BOOK REVIEW


Security, With Care takes its title from what Liz Elliot argues is the problematic underlying assumption of our current justice system. Elliot observes that ‘security’ has come to mean the freedom to not have to think about, and thus not take responsibility for our own safety. Instead, when issues of harm, crime, and rule breaking arise we simply pass them on to the ‘professionals’ within the justice system. This divorces us from participating in problem-solving and undermines meaningful engagement with our fellow citizens from fundamental questions of justice. Instead of focusing on the real harms that arise from crime, Elliot writes, we end up relying on a variety of procedural set pieces that invoke simplistic notions of law and order. At its most insidious, this approach has the affect of treating law-breaking citizens as disposable. Caught in this injustice, rule-breakers are locked up and punished day after day in a collective naive hope that somehow this will change the complex character of criminal events. This is problematic, she says, because:

The concept of punishment suggests that why we do things (or not) is unimportant. But that concept sidesteps our hope that, in the absence of authority figures to punish or reward good behavior, individuals will still act in ways that are good, or at least unharmful, for others and the environment. (p. 26)

Some will know of the late Dr. Elizabeth Elliott through her research and teaching at the School of Criminology and the Centre for Restorative Justice at Simon Fraser University (SFU). Yet, her work extended well beyond the confines of the university, and into the lives of many, particularly among those in the prison system in Ontario and most recently in British Columbia. She was well known outside Canada as well.

I first met Liz in Latvia, while I was running an international justice reform project. We became fast friends and I marveled at her ability to connect concepts that were totally alien to the Latvian probation officers who had requested training on Restorative Justice (RJ). I will never forget the last day of a 3-day workshop in which tears and gift giving marked our final circle. Person after person engaged in the sort of personal reflection I had not witnessed at any other time in the four years I spent in Latvia. Liz touched many both within the communities in which we were working, and among those working to reform the formal systems of criminal justice after decades of soviet occupation. Before she left Latvia, Liz and I went for a final beer and she encouraged me to come to British Columbia and do a
Ph.D. Although it took me two years of careful reflection, when I finally applied to SFU, she supported me at every step.

In this, her final work, Elliott provides a sustained argument for the value of restorative practices based on her belief that:

\[\text{... the problems were much deeper than a flawed criminal justice system and that our work needed to begin in our relationships with each other and the natural world and, most importantly, with ourselves. (p. xii)}\]

The metaphor of ‘care’ is used to animate her central thesis that security is meaningless without it. She tells a story about an exercise she used in her classes comparing two images that appear following a Google image search of ‘security.’ By comparing a picture of a fence topped by barbed wire with a smiling child with a blanket simultaneously, she would ask her students: ‘which do you want more of?’ Virtually no one, she reports, picks the fence. I had the privilege of watching her in action every week for a year and was one of a few to lead her unique, experiential, and participatory tutorial sections. Through exercises that provoked cognitive dissonance, the familiar discussion of justice-related concepts suddenly became more complicated. The values that students suggested they believed in were difficult to find in the formal justice system, and the harms that resulted from even the best intentions became magnified. I continue to use the exercises she developed and adapted in my own teaching inside and outside of the prison fences.

The growing interest in RJ in recent years means some of the material in this book has been covered elsewhere. Elliott’s skill, however, in combining academic literature on trauma, shame, citizenship, justice, and democracy with stories, parables, excerpts, and personal meditations is refreshing. Security, With Care opens up the world of RJ and is at once distinctive and authoritative. Organized to provide an overview of the current state of malaise in western criminal justice systems (pp. 7–19), it explores the purposes of punishment and the meaning of justice. For Elliott, justice is both a noun and a verb. Her inclusion of key philosophical works (pp. 43–60) is a useful reminder that these concepts have long been contested and our current assumptions need not be determinative. As the empirical evidence grows about the costs associated with trying to punish our way to healthy societies, alternative models from which to explore harm become more important (pp. 25–40).

While focusing on weighty topics such as values, social norms, educational models, shame, trauma, and relationships, she creates a narrative that remains accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds. Her experiences, supported by literally thousands of hours of contact with her students, and debates and dialog with her own mentors provide a wealth of material, which she uses to great effect. Free of the academic-ese and exclusionary jargon that often accompanies sophisticated scholarly analysis, she seamlessly integrates arcane biological, social, and psychosociological analysis into the challenge offered by addressing resolution of harm into an increasingly administrative justice system environment. It is this mix of the academic and the colloquial that is perhaps of specific value for those new to the area of RJ. She reports an observation by Sakej Henderson, of the Native Law Center who states:

At a meeting of Justice Ministers in Canada they agreed that the Canadian criminal justice system has failed and continues to fail. The aboriginal people call the Justice
Ministers the ‘Keepers of all the bad experiences.’ My Grandfather used to say, ‘You really think you can make angels out of assholes with a piece of paper?’ (p. 133)

Whatever the challenge, Elliott rejects cynicism and offers even the most ardent and well-read practitioners and supporters new and useful insights. One contribution is an attempt to explicitly root a holistic view of RJ in an underlying paradigm of justice (pp. 66–69). Her useful re-situation of RJ offers a new view about how underlying influences, past and present, shaped different developments in the USA and Canada.

