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Confronting Affliction: How Violent Offenders Navigate Faith-Based Restorative Justice in Prison

By

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**Abstract**

Restorative justice has been expanding for decades in the U.S. as an alternative or compliment to the traditional criminal justice system. But it’s still infrequently used with adults who have committed violent crimes, as opposed to more gently treated teenage offenders. After talking with a small group of former offenders and facilitators who participated in a restorative justice program in Texas prisons, I found that offenders begin the restorative justice program interpreting themselves as victims. Displacing blame and culpability onto others rather than reckon with the harm they committed, offenders feel persecuted by a system that does not acknowledge their complicated identities of being both harmer and harmed. The restorative justice program in which they participated, Bridges To Life, offers acknowledgement and acceptance, thereby encouraging offender accountability and forgiveness through its ideological construct of a benevolent God.

**Introduction**

Mass incarceration is a significant problem that has gained increasing attention within the last two decades. Recent numbers blatantly demonstrate the U.S. being home to five percent of the world’s population, but 25 percent of its prisoners.[[1]](#footnote-1) Many scholars have studied this issue, and the racial hierarchy it promotes, by highlighting more “innocent” incarcerates, like nonviolent drug offenders.[[2]](#footnote-2) In truth, these incarcerates are not driving incarceration rates higher. Only about 16 percent of state prisoners are locked up for drug charges, and an even smaller percentage — about 5 percent — are low level or nonviolent.[[3]](#footnote-3) To illustrate this point, between 1980 and 2009, when states packed their prisons with over one million people, over half were incarcerated for a violent offense.[[4]](#footnote-4) While violent crime in general is down since the boom of the early 1990s (with the exception of very recent trends), individuals incarcerated for violent offenses make up the bulk of people locked up in state prisons and jails. This has led to calls for alternatives.

While lowering sentences, reforming tough-on-crime laws, making prisons more humane, and investing in public services on the front end are all weighty ideas, this still leaves room to consider how society should resolve violence and hold violent actors to account without further ballooning incarceration rates. My project attempts to address one of those reforms in the form of restorative justice. Specifically, I want to know how adults who have committed violent harms – completed or attempted rape, homicide, or theft, for example — navigate the restorative justice process. How does someone who has committed violent harm both become accountable for their actions and recognize that they are complicated, not an oversimplified version of their worst mistake? What is the type of space that allows former adult violent offenders to express their regret or remorse and also explore their own trauma?

In order to better explore these questions, I focused mostly on criminology and social psychology research. These two fields provided a grounded understanding for how many different offenders, but particularly adult violent offenders, navigate the restorative justice process. In addition to qualitative insights, these fields also provided necessary quantitative data to better elucidate how adult offenders desist and transition away from criminogenic behavior. I particularly focused on how offenders must both openly lean into the harm they created while simultaneously remaining uncomfortable and remorseful for such violence. It is only by internalizing these two sometimes opposing ideas that offenders can begin to acknowledge their (albeit limited) control, thus deciding not to commit serious harm again.

Unfortunately, most of the current restorative justice literature focuses on nonviolent youth. This is partly because adults — particularly Black and brown Americans — have been historically viewed more harshly by government institutions.[[5]](#footnote-5) Legacies of slavery, segregation, and widespread discrimination permeate the country’s past and present, whether in education, employment, housing, welfare programs, or carceral institutions. As America appears to be culturally departing from zero-tolerance policies that dominated institutions like prisons and schools in the 1980s, much of the practice of restorative justice has been sequestered in schools, as there’s been less willingness on the side of local and state officials to shift to full-blown reforms for people who are perceived as dangerous and beyond repair.[[6]](#footnote-6) It’s only been in recent years that influential nonprofits — including the likes of the American Civil Liberties Union — have built campaigns in favor of progressive prosecutors seeking alternatives to incarceration, which includes, but is not limited to, restorative justice programs. As such, there is limited literature available in the U.S. on the use of restorative justice for violent offenders as a substitute, instead of a compliment, for incarceration. My research attempts to add to the limited scholarship on incarcerates who have experienced restorative justice as I interrogate how adults who have committed violent offenses navigate the reformative program within an incarcerated space.

**Literature Review**

A Brief Introduction of Restorative Justice

Restorative justice has been around for centuries, manifesting in different indigenous groups in New Zealand and the Americas, but the practice has found a resurgence in the last couple of decades as an alternative, or supplement, to traditional Western criminal justice systems. In the 1960s, the Quakers began a movement to abolish or significantly curtail prisons

because of the systematic abuses inmates experienced.[[7]](#footnote-7) The religious group’s organizing helped lead to the conceptualization of using restorative justice in the United States as an alternative to our more punitive justice system. But that shift wasn’t exclusive to the American context, and the practice continued to spread into the late 1980s and early 1990s.

