SIMPLICITY

Live Simply So That Others May Simply Live

Vol. 26, No. 1 Summer 2015

A Heritage of Brutality and Plunder

by Steve Baggarly

In late April, as police cars and stores burned in Baltimore after the funeral of Freddie Gray, one in a long line of high profile killings of unarmed African-Americans by police officers, our elderly African-American guest, Mr. Johnson, looked me squarely in the eye and spoke to both me and to all white America with his voice rising, "Racism is in your blood, you can't get rid of it! Someday you'll all be taken out one by one or in groups, but either way, YOU'LL GET YOURS!"

Gray, who was arrested after looking a police officer in the eye and then running away, only to be found illegally in possession of a switchblade, had his spine severed during the ride in a police van to the precinct station. He joined Eric Garner, who was selling loose cigarettes when police took him down with a chokehold that killed him, Walter Scott, who was pulled over for a broken taillight, found to have a warrant for unpaid child support, and then shot eight times in the back as he jogged away from an officer, John Crawford III, who was carrying a pellet gun he had selected for purchase in a store when police stormed the building and gunned him down, and 12 year old Tamir Rice, who was playing with a toy pistol by a park when police in a speeding car stopped 15 feet from him, jumped out and in a second blew him away. More recently Jonathan Sanders was out exercising his horse before he was strangled to death by an officer, Sandra Bland was pulled over for not signaling a lane change, protested her treatment, was arrested, and three days later found dead in her jail cell, and Samuel DuBose, pulled over for lack of a front license plate, ended up killed with a bullet to the head. The body count of unarmed black people killed by white police officers continues to rise.

Helen David Brancato IHM

Before Freddie Gray's killing, Michael Brown's shooting death by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9th of last year became a flashpoint for African-American anger and revived the Black Lives Matter movement to hold the authorities accountable for the killing of unarmed black people. Initial reports that Brown had been shot while his hands were up struck a deep chord as emblematic of the barbarous history of mistreatment black people have endured at the hands of white Americans.

For 250 years the labor of black slaves was stolen—they pulled down the forests, planted the fields, and picked the cotton, creating vast wealth for whites in both south and north. Their families were sold at auction, their movement restricted by chains, passes, and slave patrols, and their illiteracy enforced by the lash. Slave women's bodies belonged *(continued on page 2)*

(continued from page 1) to their white male owners who raped them with impunity. Flight meant being hunted down by dogs, burned with irons, and possibly dismembered. Even minor insubordination risked torture, starvation, or death. The slave masters preached that the God of the Bible created blacks subhuman, fit only for servitude to the superior white race and lost apart from their care.

Though the Civil War supposedly ended slavery, after Reconstruction white supremacists regained a stranglehold on southern power for another 100 years. Across the south from Virginia to Texas a convict leasing system developed which is better described as "neoslavery". Douglas Blackmon's book, *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans Between the Civil War and World War II,* documents that, beginning not long after the Civil War, many tens of thousands of black men (and some women) were arrested by sheriffs working with local businessmen to provide slave labor. The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery except for convicted criminals. So black men were arrested en masse, convicted of trivial or fabricated charges, and then fined. In a society with little cash, business owners stepped in for the penniless defendants to pay the fines and forced the convicted men to sign contracts saying they would work so many months or years for them to pay off their debt. The prisoners were then held captive at the mine, fields, orchards, turpentine camp, railroad yard, or lumber mill, where they were forced to work. Prisoners would be chained day and night, whipped for not reaching quotas, barely fed or clothed, beaten and tortured for trying to escape, and often worked to death and their bodies dumped into the company mass grave. Black families never knew when loved ones would disappear without a trace, or be sold and resold to employers in the sprawling convict labor network. For the forced laborers, convict leasing could be even more dangerous than ante-bellum slavery because replacement workers were dirt-cheap; paying a $25 fine could secure a convict laborer, while good slaves could cost over $1000. The death of convict workers meant no income loss to employers—they could just ask the local sheriff to round up and convict another wave of workers. Only with industrialization, shifting economics, and several prosecutions under peonage laws by the Roosevelt administration, in attempt to keep the Japanese from using US abuses of its black people as a propaganda tool during World War II, did convict leasing fade away.

