

Good Pattern for God's Good Creation

Recognizing the connection between war and oil, resources and global conflict, some folks have begun exploring alternatives. We know folks who have organized their lives in such a way that their homes are located where they can walk to work or take public transportation. Others have made their bikes more comfortable to use for daily transportation and capable of carrying groceries. One community even has a laundry machine that operates off of a stationary bicycle. The radical character of these decisions can't be celebrated enough. These people have chosen to reduce not only their personal costs and the amount of gas they burn but also their participation in the vast, international, wasteful system of processing and transporting (and fighting for) fuel before it even makes it to a car. (And hey, less energy is spent on finding the best new diet or exercise video.)

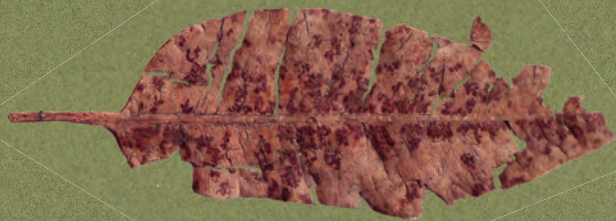
The community that sent out three hundred people on foot embodies an alternative. Among other things, they made a radical decision regarding the youth in the community. Because petroleum supplies are finite and will become (along with water) one of the major sources of conflict in this century, the community told their fifteen-year-olds that they couldn't get their driver's licenses until they could build a vehicle that runs on something other than fossil fuels.⁸

We have a community here in Philly called New Jerusalem. It's a recovery community for folks who struggle with drug and alcohol addictions. More than fifty folks live at New Jerusalem; many of them have been homeless and jobless. They know that their own healing is connected to the healing of the world. Folks at New Jerusalem have a sign on the wall that reads, "We cannot fully recover until we help the society that made us sick recover." In Philly, more than two hundred thousand jobs have left

⁸ This challenge led their youth to successfully create a mesquite-burning pickup truck.

the neighborhoods, so we have to get creative. One of their projects for practicing resurrection is a grease co-op. They gather used vegetable oil from around the city and have a little greasel station where they convert it to biodiesel. We have cars that run on used oil and homemade biodiesel, pointing us toward the hope of a post-oil era. New Jerusalem provides jobs for formerly homeless folks in a business that radiates with the hope for another world that rises from a desperate love for our God. Maybe people will ask, “Why do they run their cars off used veggie oil?” And we can say, “Because we are Christians.”

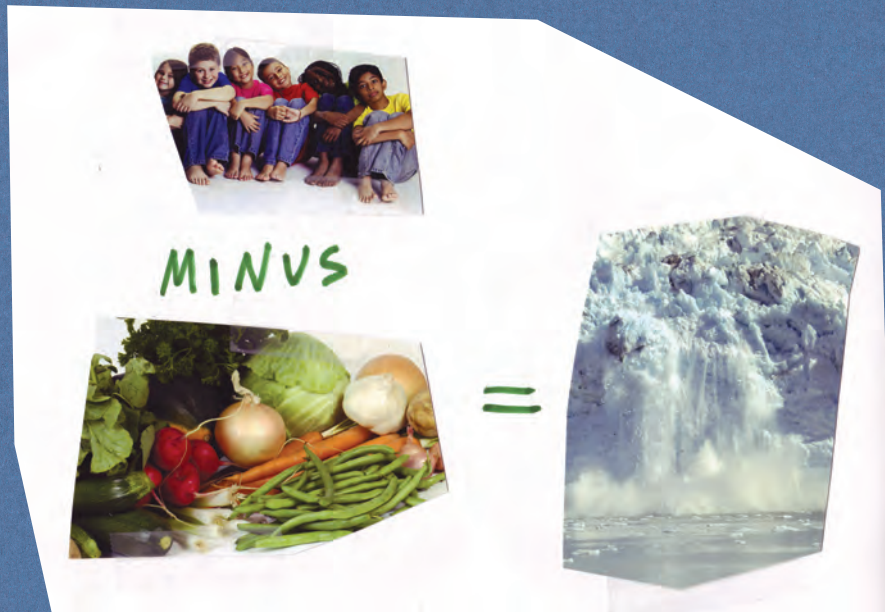
Others are learning to create houses that are in harmony with creation. Some have covered their roofs with grass and plants, reducing cooling and heating costs, extending the life of their roofs and retaining water that would otherwise drain into overburdened street sewers. Others are completely rethinking environmental design so that our economies are not just less bad (like hybrid cars—though admirable in their own way) but positively healthy and generative (like a car that creates drinking water).⁹ And this whirlwind of prophetic imagination we’re blasting you with here is not just some addendum to our book, an attempt to fit in another “issue.” Rather, the entire story of the people of God—from Adam, to Israel, to Jesus, to the church—has presupposed the claim that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything therein.” This great planet isn’t just a boring lump of secular earth but a *divine miracle*, a *creation!* Any Christian politics that doesn’t presume this is missing out on God’s gift.



