Our Duty
Create the Peace and Justice Whose Absence Is So Devastatingly Portrayed in the New National Memorial

By Ron Tabak

On April 25, 2018, the day before its official opening, I had the privilege of walking through and observing as much as I could of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Although I had heard Bryan Stevenson, whose Equal Justice Initiative conceived of, researched and developed the Memorial, speak about the Memorial many times, nothing prepared me for its impact.

I knew of our country’s dreadful legacy of lynchings and other terrorism in rendering the post-slavery constitutional amendments and federal civil rights laws a practical nullity as late as the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s, I carefully followed news coverage of violence against civil rights workers and even children. In 1999, I helped organize programs — one focused on unfinished civil rights work and another a remembrance of the solidarity during the “civil rights era” of so many African Americans and Jews — on the 35th anniversary of the brutal murders of outstanding civil rights advocates James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman.

I went to the Memorial directly after visiting the new Legacy Museum. It presents a thoughtful, contextual history of the relationships among slavery, the continuing force of white supremacy in preserving the power of the powerful while subjugating people of color and ignoring key economic needs of less financially well-off white people, the role of capital punishment as a seemingly more tasteful version of lynchings and our dramatic increase of mass incarceration in recent decades.

I was still surprised at how profoundly moved, impressed, upset and reinvigorated I was by the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. As I walked through, up, down and around the Memorial, I tried to read every name from every county from every state (many outside the South) on the cemetery-like tablets hanging above me. In certain places, seeing the names became impossible due to the intentionally greater space between the bottom of the tablets and the height to which I could stretch my body. Also most affected were the numerous chilling accounts of what happened to the lynching victims, and the evocative sculptures.

The Memorial, which contains no editorial commentary, just bare facts, is so enormously affecting because of our society’s (North as well as South) widespread lack of overt knowledge or internalized comprehension of our sorry past.

Separating Families

A Time-Honored American Tradition
But this time the Children are in Concentration Camps

By Murphy Davis

It is always interesting to me when you see or hear people on the news saying, “This is not who we are!” in response to some egregious government policy or practice. What is it about separating children from their parents at our southern border that is not “TrueBlue American”?

The first known Africans to arrive in North America were on a Dutch ship which landed at Jamestown, Virginia in August, 1619. By 1641 Massachusetts became the first British colony to legalize slavery. While slavery did not become as major an institution in the North, the 1793 invention of the cotton gin meant the explosion of slavery in the southern U.S. By 1860, cotton was the main crop produced in the South and slavery was what made it profitable. African men, women and children and their descendants were bought and sold, and free Blacks in the North were even kidnapped and sold “down river,” as famously chronicled in “Twelve Years a Slave.”

For 250 years it was common practice to sell family members away from each other. Scenes of children and babies being ripped from the arms of their mothers have been depicted in drawings and many oral accounts.

The painful search to find lost family members went on for years after Emancipation — stories of mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, siblings — walking from plantation to plantation and across states and regions in a desperate search for those dear to them. The generational trauma is difficult to even conceptualize.

Then, of course, there were the “Indian boarding schools.” After the Civil War, churches and government began to set up schools to force assimilation of Indian tribal children into Anglo culture. They were forced out of their homes and families and taken to schools where their names were changed, their hair was cut, native dress was forbidden, and they were punished for speaking their native languages. This was understood as “Christianizing” and “civilizing” them. But the methods were brutal and the children were often additionally abused sexually, physically and mentally. The aim was to wipe out their cultural identity. Again, how do we even begin to think about the amount of trauma that must be accounted for over the generations of parents, children and villages that were ripped apart and stripped of their cultural heritage?

Certainly I am not the first to make this point about the history of family separation through American slavery and Indian boarding schools. But it concerns me that we have major institutions that force daily family separation right under our noses and they are rarely mentioned: specifically, imprisonment and homelessness.

When chattel slavery was abolished by the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, it was specifically replaced by penal slavery. (See Hospitality articles since the 1990s about the battle in the Senate over outright abolition and including the phrase “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime.”) Or see Ava DuVernay’s excellent documentary “13.”)

Slavery has been practiced in the United States since the beginning of European colonization, but the term “slavery” has been reserved for the period before the Civil War. Since then, we have had a system of forced labor and criminal justice that has been used to control and exploit people of color.

The history of family separation through American slavery and the continuing force of white supremacy in preserving the power of the powerful while subjugating people of color and ignoring key economic needs of less financially well-off white people is a constant reminder of the damage done to individuals, families and communities. It is a提醒 of the importance of working towards justice and equality for all people, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. We must continue to fight against systems of oppression and work towards a society where all individuals are treated with dignity and respect. This includes addressing the legacies of slavery and working towards racial justice.