 Ideas rooted in restorative justice shift the focus away from violations of laws to the idiosyncratic harms caused to people and their communities. Centrally, restorative justice emphasizes people and relationships, asking questions about what we owe to one another and how to repair harm after an individual has inflicted pain on someone else.[[8]](#footnote-8) The process generally includes a victim, offender, an outside facilitator, and community members who are connected to the harm. Practices often include victim-offender mediation, circles, and conferencing.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a part of these practices, a facilitator of restorative justice is meant to invoke a collective understanding and acknowledgement of what happened to address the wrongs committed, restore equity in the violated relationship, discuss future intentions (specifically related to the offender), and frequently help the offender offer the victim restitution of some kind, thereby “reestablish(ing) the balance” offset by the offense.[[10]](#footnote-10) It’s the facilitators goal to loosen the offender, creating space for enough vulnerability so they can imagine themselves as people who have done harm, but not as harmful people.

The results of restorative justice programs in the U.S. and in other Western countries have been promising. A 2016 meta-analysis of restorative justice programs for juveniles, mostly including those operating in the U.S. (77 percent), since 1999 showed a modest reduction in

delinquent behavior for the individuals who went through the alternative program.[[11]](#footnote-11) Frequently, participants in restorative justice programs found the process to be fairer than traditional justice models.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In a Washington, DC program, victim-offender mediation significantly helped offenders who had been incarcerated avoid recidivism.[[13]](#footnote-13) Conversely, a minority of offenders felt victims were using their victimization status as a weapon to cause them harm (an important point I’ll return to later), and weren’t afforded space to refute or negotiate accusations wielded against them. One assessment of adult offenders in non-incarcerated spaces within European-based and indigenous-based societies in New Zealand found that making amends and apology was “commonly achieved.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While some adult offenders in the programs felt the tasks they needed to complete were too harsh, most all derived a greater degree of understanding of the harm they caused their victim and experienced remorse.[[15]](#footnote-15)

An empirical assessment of the restorative justice process for youth (most of them nonviolent offenders) in Australia found that when restorative justice was used in an equitable space offenders felt enabled to engage in a “fluid atmosphere that encouraged them to speak without intimidation,” and were more likely to develop a relationship with the survivors of their crime, possibly making it less likely that they would recommit an offense.[[16]](#footnote-16)

While rarely occurring, restorative justice for violent offenders in prison has yielded promising results. Interviews of incarcerated serious and violent offenders and their victims report being overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience with restorative justice.[[17]](#footnote-17) Mediator relationships help explain why most of the offenders enjoyed the process, as they often felt respected and acknowledged. Most victims, or their relatives, attend the mediation sessions because they both want to understand why harm was committed, and express their side of the story, sharing their pain.[[18]](#footnote-18)

There are multiple approaches to restorative justice with various processes and outcomes, each of which has certain strengths and weaknesses and nuances according to the context, crime, and offender profile. Scholars like Theo Gavrielides believe in the using restorative justice in prisons despite the hierarchical and punitive aspects of the institution’s design.[[19]](#footnote-19) While it is hotly debated whether restorative justice in prisons is “an alternative to punishment” or an “alternative punishment,”[[20]](#footnote-20) it’s possible that using the reform in prisons is a net positive — better than an alternative where offenders must defend against a host of threats on their own.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Another version of restorative justice has manifested in the form of Philly Stands Up, a prison abolition activist organization in Philadelphia that has worked toward healing victims of sexual violence and holding offenders accountable within its own community of friends.[[22]](#footnote-22) The group focuses on broad issues — related to patriarchalism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism, and the prison industrial complex — as part of what members are trying to ameliorate rather than simply the individual’s sexually violent actions.[[23]](#footnote-23)

As occurs in this group, it can be useful for offenders to tell their story and detail their own history of abuse and victimization.[[24]](#footnote-24) This is especially relevant as most people who hurt people have been hurt themselves.[[25]](#footnote-25) Thus, it is important they are allowed to recognize the ecosystems in which they were raised— spaces where violence, defensive relationships, and the “struggle for respect” frequently manifests.[[26]](#footnote-26) Offenders, particularly violent offenders, are often products of structural violence such as classism, racism, unemployment, and housing insecurity that creates acute vulnerability. The expectation, then, that offenders change should not be unidirectional, but, rather, encourage a higher demand of “transformation or empathy on the part of the victim or community.”[[27]](#footnote-27) If these boundaries aren’t instituted, restorative justice can be more harmful than helpful. In addition to spreading culpability of harm, another obstacle to ushering accountability in restorative justice spaces is shame.