⁹ Though a bit more optimistic about technology than we might be, William McDonough and Michael Braungart are thinking these thoughts in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point, 2002). For the more humble Luddite side, see anything by Wendell Berry.

Practicing Resurrection

There is a lot of talk about global warming and environmental issues these days. Here in the concrete jungles of Philly and Camden, we talk a lot about practicing resurrection, or making ugly things beautiful. We try to use the trash of a disposable society. We do a fair amount of dumpster diving, and at most of our potlucks you can find food labeled “vegetarian,” “vegan,” or “rescued” (meaning it came from the trash). In our gardens, you’ll find old refrigerators serving as compost bins, veggies growing out of toilets and tires, and gutted computers and TVs converted into flower pots.



One of the most revolutionary practices you can participate in is growing your own food. Some of the kids here in the city see tomatoes growing in our gardens and they can't believe their eyes. "You can't eat that," they say, and we laugh and say, "Oh yes; that, my dear, is a tomato. They aren't made in factories. They are God's miracles." How can we fully love the Creator when we've grown so far from the creation?

But the church can do more than just grow its own food. Aiding the farmers in our local bioregions is a way to reduce dependence on long distance food transport and enjoy knowing where higher quality food comes from. Community supported agriculture (CSA) is one way to support local farmers. CSAs connect those of us who know little about the food we eat with the farmers and land that produce it. Consumers participate in a CSA farm by purchasing “shares” of the crop yield, thereby supporting small farms whose existence is threatened by gigantic agribusinesses. Congregations that catch on and create their own “congregation supported agriculture” are signs of hope for us today. As this renewed agrarian practice grows in the church, we will come to see that it’s not so much that the community supports agriculture as it is that agriculture supports community. If we return to the helpful dictum of “reduce, reuse, recycle,” we will remember that green consumption needs to be checked by *less* consumption. The question becomes not just how to accumulate more, but how to covet less.



Setting the Captives Free

It has been said that if you want to gauge the health of a society, look at its prisons. Here in the US we have the largest prison-industrial complex in the history of civilization. More than two million citizens are in prison, largely for crimes related to economics and the drug economy.¹⁰ In fact, a few years ago, as welfare “reform” laws were being passed, a city official was asked, “How is Philadelphia preparing for the welfare cuts?” The official answered, “We are building four new prisons.” Many Christians have begun to ask, in light of Jesus’ emancipation proclamation (“I have come to set the captives free”), what place prisons have within the kingdom of God. We have many friends who know that God wants more than punitive justice and have begun beautiful projects of restorative justice, bringing victims and offenders together to listen to one another, ultimately trusting that God is a God of reconciliation.

