



Center on  
**FAITH IN COMMUNITIES**

**Hope Dreams**

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The most frightening discover in these reports from the Other America is that the people who live there are a lot like us.

At the Edward Jenner Elementary School on Oak Street in Chicago, fire drills are complex affairs. As Daniel Coyle, author of *Hardball: A Season in the Projects*, explains, the school is situated on the boundary between two rival gangs, the People and the Folks. "To compensate," Coyle writes, "the school [is] careful to keep the students' comings and goings arranged by gang affiliation, using separate entrances and allowing teachers to divide their classes during fire drills: People out one door, Folks out another."

Here in the Other America, as social critics have labeled it, gunfire is discussed like the weather: "*Better go shopping early, because they're gonna shoot tonight. They sure were shooting last night, weren't they? They was shooting early this morning, but then it let up and I got to go to my grandmama's.*"

Here, a woman named LaJoe spends \$80 per month from her welfare check on burial insurance for her two (healthy) sons – ages 9 and 12; she's uncertain they'll reach age 18. Here, it is not unusual for 14-year-olds to plan their funerals with the same eye for detail with which brides-to-be plan their weddings.

Even for our hardened, seemingly unshockable society, the accounts of life in the Other America told in this spate of recent books are jarring. Three of the narratives are set in inner-city Chicago. Ben Joravsky's *Hoop Dreams: A True Story of Hardship and Triumph* (which became an acclaimed documentary film) chronicles five years in the lives of two teenage basketball stars, Arthur and William, who hope to use the game as their ticket out of the ghetto. Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in America* focuses on LaFayette and his little brother Pharaoh, who live with their mom, siblings, and assorted relatives in a decrepit apartment in the city's Henry Horner Homes. Daniel Coyle's *Hardball* covers the triumphs and tragedies in the 1992 season of the Kikuyus, a Little League baseball team composed of boys 9 to 12 years old from the infamous Cabrini-Green projects and coached by young white suburbanites (including Coyle himself).

Another three books focus on New York City. Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* looks at a South Bronx community called Mott Haven. Greg Donaldson's *The Ville: Cops and Kids in Urban America*

explores life in the East New York community of Brownsville through the experiences of a local teenager, Sharron Corley, and a public housing cop, Gary Lemite. Darcy Frey's *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams* focuses on the basketball players of Coney Island's Lincoln High School.

## Beyond Different

The "otherness" of the America these authors describe derives not only from cruel killings and gang warfare but also from various forms of isolation from much that is common in mainstream society – a pervasive theme throughout the books considered here.

These inner-city neighborhoods are isolated, first, from the institutions many Americans take for granted. Alex Kotlowitz reports that the neighborhood around the Henry Horner Homes has no banks, no public library, no movie theater, no skating rink, no bowling alley. Darcy Frey, describing Coney Island, writes: "On this peninsula, at the southern tip of Brooklyn, there are almost no stores, no trees, no police; nothing, in fact, but block after block of grey-cement projects – hulking, prison-like, and jutting straight into the sea."

The people who lives in these neighborhoods are isolated as well from the nonpoor. New York's middle-class subway riders do not cross over 96<sup>th</sup> Street and into Mott Haven. Indeed, even the pizza deliverers won't venture there. Taxi drivers won't answer calls from Cabrini-Green in Chicago. Outsiders simply avoid the "wrong side of the tracks." Urban neighborhoods that once included families from varying economic classes now are characterized by a disproportionate concentration of the most disadvantaged segments of minority populations. Some "decent" families, those that are hard-working, responsible, respectful of authority, enthusiastic about education, and committed to traditional values, live in the ghetto. But they are under siege, battles by the carriers of "street culture" – and the drug dealers, gangbangers, and addicts – and surrounded by the chronically unemployed or underemployed, by school dropouts, pregnant teens, and single-parent households fully dependent on public assistance.

Underclass life is isolated from the "American dream" of a good education, a decent job, a stable family, and a safe neighborhood. Frey's and Joravsky's accounts of ghetto kids with basketball dreams suggest what a Herculean task it is for these youths merely to gain admission to college. For many middle-school kids, going to college is taken for granted, something everybody does. For the young men of Coney Island and Cabrini-Green, it is a fragile dream that can be shattered at any moment.