David Baggarly

Between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement many states legislated the segregation and disenfranchisement of black people. In the south, these so-called "Jim Crow" laws gave whites control over where blacks could live and go to school, who they could love and marry, when they could speak or shake hands, how fast they could drive, and where they could work, eat, pray, travel, sit, walk, and perform bodily functions. Local white police enforced the letter of the law with soul-killing efficiency, and the Ku Klux Klan, other clandestine terrorist organizations, and lynch mobs, enforced the spirit of the law. At the very *least* 3959 black people in twelve southern states were lynched by whites between 1877-1950.[1] Some were lynched in front of thousands of cheering white people who brought their children along with picnic baskets to watch as black people were humiliated, tortured, and hung up in trees, maybe also shot or doused with gasoline and set on fire. Body parts were cut off and brought home as keepsakes. Souvenir photographs were taken of smiling accomplices around the mutilated corpses, made into postcards, and sent to friends.[2] During this time the widespread rape of black women by white men continued unimpeded—in the rare event of an arrest, no all-white jury would convict a white rapist.[3] In the 1940's lynching largely gave way to due process and state imposed capital punishment, but the principal recipients of the sentence were still black men. Even today the race of both perpetrators and victims are determining factors in who gets the death penalty and who doesn't.

During this time white race riots were common, as many as 3,000 black communities were "ethnically cleansed" by white violence or coercion. From Rosewood, Florida, to Wilmington, North Carolina, to East St. Louis, Illinois, whites burned down black sections of town, killing and forcing out its inhabitants. In Thibodaux, Louisiana, Elaine, Arkansas, Slocum, Texas, and beyond, whites massacred thousands *(continued on page 4)*

Live the Questions Now

by Mindy Bertram

"Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms, or books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

~Ranier Maria Rilke

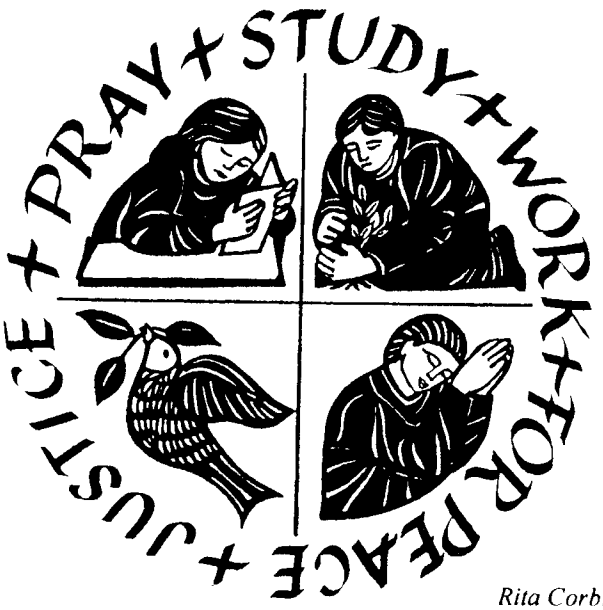
The Catholic Worker soupline has been a fixture in my life for the past four years. I started serving on the soupline when I was 18 and a freshman at Virginia Wesleyan College. I was introduced to Steve at the Season of Nonviolence by mere coincidence and that conversation led me to the doors of Sacred Heart Catholic Church at 6 am one morning in January 2012. I started to ask students from the college to come with me, and now over 125 students have served alongside the Catholic Worker community.

My experiences volunteering on the soupline have taught me important lessons about suffering, dignity, and the impact of global systems. My involvement with the Catholic Worker has been an intangibly important aspect of my undergraduate education because it has solidified my passion for public health, displaced people, and economic justice. However, Thursday mornings often leave me with more questions to ask my professors, more discussions to have with my peers, and an unquenchable thirst for answers.

Why is there inequity in health care, education, employment, housing, and wealth? What qualities create a resilient, inclusive, and respectable, community? Why is there a working poor? How do you develop trust with the community you serve? Where is the affordable housing? How much is a living wage? What kind of mental health policy reform do we need to make a difference? How can we end homelessness?

