# Restorative Justice—Insights and Stories from My Journey

_A Discussion Guide for Faith Communities_

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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

info@WalnutStreetBooks.com
For Faith Communities

Introduction

There’s no better time than the present to pause and reflect on questions of justice. Newspaper headlines tell of injustices wrought upon individuals and communities by criminal justice players who have lost their way and inflicted irreparable harm, sometimes even death. Church authorities have abused their roles, causing or covering up harm to those in their flock. Wars are pursued under “just cause” banners. Yet amid these harsh realities, people of faith are still called—indeed, in Micah 6:8, we are required—to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.”

The Old Testament prophet’s mandate shaped Howard Zehr’s work (p. 130). As the child of a minister, and having been raised in a Mennonite household, Zehr was familiar with many Christian teachings of this kind, along with newer teachings such as those of Martin Luther King, Jr., who eloquently assured us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” What, exactly, does it mean to “do justice”? These and other questions lie at the heart of Zehr’s new book. If the field of Restorative Justice (RJ) is new to you, not to worry: the book starts with a brief primer on the concepts.

Whether you gather to muse over these chapters in living-room small groups, the local coffeeshop, or a Sunday School classroom, you won’t be disappointed. Zehr challenges us to consider how we have been influenced by cultural forces and the people around us, by our own identities, and by our ways of knowing. Sprinkled with humor and reflections by those who have learned from Zehr, the pages may coax you to consider what role your community might have in bending that moral arc closer to justice, in caring for those in your company who have been harmed, and in encouraging the young ones in your midst to pursue their passions.

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. Some faith communities have historically used excommunication, shunning, and other practices which, one may argue, is a form of punishment. Zehr muses here (p. 16) that in his early writing, he stressed that punishment was not an especially meaningful form of accountability. Does punishment show up in your faith community? If so, who dispenses it and how? What is the thinking behind the change spurred on by punishment? How are 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). Given the centrality of forgiveness to Christian teaching, did this come as a surprise to you? What’s your understanding of the main purpose and application of RJ principles? Why would Zehr speak so strongly about the expectation of forgiveness? What has your faith community understood about the time and place for forgiveness in the wake of harm?

4. Many human service fields—education, social work, counseling—have adopted “trauma-informed” or healing-centered approaches to working with individuals and communities. Zehr suggests that victims who go through an RJ process with careful preparation usually suffer less trauma as compared to an encounter with the criminal justice system (p. 22). How has your faith community responded to the reality that victims, offenders—indeed most of us—will suffer degrees and incidents of trauma in our lifetime? If your faith community has established restorative practices, how were they developed with trauma-informed measures in mind?

1 E.g., “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you,” Matthew 6: 14; Peter asked Jesus how often one should forgive, and Jesus replied, “Seventy-seven times,” Matthew 18: 2; “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you,” Ephesians 4: 52.

2 Zehr issues an important caveat in his use of these terms since they are rightly criticized as being too simplistic and “labelling” (see p. 51).
5. After learning about RJ, would you consider yourself a “skeptic” or “true believer” (p. 29)? Did you used to be in one camp, but switched to the other? What reservations would you have about the principles in practice?

6. What have your own encounters with the criminal justice system been like? Zehr describes it grimly as “a trauma factory” (p. 54) 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 cites author James Gilligan, who 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 an abusive youth minister was himself abused as a child), without minimizing the harm they themselves may have caused to others (p. 39)?

8. When it comes to change, good intentions (p. 51-54) can go awry for many reasons, including institutional constraints (e.g., budgets, procedures, timelines) and cultural blinders (e.g., race, heritage). What initiatives has your congregation 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?

9. Together with victim advocate Mary Achilles, Zehr offers guidelines for higher degrees of victim engagement (p. 59-62). Does your congregation offer a range of options to engage those who report having been harmed? Were victims/survivors involved in the development of those options? If not, could they be engaged to imagine creative responses to harm? What support structures and personnel are in place for those who report harm? What is the role of outside authorities or third-party agencies and services?

10. 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 expressed in your faith community? What is the role of the arts, visual media, music, and movement (p. 69) in the way you create community and learn?

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11. **Stereotypes** surround us: New Englanders are rude and drive aggressively; a pastor’s kid is invariably a wild child; 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 does your faith community and its leadership avoid, reframe, or undo stereotypes? How have you been affected by stereotypes in a faith context?

