

# Foreword

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I read this new edition of *Doing Justice* from Detroit, one of the few remaining major black-majority cities in the country, though that demographic reality is rapidly shifting, by corporate design. In recent years, we have been under the illegitimate rule of Emergency Management where all the powers of government are vested in a single non-elected person who can unilaterally set budgets, write laws, break union contracts, privatize government departments, sell public assets, re-write the city charter, and, yes, declare municipal bankruptcy. The only thing an Emergency Manager (EM) can't do is withhold debt service payments to the banks. Under Emergency Management, public schools have been dismantled, resegregated, and converted to privately run charter schools. Water has been shut off to 23,000 households in the past year. And the city is being restructured geographically and demographically—with downtown, waterfront, and other select communities remade for white people—while poor black folks are being systematically expelled from neighborhoods without futures. Democracy from below is the only semblance of democracy that remains. A struggle is on.

Like Dennis Jacobsen, I am a straight white male and pastor, writer,

teacher, and non-violent community activist. One difference: I have never been directly involved with community organizing in the conventional sense. Whereas I have a place-based vocation in beloved Detroit, he acts and writes from Milwaukee, where he's served a Lutheran congregation and co-founded MICAHA, a church-based community organization (CBCO) with an impressive history. In both ministries he is tough on the powers-that-be and vulnerable to the pain among his people. The illustrative stories in this book are personal, often pastoral, even confessional. They are alive with names and faces from his parish.

Full disclosure: Though I see him all too seldom, Jake is a friend of mine. We share a kinship that resonates in the deep heart. We last embraced in May of 2016 at the funeral of our common mentor, Daniel Berrigan, who remarkably is such a prominent voice in this volume on Alinsky-rooted organizing. Herein, Berrigan is first thanked and oft cited, lovingly so. Call it a paradox in the belly of a book.

At the time of the first edition, Jacobsen proposed a retreat bringing together CBCO pastors and non-violent peace activists with Daniel Berrigan, making a space for challenge and conversation. Sadly, it never happened. I take the book to be partly the throw-down he prepared for that engagement, partly his own integrative work, and partly an internal challenge to organizers and pastors in CBCO work.

In *Doing Justice*, perhaps for all those reasons, the theological guides are the likes of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, William Stringfellow, the Berrigans (Philip and Daniel), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Walter Wink, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., and Francis of Assisi—not your ordinary pantheon of heroes for an Alinsky organizer, but genuine guides for the conversations, inner and outer, that are at work herein. In broad strokes, the conversation is framed between two towering figures.

Congregation-based community organizing joins the values and principles of Dr. King with the methodology of Saul Alinsky [undisputed founder of American community organizing]. Here we have a creative, often uneasy tension between faithfulness and effectiveness, morality and expediency, conscience and compromise, the prophetic and the practical.

. . . There are those who cannot handle this tension. It seems to be an unholy alliance. (p. 35)

The issues are named and joined but add the caveat that Dr. King would brook no separation of principles and methodology, the unity of ends and means being fundamental to non-violent love.

Scan the table of contents for *Doing Justice* and you will see that it reads like the agenda for a Gamaliel Foundation training in which Jacobsen, as chair of its Clergy Caucus, has been a prominent participant for years. Read theologically, it begins with the Fall, where the powers of division, delusion, and darkness reign (“The World as It Is”), and moves toward creation and redemption (“The World as It Should Be”). Organizing follows the trajectory of this simple theological move. I think readily of Wink’s and Stringfellow’s work. They offer a language, new and ancient, which is exceedingly practical. The former (the world as it is) is the era of “domination system,” “the power of Death,” and “imperial captivity,” where sin is a “complicity in our own blindness and bondage to the principalities.” To “come out of Babylon” is “transformation,” “freedom from bondage to Death,” “the militant power of the Spirit,” and “authentic existence.”

When this book first appeared, I lamented a simple omission: reference to Walter Wink’s re-reading of the Sermon on the Mount, where turning the other cheek, giving your cloak as well, and going the extra mile are recognized not as milquetoast passivity but as uppity forms of ridicule and resistance, which Wink illuminates with reference to Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*. Though there are no substantial changes here from the original, that is one omission I’m happy to see remedied in this new edition.