In the film version of *Hoop Dreams*, one of the young hopefuls, Arthur, plays in the state basketball tournament at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. One afternoon, Arthur's parents and younger brother stroll about the campus, marveling. Arthur's mom comments that the campus "Sure is nice, sure is different." With wide-eyed wonder, Arthur's younger brother retorts, "It's *beyond* different." For many young people in the

Other America, a two-parent family, a school without guns, a job at more than \$5 an hour, a chance to go to college, and a gang-free neighborhood are so unknown, so inaccessible, as to be "beyond different."

## Truncated Worlds

The seemingly insurmountable isolation of the inner city often produces truncated lives. In *Amazing Grace*, Kozol visits a school where the smartest kid in the class wants to be an x-ray technician when he grows up. Kozol wonders why he wouldn't hope to become a doctor. Any of the ambitions of the children," the school psychologist replies, "are locked-in at a level that suburban kids would scorn. . . Boys who are doing well in school will tell me, 'I would like to be a sanitation man.' I have to guard my words and not say anything to indicate my sense of disappointment. In this neighborhood, a sanitation job is something to be longed for."

Greg Donaldson's *The Ville* best captures the most unsettling expression of the truncation engendered by the ghetto: the reduction of "being" to "having." This triumph of consumerism emerges in large part from the dominance of television. "The teenagers in [Brownsville] are undereducated in most things," Donaldson explains, "but they are connoisseurs of pop culture, ready receptacles for the jingles and scattershot imagery of television. Their speech is drenched in the verbal flotsam of television shows. The police are called Five-O's after *Hawaii Five-O*. They know the stars of the soaps and sitcoms as well as they know their neighbors. Brand names tyrannize the classrooms; prestige cars are worshipped."

On the street, being a person of "substance" is defined, ironically, as having a certain appearance or image. Nearly all of Sharron Corley's actions are directed by his pursuit of this image. It is cultivated by amassing "props" – things that earn Sharron "proper respect" – such as designer clothes, beepers, or a reputation as a ladies' man or con artist.

Sharron quickly quits his summer job bagging groceries when he realizes it threatens his image. He spends the first 75 dollars he earns from another job on a beeper, in part because it makes him look like a drug dealer. Sharron and his friends "have nothing to do with drugs," Donaldson reports, "yet they don't seek to dispel the impression that they do, because dealers have props, and they 'get paid'" Sharron also periodically carries a gun and peddles stolen merchandise: such acts prove that he is not a "wuss" but a person of "substance."

Sharron and his friends call themselves "LoLifes" (short for "Polo Lifes") because they wear only Polo brand men's clothing, most of it stolen from department stores downtown. Sharron literally believes that "clothes make the man." Tragically, in his case, the maxm is chillingly accurate. For despite our growing intimacy with Sharron as we follow him through the ups and downs of school, work, and even prison, when his designer clothes are stripped away, we find virtually no substance behind the appearance. Sharron has

been reduced to a mere acquirer of goods and consumer of products. In the most memorable passage, Donaldson comments:

The world Sharron travels in is pure consumer culture; the LoLifes are more an outlaw consumer group than a gang. . . . The young black men of Brownsville indict society by their total belief in it. They trust what they have been told about image, status, competition, hierarchy, and the primacy of self-gratification. Their faith is lethal, mostly to themselves.

Inner-city residents like Sharron are hardly alone in their materialistic ways. Consumerism is a shared disease, characterizing mainstream America as well as the Other America. The difference is that the disease's effects are amplified in the ghetto. The inner city's isolation drowns out voices that could engender skepticism toward the nihilism vigorously promoted in popular culture. Many mainstream Americans have an idolatrous faith in materialism, but it is tempered by the opportunities they have (educationally and vocationally) to build their identities on something other than their appearance. While they too are consumers, they have the opportunity to become more than mere consumers. By contrast, Sharron and his friends cannot or will not access such opportunities. Consequently, "meaning" gets hollowed out of their world and replaced with "image." In this shrunken existence, kids literally kill each other for gold chains and leather jackets. Donaldson is right: the kids' blind faith in consumerism is fatal.

### Enlarging Worlds

*Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organization in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth* is a helpful book to read alongside the sobering "ethnographic" accounts by Donaldson, Frey, Kozol, and others. It profiles six organizations from three cities that are effectively overcoming the ghetto's isolation. They do so by offering opportunities to travel outside the 'hood. They introduce ghetto kids to new experiences and ambitious life aspirations, encouraging them to broaden their self-image beyond the stereotypes common on the streets and in the media. As Keisha, a young woman in the Girl Scout troop profiled in the book explains, "Outside [on the streets] it's like we're not ladies." The men on the street view girls as trophies: "It's like they [are] markin' down how many babies they got and each girl they got pregnant." Inside the Girl Scout troop, Keisha and her friends gain a new sense of self-worth "in opposition to the largely negative images fostered by many boys and men." They also begin to see themselves as "givers," by participating in community service projects organized by the troop's leader.