While Canada, in the 1990s, embraced the language of RJ, attempts to integrate RJ principles into the formal justice system have been difficult. The inclusion of programmatic RJ examples that demonstrate both the promise of adoption and the perils of system-based co-optation (pp. 72–75, 84–93) was of particular interest to me. One concern is what Elliott describes as the problem of ‘silo thinking,’ in which the flexibility required to encourage the cooperation and integration that are the hallmark of restorative programs can be undermined by the organizational and administrative needs of governmental departments (pp. 90–91).

Yet, the lessons of these experiments in which the formal system and informal processes collide and cooperate are not always easy to untangle. Elliott acknowledges that many questions remain. Can the benefits of formal cooperation outweigh the inevitable alterations demanded by bureaucracies? How can the values of RJ be integrated within practices that favor procedural protection over mutual problem-solving? Whatever the challenges, this book is fearless in its focus and consistent in message. While there is no universal panacea to the social challenges we face – the often unbridled reliance and fascination with punishment is too simplistic solution that creates more harm than it solves. For her, the means by which solutions emerge does in fact matter. Her work can be contextualized in a line from the subject of the 2008 Justice Studies Association conference held at George Mason University: You simply cannot get to a good place in a bad way.

Reading this book is like attending a Master Class on the foundational and emergent concepts that underpin our justice system, while a specific strength is her use of anecdotes from those on the inside and out. Used to introduce or conclude chapters, her use of these stories, poems, and song lyrics help locate these truisms allowing the reader to understand much more clearly than is often found in mainstream academic’s focus on quantitative outcomes driven by an inexplicable fidelity to numeric data. Nevertheless, she does not shy away from material perhaps beyond her immediate area of expertise.

To help re-conceive RJ, she usefully summarizes complex issues from criminology’s oft-criticized positivistic wing. This is especially true with her section on trauma and the emergent scholarly literature that explores gene and environmental interactions. This literature has profound consequences for understanding Traumatic Brain Injuries, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the hidden or deliberately obscured costs of punishment (pp. 176–187).

While one might be tempted to quibble with the relative lack of detail about the challenges associated with operationalizing, measuring, and drawing inferences from some of the existing RJ studies, Elliott’s focus is elsewhere. While moving restorative practices into the academic mainstream requires more thought about how funders and policy-makers can and should measure outcomes, she argues that individuals must first embrace the core message of community,
inclusion, and tolerance. Yet, Elliott argues that waiting for justice professionals to ‘get it’ is a waste of time. The only change that counts is change on the ground, driven by individuals who accept the shame of being themselves and engage in the world anyway (pp. 209–213). One of Liz’s most amazing/annoying traits was her willingness to open herself up to everyone she met. This often led to complications given the variety of people with whom she worked. By embracing the power of empathy, she engaged the Rogerian positive regard and created a space for change to take place, this despite the inevitable occasional disappointment.

Elliott cites approvingly Kay Pranis’s observation that until we move from a Newtonian, individual-focused worldview to a quantum and interconnected one, we will continue to make the same errors, divorcing our responses to harm from the communities in which they occur (p. 212). This means not only accepting that the system itself causes harm, but that communities and individuals must work together to confront this harm, and offer community-based alternatives. She concludes that without rooting the powers of the justice system in the more inclusive values to which Canadians commonly ascribe, the Canadian system may come to resemble the failed experiment in mass incarceration that may have reached its zenith in the USA. Her warning, given recent developments in federal Canadian politics, is prescient.

It is downright depressing and not without irony that a short time after her passing, the federal government in Canada is poised to institute the exact policies that Liz as a social worker, prison educator, advocate, activist, and academic spent her life working against. Although the majority of Canadians oppose the northerly expansion of US style criminal justice policies, Bill C-10 is set to become law despite warnings from experts, criminal justice professionals, researchers, and even conservative Texan policy-makers. This is not just a failure of criminological imagination but a stark example of the limitations inherent in our approach to democratic governance. Like many other countries around the world, the nominal means of participation afforded in Canada’s democratic system allows a well-funded minority to set the national agenda, and limit the terms of the debate. This is inadequate Elliott argues.

... if we do not participate in the processes that affect our lives, we end up with a default society. The meaningful participation demanded by RJ affords us the opportunity to articulate our needs in contexts that are based on listening and affirmation and to act collectively to re-mediate the social conditions that generate these needs.

On this point Liz was always passionate, funny, and inspired. Even in her last days as the consequences of the political perversion associated with denying the economic and social costs of ‘get tough’ policies sunk in, she responded in characteristic fashion: Time to double down, put your money where your mouth is, and get to work being the change you believe in. This requires getting involved in dialog and deliberation, engaging your neighbors, identifying areas of common concern, and finding possible solutions. This focus on the connection between restorative practices and participatory democracy must not be underestimated. Working together on common issues of concern within a process that defends each individual’s right to be a meaningful participant, is, she concludes:
... more likely to invigorate the sense of civic responsibility in people that helps build community. The potential of this aspect of restorative justice has been under-explored, having been shadowed by the general absorption of restorative justice programs under the criminal justice imperatives. (pp. 204–205)

As Professor Robert Gordon, Director of the School of Criminology, SFU in a message to faculty and staff noted: ‘A warrior has fallen; it behooves the rest of us who share her commitment to pick up the banner and continue her work with greater resolve.’ Security, With Care offers an important resource to do so. Onward!

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