

Justicia

Social Activism: A Spiritually Rewarding Endeavor

By Joel Freedman

Five years after the 1971 Attica prison riot, in which 43 people were killed, I decided to try to meet a challenge posed by Tom Wicker in *A Time To Die*, a book about the riot and its aftermath. Wicker wrote: "As men abhor the unknown, they shun the prison. It is, they tell themselves, none of their business, no concern of the ordinary citizen, who needs never go there." I began to visit inmates at Attica in order to educate myself and to write about the "dark pocket of mystery and silence" that, according to Wicker, characterizes our prisons.

My writings about Attica in the 1970s, published in the Wyoming County Times and other area newspapers, were not highly appreciated by the surrounding community. Auburn Correctional Facility superintendent Robert Henderson, who had never worked at Attica but who had conducted an

extensive study of the riot, explained to me that "the traumatic effects of the 1971 riot have caused the employees and the citizens in the area to be extremely defensive and concerned about criticism of the Attica facility. The loss of life and the subsequent traumatic impact this had on everyone involved has made the after-effects of the riot more severe than has been experienced by any riot in the history of corrections." One Attica villager, who responded positively to my writings, wrote me: "Since the riot the village has been an insane place to live in. It is as if those five days in 1971 left a hideous pile of garbage behind. When things go wrong at the prison, it means a free-for-all opinion, and I'm afraid the alternatives offered all involve slaughter."

Families and friends of inmates told me of the hostility they felt from the community and from some correction officers when they visited Attica inmates. When visiting inmates, we would have to wait in a long line outdoors before being admitted. On one winter Saturday morning, there was a frostbite risk for the line of visitors that included elderly people and young children as they waited to get out of the cold. In March 1979 I made the following observations in letters published in several Buffalo and Rochester area newspapers:

"During the past three years I have visited

Attica prison on several occasions. On weekend mornings even in winter you wait outdoors an hour before you get inside. You are mechanically processed at the desk and then wait another hour or two to pass through the detector. Sometimes you see reception guards standing idle while you wait.

“Or you hear the name of a favored visitor, who arrived after you, being called ahead of turn. Occasionally, you are told you are not on an inmate’s visiting list – even though you have visited before.

“Whether all this is inefficiency or a cruel joke, it is exasperating to anyone who has to cope with the experience.

“At Auburn, another maximum security institution, you are greeted cheerfully by reception guards. Even on busy weekends, you are through the detector and in the visiting room in minutes. Across the street is a hospitality center offering counseling, refreshments and baby-sitting services to visitors.

“Abandonment can cause a prisoner loneliness and stifle any desire to better himself. As a first step in alleviating this situation more should be done at Attica to encourage, not discourage, visits from relatives and friends.”

Before the end of that year, Attica opened a visitors center similar to Auburn’s center. From the visiting center, a bus would now transport visitors to the front gate, where they could be promptly admitted inside. No more waiting outdoors. I believe my letters helped to facilitate this needed change at Attica.

Fast forward to 2006, when I took the initiative to protest the use of toxic lawn chemicals at Granger Homestead, a large estate and historical museum in my neighborhood in Canandaigua, New York. On November 26, 2006, the Canandaigua Daily Messenger published my letter in which I assessed the situation at Granger:

“Since spring, I have been picketing Granger Homestead to protest its use of toxic lawn chemicals. Granger’s most recent use of weed killers occurred in October. There were no dandelions to kill, but plenty of acorns and chestnuts that would be eaten by squirrels were probably poisoned.

“During its autumn bake sale, I stood near the Homestead’s lawn with my protest signs. A police officer arrived. He advised Granger’s director, who also approached me, that my activity

was lawful. The director said she realized this, but explained the police were called out of concern for my safety, as I was standing near Main Street traffic on a dark, cold night. Yeah, sure.”

Afterward, I mailed the director information about how lawn chemicals used at Granger contributed to global warming, poisoning of wildlife, pollution of Canandaigua Lake and to cancer, Parkinson’s disease and other human diseases. Gideon Granger would turn over in his grave if he knew that his all-natural lawn was becoming a toxic waste site, and that his 21st-century managers had disrespected a neighborhood petition asking them to stop polluting our neighborhoods.

Earlier this year, a Messenger letter writer wondered why I was “picking on Granger Homestead” while the city of Canandaigua was also using herbicides and other chemicals in city parks. Last year, a Messenger editorial concluded that “all of us ought to learn to care for our lawns without these chemicals, and semi-public institutions like Granger Homestead should lead the way.”