The Significance of Shame

There are several interpretations of shame. According to professor Krista Thomason, shame isn’t a failure to meet standards, norms, or ideals, but, rather, rises out of a tension between identity and self-conception.[[28]](#footnote-28) That discord between how someone believes they are presented and how others conceive of them conflicts with their identity, causing shame. Violence in turn arises from the shamed as they feel sequestered into being defined merely by others’ conception of them, and is wielded to assert some semblance of control.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Indeed, shame is an internal feeling related to indignity, defeat, transgression, and alienation, and can lead to low self-worth.[[30]](#footnote-30) But while it can be alienating, shame is also useful in its ability to strengthen a sense of mutuality and community between a host of people, including parents, friends, and citizens.[[31]](#footnote-31) As such, shaming has the potential to curb or spur criminogenic behavior. According to sociologist John Braithwaite, shaming is an important tool to subdue harm when it is used to integrate people into mainstream society (he calls this “integrative shaming”) within ceremonial or ritualistic events.[[32]](#footnote-32) That is, Braithwaite’s theory comes with both a carrot and stick: shaming is important to dissuade certain behavior, but it’s equally important to bring wrongdoers back into the fold of conventional society for their own benefit and for the benefit of the community.[[33]](#footnote-33) Reintegrative shaming nicely couples with re-biographing or narrative therapy, whereby ex-offenders discuss their past actions to better own understand themselves.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Communitarian societies — places where families, friends, and local institutions are more involved in each other’s lives — provide ample opportunities for reintegrative shaming because it is most effectively supported by local authority figures rather than sterile bureaucrats tied to the state apparatus. Braithwaite believes America’s individualistic culture yields lower examples of reintegrative shame, thus promoting criminogenic behavior as there’s no check on people enacting adverse actions onto others.[[35]](#footnote-35) Without shame, individuals would not have boundaries on their own self-conception, encouraging the ego to exist solely within its own narratives, and therefore prepare itself for rationalization and self-justification of harmful behaviors.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This is especially relevant as violent offenders, as is commonly expressed in most humans, make themselves the stars of their own morality tales, assuming the role of protagonist or “moral hero.”[[37]](#footnote-37) According to interviews interrogating how ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives, justice and human development professor Shadd Maruna states that, when probed, many offenders acknowledge they have done wrong, but only from society’s viewpoint and not their own as every human believes they are “basically a decent human being.”[[38]](#footnote-38) If anything, people who have done criminal harm believe they acted badly, but are not bad people.

This work highlights the importance of the previously mentioned reintegrative shaming, indicating the way people believe themselves to be sacred rather than profane by assuming that they maintain “pluralistic selves.” Instead, it’s profane actions, occurring within a particular social context, that shoulders some of the responsibility for harmful actions.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Offenders who make some excuses during these stories or confessionals may actually be closer to desisting from crime because they adhere more closely to mainstream values as opposed to those who admit to wrongdoing outright, as they are less likely to feel any remorse.[[40]](#footnote-40) Contradictorily, those who desist are more likely to believe they are in control of their own destiny.

Still, these two notions — being uncomfortable with one’s past actions and believing to be in control of their destiny — are both characteristics of desistance.[[41]](#footnote-41) Offenders who don’t believe they are in control of their own destiny and can change are much less likely to. While difficult, it’s important that violent offenders internally sustain these paradoxical ideas in order to both express contrition, and to lead crime-free, fruitful lives.

Challenges of Restorative Justice

Critiques have often been lobbed at restorative justice spaces as they frequently do not adequately account for an offender’s needs, enabling a hierarchy to take shape that allows victims to harmfully wield their status against the individual who originally hurt them.

One Canadian ethnographic study of restorative justice found the playing field of restorative justice to be so imbalanced it sometimes encouraged anger and resentment among offenders.[[42]](#footnote-42) Victims, they found, had almost “free reign” to express themselves whereas offenders were much more limited in their ability to assert their emotions, even if those feelings validated a victim’s perspective.[[43]](#footnote-43) To reverse this phenomenon, ethnographic scholars of this paper advocated that offenders should not be deemed “bad” or “deviant” by restorative justice participants as it provides a misguided narrative of the stories of people who commit violence or harm, and can stunt offender’s evolution to desist.