One of the most beautiful stories we know of setting captives free is of a prison chaplain we met overseas. He was working in a maximum security prison and was overwhelmed with the hopelessness of it all. But when he looked at the history of prisons, he found that they were never meant to warehouse people in dungeons of despair but were to provide a space away from society where offenders could repent, or rethink how they were living, and be restored to society. That’s why prison rooms were called cells; prisons were to be monasteries of sorts where people could be with God in solitary confinement.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the thirteenth amendment of the Constitution reads, “Slavery or involuntary servitude is illegal ... unless the person is convicted of a crime.” Now one in three African-American men is in prison or under judicial constraint. And corporations can hire prisoners to work for far below minimum wage. The prison-industrial complex is one of the fastest-growing industries. Slavery did not end; it only changed. Thankfully, Jesus declares that he has come to set captives free. For more on this, check out our friend Mark Lewis Taylor’s book *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

This chaplain got a vision from God of turning the prison into a monastery. So he began thirty-day silent retreats with ten men at a time. On these retreats, the men become like a family of monks. They confess sins. They contemplate the passion of Christ. (The cross is located in the waste room of the prison, so the men go to be with Jesus, think on the sins of the world, and smell the stench of it all around them.) Then they experience cleansing and burn their lists of sins. (And for some, it's quite a bonfire.) Then they turn their jail cells into monastic cells; each cell has an altar in it. The hell is transformed. And the prisoners become monks.



God's Streets

A few years back, our friends in Chicago were having some hard times. On the one hand, crime was out of control. Cars were being stolen, drugs were everywhere, and street violence had trapped the neighborhood in fear. The police were not very helpful. They had become notorious for misconduct, racism, and brutality. So our friends at Lawndale Community Church began praying and conspiring. They decided to put some flesh on their prayers and to organize their own security team. There's an amazing group of folks in Lawndale called Hope House—men in recovery from substance addictions, men who are familiar with the streets and with the uglier side of police violence. They organized themselves, got some bright security vests, and stationed themselves on the street corners, where they would work shifts throughout the night. With a little creativity and courage, and with fresh eyes and prayerful hearts on every corner, the ugliness of the streets and of the police was neutralized. Love, especially when it's organized on every corner, really can drive out fear.



Living with Old People

In its worship of all things new and hip, US culture has sacrificed its relationship with the elderly and infirm. And most of the church has done exactly the same, putting older people into nursing homes and retirement centers. One community we have encountered has taken another path. They take care of people from the cradle to the grave. One time when I visited this community, one of its elderly folks was dying. His grandson had taken off work for a few months to take care of him and push him around the community in his wheelchair. His grandpa still made appearances at the community business, where he took his time putting together easy pieces for its manufacturing process and shared his time-tested wisdom with anyone around. At other times, when members were nearing death, everybody in the community would gather outside their window to sing them songs.

Another couple of our friends, Darin and Meeghan, grew to love an elderly lady named Guinn, whom they had met in the projects of Omaha. Guinn was afflicted with Alzheimer's and had no friends or family to care for her. As the government began to tear down affordable housing, Darin and Meeghan were faced with a difficult question: What is going to happen to Guinn? As they prayed and struggled, they tried everything they could think of to help Guinn live independently for as long as possible, as she wished. It started out with simple things, such as having meals together and doing her laundry while they talked. It progressed to helping her bathe at their home, setting up her daily medication for her, taking her to appointments, and managing her financial affairs. After a lot of work, it became clear that it was no longer the best option for Guinn to live on her own. Darin and Meeghan took part in the tough decision to help her move from independent living to a country nursing home. As Meeghan cleaned out Guinn's apartment, she came across an old,

weathered 3 x 5 card that read, "Don't put me in a nursing home," signed in small print "Guinnevere G. Collins."

