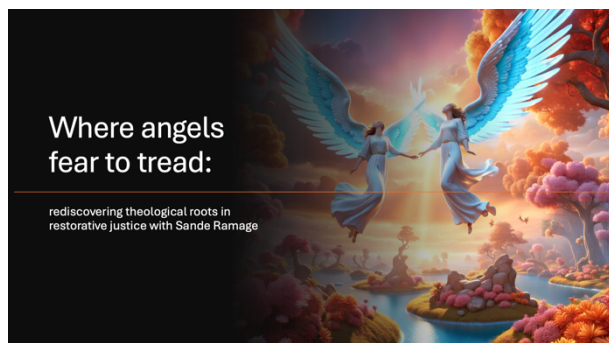


Please join me as I tip toe where angels fear to tread by sharing some of my reflections about restorative work. I raise the often-marginalised territory of spirituality and religion, wonder about remorse and forgiveness and if facilitation could be re-envisioned by seeing these complex states through theological or spiritual lenses. And then suggest that restorative justice facilitators may be integral players in what I frame as the [*new religious*](#).¹ As always, I have more questions than answers and am also biased.



My bias comes from being adopted at birth into a European, fundamentalist Christian home. There, my childhood was full of biblical stories and characters that seamlessly mixed and mingled with Aslan and the White Witch in Narnia. My bias is shaped from having lived for a time within Judaism then been trained and formed as an Anglican priest where my theology was rigorously enlivened through academic study. Although still ordained I now have no formal relationship with the institutional church. My spirituality is broad and exploratory and constantly deepened by regular Jungian dream analysis. I live into the existential questions rather than assume certainty.

Living into the questions

The journey of faith or spirituality is not linear; it resembles a spiral. Over the years, as I navigate this spiral, I often revisit concepts I believed I had grasped, only to perceive them in a new light. Frequently, I gain insights that are far deeper than I ever anticipated.

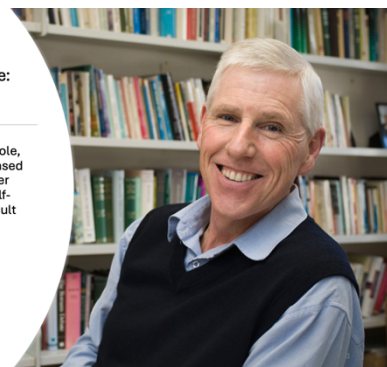


But I certainly remember when I first heard about restorative justice. Dr Chris Marshall was impressive when he came to speak to a bunch of aspiring clerics at St John's Theological College. He talked about the theological threads in restorative, a process that he later called, "a relational justice of care", needed in the legal system, "to address the growing void of care and clawing

Theological threads in restorative: a relational justice of care

"Legal institutions, and society as a whole, would look very different if they were based on the principles of relational care rather than on the ideal of the competitive, self-sufficient, unattached, able-bodied, adult male protagonist".

Chris Marshall, *Justice as Care*, 2019



¹ Sande Ramage, "Reality Bites: What Use Is the Priest in Contemporary New Zealand?," *Sande Ramage*, 9 May 2021, <https://spiritedcrone.co.nz/reality-bites-what-use-is-the-priest-in-contemporary-new-zealand/>.

loneliness at the heart of modern society".² It made head, heart, theological and soul sense to me.

20 something years later, as an experienced facilitator and chaplain, I contacted Chris again, now Emeritus Professor after retiring from Victoria University.³ Firstly, because I was concerned that the theological underpinnings of restorative justice seemed to have disappeared from our

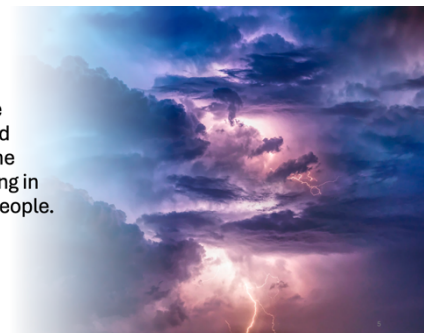


Say,
what??

practice, conversation and memory in Aotearoa, New Zealand. And buried somewhere underneath that was the growing awareness that restorative seemed to be incredibly like my work as a healthcare chaplain in a public hospital where I've been for the last 14 years.

