

Healing the wounds of violent crime

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I waited in line and watched Phil serve corn chowder. He wore those white plastic gloves that servers wear. I stared at the hands that had stabbed my sister's friend 99 times and then slit her throat.

Those hands were going to serve me corn chowder at the lunch supplied by inmates at the Restorative Justice Symposium in the William Head prison in Victoria. Keynote speaker Katy Hutchinson gave the presentation she has given to almost 60,000 people in the last couple of years. She described the life she had before the shy young man standing beside her killed her husband.

After showing a series of action photos of her lovely family, Katy abruptly showed us a photo of her husband lying on a gurney at the morgue. One evening in 1997, setting out to be a good neighbour, her husband stepped into the wrong teenage party at the wrong time.

Four years later, Katy arranged to meet Ryan, the young man who delivered the killer soccer kick to her husband's head. They talked. She told the audience that her first day of getting to know Ryan was one of the most human days of her life, next to the day her twin children were born.

Katy aimed for some kind of positive outcome. She didn't want her kids' lives to be defined by the tragic loss of their Dad. She also did not want Ryan's young life shattered by his mistake. Ryan kept his head down for most of the time when he spoke, and stood stiffly in front of the mike; as if that skinny metal thing might prop up his healthy young body if he keeled over from nerves. Katy hugged him.

He talked about how Katy was changing his life. He talked about the consequences of

making bad choices. Someone asked him if he had forgiven himself yet. He visibly stumbled over that question. He didn't know how to say no.

He understands that Katy expects him to make something of his life.

After Katy and Ryan spoke, the inmate emcee introduced the community choir led by the amazing Shivon Robinsong. The first song for Katy was about the healing power of her ability to listen and to forgive. The second song was for Ryan and the inmates at William Head prison. The song was a reminder for them to look within and reclaim their soulful beauty.

Tears reigned.

On Katy's inspiration, I expressed a private form of compassion for the man who has spent over 20 years in prison for murdering my sister's friend. While we sang, I imagined I was singing directly to Phil. I tried very hard not to judge him. It took all of my concentration.

One of the inmates baked hundreds of delicious chocolate chip cookies for the break. I munched on a few of them while my choir friend, who volunteered at the restorative justice program, introduced me to Phil. I was nervous at meeting him but extended my hand to him. I sensed that he had not received many of those in the past 20 years.

I was desperately trying to fathom the tired and sad-looking human being in front of me. From the steady work I watched him do over the course of the day, and from his interaction with inmates and staff, I could see he is respected in his community for his "model prisoner" role.

The newspapers said he had no recollection of the murder he committed that night. He was looped on a combo of drugs and alcohol. He figures he may have done it because the victim refused to give him drugs.

I asked him a number of questions. I wanted to know if he still drank; if he placed any blame on the victim; and if he was hiding behind a lack of memory. In the brief chat, I juggled my own perceived allegiance between the still-suffering victim's family and my own belief in the healing power of forgiveness.

I asked Phil where he thought his life might have gone if he hadn't made such a horrible

mistake. "I might have been a teacher," he said. "My father taught and in the last 20 years I have gravitated to teachers that I have met in the prison system." He said he appreciated working on the inmates' Alternatives to Violence program. He invited me to check it out some time.

Phil has AIDS and suffers from anxiety attacks. He hasn't touched alcohol since the night he killed my sister's friend. He hopes to get out of prison one day, but after 20-plus years in jail, he is also afraid of getting out. His comfort zone is in the prison where he has spent most of his life. I wondered if he will ever forgive himself. I doubt it.

As I went back to my seat after the break, I wondered if my family could ever forgive a person who murdered me. As loving as my family is, I am not sure they could sum up Katy's brand of extreme wisdom.

But I would want them to. I would not want a tragedy to destroy the lives of every member of my family. I was beginning to understand the power of Katy's decision to forgive the young man who killed her husband. Last Christmas her children were concerned if Ryan would get a good Christmas dinner in prison.

Ann Mortifee joined our choir and helped to close the symposium. In a powerful voice that rattled my esophagus, Ann identified the common ground of inmate and non-inmate humanity at the Restorative Justice Symposium.

Phil seems to be a good organizer. I wish he would start up a community choir at the William Head Prison. Singing helps.

Thelma Fayle lives and is beginning to sing in Victoria.