

SAWBONNA

VICTIM VOICE(LESS), & THE THREE "R'S"

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*I count the grains of sand
on the beach and measure the sea;
I understand the speech
of the dumb and hear the voiceless.*

Herodotus

Earlier this year, shortly before Glen Flett and I gave our first Alberta talk invited by The Alberta Correctional Education Association, in the same conference in which, Dr. Gabor Mate, kindred, gave a stellar presentation, I was asked by a justice professional just exactly how I thought Sawbonna was going to make a difference in the justice system, and just exactly how many talks Glen and I would give before becoming bored and boring?

Needless to say, being rankled was one of the emotions stirred by these unnerving questions. Other stirred emotions included deep anger and immeasurable frustration. These emotions, however, became necessary mentors, as any deep emotions can, and I clung to them. I sat with those two questions which were posed to me with the bite of sarcasm, and a hint, of what felt to be a dismissal of our story, an attempt at diminishment of my voice, and a lack of understanding about what exactly Sawbonna is, and to and from what it speaks.

SAWBONNA, CONTRIBUTING TO A SHIFT IN THE JUSTICE-VICTIM PARADIGM

As a victim of crime who has shared powerful connecting and kinship with the man, Glen Flett, who murdered my Father, Theodore Van Sluytman, it did not take me long to realize that was being said to me in those two questions was that I had a role to play in, dare I say, a "passion" play, and that the moment I challenged that role, I was no longer acceptable within a particular paradigm of what justice is supposed to look like for the "victim."

WHAT IS WRONG WITH VICTIMS HAVING THEIR OWN VOICE?

Those two questions catapulted me into the realization that for some individuals as long as the "victim" is content to grieve or to speak about forgiveness if called upon, and to let particular experts and professionals speak for and to us, we are deemed safe, sensible, and worthy of "their" "respect," and if need be, their support. Our life sentence, their fodder for yet another paper and presentation on what "victims" need and how.

VICTIMS BRING A PARTICULAR PERSPECTIVE AND PERSONAL STORY TO THE LANGUAGE OF JUSTICE

Many victims of crime are not only versed in the language of justice: social, criminal, and restorative, but bring a particular perspective and personal story, which can expand and deepen the necessary discourses about why our current justice system continues to draw from retribution and revenge, failing to address how an adversarial (in)justice system serves few.

RESPECT, RESPONSIBILITY, AND RELATIONSHIP... THE THREE R'S OF SAWBONNA'S "I SEE YOU"!

As well, "victims" find it pressing to address the fact that those who work for justice in various occupations, groups, committees, and associations must never lose sight of the three "r's" of restorative justice (RJ) in kinship with Sawbonna. Those three "r's" being: respect, responsibility, and relationship. Those three "r's" are not simply to be engaged in between victims and offenders, as defined by the Criminal Code of Canada.

JUSTICE AS LIVED EXPERIENCE: THE SAWBONNA PROJECT

The lenses through which we peer into the vast and complex landscape of what justice as lived experience means, is one that invites us to include multiple voices in the many conversations about how we embody justice by our actions. If we hope to shift the justice

culture we must challenge ourselves to choose to live the values of respect, responsibility, and relationship, even when we feel that our "expertise" is what those "victims" need from us.

A SAVAGE VENEER OF JUSTICE

Michel Foucault, in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, addresses how the carceral system not only keeps offenders at the mercy of those in power, but spreads its savage veneer of justice across society as a whole, whereby power and expertise are then reserved for a handful to mete out at will and whim. Might we not serve justice in our day and age by listening to each other with respect? By choosing to say a resounding "no" to the idea that justice is known and defined by only the chosen few?

SOCIAL, CRIMINAL AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE... BECAUSE THE VOICES OF BOTH VICTIMS AND OFFENDERS ARE GENERALLY IGNORED

One of the most powerful gifts I received in sharing Sawbonna with Glen Flett, was that I learned how much victims and offenders have in common, with the most salient similarity: being ignored. That social, criminal, and restorative justice are invited to make room for many voices and to create the spaces for no more being ignored, is a reminder that the less exclusivity that contours the justice dialogue, the more likely we are to encourage broad engagement, which is fundamentally necessary for shaping the justice system. And without a doubt, "victim" voices, sculpted in restorative justice's three "r's" and Sawbonna's "I see you," can prove great sources of useful information, as we trust in engagement with the, too often, voiceless. ●●

NOTES

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RÉSUMÉ

L'un des cadeaux le plus précieux qu'aït reçus l'auteure en partageant son projet de justice vivante, Sawbonna, avec l'homme qui avait tué son père a été de prendre conscience de tout ce que les victimes et les délinquants ont en commun, la caractéristique la plus saillante étant « le fait d'être ignorés ». Nous rappelant ici que la justice sociale, la justice criminelle et la justice réparatrice doivent permettre à de nombreuses voix de s'exprimer et favoriser un engagement très large, Van Sluytman souligne que moins il y aura d'exclusivité dans le dialogue de la justice, mieux ce sera : les voix des victimes, influencées par les trois « R » de la justice réparatrice et le « je te vois » de son propre Sawbonna, pourraient s'avérer des sources importantes d'information utile, si nous faisons confiance à notre implication auprès de celles et de ceux qui sont trop souvent sans voix.