Restorative Justice in a Nutshell
Stop the Cycle of Harm and Start Healing

Fania Davis

Restorative justice invites a shift in the way we think about and do justice—from a justice that harms to a justice that heals.

Retributive justice, which is our dominant form of justice, asks three questions:
1. What law was broken?
2. Who broke it?
3. What should the punishment be?

Restorative justice asks three different questions:
1. Who was harmed?
2. What are the needs and responsibilities of all those affected by the harm?
3. How do all those affected by that harm come together and heal?

What does it look like? When a kid burns a place, everyone who’s affected gets together and decides the kid should not go to juvenile detention but should work for 100 hours as the personal care attendant of a gunshot victim. Or if it’s a gun charge, the consequence might be to work 100 hours taking care of a gunshot victim.

Our current justice system is a system that harms people who have harmed people to show that harming is wrong. So what happens? We just cause more and more and more harm.

Restorative justice seeks to break that cycle and bring healing. I ask you to learn more about restorative justice and consider how you might apply it—whether in your family, your places of worship, your community, your schools, or in the justice system. We need healing.

A mural in Oakland, CA. Photo by William Newton from <flickr.com>, used here under the Creative Commons license.

Use your own words to describe the difference between “retributive” and “restorative” justice.

Read more about how restorative justice works in the Oakland Public school system here: <www.yesmagazine.org/issues/education-uprising/where-dignity-is-part-of-the-school-day>.

Fania Davis, pictured here on the right with her sister Angela Davis, is the co-founder and executive director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth <rjoyoakland.org>. This piece is transcribed excerpts from a video talk by Fania Davis. Find it on Youtube. Search for “Restorative Justice in a Nutshell.”