Christian community development organizations I've visited in Chicago, Detroit, and Dallas are also overcoming the isolation of the ghetto by relocating middle-class families into impoverished neighborhoods to model the everyday commitments on which stable families and communities are founded. The Reverend Carey Casey, the African American pastor of Lawndale Community Church in Chicago, remembers talking with some neighborhood kids after he and his wife moved into the community a couple of years ago. "We came out of the house and were talking to some little children," Casey recalls. "They asked my wife, 'What's this ring on your finger?' And my wife said,

'That's my wedding ring, I'm married to Pastor Casey.' And they said, 'You're *married*? He's your *husband*?' It was as though we'd told them we'd come from the moon."

Casey's family and others from the church are now sprinkled throughout the neighborhood – and the kids are watching them. They now see daddies getting up every morning and catching the bus or subway to work. They see families sitting down together for the evening meal. They see homeowners caring for their houses and lawns. According to church staff, this visible witness of simply living "normal" lives is just as important as the church's multiple education and job-training programs.

The faith-based community ministries I've visited, and the organizations profiled in *Urban Sanctuaries*, demonstrate that the isolation of the inner city can be overcome. Readers of these books, though, will want to know how urban America got to be such a mess in the first place. Unfortunately, few of the books offer explanations.

Daniel Coyle does the best job in *Hardball* by chronicling the decline of Cabrini-Green. When the red-brick row houses there were first built in the 1940s, he reports, the neighborhood was integrated, and "applicants were carefully screened to ensure two-parent, one wage earner households. Unseemly behavior such as littering or walking on the grass was punishable by fine." Throughout the 1950s two supermarkets, a department store, a restaurant, and a bank were established in the neighborhood.

In the late 1960s, however, racial tensions, mismanagement and corruption by city housing authorities, well-intentioned but problematic legal reforms, and ill-conceived government intervention initiated the community's breakdown. Riots in Chicago following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., left large numbers of African Americans homeless. Many – even those with known gang affiliations – were quickly moved into available units in Cabrini-Green. Lawsuits by the ACLU had crippled the housing authorities' ability to screen potential tenants. Then, a 1969 congressional act fixing tenants' rent at 25 percent of their income drove working-class families out of the projects into cheaper housing in the private sector. By the 1970s, snipers from rival gangs were shooting each other – and innocent bystanders – from the rooftops of the complex's drab highrises. Cabrini-Green became a national symbol of urban decay.

### Reality Check

The illumination of the "otherness" of the Other America that these books provide is valuable to the extent that mainstream America needs to wake up to the harsh realities of the inner city. Christians especially need to avoid remaining so insular that we fail to see the contemporary Lazaruses at the gate.

Some of these books, though, perform a further crucial service: they remind us that in some ways, the Other America really isn't so different from mainstream America. The danger in stressing the *otherness* of the inner city is that doing so may provide mainstream society with an excuse for inaction. When ghetto residents appear alien, the rest of us tend either to condemn or pity them – almost always from a safe distance. One

of the triumphs of Frey, Coyle, and Joravsky is their ability to bridge the gap and show us how inner-city residents, like the rest of us, are multidimensional characters not easily reducible to tidy stereotypes.

In *Hardball*, just before the Kikuyus' game against the Hausas, Coyle introduces us to Michael, the elder cousin of Freddie, one of the Kikuyus' players. Michael, we learn, is in his late twenties, has great affection for Freddie, and taught Freddie how to pitch and hit. Michael agrees to help coach that afternoon and does a fine job, breaking up the Kikuyus' in-fighting, reformulating some of the players' positions, getting caught up in the spirit of the competition. "This is great," Michael tells the coach at the conclusion of the game. "I could do this everyday."

Unfortunately, Michael never gets the chance: the next time we hear of him he is being sent to serve six years in prison for robbery. His recent police record at the time includes battery, sexual assault, and property damage. A police officer Coyle interviews says Michael was "a good kid for a long time," even went to college. Then he came back to the streets, got a girl pregnant, and started doing heroin. "Sad to see," says the cop, "because he was a pretty good kid." Michael – loving cousin, druggie, "pretty good kid," criminal, college man – no one label fits, for this young man cannot be boxed into a one-dimensional identity.