Despite what some people think, professional chaplains are not going about passing on their own religious or spiritual views. That is prohibited. Instead, we are first and foremost accomplished listeners who sit and reflect with people whose lives have been altered, sometimes drastically, by sudden or chronic illness, crime, random events or death.

Professional chaplains are accomplished listeners to the storms swirling in and around people.



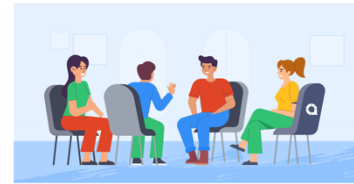
We listen to tragedy, anger, confusion, shame, despair and sometimes confessions. We engage quickly and at depth, usually within the first 30 seconds so that a trusting encounter can unfold, often in five bedded rooms with other people listening. Although there may be repeat visits, the work is mostly short term and so we become skilled at engaging, then letting go. We are not fixers of anything.

² Christopher D. Marshall, "Justice as Care," *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* 2(2) (2019): 178, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5553/ijrj/258908912019002002001>.

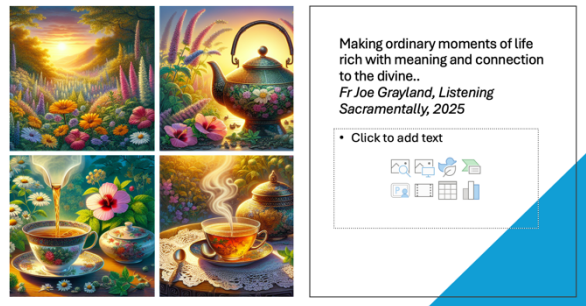
³ Chris held the Diana Unwin Chair in Restorative Justice at Victoria University and continued writing theologically about restorative justice through his tenure and now in retirement.

Our weekly group supervision using a reflective practice approach is crucial in helping us understand our motivations, always acknowledging that our involvement in people's lives may have impact but is ultimately fleeting. This may already be sounding familiar.

Our weekly chaplains group supervision is based on our rigorous (exhausting!) clinical pastoral care training. Every response and motivation is up for exploration, so that we can accept responsibility for changing ourselves.



In the listening process, much like restorative facilitators, we use our background education and experience in people related disciplines like counselling, narrative therapy, pastoral care, supervision. However, we also draw on our formation in cultural and/or religious traditions to listen in a way that enables the divine to have a place at the table.



My friend and colleague Fr Joe Grayland names this as sacramental listening that “involves being attuned to the presence of God in everyday life making the ordinary moments of life rich with meaning and connection to the divine”.⁴

Before we get caught in what we might mean by God or the Divine, for the purposes of this presentation they are code words that have a multitude of meanings, depending on our cultural, religious or spiritual traditions and our individual life journeys. In healthcare, we know that these words can attract and/or repel so, we often work within this international consensus definition of spirituality that intentionally avoids them:

God, Godde, G-d?

'Perhaps God is a code word,' I wondered out loud. They looked interested. 'A word for deep stuff that we don't have any other words for ... like our inner secrets. As fragile and breakable as a glass that we fumble with before the weight of it forces our fingers open and it smashes on the ground beneath.'

Sande Ramage, *Secrets, God and Broken Glass*, 2018



⁴ Grayland, Joseph, “Listening Sacramentally,” Unpublished, 2 March 2025, 12.

“Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions and practices”.⁵

Spirituality

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Puchalski, et al, 2014



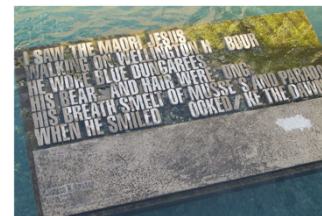
Words matter because we weave them into the stories we use to communicate with one another. But they can easily be misinterpreted like this word theology I keep using, which is two Greek words, theos (God) and logos (thinking). All it means is thinking about God and once again, what you or I mean by God is always up for exploration and new understanding.

Theology

Theos (God)
Logos (thinking about God)

= an ancient intellectual discipline with continuing and momentous social significance around the world today

University of Oxford: Theology and Religion Department



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Everyone can do their own theology, using tradition, their sacred texts and more. But theology is also created through incorporating people’s personal experience that can be contrary to those other sources of authority, which can create tension. But the important thing to know is that theology never stands still; it is a creative process that evolves both in tune and in tension with the world it lives and breathes in.

So, what I was noticing was that theological and spiritual thinking had disappeared from what I understood restorative justice to be about. At the same time and somewhat irritatingly, words and situations that had resonance with my Judeo-Christian tradition kept popping up in my restorative practice.



My chaplaincy and restorative worlds were colliding...

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⁵ Christina Puchalski et al., “Improving the Spiritual Dimension of Whole Person Care: Reaching National and International Consensus,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 17.Number 6 (2014): 5.

Things like forgiveness, penitence, shame, honour, soul, dignity, sin, revelation, and even conversion. If I listened sacramentally, in the way I did in chaplaincy, and opened the space for more than participants sometimes talked about situations or experiences that had a spiritual and religious element.

For instance, a person attending a religious ritual that has humility at its centre, being completely pole-axed by the experience because it was the opposite of an ego centred life. Or, when the person responsible for a death falls to the floor like a penitent unable to get up or proceed. Or, when someone locked down for 23 hours a day has, within the privacy of their own prison cell and inner world, come to a kind of consciousness about their life without any apparent intervention by others.



These things remind me of the ancient biblical story of Saul found in the book of Acts. Saul knew he was right about everything, especially religion. In his time, about 2,000 years ago, a new spirituality was welling up and Saul wasn't having a bar of it. He was determined to wipe out these heretics and had no qualms about killing to ensure this.

Saul falls into the dark night of the soul

Michelangelo Merisi called Caravaggio,
Conversion of Saint Paul
Italian, c. 1600-1601
Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel



One day he was on his way to Damascus to do a bit of persecuting of people who wouldn't toe his party line. Suddenly, a great light appears. He is blinded and, as Caravaggio would have it, falls from his horse that symbol of ego, strength and power. Now grounded he hears a voice questioning his motives and purpose. For three days and nights he doesn't eat or drink as he enters the dark night of the soul. ⁶

But then an **inner** light dawns and he begins to understand who and what he has become and the extent of harm he has inflicted on others. He repents, undergoing what

⁶ Spiritually, a "dark night of the soul" refers to a profound period of spiritual or personal crisis, marked by feelings of emptiness, despair, and a sense of being disconnected from purpose, meaning, or a higher power, often preceding a period of deeper spiritual growth. Often related to St John of the Cross.

the Greek call metanoia, a complete change of heart. He even changes his name and becomes Paul the Apostle. But that's a story for another day.

Repentance is an uncomfortable word. However, we need to notice it because, from a paper suggesting spirituality in restorative justice is, "recognised as important but is often fuzzy and vaguely understood", ⁷ comes the following. "Repentance is a crucial principle of restorative justice" and is more than something offenders do for victims. It can be about getting "back into right relationship with God or a higher power ... and be powerfully healing for the offender". ⁸ But if we're uncomfortable or ambivalent about the godstuff, this process can be missed or glossed over.