Two striking chapters are those on “Agitation” and “One-on-Ones”—both important methods of congregational organizing. He comes at these biblically, straight from discipleship stories in the Gospel of John. This is useful stuff. It will preach—and clearly already has—for years.

Jacobsen’s most crucial chapters, however, are those on “Self-interest” and “Power,” the twin foundations of all such community

organizing. I come to these with a view that knowing, even confessing, one's self-interest is central to the work of justice. For example, it's decisive that white people in North America recognize their vested interest in the culture and structures of race. These entail advantages for them (at a cost to others), which are carefully masked. To become aware, to do the work of knowing one's vested interest, makes possible choosing against it, denying privilege, and becoming a "race traitor" in the struggle for justice.

With his appeal to a biblical framework, Jacobsen goes further. Having invoked Bonhoeffer in an argument for engaging the public arena ("the church is the church only when it exists for others"), he further marshals him to the effect that "Self-preservation is antithetical to the cross of Christ." This puts him on a very different footing for considering self-interest in Alinsky's sense. To be sure, he identifies self-interest as a relational concept, one having both short- and long-term dimensions and concerned finally with meaning, with discovery of one's authentic identity. Already a big step, but well and good. However, the crux of his chapter is, well, the *crux*—the way of cross. Authentic self-interest, he argues, is in fact to deny oneself (that is, one's false self), take up the cross, and follow Jesus into engagement with the powers. I couldn't agree more. And yet: Has Jacobsen so deepened the meaning of "self-interest" as to turn it inside out and upside down? Does the cross in the end render the very term self-contradictory or less than useful? I believe Jacobsen is not just attempting to make self-interest palatable to people of faith but trying to completely reconfigure it for the organization and for organizers. Important.

Similar questions arise in his treatment of power. I am uncertain how widely Reinhold Niebuhr is read among community organizers today. For several generations, he has been the preeminent American theologian on the use of power—the hardball, realpolitik apologist relied upon by justice movement makers but even more by presidents, hot-and-cold just warriors, nuclear brinksmen, neo-liberals, and conservatives. Jacobsen cites Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

to justify the coercive aspect of collective action, forswearing claims to moral purity in the public arena. It's fair to say that William Stringfellow's theology of the principalities (and Wink's thereafter) was an attempt to go beyond Niebuhr in articulating an American moral theology. He too is cited in the chapter on power to the effect that all social realities (institutions, corporations, foundations, races, and nations, *including movements*) are fallen. For Stringfellow that means they place their own survival (that same variety of self-interest) above their vocation to serve human beings—an idolatrous confusion which means instead that they dominate and assault human life.

Any theological discussion of power must perforce pass through the wilderness temptations of Jesus. Jacobsen rightly does. Again, Stringfellow would hold that the principalities here in their spiritual dimension actively seek to seduce and confuse Jesus. Yet by him they are confronted, refused, and rebuked. Imperial (and state and military) power, economic (bread) power, and spectacle (religious) power, the "giant triplets" of his day, not to mention the power of death behind them all, would each deflect him from the way of the cross. Will any approach that organizes around "winnable victories" succumb to these same temptations and duck the risks of crucifixion? Jacobsen reads each temptation as an abuse of power—power over, domination if you will—as opposed to shared power or power for. He stresses that Jesus returns from the wilderness filled with the *power* of the Spirit. This he takes to include healing, humility, shared wealth, nonviolence, and radical community (p. 68). (He does, by the way, actually advocate putting community, real community, Beloved Community, back into community organizing.) I believe these can amount to a force for transformation and change and further agree that "victory may take the form of tentative triumphs within history or it may take the form of courageous faithfulness in the face of the cross" (p. 71). This is every bit like claiming the way of liberation means the *kenosis* solidarity of Jesus, pouring himself out and taking the form of a slave (p. 66). But once again, we are in the land of resurrection and paradox, which organizers are inclined to disdain.