Neither can Anthony Garrett. We meet Anthony when he umpires a game for the Kikuyus and impressed the coaches with his fairness, calm, and excellent manner with the children. "Anthony's the kind of guy who needs to be involved in this league . . . the kind we need to find and keep," says one of the Kikuyus' coaches during their after-game beers. Just the strong role model the kids need, the other coaches agree. But at the book's end, Anthony is arrested for the murder of a seven-year-old boy.

Even the drug lords cannot be easily painted one color. Alex Kotlowitz describes how one drug kingpin who used to throw community-wide barbecues, and refuse to permit kids under age 15 to join his gang. He did not take drugs and drank alcohol in moderation. One resident tells Kotlowitz that "the thing I liked about him was that he gave kids and women respect. He really wasn't a bad person."

While Frey, Coyle, Donaldson, and Joravsky offer sympathetic, nuanced portraits of inner-city life, with a measure of moral complexity, Jonathan Kozol portrays a world of victims and oppressors. Victims are essentially good; oppressors are bad. It's that simple.

Kozol's inability to avoid such stereotyping results from his faulty diagnosis of the causes of underclass poverty. For Kozol, poverty is entirely a matter of environment, not behavior. The poor are poor because "the system" did them in. If New York City would just stop being so right-fisted, and pour more money into education and social services, things could improve. And if the forces of evil in America (i.e., rich whites) would change their hearts and start caring about the poor, things could really change.

Kozol is certainly correct to expose the many wrongs inside Mott Haven, such as the unsanitary hospital and the unsafe apartment buildings, and in the broader society, such as racist attitudes and compassion fatigue. And he is right to point out that the "apathy" and "listlessness" characterizing some poor people are a natural result of hours of lost sleep (due to gunfire, noisy drug traffic), living in terror of gangs (or rats or cockroaches), and poor nutrition. But in his desperation to avoid saying anything that in any way could possibly be construed as "blaming the victim," Kozol is utterly blind to the moral-cultural and behavioral factors affecting socio-economic status.

Kozol offers no criticism of promiscuous sex and out-of-wedlock births. He has nothing to say about mothers who smoke crack while pregnant; about parents who send their toddlers out into the streets alone for hours on end; about young thugs who set fires for pleasure. Notably, his informants are far more nuanced in their views than he is, recognizing both the systemic and behavioral causes of poverty. During one interview, his chief informant, Mrs. Washington, says:

When I'm mad I think, "How can you blame this on white people? This is poor folks doin' these things to themselves." Then, when I'm calm, I think "Why did they put so many of these hopeless people in this place to start with?" I go back and forth on this. You don't know who to blame.

Similarly, Kozol himself never dares to speak on black-on-black violence, but one of his informants does so freely:

I feel afraid of my own people, my own race, black people, students my age. You step on someone's foot or look at somebody the wrong way – if he doesn't like your attitude, he might pull out a gun and kill you.

Kozol epitomizes the kind of "liberal white racism" Glenn Loury exposes and denounces in *One by One from the Inside Out: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America*. Liberal whites who blame white racism for all the problems blacks face are themselves racism and paternalistic, Loury argues. Such thinking fails to treat blacks as people capable of influencing their own behavior and destiny.

Loury's diagnosis of inner-city ills is far more realistic than Kozol's because it avoids taking either side in the "environment versus behavior" debate. The poverty problem, Loury says, is driven neither by behavioral failings alone (as some conservatives complain) nor by environmental factors only (as liberals like Kozol maintain). The woes of the ghetto result from both.

With the exception of *Amazing Grace*, the books reviewed here do a good job of depicting the complex realities of ghetto poverty, acknowledging human failures and sins as well as structural impediments that trap people in poverty. Any effective welfare-reform policy will be based on this sort of realistic diagnosis.

Moreover, the stories told in these books indicate not only the need for a realistic diagnosis of urban woes, but also the importance of maintaining a realistic prognosis for

change. The experiences of some of the main characters in these books serve as reality checks against "quick fix" solutions forwarded by either liberals or conservatives.