During this spring semester, after almost four years of volunteering, I started to notice a change while serving on the line. I would distribute the bananas or the tea, greeting everyone and a few regulars by name. I noticed this year, more than ever, people would ask me what my name was, how my week was going, what classes I was taking next semester, and one morning a man asked, "Hey, where have you been? Didn't you go traveling out of the country? You were studying health, right?" I was so surprised. It touched me that he had remembered or even noticed my absence while studying abroad because it meant to me that I was, at least, a small part of his community and he was a part of mine. I thought about that moment a lot because for me it answered one of my questions: *How do you develop trust with the community you serve*? I think it takes time, respect, and consistency.

The Norfolk Catholic Worker is an outstanding example of an empowering community structure that serves people in need, advocates against injustice, and acts as a platform for productive dialog



Rita Corbin

about social, political, and economic issues that inspires action. Steve and Kim have been running the soupline for 26 years in Norfolk, longer than I have been alive. I think their long-term commitment to this community is the key to their effective efforts to create lasting change for people experiencing homelessness and for the working poor. Steve and Kim have lived their lives devoted to the questions and never stumbling to help find some of the answers. I am thankful for the Catholic Worker community. I am thankful to live some of my questions and hopeful to find some of the answers.

"Where is the hope? You are the hope."

~Jan Eliasson **

(continued from page 2) of blacks to maintain white supremacy and stop black political or economic progress. In 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, white rioters used machine guns and threw bundles of dynamite from airplanes on black businesses, homes, and fleeing families. Whites killed up to 300 people, injured 800, arrested and detained 6000, and made 10,000 homeless as they burned the wealthiest black community in the country to the ground.

African-Americans were the unknowing subjects of sometime lethal medical experiments. Perhaps best known was the US Public Health Service's Tuskegee experiment that followed black men infected with syphilis and purposely withheld treatment to study the long-term progression of the fatal disease. Also from the 1920's to the 1970's thousands of poor, southern black women were sterilized without their knowledge or consent.

The perpetual indebtedness of sharecropping and tenant farming and the constant threat of arbitrary arrest or the sudden confiscation of all of ones property, kept southern blacks just as tied to their white landlords as slavery had tied them to their slave masters. Picking cotton still meant stooping in the dirt from sun up to sun down in the 100 degrees heat, cramping the fingers and breaking the back. It takes about 70 cotton bolls to make one pound of cotton. A 1400-pound bale of cotton is made up of some 98,000 bolls, picked one at a time. In 1931, a bale of cotton sold for less then six cents.[4] In any year, four of five sharecroppers received nothing from their landlord after an entire year's hard labor except the extension of credit for another year.

The Great Migration of over 6 million black people from the south between 1915 and 1970 was a flight from terrorism and mind-numbing oppression. If not escaping by rail, the refugees found themselves unwelcome at hotels and in hundreds of sundown towns across the country, which kept African-Americans out by law, force, or custom.[5] Some of these towns posted signs informally threatening black people with death if caught in town after nightfall—some are still all white today. In their new home cities blacks were crowded into ghettos, overcharged for decrepit housing, redlined by banks, limited in job opportunities, shunned by unions and federal housing programs, and met with violence if they ventured into white neighborhoods.

As the walls of segregation started to crack and African-Americans began to make some civil rights gains in the 1950's and 60's, whites pushed back with injunctions, school closings, attack dogs, high-pressure water hoses, jailings and torture, fire-bombings, and assassination. One response to white push back was the development of the Republican Party's "Southern Strategy" which used racial code words and race related issues ("state's rights," "forced busing," and calls for "law and order") to lure white southern Democrats into the Republican Party. Symbiotic with this strategy, in 1971, President Richard Nixon initiated the War on Drugs. By the early 1980's under the Reagan administration, the War was full blown—a mass incarceration machine faithful to the country's heritage of criminalizing black people.