Darin and Meeghan wrestled with what it meant to be family to Guinn, who had no kids and never married. Eventually, they became the answer to their own prayers, adopting Guinn. Now they have lived together for more than four years. It isn't always easy. Guinn's sickness has gotten much worse. She's a wild and eccentric old diva (she used to be an aspiring actress), so every moment is an adventure as she tries to remember where she is. Every hour she asks, "Is this the Alps? Are we in England?" and sometimes Darin and Meegs will let her choose her adventure for the day or the hour. They have helped her find ways to continue to paint and make art. And she makes them smile as she tells dirty jokes and looks for her boyfriends and does her little booty-shake boogy when she gets excited. A little while back, Darin and Meegs had a child, and now Guinn comes to life as she holds little Justice. And Darin, Meeghan, and Justice will help Guinn make the transition from this world with a smile on her face and a family around her.



Give to Uncle Sam What Is Uncle Sam's

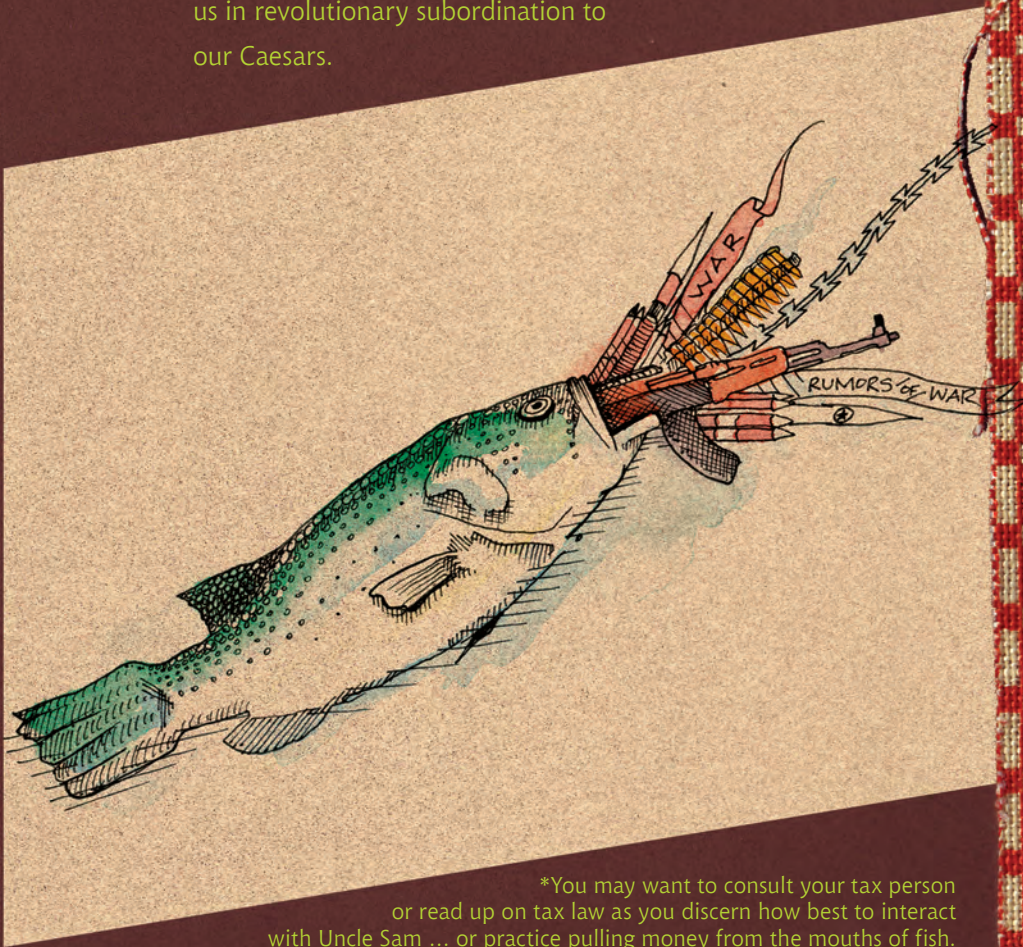
It's hard to know what Jesus would do about paying taxes if he were a citizen in the ole US of A, where nearly half of every tax dollar (the same dollars that say "In God We Trust") goes to the war machine. And yet the more you look at the eerie similarities between the Roman Empire and the American Empire, the more you get some idea of what he might do. Like the Roman Empire, the American Empire is loved by some and hated by others, but feared by everyone. And scholars estimate that Rome's military expenditures, like the US's, were also around 50 percent of the budget. So if the IRS came to Jesus, what would he do? Pull the money out of a fish's mouth? What if we can't pull that one off (or don't have a lake nearby)?

