

*“Happiness is the criterion of excellence in the art of living...”*

# American Street Philosophers

# The Success of Failure

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## CREATE HAPPINESS

Steve Wilson and Friends

*“Happiness is man’s greatest achievement;  
it is the response of his total personality to a productive orientation  
toward himself and the world outside.”*

Erich Fromm in *MAN FOR HIMSELF*

## AMERICAN STREET PHILOSOPHERS

volume:

- I **THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE**
- II WE’VE BEEN THINKING...AND IT WORKS
- III KEEP ON...KEEPING ON...
- IV THEM IS US
- V THE ‘ELSEWHERE’ OF RISING EQUALITY

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[AmericanStreetPhilosophers.org](http://AmericanStreetPhilosophers.org)

Steven C. Wilson  
ENTHEOS  
Seabeck, WA 98380-1089  
360.434.1347





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*Occupy Opportunity*

...and the street philisophers' challenge:

Blend passion, work and cooperation-without-expectation.

Add humility, patience and love.

Season with reliable justice, respectful compassion and humor.

Combine with frugal generosity, trust and fun.

Evenly enforce simple, understandable rules.

# For me, this project began

thirty-five years ago, inversely and vicariously; by which I mean I was a spectating participant at housing's top, not bottom. We had funding to make *Credit Card: Earth*, a documentary on Man's use of the planet... too much 'Nature' was becoming 'natural resources'. We could 'make a statement'. We interviewed dozens. Kristy Comstock, the nine-year old daughter of the mayor of Palo Alto, summarized and clarified:

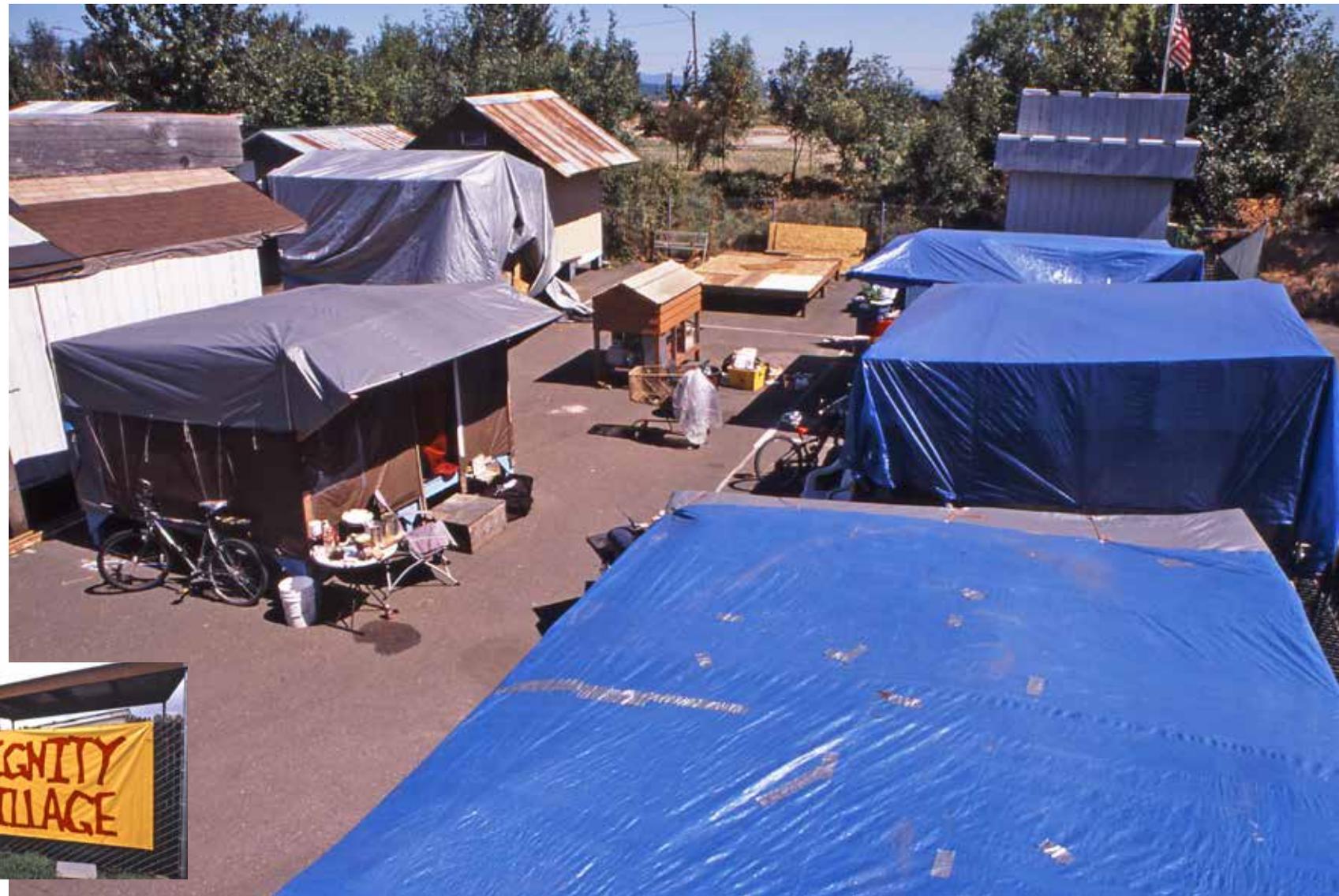
*"We have a house is as much bigger than we need, but we like it, and that's the problem."*