Restorative justice practices can become particularly deleterious if they lead to moral accounting or debt morality, where the offender becomes subservient to the absolute whims of their victim, which has at times been classified as a mild form of penitent slavery. These situations invert the paradigm where the former offender now becomes victimized, having to be punished — possibly being prevented from going to school, earning a living­, or otherwise reasonably surviving — by enduring a “restorative” process meant to avoid otherwise punitive measures.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Creating a space for offenders to navigate their actions is particularly important as they, like most individuals, believe themselves to be “essentially good” and therefore feel the urge to separate criminogenic behavior they conducted from their concept of self.[[45]](#footnote-45) In a set of interviews with violent offenders, one researcher found that individuals typically dissociated themselves from their harmful behaviors, asserting that they are conventionally acceptable people.[[46]](#footnote-46) Tying one’s identity to their previous criminal or deviant activities can be very difficult for offenders attempting to overcome their wrongs, heal, and offer an apology to those they’ve harmed.

To prevent the entanglement of one’s identity with that of “harmer,” it’s important that people around those who have harmed others don’t interpret that person one dimensionally. In the words of two restorative justice scholars, “change requires a tremendous amount of self-belief and is made highly difficult, if not nigh impossible, if those around the individual believe that change is not possible.”[[47]](#footnote-47) If offenders are stigmatized and excluded, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to garner the self-respect needed to propel themselves back into mainstream society and account for the harm they committed. That is, change cannot come simply from an individual yearning to do better him or herself. Change “requires not only a transformation in an individual’s identity but also the recognition and corroboration of that new identity within a (moral) community.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

This may help explain why desistance from crime is generally associated with good marriages, stable work, and, most crucially, a transformation of identity.[[49]](#footnote-49) The activities and hobbies in which people engage allow those individuals to explore different subjectivities, and not feel disintegrative shame and isolation. Rather, they are encouraged to engage with mainstream institutions and norms, and adopt the acceptable subjectivities that follow.

 While this process and restorative justice writ large does not necessitate religious affiliation, there have been strong linkages between the two philosophies, particularly with regards to monotheistic religions.[[50]](#footnote-50) In fact, some political scientists and philosophers have long decoupled forgiveness and reconciliation (the latter a critical component of restorative justice) from religious practice.[[51]](#footnote-51) Nonetheless, other scholars have attributed restorative justice to spiritual roots, claiming that various religious groups have used restorative justice as part of divine rule, and not merely as norms that are a mere consequence of rationalism.[[52]](#footnote-52) Even though the sentiment has frequently been violated by devotees, these scholars argue that religious groups have a tradition of denouncing vengeance and retribution. While there is a dearth of meta-analytic data on the comparisons between religious and secular restorative justice programming, one study found that Christian inmate offenders were more likely to score high on empathetic and perspective-taking measures than their non-Christian peers.[[53]](#footnote-53) Notably, however, the restorative justice programming in question was itself faith-based.

 Taken together, it’s understood that allowing a more non-hierarchical, empathetic space for offenders to explore their own stories enables the vulnerability needed to both take responsibility for harm they caused and reckon with the harm caused to them. Still, it remains unknown what particular concepts and teachings enable such vulnerability and recognition. As such, I look to investigate what kind of spaces and beliefs allow for such processes.

**Methods**

Bridges To Life is a Christian-based organization in Texas, but operates across many states and in carceral spaces around the world, centering victim experiences and working to restore offenders’ agency and internal power by acknowledging the harm they caused others. The organization has trained hundreds of facilitators, many of whom have gone through the program themselves, and has facilitated workshops for many more inmates. God and faith figure prominently in the organizations methodological approach. The program’s pedagogical teachings claim to support the idea that humans are inherently good, inspired by a benevolent God.[[54]](#footnote-54) Those who complete the program are trained, by facilitators, to exist without future shame or stigmatization. In other words, participants are enabled a path to move on.

Bridges To Life operates a 14-week small-group program where victim speakers are brought in to discuss how crime impacted them and their families. Later in the program, offenders are asked to write two unsent apology letters, one to their victim and one to their victim’s relative. At the end, they are asked to read the letters in their small group. Generally, there are two facilitators for 10 offenders in each small group. As part of the program, Bridges To Life gives victims a platform to share their stories with offenders. The program accepts almost all prison inmates who desire to be included with the sometimes exception of sexually violent offenders because of how they may be interpreted by other participants. While I only interviewed people who had completed the program while incarcerated, it should be noted that Bridges To Life also operates in non-carceral spaces like treatment facilities, court diversion units, rehab clinics, and more.

A reintegrated space, described as a space that ritualistically includes people after shaming them for “negative behavior”, is almost non-existent in the U.S. But Bridges To Life — and many restorative justice spaces — attempts to create exactly this place. In the process of reducing recidivism both shaming the individual behavior and integrating those people back into community is crucial. Restorative justice sessions begin with a victim surrogate[[55]](#footnote-55) sharing their story, attempting to both condemn the actions of offenders’ writ large, and to provoke remorse and introspection. Offenders are later encouraged to offer an apology to all those harmed by their actions, but are simultaneously accepted, or placed within, an affectionate, supportive environment.