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Do Not Take Children in My Name

By Catherine Meeks

Thirty-two years ago, when I gave birth to William, I was surprised at the depth of my reflection upon what it would mean to have him taken from me. I was thinking about the slave era and the way in which enslaved mothers had their babies taken from them to be sold to other slave holders. My son’s birth and Toni Morrison’s powerful historical novel, Beloved, coincided with one another and with my doctoral work, which had led me into a deep study of enslaved persons. The issue became very personal for me. I understood why Sethe, the main character in the novel, had killed her twins to prevent them from being sold into slavery. I wondered what I would have done if someone had come to take my little newborn son from me. I did not know and I still don’t know. How can one figure out such things?

The current issue of taking children from their parents at the border of the U.S. and Mexico is simply the way we manage those that we need to control. The white supremacist mentality which serves as the foundation in the way in which we conduct business in most areas in America continues to thrive.

It was the mentality of white supremacy that made it possible to imagine that enslaving the children of Native Americans was an answer to the way in which to manage them. The creation of the Indian Boarding Schools to enable Native children to be taken from their families so they could be forced to learn how to be subservient to the white supremacist way of life is totally indefensible. History clearly verifies that it was a terrible idea that has led to destruction for our Native sisters and brothers. It is a destruction that can never be repaired.

One wonders what it is that makes a group of people believe that they have the right to take the children of anyone and treat them as they wish. It seems that the process of dehumanizing a group of people is the primary factor in making this type of behavior possible.

There is no way to measure the degree of hatred for and denigration of a group of people that has to take place in the mind and heart of a person who takes a baby from the sages in the Bible to help justify that dastardly behavior and to help make it all seem fitting to them.

In the midst of all of this, where does a faithful person find solace? It is not easy because the first response is one of rage. It is easy to consider responding in violent ways. Just as Sethe killed her twins to save them from slavery, that urge to find a remedy comes to the forefront of our hearts and minds. But we need to be more thanthankful every time grace holds onto us and we do not act like Sethe or the supremacist. Clearly God’s way is not the way of violence or denigration and we cannot develop an eye-for-an-eye mentality if we have any hope of saving ourselves.

This empire, the United States of America, does not deserve to be saved. But the people do. We who have faith must hold on to that notion and do our best to stand against the dark, cold wind blowing across our land at the moment. But as we do, we need to remember that the wind has been dark and cold for a long time and that this act of taking children is not new.

My solace is found in the fact that there is a community of folks willing to resist the dark, cold wind and we can stand together. God’s grace will meet the resisters. Let’s Hold On.

Catherine Meeks is the Founding Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing, and the retired Clara Carter Acree Distinguished Professor of Socio-cultural Studies and Sociology from Wesleyan College. She has published six books and is editor of Living Into God’s Dream: Dismantling Racism in America (2016), which focuses on racial healing and reconciliation. She writes for the Huffington Post and is a regular contributor to Hospitality. She is involved with prison work, visits on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (kayma53@att.net)

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Thank you, David, Eduard and Murphy.
How Does God Act in the Pursuit of Peace and Justice for All?

A Cry of the Poor Based Upon the Great Psalm 146: Part 2

By Eduard Loring

Psalm 146 for Today
Perhaps for Tomorrow Depending on How We Act

We are thankful to the God who is the force of love in the universe. We shall not put our trust in White Supremacist America and its corrupt capitalism; No system can save us. All systems and empires die. On that day all the oppression, wealth and police brutality come to an end. Blessed are those who have The Black God and The Black Jesus and Who depend upon the justice to build the Beloved Community, the Common Good. The God of Love, the life force in each of us, created the heaven, earth and sea and all that is in them. The Holy One of Love, Mercy and Justice keeps Her promises. The Black Jesus tells those who have eyes to see and ears to hear what constitutes the outward journey of his disciples: We are to: Judge in favor of the oppressed Give food to the hungry Set prisoners free; Our doctors are to give sight to the physically blind Our protesters, investigative journalists, Liz McAlister, Martin Luther King and James Cone empower us to act, to seed and bring sight to the morally blind, deaf and numb. We must lift everyone who has fallen out of our own fallleness. God loves the Human Ones and gifts a revolution of the heart in their Inward Journey. We are told to do justice for widows and orphans. In a senior moment, She told us to take the wicked to their ruin. But as An ambassador of the Black Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr. instead gave Vision to the ultimate reconciliation of us all: The Welcome Table where the Children of the Abolitionists and the Children of White Supremacists will sit down and eat together. Amen!!! Halleluiah!!!