Take, for instance, 18-year-old Russell Thomas. We meet him in the opening pages of *The Last Shot*. He is practicing jumpshots in an outdoor basketball court with military precision and discipline. His regiment, Frey instructs us includes an hour of three-point shooting, then wind sprints up the 14 flights of his apartment building, then a series of one-handed shots thrown while sitting in a chair. And this, we learn, is just one part of Russell's all-encompassing entitled "Things to Do to Get My College Scholarship." This plan also includes working diligently at school, skipping lunch period to study vocabulary words likely to be on the SAT exam, studying hour after hour every night in his cramped apartment, and eschewing the entertainment of the streets. Through Frey's eyes, we see Russell's intensity as he competes on the gym floor. Russell doesn't "play" basketball; every game is a test that can make or break his dream of a four-year-degree and a way out of Coney Island:

Sweat streams down his face, pooling in his eyes, but he doesn't pause to mop his brow. Each time Russell sinks a shot, he runs downcourt with his hands in fists, never once cracking a smile.

Russell is a striver.

So is Sheila Agee, mother of Arthur, one of the central figures in *Hoop Dreams*. Married to an abusive, crack-addicted braggart, Sheila endures hardship at home and chronic back pain on the job. She eventually has to leave work and goes on welfare – only to be cut off after missing an appointment with her case manager. Eventually she enrolls in a rigorous training program to become a certified nurse's assistant, achieving the highest grade average in the class. Throughout it all, she faithfully attends Arthur's games, allows Arthur's best friend, Shannon, to move in when Shannon's home life becomes unendurable, and meets with Arthur's teachers when his grades start slipping dangerously. Throughout *The Last Shot* and *Hoop Dreams*, I rooted for Russell and Sheila, stirred by their determination, understanding of their weaknesses. Their experiences are disturbing, for they rattle our confidence in the equation "hard work + self-discipline + determination = success." Despite his diligence, Russell never manages to score 700 on the SAT, the minimum score needed to be eligible for an NCAA Division I athletic scholarship. Sheila uses her hard-won credentials to get a job as a rehabilitation technician at a nursing home. The work pays her \$4.85 an hour, about which she comments:

It makes me angry to hear people talking about women like they're dogs. People say, "Get a job." Well, think about this: After all these years of training and working, I'm still making less than five dollars an hour and I don't get any benefits. You can talk all you want about people pulling themselves up. But you have to ask yourself: What kind of future is out there?

Sheila's question is the kind Jonathan Kozol would bandy about as an indication of the oppressiveness of "the system" and the futility of following the conservative prescriptions for success in America. But this is taking it too far. After all, Sheila and Russell do attain a measure of success as a result of their hard work and good choices. Russell eventually earns a scholarship from a Division II college and is able to pursue his RN degree. And Sheila gets off welfare and into a job that she says is fulfilling, if low-paying. She hopes also to attain an RN degree and begin her own nursing home: dreams that will be difficult, but not impossible, to achieve.

Nevertheless, Sheila's question about the kind of future available for those who struggle out of the underclass is a legitimate and pressing one at this time of welfare reform. It indicates the need to accompany welfare reform with broader economic policies – such as enterprise zones, school vouchers, and enhanced college scholarship programs – that create better opportunities for the many strivers in the ghetto.

Since persistent underclass poverty is sustained by institutional and structural factors as well as personal and behavioral factors, welfare reform efforts that focus exclusively on the latter are insufficient. While available evidence does not support Kozol's radical conspiracy theory that the rich are deliberately oppressing the poor, it is true that the greed and racism of some among the "haves" inhibits progress for the "have nots." One need not be a left-wing ideologue to be disturbed by economic inequalities in American society, or by the continuing – albeit significantly moderated – problem of racial discrimination. As Glenn Loury states refreshingly, "a neo-conservative can still be outraged by conditions of awful deprivation."

### The Ultimate Source of Hope

*Hardball*, *The Ville*, *The Last Shots*, and the other books considered here tell engaging stories; they are extremely well-crafted, readable, and poignant. I do not recommend reading them en masse, though, as I did. Fortunately, I could counter my sadness by reflecting on the many living examples of hope and transformation I have witnessed firsthand while visiting Christian ministries in inner-city America. The most lamentable oversight in all of these books, save Loury's, is their failure to see the powerful role Christian faith is playing in urban America. Some of the authors simply do not see religion; others fail to grasp its significance.

In *Hoop Dreams*, for example, Sheila's husband, Bo, accepts Christ in jail and is delivered from cocaine addiction. Upon his release, Bo asks Sheila to allow him to return home. Sheila and the rest of the family are initially suspicious of Bo's alleged transformation. But he remains clean from drugs and faithful to his wife. In the book's epilogue, we learn that three years after his conversion, Bo is still off drugs, in church, and caring for his family. Sheila comments, "I just thank God for bringing some peace to my house and to my marriage. Bo has changed. Believe it or not, the man has changed for the better."