12. 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). Is humility a posture you see in your faith community and its teachings? How does “seeing through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12) play out in choices your faith community makes? How is space left for what we don’t know, or what we can’t know?

13. Zehr introduces the concepts of **wonder and awe** (p. 75-76), words heard in our psalms and hymns, but rarely in everyday conversation. Where have you seen these values appear in the work of the church? What might it suggest about someone who strives for and experiences wonder and awe?

14. 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? Do members of your faith community practice accountability? Have you seen accountability in constructive ways among others at church? Is it part of the culture? What has that looked like, and what shifted after acts of accountability?
Part 2: How I Got Here, Personally

1. 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 your faith community? Are there occasions when your church consciously steps into the unknown, perhaps into discomfort, in order to learn?

2. 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?

3. 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? Who are the influential people in your faith community? Whose influence is subtle but meaningful or impactful? How and where can young people be influential in meaningful and constructive ways?

4. Reflecting on turning points in his life, Zehr recalls that a fire at a 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? Where did your faith community take an unexpected turn that was a precursor to—or even a precondition for—something promising?

5. Enthusiasts for a particular idea (in this case RJ) have a habit of collecting and reciting “butterfly stories” (p. 113). They are the bright, beautiful, tidy ones that showcase the best “specimens” to engender excitement for the cause. But one of Zehr’s students urges us to listen for and tell “bullfrog stories” in our work, too. What are the risks and rewards of reaching for stories that are “ugly” or that may fall short of the ideal? Do you ever hear “bullfrog stories” in and about your faith community? Who tells them, how are they received, and what are the take-home lessons?

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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.
6. **Humor** appears throughout this book. There's the mash-up of Zehr supposedly appearing with Gandhi (p. 108), a photo of Zehr sporting a constable hat (p. 117). How does humor enter into the life of your church? Is it used it purposefully? By whom? What function might humor play in living restoratively?

7. 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 or see versions of “We are here” in your faith context? What human need lies at the root of a declaration like that? Are there ones on the fringes who have not yet had the courage to—or been permitted to—make a similar announcement?

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**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. Where does relational social distance and “othering” exist in your faith community? How can you actively close that distance?

2. Zehr suggests that metaphor can drive our ways of thinking and communicating (p. 131-133). 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? In what contexts do you hear metaphor in the life of your church, and what purpose does metaphor serve there?

3. 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?

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4. 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, live, serve, or worship?

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**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). This language is especially prevalent in faith communities. 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? Who were the key supporters in your response? What if someone hasn’t experienced such a “push” or heard such a “call”?

2. Zehr briefly mentions 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 in your work, family, faith community? How do you reflect on a circle being a path to “radical, participatory democracy” (p. 172)? Did it feel that way 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. Zehr tells the story of someone trained in facilitating RJ cases who applied his newfound skill to his own broken family dynamics. The results? Among other things, “holidays together again” (p. 179). This anecdote is a reminder to practice what we preach in our own **backyard**. What would be a close-to-home tender spot in your family, neighborhood, or community, whose dynamics you would like to shift? Whom might you call upon to help think through what a restorative process might look like?
5. **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? What are the risks? What might be some unintended consequences? Is it even an appropriate use of RJ principles? Why or why not?

6. 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?

7. 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? How has your faith community handled “care-fronting”? To what extent are formal systems in place? Where, when, and how does it happen informally?

8. 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 your faith community be more inclusive in various arenas of your decision-making?

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

10. Reflect on a time 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, especially in positions of leadership. What are the conditions that lead someone — or yourself! — to being open to hearing a previously unknown truth, perhaps held by someone else?
11. Zehr is convinced that our **ways of knowing** are “profoundly shaped by our biographies” (p. 200). What was the first time you remember being reflective about assumptions around your circumstances, family of origin, faith story, or 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?

12. With considerable experience in the field of higher education, Zehr observes that our schools have “assumed the authority of the instructor” (p. 200). The same might be true for religious teaching: authority and expertise have historically been vested in clergy and elders. Consider informally interviewing a religious teacher you admire from your own faith **learning.** What was it about this person’s methods or way of being that helped you learn? What brought them to their approach? What elements of their teaching do they doubt...do they stand behind...do they hope to shift? How do they view the locus of expertise and authority in their instruction?

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**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.