The Exposition
We are thankful to the God who is the force of love in the universe. We shall not put our trust in White Supremacist America and its corrupt capitalism; No system can save us. But John Lewis, the great political leader and embodiment of the last political leader who brought Black, Brown, Native American, poor whites, and Anti-War Peace Makers together: Robert F. Kennedy (I volunteered in his presidential campaign in Madison, New Jersey in 1968), is wont to teach (following Reinhold Niebuhr), “There is no salvation within the political order, but no salvation apart from the political order.” The Open Door Community partners with Our Revolution. Nina Turner is a radical African American Christian priest who preaches Black Liberation Theology as she introduces Ben Jealous, former leader of the national N.A.A.C.P. and Democratic candidate for Governor of Maryland.

There is no justice without the government to tax people, businesses and corporations to pay for the expenses of justice. Justice is very expensive. Martin Luther King Jr. called it a war. Jesus’ Mantle is a book and a plan to address what the Kenner Commission called a poor and Black society in a land that had long been fractured into two societies: Black and White. Rich and Poor. The communities of faith are at a loss. The mainline churches are full of bankers, military contractors and members of the Republico-Libertarian Party. Today, as in 1968, these forces kill the poor. We can, at times, mitigate the aggravating circumstances of the Death Machine, which is our government and the government of Israel. The Romans killed Jesus and thousands of Jewish People who wanted peace and justice. The United States of America with the avid support of Evangelicals and Conservative Catholics kill the poor, people of color and immigrants of all shades. Israel mainly murders Palestinians whose land they took in 1948. Jesus is a Jew. In Palestine he is a Palestinian. In the United States of America he is an African American man. Read his words. Practice them and watch the walls come tumbling down. Faith, courage, feet in the street. Love in the heart. Peace in the soul.

All systems and empires die. On that day all the oppression, wealth and police brutality come to an end. I am an old man and have received many blessings by living the days I am allotted. I was taught the political meaning of America by activist scholars teaching the Book of Revelation written in exile from Empire by John the Revelator. William Stringfellow shook my soul in 1973 when Glen Wittig gave me a copy of An Ethic for Christians & Other Aliens in A Strange World. Stringfellow taught me to read America biblically instead of reading the Bible Americanly (Evangelicalism, white Christian nationalism, KKK). Phil Berrigan was a man of The Lamb, and Dan Berrigan in many an essay, book and poem explicated the revelation in the Book of Revelation for Christians who would engage the powers. What is the future of the United States of America? Of all Empires? Of Merchants? Of the greed-filled wealthy ones? Banksters? Says the Word of God: Fallen, fallen is Babylon (America) the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, A haunt of every foul spirit, A haunt of every foul and hateful bird; For all the nations have drunk the wine of her Impure passion, And the kings (politically powerful) of the earth have committed Fornication with her. And the merchants of the earth have grown Rich (neo-liberalism) with the wealth of her wantonness. (Revelation 18)

The God of Love, the life force in each of us, created the heaven, earth and sea and all that is in them. We are committing suicide today. We are destroying the earth, the sea and the air. We are dying. We are stupid like a mule. There is no health in us. The fierce urgency of now is about over. Will Michaela or your young family members live to be 50? Less likely today than yesterday.

The Holy One of Love, Mercy and Justice keeps Her promises. What promise? To never leave us alone. Yes. This She died in Auschwitz and on Charles C. Jones’ rice plantation as, in terror of snakes, mosquitoes and The White Man, they shoveled soil and worked in water worse than the immigrant laborers in the chicken factories today. Not justice, not reparations, but the presence of God in the hell of dehumanized existence is the root of the Slave Songs of hope, liberation and the overturning of The White Man’s way. From 1831 unto this day, Nat Turner’s ghost rides the skies. Divine Compassion never leaves us alone. Never left Martin Luther King Jr. alone after his “Kitchen Table Conversion.”

Love is most present in the inward journey as in prayer and meditation. We pray. We hope. We listen. Yes! The fractures and captivity of our lives can be healed. As the human fractures bring us to empathy for all human suffering and gift us with a hunger and thirst for Justice — the Outward Journey.

On the other hand, God’s promises in the construction of history and the social order are not kept except through the lives, sacrifices, activism and often suffering and death of those who work for the Beloved Community or, in secular terms, The Common Good.

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Personal Recollections of James H. Cone

By Jürgen Moltmann
Translated by Steffen Lösel

I believe that we first met at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in New York in October 1970. I gave a lecture on “How Can I Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?” in preparation of my 1971 book Die ersten Freigängersinnen der Schöpfung (published in English under the title Theology and Joy), and he spoke about his theological interpretation of The Spirituals and the Blues, published in 1972. But I had already read his book Black Theology and Black Power, which appeared in print in 1969, and I was deeply impressed. My friend Fred Herzog at Duke University and I were working on a German translation, which was published in 1971 in the series “Political Theology,” which I edited together with Johann Baptist Metz. Further translations followed. Jim Cone was a known voice in theology in Germany.

