Loretta: Most of the practitioners I've talked to in the field have noticed a definite dividing line between the pre-COVID and post-COVID times, as far as the challenges that they've faced and how their practice has had to evolve. Can you comment on that?

Dr. Robert Spicer: First, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to be interviewed by you. I am a huge supporter of the work Living Justice Press does and I look forward to continuing my support. In answering your question, Yes! There have been a myriad of personal and professional changes that occurred during the historic COVID pandemic and the worldwide lockdowns.

During that time, my consultant business, Restorative Strategies®, LLC, was asked to travel West to schools in northern California and Nevada. I was preparing to go and then COVID happened. When COVID hit the US, a majority of my local and national clients dried up because most of them were schools and NFPs.

What became clear to me was I wanted to still support my clients during this time and the only tool that was available to me was ZOOM. So I began to engage my clients there and I even got to work with individuals from the company Snap Chat! As I recall it was a very fluid time in the work. I was going to not only teach Circles, but also allow the space to support all of us as we tried to understand what was happening and how to stay true to our values and hold these sacred spaces for healing, support and sharing.

Then in May, the entire world witnessed the killing of George Floyd on broadcast television. It was so terrible to see something like that happen. But not only that, we were locked in our homes due to the pandemic. Of course, I watched TV when I was not reading, and there we were faced with one of the scourges of racism—police brutality. To hear Mr. Floyd’s dying words, to hear him beg for help and see him die right before my eyes. I am father of three daughters and one son. And to know that he was not only taken from our community, but also was taken away from his daughter, and his brothers: it still hurts to think about that dark time to this day.

So I had to think long and hard between moments of tears. What can I do?

This has been a lingering question in my head as an African-American who practices restorative justice. The questions that came to mind over and over again were: “Is restorative justice enough to heal the racial divide in America? Is restorative justice enough to deal with the 400 plus years of slavery and its vestiges? Is restorative justice enough to help create that table of brotherhood that Dr. King prophesized about in his ‘I have a dream’ speech?” I was teaching others as a consultant to restore our children in schools, but when they matriculate into this global society, this next question presented itself to me: “What are we restoring our youth to”? This question encouraged me to think differently about the tool I have been using as an
educator, community activist, preacher and parent. From that point, Loretta, I decided that we need something more.

This journey from COVID, to the lockdowns and to the killing of George Floyd is what prompted me to write *Aspirational Justice*. It is a new form of justice birthed out of the restorative justice philosophy. It is a form of justice that we must aspire to become as a nation and as a global influencer. As restorative justice practices have been seen as tools to eradicate zero tolerance practices and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, I envision Aspirational Justice as a solution to remove institutional and structural racism and as a replacement for them. In many communities both local and national, I am beginning to see that it's actually beginning to take root as people begin to have conversations about what is possible when it comes to racial healing, racial atonement, and racial reconciliation.

L: So, when you say that there are some people who are of that same mind, what does that look like? Are people using Peacemaking Circles or other restorative justice methods to pursue Aspirational Justice?

R: When I say “some people” I am talking about members of our community who have been in the fight for social justice and have been using different approaches to bring America closer to its core tenets of liberty and justice for all. Before I highlight a few examples from my book, I want to share with you a working definition of Aspirational Justice and the constructs that support this new philosophy toward racial healing and reconciliation.

This definition comes from my book, *Aspirational Justice*: Aspirational Justice is a truth and healing construct that engages African Americans and the wider American society to establish a new racial and reparative relationship.

The Constructs are Truth-Telling, The Symbolic, The Institutional, and The Tangible. Each of those constructs work together to bring in to fruition Aspirational Justice. These construct all work together in moving toward this particular philosophy.

The Truth-Telling construct is important. It is the foundation that all the other constructs rely upon. An example of a nation using this particular construct is South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commissions under the leadership of Bishop Desmond Tutu and, of course, Nelson Mandela, the first president of the new South Africa.

But once we've told the truth, now we need to figure out how to move forward. There's power in confessing. There's power in telling someone, “I messed up and I beg your forgiveness.” There's power in that. There's a release for both individuals from the shame and guilt of the act. So, Truth-Telling is super important, and our media, historians, statisticians, and scientists and many other are a part of that truth-telling process and have a responsibility to teach it to our children.
We see what's happening in Florida where they're trying to make slavery into something that was beneficial because some slaves learned skills. But let's be clear that the Africans that were here already had skills, they already knew how to do things. So, let's tell the truth and let's tell the truth to our children so that they can grow up empathizing and then one day become leaders that can begin to right this wrong. We want to go to Mars and we want to develop AI and do all these great things scientifically, yet we don't know how to live with each other. We're going to take those same things to Mars and we're going to discriminate on another planet? We as a society have to deal with this behavior and right this wrong once and for all.