Christians all over the empire are living with the same prophetic creativity as Jesus did. Many folks live so far below the poverty line that they never even show up on Uncle Sam's radar screen. Is it lawful to pay taxes? Jesus' answer might be, "Live in simplicity, and there won't be anything for Uncle Sam to take from you." Many Christian communities, such as Reba Place in Chicago, live off the grid to such an extent that the government has a category for them known as an "apostolic order" under section 501d3 of the government code! They just don't know what to do with these Jesus freaks!

The idea of war tax resistance has emerged in fresh ways in this era of military building. One of our favorite approaches to taxes, which is employed by many Christians in the US, is to send a letter to the IRS along with a check for a portion of the taxes owed and a receipt showing that the sender has donated the amount that would have gone toward weapons to a nonprofit doing the work of the kingdom of God. Usually such letters applaud the use of tax money to benefit the poor

and the common good (which is about half of all tax receipts) but lets the government know that as people of the gospel, we are peacemakers and cannot contribute to the destruction of life. Deeply disturbed by the amount of money going toward weapons, many Christians are unable to support such expenditures, just as the early Christians could not burn incense to Caesar.*

May the one who pulled money from the mouth of the fish guide us in revolutionary subordination to our Caesars.



*You may want to consult your tax person or read up on tax law as you discern how best to interact with Uncle Sam ... or practice pulling money from the mouths of fish.

Make Stuff

One of the ways we can embody a new economy and politics is by making our own stuff from the scraps of the empire. In our communities, we are able to make many of the things we need. We have friends who make shoes from tires. We have lovely bags made from curtains, using seatbelts and bike tires for straps. When we drink from our mugs, we know where they came from, because we made them. Each creation is a small act of resistance to the corporate global economy. It's also a lovely way to bond with each other as we make candles or paper. Shane and his mom make clothes together each winter (perhaps helping to fulfill his mom's wish for a little girl). As a wedding gift, they made pants for the men in Chris and Cassie's wedding. These are things that give meaning to the work of our hands, substance to our days, since we are created in the image of an artistic God.



Made in Camden

For Gandhi, the spinning wheel was the symbol of the movement to nonviolently counter the British occupation and colonization of India in the early twentieth century. Making their own cloth was a way of saying, "We don't have to be dependent on the society that is oppressing us." We will march to the sea and get our own salt. We will grow our own food, and sew our own clothes. They were no longer dependent on the king's economy. In fact, folks said you could tell how broadly the

revolution had spread because people were wearing homespun clothing even in the government buildings and in parliament!

A story goes that Gandhi went off to an important meeting with British royalty. He arrived wearing his usual rags, the typical attire of India's poor.

On the way, a news reporter stopped him and noting his clothes said, "Why didn't you wear more clothing, knowing you were going to meet the king?"

Gandhi said to him with a smile, "I knew he'd have enough clothes for both of us."

Besides, it's fun to make stuff. We had a youth group write us to let us know they had begun making their own clothes together and were having a blast. It had created a sense of community in ways that no Disneyland trip ever could. And it was their little way of "protestifying" against the abuse of overseas workers that breaks the heart of our God. Another youth group said they had taken their kids out in the cotton fields to pick cotton so that they could remember their ancestors, and so that they could begin to think about the hidden faces behind our way of life. As the kids got their hands dirty and scratched up, had the sun's heat beating on their sweaty bodies, and felt the soreness of their backs the next day, they had new eyes to see the people laboring all over the world to make the things we buy and dispose of.