Our friendship brought him to Tübingen twice, and my wife Elisabeth and I visited him whenever we went to New York. He became my American counselor. In 1975, after I had declined an invitation to take a position at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he called me in the middle of the night and asked if they should invite Dorothée Sölle. I encouraged him to do so, and in this way, Dorothée went to New York. When I received an invitation to take a position at Princeton Theological Seminary shortly thereafter, I asked him if I should go. He preferred to see me as a “prophet from the outside” and not as part of the theological scene in the U.S. Hence I stayed in Tübingen, “East of Eden.” When I asked him if he would join in a theological dialogue, he counseled me against it: dialogue only when there is a need that makes dialogue necessary, otherwise theology turns into mere chatter. He knew what he was speaking about, because white racism in the U.S. is aggressive. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot on April 4, 1968. Jim Cone felt indebted to both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to both civil disobedience and the Black Power movement. Jim’s theology was always pugnacious. We met a last time at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 2015 in Atlanta. After my presentation, he came over to me, young-looking and smiling as always, and gave me a hug. I am shaken by his all-too-early death. I have lost a good friend.

I am not qualified to evaluate Cone’s theology. I have never read his books as Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology, considered one of the most influential theological works of the second half of the 20th century, The Crucified God and The Church in the Power of the Spirit; A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology. He has been a good friend of the Open Door Community since 1983, and his life and theology have touched us deeply.

A Poem on the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy

Trees are never felled . . . in summer . . . Not when the fruit . . . is yet to be borne . . . Never before the promise . . . is fulfilled . . . Not when their cooling shade . . . has yet to comfort . . .

Yet there are those . . . unheeding of nature . . . indifferent to ecology . . . ignorant of need . . . who . . . with ax and sharpened saw . . . would . . . in boots . . . step forth damaging . . .

Not the tree . . . for it falls . . . But those who would . . . in summer’s heat . . . or winter’s cold . . . contemplate . . . the beauty . . .

—Nikki Giovanni


When Does This Stop?

By Maurice Jenkins

I would like to talk about my life within the Georgia prison system. Understand that I am one of those people that talk the talk; but I walk the walk as well. I have an education. I have been to Mercer University, majoring in Human Resource Administration, Fall 1989, 1990, 1991; Winter 1990; Fall 1991. I am a clean-cut man. But I am sitting within these walls and it’s been 25 years now. I feel I have demonstrated that I deserve a new chance at life. I want people who work for the system not to just look at a person as an inmate or number. Numbers are statistics, and it becomes much harder to turn away from a person in the face of injustice. Prison is hell, but I know that because I have seen so much with my eyes. I have seen people die; some have committed suicide because they were unable to get the medical help that they should have had. When you are here you have to deal with all kinds of excruciating pain and suffering of all kinds, and abandonment. I have seen one of my roommates die. You end up asking yourself. People should be able to see within these walls. Tax payers should be able to come and see what is true and what’s not. I want people of the community to know, if they want to fix this problem, talk to the people who have been part of the problem. One must walk in this trash to know how to remove it as well. I have the experience to know what must be done and get the job done. We need real action and real people and they are within these walls and they care about people. I call this the toughest part of having to deal with the final stage of life. I want the opportunity to talk to people, not just kids. I know the Lord will open the door for someone to give me a speaking opportunity, and I will open people’s eyes up. The people who work around this system, they say, “It’s my job. Someone has to do it.” But why not do it the right way? You should see the food one must eat in prison. One does not get real medical care. Why is the payroll so big and the job is not getting done? The young kids that have their job as officers are just kids and don’t even know what’s taking place.

I want people who work for the system not to just look at a person as an inmate or number. Numbers are statistics, and it becomes much harder to turn away from a person in the face of injustice.

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says it, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” (This quote I learned from Willa Bickham at the Baltimore Catholic Worker).

The remainder of this cardinal Psalm 146 spells out that The Human Ones and the disciples of the Black Jesus are to spend their lives in non-violent militancy, institutionalizing justice in church and society. This exposition of Psalm 146 does not assume that today the works are addressed to people of faith alone. The Human Ones are those who dwell on this earth and will the good for all people. The Open Door Community has worked on a Progressive Agenda for 40 years. Every one of those blessed years, the majority of The Human Ones with whom we work are not believers. Many believe The White Christ is an enemy of justice. True dat, when we think of the Evangelicals and Catholic right. The liberal white church ran out of gas during Martin Luther King Jr.’s Freedom Movement in Chicago in 1966.

Here are the works for The Human Ones. These works must be performed every day; and the White Power structures of American society (Like Wells Fargo and all the big banks) must be dismantled. Otherwise we are stuck with the Silence of American society (Like Wells Fargo and all the big banks). The Human Ones and the disciples of the Black Jesus are to work with the Equal Justice Initiative. ACLU. The Nationalist State and its side-kick, neo-liberal capitalism, along with the bloated soul-shattered 9.9% will fall down and disappear. We could bring peace to Baltimore and the United States of America if every citizen had economic security. A basic right of love and justice. As Jesus’ parables demonstrate, economic security is a base of healing of the body, mind and spirit. A guaranteed income, Martin Luther King Jr. named the base as he called for a job guarantee for all who need a job. Employment precedes job training, King proclaimed to Congress in the day when there were folk who would listen.

