

I'll set the tone for this morning by quoting Proverbs 30:14.

“There are those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mankind.”

That's been in my email sig for about a decade now. After 2,600 years or so, it's still timely.

So, you know that I started Real Change 20 years ago. Let me begin by saying a bit about why.

I never imagined, growing up, that I'd be doing what I do. I never thought I'd go to college. I didn't really count on living past 30.

I came from a family that was much more dysfunctional than most, and have dealt with undiagnosed ADD most of my life. School didn't work for me. By 8th grade I was a chronic truant, and in tenth grade I got kicked out of all three high schools in Sioux Falls, SD.

By the time I was 17, I'd dropped out of school and was a runaway, though no one was looking for me. I worked when I could get it, but was usually hungry. When I enlisted in the Air Force, I was living on Sioux Falls' skid row, right over the Arrow Bar and across the street from the Nashville Club. I'd been high most of the time since I was 13.

You'd think that going into the military would entail some sort of commitment to sobriety, but you'd be wrong about that. For the most part, during the first half of my enlistment, I was still drunk or stoned most of the time.

And then, I had what I think of as my Iceman Cometh moment. I was taking a community college freshman lit course — the Air Force paid for it and I was bored — and was assigned the Eugene O'Neill play, about a bunch of bar flies whose one real bond was their agreement that a numbed out existence was perfectly normal.

And I saw myself. I was in Harry Hope's Last Chance Saloon, and I could see it wasn't working for me. So, at around 21, I stopped. I distanced myself from my stoner friends, threw myself into night courses, and, when my four years was up, I somehow got into UMASS-Amherst.

I became a student activist, and learned I could be a leader. Over the course of four years in Amherst, I learned the folkways of the educated middle class. I got a degree in Social Thought and Political Economy, minored in journalism, and started my first paper, a monthly anarchist rag called critical times, in 1985.

Also that year, a bunch of us drove from Amherst to Washington DC to support a 51-day fast by Mitch Snyder, who had founded the Community for Creative Non-Violence, an outfit that inspired direct action style organizing around homelessness across the nation. We got arrested with nearly 100 others and spent 3 days in DC central cellblock.

Snyder lost 57 pounds in a little over 7 weeks during that fast and almost died. And when a reporter asked if the idea of dying scared him. He said, "No. It's painful, but I

have a greater fear of allowing people to languish like animals, and sometimes I'm afraid I'm not doing enough."

Snyder saw homelessness as a burning moral issue, and he connected to people in a way that recognized their dignity. He didn't see homelessness as a top-down human service delivery problem. To him, homelessness was about institutionalized dehumanization and misplaced federal priorities.

And he saw that if we were to end homelessness, we had to organize across class, with everyone from empowered homeless people themselves to celebrities, like Cher and Martin Sheen, who played Snyder in the movie Samaritan, being a part of the solution, bringing their strengths to the table, and building a movement together.

That spoke to me. I didn't see a whole lot separating myself from the folks I met on the street. I grew up in that category of "loser," destined for a life of shit jobs and social marginality. And then, through a series of lucky breaks, I got a different script. I became a class straddler, and was able to move in different worlds.

After college, I moved to Boston to organize homeless folks. I could take chances with my life. I'd been poor and hungry before, and knew I'd be ok. This was the 80's, and over that decade, as globalization, deindustrialization, and Reaganism changed America, homelessness in most American tripled or worse.

I found work at Boston Jobs with Peace, which did poor people's organizing while making connections to federal budget priorities. We were organizing homeless

protest encampments on the Boston Commons and at the Tip O'Neil Federal Building, doing civil rights work, making a lot of noise.

I had one foot in homelessness empowerment organizing, and the other in the Cambridge peace movement. These were radically different class cultures, and I frankly preferred the homeless folks, but I understood that we needed everybody.

We organized the direct action response to Bush senior's shock and awe bombing of Iraq, and did mass civil disobedience at the Statehouse to protest Governor Weld's shredding of the safety net. To us, it was all the same fight.

But while we were getting in the papers and on TV, I felt we weren't really building for power. Francis Fox Piven, in her book *Poor People's Movements*, talks about how there are times when history arcs toward righteousness and times when it does not. This was definitely a time when it did not. And so, as she says, the task was to build power, and lay groundwork for when the pendulum swings the other way.

Organizing homeless people was hard. They have their own dire needs to worry about. Their lives have a lot of instability and chaos, and that got reflected within the organization. It felt like the right way to organize homeless people hadn't been invented yet, and we were figuring it out, and making it up as we went along.

So I started the Spare Change newspaper in Boston in 1992. The idea was that homeless people could be activists in a way that helped meet their most immediate needs.

