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# Educational Genocide, Eco-Violence, and Poverty Pimping: The Cry of Faith in Urban America Today

by Mark I. Wallace

**A**S AN EDUCATOR AND A CHRISTIAN, I NOW WORK IN THE CITY OF Chester, outside of Philadelphia, where the “American Dream” has failed for urban families mired in failing schools, dangerous environmental conditions, and low-paying, dead-end jobs—or no jobs at all. The ground of my activism—Christian hope—is best captured in a newly painted Chester wall mural (reproduced here) where a little girl with a crown of thorns on her head is reaching out to the viewer with a dove of peace in her hand. The mural resonates with my hope that Jesus rose from being dead on the cross, and animates my expectation that Chester, left for dead, can rise again in new life. This hope is the fiery nucleus at the center of my life. It is the basis of my conviction that the demons of grinding poverty and joblessness can be conquered, that good schools and safe neighborhoods can take root and flourish, and that political hacks and corrupt officials can be pushed aside and, in some cases, punished for their crimes against local residents. Like the girl in the mural, I believe that Chester, crucified, will rise again into a new future.

Four years ago, I forged a covenant relationship with clergy and activists in Chester and the nearby town of Swarthmore. I had heard about some of Chester’s urban prophets, and I wanted to be part of the transformation and hope that these agents for change were bringing to the city. I too wanted to be a leader in a cause bigger than myself; to give back to others after so many had given to me over the course of my life. At that time I co-founded, and now meet monthly with, the Chester Swarthmore Learning Institute to advance political change and social transformation within the communities of these two towns. Chester is a gritty urban community. Swarthmore is a leafy green college town. My Chester colleagues and I have crossed racial and cultural divisions in order to make our institute work. This has not been easy. Mistakes have been made and misunderstandings have arisen. But I believe real change happens when people from different walks of life come together in collegiality and trust to see how they can mutually strengthen the well-being of others. My life has been transformed through my partnership with friends in Chester. In turn, I hope that these friends and the communities they



*Detail of girl with dreadlocks from the mural created by Chester artist, Joseph Church, with adult volunteers, business owners, children and teens, and several Swarthmore students.*



*Living in Chester is like living in any other place: People have roots in community, family, and spiritual practice. Ebony Gordon (left) and her mother, Linda, hug on Third Street.*



*Vacant lots fill with trees, flowers bloom on rusting fences, and the blue water of the Delaware beckons. Nature's hand is everywhere in Chester.*

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serve have also been enriched through our association.

At present, Chester is known primarily as a poverty-stricken city of 35,000 people that exists on the fringes of America's global economic dominance. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did pastoral training and received his ministerial degree from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester in the early 1950s. Continuing King's legacy, it is a place of strong families, gifted young people, committed churches and mosques, and visionary leaders who care deeply about the city's future. However, today its average household income is \$24,000 per year, its unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent, its violent crime rate is two to three times the national average, and it has the highest infant mortality rate in the state. Many of Chester's residents now inherit the ranks of the dispossessed—the forgotten leftovers of the current economic boom who do not have access to the good schools, workforce development, clean environments, and quality health care that many of us consider our birthrights.

### The Resurrection: the source of my hope for Chester

THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL IS STRAIGHTFORWARD: follow Jesus by committing oneself to radical personal and social transformation. St. Paul writes in the Book of Philippians: "Have the mind of Christ, who was in the form of God, but emptied himself, became a servant, and suffered death on a cross—and therefore, God raised him up." This is the model all disciples of Jesus are to follow: be like Jesus who emptied himself, became a servant, suffered death, and was raised up. To follow Jesus through self-emptying and resurrection hope, this is the Christian way. Self-emptying is abandoning narrow self-gratification in order to serve the interests of others. Resurrection hope is the confidence that God is able to raise up everyday people to revolutionize systemically distorted structures, no matter how hopeless and entrenched these structures might appear to be. Such hope is impossibly expectant that life can emerge from death—that new beginnings can be generated out of the detritus of broken dreams. No matter how bad things get, even in the moment of death, God is able to create new life under the most dire social conditions.