Psalm 146 is a canonical scripture for the Black Jesus Movement. The Psalm is radical in the personal relationship of the community and God. Psalm 146 is revolutionary in the outward journey of justice, social equality and economic security for all. Practice this Psalm and the White Christian Nationalist State and its side-kick, neo-liberal capitalism, will hear the true facts, and you will understand more than you do now.

I have been in now 25 years. When does this stop?

Maurice Jenkins is a prisoner in Georgia.

My eyes have seen so much and my heart has been hurt as well. After getting out of bed one morning, I looked out my window and saw the tactical team of the State Department of Corrections. They lined up on the walkway, and all one could hear was “What we come to do? Kick ass, kick ass.” When these officers entered the dorm, they had all inmates standing in just underwear. They caused so much pain that day. People were hurt for no reason at all. People were hurt for just being in prison at that time. You could see inmates with blood all over them. Staff members were crying, wanting to know why this kind of thing was taking place by people at the top of the Department. Inmates were standing naked on this day, all expectation of privacy had been removed. Inmates were ordered to lie face down on the ground. Back then, you could look at the news and see Hays State Prison was the head stone of this action, and I found myself standing in the middle of it all. When the officers went in your cell, it was left in disarray. Whatever you had was no good anymore. Years later, I find myself here at Wilcox State Prison, and yes it just happened again. You are standing with your face to the wall with your hands behind your back. Standing in your underwear and the female guards are looking at you the whole time. It’s just a game to them, standing around making fun of you. We ask ourselves, how did they even get a job? We understand now; they are just those kind of people. Most of them should be on this side of the wall, because they have trash under their feet and are not trying to clean this action up at all.

I want people to understand when looking at this system: Look at each side — the people that run this system and the people on the inside. Talk to the people on the inside and hear the true facts, and you will understand more than you do now.

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Amen.

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Rita Corbin
States of America in an unbroken line. By moving to penal slavery, the practice of slavery was largely moved out of public sight; but many of the characteristics of chattel slavery are still in place and family separation is basic. On any given day, some 2.3 million men, women and children are locked away somewhere in this country. Most of them are mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and some are children in children’s cages. The pictures and sounds of the separated immigrant children today are breaking our hearts, and rightly so. But we could take those same pictures in “juvenile detention centers” in every state of the U.S. where the cameras and the press never go. Or go to an adult prison on family visitation day. Most who are locked up will never get a visit — one form of heartbreak. But if you are there to witness those who do see their small children, you will never forget the sound of a little one screaming when visitation is over and s/he is being torn from mama or daddy’s arms. How are children to understand this? Who is there to comfort the parents and help them when the cries of their children echo endlessly in their hearts? How do children understand when their parents, aunts, uncles are simply “disappeared” from their lives?

And have you ever known a homeless family whose parents live in terror that their children will be taken away from them? Some have to split up so that the father can go to a man’s shelter and mother and children to another shelter. While there are a few good ones, there are not many shelters for intact homeless families. Some families live under bridges or in abandoned buildings, desperate to stay out of sight of law enforcement or anyone who could call Child Protective Services.

What is this about? How is it that we tolerate these systemic patterns of ripping families apart?

We started with systems of imprisonment, while there have always been those who have advocated against the systems, critiquing the systems of imprisonment has never become a “popular movement.” Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s we moved to a general tolerance of systemic homelessness. Such massive systems of neglect and punishment never “just happen.” They are matters of public policy, and they exist to benefit individuals and systems.

The famous Roman judge Lucius Cassius in the first century of the Common Era is said to have habitually asked “cui bono?” or “to whom will it be a benefit?” It was an ancient form perhaps of saying “follow the money.” Neither mass imprisonment nor systemic homelessness would exist unless these systems created great benefits for the corporate elites. Those who are in prison and on the streets are the “surplus people” of our post-industrialist age. With increasing mechanization and movement to a service economy, these millions of American citizens are not needed. So they are shoved out of the common life and used as needed for below-minimum wage work (homeless people) or convicted of “crime” and warehoused to the benefit of predatory corporations that extract profits from every aspect of prison life (slave labor, exorbitant rates for phone calls, medical “services,” food vendors, and state and federal contracts to build and manage prisons and transport convicted felons, etc.). All of this is worth billions of dollars of corporate profits, and the system could not exist and thrive without separating families from each other.

