

# Reading Rivera

## *Resurrection and Remembering in Post-Industrial Detroit*

by Bill Wylie-Kellermann

The end of June 2010, upwards of 20,000 social justice activists are expected to gather in Detroit for the U.S. Social Forum. They come here because *Another World is Possible; Another U.S. is Necessary; and Another Detroit is Happening*.<sup>1</sup> They come because Detroit already knows the economic devastation now faced in the rest of the country. They come because as survivors we know something about deindustrialization and how to live humanly in the midst of it, because we have a history of organizing, resistance and community, and also because a new economy is being invented here from the ground up. Faith, spirituality, culture, and community are central to that re-creation.<sup>2</sup>

No adequate visit to this beloved city is complete without a long slow meditation in the Rivera Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Diego Rivera, among the greatest Mexican artists of the last century, who composed these industrial murals depicting the Ford Rouge plant, is no mean theologian. Or so I would say. I myself, a white male pastor, am no academic theologian, never mind a student of art. But I do know what I love and I can tell you what I notice. And how I read it in a Detroit fast becoming the first postindustrial city.

Upon entering the DIA's cathedral-like space, the first thing one sees, high on the east wall, is an infant in a seed-womb planted deep in the earth. It seems to me a literalization of Psalm 139. "For it was you who formed my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb ... My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth." (v.13,15) Or perhaps the image from another angle in St Paul: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves ..." (Romans 8:22) Placental veins and arteries on the wall reach as roots toward the Michigan fruits and vegetables grouped in panels and cradled in the arms of indigenous women. With first glimpse, we are on notice here: the topic is actually humanity in relation to creation. A birthing time and a holy enterprise as it were.

In fact, earth is above, not below, a kind of heavenly canopy, almost as though the assembly line, the grinding machinery of industrialization at our eye-level, were a subterranean Sheol in the bowels of earth.

The religious structure is pretty explicit, combining the framing devices from European cathedrals with a rich



Credit: East Wall of a Mural depicting Detroit Industry, 1932-33 (fresco) (see also 139314-5, 139317 & 112945 & 47) by Diego Rivera (1886-1957) The Detroit Institute of Arts, USA/ Gift of Edsel B. Ford/ The Bridgeman Art Library  
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The Rev. Bill Wylie-Kellermann is a United Methodist minister who serves as pastor at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Detroit and is on the Faith and Spirituality Committee of the US Social Forum 2010. Through a modest St. Peter's Social Forum Faith Witness grant from the Justice and Peace Advocacy Ministries, the Diocese of Michigan is supporting the US Social Forum next summer.

and ironic underlay of the four directions from pre-Columbian spirituality.

The most notorious religious image, of course, is the controversial "nativity scene" which was one of several things which almost got the murals destroyed. An upper side panel on the medical industry portrays the child being vaccinated by a nurse-doctor couple, while the three wise scientists in the background develop the vaccine, and a cow, sheep, and horse gather in the fore. Insofar as the child, like the earth-wombed infant, represents all humanity, it is an early image for the possibility of universal health care as a human right. Today in Detroit, we might push the image further—beyond industrial medicine or insurance reform—to ask: What is wholeness and health? What is a healthy city or neighborhood? How is illness connected to injustice, or to corporate assaults of workplace, or addictive consumption, or toxic

environment? How is personal health bound to human community? to a right relation with earth? More.

Another, less obvious, ecclesial form is most striking to me: along the base of the mural 13 monochrome panels tell a kind of narrative sequence, a day in worker life, beginning with punching the clock and concluding with five workers trudging across a bridge to a gray sprawl of parking lot. But something more liturgical is afoot. Rivera executed his work in 11 months, 1932-33, at the nadir of the Great Depression. Seventy-five percent of the Rouge workforce was laid off and without public relief. In the winter of '32 just prior to his work people were freezing and starving to death. On March 7, the Ford Hunger March was met by cops and company thugs on the Miller St. bridge with fire hoses and submachine guns. Five workers were killed and many more injured. These panels, in fact, reflect

the traditional—thirteen in number—"stations of the cross."

