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Opinion

In My Opinion: Alai Reyes-Santos reflects on Mother's day, grief and justice

By Alai Reyes-Santos

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When my mother — daughter of Puerto Rican farmers, first-generation college student, nurse, mother of five, hospital administrator, mentor to many — was murdered three years ago, friends and family kept talking about prison, punishment, revenge.

Everything is still a blur. I was in shock. No one could explain why or how this woman could be killed in her home after 40 bullets pierced its walls and the cars nearby. From one day to the next, our home was not safe. I could not pray the traditional nine days with her community.

I spent years attending funerals with her. She taught me that we must honor the end of a life on earth, and we must care for those still here. But I could not do the same for her. I was devastated.

I also kept replaying those last minutes of her life. When she realized her house was being shot at, her first instinct was to protect her daughter, my sister. And she did.

I write today from that place of overpowering pain; remembering how all these loving people, trying to find solace somewhere, looked for it in revenge and punishment.

The truth is that nothing can dissipate the pain. Time just makes it bearable.

The fact that those who took her life are in prison does not diminish it.

I also feel for the mothers who lost their sons that day. Their sons must now live knowing they took a life.

Why can we not have other responses to violence? Not prison — true dialogue. Reconciliation. A healing process. A time when we are heard and honored in our pain, anger, despair, fear.

If there is something my mother taught me, it's that we must be responsible for our communities as a whole.

And her death was not solely in their hands. It is also in the hands of a society that stigmatizes the poor, that limits educational and work opportunities to a few, that leaves few choices for most, that incarcerates the poor and people of color at the highest rates seen in the world.

Reading Michelle Alexander, Michael Hames-Garcia, Angela Davis and Sharon Luk, among others, requires that I ask: What would I gain from supporting a prison system that does nothing to help us heal from racist, classist and sexist violence? That perpetuates that violence? That does nothing to enable those inside to return to our communities whole? That does not attend to our trauma, loss, mourning? That limits our capacity to imagine true community healing?

I refuse to do so. I choose life. I choose to imagine a world where prisons are not the answer to our pain, where we can truly do the hard work of helping each other heal and grow together with dignity.

Some may say I am idealistic. That may be true. And yet, I am choosing to nurture community, instead of breeding violence from violence. That has not gotten us anywhere good so far. Why not try something else?

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