I opened the film with that quote. Skip forward thirty years. I am doing a magazine series on small residential architecture: house boats, tree houses, gypsy wagons, etc. Jeff and Samara, my Oregon building and brewing local knowledge suggest I go to Portland's Rebuilding Center. "They know eco-conscious small home owner-builders using recycled material." I go. They know. And that afternoon I'm a couple hundred yards west of Portland International Airport.

On an acre of asphalt parking lot, squeezed between the city's dusty composting facility, a jail, United Van Lines' warehouses and Sunderland Avenue...a confusion of tarped 2x4 and plywood 10' x 12' "boxes" cuddle inside a chain link fence. A sign says, Dignity Village.



Tim, a Village co-founder, escorts and informs me as I photograph the embryonic architecture.



A motherly woman sitting on the steps of a crowned 12-foot cube waves a “Hi.” I talk with her about her 12’× 12’× 12’ building. “It’s my wonderful story. I was walking across the Burnside bridge” (a homeless favorite) ”and this homeless man hollers, ‘Hey Babe, come



shack up with me!’ I fire right back, ‘I only shack up with people who live in ‘castles.’ I look again, for the first time seeing parapets and gargoyles. Unmistakably ‘castle.’ Yes, oh wonderful. She smiles. Yes and Yes again.

Architecture becomes just scene-setting language.  
**My story is people’s stories.**

A twenty-something with ‘NY’ baseball cap, a college student using his overseas-study year “to

experience homelessness in the US” offers a vignette: “A while back I met an extremely attractive co-ed and asked her out. For our first date I took her dumpster-diving for pizza.” Smiling, I asked how long the relationship lasted. “Oh, maybe a year. It lasted until she stopped rebelling against ‘shouldn’ts’, ‘wouldn’ts’ and ‘but ifs.’

On the Village security shack blackboard white chalk spells, **“It’s drama, not trauma.”**





“...it’s like a real whatever,  
*...the freedom to be responsible.*

Use it or lose it.”

---

# Dignity Village, Inc.

“Coming out of doorways, out from under bridges, from under bushes in parks, on windy, cold December 16th, the year 2000, eight homeless men and women pitched five tents on public land: Dignity Village was born.

“With nothing, but no longer obliged to fear Portland’s Draconian camping ban lately overturned on constitutional grounds, they came with green, sustainable urban village visions of living in peace and improving the condition of their own lives and Portland’s...a self-made future for themselves and a do-it-yourself model for others.