Detroit community activist and lay minister Elena Herrada recalls her *Abuelito* (as anti-church as Rivera himself) often saying, "Who wants to go to mass?" and then piling his grandchildren in the car for a reverential visitation to "our very own" murals. Her grandfather, Jose Santos Herrada, who had come from Mexico to work in the plants, would point to a brown-skinned figure on the north wall where the racial and cultural mix is notable, and say "That's me." Perhaps more to the point, in the period of its painting, he had been among the 15,000 people, including U.S.

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ussf2010.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dcoh.org>

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citizens, from Detroit (and perhaps a million more across the country), “repatriated” forcibly and otherwise to Mexico. Send home the immigrants stealing our jobs! A trail of tears in its own right, many died along the way. Among the many controversies of his work, Rivera donated certain of his profits to *los repatriados*, saying “Go back and start a co-operative in a land more hospitable.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, at the end of Auto, the union-breaking dismemberment of the industry has spun off a myriad of parts suppliers. And not just big ones like American Axle or Delphi bankrupting itself out of union contracts, but a host of smaller ones that function as *maquiladoras* of the north. In the Detroit area, undocumented workers make fly wheels, seat covers, LCD screens, safety systems and the like, for minimal wages and no benefits. In place of cops and company thugs, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) hovers ready to arrest and deport the wounded and malcontented. More stations on the trail.

Those who made the journey north to the industrial promised land (or north once again, as Herrada’s grandfather in fact did) are portrayed in a line on that north wall. It is actually a prescient mix of immigrants who came in waves—eastern Europeans, Mexicans, American blacks and rednecks from the south, even Arabic peoples. It was the auto industry and the Rouge Plant that eventually drew and anchored in Detroit the largest Arabic community outside the Middle East. Rivera portrays them all working side by side in a common task. Would that it were yet fully so. Despite its black majority, Detroit has remained one of the more segregated urban areas of the nation. In point of fact, African American workers were separated off for years in the dirtiest, most dangerous, and body-breaking jobs. Insofar as Ford and the industrialists encouraged immigration, it was partly to divide a gathering labor movement—pitting groups against one another culturally, linguistically, racially. (Ford, fiercely anti-union, didn’t yield to unionization until wartime 1941). But for Rivera, this mix, this rich human solidarity, as inclusive as the kin-dom of God or Martin King’s “beloved community,” held revolutionary hope and possibility.

With others, I was once treated to a guided tour of the murals by Pablo Davis, who as a young person assisted Rivera with their construction. Through a series of questions he pointed us to a vertical line that runs straight



Credit: North wall of a mural depicting Detroit Industry, 1932-33 (fresco) (see also 139315-7 & 112945 & 47) by Diego Rivera (1886-1957)  
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up the center of the north wall. From a base in that line of worker diversity, it begins in perhaps the mural’s most famous image: those workers aligned in the back-breaking task of moving engine blocks—and from there goes straight up through the fire of the smelting furnace, toward the volcano at the ceiling, dormant but ready to blow. The most brutal labor is the ignition spark in this revolutionary vision.

The biblical parallel to this is the “cry,” the “groan” of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. It goes up four times in two verses (Exodus 2:23-24), straight up, as it were, to God who hears and responds. It may be said that the groan beneath the imperial whip is what sets the whole biblical saga of liberation in motion. Before long they will be walking out from under empire into wilderness (which truly is the way out). The bush burns in the next chapter. The fire below and above is lit.

What if the history of suffering in Detroit is a spiritual resource waiting to be unleashed? A groan for the transformation of the city, even the nation? Here we say, our hope begins as grief.