So it was only a small jump for corporations to get on the gravy train for ICE contracts. When Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions laid out the “Zero Tolerance” policy to rip the children from their refugee parents at our southern border, the corporate vultures were ready. Even with the policy being “called off,” the corporations continue to reap billions of dollars in profits from the system.

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We have heard only bits and pieces of news to let us know that they have been spread out into concentration camps around the United States. What we know is that they are not with their parents and that the trauma they have already endured will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Some will never recover. But that, Trump says, is just the price they will all pay for trying to “invade” or “infect” our country.

Why the continuity of family separation? Is it simply some cruel tendency that resides in the heart of this nation? Or is it that we simply are not paying attention to our history and the political policies that crush the lives of the most powerless among us?

We know this truth: When children, parents, siblings, spouses and others dear to each other are separated or “disappeared,” families and communities are destabilized and vulnerable to a multitude of social dysfunctions, addictions, disorders. Everyone involved is damaged by the pain, and this reinforces the power of the master class. Destabilized communities are much more easily exploited than stable communities. “The family” as anthropologist Ashley Montagu said, “is the basis of society. As the family is, so is the society, and it is human beings who make a family — not the quantity of them, but the quality of them.”

The damage inflicted on families by mass imprisonment has been the source of organizing the Hardwick Trip which the Open Door Community has sponsored with the help of First Presbyterian Church of Milledgeville, GA for 38 years. Coordinated now by Wendie Ballew, volunteers from Oakhurst Baptist, Central Presbyterian and Central United Church of Christ pick up passengers at the Candler Park MARTA station and drive to Milledgeville. The door of the church swings wide and we are welcomed to a bountiful meal by our Presbyterian friends. After a delicious repast, we take the families out to three prisons in the area for visits with family members and friends. As long as people continue to come, they have a place in our caravan; the significance of this is that the families do not have to be strangers to each other. When the time comes for folks to be released, we have seen countless families welcome their beloved family members home free of the anxiety created by long separation without contact. Without help, most of these families would have little or no physical visitation during the years of a prison sentence. What we have been able to do is a small drop in the bucket. We need such trips crisscrossing every state to make visits possible. But we know from our long experience how much this trip means to all of us. It has transformed the lives of our passengers, the folks in prison that they visit, the church members and all of us who participate.

But in general, the family is not faring well in these days. And surely we know by now that we cannot poison the lives of the poor without consequences for us all. We have sown the wind and will surely reap the whirlwind.

As we organize, resist and continue to respond to the cries of the refugee children, we need to do so with a deeper awareness of how “normal” is this infliction of terror on the least of these among us. To attempt to address and heal the dysfunction at the root of our sick society we will have to wake up to the deep and entrenched patterns of cruelty that have been a primary goal for the white elite. As our system has evolved, the structures of democracy have been forced to give way to what Chris Hedges has named corporate totalitarianism. The U.S. Supreme Court has even defined corporations as “persons” with the Constitutional protections of citizens — most notably in the Citizens United case in which the court defined political “speech,” i.e., financial support, as protected under the First Amendment. So while the interests of the wealthy have always played a major part in our system, the political manipulations of the last forty years have brought this to an obscene obsession that has not only shredded our most basic democratic institutions, but has literally crushed the poor in new and grotesque ways. The numerous corporations who are profiting royally from Trump’s child separations are rewarding Trump and his minions with hefty contributions/kickbacks.

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history of lynchings and other terrorism into the 1950s and 1960s. This horrendous record, which continued for more than two decades after the end of the Holocaust, has not been the subject of education anything remotely like Holocaust education—which has affected the innermost attitudes of the vast majority of Germans (despite some recent retrospection there). Most Americans have very little idea of the continuity of white supremacy as an ideology well into the twentieth century and even through the present, and of the post-traumatic impact that lynchings still have in many communities of color—notwithstanding the enormous Northern migrations arising from such horrors.

The Memorial, aided by the Museum and many other initiatives that either have been or should promptly be undertaken, can go a long way toward overcoming the lack of such information or even distorted depictions featured in, for example, Gone With The Wind and “Birth of a Nation.”

To achieve Peace and Justice, we need to focus on the frequently embarrassing role that our legal system has played and to some extent still plays. For example, in the 1920s, the legendary Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes justified executions following proceedings bereft of most indicia of due process by saying that executions were a more benign form of killing than the spectacles of carnival-like lynchings in public squares.

Many people believe that after the Supreme Court cleared out our country’s death rows in 1972 and then in 1976 upheld new statutes, it has ensured careful individualized consideration of the appropriate punishment for those found guilty, with thorough investigation and presentation by defense counsel. However, the actual history of the revived death penalty system fails to justify that belief.