“From such a humble, and admittedly civilly disobedient beginning, the journey to their present location in Sunderland Yard has not been without incident. This is their sixth, and the only location not arrived at in one of their notorious “shopping cart” parades. Seeking safety and self-governance, the 60 transient members of Dignity Village have become a solid grassroots democracy...an established part of a solution to ease a world-wide catastrophe.



“Over 900 homeless people, many with mothers who love them, friends that cherish them and often with children who need them, have been sheltered using their opportunity to get lives in order, seek employment, save money and move toward independence. Homeless people helping homeless people at a social and economic cost far below other solutions. Couples and pets are welcome. No background check required. Sweat equity counts.

“An Oregon registered 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, Dignity Village is democratically self-governed with a mission to provide transitional housing that fosters community and self-empowerment. The vision: build by and for ourselves with mostly donated and/or recycled materials a village of houses, solar and wind powered, composting toilets, growing organic food in greenhouse and garden fields...ingeniously frugal and no paid staff.”

*(Dignity Village,  
9401 NE Sunderland Ave.,  
Portland, OR 97211: 503.281.1604)*





Jon Boy's quik Village facts:



“On this 125' × 294' piece of asphalt we built 42 homes with recycled building materials, about twenty bucks a square foot. Each on its 20' × 20' lot. Each no taller than 13'6" which means 'portable' and 18 'cat-accessible inches' above the asphalt which means no rats...

## 1.3 Acres West of PDX

“The Village happened at the right time: the Portland City Council, the location, potential inhabitants - all energized to happen, to succeed.

“First, tents on plywood on top of pallets.

“...rats...rats...rats.

You couldn't imagine the rats.

Rats **everywhere...**

**It was impossible.**

The pile of dead rats was three feet in diameter and a foot high, **but we overcame.**

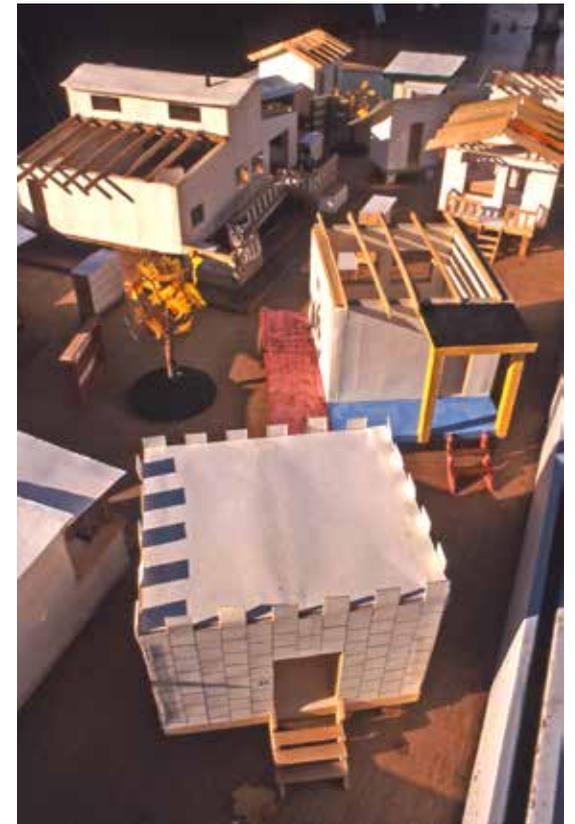




“Zoned as ‘campground’,  
code compliant and  
fire marshal inspected,  
sixty, plus or minus inhabitants,  
no background check required  
‘Old time is no crime’,  
self-govern with bylaws  
birthed from consultations with  
the U.S. Bill of Rights and Constitution,  
the UN Bill of Rights,  
the Talmud,  
the Bible and  
the Koran.