Parallel and opposite the volcano, high on the South Wall is a mountain made with hands: a pyramid (see next page). In fact there are great hands reaching out of the sun-browned structure in anger and anguish—one shakes a giant fist of resistance toward the placid figure of the “white” European, one of the archetypal “races” holding the four corners. Does the terraced mount signify for Rivera the conquered Mayan civilization, indeed the conquest of all first nations in the Americas? I say yes. But more. At a history deeper, and perhaps reading Rivera against Rivera, I’m inclined to think of biblical pyramids which always bespeak empire: towers of babel, those Egyptian versions and granary towers built with Hebrew slave labor, Babylonian Ziggurats. These skyscraping structures of power have their analogy in the Twin Towers or in Detroit’s Renaissance Center. A pyramid itself is the very image of empire, of hierarchy resting on the backs of an enslaved base with a narrowing elite atop. Not a bad emblem for the whole industrial project, Fordist modernity.

Speaking of empire and looking west in the murals: one finds an early image of corporate globalization. Mid-level and center, a monochrome panel that appears to be a sculpted limestone relief, portrays a river bearing along a freight ship. It is really two rivers meeting as one: the Detroit River and the greatest river on earth, the Amazon. It is their connection that speaks to industrial globalization.

Locally, the Detroit River basin defines the biological region in which we reside. The Ojibwa called it *Wamiatonong*, “where the river goes round.” Its shore was for them a place of meeting. And they trod lightly upon its banks. The Europeans named it *de troit*, “the straits.” It was for them a place of trade and eventually of forts, held and fought with warships. They made of it a border between nation states.<sup>4</sup> Omitted from Rivera’s image was the Ambassador Bridge, which had then recently been completed.

Today, on the bridge Free Trade Agreements accelerate the truck traffic

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<sup>3</sup> See Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

Also, contact *Fronteras Nortenas* (<http://www.losrepatriados.org>) co-founded by Elena Herrada to gather and protect the oral history of Detroit’s repatriado community.

<sup>4</sup> They also flushed their industrial machinery with the river. For the Rouge Plant the mainline to the Detroit River was in fact the River Rouge. Though a clean-up project has been hugely successful, in the Sixties, the Rouge was one of three rivers in the country to actually catch fire. Ironically, upstream it ran clear and clean through Fair Lane, the mansioned estate of Henry Ford, complete with a waterfall dam and a turbine system generating its own electricity. Thomas Edison sent a formal greeting to Ford for the dedication of the mansion’s bird fountain. He wrote: “I am greatly pleased to do so because, while mankind appears to have been gradually drifting into an artificial life of merciless commercialism, there are still a few who have not been caught in the meshes of this frenzy and who are still human; and enjoy the wonderful panorama of the mountain, the valley, and the plain with their wonderful content of living things – and among those versions I am proud to know my two friends, John Burroughs and Henry Ford.” About the scale of such self delusions I have nothing to say.