But the use of toxic chemicals in city parks is particularly offensive because taxpayers are forced to pay for practices that harm all of us. Cemeteries, too, should be kept chemical-free. Workers at Rochester’s historic Mount Hope Cemetery, instead of herbicides, use an aquacide machine that controls weeds with hot water.

City Council, instead of asking park maintenance employees to follow the good examples set by Thompson Hospital and the Canandaigua School District, which have stopped using lawn pesticides, produced a sugar-coated public education brochure that fails to mention the most serious hazards of lawn chemicals.

I will continue my protest at Granger. I will also peacefully protest at Canandaigua City Hall. It would be nice if more people would join me on the picket line, but I also don’t mind standing alone. As Henry Thoreau wrote, when you do what is right, you become “a majority of one.”

Granger Homestead continues to use chemicals on their lawns since the publication of the above letter.

I have been an activist for 40 years in hopes of improving our state and VA hospitals, nursing homes, and penal institutions, assisting miscarriage of justice victims, preventing cruelty to animals, and addressing other social and environmental issues. I

have had some successes. More often than not, I have wondered if my actions really made a difference, particularly when my appeals to the powers that be are not even acknowledged. Case in point: I sent a copy of my *Justicia* article “Cruelty To Animals Behind Prison Walls,” which appeared in the Summer 2007 issue, to the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Correctional Services. I requested he take some measures to address animal abuse issues at New York’s state prisons. No reply. (I experience similar frustrations all the time in all my areas of advocacy.)

An Attica inmate once asked me, “Do articles about prisons bring change? Do they help develop a lobby by planting seeds for future movements?” Good question. I do know that if we don’t continue to keep the spotlight on our penal institutions (or other social issues), it is likely that conditions will get worse.

Whenever I embark on a new writing endeavor or project, I have largely conditioned myself *not* to try to predict whether my efforts will be successful. If the spirit within you moves you to do something you feel, from a moral standpoint, ought to be done, you need not attempt to predict the success or failure of your endeavor. Success can be measured in terms of your efforts rather than in terms of your accomplishments. If your efforts have one positive effect on one individual, now or in the future, and even if that individual is you and you alone, then – by all means – “damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead.”

The reformer’s task is not an easy one. As the late Dr. Burton Blatt, who devoted much of his life to try to improve state institutions housing developmentally disabled people, summed it up: “You have to develop strategies that will move the mission along yet, at the same time, you have to protect your flank so that you’re not surplused during the process. It’s a tough job, as any of us know who have been involved in such activities.”

In confronting some truly evil and frightening aspects of our society, there are times that following the voice of my conscience can be quite difficult. I sometimes feel overwhelmed and overextended. At such times, I have to recognize that one person can do only so much. I can only get involved in a small fraction of the requests I receive on a daily basis. If I don’t find time to get a good night’s sleep, to do a vigorous physical work-out several times a week, to spend quality time with my

companion animals, to read a good novel or to have a good laugh watching *Saturday Night Live*, or in other ways to find a sense of balance in life, then my life becomes unmanageable. It is all about striking a “happy medium” between one extreme of “ignorance is bliss” to the opposite extreme of experiencing “burn-out” from trying to do too much.

Whatever hassles I encounter from having a sensitive conscience, ignoring the voice of my conscience would cause me far more pain than any pain experienced from letting my conscience be my guide. I have come to believe that the worship the God of my understanding appreciates the most is the individual’s indignation against injustice and the individual’s attempt to right some of the wrongs in the world we live in.

In his book *Exodus From Pandemonium*, which inspired me to get involved in efforts to help mentally retarded Americans, Dr. Blatt admitted that he “never really lost any sleep or had any sustained grief in hearing about or observing cruelty to animals.” I *have* experienced such grief. A large part of my spiritual development has led me to appreciate Abraham Lincoln’s statement, “I am for animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being.”

Whether I am advocating on behalf of vulnerable people or vulnerable animals, there are many joys in my life I would never have experienced if I had not taken “the road less traveled.” One of the rewards of advocacy is a sense of pride in having taken a stand on behalf of an ethical conviction, and occasionally seeing personal efforts contribute to helping those in need.

One of the most meaningful activities in my life is my affiliation with the Judicial Process Commission, particularly as a volunteer writer for *Justicia*. If I had not been an activist, I would never have met Clare Regan or other JPC people who have enriched my life. My article writing for *Justicia* has not only provided me opportunities to explore, in depth, topics close to my heart, I have also been able to become acquainted with interesting *Justicia* readers who have written to me, including prisoners who have become my friends. I have met many wonderful people I would not have encountered if I had not become an activist for animals, for nursing home reform, for prison reform, and for miscarriage-of-justice victims. (I probably also have more than my share of enemies as a result of my activities.)