Jesus' death was final. He was executed as a criminal by the Roman state and buried in a cave. But three days later, according to the Christian story, he walked away from his own grave to continue his ministry. Unlikely? Perhaps. Impossible to verify? To be sure. But it is this story—what Christians call the gospel—that inspires many urban change agents like myself to work for renewal and justice in blighted communities.

I cannot work in Chester without such hope. For me, the dysfunction is too deeply embedded, the pain and suffering too long-standing to be overcome without such hope. Resurrection hope propels me toward a sustainable and robust commitment to the well-being of my Chester neighbors; it carries me through the crushing disappointments and spiritual assaults that come with such work. I cannot speak for others, but hope in resurrection keeps me focused and forward-moving in the face of seemingly impossible odds. This hope is not layered onto an already existing social commitment; it does not provide a religious patina to a pre-formed political agenda. This hope, rather, is the genesis of my politics as such. It is this hope *itself* that is the wellspring of my long-term commitment and enthusiasm for this work. Without it, I could not continue. Without it, I fear that the forces that have brought this once thriving city to its knees would defeat me as well.

Of course, Christians are infamous for translating resurrection hope into vapid pie-in-the-sky foolishness. Antebellum white ministers were notorious for telling African slaves that the object of Christian hope is not changed social conditions in this world, but blissful existence in the world *beyond*. Today as well, many clergy counsel the faithful to avoid large-scale justice movements in favor of personal salvation and morality. But this type of politically indifferent, otherworldly religion is a Christian heresy. It has nothing to do with the religion of Jesus. Indeed, it is a betrayal of everything that Jesus taught and did. At the inauguration of his public ministry in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus quotes the Book of Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good

news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set free all of those who are oppressed.” Remembering Paul’s mandate to have the mind of Christ, the real Christian message is clear: be like Jesus through solidarity with the poor, the incarcerated, the disabled, and all others who are oppressed in any way. This revolutionary social theme is the essential thread that ties together the whole Bible.

In the face of urban blight but charged with resurrection hope, I am angry and ripped up inside by the misery and despair that characterize Chester’s good people and hard-working families. As a boy, my father gave me the 1897 book *In His Steps* by Charles M. Sheldon, the fictional story of a mid-western Protestant minister who invites his congregation to confront the urban dysfunction and political problems of the Gilded Age by asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” In Jesus’ steps, as it were, so-called social Christians begin to disinvest in, and then rehabilitate, slum-lord tenements; work with local newspapers to expose corruption in city government; and persuade well-endowed churches to fund and staff labor development programs and city-wide settlement houses for the working poor and new immigrant families. The book impressed upon me the invigorating truth that faith working toward justice has the power to infuse one’s life with meaning, purpose, and prophetic zeal. Since that time, I have seen that the founders and practitioners of many of the world’s great religious traditions—from Hillel and Jesus to Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh—all teach that a life of justice-seeking faith is a joyful life worth living. Following the example of Jesus, the Christian gospel is a liberating force to be reckoned with.

In spite of the promising history and basic goodness of Chester residents, how did things get so bad? As in many drug-infested, inner-city areas, the social and economic fabric of Chester has been shredded by three equally powerful forces: toxic education, ecological violence, and poverty pimping.

## The worst schools in Pennsylvania

CHESTER’S SCHOOLS ARE THE WORST IN PENNSYLVANIA. Until recently, the school district was managed by a for-profit education vendor that propelled the schools’ downward slide toward low test scores, chronic absenteeism, and occasional shootings and riots on school grounds. Then, through early 2007, it was run by a politically appointed part-time overseer with a track record of financial misconduct and political cronyism. The result is that most students from grades one through twelve cannot read at grade level, the high school dropout rate is 50 percent, and almost as many high school students commit crimes and become incarcerated as graduate and go to college (about 5–6 percent in both cases).

