

A Possible Place to Start

In 1990 I had the privilege of being part of a community-wide violence prevention initiative in Ramsey County, work that has continued in our community, and my life, to this day. As I have thought about what was learned and accomplished through that work and what I can offer of use as we struggle today for true justice and reforming policing, what keeps coming to mind is a phrase we developed in 1990 and used as the basis for all of our work: *Please show kindness and respect in your words and actions toward our children and each other.*

There is a great deal about policing, and our larger justice system that I do not understand nor feel qualified to speak about. And as an older white male, I cannot speak with authority on understanding and addressing racial injustice. However, based on my decades of experience in local public health (and life), and interactions with people in policing and criminal justice, I believe that policing is the public face of our larger justice system, a system built upon judgment, harsh cruelty, and often a fundamental dismissal of humanity, a dismissal of kindness and respect for everyone involved. I believe that the entire system, including its public face of policing, largely works as it is designed to. Three examples to illustrate this premise:

1. When touring a county jail with a co-worker who worked there, one of the kindest people I have ever known, we walked past a cell with a man screaming and crying for help. I stopped and asked my friend what we could do to help him; she said that they all act that way all the time, and there is nothing we can or should do - to just keep walking.

2. When accompanying another colleague, a probation officer who was visiting a client of hers before a court hearing, we were escorted from beautiful wood-paneled court rooms to the back room with three "holding cells" - large open cages filled with orange suited people and open toilets in the middle of each cage. We had stepped from a Perry Mason tv set to a human-created Hell.

3. A recent Star Tribune article announced that "...in July (2021) Minnesota will become the first state in the nation to stop the practice of separating mothers in prison from their newborns, instead placing them in a community-based program for up to a year after birth." (<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-is-first-state-to-stop-separating-moms-in-prison-and-babies/600062725/>) The article goes on to describe current practice in Minnesota, and every other state in our nation, of handcuffing mothers to bed rails during childbirth, and then taking their children away within hours, for months or years. Two of the women who had been separated from their children at birth were interviewed in this KARE-11 story: <https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/a-mothers-pain-former-inmates-help-change-mn-law-after-speaking-out-about-post-birth-separations/89-2852a2f6-04a8-4b7f-863a-e57fcfa52d8>

We recently have seen and been shocked by egregious examples of cruelty, including immigrant children in cages and police officers shooting and suffocating fellow citizens - the very people they are supposed to be serving and protecting. Thankfully, these images have led to calls for change, for justice. But my question remains, what is justice, what changes can we make to achieve lasting differences reflecting the values that we as Minnesotans and Americans perhaps foolishly thought were the basis of our communities and country?

I fully support the complex and needed conversations about reforming policing and the larger justice system currently taking place, but I think we need to reckon with the fact that much of the cruelty we have witnessed, and much of the harm caused to too many people at the hands of police and other agents of our government might be extensions and natural outcomes of the cruelty and inhumanity underlying the systems we have all created together.

So the question, where to begin? Perhaps with the phrase, *Please show kindness and respect in your words and actions toward our children and each other.* This may sound trivial in light of the challenges we face and the centuries of harm this country has been built upon. But I believe that if everyone within our justice systems (and each of us in our families and communities) understood that our prime directive as fellow humans was to show kindness and respect to the people they worked and interacted with, and themselves, that we would no longer walk past people in cages, and in fact would no longer place people in cages; that we would no longer handcuff mothers during childbirth and take away their children; that the families of Philando Castile, George Floyd and too many other fellow citizens would no longer have to witness the brutal deaths of their beloved sons and daughters; and that the police and all within our justice systems could become officers of peace for themselves and us all.

Donald Gault

© June 5, 2021

Building Peaceful Community

www.buildingpeacefulcommunity.org

dosgault@gmail.com 651-470-6811