment, as doled out to the harm-doer, is a way of holding that person accountable and bringing justice to those affected by the harm. Zehr muses here (p. 16) that in his early writing, he stressed that punishment was not an especially meaningful form of accountability. How did punishment show up in your youth? In school, your family, your community? Who applied it? How was it dispensed, and what was the thinking behind the change supposedly spurred on by punishment? How were other individuals (e.g., those harmed, other stakeholders) included, if at all?

3. Zehr speaks unequivocally about RJ being “absolutely not about forgiveness” (p. 21-22). Did this come as a surprise to you? What’s your understanding of the main purpose and application of RJ principles? Why would HZ speak so strongly about the expectation of forgiveness? Where have you seen these ideas confused? Why do you think stories of forgiveness hold such power?

4. Zehr refers to James Gilligan, author and psychiatrist in prison settings, who has said that shame and the desire to remove it motivates much crime, and that violence is an attempt either to do justice, or to undo injustice. If that’s true, how can we view offenders as victims (for example, if they were raised in households where domestic violence tore relationships apart and became a template for behavior), without minimizing the harm they themselves may have caused to others (p. 39)?

5. We all know the proverb about the road to hell being paved with good intentions. Zehr understands that applying RJ principles with noble purpose may have unintended consequences (p. 51-54). What change initiatives have you started or witnessed that have veered off course from original intent? What factors contributed? What are you able to see now that you couldn’t see then?

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1 For example, see this episode from The Oprah Winfrey Show titled, “Finding Forgiveness” on October 25, 2004: https://www.oprah.com/spirit/finding-forgiveness/all.

6. What have your own encounters with the **criminal justice system** been like? Zehr describes it grimly as “a trauma factory” (p. 34) and quotes another scholar, Judith Lewis Herman, who suggests that its design reliably produces post-traumatic symptoms for victims (p. 56). If that’s true, and given the enormity of the system, what does change look like? Is tinkering with a broken system enough? What does it look like to heed the tall order of remaking it from the ground up? What would meaningful change look like?

7. Zehr describes his interest in “intuitive, emotional, less linear” photography as a counterpoint to the “rational, analytic, verbal...skeptical” fields of criminal justice and academics (p. 67). What are the different **ways of knowing** you experience in your family, at work, in your community? What is the role of the **arts**, visual media, music, and movement (p. 69) in the way you know about yourself and the world around you?

8. **Stereotypes** surround us: New Englanders are rude and drive aggressively; folks in the “flyover states” live on farms and milk cows; and we’re pretty sure that everyone in Africa has a pet lion cub. On the one hand, stereotypes are a natural way our brains make sense of a complicated world. On the other hand, stereotypes are inflexible, oversimplified, and often destructive. Zehr talks about “deliberately depriving viewers” of stereotypes in his documentary photography. In fact, he was actively trying to **undo**—or at least partially reverse—how those in prison are portrayed in the media (p. 72). In what ways do you avoid, reframe, or undo stereotypes in your everyday life? How have you been affected by stereotypes yourself?

9. The words “**humility**” and “**humble**” appear no less than 26 times in this book. Clearly, it’s a guiding light for Zehr’s wandering in the world. He advises that humility can be not only about how we act, but also about who we are, how we know, and how we respond when it turns out we don’t, in fact, know something (p. 75). What things did you once “know” about your work, family, or others, but now you aren’t quite so sure? What are the blind spots you’ve noticed about yourself over time?

10. Zehr introduces the concepts of **wonder** and **awe** (p. 75-76), words rarely heard in most everyday contexts. Where have you seen these values appear in yourself and others? What impact could adopting attitudes of wonder and awe have in your work, at home, with your family?

11. One of Zehr’s former students cites Zehr’s own “**willingness to be accountable**” (p. 84) as having shaped the RJ movement. In what spaces and times, and to whom are you willing to be held accountable? If you can recall such an occasion, what did it feel like, and what shifted afterwards?
Part 2: How I Got Here, Personally

1. Zehr suggests that his interest in photography stemmed from the dearth of copy machines in 1970s-era libraries (p. 90). So, he fashioned his own microfilm, lighting systems, and was drawn into the mystery and chemistry of photo production. What passions did you stumble upon by happenstance or outright necessity?