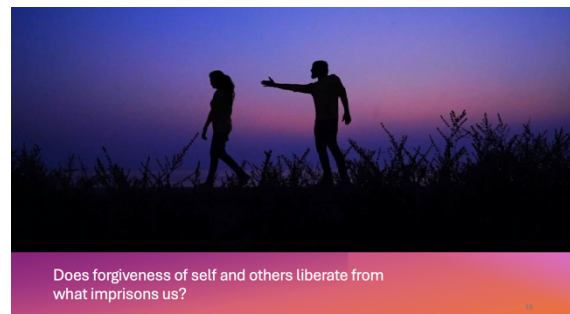
Now it gets awkward...

"Repentance is a crucial principle of restorative justice" and more than something offenders do for victims. It can be about getting "back into right relationship with God or a higher power ... and be powerfully healing for the offender".

Bender & Armour, *The Spiritual Components of Restorative Justice*, 2007

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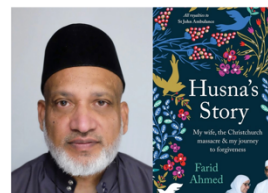
Then there are the situations when a person forgives the other and can walk away not needing anything, as though this act is their liberation. The forgiven person often has no previous experience of this and is dumbfounded because it undermines everything they understand about life. What's more, the forgiven person now has no hold over their victim who has freed themselves. You may have witnessed this and know how startling and almost incomprehensible it is.



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As Bender and Armour say, "This form of surrender is spiritual in nature, as victims release their control and hand their anger over to something larger than themselves".

⁹ Last conference Farid Ahmed illustrated



Letting go

"This form of surrender is spiritual in nature as victims release their control and hand their anger over to something larger than themselves".

Bender & Armour, 2007

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⁷ Kimberly Bender and Marilyn Armour, "The Spiritual Components of Restorative Justice," *Victims and Offenders* (2007): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564880701403967>, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15564880701403967>.

⁸ Bender and Armour, "The Spiritual Components of Restorative Justice," 258.

⁹ Bender and Armour, "The Spiritual Components of Restorative Justice," 259.

this for us with his account of forgiving the killer of his wife Husna who died in the Christchurch Mosque terror attack.

All of this is powerful stuff and perhaps forms what people call the ‘magic’ of restorative justice. But because of my background, I see and hear these kinds of things as even more significant. Like doorways to the soul, opening to a deeper appreciation of what it is to be human.

But wait, soul is another strange and often contested word. For some this is imagined as an ethereal body part that leaves the person at death for another realm, and you may have been part of rituals that acknowledge this view.



Care of the Soul

“Care of the soul goes beyond the secular mythology of the self and recovers a sense of the sacredness and endless depth of each human life”.
Thomas Moore,
thomasmooresoul.com

Thomas Moore offers another perspective. Originally a monk he left the monastery to become a psychotherapist and prolific author, coming to prominence in the 1990’s with the publication of his seminal work, *Care of the Soul: a guide to cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life* where he offers this:

“Soulfulness is a dimension that lies somewhere between the understanding and unconscious. Its chief instrument is imagination. It is to do with genuineness and depth. It is revealed through attachment, love and community, known by its absence as much as by its presence and when not cared for, obsessions, violence and loss of meaning emerge.”¹⁰

Soulfulness ..

.. is a dimension that lies somewhere between the understanding and unconscious. Its chief instrument is imagination. It is to do with genuineness and depth. It is revealed through attachment, love and community, known by its absence as much as by its presence and when not cared for, obsessions, violence and loss of meaning emerge”.
Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: a guide to cultivating depth and sacredness in everyday life*, 1994



¹⁰ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, First HarperPerennial edition. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), Compilation.

That has resonance with our work, because we are faced with people who are suffering, not just physically, emotionally or mentally but spiritually, which can be described as an all-encompassing phenomenon and “..characterized by the experience of alienation, helplessness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness in the sufferer that is difficult for them to articulate”.¹¹



Spiritual suffering

can be described as an all-encompassing phenomenon and “characterised by the experience of alienation, helplessness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness in the sufferer that is difficult for them to articulate”.

