

My Experience with the Sycamore Tree Project®

I've been facilitating the Sycamore Tree courses in my prison now for about eighteen months. Sycamore Tree is the Restorative Justice programme run by Prison Fellowship (<http://www.pfi.org/>). It is a six week course which runs one afternoon a week.

Over such time you would not expect very much to happen. How can you change a person's outlook on their life in six short afternoons?

Week one: Restorative Justice – what's that?
Week two: Taking responsibility – the impact of crime on victims, offenders and community
Week three: Saying sorry – listening to victims' stories
Week four: Reconciliation – what is the benefit for offenders, victims and wider community?
Week five: Taking the next step – planning what to do
Week six: A symbolic act of restitution – making reparation

Week one, they all arrive a little unsure. Most have applied to do the course because it is on their sentence plan, or because they are aware that it looks good on various boards, for them to have taken the course. Most who apply are also looking to change. They do not want to come back to prison again, they are beginning to see they have hurt their families by being locked up. They are often beginning to realise that a key part to that change lies in understanding what they have done to their victim(s). They are very vulnerable in their uncertainty, in their need to change, which often – in the Young Offenders – presents as bravado.

The candidates are introduced to the idea of Restorative Justice. They start to

Retributive Justice asks:
What crime was committed?
Who is to blame?
What punishment should be served?

Restorative Justice asks:
Who has been hurt?
What are their needs?
Whose responsibility are they?

examine the idea of the restoration of relationships, to understand that bridges can be rebuilt but that it is process, a journey that can take years. They are offered the idea that they are people of worth, who hold their future in their own hands. Then they meet Zacchaeus (Luke 19, The Bible), a man who is restored by Jesus. They are introduced to the idea that crime is not just a matter between the criminal and the victim, but something that impacts widely on the community.

Then they have a week to think about it.

This is the pattern of the course, each week of the course leads them on into understanding their responsibilities and the paths to restoring their own lives and the lives of the people around them. At the end of each session they return to their cells, and have a week to digest and internalise the work they have done.

When a victim of crime comes to talk to them on week three it is nearly always transformative. They are brought face to face – literally – with the impact crime has, and by implication the impact of their own actions. As Chaplain, I am especially alert this week, as some find this experience overwhelming.

The victim who comes in has been trained by Prison Fellowship to present his/her story without risking themselves. All the people I have heard, speak movingly and honestly about the damage that has been done to them and their family – I have been moved to tears by some accounts – and about their path to their own restoration. All the ‘victims’ who come in have forgiven the criminals who so hurt them. This last element is something the candidates find especially difficult.

Then they have a week to think about it.

An Offender's poem:

*To all the people who have been hurt
by me*

As I watch the smile drain from you
The tears run down your face
The heartache there is clear to see
And all because of me.

The pain
The hurt
The sorrow cause and why?
Because of me.

No excuse can there be
No thoughts of you were there for me
I was too blind to see
It all comes back to me.

Now in the darkness, alone at night
The tears I cry, the heartaches ripe
So much lost
And all because of me.

It's time to turn life around
Work hard to put things right
Saying sorrys not enough
I have to show it's right.

A promise here I give you now
Is to always think of you
To rebuild relationships
Just make our life anew.

And that will be because of me!

*Poem courtesy of
www.prisonfellowship.org.uk*

By week six they are transformed people. Vulnerable in their transformation, still, newly formed, newly resolved; but convicted of their own offence and their desire to do and be better. At the end of the course they publically affirm this in an ‘act of restitution’, and often are moved to *ask* to contact their victim and apologise.

It never fails to take my breath away, not only how far these men – I work in men’s prisons – come in six short weeks, but how jubilant they are in getting there. They

know something vital has happened, something which has not only changed them but has the potential to change their lives and the lives of those around them.

The author is a prison chaplain in England and asked to remain anonymous.