

Eric Waters



Eric was chosen by Rev Muller to review and edit the manuscript, *Never Abandon Hope*, he intended to publish. So, it is natural that Eric is a primary researcher and the manager for building this website. He is a veteran of the Exodus program and has become a gifted author, community leader, achieved two bachelor's degrees, and is an alumnus of the NYTS Master's Degree Program where he was faculty member and is now on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, which is continuing the degree program. He is the author of three poetry books, *Black Shadows and Through the White Looking Glass: Remembrance of Things Past and Present*; *Sometimes Blue Knights Wear Black Hats*; and *The Black Feminine Mystique*; and one novel, *Streets of Rage*. Professionally, Eric has over 25 years experience in the legal field and corrections, with expertise in felony murder, prosecutorial misconduct, and parole. He works with faith-based organizations interested in social and criminal justice. (also affectionately known as Easy, EZ, and William E. Waters)

Two Papers by Eric follow:

Celebrating Fifty Years of Life

by Eric Waters (aka E-Z Waters)

I saw the best minds of my generation drop out of school and get their education on the streets, in the schools of hard knocks: in group homes, reform schools, jails, reformatories and prisons. They dropped out of schools that didn't teach *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; schools that didn't understand the psyche of *The Wretched of the Earth*; schools that didn't challenge; schools that placed a premium on memorization and rote at the expense of thoughtfulness and learning; schools incapable of tapping into the creative energy of these minds that were once trained in the greatest institutions of learning on Mother Earth, in Songhai, Ghana, Mali and Timbuktu; schools

that taught history that excluded them and their contributions; schools that alienated them; schools that taught cruelty; schools with low ceilings and finite possibilities.

I saw the brightest boys of my generation descend into insanity. They were in the best high schools the City had to offer, but their minds were light-years ahead of the curriculum. We knew they were different, their heads shaped like eggs, but brilliant, not of the world they were relegated. They tutored others in math and science and instead of graffiti wrote formulas on the walls. They were bored in lab so conducted their own experiments, on stray cats and dogs – we saw their remains throughout the projects. They flew homing pigeons from coops on the projects' rooftops, sent esoteric messages to other egg heads throughout the City's housing developments. They experimented with mind-altering drugs – Acid, LSD and angel dust. They were our angels, not of the world they were relegated. They leapt off of tall buildings, believing they could fly like their pigeons, and they did, for a brief moment in time, only to crash land on the concrete, their wings crushed and their bodies broken.

I saw the best physical specimens of my generation, the fastest, the strongest, play three sports with effortless grace, *not* become all Americans. I saw them earn full scholarships to play basketball but drop out of school in their freshman year because they refused to ride the bench behind the starters, when they knew that they ran faster and jumped higher and that they shot hoops with the accuracy of marksmen. So they returned to the streets, their dreams of playing pro basketball dashed on the hardwood floors of colleges eager to exploit their talent; instead they played in the summer leagues, more dazzling than the sun. And when the sun set, not only did the freaks come out, but the gamblers collecting their winnings from the games, the pimps,

hustlers, con men and gang members, the whole wide underworld. Then their physical prowess was put to other tests. I saw them outrun cop cars and motorcycles and police dogs. I saw them hurdle five-foot fences, leap from building to building, with cops hot in pursuit, and they seemed to always get away. Before extreme sports were invented, they were pushing their bodies to the outer limits, redefining the use of space. I saw them subway surfing and elevator surfing, engaged in thrills that could kill.

I saw the boldest boys of my generation, those that didn't die young, graduate from petty to major crimes. It started innocently enough, playing hooky from school, stealing lunch from the *bodega*, but gradually escalated to shoplifting, burglary, armed robbery and even murder. From juvenile delinquents to juvenile offenders to youthful offenders to adult criminals. In the projects they hunted the rats for sport, with BB guns and bow and arrows; and it turned out that the animals' remains I saw throughout the projects was not the result of tests of the brilliant egg heads, but the evidence of their torture. They were not only the boldest, but also the most alienated of my generation. They descended into another kind of madness, defined by cruelty. They hated a world that hated them – “The Hate that Hate Produced.” They hated this world of low ceilings and finite possibilities. They hated this world that would deny them their dreams. Thus they ended up in group homes, reform schools, jails, reformatories and prisons. A lawyer would later tell me that all of this was “inevitable,” which made me think of the Watchers, the Watchers from behind Venetian blinds, the projects' old ones in the know, septuagenarian seers, who predicted that many of my generation wouldn't amount to anything, that we'd end up in group homes, reform schools, jails, reformatories and prisons, that many of us would not live long, that many of us certainly would not live to see fifty years.