Megan Best et al, 2014

But I have found it hard to raise these issues in any meaningful way because spirituality in restorative is a once over lightly. Perhaps the insertion of a karakia or prayer because a participant wants this. But there is no training or even general conversation about our capacity as facilitators to understand or work in a soulful way.

Ah .. yeah, nah!

• Click to add text



But we’re not counsellors, I can hear you say, not psychotherapists or heaven forbid, priests. However, we are entering the deepest part of people’s lives, into soul territory and done well, with an awareness that there’s more going on here than meets the eye, our work can be therapeutic. As Moore says to us all, “therapy is appropriate every moment of every day. You are not fixing the world, but you are giving it the care it needs to thrive”.¹² But if we try to avoid this reality then perhaps we are acting like fools rushing in where angels fear to tread.

All conversations can be therapeutic

“Therapy is appropriate every moment of every day. You are not fixing the world, but you are giving it the care it needs to thrive”.
Thomas Moore, *Soul Therapy: The Art and Craft of Caring Conversations*, 2021



¹¹ Best, Megan et al., “Assessment of Spiritual Suffering in the Cancer Context: A Systematic Literature Review,” *ResearchGate* (2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951514001217>.

¹² Thomas Moore, *Soul Therapy: The Art and Craft of Caring Conversations* (New York: Harper Collins USA, 2021), 271, <https://www.thomasmooresoul.com/soul-therapy>.

To help reframe our thinking, let me introduce you to Niki Harre, Professor of Psychology at Auckland University. Niki is an atheist; she was raised that way, like I was raised religious. She also has an interest in the falling away from religion and what that means.



Professor Niki Harre

Atheist, secular priest, maybe even one of the new religious!

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To explore this, Niki spent 2021 as a secular priest offering services, personal conversations and ceremonies.¹³ Her “inking that secular communities have lost something important in abandoning religion was born out.” and she also noticed that we are losing access to the people (priests or ministers) who can assist, “when we require help to steady ourselves”.¹⁴ I love that image, being present and alongside as someone steadies themselves, which resonates with chaplaincy and restorative justice.

Over that year, Niki gradually “developed a more nuanced sense of what it means to regularly turn towards humility, the unknown, reflection, listening to and care for the other, and awareness of the world as it is rather than as we wish it was”.¹⁵ Her book, *Once there were priests*, is due out soon and as one of her [support team](#) I can’t wait to get my hands on it.¹⁶

As a secular priest

“I developed a more nuanced sense of what it means to regularly turn towards humility, the unknown, reflection, listening to and care for the other, and awareness of the world as it is rather than as we wish it was”.

Niki Harre, personal correspondence, 2025



What Niki came to understand resonates with chaplaincy and restorative justice facilitation but also leaves us with a conundrum. For although we are privileged to have restorative justice in legislation, it also means we are in large part captive to the court and political system who are looking for changes in behaviour so that, “it won’t happen again” and SMART outcomes, often educational, as though they believed in miracles.

¹³ “Secular Priest,” *Secular Priest*, n.d., <https://www.secularpriest.org>.

¹⁴ Personal correspondence

¹⁵ Notes from personal correspondence

¹⁶ Sande Ramage, “Secular Priest: Research or Consecration?,” *Sande Ramage*, 31 January 2021, <https://spiritedcrone.co.nz/secular-priest-research-or-consecration/>.

Acknowledging the importance of education and the law in building character and a good society is important says Nicholas Aroney, Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Queensland. However, he suggests there is a missing element in this partnership and that is religion. He's not talking about belief in a set of doctrines or abiding by rules. Instead, "religion, understood as a conversion of the soul, is something that softens the heart and redirects the will. Something that penetrates to the little lies we tell ourselves. Something that can orient us to True North".¹⁷

"Religion,

understood as a conversion of the soul, is something that softens the heart and redirects the will. Something that penetrates to the little lies we tell ourselves. Something that can orient us to True North".