In her 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, author Michelle Alexander writes that in its first forty years the War on Drugs accounted for more than 45 million arrests, making the United States the world's largest jailer, with people of color accounting for 70% of the prison population. The US prison population is now over seven times larger than it was in 1972, and drug arrests are responsible for most of the increase. Though drug use and selling is similar percentage-wise across all racial and ethnic groups in the US, the vast resources the federal government has poured into the War on Drugs have overwhelmingly been brought to bear on the black inner-city, not on college campuses or middle class white neighborhoods where using and selling are just as frequent. The war is waged in African-American neighborhoods that have become targeted, militarized, police states. Though the majority of illegal drug users and dealers nationwide are white, three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino. Blacks have been arrested at five-and-one-half times the rate of whites in the War on Drugs. In at least fifteen states, black drug offenders are sent to prison at a rate from twenty to fifty-seven times greater than that of whites. The War on Drugs again made "black man" synonymous with "criminal". Alexander argues that if comparable legions of white men were being randomly stopped and searched, arrested, prosecuted, convicted of drug felonies, and sentenced to long prison terms, that the policies of the drug war would change over night.

Though the War on Drugs was advertised as targeting violent drug kingpins, most arrests have been for possession. Three quarters of drug arrests are of nonviolent offenders. For over three decades, politicians running on racially coded "Get Tough on Crime" platforms have insisted on draconian mandatory minimum sentencing laws that impose sentences once reserved for violent offenses on nonviolent drug offenders.

The result has been that nearly half of young black men in this country are behind bars, on probation or parole, or labeled felons for life. And the felony label has created a new caste system. (continued on page 5)

(continued from page 4) Upon release from prison, convicted felons are often unable to vote or to sit on juries; they can be legally discriminated against in housing, employment, and educational opportunities, and are ineligible for government benefits. By the hundreds of thousands, black men who grew up with little economic opportunity in our nations inner cities (good manufacturing jobs having pulled out decades earlier), and who turned to the only thriving local economy—the drug market—have been jailed, given long sentences, labeled felons, and then returned to society with legally limited opportunities, cutting them off from the mainstream and raising the possibilities of a lifetime of recidivism.

In addition to the tens of millions of arrests, the War on Drugs has cost well over $1 trillion and ignited a hemisphere-wide epidemic of gang violence. Yet today drugs are purer, cheaper, and more readily available than when the War began—and mass incarceration from the War on Drugs has followed slavery, convict leasing, and segregation, as America's newest system of racial control.

As Freddie Gray's body was lowered into the ground, it was a visceral reminder that for 400 years the lives of black people in this country have been up for grabs. Adding insult to injury are the Confederate battle flags and flag paraphernalia, Confederate monuments, and streets, schools, and military bases named after Confederate officers, that litter our national landscape—they serve as memory and reverence for the cause, symbols, and heroes, of white supremacy. Also polluting the national memory is the neo-Confederate myth that the southern states seceded from the union because of differences over states' rights and tariffs. The Declarations of Secession passed by various southern state legislatures all made clear that they separated from the union because of the threat the north posed to slavery.[6] This historical distortion spun soon after the war by ex-Confederates was a denial of the sadistic white violence the country was founded upon and a hard-hearted refusal to repent and atone for unspeakable evil.

The crime of slavery has now gone 150 years without punishment, expiation, or reparation,[7] likewise convict leasing, Jim Crow, and the abuses of mass incarceration. Slavery's heritage has been racism and economic oppression. In 2013 the median wealth of white families ($141,900) was thirteen times that of black families ($11,000). Over one third of black families have zero or negative wealth. Historically, whites have had great success at keeping blacks from accumulating wealth and passing it on to their children. The current poverty of the African-American community, its internal violence, unrelenting unemployment, and generations of trauma—all the forces working against its families—cannot be understood apart from the history of brutality and plunder it has endured at the hands of white Americans.

As poet Nikki Giovanni said, "If what Jesus said were true, that 'those who live by the sword, die by the sword,' then white people would have disappeared a long time ago."

White people. What will we do to change our legacy of violence?[8]

***

1. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* by the Equal Justice Initiative, also see eji.org
2. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by James Allen, also see withoutsanctuary.org
3. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* by Danielle McGuire
4. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
5. *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* by James Loewen
6. *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The "Great Truth" about the "Lost Cause"* edited by James Loewen and Edward Sebesta
7. *The Case for Reparations* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *The Atlantic*, June 2014
8. A banner held at a Showing Up for Racial Justice rally, see showingupforracialjustice.org

Brian Kavanagh