2. Based on Zehr’s own story, he advises young people to “pursue passions” and not to obsess over grades. Case in point, he spotlights Martin Luther King, Jr., “one of the greatest orators in history,” who landed himself a “C” in speech class (p. 91). Where have you stumbled but kept on trucking, and proven your strength or skill? How can we encourage young people to excel beyond report cards? What have been the attitudes around achievement in your own family and upbringing?

3. Citing his enrollment as a sophomore at Morehouse College in 1963, Zehr reflects that “immersion” was the only way to learn about his assumptions and his identity in the world (p. 95). What’s the blend of learning by study and learning by experience for you? Which modality works best for you? What does it feel like to consciously step into the unknown, perhaps into discomfort, in order to learn?

4. A professor from a younger generation interviewing Zehr wonders if generational transmission of good ideas is “like putting the ocean into bottles” (p. 98). How and where do you see instruction of the next generation taking place? What methods of learning seem most effective?

5. Zehr toys with questions of legacy in this book. While being aware of, and grateful for, having animated an entire generation of peacebuilders and justice-seekers (even being called the “Elvis” of RJ; p. 99), he eschews the spotlight and is uncomfortable with being called “father” of the field. What qualities of being, discoveries, and learning do you want to be remembered for? Where, how, and by whom will those memories be housed? What ideas of yours will morph and take on a life of their own?

6. Think about those who influenced you in your life choices. Zehr mentions Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 103), Vincent Harding (p. 94, p. 103), James Baldwin (p. 94), Mahatma Gandhi (p. 103), his Morehouse professors (p. 95), and other civil rights activists. What factors rendered you “ripe” for learning from those who influenced you?

Morehouse College is part of a network of around 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), established from the mid-1800s to the mid-1960s, whose original mission was to educate people of color denied admission to other universities on the basis of race.
7. Reflecting on turning points in his life, Zehr recalls that a fire at halfway house where he worked as a young man pushed him to reluctantly accept an assignment convening those affected by harm (p. 112-113). Looking back on your life and work, where are the inflection points that set your feet on a new, perhaps unexpected, path?

8. Humor appears throughout this book. There’s the mash-up of Zehr supposedly appearing with Gandhi (p. 108), and a photo of Zehr sporting a constable hat (p. 117). How does humor enter into your life and work? Do you use it purposefully? What function might humor play in living restoratively?

9. One tribute included in the book suggests that Zehr believes all people have the right to be heard, to say, “We are here,” and to create beauty (p. 122). What are the ways you hear versions of “We are here” in your life and work? What human need lies at the root of a declaration like that?

Part 3: Photography, Art—and Radio—at the Healing Edge

1. Before COVID-19’s “social distance” recommendation for public health reasons, there was what social scientists called relational social distance, which allows us to turn a person into an object, into “the other,” an abstraction deserving of punishment or neglect (p. 127). Zehr’s Doing Life was an explicit attempt to reduce relational social distance between readers and those who are incarcerated. How can you reduce relational social distance in your life and work, in your family and community? In what ways might you be “othering” someone or a group of people?

2. Zehr suggests that metaphor can drive our ways of thinking and communicating (p. 151-155). In Zehr’s book Transcending: Reflections of Crime Victims, one survivor described dealing with grief as trying to climb “a ladder without rungs.” Where have you turned to metaphors to describe difficult experiences in your life? What were they, and how did they serve you?


5. In this era of social media and documenting much of our lives for others’ consumption, what role does the taking and sharing of pictures play in your life? Have you thought about the metaphorical language of “taking” a photo (implying ownership) or “shooting” a photo (implying overpowering)? What would it be like to shift the language to “receiving” a photo instead (p. 133)? Would that be a meaningful or significant change for you?

4. In the criminal justice arena, Zehr has used documentary photography to tell the stories of those serving life sentences, victims and survivors of severe violence, and the children of prisoners. What other groups or individuals would you want to see featured in future projects of this kind? Whose voices do you think need to be amplified?

5. Zehr talks about the pigeonholing he experienced as a boy growing up in the 1950s. He wasn’t especially sporty. He was shy and an introvert (p. 148). These characteristics molded his choices of study and his other diversions like ham radio. What forces in your family, your community, and the society at large shaped your identity and the choices you made as a child or young adult? In what ways might prevailing expectations around gender roles limit those with whom you work or live?