As the superintendent recently put it, “My school is a pipeline to prison right now. When you lose more than 50 percent of your children to the streets in four years, where else are they going? And many of them do go right to prison.” Chester schools have become educationally and personally debilitating for scores of students. One teen recently told a Swarthmore student of mine that all of the students in one of his classes had been kicked out of school for a week because a classmate had thrown a paper airplane during a lesson.

But there is hope amidst the despair. Both the for-profit school manager and the corrupt overseer have been thrown out in favor of a new state-appointed oversight board. The community worked tirelessly to bring down the previous manager and overseer and is guardedly optimistic that the new school board will move away from the “plantation” management style of the past to fully incorporating the voices and interests of teachers, parents, and children in the decision-making process.

Enabling local stakeholders to be active participants in shaping the future of their schools is the key to urban renewal today. Continually fueled by resurrection hope, I part-



*An annual revival/barbecue weekend held in August at the New Jerusalem Church of Chester is called “Healing the City: Life and Love.”*



*Chester resident Angela Logue and her three-week-old son, Tyler, live across the street from the Delaware County Waste Treatment Facility, where all solid waste from the County is incinerated. When asked how she felt about living so near this facility, she replied, "Where else do I have to go?"*

ner with local clergy and community leaders to insist upon accountability from school officials, and I provide Swarthmore College students as after-school mentors and tutors for Chester young people. My colleagues' and my direct intervention in the school district is designed to tear out the poisoned roots of mismanagement, influence-peddling, and cynicism that characterize this system. With the ouster of the preceding top officials, many of us believe a new day dawns for genuine educational reform in Chester.

## Dumping on the Poor

CHESTER'S ECONOMY IS NOW PARTIALLY DEPENDENT UPON THE PRODUCTION and management of toxic wastes. In economically distressed communities, the waste industry's assurances of a stabilized tax base and jobs for unemployed residents are impossible to resist. But what is the real cost of such promises? Five waste treatment facilities now make Chester their home: a sewage treatment plant, a metal-recycling plant, a regional incinerator, a paper mill, and a medical-waste autoclave (currently not operating). The clustering of waste industries only a few yards from residential areas has brought about an infestation of rodents, the presence of hundreds of trucks a day at all hours in the neighborhood, and toxic air emissions that have contributed to lead poisoning and have raised the specter of cancer to two-and-a-half times greater than the average risk for other area residents.

Predominantly African American, Chester is a stunning instance of environmental racism. It has become one of metro Philadelphia's toxic sacrifice zones—what the former mayor called a "killing field"—where waste from surrounding affluent and white municipalities is disproportionately dumped. Resurrection hope propels me and other area residents to resist the imposition of environmental apartheid here. My faith in Jesus' resurrection from death sustains my long battles against eco-injustice. We march in the streets, meet with community officials, and attend numerous regulatory hearings to fight against toxic racism. I hang my hope on the slim reed of occasional victories against the eco-domination system.

Recently, the state did not approve the siting of a soil treatment plant, the paper mill was not allowed to burn tires for fuel, a biotech firm that would have increased overall pollution in the area was kept out, and the sewage treatment plant was successfully sued by local residents for violating federal and state air pollution laws. Still, the waste facilities in the killing fields of Chester continue to operate. We live in hope that the corrupt regime of unequal waste management will end. Hope never fully realized is not hope destroyed, however, and so the battle for justice against the big industrial polluters rages on.

## Gambling and the oppressed

CHESTER BOASTS A SPECTACULAR WATERFRONT ON ITS SOUTHERN border facing the Delaware River, just west of Philadelphia. The waterfront used to be home to shipbuilding and manufacturing jobs. As in much of the United States, this industrial base collapsed two generations ago, rendering the waterfront a wasteland of empty factories and crumbling infrastructure. Since that time, the waterfront has become a zone of economic opportunity—attracting, among other industries, a casino—with the promise of making lots of tax-free money for developers, since new businesses in such zones are exempt from property taxes until 2013. Instead of measurable commitments to workforce development as a prerequisite for setting up shop, however, the new casino and other developers are grabbing up valuable riverfront real estate for pennies on the dollar and offering little to local workers in exchange.