Bo's transformation is the most astounding event in the entire book, yet it warrants only a few sentences. The driving theme of *Hoop Dreams* is escaping the underclass; yet this vehicle of overcoming the ghetto's woes through a personal spiritual transformation is virtually ignored.

To his credit, Kozol at least notices religion. His coverage, however, is also inadequate. Kozol writes of being depressed by the streets and attracted to the churches for their solace. Yet the only churches he seems to find are those espousing liberal theology (as well as Kozol's left-wing politics). One minister he comes to know, for example, sees God as "a liberating force who calls us to deliver people from oppression."

From what Kozol describes, these churches address the poverty all around them in one of two ways: they offer "commodity-based" mercy ministry (clothing closets, soup kitchens, emergency shelter, financial aid) and/or engage in "social justice" political advocacy. They may be involved in other kinds of community development work as well, but if so, Kozol does not tell us.

These two forms of mercy ministry are the natural outgrowth of liberal theology. Liberals are quicker to locate sin in societal structures than in human hearts; consequently, they are often more eager to engage in political advocacy than in evangelism. Liberals are reluctant to "impose" values on people, since their moral relativism gives them no absolute standards of right and wrong. Their work among the poor aims at transforming the environment in which the poor live, rather than trying to transform poor people themselves. After all, to speak of the need for personal transformation suggests that there is something wrong with the person in the first place, something that needs reforming. While some liberal churches may go beyond "commodity-based" mercy ministry and political advocacy to offering job training and education, typically they do not deliberately address underlying moral, cultural, or behavioral issues that can exacerbate a person's economic distress.

Orthodox theology, by contrast, takes it as a given that people need reforming. It argues that all of us – poor and nonpoor alike – are sinners in desperate need of radical transformation. Sometimes conservative Christians stop here and offer evangelism and moral instruction alone, without adequately addressing poor people's material needs or confronting the structural impediments (horrible public schools, inadequate public transportation, discrimination in housing) confronting the "strivers" in the inner city. Often, though, orthodox theology translates into a vision of community outreach that offers not merely Band-Aids that make the living conditions of the poor more tolerable, but educational opportunities, jobs, *and* moral exhortation and spiritual instruction that help poor people *transform* their lives.

The evangelical inner-city ministries I've visited challenge drug addicts to renounce their lifestyles; exhort young people to sexual abstinence; insist that the able-bodied work for the assistance they receive; and teach all their participants God's rules for wholesome living. In short, they address the moral, cultural, and behavioral factors influencing people's economic prospects. While doing so, they do not ignore the structural

impediments ghetto residents face. Groups I've visited are advocating reforms in the school system, the law-enforcement system, and the social-service system; protesting discriminatory practices by businesses and banks; and denouncing racism. With the two-pronged attack, such groups are bringing change to inner-city communities and helping individual poor people to turn their lives around.

We see little of this sort of transformation in *Amazing Grace*. One of the repeated scenes in the book is that of the drug addicts and prostitutes coming into the local park to receive free, clean needles from a group of volunteers. Kozol's failure to criticize this act indicates his deformed understanding of compassion. True compassion does not hand out clean needles to enable people to continue in their self-destructive behavior. True compassion establishes a ministry in which the addicts and hookers are befriended, invited to change their lifestyles, provided biblical instruction on a different way to live, and lovingly assisted over the long, long transition from homelessness and destitution to self-sufficiency. And true compassion is not a fiction: organizations like the Detroit Rescue Mission, Chicago's Lawndale Community Church, and Birmingham's Center for Urban Missions are living it out every day.

Ultimately, this is the ground of our hope for the inner city and its inhabitants. Basketball dreams won't save many kids from the 'hood since the college recruiters, at bottom, view the talented players as commodities to dispense with according to the dictates of the Big Money game. Liberal churches whose "compassion" is limited to hand-outs that make people comfortable in their poverty won't save many. The conservative politicians who think getting tough with lazy welfare recipients is the answer won't help many, either. Only the melody of the gospel, with its means of personal transformation, its prophetic denunciation of injustice, and its warning that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" offers the power, grace, and hope required to break out of the underclass. It's too bad that these authors who so carefully document the woes of the ghetto are tone-deaf to the song of its salvation.