We visited one college where the Young Republicans and the social justice club had become quite polarized. In a beautiful gesture of grace, they got together to find common ground. While there wasn't much they could agree on ideologically, politically, or socially, they could agree that homeless people shouldn't freeze on the streets. So they began making blankets together and taking them to the streets. Something mystical can happen in the course of acting together that transcends words and ideologies—people who do not agree on ideas can create common ground in the act of loving. And frankly, the folks on the street probably couldn't care less who the students voted for in the last election.

A Real Security Plan

The rain forests of Belize are not an easy place to farm. Farmers there work hard to till and nourish nutrient-poor soil. Most agricultural fertility is locked in the huge leaves of the green canopy, having been rapidly cooked out of the soil by the rainforest heat and humidity. The scurrying ants carry away for their own purposes any leaves that would enrich the soil.

So their farming is an uphill battle. They irrigate their crops with precious water dripping from pinholes in hoses running along their rows of carrots, lettuce, and other greens. They travel by way of horses and run their sawmill with them. Certainly, they have very little monetary wealth and don't need much. Their hard, co-operative work and skill is their wealth.

Nevertheless, armed bandits at times steal what money they have. A robber recently came into their community while they were away, broke into their houses, and took their money. The police found this man and imprisoned him. In response, the farming community did two things: (1) they printed money that is useless in the national economy and useful only in their farming village, removing the incentive to steal from them, and (2) when the robber was released from prison, they found him and built him a house. Without a doubt, this thief was "converted."



While the most obvious realities of this story are the farmers' nonviolence and creativity, we must see what makes their nonviolence possible. Certainly, belief in Jesus' teachings is at the root of their obedience and creativity. However, believing in Jesus often looks different from actually following him. A multitude of "sold-out" Christians say they "just want to do what Jesus taught," but we wouldn't suggest testing their commitment by striking them on one cheek and waiting for them to turn the other. For most people, too much comes in the way of doing what Jesus did and taught. Economic and social factors (which take time and effort to nurture) can either help us or hinder us in doing what Jesus taught.

A major factor in this community's response to violence and theft is communal economic strength. It's not that they are rich in any worldly sense. But the farmers' economic lives are structured in such a way that their community gets them through trials. They live with confidence in the face of conflict because the community has proven itself able to withstand living with less. They understand that they are not alone. Because their survival comes not from making money but from sweat, acquired skills, and communal work, they do not fear theft. They know how to make a living without making money off of somebody else. They can make their own lumber, build their own houses, make their own clothes, and grow their own crops. Because they do not store up treasures on earth, they are not tempted to kill the intruder. They can pray, "As we forgive those who trespass against us," because they know how to work to absorb a transgression.

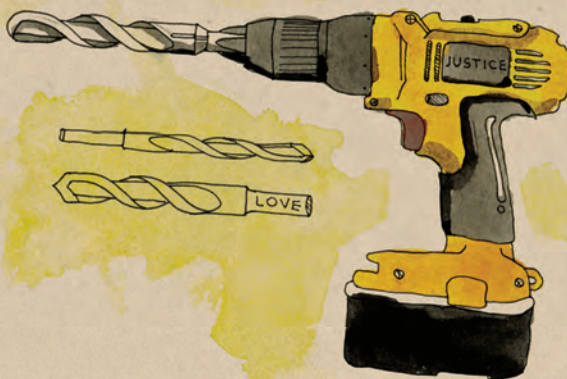
Our individuated lifestyle of single-family dwellings, a car per person, and a house full of "my" stuff purchased cheaply from China makes it harder to follow Jesus, even for those with the best of intentions. When your house is built on sand, you waste energy keeping it from being knocked over. In the farmers' case, strong community economics makes theft easy to overcome. Free from the economic fear of being toppled by the enemy, they can focus outwardly on the harder task of redeeming their enemy. You cannot follow Jesus socially (in relation to your enemy) if you are not following Jesus economically.