In Detroit, increasingly we speak often and openly of the spiritual dimension of movement work. That includes not just biblical spirituality but hip hop and Indigenous depths. For me this bridges “in the power of the Spirit” with Jacobsen’s chapter on spirituality for the long haul. Here he’s at his best. Read it. Jacobsen is an iconographer, a slow and patient painter of icons for which he’s taken some heat in the organizing world. Happily, he sees in this no contradiction at all with being an organizer but a crucial paradox. This counsel is needed not only by workaholic urban pastors but by workaholic organizers, all who justifiably run themselves into the ground from burnout. Icon painting is seen as resistance, a source of power for all who “need to unleash the contemplative’s springs within” (after Berrigan, p. 141).

I trust Dennis Jacobsen in part because he is prepared in this volume to raise concerns and challenge the community organizing movement networks. In his new preface, he challenges them to overcome ego and the concern to protect their “turf” in order to work together in collaboration. These days, all four of the Alinsky-style organizations, including Gamaliel, are doing nearly identical CBCO work. Ironically, that creates a “turf-based” competition, often rancorous between them for funding, for organizers, for institutional and congregational support, for space on the ground. These too reflect a narrow version of self-interest, which he is challenging.

I should add that I do not believe “turf” as such is the problem. At the outset, I confessed to a place-based vocation in Detroit. The idea of a “parish” involves a walkable territory, a space, and a place to be tended, defended from assaults, and cared for. Too often, organizers are moved about interchangeably (like newspaper journalists these days), as though you could learn here and apply it there and should have no ties or commitments to a community too deep to break as the network requires. Turf-based organizing can actually mean knowing, loving, and committing to a neighborhood, a city, a watershed. It can mean rootedness, growing from below.

Mention of watersheds raises an interesting vision with respect to Jacobsen’s chapter on metropolitan organizing. Could urban

regionalism embrace bio-regionalism? Jacobsen similarly questions: “Will at least one of the networks declare its clear commitment to nonviolent direct action as a prism for evaluating organizing concepts, tools, and methods?”

Though it has been unduly sporadic, nonviolent direct action has been a pillar of the struggles ongoing in Detroit. Expressway slow-downs and street blockades, doors chained shut, arrestable disruptions of public meetings, as well as guerilla art and theater have figured in. With friends, I am currently facing charges for blocking the trucks of a private demolition company hired to shut off water to three thousand homes a week in Detroit. Our first round ended in a mistrial when, after closing arguments and jury instructions, the prosecution rushed in with an emergency stay on the proceedings, sending the jury permanently home without deliberation. Even denied the defense that we acted out of necessity, we’d presented too many facts for the prosecution’s liking. So much for the jury being the last vestige of democracy in Detroit. Jacobsen might rightly challenge us to make such actions and trials more campaign-focused and built from a base of neighborhood organization. Fair enough. Taken to heart. That could be his unfulfilled Berrigan retreat in a nutshell.

There is indeed an affiliated church-based community organization in Detroit, though they have not embraced civil resistance and direct action. As I write, I am receiving invitations from them to a meeting of pastors with the head of the Water Department. As part of the city reorganization and utility rate increases, churches in the city are being newly charged exorbitant fees for the sewage run-off from their parking lots—some quite vast—and community organization is moving on it. This, of course, connects in a very direct way with the Detroit Water Struggle, and it could be a chance to pull some further church folk in. Notice also, it is a matter of immediate self-interest for pastors and their congregations, it can build the organizational church base, and it will probably yield a limited, winnable victory. But what does it mean that in three years since the imposition of Emergency Management, the bankruptcy, and the struggle for affordable rates for

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poor people and against water shut-offs that this is the first time the churches have raised a voice, let alone taken a risk? Perhaps I should urge them toward *Doing Justice*.

Fifteen years in, this book puts a still-unresolved question: Will Scripture and theology be simply a cover for power, an instrumental shroud of meaning, a palatable entre into the community-based infrastructure of the “religious sector”? Or . . . can biblical theology help deepen and re-shape this work? Is it just for pastors and laypeople, or is this a book intended for organizers and networks to ponder and follow? My hope for it lies substantially there.