

Urban hobo brings sales to life in downtown

BY KAISA CROW
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Buy a copy of Street Roots from vendor John Michael Christian if you are passing by SW 6th and Salmon outside of Starbucks, or some mornings, if you find yourself leaving Great Harvest Bread at SW 2nd and Yamhill. The least you'll get is the paper, but if you have a few more minutes, you can get a lot more. John Michael, although he doesn't take to

VENDOR PROFILE John Michael

labeling himself, is an artist, a writer, a teacher and spiritual guide, whose own life is reflected and expanded in a message of love and compassion that he wants to share with others.

That message is so ready to be shared, that when I arrived late to our interview it felt suddenly as if I had tuned in late to "This American Life" and was scrambling excitedly to put together what I had already missed in Part I. Tall in stature and slightly flaired in dress, John wore a blue stocking cap, a cross necklace layered over a rosary, and donned painted red fingernails, which appeared both calculated and cursory at the same time. We attempted to go for a walk, which lasted only a block before I found myself simply leaning against a lamp post, listening intently to both his personal story as well as his life philosophies, which he collects in a working tome titled, "Hobo Metaphysics."

For John, "hobo" is the term he prefers over "homeless." He doesn't like the stigma attached to the word homeless and sees hobo containing a greater spirit of adventure. Traditionally, hobos have been known to be train-hoppers and travelers, and as John Michael says coyly, "handsome men of the road." So when John Michael talk about hobos he is at times referring to his greater community, but I also get a sense that there is a dignity that lies in the attainment of a higher level of "hobo-ness."

However, if enlightenment is necessarily preceded by struggle and pain, much of what John writes and shares stems from the harsher side of life's experiences and living on the streets rather than its idealized adventures. John felt a huge, painful shift in



his life when he was able to reconnect with memories of sexual abuse from his childhood that had been blocked out, which reshaped the trajectory of the following years of his life. Plagued by shame and self-loathing, and many years that he says he spent "feeling sorry for himself," John Michael spent years "hoboing" across the South, mostly alone, reading all he could and slowly, unconsciously, working through some of his pain. That time took on a tone of spiritual solitude for John Michael, and it was this that gave him an opportunity to begin the healing process, a vital step for his happiness.

Considering himself a lone-hobo, when he eventually ended up in Portland among a

large community experiencing homelessness, it rocked his world and moved his heart. He was blown away by the repeated abuses and wounds people were suffering, and the enormous need for healing that he could see and feel around him, and decided he wanted to tell people's stories. "People want to understand homelessness," he says. "There are so many stereotypes, people don't know what to think. I kind of want to put a human face on it."

John Michael writes these stories and shares his "hobo metaphysics," with others. "The eyes see only what the mind allows," he says when talking about the limitations we place on ourselves by letting our painful

experiences shape where we can or can't go in life. "It's not who you are, or what you are, only that you are."

An ardent reader and spiritual journeyman, John Michael can quote the writings of spiritual leaders and gurus from many different schools of thought. One of those gurus is Jesus Christ, who proclaimed that what you measure out in this world will be measured back to you. "He is talking about karma," said John simply, and he practices it. He isn't preoccupied with finding one route to peace or heaven, instead likening each spiritual journey to different modes of transportation, all taking us to the same place. He doesn't understand those that would point a finger at someone's spiritual path and say "That ain't the right bus. Nonsense," he laughs. "Why would you even care?"

Instead, "hobo metaphysics" is grounded in a philosophy of learning to love oneself and accept that we each deserve healing, compassion and love. John Michael aspires to pass on these tenets. "I want to teach people," he says. "Not like I'm this big wise guy, but I think I have some wisdom to pass on." He sees a world around him of "the walking wounded," especially in his street community, people in desperate need of some time and space to heal. He doesn't believe pain and abuse are natural, but instead are a departure from our original state of happiness.

This state he sees as possible again, through a belief in ourselves and a higher power. "What you believe is true, is true. So if you must carry beliefs, make it just two: Belief in God, and the belief in You, until the differences between you are through." Once a love for oneself is attained, he believes the capacity for compassion and healing necessarily spills over into our human community.

"Kindness is the goal," he says. "It is what I want to feel for people all the time." He acknowledges the struggle that this can be, and the requirement for the active practice of loving your neighbor in a world so askew. But it is the practice and dedication to a better way that brings so much hope to John Michael's perspective. To him, everyone is a lovable, yet repressed, creative genius. You may be one yourself, in fact. John Michael assures you that you are. Stop by for a chat, and in no time he'll have your rapt attention, and will be underway helping you discover it for yourself.

Answers to puzzles on page 15

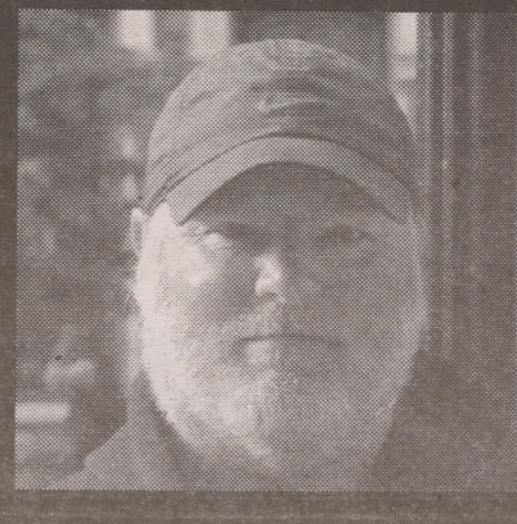
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CORRECTIONS

Street Roots strives for accuracy, but we're human. So we also strive to correct errors in our paper whenever possible. Please report any errors to our managing editor, Joanne Zuhl, at 503-228-5657, or write to joanne@streetroots.org

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