A Discussion Guide for Restorative Justice Practitioners, Peacebuilders, and Students

About the Book  2
Suggested Audiences and Structure  2
How to Contact the Publisher  2
For Restorative Justice Practitioners, Peacebuilders, and Students  5
  Introduction  5
  Preamble, Part I: What Exactly is Restorative Justice?  4
  Part 2: How I Got Here, Personally  7
  Part 5: Photography, Art—and Radio—at the Healing Edge  8
  Part 4: Restorative Justice: A Vision to Guide and Sustain Us in All of Life  9
About Jennifer Larson Sawin, Discussion Guide Author  10
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 Restorative Justice Practitioners, Peacebuilders, and Students

Introduction

As someone who has experience with Restorative Justice (RJ) concepts, you will bring a seasoned view to these pages. Maybe you studied with Howard Zehr and have devotedly read every one of his books and chapter contributions (impressive!). Perhaps you attended one of his classes, or heard him speak at a conference or seminar, and his ideas continue to resonate with you. Maybe you’ve been knee-deep in the often inspiring, sometimes wearying work in the field.

This text may offer a pivot-point for further learning, taking you beyond Zehr’s *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*¹ or *Changing Lenses.*² It will give you a chance to re-boot on the basics of RJ, gain insight into how Zehr found himself the “grandfather” of the field, and how your practice might be strengthened, affirmed, and challenged, and become more reflective.

Consider gathering a few colleagues to read the book with you. Divvy up the parts or chapters and chew on content over your lunch hour, during an extended a teatime, or as a Friday afternoon off-ramp to the weekend. We offer these questions to get the juices flowing.

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Preamble, Part I: What Exactly is Restorative Justice?

1. Restorative Justice (RJ) practices overlap with many indigenous practices, although Zehr confesses he was “almost totally ignorant” (p. 9) of those traditions when he first conceptualized RJ principles. In your work, do you explicitly connect to indigenous traditions? How do you do so without appropriating or diminishing their origins and intent?

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 have you seen the idea of punishment show up in your conversations with newcomers to the field of RJ? How do you respond to those who assert that punishment equals accountability?

3. Zehr speaks unequivocally about RJ being “absolutely not about forgiveness” (p. 21-22). Is this true in your own practice? What’s your understanding of the main purpose and application of RJ processes and principles? How have you seen the popular perception confusing RJ with forgiveness being problematic in your work?

4. Many fields—education, psychology, social work—have adopted “trauma-informed” or “healing-centered” approaches to working with individuals and communities. Zehr suggests that victims who go through RJ with careful preparation usually suffer less trauma as compared to the criminal justice process (p. 22). How has your work reflected the reality that victims, offenders—indeed most of us—will suffer multiple degrees and incidents of trauma in our lifetime?

5. Many peacebuilders know that popular and social media can amplify human stories, for good and for ill (p. 22). Where have you seen RJ themes appear in the media? Why do you think the stories hold such power? How does it help or hurt the field and your work? What decisions have you and your colleagues made about engaging the media (or not) as a tool to further publicize your RJ work?

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3 Zehr issues an important caveat in his use of these terms since they are rightly criticized as being too simplistic and “labelling” (see p. 31).
6. One critique of RJ is that it is too widely applied in a reactive manner (i.e., in response to wrongdoing) and with too narrow a focus on a single incident of harm. Zehr suggests that ideally, RJ can address “harms caused by and revealed by wrongdoing” (p. 25; emphasis in original). How do you see these dynamics playing out in your work? How and when do you recognize larger social and cultural forces at play that may have contributed to the harm?

7. Do you consider yourself an RJ “skeptic” or “true believer” (p. 29)? Did you used to be in one camp, but switched to the other? Does it depend on who’s listening? Are you a “true believer” in public, but a “skeptic” in private (or vice versa)? What are the risks and rewards of each category? How do we balance being transparent about our mistakes as practitioners with promoting exciting or promising results to earn buy-in?

8. Zehr strives for an “exploratory” tone when examining the ways “victims” and “offenders” may share common experiences (p. 32). Why do you think he chooses exploration rather than assertion here? Why would the idea of common experiences be seen as a risky proposition?

9. Zehr refers to James Gilligan, author4 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)? How have you navigated this dynamic in your work?

10. Good intentions (p. 51-54) can go awry for many reasons, including institutional constraints (e.g., budgets, procedures, timelines) and personal identity blinders (e.g., race, culture, heritage). What initiatives have you started or witnessed that have veered off course from your intent? What factors contributed? What are you able to see now that you couldn’t see then? How does that experience influence your future activities?