“...it was impossible.  
It was *absolutely* impossible,  
but **WE DID IT.**





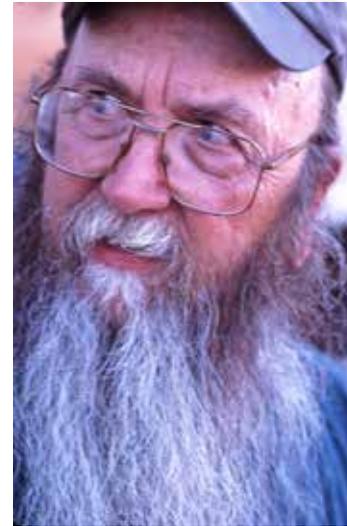
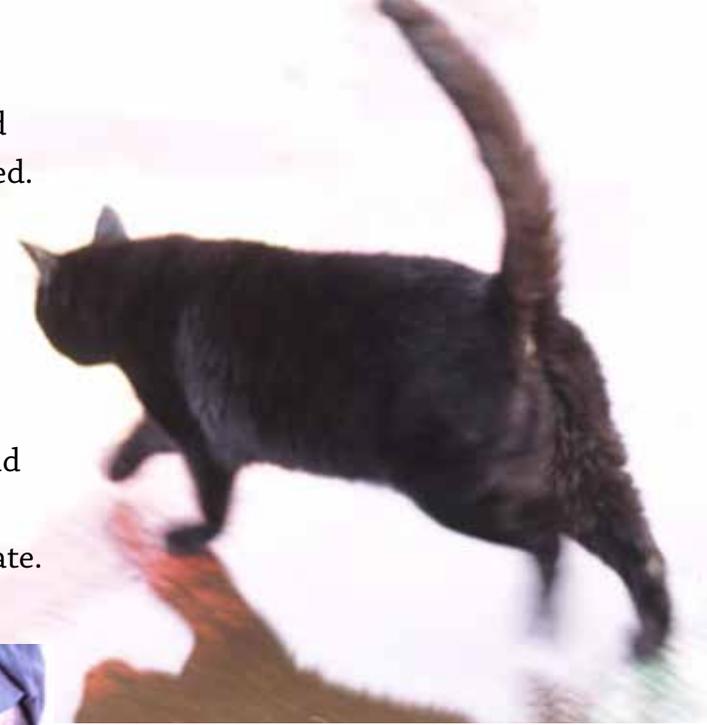
“...*absolutely* impossible,  
but **WE DID IT.**”



Tim, ex-Village CEO and  
eight-year resident talked.  
I wrote.

## Za Cat

Throw-away kids  
living under the west end  
of the Fremont Bridge  
on dirt owned by the state.



16 December 2000

The state demanded the city evict.  
The Village was a necessity.  
“We could build scratch from recycle.  
We needn’t worry about cops  
or thrown stones.  
We were privileged.



“Eight people had gone out and set up tents that first night. Days, now historic, became nights became fights became discussions **became sixty unwanted people, unwanted even by ourselves, working together to make us what we are:**

I, I, I, and me, me, me  
became  
us, us, us and we, we, we.

“Our concept of the Village was to make people interact every day. Every rule was based upon the Golden Rule. The bylaws were done under the Fremont bridge each on a roll call vote of the 150 people:

- change our mind set
- relearn work ethics
- reacquaint with education
- distinguish wants from needs
- share kindness and fun.





“The Village became a way big part of me  
extending my father’s: ’tis better to help than accumulate;  
'tis better to enhance than insult;  
'tis better to kindle loving kindness.”

A roar from the bushes  
and Tim yells ‘za cat.’  
And since he comes,  
he is ‘Za Cat.’  
He ups a tree, three dogs beneath:  
Zam Zam, Zeldaway and Zag.





Next morning Zag joins him in the branches.  
Day three ends with three friendly dogs,  
and a cat by craft and cunning  
gifting Tim's sleeping bag  
with a nearly-fresh mouse.

Za Cat and dogs and nearly-fresh mice,  
hopes and helps and hungers;  
**the joys and sadness of life**  
**offer the choice of being saint or rascal.**



# Attitudes and Perspective

Shadowy gestures animate the veil of light that fills Jeff's cabin with grey-blue air. Amid the pleasures of conversation we are discovering things we didn't know we knew. Jeff's cell phone records all, while my pen captures essential words for crafting the ideas.



Jeff shares personal history and defines the spirit of Dignity Village.



