

## Complex Compassion

“Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.”

--Karen Armstrong

I meant to take a principled public stand against the proposed tax increase to fund the Justice Complex at the presentation by Criminal Justice professor John Burchill and Sheriff Glen Kochanowski. I meant to say there was a better way to handle justice in our county than a new government building. I meant to say that if we build it, we will fill it – that if we think a building will resolve our justice concerns, then we won't try alternative approaches for a more just future.

But instead of speaking, I stayed still. Listening, it sank in that our community is not being compassionate toward those who are currently administering justice in Saline County: Law enforcement, community corrections, and court staff are working in crowded and difficult situations; they need workplaces where they can do their best. Withdrawal of state funding is reducing diversion programs and increasing demands for local jail space for drunk drivers and domestic violence offenders. Of course, inmates should have adequate personal and health care space.

Building a Justice Center would show that we care about the people in the system...and we have to ask, “ Will this system provide justice in a way that will take us into a more compassionate future?” Combining interest in fixing what's most obviously inadequate with a values-driven vision brings out the complexity of community justice in our time and place. We need to take care of present needs, yet simultaneously change how we're doing things.

At Prairie Festival recently, I heard Texas journalist, author, and college teacher Robert Jensen's talk “We are all Apocalyptic Now.” He meant that each of us has a foot in the present and a foot in the future. It's an uncomfortable posture, with unanswerable questions. When Robert has looked at what isn't working in our systems, it's often their hierarchical nature – which values the people at the top of the pyramid more than people at the bottom. We need to tell difficult truths and get to work re-shaping our systems.

As one of the mediators for the Salina Initiative for Restorative Justice, I meet regularly with young offenders and their victims. As in all restorative justice approaches, we try to resolve problems directly between those affected – so that the people involved maintain more control over their own lives and hold themselves and each other directly accountable. Most of the time, participants leave the conversation circle with a greater understanding and compassion for themselves and each other. They agree together to take care of the problem themselves.

The community benefits when problems are resolved at the lowest level. It brings out the best in us when we face those who have harmed us or those we have harmed, and then we talk through a resolution and reparation. We can create a community justice program for Saline County that reduces reliance on conventional hierarchies and their costs. We want to bring out the best in each other, including having the chance to be compassionate with each other.

As we decide whether to build a new criminal justice complex, let's also decide whether to take responsibility for changing the system's shape. Salina's support for the arts and other opportunities for creative expression shows that we know how to bring out the best in ourselves and each other. We can also do this with the complex issue of community justice. With creativity, collaboration, and good will, we can use restorative justice approaches for most justice-seeking situations in our County.

If you have ideas for how we might best seek Justice in the highest sense of the word, please join the conversation and visit the website [www.spiritualityresourcecenter.com](http://www.spiritualityresourcecenter.com) to leave a comment.

Thea Nietfeld, October 2014