11. If the criminal justice system is “a trauma factory” (p. 34), virtually guaranteed to produce post-traumatic symptoms for victims (p. 56), how can we choose between tinkering with a self-perpetuating broken system and the tall order of remaking it from the ground up?

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12. Is it possible for RJ practitioners to engage with a criminal justice system that is offender- and punitive-focused while also remaining eyes-wide-open to the potential of that system’s **coercion** (p. 57)? How might practitioners adhere to RJ’s values and principles while under tremendous pressure?

13. Together with victim advocate Mary Achilles, Zehr offers guidelines for higher degrees of **victim engagement** (p. 59-62). Does your practice offer a range of victim engagement options? If you were to diagram where victims and their advocates find themselves, relative to the center of your work, where would they position? What measures might you take to place victims closer to the heartbeat of your work?

14. Zehr describes his interest in “intuitive, emotional, less linear” photography as a counterpoint to the more “rational, analytic, verbal...skeptical” fields of criminal justice and academics (p. 67). What are the different **ways of knowing** you experience? Where and when do you find yourself reaching for balance in your RJ work?

15. Do you find the pursuit of art and art appreciation as being “directly opposite” to your RJ work, as Zehr describes (p. 67)? Or have you found ways to integrate multiple ways of knowing in the same spaces? How have you found ways to integrate the **arts** into your work? What role do visual media, music, and movement play (p. 69)?

16. Zehr talks about “deliberately depriving viewers” of stereotypes about those in prison in his *Doing Life* book, stressing that he was trying to undo—or at least partially reverse—how they’re portrayed in the media (p. 72). How does your work avoid, reframe, or undo, **stereotypes** or **labelling**? Is this a conscious effort or a happy byproduct of the work itself?

17. What might it look like to consider others in your work—clients, colleagues, other stakeholders—as “co-collaborators” and “co-creators” (p. 73)? What are the implications for the **dynamics of expertise and knowledge** when someone moves from being a name in a case file to being a “co-creator” of justice?

18. 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 did you once “know” about the work or about others, but now you aren’t quite so sure? What are the blind spots you’ve noticed about yourself in your work over time?

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19. Zehr introduces the concepts of **wonder** and **awe** (p. 75-76), words rarely heard in most work contexts. Where have you seen these values appear in yourself and others? What impact could adopting attitudes of wonder and awe have in a Restorative Justice process?

20. One of Zehr’s former students cites Zehr’s own “willingness to be accountable” (p. 84) as having shaped the RJ movement. In your work, when, to whom, and how have you been vulnerable in that way? What did it feel like, and what shifted afterwards?

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**Part 2: How I Got Here, Personally**

1. Citing his enrollment as a sophomore at Morehouse College6 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? What mix of learning styles do you make available as options for others in your work?

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

3. Think about those **who influenced you** in the work. Zehr mentions Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 105), Vincent Harding (p. 94, p. 105), James Baldwin (p. 94), Mahatma Gandhi (p. 105), his Morehouse professors (p. 95), and other civil rights activists. What factors rendered you “ripe” for learning from those who influenced you?

4. RJ enthusiasts have a habit of collecting and reciting “butterfly stories” (p. 113). They are the bright, beautiful, tidy ones that showcase the best of RJ principles and practice, that engender goodwill and 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?

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6 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.
5. 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 work? Do you use it purposefully? What function might humor play in living restoratively, and practicing RJ?

6. 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 work? What human need lies at the root of a declaration like that?

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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. How can you reduce relational social distance in your work?

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 heard metaphors show up in your work? What purpose do they serve?

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?

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—or perhaps even expand?—those with whom you work?

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

1. 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?

2. 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 our skills 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?

3. 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 exchange? 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. As you know, 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 do you effectively identify and engage the right people who should be at the table?

7. 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?
8. Reflect on a time in your work 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 someone—or yourself!—to being open to hearing a previously unknown truth, perhaps held by someone else?

9. 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...do they stand behind...do they hope to shift? How do they view the locus of expertise and authority in a classroom or other learning environment? How might your own RJ practices shift to maximize learning?

10. Zehr quotes Hal Saunders, negotiator extraordinaire, who asserts that “the education that matters is education that helps participants to conceptualize their own experience” (p. 204). What do you think of this statement? How closely did your own teachers cleave to this kind of education?

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.