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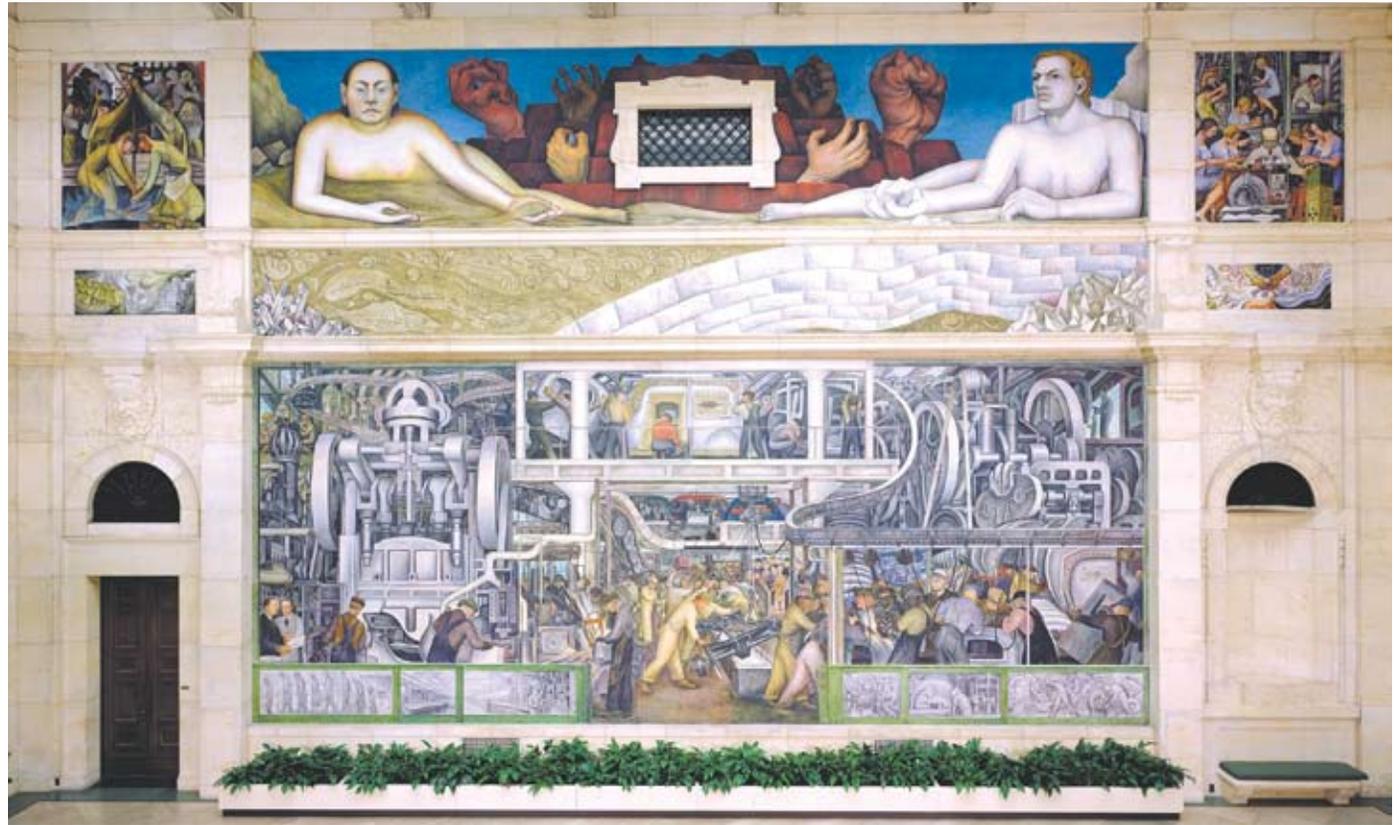
in commodities (and capital, of course, moves at the speed of light), though to human beings, Homeland Security tightens the gateway. The bridge's billionaire private owner now presses for a second span vying with the state against a downriver public version, while adjacent neighborhoods suffer his presumptions and the diesel fallout. The same neighborhoods are stalked by ICE and the Border Patrol. At our southern border the U.S. builds walls and the militarization is more complete.

In Rivera's image the two great rivers are joined by a shipping route that connects the northern hemisphere with the global south. The left side of the panel is recognizable as Detroit by dockworkers, the skyline, and the powerboats accompanying the freighter. The South American side is represented by rubber workers, the trees being extracted, and by giant fish swimming upstream. The workers, at different tasks, mirror each others' posture, suggesting their commonality and the hope of solidarity in a Pan-American union.

As should be clear, the murals are rich in ironies, subtle and blatant. Whether he knew it or not, this image of Rivera's would become increasingly so. Both ends reflect Ford Motor holdings at the time. Four years prior, in 1928, Ford had acquired two and half million acres along the Brazilian Amazon to grow his own rubber—at the time the only automobile raw material he did not control. But more, he tried to replicate there a Midwest American town, called Fordlandia, complete with hamburgers, a golf course, and telephone system. The indigenous trees (and their pests) resisted cultivation. And indigenous workers revolted against the cultural imposition of Americana, during one revolt smashing all the time clocks in the project. By 1945 the entire effort was abandoned and sold off without ever having delivered a single drop of latex to a Ford vehicle.<sup>5</sup>

Today market globalization assaults not only indigenous ways of life, but industrial ones. White flight figures into the devastation of Detroit, but no more than capital flight and deindustrialization. Unemployment in the city is almost 30 percent. In the last decade nearly a quarter million auto related jobs disappeared in the Metro area. They will not return.