Nicholas Aroney, The Compass of Character, 2024



My contention is that we are at an intersection in the development of restorative justice. There is acceptance that restorative is an important contribution to individual people's lives and to our society. However, it is not clear to me that we know who and what we are. What our soul is and what rivers of life our restorative tree is being fed by. As a result, we are in danger of being swallowed up by the demands and contractual obligations of powerful institutions intent on creating that world they wish was real.

What rivers of life are feeding the restorative justice tree?



I argue that the real restorative work is done when we welcome people into a clearly boundaried ritual encounter, where we listen sacramentally to stories of suffering as they tumble out into the sacred space between us. When remorse or repentance and forgiveness can be understood as having spiritual undertones and nurtured as central to restorative because this is where reality bites.¹⁸

To refocus would take considerable nerve. We would have to get over the Kiwi anxiety about religion and particularly Christianity to do some theological and spiritual exploring. But the treasure trove is waiting because as Dr Jeremy Simons notes religion has kept "forgiveness front and centre" for millennia and this has happened because, "faith and religion have rightly wrestled with the ideas and brought a spiritual sort of

¹⁷ Nicholas Aroney, "The Compass of Character" (Annual Sir John Graham Lecture presented at the Auckland, 6 September 2024), 20, <https://www.maxim.org.nz/content/uploads/2024/09/SLGL24-Monograph-Nicholas-Aroney-FINAL-WEB.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ramage, "Reality Bites."

layer to what it means to forgive and be reconciled”,¹⁹ which is exactly where our business lies.

We might have to be vulnerable like Niki was in her secular priest year when she came to new and surprising understandings. Like Niki, we might also be part of what I call the new religious.

Believers in the sacredness of everyday life in all its mess and muddle, aware of more/the divine and the unconscious, senses attuned to stories, open to what religions can teach us, adept in the art of listening sacramentally and then, with humility, letting it go secure in the knowledge we are not in control.²⁰

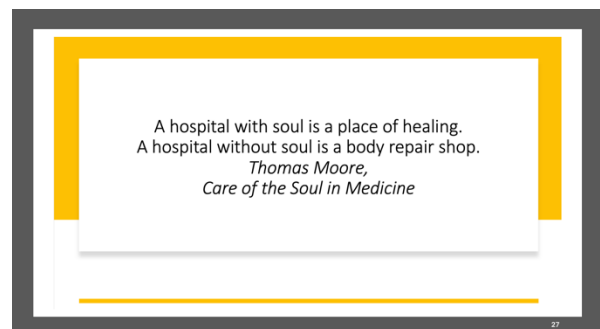


The New Religious

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Thomas Moore nails it for health when he says, “A hospital with soul is a place of healing. A hospital without soul is a body repair shop”,²¹ a phrase that resonates with every health care professional who sees it. On a good day restorative can lay claim to soulful healing, but we all know how easy it is to become a spare parts factory.



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If you're up for it, I'd be pleased to talk more about how we could launch a theological and soulful adventure in restorative. Where we explore wisdom and riches from religious, cultural, spiritual, philosophical and depth psychology traditions so that we can keep co-creating the magic.

In the meantime, thank you for your kind attention. May your Gods go with you as you continue to be a blessing in the world. Shalom.

May your Gods go with you as you continue to be a blessing in the world. Shalom



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¹⁹ Solomon, Serena, “Forgiveness: It Sounds Nice but What Does Science Say?,” *RNZ*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/life/wellbeing/forgiveness-it-sounds-nice-but-what-does-science-say>.

²⁰ Ramage, “Reality Bites.”

²¹ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul in Medicine: Healing Guidance for Patients, Families, and the People Who Care for Them*, 1st ed. (Carlsbad, Calif.: Hay House, 2010), Get page.