Life is about learning, and I have learned a lot about the role of press, politics, bureaucracy and consciousness raising that I would not have learned had my life been more conventional. And my life as an advocate and activist has never been boring.

Several years ago, Professor Robert Strayer retired after 32 years of teaching history at SUNY College at Brockport. In his farewell address to students, Strayer made some thought-provoking comments about life experiences that are far more important than how many A's students receive in classes, or how much money we may earn at work. Strayer expressed his hope "that you have found something to love, something to excite your passion, something to engage your mind, something to compel your devotion." Activism has given me such gifts.

Strayer asked the students: "Is there anything in the whole catalog of human virtues that we need more than simple kindness? When we come to the end of this road, we will not ask ourselves how many books we have written nor how many A's we received. But we may well ask – Did I show enough kindness to others? Beyond personal kindness, recognition of the world's suffering often prompts efforts at social repair and collective healing. Here, the language of the Bible perhaps best describes this task of life. We are called to feed the hungry; to beat swords into plowshares; to let justice roll down like waters; to make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. It is among the great callings of life – to extend kindness, to be of service, to tame the cruelty of the world." Basically, this is what activism is, or at least should be, all about. Endeavors involving activism for the purpose of promoting kindness and social responsibility teach the activist the true meaning of commitment and perseverance. Engaging in such activism makes the activist a better person – and we all have to live with ourselves 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

I am also mindful of the words of the English statesman and political philosopher, Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in the world is for enough good men to do nothing."

Many years ago, after a visit to the Auburn Correctional Facility, I decided to go for a long walk along the walkway between the institution's massive wall and the stream that runs alongside it. The walkway certainly would be a "road less

traveled," and I was in an adventurous mood as I contemplated the water below me and the armed guard towers above me. I did not get very far. My walk was interrupted by an officer in one of the towers. I truthfully told him and the lieutenant who later questioned me that I had not noticed the "keep-off" sign, and that I was up to no mischief. There was no hassle, but I did have to get off the walkway. (Shortly thereafter, the sign was readjusted to reassure that passers-by could see the off-limits warning.)

The symbolism here is that penal institutions are designed to discourage community interest in their secrets. The same can be said about nursing homes and institutions for the severely mentally ill and developmentally disabled – as well as animal research labs, puppy mills, slaughterhouses, large factory farms, and other places where helpless animals are subjected to unspeakable cruelties.

In the movie *Schindler's List*, one of the Jewish workers rescued by Oskar Schindler from the Nazis told Schindler that when a person saves even one other human life, the person saves the world. Believing as I do that humans are not the only species on our planet worthy of moral consideration, I believe such an ethical philosophy should also encompass other living beings.

Every now and then, the recipients of human kindness may repay their rescuers. Many years ago, I befriended the family of a young man who was convicted of a violent crime that shocked the community when it occurred. Although the man's claims of actual innocence were eventually proved to be false, my friendship with him and his family continued, as did my visits to the prison where he was incarcerated. Some time later, when I faced a crisis in my own life, this prisoner's father helped me. I had been fired from my social work position at a VA hospital because of my writings about the mistreatment of disabled veterans at the hospital. The father of the prisoner drove me to Syracuse and Buffalo for my appeal hearings, and stayed with me throughout the process – which happily ended with my reinstatement with back pay. (I didn't ask my friend for his help and emotional support. It was something he just wanted to do.)

In 1938, Roman Turski, a flying instructor, left France to return to his native Poland. Flying his own airplane, Turski was forced to make an emergency landing in Vienna, Austria, after the

airplane developed engine trouble. While the engine was being repaired, Turski checked into a hotel.

The following morning, Turski encountered a Jewish man who was running from the Gestapo. Turski risked his own life by hiding the stranger in his hotel room, and later by flying the stranger out of Nazi-occupied Austria. They landed in a pasture near Cracow, Poland. Turski gave the stranger most of his (Turski's) money because the stranger had none, and wished him well. Conversation between the two men had been limited due to a language barrier. Just before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, the stranger escaped to England. Shortly after the Nazi conquest of Poland, Turski also escaped to England, where he fought as a fighter pilot against the Germans.

