

Witness to Reconciliation

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Just Love. This phrase's meaning has evolved for me. I have been involved in the criminal justice field in the past 15 years in almost every aspect. I started as a corrections officer in my early 20s, and then transitioned to a prosecutor then defense attorney. For the past five years I have worked as a therapist working almost exclusively with men and women in the criminal justice system.

I started out my adult life believing the love, respect, dignity, etc. were things that needed to be earned or justified. This fit my upbringing in rural South Dakota and farm-family values. Everything is earned whether good things or bad.

I have been given an opportunity to work with the treatment court system in Michigan. First in the drug treatment court system and now currently in the Veterans Treatment Court system. I work with men and women who have volunteered to be part of an intensively supervised probation program for 18 months with the purpose of surrounding a small subset of people with treatment options and accountability to those options. When we first began the program in Muskegon, we had 8 men, 6 of whom had attempted suicide within the 2 years prior to entering the court. For 3 of them the crime that brought them to the treatment court was directly related to their suicide attempt. One of my greatest joys in this program is that none of those men attempted much less completed a suicide since joining the court. Six have graduated, one did not complete the program, and one was killed in a traffic accident.

I am always drawn back to the story of one gentleman who had had three previous suicide attempts. He is a chronic alcoholic who struggles with PTSD and a severe back injury. From the first time that we met and for the next 12 months, every conversation would contain the question, “Why do you care?” He asked this to his probation officer, his mentor, the judge, the chaplain myself, and all those involved in the court. For months, I would give him the answers that felt most right in my heart; “because we share a bond as Soldiers”, “because you deserve to have us care” and so on. After many ups and downs with sobriety and relapse, this gentleman found the longest stretch of sober-living in his adult life, which was 3 months. It was during this time that his attitude changed, but so did mine. When we had discussions and the question “Why do you care?” inevitably came up, instead of searching for an answer, I simply said, “I do care because I do care.” I realized that I was searching for the ways that he had earned my caring either through his previous good deeds or through enough suffering. However, when I simply loved him because I loved him with no preconditions or justifications, I was as free as he was. As we have continued to work together over the past few months, the question that has been a staple of our relationship does not come up anymore.

I am seeing the true value of the reconciliation for him and for me, for a criminal justice system that can truly care about a small group of men and women, and for all of the people that have and will be effected by the men and women who graduate from this program. It is not about a just love that is earned but instead it is Just Love that allows the rebuilding of lives.