

Phyllis B. Taylor

## The Assault

*Justice and Mercy Behind Bars*

“**H**OW ARE YOU? DO YOU NEED ANYTHING TODAY? I’ll be back to see you next week.” That was the last thing I remember until I saw the very worried look of the corrections officer who was standing next to me at the inmate’s door. I had asked him to open the cell door so I could speak to the middle-aged Jewish man I’ve been seeing since his arrest almost a year ago. The man was not agitated at all. His uppercut punch, which broke my nose, bruised my mouth and resulted in extensive swelling of my lips, came literally out of nowhere.

Before I went to the hospital the three biggest concerns I had were how my husband of forty-eight years would react, whether the inmate would be safe from the anger of staff and other inmates, and whether I should press charges. When the question of pressing charges was raised by the deputy warden, I first said I would not do so. She told me I really had to and to think about it while I was at the hospital. After thinking a lot about it and talking to people I really respect who know me and know prisons and jails, I decided to go through the legal process. Why? This short reflection is my response.

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PHYLLIS TAYLOR is a chaplain in the Philadelphia Prison System. In that capacity she is the chaplain for the seriously ill, those with complicated grief issues, the Jewish population (as well as some of the other smaller religious groups) and the person responsible for religious diets. She is also a chaplain for staff. Phyllis is involved in promoting palliative and hospice care in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections as well as other correctional systems. She is a longtime board member of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.



I believe in the concept of Restorative Justice. In Howard Zehr’s *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, he defines it as “a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.” Zehr goes on to state that “restorative justice programs

aim to: put decisions into the hands of those most affected by crime; make justice more healing and, ideally, more transformative, and reduce the likelihood of future offenses.”

Although many people who end up behind bars have some form of mental illness, that does not mean their actions have no consequences. This is true of the man who attacked me. He is a fifty-three-year-old

Russian Jewish man. In the past, he has been charged with harassment and, I found out after the attack, aggravated assaults. I am not aware that he hears voices, but he clearly has trouble with impulse control. As many people have told me, if he can hurt me, who serves as his advocate, he can hurt others — especially if he is not punished. Many people, both staff and inmates alike, argue that pressing charges helps them because it protects them.

One result of the attack has been a closer sense of solidarity with correctional officers. Though I went through the prison system’s training academy as a chaplain and have been available to staff as well as inmates, I now know more intimately what prison officers face every day. They are locked in with inmates whereas I go in and out of cell blocks as I make my rounds to see various men and women throughout the Philadelphia Prison System. If there is a disturbance I know to get out of the way; but they have to go in and quell the

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trouble. They are always putting themselves in harm's way without the kind of recognition and appreciation police and firefighters ordinarily receive.

Throughout this experience I have been "loved up," as the expression goes. I have felt such support from correctional officers, social workers, other chaplains and, yes, inmates and ex-offenders. Every person has asked not only how I am but whether I am pressing charges. Every person has told me that they feel it is vital to press charges to safeguard themselves as well as to show that no inmate can hurt someone without being punished. I feel that I am "reducing the likelihood of future offenses" by going ahead within the legal system.

What about the man who hit me? I feel nothing but sadness when I think of him. I feel no anger, but I am concerned for him. The day following the attack, I talked to a lawyer and a paralegal to let them know I am still his chaplain and want to see him. I have been told that cannot happen because then

there is a conflict of interest. Given that reality, I've asked a social worker to let him know I am not angry at him and am concerned about him. I've also said that if he asks whether I am pressing charges to let him know I am, but to make sure he is locked in so he cannot hurt anyone.

The prophet Micah is one of my favorites. When he said that we are to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God," I find myself hoping that my decision follows that edict. I am humbled by the love that has come my way. I feel that justice will be served if the man receives ongoing physical and psychiatric care and is prevented from hurting others. I hope he is being treated mercifully. I believe it is also consistent with Restorative Justice as well.

When family, friends and coworkers ask how I am now, my response is, "Grateful beyond measure for all the love and care I have and continue to receive." May it be that way for all people who are victims of abuse, and may the abusers know that God is a God of justice and mercy. ✧