In 1976, ruling in Duane Buck’s favor, the Court held that defense counsel was ineffective for having presented an expert witness who said the fact that Buck was African American made him more likely to be dangerous in the future than were he not African American. This and the prosecution’s reliance on it, was “potent,” the Court said, particularly since it “appealed to a powerful racial stereotype—that of black men as ‘violence prone.’” The Court stated, “Buck may have been sentenced to death in part because of his race. As an initial matter, this is a disturbing departure from a basic premise of our criminal justice system: Our law punishes people for what they do, not who they are. Dispensing punishment on the basis of an immutable characteristic flout traveness this guiding principle.” The Chief Justice, writing for the Court, added that what occurred was especially troublesome because it concerned race; as to which discrimination is particularly egregious in the criminal justice system. Consideration of race in that context “injures not just the defendant, but the law as an institution, . . . the community at large, and . . . the democratic ideal reflected in the processes of our courts.”

Indeed, the Chief Justice added, the State seemed to recognize that Texas’ citizens have no “interest in enforcing a capital sentence obtained on so flawed a basis.”

A year earlier, on May 23, 2016, the Court dealt with blatant evidence of racially-based discretionary challenges by the prosecution team led by District Attorney Stephen Lanier and Assistant District Attorney Douglas Pullen. In Foster v. Chatman (2016), the Court held that materials in the prosecution’s file showed that the prosecution’s stated justifications for striking one prospective black juror had essentially “no grounding in fact” and were replete with “misrepresentations.” As to another peremptory strike, the Court said that many of the prosecution’s justifications “cannot be credited.” The Court said these strikes were “motivated in substantial part by discriminatory intent.”

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Writing for the Court, Chief Justice Roberts, clearly infuriated by the State’s indignant refusal to admit what its file made obvious, and by its seeking an apology, said there clearly was “a concerted effort to keep blacks off of the jury. . . . [Prosecutors] were motivated in substantial part by race when they struck [these two jurors]. . . . Two peremptory strikes on the basis of race are two more than the Constitution allows.”

However, in the absence of such unambiguous “smoking guns,” the Court repeatedly counseled miscarriages of justice with regard to racial discrimination, innocence and much more by enforcing procedural technicalities or insisting—as in Troy Davis’ case—on completely air-tight proof.

This leaves counsel for people facing potential execution with the continuing task of marshaling evidence and, when unsuccessful in the courts, revealing to the public what is being countenanced in its name. Sometimes this may lead to justice being to some extent served, albeit decades after the original “legal” travesty.

This may finally happen for Johnny Lee Gates, thanks to the Southern Center for Human Rights and the Georgia innocence Project, which after a gap of many years, picked up where George Kendall, Gary Parker and I left things after, in 2003, getting Mr. Gates’ death sentence changed to life without parole. At a recent hearing, counsel presented newly available proof that, among other things, the prosecutors—whose leaders included, as in Foster, Douglas Pullen—based peremptory challenges on the basis of race.

In 1988-89, the Eleventh Circuit could have granted relief based on an even more basic type of racial disparity: What it said was sufficient proof of racial disparity in the composition of the jury venire to establish a prima facie case of unconstitutional under-inclusion of people of color. But it denied relief because Gates’ trial lawyer had not objected (he later said he would never challenge racial discrimination in capital cases, due to fear that juries would hold his doing so against his clients.

As in Mr. Gates’ case, it is incumbent upon all of us to learn more about our long history of racism and its continuing legacy, and to bring this understanding to bear in seeking greater public education and dialogue on what this means for us today. And we must act where we can be effective, to bring the truth to both the courts, the prosecution and the public.

Ron Tabak lives in New York and coordinates the pro bono practice for Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP worldwide. He is a long-hand litigator against the death penalty and has argued cases at all levels of the courts. He is active in local, state and national Bar associations and has long chaired the Death Penalty Committee of the ABA’s Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice. His proposals in regard to mental disability and the death penalty have become policy of the ABA, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. He has also led the way in the ABA’s efforts to recruit and train lawyers for indigent death row prisoners. He writes and speaks prolifically and has received many awards for his work. Ron is also an active member of Central Synagogue in Manhattan. We are happy to welcome Ron to the pages of Hospitality.
Once When We All Were White: Part Two

by Nibs Stroupe

This article is part two of a series that originally appeared in the Journal for Preachers. It focuses on three books related to the election of Donald Trump. Last month, I looked at White Trash, by Nancy Isenberg, and this month I’ll finish the review of J. D. Vance’s Hillbilly Elegy and also look at The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality, by Justin Gest.

Vance is in his early 30s, so we do not know how his story will continue to unfold, but his Hillbilly Elegy could actually be “Hillbilly Redemption” in terms of his own journey. Through his own will and through the love of complex members of his family, especially his grandmother, he is able to hear a different definition of himself and his possibilities. Rather than being a white boy trapped in poverty and oppression, he is able to hear that he is the child of love and equity. Through love, through education, through hard work, through the Marines, through college at Ohio State and grad school at Yale Law School, he is able to tell there are other narratives of himself and of life, narratives that offer a path to life rather than to the navages of internalized oppression.

