**What is Restorative Justice?**

When we think of justice, we very often think of what has come to be known as retributive justice: a wrong has been committed, and the wrongdoer must pay in a manner commensurate to the crime. This is the type of justice system under which most societies operate, and may be understood as an evolved form of the biblical “eye for an eye” injunction. The focus of retributive justice is on punishment for the wrongdoer, which in turn is assumed to be justice for the wronged.

Restorative justice takes a broader view of justice. It understands that a crime is rarely just one person against another; it tears at the fabric of the whole community. The violation of the social contract is what is at stake. Where retributive justice may focus on the broken law, restorative justice focuses on the broken relationships and how to mend them. In a restorative justice model, then, we seek to balance the needs of the victim—which may include the entire community—with the culpability of the offender, recognising that the offender also needs to be restored to right relationship.

Restorative justice often entails an acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the transgressor, and a profession of repentance, usually followed up with some sort of concrete gesture of restitution. Central to this is the recognition that the offender has not simply broken a law, but hurt a real person and community, and must look them in the eye and take responsibility for that. The wronged party, in turn, extends forgiveness and a willingness to take on good faith the repentance of the wrongdoer.

Forgiveness is a term, like reconciliation, that has sometimes been cheapened by how casually it has been used to cover up sins and act as though they never happened or require no redress. People are understandably suspicious when they are expected or asked to forgive, afraid it may mean a whitewashing of the past, a sort of historical amnesia. In truth, forgiveness does not minimise the transgression; rather, it is the only response that recognises the immutability and irreversibility of the act.

A model of punitive or retributive justice would suggest that once punishment is dealt, justice has been done, which in turn presumes that a price can be put on human suffering and it can be made right. Forgiveness, strangely enough, seems to recognise that transgressions can never fully be made right and appropriate, because the evil act simply cannot be reversed. Far from negating what has happened, it is a model that takes it very seriously indeed. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we must go on as if nothing had happened; it understands with utmost gravity that something has happened that cannot be undone, and therefore can only be forgiven.

But perhaps we must begin thinking beyond even restorative justice. As mentioned earlier, the very notion of restoration suggests that there was some previous time in which the parties lived in harmony and right relation with each other. Yet that is not the case; we do not have a time we can look back to as the paradigm of healthy relationships to which we seek to return. Perhaps, then, we should begin thinking in terms of *transformational justice.* Such an idea recognises that we need a wholesale shift in the way we relate to each other—a transformation—that opens up new possibilities. Transformational justice asks us to go deeper, as we ask difficult questions about why things are the way they are, and how we can change the cycles in which we operate so that we can reduce conflict and create new and equitable relationships.