So, from Truth-Telling we move to the Symbolic, and the Symbolic is focused specifically on creating symbols that are more life affirming, that show that we're at peace and not at war. When citizens tore down General Robert E. Lee’s statue and many other Confederate statues all around the South, it symbolizes to me a complete understanding that we're not at war anymore. There are those that want to hold us back in the past and want to keep us in that mentality and the Symbolic construct is all about how to create new symbols. I highlight in detail in the chapter on the Symbolic Construct.

From the Symbolic, we move into the Institutional, where I detail the variety of institutions that need Aspirational Justice process. An example is the banking institutions and the practice of redlining. Because of this practice, African Americans were relegated to specific neighborhoods and not allowed to move into other neighborhoods. Or they were priced out by the banks, who took their land and resold it at a higher price, continuing to keep the cycle of poverty going in the lives of African Americans.

Another institution is the educational system: the zero-tolerance philosophy and the school-to-prison pipeline. There have been significant gains in the fight against zero tolerance, but the fight continues, zero tolerance thinking is still around. There could be a retraction of the gains that have been made—definitely here in my home city of Chicago, in Chicago Public School District 299. We still have a lot of work to do. We still have institutional racism in the education system. We still have segregation going on, with Chicago being one of the most segregated cities in the United States. We still have a lot of work to do in the institutional space. With Aspirational Justice—with the Truth-Telling, the Symbolic, and the Institutional—we begin to figure out how to bring this philosophy into the many institutions that affect our quality of life every day.

That leads me to the last construct, which is the Tangible. If this is about racial atonement, about how we truly heal, how do we reconcile the fact that 400 plus years of free labor has built this nation into the greatest nation on earth? How do we reconcile and give repair to a community that so much was taken from to bolster a nation to become a superpower?

There are a variety of different ways the Tangible reparative process (TRP) can be done, from using universal basic income model to creating tangible reparative processes that bring income into communities that have been hardest hit by slavery and its vestiges. We should be focused on making sure that people have financial literacy. Everybody who’s educated on finances and
has financial freedom knows about how money works. How to invest. How to use compound interest to their benefits. How to give, because giving is a part of wealth building as well—teaching people how to give and how to help those who are less fortunate by investing in projects and people that can make the world a safe and better place.

All of these constructs are focused on one specific goal—racial atonement. Atonement in the biblical sense is being separated from the bad that you’ve done, forever, and not picking that bad up anymore, but being sorry for it and then moving into a space of repentance, a space of actual tangible steps toward reconciliation. That’s what Aspirational Justice hopes to accomplish—to give us, as a nation and a global influencer, the tangible steps for how we as a nation can “get to the promised land” as prophesied by Dr. King. King said that there will be difficult days ahead, but he gave us hope by telling us that there is a place that we can aspire to become. I hope that Aspirational Justice can be the blueprint for our nation to move from a place of division to a place of encouragement for people that have been systematically and politically disenfranchised and disconnected from the American promise.

L: I’m not aware of any formal process of truth-telling in this country, but I have noticed much more media coming out with videos or films talking about the real history.

R: I highlight the media in my book as an institution that can help move our country toward an Aspirational Justice mindset. But it is not enough to expose the citizens to our difficult past in race relations. Just sharing the information may only continue the shaming that causes more disconnect and more guilt. That is why I wrote Aspirational Justice—to give our citizens a pathway toward healing and away from guilt and shame. Mass media can use their platforms to create a huge impact on the minds and hearts of people through their storytelling.

Loyola University asked me to teach a course on restorative justice in schools, and my colleague and friend Dr. Pam Fenning encouraged me to teach Aspirational Justice as a part of this class. So for the past 8 semesters, I have taught administrators, teachers, and students from as far away as Bermuda, in the School of Education at Loyola Chicago, about the possibility of Aspirational Justice. The experience has been wonderful and I am looking forward to continuing this amazing partnership.

Here are three examples of how Aspirational Justice is being actualized: in the media, in a local municipality, and through a state wide legislative committee.

On a “60 Minutes” episode that just recently aired, Anderson Cooper [talked with] descendants of former captive Africans who were brought the North America on the Clotilda, which was the last slave ship that came to the United States. It sunk, and the descendants of that ship have always said that that ship is [still] there and their descendants came from that ship. Eventually they were able to find the ship. Well, [the family of] the actual slaver is now working toward reconciliation and some type of repair between the black descendants and their family.
In Evanston, IL, they've done a reparations program with their African American residents. The government is sending money in the form of grants to these households to help them in a variety of different ways, no strings attached, as a way for the government of Evanston to actually begin to reconcile with this group of people. You hear about these pockets of individuals and municipalities and media beginning to have this difficult conversation and to begin to do something about it. It is inspiring.