His story is impressive, but he falls into the trap in which many who believe in independence and self-reliance find themselves in seeking to explain the disconnect between systemic oppression and personal responsibility. Although he acknowledges the powerful economic forces that have pounded on white working class people and others, his main explanation for the marginalized status of Appalachian whites is their lack of personal responsibility. Like Clarence Thomas before him, Vance experienced the struggles of an oppressed people and has heard a different definition of himself. Like Thomas, he lays most of the blame of his cultural crisis at the feet of the welfare state, which he claims has created personal irresponsibility. Here his ideology seems to take over his analysis. While there are undoubtedly people who are personally irresponsible, he would do well to have used Isenberg’s analysis of the marginalization of working class white people from the beginning of our history. The truth is that the source of the cultural crisis of working class white people and other cultures in our midst is a combination of economic and capitalistic forces of the racism on which this nation was founded, of the longstanding indifference of our society to those in need, and the diminishment of the individual human spirit that so often occurs in response to these factors.

Vance also fails to understand the depths of the “wages of whiteness” in himself and in his culture. W. E. B. DuBois’ insight on this is profound. Part of the internalized oppression of white Appalachian culture is that they have failed as “white” people. They are able to receive the psychological boost in our society from being classified as “white,” but that boost seems to have fizzled for them because they too feel marginalized and oppressed. As Vance puts it so well, when he read William Julius Wilson’s The Truly Disadvantaged about black people trapped in inner cities, he felt that it was written about hillbilly transplants from Appalachia. Yet, like Wilson and later Charles Murray, Vance attributes this marginalization to the failure of individual Appalachian transplants. He does not address their sense of failure as “white people,” or the long, grinding and deliberate history of setting up this system that is now crushing his culture.

In The New Minority, Justin Gest’s sociological study of failing white districts in Youngstown, Ohio, and in the London, England area, Gest does begin to name this complex of factors that drove the working class whites into the arms of Donald Trump. He bases his thesis on economic crisis—both places have lost thousands and thousands of manufacturing jobs. The original white populations have lost their jobs and their livelihoods and now their majority status. Their tacit agreement to participate in the wages of whiteness worked well until the jobs left, and now they face the unpleasant news of American history—their cheap labor, and being a buffer between middle and upper class whites and African-Americans below them, no longer brings them the benefits that it once did. With this loss has come a sense of marginality, of moral and race failure, and of being overwhelmed by immigrant laborers who are willing to do the jobs previously reserved for working-class whites.

This sense of deprivation drives white working class people to see African Americans, and especially recent immigrants, as their primary antagonists.

Gest calls these districts, of which there are many, “post-traumatic cities (PTC)” meaning that they are exurbs and urban communities that lost signature industries in the mid-to late 20th century and have never recovered. These PTC are often nostalgic and backward looking. Rather than adapting to the post-traumatic future, they seek to reinstate the pre-traumatic past. As white people, they were not supposed to end up this way. This sense of deprivation drives white working class people to see African Americans, and especially recent immigrants, as their primary antagonists. Rather than building coalitions with the “other” to engage the corporations and upper classes who have used their labor and deserted them, they chose to ally themselves with the upper class whites, maintaining their race loyalty.

Despite this loyalty, Gest makes it clear from his studies that white working-class people are now feeling cleavage from “white, elite, co-ethnics, who exploit working class needs of immigration and inequality.” Yet, they also feel caught, because they continue to long for solidarity with the behavior of the wealthy. At the same time, they double down hard on welfare recipients, whom they identify as African Americans and immigrants. For them, “welfare” is framed as “cash assistance,” not unemployment, Medicaid, disability or food stamps, all of which some of them receive. The narrative now is a “litany of stories about heartbreak, desperation, disappointment and betrayal — recounting the tragic steps leading to a world where white working class people have been displaced to their society’s periphery.” (2) Like Isenberg in White Trash, Gest notes that this narrative that white working-class people were once closer to the center is a false historic construction, and therein lies the tale.

In a section in which he is talking about developments in Britain, he notes the reality that a global, capitalist meritocracy that features even greater inequity now drives Western economies. This model shifts production to cheaper overseas venues and then recruits immigrants to fill the skilled positions that nationals are unqualified to take, while also recruiting (or encouraging) immigrants to take the unskilled positions that nationals are unwilling to take. This certainly seems to be the case in the American context. He notes that in the American context we are permeated by a repertoire of individualism, self-sufficiency, and mobility. These factors enhancement the decision by white working-class Americans to see more solidarity with white upper classes than with the working-class ethnics who are in the same situation economically and class-wise. It’s an old, old story in Western and especially in American culture, and we’ll explore its implications in the conclusion next month.

2. Gest, p. 150.

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