

A bottomless pit

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

"The politics of death is a bottomless pit that sucks everybody in." This judgment, offered by a California attorney who has tried more than 100 capital cases, aptly summarizes the complicated arguments for and against the death penalty in American culture. After all, who can deny the horrors of a Ted Bundy or a Jeffrey Dahmer? Who can deny the pain of parents whose children are slaughtered by unrepentant murderers? Yet how many innocent people have died in the midst of a politics of revenge? How do we account for racial and economic disparities among those sentenced to death? And what do we tell ourselves and our children, if the way we respond to murder is by killing the murderer?

The attorney's judgment also summarizes my reaction after reading a gripping true narrative, *Dead Run: The Untold Story of Dennis Stockton and America's Only Mass Escape from Death Row*. Authors Joe Jackson and William F. Burke Jr. tell the story of Dennis Stockton, a man who they believe was wrongly convicted and executed. They narrate in excruciating detail the sordid character of life on death row and the inmates' encounters with prison guards, wardens, attorneys and others.

Part of what makes their account so gripping is that they rely on diaries that Stockton kept throughout his time in Virginia's Mecklenburg Correctional Facility. The diaries provide an "insider's account" of living and dying on death row. They also reveal the planning that led to a mass escape from death row in 1983 (Stockton declined to participate in this escape), as well as Stockton's reflections as his appeals ran out and he faced his final days in 1995.

Jackson and Burke undertake some investigative reporting to analyze Stockton's claim to innocence, a claim that they come to believe and that I found persuasive. They do not excuse Stockton's other criminal behavior, and they include a candid analysis of the mess Stockton made of his life. But they are convinced that he was innocent of the crime for which he was put on death row.

Jackson and Burke also reflect on the politics of the death penalty in Virginia, and offer a provocative account of its relation to slavery. They point out that Virginia has

had many more executions than, for example, North Carolina. They argue that a significant reason for this is that Virginia was more dependent on slaves, and that the punitive system of slavery was easily transmuted into legalized desires for vengeance through the death penalty.

As I read their account, I developed an intense despair about the politics of death. There are few heroes in this story. Stockton and his associates engage in regular criminal behavior and are often drunk or high on drugs. The prosecutors who try the case appear to be more interested in higher office than in justice. The prison guards, underpaid and overworked, are susceptible to bribes and other corruption. The legal system is constrained by stringent laws that do not provide adequate safeguards to protect innocent people from being executed. Several of the other men on death row, as described by their fellow inmate, are truly frightening characters. In this story, the politics of death is a bottomless pit that sucks everybody in.

Is there any hope? Glimmers can be found in some of Stockton's regret about decisions he made, in the attorneys who represent Stockton in his final appeals because they believe in his innocence, and in the reporters themselves. But even the attorneys and the reporters become discouraged and despondent when Stockton is executed. Jackson and Burke comment poignantly in their epilogue: "Who could tell the truth from the lies? In the end, the only certainty was that the true story surrounding the murder of Kenny Arnder that warm July night in 1978 might never be revealed. The law's purpose had shifted from the search for truth to the triumph of procedure. The lawyers argued law, and society looked away."

Might there be more hope if society would stop looking away? Or to put it less abstractly, if you and I stopped looking away? Do we look away because we fear the bottomless pit? Or because we do not want to confront our own complicity in systems of punishment that dehumanize us all—prisoners, lawyers and prison officials included? Have we confronted not just the abstract arguments about capital punishment, but the actual conditions of our prisons and the persons within them—including the chilling character of many of the prisoners?

Christians are enjoined by Jesus to visit those in prison, but how many of us do so? A few years ago, I was taken aback when a woman came to visit me to ask why Christians were so unforgiving. She had heard that I had written a book on forgiveness, and she was trying to figure out why so many churches were unwilling to interact with recently paroled ex-convicts. She worked in the attorney general's

office, assigned to help reintegrate ex-convicts into the community. Yet she had found churches in her area to be consistently resistant to reaching out. She told me that she was a Christian, but that she found it increasingly difficult to believe that the gospel actually made much difference in the world or in people's lives.

Her question about why Christians are so unforgiving has haunted me. Could it be that the only way to avoid the bottomless pit of our politics of death is to think through and embody the complex practices involved in the redemptive forgiveness of Christ? There, we claim, a politics of life is to be found—of life abundant and free. Are we willing to risk a justice that is restorative rather than merely retributive?