“I grew up in Catholic history, attitudes and perspective. I didn't understand and wasn't understood, but adhered to the rules 'til my teen rebellion against all 'isms'. Then focusing agreeable communicative humor for a want, a need, a desire to become one within a greater One.”

The door opens.  
A couple of Villagers smile,  
back away closing the door.  
(Jeff's 24/7 availability for non-judgemental listening.)

“The birth of this place was to facilitate life.  
The original vision to respond to  
the unique requirements of a poverty community.







“Separateness is the tragedy.

“Undercurrents from human interactions not being dealt with.

Just a lot of people behind a fence, not a community.

The physical realm a can of sardines

and the sardines in the can are bickering.



“Ask about the purpose of the Village?

The Village experience needs a paradigm shift.

Homeless come out of a muddy puddle

and need a whole new shining...Enlightenment.”

I ask Jeff for the ‘what’ details.

He responds with a list of classes, workshops:

“sensing not being separate”

“communicating with authentic connection”

“quelling of emergent fires”

“self-awareness—honest, trusting”

“participate in creativity”

“opportunities to trade talents for dollars.”

“A Village of clarity, charity and education

for the people passing through.”

Attitudes and perspective?

“Yes, attitudes and perspective.”









I'm listening to Melissa A,  
homeless and on her first  
visit to the Village.

## Stop, Look and Listen

"You're down, broken.

You've done it.

You don't trust yourself.

**You need to be your own hero**

but that's days and weeks away.

"I shouldn't be here

but I've made bad decisions

...and every time I chose the wrong thing

it got deeper and more difficult  
...living in 'mud' instead of different.

"I know I can reach it.  
'It' is purpose,  
competence and energy,  
understanding and happiness -  
so many things  
and when they're all put together  
they bring **stability**.

"Whatever they are  
is what I'm trying to become.

"First time I fell  
I lay there and cried.  
Second time I knew  
it was going to hurt.  
Third time, I asked,  
"Why am I falling?  
Self-destruction?  
Heart aches?  
Relationships?  
Motherhood?"

"I can't figure them out separately  
but it's getting easier to get back on track.  
When I fall,  
all my life experiences and lessons  
pad and protect me.



"Twelve years ago when I,  
when my son was born  
I had purpose.  
I had allegiance.  
But I made mistakes I can't take back.  
Can I show him I care?  
Can I show him what I've become?  
I talk a good talk.  
It all makes sense up here, in my head,  
but I can't walk it.  
I make a million excuses for myself,  
for my reactions to things,  
for how I spend my energy.

"All the discussions,  
all the past I need to give up.  
I look at myself and wonder.  
Am I'm putting on a mask:  
...happy adventuress  
...or bitter, dark and alone?"

“Tears, sadness, anguish.  
Every time I’ve been alone  
it’s been a result of tragedy.  
Am I always going to wear that jacket,  
trying, pretending to be something I’m not?  
It’s choice, over and over and over again.

“With no skill to ignore it, to walk on,  
I create my own demise.  
I need to stop, look and listen.  
To be aware.  
I’m not quiet, looking for what I want:  
looking for love,  
...for not being hurt;  
...to be soft and peaceful.  
But life comes in forms that are unexpected,  
and always tempting.  
...I’m wondering,  
coming and going.

“OK, how do I put this?  
Addictions: alcohol  
...now exercising  
(6 days a week, 4 hours a day)  
I replace one addiction with another,  
living in our culture’s addiction to Comfort.