I saw the bravest boys of my generation find their way out of the projects and into basic training. They knew that there was no way they could be all they wanted to be in a housing development with low ceilings and finite possibilities. They went from leaping from building to building to jumping out of airplanes to fight in Granada and Panama. They were honor guards in championship games, those games the best physical specimens of my generation should've been playing in. They were in the Marines, in the Army and the Navy. They swaggered down the streets of Spain, ran with the bulls, found cheap thrills in Manila with "our little brown cousins," redefined what it meant to be a warrior in Japan, fished in Korea and drank beer in Germany and convinced the *fräuleins* that Hitler got it wrong, that *these* physical specimens were part of the Master Race – you *could* take them out of the ghetto – none of them came back to the projects. Later, I saw them, military erect, at the funerals of their parents and their younger siblings, casualties of the wars on poverty and crime. We looked at each other, nodding, acknowledging that we were still here, smart, sane, in shape and unbroken – celebrating life.

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The Burden of the Cupbearer

by Eric Waters

When I was in prison I had a strong identification with Joseph in prison in Egypt. Shortly after I was granted parole, but before my release, I reread the Joseph story and for the first time in my 24 years of imprisonment was able to identify with the cupbearer, the prisoner who is released and leaves Joseph behind.

Before the cupbearer's release, Joseph had made one request, "Remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to the pharaoh, and so get me out of this place."

When prisoners read the Joseph story, they sympathize with Joseph because they know he is an innocent man unjustly imprisoned. Many prisoners identify with Joseph for this reason. We have heard that most, if not all, prisoners claim to be innocent. I have no idea what the numbers are. There are far too many innocent men and women in our prison system, some vindicated after many years of imprisonment and released from prison, sometimes from death row. On the other hand, there are far too many men and women in our prison system that are guilty and have done their time, but cannot get out of prison for political reasons — because they have been convicted of a crime of violence.

Some might think that prisoners' strong identification with Joseph is misplaced. Simply put, prisoners identify with Joseph because he is a prisoner. It is not a question of Joseph's innocence, or their guilt or innocence. Joseph is a prisoner. He is the prisoner left behind, the prisoner who tells the cupbearer, his fellow prisoner, who is soon going to be released from prison, to remember him, not to forget him. This is the burden of the cupbearer. To remember.

In anyone who has been imprisoned, who knows this story of Joseph in prison in Egypt, and perhaps identified with Joseph while he or she was imprisoned, there came a time when he or she no longer identified with Joseph, but with the cupbearer. Prisoners said to them, "Don't forget us! Remember us!" And this became a burden they would bear when they were released from prison. Not to forget. To remember.

In the Bible there are about 267 references to the word "remember." Remembering is theologically as well as morally important whether, as Christians, we are partaking of

communion in remembrance of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or remembering the Lord's saving deeds in the days of old, or remembering prisoners.

The cupbearer has been released from prison and restored to his former position in pharaoh's court. He forgot Joseph, probably immediately. We know from reading the story that two years pass before the cupbearer remembers Joseph, and only because of pharaoh's dreams — the dreams that no one in pharaoh's court could interpret. Then, and only then, does the cupbearer remember Joseph. When he does, he says, "I remember my sins today."

For those of us who have been brought out of prison, remembering means testifying to that fact. Only by such testimony can people of good will see the power of the Holy Spirit active among us today. That men and women have come out of prison and are doing good things. That there are men and women left behind in prison with the same potential. That they are Josephs hoping to be released from prison, restored to their families and communities, and redeemed. That they are men and women who dream. That they are men and women who have the potential to come out of prison and do good, if not great, things. We must remember them. Whether or not we want to, we embody their hopes and their dreams.

As NYTS (New York Theological Seminary) Sing Sing graduates we are all cupbearers, and we must all carry our burden. We do not have to be close to power in a political sense, as the cupbearer was, to make a difference. We only have to know the right thing and do it. This means not forgetting what we have been and where we have been. And, of course, not forgetting the prisoners we left behind.