In the casino's case, studies show that economic opportunity and quality of life is generally undermined by gambling development. The casino will likely introduce more crime, bankruptcies, and family disruption—an inevitable byproduct of gaming in disadvantaged communities. But while poverty pimping (producing profits at the expense of the poor) is rampant, there is a small ray of hope. The casino and other new ventures will

eventually generate millions of dollars in tax revenues for the city.

A group of local clergy and others have formed the Fair Deal Coalition to pressure city government to allocate these funds to education and job training to finance the workforce—and skills—development necessary for Chester’s poor to share in the coming economic boom. Chester’s new economic order will be built on the backs of low-income, minority residents, unless city officials can be persuaded to redirect these funds toward long-term sustainable economic development for the most disadvantaged of local residents. Resurrection hope animates this struggle to incorporate the disenfranchised in the long-awaited economic revival of the city. The Fair Deal Coalition is a bright star in the dim universe of chronic poverty and joblessness.

## The Joy of Resistance

“WHEN JESUS CALLS A PERSON, HE BIDS HIM ‘COME AND DIE.’” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and martyr who joined the resistance to kill Hitler, wrote these words in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Not all of us are asked to give up our lives, as Bonhoeffer did, to combat systemic evil. But all of us—as Christians, Jews, and other people of faith, or no faith at all—are called to sacrifice our private interests to serve a greater good. For most of us, such acts are not true sacrifices. For example, parenting my children, teaching a class, or meeting with Chester activists to generate social change is not a sacrifice, but a joyous and life-sustaining commitment to the well-being of the commons. In these commitments I am no longer an automaton in service of the capitalist machine, but a member of a global resistance movement fighting the spreading tentacles of the domination system. Belonging to this movement, I make common cause with all people of good faith. Some of my colleagues in Chester are prophetic clergy, others are secular activists, but all of us are driven by common visionary sources—Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy, Saul Alinsky’s community organizing, Wangari Maathai’s environmental activism—that sustain us over the long haul of our respective work challenges in Chester. Together we draw deeply from the religious *and* non-religious wells of our own backgrounds and traditions in order to keep ourselves fresh and alive in the face of continuing adversity.

I am not imperialistic about religion in this regard. I do not think religion is necessary for social change. While *I* need the strength of resurrection hope to propel me forward, it is not necessary to make religion, Christian or otherwise, a requirement for sustainable social action. What is necessary, rather, is to plumb the depths of one’s own life-source—be it ethical, literary, religious or otherwise—and therein be nurtured, fed, and energized to re-enter the fray and battle the forces of oppression.

The powers of resurrection hope and biblical justice enable me to combat the mean-spirited politics of greed and power that drive the downward cycle of Chester and many other American cities today. These twin engines—robust hope founded on Jesus’ victory over death, and a passion for fairness fueled by anger over the grim poverty suffered by the working poor—enable my push toward social transformation.

Today, the Christian gospel has been coopted by politicians and preachers who trumpet personal morality at the expense of fighting against the structural conditions that lock down America’s underclass in deprived and dehumanizing urban environments. This is a betrayal of the Christian message. The defining feature of Jesus’ ministry is solidarity with the poor and oppressed. To be a revolutionary Christian today is to follow in Jesus’ steps and care for the marginalized and forgotten in our midst. When despair for the world overwhelms me, the problems of Chester and of the world seem impossible to overcome. But then I recall Jesus’ life of compassion and liberation, I remember the girl in the mural wearing her crown of thorns and reaching toward me with outstretched hand, and I am empowered to live to fight another day. ■

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