Wounded in 1941 by the guns of a German fighter plane over the English channel, Turski flew his plane close to his base, where he crash-landed his Spitfire. Rushed to a hospital with severe skull fracture, physicians were uncertain if surgery would save Turski's life. There was only one available brain surgeon who could save Turski's life. He was summoned. The surgery was successful.

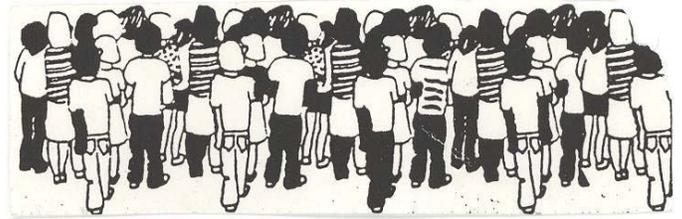
As Turski regained consciousness after surgery, he looked at the face of the surgeon who saved his life. The surgeon was the same man Turski had rescued from the Gestapo three years earlier.

Several years ago in Binghamton, New York, Zoey – a four year old Akita – alerted the human family that had rescued and adopted her that a fire had started in their home. Zoey risked her own life to drag the family's disabled daughter out of their burning home.

Such cases are highly unusual. True advocacy and activism is about listening to the voice of one's conscience, and not about expecting reciprocity. Allowing your conscience to be your guide will often bring about some hardships and turmoil in your life, but there are triumphs and satisfactions, too.

As I think about the joy that accompanies any accomplishments in helping people and animals, the many new friends who have enriched my life, the excitement of finding myself in situations quite outside the range of what are considered to be usual life experiences, my spiritual growth that goes with activism, and the awe and delight that an individual experiences when he believes a God of

his understanding approves of what he is doing, how glad I am that I chose "the road less traveled" to become a social activist.



Taking the Next Step: New Yorkers Hail New Jersey's Death Penalty Repeal

By David Kaczynski

The following originally appeared in the Schenectady Daily Gazette, December 23, 2007. The author is executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, which according to its mission statement is a "statewide coalition of organizations and individuals committed to the abolition of capital punishment" that "advocates for public policy change through education and grass-roots organizing." See www.nyadp.org for more information.

On Monday [December 17, 2007], New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine signed a landmark bill making his the first state in the modern era to legislatively repeal its death penalty statute. New Jersey thus follows in the footsteps of New York, which achieved de facto abolition in October when the state's highest court removed the last inmate from the Unit for Condemned Persons at Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora.

The demise of the death penalty in both states followed careful studies and open public hearings on every conceivable aspect of capital punishment. New Jersey's bi-partisan death penalty study commission - which recommended repeal after a year-long study – modeled its approach on five days of public hearings conducted by the New York State Assembly in 2004 and 2005. Both groups found, in essence, that any speculative benefits of the death penalty were outweighed by the known risks and costs, including the likelihood that innocent people would be executed, patterns of unfairness in the application of capital punishment,

and the exorbitant cost of capital prosecutions. There is an emerging consensus among New Yorkers, reflected in public opinion polls, that a maximum sentence of life imprisonment without parole is the wiser choice. It protects society at a fraction of the cost of the death penalty, without risking the execution of an innocent person, and without forcing murder victims' family members to endure a decades-long capital appeals process.

As our lawmakers negotiate next year's budget, funding for the Capital Defenders Organization and for death penalty-related programs at the New York State Prosecutors Training Institute are off the table for the first time since 1995. Since 1995, more than \$200 million in tax dollars was wasted on New York's death penalty system.

But we should not allow ourselves to forget what the 1995 law hoped to accomplish – a reduction in crime and violence. Even as we learn that the death penalty is not the answer to our crime problem, it goes without saying that abolishing the death penalty is not the answer either. If lawmakers were once willing to invest more than \$20 million a year in an unproven crime-reduction program, they should now be willing to invest at least that much in programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in preventing crime from occurring in the first place.

In Blueprints for Violence Prevention – a comprehensive national study by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder - a forceful case has been made for a more preventive approach. Instead of devoting all our energy and resources to mopping up after violent crimes occur, we should work to prevent such crimes from occurring at all. What the study found should not surprise us. Too often, today's victimized child becomes tomorrow's perpetrator.

The best way to prevent future crimes is two-fold: prevent child abuse now and employ research-tested interventions with troubled youth before they get caught up in the adult system.

