

Tuesday night discussions give Street Roots a fresh view

BY STOOP NILSSON
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educator and theorist, said that education is the practice of freedom. He made a life of practicing this wisdom through the development of his conversational and controversial method of teaching and learning. When he taught peasants how to read he transformed the poorest and most oppressed members of his society into activated and involved workers for justice. His work made such an impression on the nation that he was exiled from his country. But why is this important, and how is this story connected to our community? Well, truth be told, we want to do something transformational in Portland.

From mission bread lines in the broken down, programmed pockets of the city, to prison cell blocks, city sidewalks, four-walled classrooms, playgrounds, parks, and piers; to the ivory towers of academia, to street corner cafes, to cockroach-infested tenement houses, to cozy condos with city views, the nightly news and the podcast of the hour, information is flying. It is unforgiving, always forming, constantly changing and intersecting, but not often penetrating the barriers that stand in the way of real communication and a deeper understanding between the many worlds of a bustling metropolis in ways that will transform our city — our lives — by virtue of connections made and relationships built. We live with much and little: lots of perspectives, perceptions, myths, realities, plenty, and poverty. But how will we best enjoy and engage one another if we don't make room to meet our diverse lives face to face? How will we know where to get involved, what battles to fight, if we haven't paid attention or engaged the different angles and impacts of our current systems on our society in the everyday lives of our struggling neighbors, our policy makers, our workers, owners, artists, and beggars?

Street Roots has an idea. Let's all get together for coffee and conversation! Lots of different kinds of folks from the neighborhood are reading our paper — all kinds of smart and interesting people. We're reading and thinking, maybe mentioning a thought or two to a friend, or only just keeping the thought to ourselves. But where is the greater dialogue between the policy makers and the traveling hobo,



"Share," by Street Roots vendor Gimel.

between the comfortable suburbanite, and the middle class family of four who just lost everything?

There are obvious gaps in services, glitches in systems, disillusioned providers, and a grip of citizens reacting to poverty as if it is a disease, resulting in stories untold, and the greater isolation of people from those who could well create mighty partnerships based around advocacy and education in the diverse communities of the city. There are geographical paradoxes that baffle some and are unseen by others — beneath the Burnside Bridge — home to the beggar, where sack lunches, sneaker giveaways,

and homeless campers set up shop following the deconstruction of Saturday Market's tourist and trinket trap; where consumers bring their wallets, buy beautiful things, and don't often think twice that the flag-flying vagabond could easily be their brother-mother-grandparent, and may likely be swept from their precious sleep in the middle of the night by the boot of a private security guard to the ribs.

But where is our human analysis? When laws targeting our neighbors living outside are forged by politicians and private business interests that have never had to fight to meet their most basic needs —

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food, shelter, medical care, sleep — there is something seriously wrong. When services are cut, because we need to "stimulate the economy" who is hurt the most? These days it can really be anyone. But why is it that the people most affected are most often the ones left out in the crafting of solutions? Why must we criminalize individuals, and set up agencies to fail, because we continue to ignore the root causes of poverty and homelessness by relying on reactionary mechanisms, rather than systemic prevention? We could be creating jobs that build affordable housing, opening all the empty lots and parks for safe sleeping until these structures are available, creating incentives for downtown building owners to provide affordable housing, and rent controls to protect people from getting moved out of their homes for renovations and inflations.

We have shown through history that we can overcome great obstacles, and it has always been because we have come together, not allowing our differences to prevent us from finding common passions that compel us to work for the strengthening of all people, rather than only just a few. Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement encouraged us to live in such a way that we create communities where it is easier to be and do good, and in doing so, build a "new" new society within the shell of the old." Let's get to work listening to one another, for when we have heard and shared the stories of our lives, we will be inspired to act in the changing of the world around us, by first changing ourselves.

We invite you to be a part of Street Roots' new dialog project, Roots With A View. Every Tuesday following publication, we'll gather to discuss and synthesize the issues of the day. We'll meet and address one another through the lens of our unique experiences in a lively roundtable discussion focused on current events, policy analysis, and clarification of thought. We welcome your voice to the table. Bring your perspective to share and we will all come away humbled to see reality in a different light.

The Wraith

By Terris Harned

I glide through the night on wings of despair.
I am unseen by the eyes of the living.
And yet my eyes see things the living do not.

I see the girl, all dressed in black.
Her face is painted white, her lips blood red.
Her soul cries.
She wants to be accepted.

I see the man with the styled hair.
The collar of his Gap polo standing high.
He preys on women to find what he seeks.
Someone who will love him, as much as he loves himself.
Or what he thinks is love, at any rate,
that yearning in his loins.

I see the Family.
The parents working too many hours to talk to each other.
Ships passing in the night
The faces of their children dirty, their eyes hungry.
All of their hopes long since erased.
The Father drinks to forget his life.
They want the picket fence.

I seem them in their nice suits.
Men and women both.
Their jackets a barrier between them and the world.
They crave something they cannot ever have enough of.
It's lure is hypnotic to them. It calls to them.
And burns holes in their pockets.
Never enough money no matter what they buy.

And I see the Evil Merchant.
The true predator.
He preys on all those above.
He peddles his sinister wares on the corners.
Vials of dreams. Rocks of Energy.
Powders to make the pain stop.
He takes from all those who seek to fill the empty holes in their hearts.
And replaces it with illusion.
Snake oil cures.
Hole the cure.
Extra venom.

He sees me and is afraid.
I offer what he does not, to those who don't even see me.
I carry my head high.
I look them in the eye.
I make them see me.
I make them see my selves.
I am a champion of truth.
I reject society's lures.
and I pay the price.

I am homeless and I dwell in the hell of the city.
Waiting for resurrection.