

## Are victims' rights and prisoner redemption compatible?

By **Brian E. Moran**

*Published on November 7, 2014, in The Stamford Advocate and Greenwich Time*

As I travel across Connecticut advocating in favor of right-sizing our prison system, I have encountered audience members who question what prison reform will do for victims.

I am quick to point out that the recent book on which I served as the lead writer, "The Justice Imperative -- How Hyper-Incarceration Has Hijacked The American Dream," is dedicated to "all those who selflessly work in our criminal justice and correction system for the rights of victims, the protection of the public and the rehabilitation of offenders."

I do not see victim advocates and prisoner advocates as interest groups necessarily in conflict with one another. I also respond by noting that (1) The book does not advocate for the early release of violent offenders or those who pose an undue risk to public safety; (2) We recommend taking 3 percent of the cost savings from right-sizing and investing it in a victims fund to pay for counseling and treatment of victims and educational scholarships for family members of victims; and (3) Many of those currently incarcerated are themselves the victims of physical and sexual abuse, particularly women inmates.

Indeed, as we note in "The Justice Imperative," the "typical female inmate in the United States is a woman of color in her early 30s, convicted of a drug or drug-related offense. She is likely to come from a family whose members are caught up in the criminal justice system. She is apt to be a survivor of physical and sexual abuse, both as a child and as an adult. She has significant substance abuse, as well as physical and mental health issues. She has a GED, but only limited non-vocational training and a spotty work history."

I sense, however, that the foregoing response is inadequate. It seems insufficiently empathetic with the anguish felt by victims of heinous crimes. While I have been mugged at knifepoint, I have not suffered a grievous personal loss to violent crime. Thus, I do not believe I can speak to the agony felt by those who have suffered the loss of a loved one.

Nevertheless, I do not regard compassion for victims and affording offenders an opportunity for redemption and reintegration into society as antithetical. When it comes to corrections, our policy choices should be driven largely by what makes economic sense and what works, bearing in mind that public safety is paramount. That said, as a society we should aspire to a system that provides a path for offenders to seek redemption.

Forgiveness is another matter. It should rest within the exclusive province of the victim. The exclusivity of such prerogative is what imbues forgiveness with incredible healing power. I recently read a remarkable book that speaks to the power of forgiveness. The book, "Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst The Rwandan Holocaust," was written by Imaculee Ilibagiza, the 2007 winner of the Mahatma Gandhi International Award for Reconciliation and Peace.

Imaculee, a Roman Catholic Tutsi, survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide by hiding in a tiny concealed bathroom (3 feet long by 4 feet wide) in a Hutu minister's home. She hid there with seven other Tutsi women for 91 days; there were several times when the women were almost discovered.

As she and the other women hid, her parents were slaughtered and her two brothers were tortured and killed. The perpetrators were neighbors with whom Imaculee grew up and was friendly. An older brother studying in Senegal was her only family member who survived. Following her escape, Imaculee learned the identity of her family's killers. Eventually, she visited them in prison and forgave them.

A few years ago, I visited Robbin Island in South Africa. I saw the conditions under which Nelson Mandela was held for 27 years. Mandela, like Imaculee, forgave his captors. As he describes it, such forgiveness had a remarkable effect not only on those who caused him harm, but also on Mandela. He did not feel truly free from his long ordeal until he forgave his transgressors.

The stories of Imaculee and Nelson Mandela reinforce my belief that any system of criminal justice and corrections must not only make sense from an economic and public safety standpoint, but should strive to be humane to both victims and offenders. As New Canaan resident William J. Fox, Director of The Malta Justice Initiative, has written, "(b)y recognizing the human dignity of all offenders and enabling them to realize redemption and restore their relationships within the community, all of society is ennobled."