

### Restorative Justice Circle Reflection

Restorative justice intrigued me from the start. Its potential for genuine, holistic healing was clear. Restorative justice practices, such as healing circles, have already had positive impacts on the local education, criminal justice, and even religious communities. I was eager to learn how I could incorporate these strategies into my own practice one day.

I was less convinced, however, on how the class would benefit from its own circle. I felt a circle was best to combat serious community harms, such as abuse and crime. Circles were used to heal victims of the Catholic Church clergy abuse scandal. They helped families affected by gang and gun violence. They effectively addressed why kids were acting out at school. A group of law students though? Arguably, we are better off than most. Sure, we are stressed and have our own problems, but I felt that our harm fell out of the scope of what circles offered. I learned, however, that I was looking at “harm” the wrong way.

The first circle opened my eyes to how powerful they can be. Circles are not limited to extreme traumas and do not only help stereotypical “victims” of harm. The group came together with our own hurt and an open mind, and that connected us in an unexpected way. Intimate life stories were told. Tears were shed. Fears and uncertainties were confessed. After only knowing each other for a few days, we spoke candidly and quickly built comradery. The room became a place to unload our stress in a healthy way. Our ability to be vulnerable, even in the face of discomfort, spoke to the power of the practice. I left the circle feeling better than I had in months.

My initial experience made me look forward to the next. Plus, I had a personal stake in this next circle. Abby Honold and I went to college together. While I did not know her well, I once considered Dan a friend. I was also friends with his other victims. After his arrest and

subsequent prosecution, I felt stupid and manipulated by him. He had convinced me, and so many others, that he was goofy, fun, and completely harmless. Meanwhile, he was preying on women and using his “nice guy” reputation as a shield. For far too long, we let him. I was hoping the circle with Abby, a survivor I had come to admire, could help me work through the guilt and pain I still felt.

Abby’s story was powerful and inspiring, but what she went through was horrifying. I felt guiltier than ever. Convinced the group would judge me for belonging to a community that allowed Dan hurt so many women, I decided on staying silent. That was until other group members began to talk. They came forward with their own experiences with sexual assault and sexual harassment. If they could be this open and brave, why couldn’t I?

Finally, I worked up the nerve to do what I had always wanted: to apologize to Abby. I had not directly caused her harm, but I had heard rumors of what happened and chose to remain uninvolved. I chose the easy option: apathy. Apathy is what allowed Dan and his friends to silence Abby and hurt more women. Abby deserved an apology for my indifference. And I needed an outlet for the guilt I had been harboring for years. The circle provided us with that. I would have never been able to connect with Abby the way I did in the circle on my own. But, because we were able to have an open and vulnerable conversation, I left that circle with a new friend.

I was excited to take what I had learned from our in-class exercises into the community for my final circle. However, the night before my “Coming to the Table” session with the Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Initiative, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. I was devastated. I logged into the meeting disengaged and sad. How would I be able to connect with group of strangers over Zoom in this state? Immediately, however, I recognized we all were hurting. Everyone had spent

the last twelve hours grieving an icon and worrying about the future. That circle became an opportunity for us to mourn together. A group of eight strangers on a computer screen became the first to help me navigate this newfound sadness. Crixell led us seamlessly from fear and anxiety to hope. We brainstormed small changes and impacts we could immediately have in our local community. The group was able to build concrete plans to help build a better future. Again, I was able to find comfort in an unexpected place.

Our coursework for this class introduced the concepts and tools of restorative justice, but the circles demonstrated its power and benefit. Each circle had an unexpected yet profound effect on me. However, I believe the true power came from circle members themselves. Each participant came to the experience vulnerable and open-minded. That made space for real conversation and healing. Although participants may be uncomfortable and hesitant at first, restorative justice practitioners must continue to get genuine buy in for their methods to work. Once they do, holistic healing is possible, no matter who partakes in a circle or what kind of trauma they bring.

Lawyers are and will continue to be integral members in our communities. Offering this course gives law students insight to an important and beneficial practice. I encourage you to continue to offer this course with restorative justice circles a core part of the curriculum. This course helps create a more empathetic legal community. Moreover, it can inspire the next generation of attorneys to keep restorative justice at the forefront of legal practice. Even though at times it was draining and difficult, I am grateful for this experience. I believe I will be a better lawyer because of it.