For this paper, I interviewed 11 people from the program, including five former offenders and six facilitators. Those I interviewed were all considered in high esteem with Bridges To Life, some being the most promising members as they were (or are currently) leaders in the organization. Notably, all of them had transitioned through Bridges To Life, and claimed to be better for having completed the program. As such, I never spoke with anyone who dropped the program before completion, had been removed from it, or who had been re-incarcerated after going through Bridges To Life. The results from this paper, therefore, are skewed more favorably in the organization’s direction, and likely adjusted holistically how I assessed the organization. Nonetheless, Bridges To Life has made some clear, if temporary, inroads in reducing re-incarceration. One Medicine and Law Journal study found that the program had reduced recidivism rates by more than 18 percent, compared with the national average.[[56]](#footnote-56) In order to better understand how offenders negotiate Bridges To Life, I created a table that includes each time an offender or facilitator mentioned one of four themes. I discussed two of those themes — “Responsibility/Accountability” and “God” — in my analysis. The table can be found below.

Number of mentions for following words:

 Responsibility/Accountability Forgiveness God Empathy

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Facilitator (6 total) | 10 | 29 | 20 | 10 |
| Offender (5 total) | 15 | 27 | 10 | 2 |
| Total (total)  | 25 | 56 | 30 | 12 |

**Analysis**

In our discussions, Bridges To Life participants and facilitators emphasized four general themes: responsibility, God, forgiveness, and empathy. Although referenced less frequently than “Forgiveness,” “Responsibility/Accountability” and “God” were constant themes in my

discussions with both facilitators and offenders of the restorative justice process. My first analysis begins with the former topic. My second, the latter.

The criminal justice apparatus creates perpetual shame, egotism

In prison, no one is good. Inmates become recipients of exclusively punitive ends of the carceral state. This is all the more convincing considering the frequent sentiment expressed by offenders that they internalize enmity, not compassion. Such are the signals from their social milieu: prisons remove people from society, stigmatize those individuals, and suggest to others that they should be stigmatized, out of sight and out of mind. Police, magistrates, lawyers, representatives, prison guards — those who control or are controlled by several levers of power — exclude offenders from society. Even families begin to internalize the toxicity leveled against their loved ones (now considered “prison inmates”). The internalized stigma erects a wall preventing a path back into society (i.e., reintegration). Consequently, offenders “are starved for love,” as one former offender I interviewed said.

According to every facilitator with whom I spoke, participants begin in more closed emotional states, often challenging their “offender” status, and by virtue of that, disbelieving they could have victimized anyone at all since *they are the true victims*. During circle discussions, facilitators advocate for participants to accept the idea that they committed harm, not just for others but also for themselves. Unable to negotiate the self, offenders can’t recognize their own actions within a broader perspective, nor acknowledge others. As one offender put it:

“I didn’t care about myself; I didn’t love myself. I didn’t care about anyone else because I was full of anger.”

Since there’s no avenue to being “right,” offenders frequently cling to “having been wronged.” They flip a status that is more mixed offender-victim into one that is exclusively one of victimhood. One offender put it to me succinctly: being locked up makes you a victim — persecuted and unloved by all registered signals — incentivizing inmates to abdicate responsibility, and diffuse blame from themselves and push it on to others. Instead of inflicting harm and receiving proportionate punishment, they feel wronged for receiving *totalizing punishment.* As a result, one former inmate told me, they become “me monsters.” Offenders become so invested in the idea that they are good, they reject the notion that they could have done, or currently do, anything wrong to others. In short, they are self-absorbed, invested in the protection of their ego. In introductory restorative justice meetings, most offenders are not open and curious but, rather, are angry or ambivalent about the process because they are not yet heroes or agents in their own stories. As an offender put it to me:

“Everybody feels like they’re the victim because they’re locked up. And, they’re always thinking about me, me, me, me.”

This frequently leads to abdicating responsibility and diffusing it to others who often times did legitimately create harm in an inmate’s life. As one former offender told me, she pushed all accountability away from herself, spewing it at her mother for the mistakes that she had made with her as a child.

“I turned that (anger) towards my mother — this is what she did to me. I never did take accountability and responsibility for my actions for what I did.”

Scholarly literature from the 1960s supports the notion that prisons are totalizing institutions that offer little in the way of comfort or nuance for interpreting peoples’ actions because, unlike those on the outside, they are perpetually watched and meticulously judged.[[57]](#footnote-57) Aside from the scholar Foucault, who most popularly raised this notion, more contemporary scholars have uncovered similar findings.