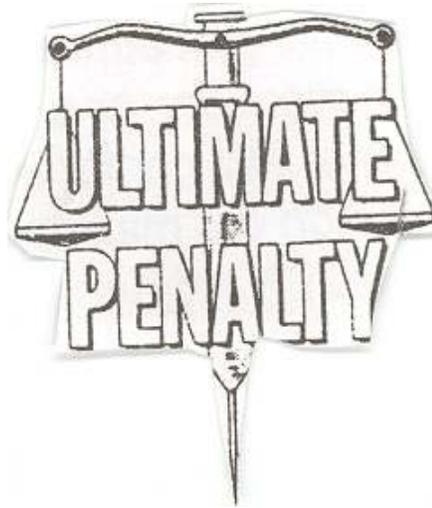
While the study offers a disturbing glimpse into a failing juvenile justice system rife with waste, inefficiency, and bureaucratic inertia, it also offers immense hope by pointing to strategies that have worked successfully over time to reduce child abuse and helping at-risk youth discover positive futures. The study identified eleven model

programs so effective that the federal government has jumped on board to promote replication efforts around the country. New York needs to get on board, too.

The death penalty was always more about desperation and despair than preventing crime. On the other hand, when we intervene to save a child we may well end up saving more than one life. Rescuing children is something we have learned how to do. There is a growing body of research to give us positive direction. Cycles of violence can be broken.

Abolishing the death penalty, whether through court action in New York or legislative action in New Jersey, frees up money that can be far better used for crime prevention and victims' services.

It only remains to be seen if our political leaders have the will and energy to tackle the crime problem at its source.



AfterShock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, A Guide for Activists and Their Allies, **by Pattrice Jones**

A Review by Joel Freedman

A biographical summary of Pattrice Jones, along with a photograph of Jones providing care for a

rescued chicken and a cat featured on the book's back cover, reveal: "Patrice Jones stopped eating meat in 1976 at the age of 15 and flung herself into the new movement for gay liberation. Since then, she has organized rent strikes, kiss-ins, and an assortment of unlikely coalitions. As a psychotherapist, she studied and worked to repair the repercussions of many kinds of trauma, including sexual and domestic violence. She has taught courses in psychology, public speaking, and social change. She speaks and writes about the links among racism, sexism, specieism, class exploitation, and environmental despoliation from an ecofeminist perspective. She lives in rural Maryland, where she helps operate the Eastern Shore Sanctuary and Education Center and teaches at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore."

In the Spring of 2005, Jones wrote an article entitled "Fear of Feeling: Trauma and Recovery in the Animal Liberation Movement" for *Satya* magazine. Several months later a Lantern Books publisher asked Jones to expand her article into a book applicable to all activists – people who, when confronted by social injustice, go beyond just thinking about the need to right the wrongs which disturb the conscience. An activist, according to Jones, is "anybody who acts, regardless of whether they call themselves activists or work within social change organizations." Many forms of activism are inherently emotionally taxing, particularly when one's activism places the activist face to face with suffering that ought not to exist.

During Jones' first visit to a factory farm, she "spent more than an hour slogging through ankle-deep litter with tears streaming down my face from the accumulated ammonia of the trapped urine, slipping and tripping over dead birds in various stages of decomposition, as I chased the handful of chickens who had been left behind when their peers were captured and trucked to slaughter. Not knowing that I intended to take them to safety, the birds fought back, frantically scratching and pecking me. The stench of excrement and terror was almost unbelievable. Back at home, I left my ruined shoes at the doorstep and announced, 'I'll never be the same person'. Trauma will do that to you. No matter how mild or severe your reaction to a traumatic occurrence, whatever you do or don't do to take care of yourself, you'll never again be a person who has not lived through or witnessed that

thing."

Additionally: "Whatever the cause and however peaceful the protest, activists whose actions actually block the misuse of power may find that power redirected against them. Even activists engaged in less directly confrontational tactics can find themselves on the receiving end of retaliatory violence. Peaceful picket lines of all kinds have been the target of bullets, bricks and baseball bats." Threats and intimidation, economic reprisals, taunts and insults, detention ranging from temporary arrest to long term imprisonment, and other abuses - along with the trauma of encountering the suffering of others – result in "aftershock," a word chosen by Jones to describe the post-traumatic stress, depression, and other psychological disruptions that "can leave people feeling like they are in ruins." And "like firefighters who end up burned, activists try to respond to cries for help but sometimes end up so damaged themselves that they cannot do so effectively. These are the activists at high risk for aftershock."

Presented in an intelligent and down to earth manner, *AfterShock* is a book that should be read by anyone who has ever taken risks to try to make our world a better place. Jones writes with compassion and insights few can match. Reading *AfterShock* is like having a lengthy session with a kind-hearted and knowledgeable therapist – except there is no financial charge for the services rendered. The clarity of the book's prose, the richness of Jones' insights, and her choice of anecdotes and life experiences make this book vivid and palpable to the reader.

