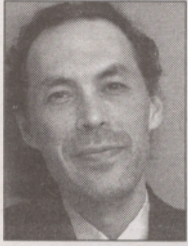


# Don't be helpless. Exercise your free speech and give



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BY ANDY KO  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Autumn has always affected me the same way. This time of year and its fading light draw me into a reflective mood — let's say an even more reflective mood. I think quite a lot about my family, my friends, what has been good in the year and what I could have wished different. I don't become morose, quite the opposite. This is a time of anticipation and hope for me. I think about the holidays, followed by a fresh new year, projects to begin both at home and at work ... fishing the winter steelhead run. But, my thinking does inevitably settle on the contradictions in life. I'll give you an example.

Our country endures as the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. And Americans, for all our mistakes, are fundamentally honest, caring, generous people. I truly believe that. But, what a

contradiction we have created! While most of us have more (at least materially) than our ancestors, an alarming number of American men, women and children teeter on the brink of homelessness, malnourishment,

violence, arrest and imprisonment, health crisis, addiction, family disintegration and political disenfranchisement. Others of us have more than we could need in 10 lifetimes. We have created a society that tolerates, and often celebrates, the enormous gap in the way rich people and poor people live — and for no good reason.

This contradiction of lasting (and possibly growing) poverty within our wealthy nation is at the center of America's internal

struggle. While we have one of the most scientifically advanced medical systems in the world, we still have millions of Americans with no health care coverage. While business generates enormous wealth for some, we permit corporations to break faith with retired employees whom they promised to support in old age. There are many other examples, but they always seem to be traceable back to the gap between who has control of the money.

Most people are aware, on some level, that this is a problem. But people react in different ways. Some of us wrap ourselves in our wealth like a security blanket (it doesn't take much) and go to sleep. Others of us build a fortress out of our prosperity, investing in political movements and ideologies that further promote the idea of personal wealth as a virtue: the outcome of our hard work and good judgment, or the hard work of our parents, grandparents or great-grandparents. Both of these reactions, I imagine, make it easier to accept (or support) attacks on poor undocumented workers, elimination of safety net programs for underemployed Americans, or criminalization of many of the things that poor people have always done to survive. Maybe it also makes it easier to accept that monument to American inequality: the system that, on any given day, holds roughly 2.2 million of us in prisons and jails.

We all know something is wrong, but there are precious few ideas what to do about it. I don't have a lot of suggestions myself, but I do have one. How about accepting, just for a moment, that money is our power? No one, who I have heard, has said that money is love or that billionaires should get extra votes on Election Day — not yet. But the Supreme Court of the United

States has said that money spent to express our individual will is constitutionally protected speech. Start by "talking" small. There are an endless number of ways to use your money — just a little of it — to help build the community, state, nation — world that you want.

And there are easy ways to do it. If you live in the Portland metropolitan area (and even if you don't), you could get on the Internet to make a contribution to one of the nonprofits in the Willamette Week Give!Guide. [www.giveguide.org](http://www.giveguide.org) [Full disclosure: My organization, Partnership for Safety and Justice, is in there this year — but there are 135 other organizations doing important work, so give to one or more of them!] Or, if you're a little more ambitious and want to expand your search outside of Oregon, you could get on a philanthropy website, like Philanthropedia, [www.myphilanthropedia.org](http://www.myphilanthropedia.org). You also could go the direct route and just put a \$10 bill into the hand of someone who seems to need it. There are a lot of great nonprofit groups doing important work, but you don't need to make it complicated.

Some people reading this might think, "Whose life is \$10 going to change?" I have an answer for that, too. It is going to change yours. The simple act of moving the wealth that some of us have been blessed with — by God, luck, hard work, whatever you believe in — to the "have nots" is proof that we are not helpless. Start small, but make sure it is meaningful to you. Breaking down the contradiction between what we feel is important and our seeming inability to affect change is the first step toward finding answers to our problems as a nation. I believe that. And, even if I'm wrong, it's only 10 bucks.

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## A hike through time

by Allison Strange

I started my hike 29 years ago  
Oh, what a long hike it's been  
I've met some wonderful people on the road of life  
Have been shown some exciting miracles  
I sit here on a break in my hike of life  
And I think of all the people I have met  
I know some have hurt me  
But both kind have helped me along my hike  
I see kindness in strangers,  
Rudeness in some that are close to me,  
And some that take me by surprise,  
But they all push me along on my path  
I know that someday when my hike is over,  
I'll be rewarded  
By seeing the ones again that have completed their hike before me.

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