Modern prisons and the systems in which they function are hierarchical, panopticon-like spaces that offer little negotiation for interpreting offender behavior. Restorative justice, as scholar Jane Anderson found, is frequently at odds with these institutions. As noted in a previous section, prisons can destroy the restorative justice experience as it stunts vulnerability and emotional development, creating a sense of “hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust and suspicion, emotional overcontrol, alienation, and psychological distancing.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Restorative justice necessitates the ability for offenders to balance multiple ideas in their heads at the same time: that they have been both recipients and perpetrators of harm. As uncovered by scholar Theo Gavrielides, restorative justice clashes with prisons as the former suggests a greater perspective on how harm is created and encourages emotional vulnerability and openness on the side of the harm creator.[[59]](#footnote-59) Because of these findings, and the notion that prisons create asymmetrical and hierarchical spaces where inmates feel stigmatized and shamed from reentering their communities and forming stable connections, restorative justice in prisons begins as an uphill battle. Prisoners must feel separated from the institution in which

they are perpetually confined in order to begin adopting responsibility for harm they created and recognizing it within a broader, more generous lens.

God relaxes the sting of offender shame, creating space for forgiveness

There’s a fervor, a perpetual optimism that exists within the Bridges To Life model of a God-loving belief. The program believes that He gives all, allowing you to live, breathe, and opens a successful, stable path away from the drudgery that attaches itself to addiction, violence, and helplessness. But the program’s dialectical stance of the beneficent God is an all-

encompassing theory, and therefore, according to my analysis, raises strategic questions. How does the organization deploy the idea of God through its restorative justice methodology? And, what effect does this approach have on offender experiences in their program?

Despite feelings of anger, isolation, and sometimes despair, Bridges To Life reminds people, with the vehicle of God, that they are not hopeless or full of anger. In fact, in restorative justice circles, Bridges To Life uses God as a stand in for stable connectivity that is otherwise nonexistent. God is depicted in small groups as the great equalizer: He is inside everyone, is good, loving, and forgiving. All, therefore, are good once they’ve recognized Him inside themselves. Loving all equally regardless of our actions, He erases the shame otherwise sharpened, sometimes painfully and almost always disproportionately, at offenders. The acceptance of God creates interpersonal space for incarcerated individuals to reckon with harm offenders created without feeling too shamed to interrogate them. That love, manifesting from God to the victim or offender facilitator, temporarily suspends the exclusively punitive ends of prison life.

But in the beginning of the facilitation process, facilitators and offenders alike note that offenders infrequently feel connected to others or the program’s belief system. The hierarchical and punitive structures of the carceral state hinder any sort of love – God’s or otherwise — from breaching its walls. As the restorative justice process begins, Bridges To Life facilitators and many participants claim that most cannot yet feel God’s embrace. As one offender stated in the early days of programming:

“I had made a decision spiritually — I didn’t care about God. I didn’t care about the consequences. If I was going to hell then I was going to hell. Sitting here on the other side of it, that’s how far removed from God I had gotten.”

The construct of the benevolent God is ideologically embedded in the Bridges To Life facilitator playbook, and therefore flows downstream to offenders during the course. In addition to the secular mission of the organization (to reduce recidivism and enhance public safety), Bridges To Life maintains a spiritual mission of ministering “victims and offenders in an effort to show them the transforming power of God’s love and forgiveness.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Facilitators manifest as priest-like figures, outlets for God’s compassion, as they claim to carry God’s instructions. Their own sentiments, according to my discussions with them, were most always positive: caring for inmates and their development as individuals. They always

encouraged offenders to show up to the program, only excluding those from restorative justice discussions if they did not invest apparent effort or hindered the ability of other offenders to do so.

Simply acknowledging that care and love (or positive reinforcement) exists in a world outside of prison is relevant. These sentiments begin to quake the narrative suggesting that all nodes of social connection for inmates include shame and guilt. In fact, outsiders — by way of facilitators — demonstrate care for those existing on “the inside,” despite broader institutional sentiments. They love others through the medium of the program’s depiction of God. As one facilitator told me:

“All you got to do is have the love. You know, to go out and share your time with these people. And in the prisons, and they are just so grateful. ‘Somebody gave us their time in their life for somebody like me,’” [an offender reported to the facilitator.]

Some Bridges To Life participants internalize these values, believing they were always good even when they were committing harmful acts in the past because they were still then in the presence of God. They simply didn’t tap into their true, God-inspired self. The programming, enabling belief in a beneficent God, is a pathway to interpersonal and social connection because, ultimately, they can only be judged by Him. He allows them to simultaneously balance two sometimes opposing ideas: you’ve done wrong, but you’re also not a ‘wrong person.’

