

## **Impressions of the Eighth Conference of the European Forum for Restorative Justice 'Beyond Crime: Pathways to Desistance, Social Justice and Peacebuilding' Belfast, 11–14 June 2014**

To give a full impression of a conference with so many interesting plenary speakers and workshops in 600 words is quite impossible and at the same time a dilemma: what is worth mentioning without the risk of forgetting an interesting topic or connection? Besides, a lot of interesting experiences and insights were shared during the many personal encounters arising out of the conference which I could not witness however much I might want to.

Nevertheless, I will give it a try by giving my personal impression, which of course might be influenced by my enthusiasm and dedication to this conference as a volunteer on the organising committee.

The conference took place in the beautiful city of Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city with a burdened history, still visible in the many murals around the city, picturing the struggle between the protestants and the Catholics. And also this history was one of the reasons that this conference was being held in Belfast, since Restorative Justice played an important role in establishing peace between the parties, and it still does. This history and the role of Restorative Justice was also mentioned in the welcoming speech of the conference by Prof. Kieran McEvoy. one of the hosts of the Queen's University — situated in a beautiful Victorian architectural style building in the university district of Belfast He also welcomed all the participants by saying that Irish people are very friendly people with a positive mind; they are even proud of the fact that the Titanic was built here, although it sank after hit by an iceberg on its maiden trip!

One of the plenary speakers who really inspired me was John Braithwaite, who elaborated on the theme peacebuilding in relation to restorative justice, focusing on the importance of viewing restorative justice as a social movement able to play an important role in transcending conflicts, such as in the recent past of Belfast but also in Afghanistan. In this country he is involved in a research project, focusing on comparative peacebuilding and the concept of shame and pride. If shame is encouraged, it's linked with humble pride. If shame

is discouraged it is linked with narcissistic pride. As far as Braithwaite is concerned, we should be striving for humble pride, as a way of overcoming conflicts, along with, on a smaller scale, bullying on schools.

The plenary speech of Shadd Maruna on the relationship between desistance and restorative justice was worth while listening to. He convincingly showed that desistance researchers can learn from Restorative Justice by questioning the concept of crime, while Restorative Justice researchers can learn from desistance researchers to recognise the importance of structure and the context of crime and of taking the long view.

I must highlight one of the interesting workshops I attended 'Through the Glass: One woman's pursuit of Justice, Forgiveness and Healing,' in which the author Shannon Moroney — in a very convincing way — told her personal story of what happened after she found out her husband had committed severe sexual crimes— from the conversations with her husband Jason in prison, the reactions of her friends, family and the community, her estrangement from the victims and the slow criminal justice process not being restorative at all. During the workshop she told her story of two journeys: The first was private and personal — how she was trying to overcome trauma, to rebuild her life after her husband's crimes and to understand who he was and how he could have done what he did. The second journey was public and political — she being a citizen, bearing witness to a justice system that leaves victims out in the cold and a society that can be as stigmatising as it can be compassionate. She experienced the limits of a retributive justice system, and the need for systems that actually heal people: victims, offenders and communities. Shannon Moroney ended her workshop with a clear plea to put victims of crime at the core of the criminal justice system, not only in Canada but also in other jurisdictions around the world, and not to be punitive towards her former husband as an offender, but show the power of forgiveness, as a powerful restorative response to crime.

**Key lesson:** Forgiveness can be a powerful force in establishing restorative justice and resolve conflicts in a restorative way.

Another highlight was the handing over of the Restorative Justice Award to Christa Pelikan for her ground-breaking work on Restorative Justice in Austria and the rest of Europe during her career and her great efforts to encourage the use of restorative justice practices while conducting action research at the same time. She accepted the Award with her typical humble and shy attitude, not forgetting to mention her colleagues who inspired her very much, not only within her research institute but also within the EFRJ. And at the same time, she felt very grateful and viewed the award as an encouragement to continue her research work on Restorative Justice.

Another informal moment to connect and share ex-

periences was during the social visit to the Giant's Causeway — a beautiful site at the coast of Northern Ireland — and the visit to the community peace centre on Saturday. Both visits were impressive, especially the visit to the community centre, in which we were welcomed by great hospitality — and scones and tea. I even experienced a peace circle ceremony together with fifteen other participants of the conference, a memorable moment I still cherish.

And last but not least: the conference dinner and musical event afterwards turned out to be a perfect environment to connect with each other by means of talking and Irish dancing, which at first hand seems easy but it ain't — you will find out when you start practising!

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