Last year auto workers caravanning to Washington to lobby for the future, urged a vision of single payer health care and, get this, the conversion of the



Credit: South Wall of a Mural depicting Detroit Industry, 1932-33 (fresco) (see also 139314, 139316-17 & 112945 & 47) by Diego Rivera (1886-1957) The Detroit Institute of Arts, USA/ Gift of Edsel B. Ford/ The Bridgeman Art Library

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auto industry to mass transportation: build buses and trains, they said, even wind generators, in shuttering auto plants. Now there's a worker vision.

When Pablo Davis gave us his tour, he asked, "Do you see any cars in the mural?" We hunted the twisting motion of the line and its rich human narrative. Nary a one. Then he lifts his cane to point it out: dead center on the south wall, about two inches big at the vanishing point of the perspective. Here was the precise opposite of what Marx called commodity fetishization, where human value is projected onto a thing, inflating it in scale and import and summoning it into a life of its own. Rivera's reduction likewise marked the opposite of what the biblical texts call idolatry or that which they name as a "principality." This is the very idolatry that has been writ large in consumerism. If Henry Ford had painted the mural (never mind had he understood it), the car would have been huge as an SUV billboard, and the human beings minuscule cogs on the line.

The lobbying auto workers, bless their souls, were not stuck on the car. They imagined another world where a corporation might actually be accountable to and serve the city, serve human community, serve even the creation itself, holding out for a corporate vocation of transportation and sustainable energy.

Is such a conversion, spiritual and material, possible?

I don't know anyone with blueprints, but the material precedent most often cited (for good or ill) is Detroit as the Arsenal of Democracy—when for three years during World War II

industrial production in the city was quickly converted so that tanks, jeeps, and planes rather than cars rolled off the assembly lines of Detroit. An industrial conversion to green transportation and energy, a conversion to life instead of death, would take political will not yet seen, a focus and effort morally exceeding the warmaking enterprise.

Current efforts are far more modest. In Detroit, the General Motors Poletown plant (made famous in 1980 for being the first time eminent domain was used to level and clear an entire neighborhood for a profit-making corporation<sup>6</sup>) will be the assembly site for the Volt, GM's hybrid electric car. That's the industry's stab at leaner and greener. Another has an irony related to the mural: in a parody of earth above/plant below, the current Rouge truck plant has a green roof, some ten acres of drought-resistant perennial ground cover that reduces run-off and absorbs carbon dioxide, even providing a level of insulation. It's a good model—but at this point, little more than a public relations scheme.

Rivera himself, however, seems to foresee Arsenalization. High on the west wall we look out, as through basement windows toward the sky. On the left the civilian Ford Tri-motor airplane is in production and on the right, its use as a fleet of warplanes with gas-masked airmen is envisioned. Follow further right to an adjacent panel

on the north. In counterpoint to the healthcare nativity, eerie masked workers tend the construction of a poisonous gas bomb. It is practically tended as a "Little Boy." At the time of the painting these gas bombs had already been rendered illegal under international law, but the painter sees them being made. The gas weaponry of World War I, along with aerial bombardment, had ruptured the pretense of moral boundaries, opening the door wide to anti-personnel devices and weapons of mass destruction. The panel summons to mind the weapons used now in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Gaza—not to mention the undergirding nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and others.

The Industrialist himself is situated in the war corner. On the lower right west wall a composite of Henry Ford and Thomas Edison spreads out his own blueprint. Above him a hawk scattering doves is the emblem. It's worth noting that in the Thirties, the auto companies were investing in what came to be the Axis powers. Another early wave of corporate globalization. Ford was actually enamored of Adolph Hitler and if Germany had won the war, he would have come out impeccably Nazi, I suppose.