In this way, offenders begin to disentangle a web of harm, and, according to one facilitator, offer forgiveness to others and themselves. God, program managers claim, and the

space in which He is leveraged, relaxes the shame preventing people from offering, and accepting, apology. As one facilitator stated:

“Forgiveness, we say, (operates on) three levels. Vertical, God to them; horizontal, other people to them; and internally, them to themselves. And you keep peeling off, peeling off.”

Offenders, then, begin to imagine others in the same complexifying light that God manifested in them. As part of the forgiveness process, offenders are asked to write letters to those they harmed, and someone one degree removed (typically a loved one) from the harmed. But they can also write letters to anyone for whom they carry anger.

In one instance, an offender was made to forgive the person who turned him in — an individual who was also his co-conspirator in committing violent and potentially-violent offenses. In the offender’s mind, he “killed (his co-conspirator) over and over every day” while sitting in prison. Locked inside the recesses of his own ruminations, the offender was unable to experience freedom to interpret his co-conspirator as anything but harmful. In other words, the co-conspirator, according to the offender, was not a child of God. In writing an apology letter, he explored her complexities. In doing so, the idea of her no longer controlled him. As he said:

“So, when I wrote the letter, I was at least letting go of that coping mechanism that I had of murdering this woman in my mind every day, and I knew that I was going to have to now let that go.”

As explained by restorative justice participants, forgiveness changes the body’s stance, allowing for an expressiveness and understanding beyond that which was otherwise recognizable. One Bridges To Life participant, according to a facilitator’s story, had been forced to have sex with his sister as a child, which was videotaped and sold as child pornography by his stepfather. Later in life, coming home from work, the same victim discovered his grandfather to be molesting one of his daughters. Spinning out of control, the man murdered his grandfather. While in the program, that man was asked to tell his story in a Bridges To Life restorative justice circle. Initially against the program, one facilitator found him broken, in tears. The facilitator prayed with him and the offender “accepted Christ.” In a restorative justice circle, the offender publicly forgave his stepfather. Everyone listening to the story wept. As one facilitator explained the process of forgiveness:

“Forgiveness doesn’t mean it’s alright what you did. Forgiveness means I’m not going to carry this burden anymore… [Later, referring to the offender] His demeanor changed; his eyes changed. He looked happy.”

God Bridges To Life encourages offenders to emphasize the theories mentioned earlier by Shadd Maruna. The scholar states that offenders are made to adopt agency by admitting wrongdoing of their past, thereby taking ownership of it.[[61]](#footnote-61) But in order to do that – because we are all heroes of our own stories — they must also admit that they are not inherently harmers but, rather, have committed acts of wrongdoing in a harmful social context. A beneficent God, and an accepting restorative justice space, makes it easier for offenders to open up, becoming more vulnerable and tolerant of multiple, even conflicting, perspectives.

In this way, Bridges To Life offers a reintegrative space so infrequently experienced in American society. According to scholar John Braithwaite, often times offenders only experience “disintegrative shaming,” meaning that there are no outlets for them to exist in a future where they are fundamentally “good” – only places that reinforce their construct as

“bad.”[[62]](#footnote-62) When this happens, offenders are more likely to recidivate. In fact, this doesn’t just occur within prison’s four walls. Even when offenders leave prisons, there are still many active punitive measures preventing them from literally reintegrating into society, as University of Chicago sociologist Rueben Miller recently demonstrated in his book *Halfway Home*.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Without possible reintegration, criminogenic tendencies are internalized, for, what other path can an “offender” adopt? Societies like America buoy these sentiments when they rely exclusively on institutions and characters of justice from above — from those who hold official titles of justice ­— instead of more personalized relationships, including from members of a community, family, or neighborhood.

**Discussion**

Restorative justice, existing in a relatively equitable space, allows for more vulnerability and the ability to explore past harms — both harms committed and received. The project’s philosophy is meant to create space for openness, understanding, sympathy, and an exploration of how one’s story intersects with others. This is a significant distinction from the norms established by the carceral state. When someone has harmed in the U.S., that person is frequently considered “harmful,” becoming, in their totality, a moralistically “bad person.” In other words, prisons operate to stunt the exploration of self, and other positive social interactions. Instead, the justice system simply shames the wrongdoer. But as has been explored by scholars, activists, and philosophers, people are both frequently harmers and recipients of harm, and sometimes both simultaneously.

