

## Interview with Dr. Dorothy Vaandering 3-15-23

Dorothy: When I got started in restorative justice—I'm amazed that it's probably close to 25 years ago already—I got involved with restorative justice in education specifically. It was around the time of Columbine in the U.S. and Taber in Canada, and schools were cracking down on inappropriate behaviors. We have two sons who were in grades five and seven at the time, and they were somewhat rambunctious. We found them at home quite a lot because they were being suspended for playing rough on the playground or disrupting class. We just had to find a way around this.

At that time, I had already been doing a lot of work, as a teacher, with peace and conflict work in elementary classrooms. I was very happy with a lot of the things that were happening. We had a peacemaker program at the school that I was heading up. Eventually, a friend gave me one of the first articles written on restorative justice in schools. I read it and said, "This is the missing link." From there, I started to apply some of the basic principles of restorative justice in our parenting and also in my teaching, and everything changed. It was just a real gift to begin to think about it and feel its impact in a holistic way.

When I began working on my Ph.D., I picked up restorative justice in education again. I started to look at implementation and sustainability. Those were the early days of restorative justice in schools, and I was looking at it through the lens of two schools that were implementing it. I did a study of each of the schools and then a comparison between them. In the process, I was grounding the work in the foundations of restorative justice. I started to question and problematize the words "restorative" and the word "justice," especially at a time when people were saying, "No, we don't want to call it 'restorative justice in schools.' We want to call it restorative practices, restorative approaches, restorative whatever, -- anything but justice."

The key thing that came out of my doctoral work was a strong footing and foundation around why we need to continue using the word "justice," why we need to rethink what we mean when we say "justice". And why we need to recognize that it extends beyond the judicial context. My doctoral work used critical theory as a framework or lens. So, when I was looking at schools that were implementing restorative justice, I was asking the question, "Who's benefiting and

who's bearing the burden?" It was pretty clear that often, often unconsciously, restorative justice was being used for the benefit of the adults and not the students. That's when I started to really question the potential of restorative justice to do harm, or cause further harm.

In those early days, I was using Howard Zehr's work, but had always had interest in understanding the Indigenous foundations of restorative justice. I did not have relationships with Indigenous people at the time and so just stayed quite focused on the Mennonite tradition because my own background is also Judeo-Christian, so it resonated with me.

After I was done with my Ph.D., I accepted a position in Newfoundland in Labrador at Memorial University; I was an assistant professor in social studies and democratic citizenship. In that context, I continued my research around restorative justice because it dovetailed pretty nicely with my work. Because I was looking at the foundations of restorative justice through a critical theory lens, I found that I was having conversations with people across community, across justice, across education—restorative justice in any context. I was promoting restorative justice as a framework, as a world and life view. Then as I connected with indigenous people and indigenous communities, that resonance really took off.

Kathy Evans and I, in writing *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education*, intentionally set out to challenge people to look at the foundations and the framework of restorative justice, rather than the practice or only the practice. In the work I do with Relationships First (<https://www.rfnl.org/home>) our relationship with Mi'kmaq community and leaders, helped us refine our thinking in a good way. We now have made a distinction between Circle pedagogy and sacred Circles recognizing them as two different things. We're working very hard to incorporate honoring the Indigenous connection, working hard to decolonize how restorative justice is understood in the non-Indigenous context.

We had an event in November 2021 called "Two-Eared Listening for Deeper Understanding: Restorative Justice in Newfoundland and Labrador." [[www.twoearedlistening.com](http://www.twoearedlistening.com)]. Indigenous people of this province led the discussion around what is restorative justice by challenging participants to see how we can't understand justice till we have heard the stories of injustice. We were challenged as non-Indigenous people to recognize that we do not listen. It

was a two-and-a-half-year process of organizing it. In 2021, we had a window of about six to eight weeks where we could meet in public, in person, during COVID. This event happened in that window of time. We were about 175 people—135 in person, about 40 people online. It was a transformative event. Those of us who planned it were led by Saquamaw [Chief] Misel Joe, [Miawpukek First Nation]. For those of us who were on the planning committee, that experience was an incredible learning experience. We invited non-Indigenous leaders in government, education, and community in the province. For the most part, Indigenous people led the event, and the rest of us just kept our mouths shut and listened. The majority of people who attended said it was beyond anything they had ever experienced.

Our event was basically about that first stage of a restorative justice process: we can't ever engage in justice unless we're ready to hear the stories of injustice. The whole two-ear listening protocol that was developed for this event is rooted very much in an Indigenous way of understanding listening. It came about in reflecting on “two-eyed seeing” which was developed by an elder in Nova Scotia. In the context of botany/biology, Elder Albert Marshall said, "We have to look at the world through two eyes, one eye being the Indigenous perspective and one eye being the Western perspective and valuing the strengths that each of them bring, so that we develop a new way of going forward." Two-eared listening is a little different in that it is about listening not just with our ears and our brains, but that we listen with our hearts and our soul. What does it mean to listen with our hearts and our souls? What difference does that make when it comes to justice?

Loretta: I like these concepts and it's so descriptive about what's necessary to basically create something new.

Dorothy: Yes. It's what's necessary to, without any coercion or co-optation, to make a synthesis of both of those worlds.

Loretta: It won't be done in my lifetime.

Dorothy: No, no. What's interesting is that this is being led by Indigenous peoples, who are completely cognizant of the need to work with non-indigenous people. So, how do we find that path forward and rebalance what's gone wrong? I think

we live in a time where we just need to learn from and listen to Indigenous people and put our own western ways of thinking aside.