

G. BABA ENG

“Any wrongdoing can be examined in a way that allows people to see exactly where it comes from and give people the power to repair it.”

- BaBa Eng

You cannot quantify the taking of a human life. That’s what BaBa Eng says. He’s referring to how our justice system determines sentencing for homicide: BaBa was given 25 years to life for shooting a man during an argument; the man had pulled a gun on BaBa’s wife. The justice system was then tasked with determining how many years of imprisonment would adequately make up for the man’s death. But what BaBa means – *you cannot quantify the taking a human life* – is that no amount of prison time can equate to the value of life and the loss that was experienced.

Once we realize the trouble with quantifying the abstract, such as the value of life and retribution, one can’t help but wonder if we’re seeking justice in all the wrong ways. Much of society clutches to an unforgiving philosophy of punishment: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Others look at our justice system and only see damage amplified, a rippling tremor through our communities. But what if we looked at punishment differently – not in terms of vengeance but in terms of mitigating suffering? No matter anyone’s regrets in life, we cannot hit rewind and call the actions back; we cannot re-walk the pathways that lead to our mistakes. So shouldn’t we have the power to atone?

BaBa is the type of person who inspires such questions about our justice system. He has a different thought paradigm, one that argues in favor of this beautiful truth: Humans have the capacity to change and be changed for the better. For years, BaBa has been a vocal advocate for restorative justice practices. Restorative justice is a process that focuses on repairing harm done to people wronged by any behavior that violates them as human beings. For a former offender, this requires restoring the relationship with his or her family and the community they are reentering, and it often can involve reconciling with victims. Restorative justice acknowledges the role of shame when a person does wrong, but more importantly, it allows him or her to move beyond shame to redemption and atonement.

Restorative justice can work in any part of society where relationships exist, BaBa explains, such as school classrooms, neighborhoods, and workplaces, or families that need to heal broken bonds.

BaBa’s first in-depth engagement with restorative justice began while he was incarcerated, when he developed a program to help men acknowledge responsibility and accountability for what brought them to prison. This involved working with clergy to reach out to victims, or any people the person’s actions had harmed, to invite them into a dialogue where the healing process could begin, or writing an apology letter. This, of course, had to be done on the victims’ terms and with their consent, bearing sensitivity to their needs and confidentiality. BaBa believes in raising victim voices in the criminal justice system and allowing them to have a larger role in the justice process.



“Who knows more than the victim what it will take to heal them?” BaBa points out.

In total, BaBa spent 37 years incarcerated, but those years were far from idle. He spent his time striving to restore himself and others.

“I never took the prison environment inside of myself, psychologically or spiritually. I never became [institutionalized]. I created a barrier around myself to keep that negativity out of me,” BaBa explains.

He studied the law, earning an Associate’s Degree in paralegal studies from Bronx Community College, and became known not just as a “thorn in the side” of the prison system but as an ardent advocate for civil and human rights. He filed actions in New York State and federal courts to protect the rights of people who are incarcerated, including actions to allow religious practices for Muslims, to reform the state’s disciplinary system, to improve conditions in solitary confinement, and for pre-confinement diagnosis for people with mental illness. A case filed in the Western District Federal Court by Baba and three other prisoners demanded humane treatment for prisoners with mental health challenges. The case lasted over 25 years, kept alive by the Honorable Judge John Curtin, but eventually created mental health units at major maximum security prisons throughout New York State.

Through his advocacy work, BaBa met his wife Karima, a fellow social justice activist and the founder of Prisoners are People, Too. BaBa says that Karima inspired and influenced his work, and so has his faith, Islam, which emphasizes peace, redemption, and salvation.

“Had I not been who I am, and connected with Karima and the advocacy community, it would’ve been extremely hard for me – harder than it has been – to get out of prison and get my life back on track,” he says. “That is not the normal for most people coming out on parole. They don’t have everything they need in place.” He is referring to the obstacles a returning citizen must overcome, often without knowing how and often with no support, such as working with the Department of Social Services, accessing medical care, enrolling back in school, and reintegrating with family even when those relationships may be damaged.

Once BaBa was out, Karima introduced him to the social justice community in Buffalo, NY, where he continues his work, though not without certain roadblocks. Parole initially barred him from a job as a reentry coordinator with a local nonprofit. He has also been unable to accompany Karima to do restorative work at a nearby correctional facility, despite his long list of credentials, because the prison (up to this point) will not let him in. BaBa possesses multiple restorative practices licenses and has trained others to carry out this work. He has a Bachelor’s Degree from Excelsior College and a Master’s Degree from New York Theological Seminary, and he is also enrolled in a Master’s Degree program for restorative practices.

BaBa is undeterred and undaunted. In the future, he also hopes to create a restorative justice center in Buffalo where he and his team can continue training others and facilitating peace circles and peace conferences. This could serve as a front-end diversionary program for the justice system and also as a central place where community members can come to learn better communication, engage in peaceful interventions, create healing environments, and foster more functional relationships.

When BaBa was sentenced years ago, the environment of systematic shaming and degradation could have swallowed him. But he made a conscious choice. He instead committed himself to uplifting others, protecting human dignity and fighting for civil and human rights, and helping to create a more peaceful and just world.

“We only get to God through our relationships with each other. We have to get back to that,” BaBa says. “And that is what restorative justice allows us to do.”