Part 4: Restorative Justice: A Vision to Guide and Sustain Us in All of Life

1. Zehr writes that most people experience a “push or call to make the world a better place” (p. 159). Do you believe this is a universal experience? Has it been true for you? What was the story of that push? How did you respond?

2. Zehr mentions—briefly—one RJ practice: a circle process (p. 170). Have you sat in a circle of this kind before? How did you experience the process? What did you learn about yourself and others? Do you see possibilities for the use of a circle process in your work, family, community life? How do you reflect on circle processes being a path to “radical, participatory democracy” (p. 172)? Was that true for you?

3. Revisiting the notion of humility, Zehr describes it as “a deep recognition of the limits of what we ‘know’” (p. 175). Notice he places the word “know” in quotes as a caveat. Have you ever waded into hot water for stridently asserting something you “knew” to be true, only later to learn the limits of that knowledge? What did you learn about yourself in that moment? If we adopt humility in this sense, what does it look like when we act it out in the world?
4. **Systemic racism** is an old issue which has received new attention after the killing of George Floyd and Tyre Nichols at the hands of police. Too many others have suffered similar unjust and agonizing fates. Zehr wonders what it might look like to apply an RJ lens to systemic racism, and to police brutality and misconduct (p. 180). What do you think? Whose voices would need to be at the table? What spaces do you see being open to provide a safe encounter? What are the power dynamics to consider? What might be a first step? To whom would you turn as a convenor or host to guide the discussion? What are the risks? What might unintended consequences be? Is it even an appropriate use of RJ principles? Why or why not?

5. Among the “10 Ways to Live Restoratively” (p. 182-183), which do you find the most puzzling? Which would be the most challenging? What would you add/what’s missing from the list? Where have you seen people embody these values? Where have you perhaps let them slip?

6. What does it look like to “sensitively confront everyday injustices” (#10, p. 183) while also showing respect to everyone (#4, p. 182)? When might those be opposing dynamics, or at least in tension? How could they work together?

7. Participatory decision-making/engagement is a guiding principle of RJ (#5, p. 182). (You may have heard the slogan, “Nothing about us, without us.”) Where have you seen decisions imposed that excluded critical voices? How did those voices come to be excluded? What were the consequences? How can you be more inclusive in various arenas of your decision-making?

8. In your life or work, think of a time when conflict turned out to be an opportunity (#6, p. 182). How long did it take for you to recognize it as such? What were the conditions that allowed you to change your lens in that way?

9. Reflect on a time in your life when you may have “imposed your truth” (#9, p. 183) to your detriment, or for those around you. Perhaps you have observed this habit among others. What are the conditions that lead to someone—or yourself!—being open to hearing a previously unknown truth, perhaps held by someone else?

10. Zehr is convinced that our ways of knowing are “profoundly shaped by our biographies” (p. 200). When was the first time you remember being reflective about assumptions around your circumstances, family of origin, and identity? Sometimes a child will visit a friend’s house and, alert to the differences therein, will express: “Hold on. You eat that kind of food? You speak to your parents like that? You approach conflict in that way?” What difference does it make to have an awareness of your way of knowing and biography, with respect to your choices?
11. With considerable experience in the field of higher education, Zehr observes that our schools have “assumed the authority of the instructor” (p. 200). Consider informally interviewing a teacher you admire from your own learning experiences. What was it about this teacher’s methods or way of being that helped you learn? What brought them to their approach? What elements of their teaching do they doubt...stand behind...hope to shift? How do they view the locus of expertise and authority in a classroom or other learning environment?

About Jennifer Larson Sawin, Discussion Guide Author

Jennifer is a freelance writer and editor based in North Carolina. She earned a master's degree in conflict transformation from Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding in 2004, where her worldview was colored by sages like Howard Zehr, Kay Pranis, and Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz. She practiced RJ in Northern Ireland and the Republic; in Charlottesville, Virginia; and later in Boston, Massachusetts, where she served as Executive Director for Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ) and helped craft RJ legislation. In these places, she saw the power of engaging the community in offering creative options to those affected by harm. When not at her desk, she’s on a run, chasing kids, or plotting a trip to Botswana, beloved country of her youth. Visit www.jlarsonsawin.com to learn more.