A friend of mine once noticed that the dynamo generator behind him forms an industrial-sized ear. This is telling as well. Henry Ford was notoriously

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<sup>5</sup> Grandin, Greg: *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (Metropolitan Books, June 2009). See also *The Amazon Awakens*, documentary on Fordlandia produced in 1944 by Walt Disney for the US Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> See Jeanie Wylie, *Poletown: Community Betrayed* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990) and the award-winning documentary, *Poletown Lives!* [www.informationfactory.info](http://www.informationfactory.info)

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ous for his surveillance.<sup>7</sup> Even of the murals themselves. Each night he would have Rivera's work photographed and pictures brought to him for study. Apparently, Rivera was too deft or Ford too artistically challenged to get the bitter ironies and critical vision. The risks to the piece were real. Rivera's next project in New York City was, in fact, destroyed by Nelson Rockefeller, his erstwhile benefactor.<sup>8</sup>

Ford's ear on the shop floor is represented on the south wall, a lower left panel of the final assembly where a foreman surveying the scene seems to eye the viewer suspiciously. More than one Rouge manager has been suggested for the portrait. I myself always imagined him Harry Bennett, Ford's enforcer and then heir apparent. If so I further imagine a .38 covered by his coat.

There is actually a jazz musical performance about the Rouge Plant in the Thirties, called *Forgotten*, planned in Detroit in March 2010.<sup>9</sup> A celebration of workers and a representation of the struggles in this period (including the Ford Hunger March and the Battle of the Overpass), it follows the true story of a pastor, the Rev. Lewis Bradford, who hosts a street-level radio show for and about people in the Detroit soup lines. It is, however, his work and organizing at the Ford Rouge plant that gets him murdered in an "industrial accident." Foil to Bradford's ministry is the character of Father Coughlin, a Ford confidant with his own radio show, also pro-fascist and presaging the era of hate radio. Toward the center of the south wall a priest and a handful of pious church people on a tour scowl indignantly at the workers. I think of Bradford, who would stand elsewhere, a worker/pastor incognito on the line. In the musical, Ford sings of inventing "auto love," a clever name for commodity consumerism with perverse erotic underscore. Bennett utters his own dark song before the deed.

But in the end, *Forgotten* is a story of recovered memory and even resurrection faith. The chorus invokes Joe Hill. "Don't mourn. Organize," says he. Of Bradford and the Hunger March martyrs: "We remember you/ We remember you/ What you gave/ What you've done/ Will not be Forgotten." I hope one day to hear those strains echoing off the mural—one production calling to another.

There is, in actuality, a resurrection taking place in Detroit today. A new economy really is being developed from the ground up. *Another Detroit is Happening*.

Kitty corner, across the street from my church, St. Peter's Episcopal,

there is a vacant lot several city blocks in size where old Tiger Stadium used to stand. In other neighborhoods such spaces are made by industrial plants carried off piecemeal in trucks like so much history lost and forgotten. I notice that the wound of demolition and removal of the old place is fresh enough that it still feels every time I look like a huge gaping hole has opened up in the world. That's Detroit. Things coming down and spaces opening up. But open spaces, as the Social Forum folks aver, mean possibility.

Thirty percent of Detroit is vacant land, like to nearly 40 square miles in the city limits. Google Earth that! This year 11,000 urban gardeners were connected to Detroit's Garden Resource Network. Three farms and over 300 school and community gardens bloomed in those open spaces, plus nearly 600 family plots—and those are just the ones formally connected to the Network. Some of these are public school-based, like Catherine Ferguson Academy where pregnant teens and young mothers, in the shadow of the barn they themselves raised, each have an organic plot ringing the former football field (where horses now graze). Some are like the simple line of raised beds we constructed behind our church parking lot, a cooperative venture between congregants, neighbors, and soup kitchen participants. Some gardens spring up on vacant land probably city-owned, but who knows? It feels like no one's been in charge for a couple years, so people just seize the opportunity. But imagine if there actually were a programmatic city policy, with protected zoning for urban agriculture or ways to legally get water from hydrants to vacant lots.

In fact, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network has shepherded through City Council a substantial resolution laying out policy directions related to food access, malnutrition, the role of schools and institutions, and urban agriculture. A Food Policy Commission has been created. It's beginning.