AfterShock includes many practical tips to help people who have faced or could face some degree of trauma in the course of progressive activism. The book also delves into the "culture of trauma" which we have created by the way people have mistreated our planet and its inhabitants. While *AfterShock* is largely an odyssey of people's inhumanity, it is also an account of tenacity and courage shown by Jones and others who have opened their eyes and hearts to injustices, made commitments to get involved in solutions, taken action to address the injustices, and who ultimately have helped to make a difference.

Jones relates that "in the course of activism, I've had it relatively easy. I've only been arrested once and have never spent a night in jail. I've only been pepper-sprayed twice. I've had a few tense

moments staring down riot cops and domestic violence perpetrators, but have never been hit by them. I've gotten threatening phone calls, and once racist skinheads staked out my apartment, but, other than the time I crashed my bicycle because its brakes had been cut, I've never been injured by political opponents. Like most activists, I've had chronic money difficulties, but, since I've been out of my teens, I've always had enough to eat and a place to sleep." Jones adds that she does not want to minimize her trauma – "I was really scared of those skinheads and pretty bruised by that bike crash" – but she regards herself as lucky that she has not suffered as much as many other activists. The most difficult experience of her life has been managing a sanctuary for birds who have suffered unspeakable horrors in their lifetimes.

"Witnessing the animals' injuries, deaths, and grief has taken a much greater emotional toll on me than anything that has been done to me directly," Jones writes. "Hens caged in egg factories endure suffering that, blessedly, most of us can only imagine dimly. They spend years in physical agony and emotional torment, unable to open their wings or even lie down comfortably, and with nothing to do other than listen to the shrieks and screams of thousands of suffering others. When they arrive at our sanctuary, so-called 'spent' hens have few feathers and are shockingly thin. Their combs and legs are ghostly pale. Terrified of everything and not accustomed to using their legs, they careen crazily when not huddled together in a heap."

Jones acknowledges that she, too, has experienced aftershock to the point that she has sometimes wished for the relief or release that suicide would bring. But Jones has chosen life over death. She recognizes she is not alone, that her work is important, and that the suicidal wishes will go away. And the chickens Jones has rescued have taught her some valuable lessons about overcoming trauma. At the sanctuary that Jones and her partner manage, the chickens, over time, "learn to be birds, and usually turn out to be among the most curious and intrepid chickens at the sanctuary. Every morning, they swoop out of the coop, eager to see what the new day brings. Maybe there'll be a new mud puddle in the middle of the yard! Or maybe some interesting insects out in the woods! They don't let yesterday's sorrows hold them back."

Jones reminds us that "there are going to be days when you feel just awful. There's no way around that. The world is hurt and so are you. But you will be better able to sustain yourself and your work within that chronic pain if you learn to take better care of yourself. Chickens like mud puddles. What do you like? What soothes you? Make a list of things you like to do, and consult it when you feel bad. Notice and express your sad and mad feelings, but don't forget to notice your happy feelings, too - Blue skies and bright colors, birdsong and sea breezes, all of these are parts of the real world, too. Indeed, they are more longstanding than concentration camps and highways. Remember that, and you'll have an easier time making peace with less pleasant aspects of present reality."

In a wide-ranging discussion of activism, ranging from the need to "nurture activists at least as ardently as the dominant culture nurtures athletes" to the need for activists to be ever mindful that "we cannot drive ourselves relentlessly and expect to remain alive, much less remain effective," from her perception of activists as being "more likely than other people to believe that the passive failure to do something good is just as wrong as actively doing something bad" to her recognition that aftershocked activists and other trauma survivors need not feel they are alone, Patrice Jones has provided us with a richly compelling book.

AfterShock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, A Guide for Activists and Their Allies is published by Lantern Brooks, New York. 2007. 257 pp. \$15.00. ISBN 1-59056-103-1.





“To Err is Human, To Forgive Is Divine”

By Joel Freedman

The Polisse family of Palmyra, New York lost 27-year-old Casey Polisse on March 22, 2007 to a drunk-driving crash. The driver was 22-year old Jamie Giles, who got behind the wheel of his pickup truck while he was intoxicated, sped 75 mph in a 30-mph zone, and struck a utility pole. Jamie was not seriously injured, but Casey, who was Jamie's childhood sweetheart and fiancé, suffered massive internal injuries and was pronounced dead at Newark-Wayne Community Hospital.