And in the State of California just recently, a legislative committee empowered by Gov. Newsom conducted a series of hearings on reparations for their African-American citizens. Gov. Newsom and his administration are moving their state toward reparations for their African American citizens. The state government, through this act, is also moving a step closer toward healing, reconciliation, and more importantly, acknowledgement of their part in the “peculiar institution.” To date, there has never even been an apology by the federal government of the United States for their role in slavery. [I have] hope that there will be an acknowledgement from the president of the United States. To acknowledge that slavery and racism did affect Black American men, woman, and children and that many suffered while others benefited, would begin the process toward racial healing and reconciliation. Aspirational Justice is the process that would give our citizens the courage to answer this question: how do we as nation right this wrong?

L: I've been reflecting on the word “atonement” while you're speaking; it begins with “at one”. Somehow my side of the fence—the White side of the fence—hasn't come to the realization of the harm we have caused ourselves by this aberration and to understand that we are “as one”: we can't profit off of each other, we need to operate as one culture, and we could do ourselves a big favor by pursuing this in a positive way saying, “Yes, we acknowledge what happened and how it happened and what the ramifications have been throughout history.” You know, it has to happen for us to hold together as a society.

R: In order for us to get to the “Promised Land” of Aspirational Justice, we have to do it together. We cannot do it separately. It's hard for us to face these challenges if one group still has an issue with another group. I talk about it in Aspirational Justice. The reason why restorative justice would not work in this racial space is because to be in a restorative space means that at one point we were in good relationship. So that when we come together in a Circle or in one of the other restorative practices, we have a story in common. Somewhere along the line things fell apart, so now we bring in the facilitators to help get back into a right relationship. African Americans in the United States have never had a good relationship with slaveholders, nor their descendants. We never started with a good relationship. So, I contend we must start with Aspirational Justice before we could have a discussion about restorative justice. Aspirational Justice is seeking to solve this problem from a sociopolitical, socio-historic, and socioeconomic standpoint.

L: That's what we have to hold on to these days because it's rough times out there.
R: We’re experiencing this because we must continue to build bridges and tear down walls that have kept divided as a nation.

L: If we did, in some sense we would lose the civil religion that so many people believe in, that there is something sacred about the way things are right now.

R: Yes, and in the losing we’re going to gain so much more. I think there’s a letting go that needs to occur and that is not going to be easy, but it’s going to be necessary. I’m hopeful, but I also know that it’s going to take a lot of work. That’s why I’m so grateful to Loyola University for taking me on to teach this class in restorative justice in schools and to embed Aspirational Justice as a part of this conversation. As a practitioner of restorative justice or as a teacher or administrator, you consider that there is a group in your building that will drive your data up through suspensions, expulsions, and maybe even arrests, but there’s something else going on with this group that you as a school community can begin to tend to—not only the physical and mental needs of these students, but also the emotional and social needs. I believe Aspirational Justice is a part of that process of supporting the social-emotional needs of a variety of different groups that feel disconnected.

L: That’s great that Loyola has taken that on and I hope it continues and expands. To have these positive signs that things could be turned around is helpful for all of us.

R: I didn’t want to leave without highlighting my children’s book.

L: Oh right, tell us about that.

R: The children’s book is a homage to what good teachers can do when they learn restorative justice practices and use these practices for their students. As a former classroom teacher, I was blessed to teach in one of the most under-privileged communities in the city of Chicago—Cabrini Green. I taught third grade and enjoyed every day of being with those children because they taught me so much. I had just recently graduated from college, so I was 22 years old. I always remember the love that those children showed me especially on 9/11. My family lived in New York at the time, and when 9/11 happened, and I couldn’t get in touch with my family, and those children put me in a Circle. Those children held me and supported me.

One of the characters in the children’s book is based off of one of the children that helped me during that difficult time. His name was Percy Cole. Percy, bless his heart, was an angel really. He told everybody, “Whenever I feel bad, my mama hugs me. Can we give you a hug, Mr. Spicer?” And you know, in the schools you’re not supposed to get hugs, but I needed a hug, and I got up and they hugged me. Percy later passed away, so I placed him in my book to memorialize what an incredible young man he was.

I joined the team at Fenger High School in Chicago, where I worked with some amazing teachers and administrators. During my tenure, we exposed the world to what was possible using restorative justice. While there, I also worked with some amazing young leaders. One of
them, Anna Muniz, who was from Mexico, was one of the youth leaders who helped me during my time as an administrator at Fenger. I got word that Anna went back to Mexico, married her high school sweetheart, and had two beautiful children. But as our conversation started with the COVID pandemic, it’s going to end with COVID, because that virus took her life. I also added Anna into the book as a character, so both Percy and Anna are like book ends to my journey in the schools. Those two children among many others meant such a great deal to me and helped me during some difficult times. I’m eternally grateful that they passed my way and I’m grateful that names will continue be spoken in the mouths of our children. No matter where the book is read, Anna and Percy will be on the lips of adults and children all over the world as they learn “What are Circles for?”

L: That's wonderful! I can't wait to read it.