Do you know there's not a single brand name grocery store left in the city of Detroit? The chains are gone. Neighborhood groceries remain, but the closest and easiest food sources tend to be dollar stores, gas stations, fast food outlets, and party stores. Too many people try to live on chips and pop. The United Food and Commercial Workers, who lost the union grocery jobs from the city, are facilitating conversations with community organizations about worker-owned stores that sell local food as a matter of policy. Perhaps more to the point,

other conversations are in motion about a certified cannery where people could preserve and then sell their produce. A bigger operation could be making homegrown salsa, tomato sauce, and the like. Oh, bakeries of course—some amazing ones already, more planned. All feeding a budding system of small city farm markets. Lot by lot, store by store, we are rebuilding an organic local food system for a sustainable Detroit.

Are these "green jobs?" Some of them are. And there would be more to speak of. (Including some generated by the green parts of the stimulus package). But there's something of a shift going on among us from thinking about "jobs" (certainly those provided by corporations or government) to more entrepreneurial and community-based "work." In fact, some of them in gardening are more about community than jobs. They revive elder wisdom not yet lost and create inter-generational relationships. They foster real connection to place and to earth and to the creatures even in the living soil. They reclaim neighborhoods as public communal spaces, safe ones. They encourage an economy of giving and sharing. An economy more of grace than consumption. We're actually talking about love and hope.

So often we analyze "political economy," but more and more here we are thinking about "cultural economy," even "spiritual economy." How do we break the spiritual grip that individualism, materialism, consumerism, and economic expansionism have on us? What are the disciplines that simplify our lives so that others may simply live? How do we shift our hearts and our minds from "hoarding" to "release?" How do we think of economic practices and forms that constantly build community and human relationship?

Currently there's a film making rapid rounds in Detroit: *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I forbear to open the topic of political surveillance here. It has become omniscient. NSA, FBI, CIA, Homeland Security. However, it is commercial surveillance which has become numbingly ubiquitous. Not simply shopfloor cameras, but those in malls, and stores, and building-mounted street corners. Add the consolidation of credit card data collection, shopping cards, cookies and computer spyware, and the like.

<sup>8</sup> Not Henry Ford, but Edsel was the benefactor of the mural. To suppress or destroy it, father would have had to go through son. Rivera's refusal to compromise his vision and the resulting destruction of the NY mural is portrayed in two popular films: *Frida* and also *Rock the Cradle*.

<sup>9</sup> March 26, 2010, Macomb Community College presents "*Forgotten*" at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts, as part of a spring program and exhibit on the 1930s and the Great Depression built around the theme *And Yet They Survived*. My own review of an earlier production may be found at <http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=147>

Here's the story: When the Cold War ended, Cuba's oil spigot from the Eastern Bloc got shut off. Having once succumbed to petroleum-based, mechanized, soviet-style agriculture, an island people, already under U.S. embargo, had to figure out urgently how to survive without oil and feed themselves. Everybody lost 20 pounds. Bikes figured in, imported and newly-produced. But above all, organic and community-based gardens carried the day. They sprung up at first unbidden, by necessity, and then were supported by government policy. Today, half the food in Havana is grown in Havana! For smaller cities it's more like 80 percent. For the filmmakers it's an edifying lesson in how to survive the pending global collapse from the peaking of oil supplies. Me and a bunch of other Detroiters? We're thinking deindustrialization, and that Detroit could prove to be the Cuba of the rustbelt.

Or, dare we imagine, what about becoming the Chiapas of the Midwest? What if Detroiters created a kind of autonomous zone for economic life? Instead of trying to access and compete in the global economy, what if we figured out ways to disconnect altogether from finance capital and Wall Street? What if people burned their Chase credit cards? What if we stopped trying to lure corporations and their jobs back into the city, and instead recreated a truly local economy, of human scale, even with local currency that kept things moving and circulating close to home? What if it's already happening and the urban agriculture movement is one of its emblematic forms?

I think again of Rivera's placental veins reaching for the Michigan fruits and vegetables. Sustenance is being drawn to the earth-bound fetus. The creation groans in travail awaiting a birth, even a new humanity.

Rivera asked it, and we are asking it too: What does it mean to be human in such a time and place as this?