Jamie pleaded guilty to vehicular manslaughter and faced a maximum of five to fifteen years imprisonment. Casey's mother, Cindy Polisse, asked the judge not to send Jamie to prison. A spiritual Christian woman, Mrs. Polisse said she could hear her daughter telling her that Jamie was already suffering. Mrs. Polisse and other family members were relieved when the judge sentenced Giles to one year in the Wayne County Jail. Jamie began to serve his sentence in September.

Six months after her death, family and friends gathered in Marion cemetery for a balloon launch in honor of Casey Polisse. But the Polisse family also began receiving mean-spirited calls from acquaintances and from strangers who insinuated that by supporting Jamie, they didn't really love Casey.

Mrs. Polisse told Messenger-Post newspapers it could have been the other way around. Casey and Jamie both drank and when they went out, they took turns driving home. It could have been Casey behind the wheel that night. "I can hear her telling me 'Mom, geeze, he didn't do it on purpose. I got in the car with him,'" Mrs. Polisse said.

Casey's brother, George Polisse, 22, said he has had dreams about his sister, and that she was as beautiful as he'd ever seen her. George said that Jamie "does need to pay justice. If he'd gotten less than a year, I'd be really pissed. I one thousand percent loved Casey." But George is relieved that Jamie will not have to go to a state prison for a longer period of incarceration.

The family of Casey Polisse should not have to endure public criticism for the compassion and forgiveness they have shown for Jamie Giles, who caused the death of his bride-to-be as a result of driving while intoxicated.

To those who are skeptical about the family's beliefs that Casey still communicates with them through their thoughts and dreams, remember that we live in a mysterious universe, with many unanswered questions about spiritual survival. In my own life I have sometimes "felt" the guiding spirits of people now deceased who have helped me through some rough times.

Casey's family did not give Jamie unconditional forgiveness. Casey's brother, George, said he agreed with the one year jail sentence the judge gave Jamie. The family also expects Jamie to keep his promise about finishing schooling, never using alcohol again and using his experiences to help others.

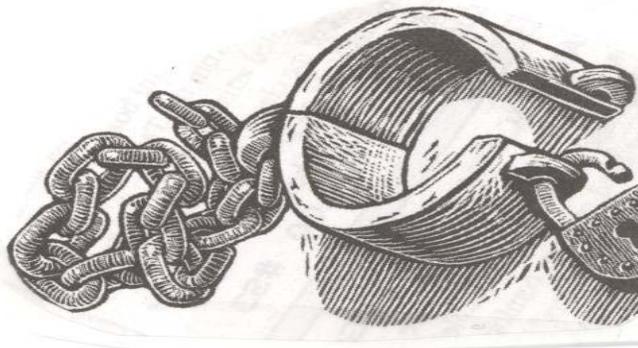
On one occasion when I was Jamie's age, I drove a car while I was so intoxicated that I drove the wrong way on a major highway. There was no accident, no injuries or deaths, and I got back on the right side of the road without getting caught. After that experience, I never again drove drunk. Eventually, I realized alcohol was my enemy and I

stopped drinking it.

If Casey's death is the rock bottom episode that will transform Jamie into a sober, responsible individual, we should extend our best wishes to him.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." We want forgiveness for our own wrongdoing, but it is much more difficult to forgive those who have wronged us.

I believe the experience of forgiving Jamie will help bring serenity into the lives of Casey's family, who have given us a better understanding of what Alexander Pope meant when he wrote, "to err is human, to forgive is divine." And by finding it in their hearts to forgive Jamie, Casey's family reminds us that forgiveness and redemption can bring out the best in human nature and potential.



JPC Has a New Home

The Judicial Process Commission has completed a move to a new location: 285 Ormond Street, off Central Avenue on the north side of downtown Rochester – and only a stone's throw from the historic Cumberland Street post office.

The new location, chosen by the JPC board and staff after a dozen potential sites were checked out, features ample and easy parking, off-street and on-street. And the actual office space, which is nicely painted, is twice the square footage of the office JPC occupied for years on North Fitzhugh Street.

The added space is very welcome, says JPC coordinator Sue Porter. "We were really on top of each other [before]," she says. Porter lauds those board members and clients who helped with the difficult move – three truckloads of gear – and

she says all are grateful for such things as a donation of furniture made by a supporter in the town of Greece.

Porter says another gift, enough to offset two months of rent, came from her own family in memory of her father, David W. Porter, who died last year.