The Third Way of Jesus

Criminologists teach that one of the quickest ways to diffuse violence is by doing the unexpected. Those who commit violence depend on the predictability of their victims. When their victims do something that surprises them, it throws the whole plan out of whack. Jesus is always doing weird things in the midst of conflict. When the men are about to stone the adulteress, he bends down and draws in the dirt, and eventually they all drop their stones. There's that time when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, and Peter pulls out a sword and cuts off a guy's ear. Jesus rebukes him, and then grabs the dude's ear and puts it back on. That must have been a little awkward for everyone, especially the soldiers. (How do you arrest a guy who just put your buddy's ear back on?) Jesus' theological stunts and prophetic imagination surprise and disarm. They make people laugh and catch folks off-guard, even folks who wish they could hate him.

We catch another glimpse of this disarming grace in the musical *Les Miserables*, in which a priest allows a vagrant, Jean Valjean, to stay in his home, only to find himself knocked unconscious and his home robbed. The next day, the authorities catch Jean Valjean and drag him before the priest, telling him that Valjean claimed the priest gave him the silver goods in his bag. And the priest instinctively, beautifully, says, "I am so thankful you have come back, because you forgot the candlesticks." As the authorities release Jean Valjean, the priest whispers in his ear, "With this, I have ransomed your soul."

Sounds good—musicals can do that for you—but it's not that easy. When someone stole our power drill (and we all knew who), we didn't run after the person with the drill bits, calling, "Hey, my friend, you forgot these." We're more inclined to teach a lesson of justice than a lesson of love.



Love takes courage. One of the neighborhood kids who hangs out at our house all the time came up to us one day very upset because one of the bullies in his school was picking on him. We told him, "Rolando, that means you get to show him how friends treat each other. He must not know what love and friendship feel like, so you get to teach him." And Rolando said, "Aww man, love is so hard."

Love is a harsh and dreadful thing to ask of us, but it is the only answer.

—Dorothy Day



Bustin' Out a Can of Grace

Kassim, a great kid who lives in our neighborhood, is eleven, and his mom doesn't let him out a lot. He's the sort of gentle kid you never want to see lose his innocence and trust or have his heart grow hard. He likes cooking with us, gardening, getting beat at Othello, even cleaning the house or doing homework.

One time Kassim and I (Shane) were walking to the post office, a walk I take several times a week. We were walking down a narrow side street, and some teenage guys started following us. You could just feel the mischief brewing, and the group grew from two young men to four to eight, until there was a little mob of sorts. They started calling out some names, throwing rocks and sticks, trying to stir up trouble. It's always hard on the spot like that to know what Jesus would do. I told Kassim, "Let's go say hi." He looked at me skeptically. We turned back and walked toward them, knowing full well that if we had run, we probably would have made it to the post office. "Hey, I'm Shane. And this is my friend Kassim. We live around the corner," I said with my hand out. They weren't really sure what to do with that. A couple of them shook my hand and introduced themselves. Others snickered. One or two refused the handshake. We said, "Nice to meet you guys," and headed back on our walk.

With the wind taken out of their sails a bit, they regrouped and continued to build momentum toward a brawl. They ran after us, throwing some rocks and bottles, and I noticed two of them now carried broomsticks from the trash. We picked up the pace a bit, and then I looked at Kassim and said, "No, don't run." We turned back, and before we knew it, one

of them had clocked Kassim on the side of the head with a stick. I said firmly, "Why would you do that? We haven't done anything to hurt you." They laughed. Then they started hitting me with a broomstick until it broke over my back. At this point I decided to bust out a can of holy anger. I looked them in the eyes and said as forcefully as I could, "You are created in the image of God ... every single one of you. And you were made for something better than this. Kassim and I are followers of Jesus and we do not fight, but we will love you no matter what you do to us." That wasn't exactly what they expected or hoped for. They looked at each other, startled a bit. For the first time they were quiet. And then they scurried off in every direction.

