

Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO

Let's all reject the cruelties of the status quo

In the morning light in Old Town, an elderly woman trudged down a rain-shiny sidewalk on Sixth Avenue, her backpack full and sagging low.

It was unclear how much her appearance of advanced age was from lived years and how much was from a hard life. But what was clear was that each movement was an effort – her body in pain.

Here in Portland, elders live in cars and doorways, in shelters and in tents.

Sometimes it takes an effort to notice how wrong this is.

"We all want to live a well-adjusted life," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told a crowd at Western Michigan University in 1963, but "there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted."

He went on to list many injustices to which he refused to adjust: racial segregation and discrimination, religious bigotry, militarism, violence.

"I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few," Dr. King went on to say, "and leave millions of God's children smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society."

It was those lines that echoed for me as I witnessed this elder walk slowly and with great effort.

Extreme poverty is "an airtight cage" at any age, but as a person ages and weakens, vulnerabilities compound. Seniors suffering poverty are on average more disabled than the more wealthy elderly population. Catastrophes descend suddenly: health crises, foreclosures, deaths. People age with no savings. Forced to choose between food, medicine and rent, their difficulties compound.

Some people may have hoped to earn wages into old age, but their bodies failed to keep up.

Those who have the physical health for employment may face age discrimination, and if they are able to secure a minimum-wage job, those wages do not add up to enough to pay for an apartment in this city.

This is clearly a situation to which, as Dr. King said, we should never adjust.

Let us not adjust to the fact that many people in Portland cannot afford housing. Historical injustices compounded by present-day injustices mean that, on average, Native American and African American-led households make less than half that of households led by white Portlanders and, as a result, those households cannot afford apartment rents in our city. Connected to this fact, Native American Portlanders are more than four times more likely to be homeless than white Portlanders; African American Portlanders are more than twice as likely.

Let us refuse to adjust to the fact that if people cannot afford housing, they may end up on the streets.

Isn't it bizarre that luxury dwellings targeted to wealthy people should be built before every single person is housed?

Let me repeat Dr. King here to underline this point: "I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few."

Shouldn't we refuse the cruelties of market-rate housing that privileges the second, fourth, tenth dwelling for a wealthy person over the first dwelling for any person? I am not advocating for shoddy construction. The poorest among us deserve well-built, beautifully designed, sustainable, smart dwellings.

Dr. King went on in his speech to call for an "International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment." This, he asserted, would be peopled by those who refuse to accept the cruelties of the status quo but instead strive for justice.

In the courageous light cast by Dr. King's thinking, to be creatively maladjusted would be to imagine a Portland where housing was not simply real estate. Housing would be a right.



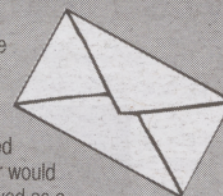
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

Kaia Sand is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach her at kaia@streetroots.org. Follow her on Twitter @mkaiasand

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Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

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kaia@streetroots.org
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joanne@streetroots.org
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cole@streetroots.org
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