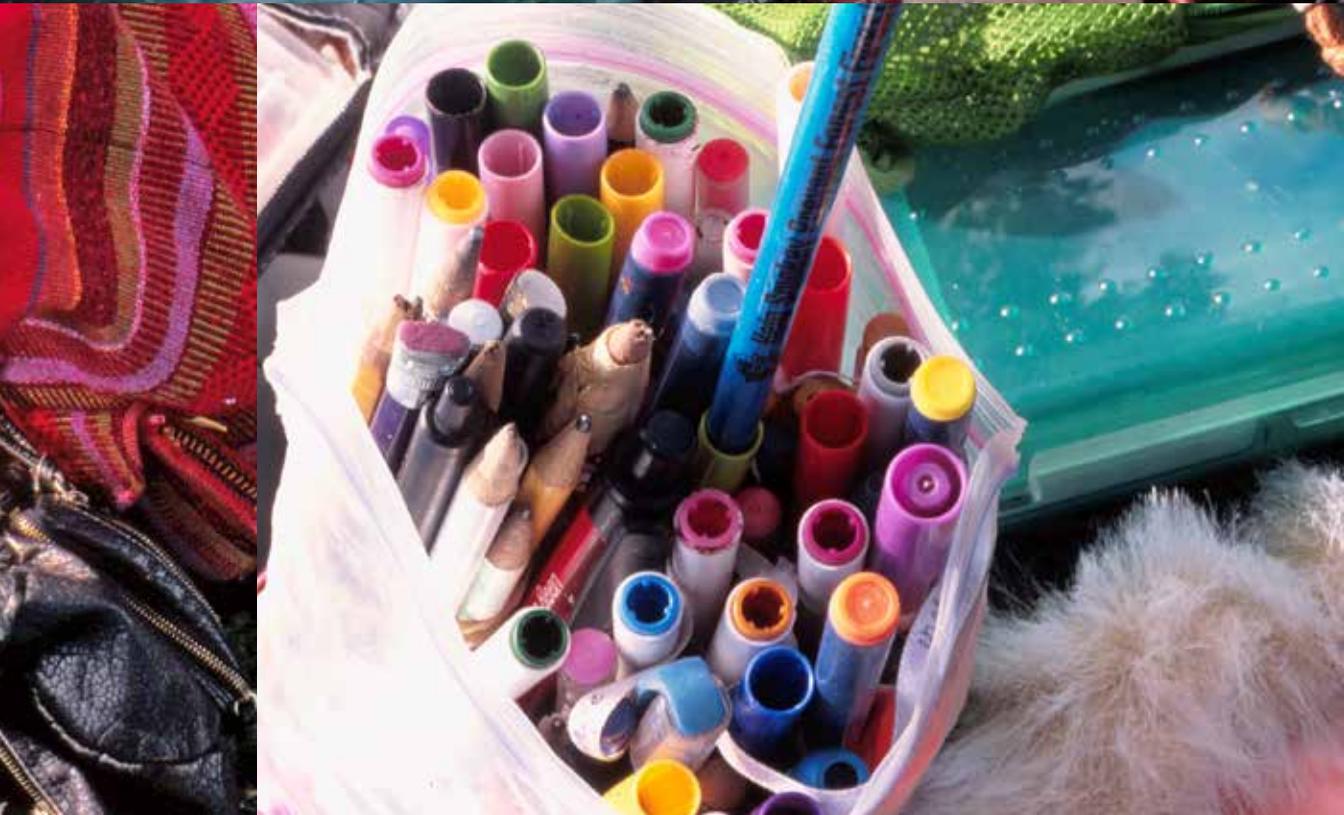
“I want to be obedient to myself.  
I want control.  
But how?





I organize my stuff.  
I get clean.  
I throw everything in the trash:  
all my paraphernalia in the trash.  
It's a choice I'm comfortable with.  
But it only works when I quit  
polluting the waters of my life.

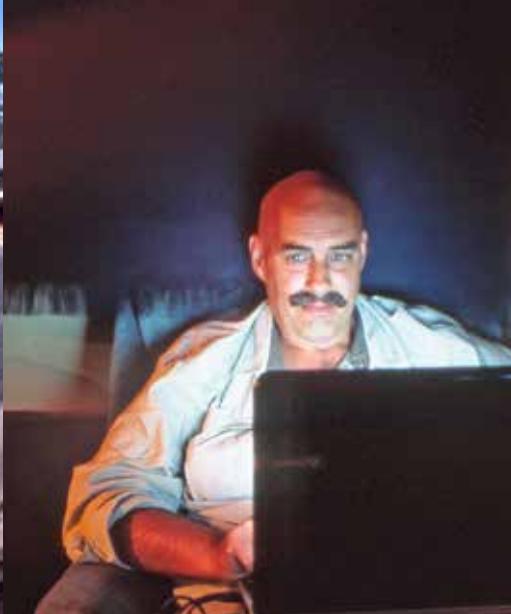
"I forgive me  
but I can't forget.  
Do I have to live in that dump?  
I'm moving forward.  
I want to stay focused.  
It's choice over and over and over again  
to be with loving, kind, helpful, patient people.  
To take care of our place.  
To respect this land that is borrowed.