The process of restorative justice allows facilitators to help breech seemingly impenetrable walls that prevent introspection, accountability, forgiveness, connectivity, and

empathy. Through the process of congregating in small groups and listening to a variety of “victim” and “offender” stories, participants are able to recognize their own situations in others, and understand how harm circulates through communities.

Frequently, in the beginning of this process, inmates don’t want to be placed in the same room with others who have caused harm, believing they themselves don’t belong in such category. Institutional and social signals promoting the idea that they are holistically and inevitably “bad” prevent them from interrogating themselves honestly. Rather, they still feel isolated from peers, loved ones, and former communities that rejected them. They are prevented from becoming the protagonist and therefore feel they must be the victim.

In other words, rather than accept and demonstrate remorse for harm they committed, offenders *are afraid* *of the very harm they committed* because the harm has claimed to represent themin their totality. If they are not eternally loved — or inherently good – they struggle against managing actions that construct a narrative of them in a poor light.

It’s in restorative justice circles — where facilitators carry messages from a proclaimed loving God and where care is actively experienced over time — where inmates can begin to reconcile the harm they inflicted on others, the context in which they created it, and the harm that has been inflicted on them. Although possibly explored outside the restorative justice context, restorative justice circles provide a space of vulnerability for inmates to seek different boundaries to guide them through life’s meandering path. Despite tensions in its belief system, the program’s belief in God can also ameliorate ideological conflict. In the restorative justice space, offenders are infrequently exclusively “offenders,” as all their actions, according to facilitators, can be traced to something else (God).

If the hero is pointed in God’s direction, then, and not the offender’s, those who’ve done harm are able to more comfortably balance contradictions. This can lead to the understanding that offenders are not in control of everything (it’s God’s will), but also that they have choices in the decision-making process (based on God’s facilitation), and that they are *meant* to make the “right” choice (based on God’s benevolence) even if they don’t always do so. That is, if God is the protagonist, in the Bridges To Life model, He lays the tracks of life for people to follow — stricter boundaries that justly, lovingly, and *proportionately* mete out punishment when wrongdoing has been committed. Therefore, it becomes easier to accept wrongdoing one has committed in addition to the wrongdoing that has been committed to them. In this light, offenders are not solely accountable to themselves, and therefore violating their own moral codes. Rather, if they strayed from God’s boundaries, committing moral violations in His name is easier to digest than if their failures were exclusively their own. This internal and external dialogical process allows for a certain degree of humility as, the program states, nothing can be done without His will. Interestingly, the program’s manifestation of a kind God also encourages hope and a willingness to accept larger portions of agency, as He believes in you no matter what, and has instilled in you a measure of His power.

In addition to God’s love putting people on an equal moral footing, the restorative justice circle emphasizes similarities rather than differences between all those who harmed. Honesty and openness are able to be expressed as relationships begin to take shape, and offenders hold less power — moral or otherwise — over one another. The shackles of prison’s social dynamics begin to crack as no one becomes more deserving of punishment or

shame than another. In the eyes of God, the programming states, they are all loved equally, all His children, all inherently good. Mutuality and connectivity replace the enmity and distance previously existing between group co-inmates, challenging dynamics that otherwise incentivize panopticon-like tracking that aim to exploit mistakes and vulnerabilities.

The benevolent God Bridges To Life brings into the restorative justice dialectical conversation helps offenders overcome barriers erected by prison hierarchies and encompassing stigmas, thereby reducing short-term recidivism rates and allowing for more stable reintegration into American mainstream society.

**Conclusion**

In American life, offenders are typically interpreted as one-dimensional. For people who have been convicted of committing harm to others, the public often shifts its attention to top-down institutions and hired bureaucratic actors to handle people who have become ‘problems.’ Offenders, then, become only interpreted as such and are consequently deserving of the entire weight of the justice system to be thrusted onto their backs.

While most often occurring within an incarcerated space, restorative justice offers a break from traditional criminal justice methods. The model advocates for a greater understanding of harm, not broken laws; sets the narrative straight, allowing the offender to honestly explain what happened and why; and frequently creates space for reparation and reconciliation with the victim and the victim’s community. In this sense, the process is meant to include greater agency on behalf of all people involved in the harmful incident, including the victim (or victim surrogate), offender, and community members tied to the event.

Restorative justice, therefore, is trying to restore power and sovereignty to community members, rather than remove people from processes in which they are intimately implicated. Greater political institutions play a more limited role. In the Bridges To Life model, several variables facilitate a more nonhierarchical environment where people can explore their story. With the introduction of God, they are meant to be restored as heroes in their own narrative. By partaking in the process of being recognized and acknowledged, they are able to take accountability, and offer forgiveness, thereby reimagining their story as it relates to harm committed in a greater context.

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