

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Lessons from Peoria September 24, 2016

I want to talk about Peoria and police community relations, not because we are doing anything super great or super bad in Peoria but because we represent a typical situation for a town of 115,000 people with about 31,000 identified as African American.

With each local victim of gun violence there are well attended late afternoon public gatherings and we grieve together, holding signs, and pray together. There is a Human Relations Commission that has good people in place with direct talks with the new police chief. Some of the Commissioners are young and there is clearly a new generational opportunity in Peoria to have important conversations. The local public TV had a 45 minute audience conversation recently with Black Lives Matter activists, NAACP and out of town police officers that while very defensive was riveting. Unfortunately not much is really changing for social justice in Peoria.

Most of the gun violence and homicides continues to be contained to the low income areas that are also the high minority population areas. Of the 220 Peoria police officers, only 14 are African American. If we accept the idea, which I do, that the Federal 2010 Peoria census should be used as a marker for the percentage of minority employees, the Police Department should have nearly 60 African American employees. The police force continues to use intimidation tactics with racial profiling for traffic stops and harassing pedestrians late at night. It's worth noting that the Federal prison outside of town has over 350 people on payroll. Across the country over 700,000 jobs and \$200 billion are involved with incarceration and tracking parolees. Not much is changing. We need a revolution.

The last two Peoria trips by the Republican Governor to speak to the African American community has been carefully arranged through the Black Chamber of Commerce. This shows how well our society can twist ideas to support the status quo. Promotion of the Black Chamber of Commerce with its conservative political views creates a visual presentation and leaves the impression that entrepreneurs can succeed no matter the overall social situation. Instead of collective solutions, individualistic opportunities are suggested. Nothing much changes.

Last week in the small town of Bartonville, Illinois outside of Peoria, population 6000 people, the police department celebrated the acquisition of an armored vehicle for its department, to be used as a nuisance abatement surveillance. The nearby city of Peoria has two similar vehicles. While the machine guns have been removed, the intimidation remains.

What will it take to reduce poverty and break the Peoria ghetto lifestyle that dehumanizes and criminalizes African Americans, concentrates parolees and felons in the same areas where there is substandard housing, thousands of lead contaminated children, poor air quality and always, everywhere, the threat of violence.

What will it take to make a really big change? The Green party cares about equal justice for everyone and we understand there is a connection between Standing Rock and Little Rock,

indeed there are many connections. One of them is the realization there is a common thread of corporate power and racism camouflaged behind the pretense of practically every public hearing and public input session, whether it is at a North Dakota Indian Reservation or in Peoria, Illinois, City Council meeting. There is increasing clarity about who is the common enemy and we urgently need to have conversation and analysis of how to achieve radical solutions. So with that background on my town, I look forward to the conversation about police and community relations.

**POLICE COMMUNITY RELATIONS** It is a worthy community goal is to have efficient crime solving that builds relationships of trust with the police in the neighborhoods. Although not incompatible, these issues certainly could push against each other. But in Peoria and everywhere else, police are obligated to be the front line enforcers of a criminal justice system that incentivizes incarceration. Police are **OBLIGATED TO BE THE FRONT LINE ENFORCERS** of a criminal Justice system that **INCENTIVIZES INCARCERATION**. Police Department expectations include a degree of revenue based on incarceration. I believe that is the context to discuss the potential for improved neighborhood relationships.

Communities like Peoria could conceivably work on the important issues of decriminalization of minor offenses, municipal court reforms, diversion programs, bans on bias based policing, renewed protection of consent to search standards, increased community oversight, independent prosecutors, demilitarization of our police forces, use of force guidelines and improved police training. All of these things could be done, if the existing political system wanted to improve police community relations. These initiatives are all designed to limit the power of incarceration. A humanist police force will put fewer people in jail. While there has always been violence and crime, police who are free to focus on true criminals will have a much better chance of building good community relations.

#### **INCREMENTAL CHANGE VERSUS REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE**

Here are two stories, one about Peoria and one about our host town of Carbondale.

Mark Clark of Peoria, Illinois, was a gifted 17 year old who helped organize hundreds of young people his age or younger to protest in the streets of Peoria in 1964 to shut down the public water works. At the age of 18 he organized a free breakfast for Peoria youth and community along with classes about black pride at Ward Chapel church. Six months later Mark Clark was shot and killed by a Chicago Swat team at Illinois Black Panther headquarters in a night raid. If you should ever have a chance, please come to Peoria and stand over his simple grave in Springdale Cemetery. Say a prayer for all of us and say thank you to a young man with a desperate and dreamy vision of America. His vision ranged from free church breakfasts to unrelenting black pride. He lived and died for a revolution that has not yet come.

The City of Carbondale said thank you in 1980 to a lifetime of struggle for change and named Turley Park after Reverend Lenus Turley. The website calls him a black warrior, a drum major

for right and justice. Honesty, integrity, energy and determination and a true greatness are written on his large plaque. He worked for senior citizens, police community relations, county housing, mental health, family and child welfare, and was District Chair for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He came to Carbondale as a child from Mississippi and lived his whole life for social justice. Like Mark Clark, he tried to create change and no one would claim Carbondale has not benefitted from his long years of effort. The people of Carbondale chose to thank Reverend Turley for his slow, cumulative, incremental change that improved many lives. Can incremental change ever lead to revolutionary change?

( encourage discussion if not offered)

The economic collapse of inner-city black communities could have been a national call to action, a real War on Poverty. Education, job training, public transportation, urban farm food programs, older housing stock rehabilitation that eliminates lead poisoning and creates energy efficiency could have been a part of that. But instead we got a war on drugs, free military equipment to the police around the country and a backlash against civil rights. We got a new Jim Crow system that has incarcerated over 2.3 million Americans and given many of them permanent felony records that will keep them from obtaining good paying jobs. President Obama has called for better father figures in the African American community without mentioning there are a million African American males under long term incarceration. We should all support Black Lives Matter as it rises up, fierce and full of anger not just with the front line police officers but with all of the American system that has created and perpetuates systematic oppression.

Over fifty years ago, James Baldwin (Fire Next Time 1962), accused white society of creating a deliberate innocence that ignored the African American segregation. In the same visionary voice he also wrote "If I love you I have to make you conscious of the things that you do not see." Let us hope that we can use this discussion of police and community relationships to lift the veil of make-believe. I am convinced my country will live up to its promise, someday.

Let us work as Greens to make sure it does.

.You got a Right

You got a right, I got a right,  
We all got a right to the tree of life.  
Yes, tree of life.

The very time I thought I was lost,  
The dungeon shook and the chains fell off.  
You may hinder me here,  
But you can't hinder me there.  
'Cause God in the Heaven's  
Going to answer my prayer.