Porter says, too, that JPC is grateful for other services friends and supporters have provided – mundane but important things like snow-shoveling. She recalls that the move to Ormond Street took place on January 19, a snowy day when the temperature plunged to 10 degrees.

JPC will host an open house at the new digs on Friday, April 4, 3-6 p.m. And a fundraising drive, aimed at meeting ongoing costs, is also in the works.

Public Defender Update

In the last issue of *Justicia*, board member and contributor Suzanne Schnittman laid out the issues and concerns surrounding the process for choosing the successor to Monroe County Public Defender Ed Nowak, who recently retired after 30 years of service.

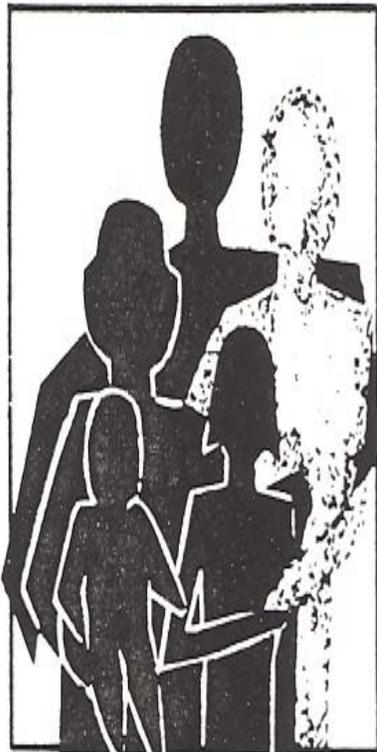
In the past weeks, community activists and mainline groups – a broad range of individuals and organizations, from New York State Assemblymember David Gantt, to House of Mercy leader Sister Grace Miller, to the Monroe County Bar Association – have voiced criticisms of the process by which Nowak's successor would be chosen. Briefly, critics felt that the process that was used decades ago, which brought in a great variety of community stakeholders to take part, was sound, efficient, and democratically structured – and thus should be used again. But when leaders of the Monroe County Legislature majority decided to abandon this method of selection in favor of what some saw as "backroom" politics, the stage was set for protest.

And indeed, that's what happened at more than one public meeting on the subject.

On April 12, for example, a great number of citizens and community leaders arrived at the legislature in a last attempt to return the process to

its roots. By all accounts, the police presence at the meeting was massive, leading some critics to charge that the Lej leadership was out to intimidate critics and thwart dissent. (Indeed, at least two activists were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, and others who spoke were “accompanied” to the microphone by security personnel.) One Democratic Party legislator, quoted by the Democrat and Chronicle, called the atmosphere “horrifying.”

In any case, the leadership had its way, selecting candidate Timothy Donaher as the new county PD. In his statements to the media, Donaher, an eight-year veteran of the PD’s office under Nowak, has been conciliatory and neutral. All concerned are hopeful that the PD’s office will continue to function as admirably as it has for many years.



The JUDICIAL PROCESS COMMISSION

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We welcome your letters and Justicia article submissions by e-mail or postal mail.

VISION

The Judicial Process Commission envisions a society with true justice and equality for all. We understand that in a just society, all institutions will be based on reconciliation and restoration, instead of retribution and violence.

MISSION

The JPC is a grassroots, nonprofit organization that challenges society to create a just, nonviolent community which supports the right of all people to reach their fullest potential. We do this by:

- Providing support services for those involved in the criminal justice system
- Educating the public
- Advocating for changes in public policy.

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JPC APPRENTICESHIP MENTOR TRAINING

April 14 and 15

Monday and Tuesday, 5:00 to 9:00 PM,
Hospitality thanks to the Rochester Friends Meeting.

84 Scio Street
Rochester Friends Meeting
(Near the Eastman Theatre)

Training Topics:

- Local, State and Federal representatives discuss their agencies role in the criminal justice system. Presenters include: Dave Varralli, US Probation, Dave Fluellen, Monroe County Probation and others.
- Project guidelines and boundaries, Bob Miller, Cephas.
- Mentor reflections and requirements.
- Active listening skills and feedback, Nancy Donatucci.
- Health issues, Donna Del Santo, Sister of Saint Joseph.
- Employment discrimination and welfare issues, Jason Hoge, Monroe County Legal Assistance Center and Lori O'Brien.

Reservations required in advance by Friday, April 11, at noon. Call 325-7727, fax 325-2165 or email info@rocjpc.org. Interested volunteers should have 2 hours a week to give, be willing to commit to 1 year of apprenticeship service, attend some Monday Night Training Workshops and provide written information about the outcomes.