“Walk on and tell me  
what I’m looking at.  
I see little that is taken care of.  
Not even the people themselves.  
**Yet I like the way we speak plain English to each other.”**







Paul C and I  
talked about Dignity Village  
and a day later the “Professor”  
handed me a sheaf of notes:



## “I’m Crazy...Trust Me...”

With no particular order of importance  
the up and down observations  
and philosophy  
of a sporadically homeless person  
eating, breathing and living  
at Dignity Village.

Can a carpenter do brain surgery?  
...or a politician solve homelessness?  
I don’t think so.

Welfare begets welfare...  
strips dignity, self-esteem, self-worth, self-reliance  
and sense of control.

**Welcome** to enthusiasm for Village success,  
with 'self-help micro-housing,'  
with self-governance  
with treasury and judiciary,  
Sergeant-at-arms, CEO  
and a majority of Villagers  
with minimal 'jailhouse mentality.'  
And an involved outside board  
of researcher, observer and Village alum  
to broaden the wisdom and mediation.

And for each of us,  
consult our own expectations of self  
And measure by them.

Utilize and uplift individuals' strengths  
and be kind to deficiencies.

Embrace a collaborative sense of participation  
and promote self-worth.

Know, but don't defend shortcomings.

Don't forget the past.  
Learn from it.  
Leave it.  
And keep it in the past.



Welcome social events: meals, music, movies,  
presentations and outings.  
Get out of the Village  
at least once a week,  
preferably overnight.

*How true am I  
to my opinions, observations and philosophy?  
After two days outside the Village,  
a few (2-9) cocktails and getting laid,  
I have satisfied Item #6...ten more to go!*



**Laughter. FDA-approved  
to reduce high blood pressure, stress,  
insomnia, tension, anxiety, depression,  
anger and occasional vertigo  
with side effects of optimizing self-esteem,  
self-reliance, self-worth and overall feel good.**

*And my perspective about Village failures?*

Negative presence  
toward positive direction and accomplishments.

Destabilizing what historically worked for the Village.

Focusing on other's faults and festering wounds  
reopens scars, slows healing, and emboldens the feeling  
of 'unwanted even by the unwanted.'

Accepting 'jail house mentality':  
intimidation, disruption, loud voices,

the 'no snitching rule', misdirection of fault,  
missing files, lost meeting minutes,  
amendments, procedures, by-laws;  
protocols and rules  
not updated or posted in plain sight  
...and endless excuses, excuses, excuses  
with justifications, justifications, justifications.  
Confusion, chaos and tension.

Yes, we are a legal entity  
and, Yes, we are self-governing.

Simple rules, enforced,  
self-help micro-housing,  
collaborative participation sweat equity  
(\$35 a month and 10 hours a week);  
social events.

Here, you are:  
nuevo homeless,  
sporadic homeless,  
or professional homeless  
...and whatever you did on the outside,  
stays on the outside.

Our over-indulgent self-gratification  
works in a dysfunctional way  
and self-medication numbs the immediate ill,  
but raises the greater hurdle.

Observing the 'rain walk' of pets and owners  
I reflect upon hopes and visions,



their outcome never what we dream  
as we play out the hand we are dealt.

Life is forever a work in progress.  
My 28-years-ago-vision,  
the outcome hoped for,  
saved in a youthful poem,  
did not predict today.  
It makes me feel good however.

...and now it is time  
to complete this chapter of my Life.

The commute? The cul-de-sac? The corporation?  
The credit cards? The clock? The calendar?

**Voluntary slavery in a life collecting 'stuff' ...?**

**...or?...**