At the time, I was an unreconstructed Alinskyist, and believed that my role as an organizer was to lead homeless folks to make all the decisions. I needed to have several organizing projects spectacularly blow up on me before it dawned that this was not the most stable of models for organizing homeless people, and that, again, the way to building power was to involve everyone.

So, I came here in 1994 to start another street paper, and that became Real Change.

Seattle, it turns out, was the ideal petri dish in which to build an organization that organizes across class.

Seattle is a city with a deep, unresolved, psychological complex. We have always, not so secretly, wanted to be New York West. We overcompensate for our small size and weird watery hourglass geography with visions of upscale grandeur.

We built that ridiculous Space Needle during the 1962 World's Fair, along with the monorail, as a statement of our bright shiny future, but our roots are in our history as a working class port town, a labor town, home to the IWW and Anna Louise Strong, and the General Strike of 1919. In Henry Yesler's mill, and Skid Road.

The last two or three decades in Seattle have consistently reflected a tension between development to attract affluent high-earners and those who get left behind in our two-tiered economy. After the Boeing bust and the 15-year economic slump that followed, Seattle, like a lot of cities, reinvented itself as a center for urban living.

The ideology behind Seattle politics is this sort of corporate liberalism, that says invest in business and attract the affluent, and you'll have the tax base to robustly

fund services for the poor. It's a sort of liberal democrat version of trickle down economics. But the tension between corporate friendly development and the needs of poor folks isn't so easily resolved.

In the 80's, Seattle began to hatch the Rhodes Project, which rebuilt the downtown in the mid-nineties from Nordstroms and Westlake Plaza outward. And the city embraced the broken windows theory that began with Giuliani in New York and has spread like a virus since. Along with the Westlake development came the Sidran ordinances, that made sitting or lying on business district sidewalks illegal, and laws against panhandling.

We refashioned our downtown with the upscale urban amenities that would attract the kind of bright shiny people that make for a bright shiny city. We built Benaroya Hall, remodeled the Seattle Art Museum, and upscaled Pike Place Market, and in the midst of this, the downtown interests waged a protracted war to keep a planned homeless hygiene center the hell out of downtown.

In 2007, Seattle lifted height restrictions on downtown residential development and touched off a high-rise condo building frenzy that filled the skyline with cranes. The gold coast near Pike Place Market and the new symphony hall was where the high-end luxury condos were built. This was housing as pure speculative investment, portfolio properties, for people who might own similar investments in other world-class cities like New York and London.

True to form, the residential development boom was coupled with several ugly years of intensive homeless campsite clearances. This was happening everywhere it seemed, and the script was always the same. A highly stigmatizing media narrative

of filth and contagion. Press reports centering on piles of feces, bottles of urine, hypodermic needles, and tonnages of garbage.

There were plans to build a new municipal jail to house all the misdemeanor criminals the city intended to incarcerate, and there was a run at toughening restrictions on panhandling as well.

We were able to beat both of these back. Both of these fights, the jail and the panhandling ordinance, were thought to be unwinnable.

The new jail was supported with projections of a growing population of misdemeanor criminals that turned out to be baseless. When we started organizing, the city was going through a series of neighborhood meetings to determine where it would be sited, and nobody, of course, wanted a jail in their backyard, so, we had that going for us.

We ran an initiative campaign that turned a value neutral and mind numbingly technical zoning discussion into a debate about racial disproportionality and the criminalization of the poor. The Seattle school board chose this moment to close several schools in communities of color, and we took the opportunity to hammer away on the school to prison pipeline.

This whole debate was taking place during a mayoral election, and over the course of the various debates and community forums, support for the jail became politically toxic. By the time elections came around, Mayor Nickels and City Attorney Tom Carr were the only elected supporters the jail had. Both lost. Nickels didn't even make it

through the primary. It took another year or so to draw up the papers, but with that election, the jail was dead.

The panhandling legislation was similarly defeated. This was an ordinance that created “time and manner” restrictions, creating these safety bubbles around ATMs and parking meters, and handing police new tools to issue citations at their discretion.

There were the usual protests from the usual people — human service advocates, civil rights organizations, religious organizations — the ordinance appeared to be heading to an 8-1 vote for easy passage in city council.

Here’s the thing about these kinds of laws. They often defy logic. All the data showed that panhandling was not a significant issue. When test flags first went up, police said this wasn’t really an issue of concern.

But the polling of the Downtown Seattle Association and their allies showed that people didn’t “feel safe.” So we’re into this weird debate, not about reality, but perception, and talking about passing laws that don’t address real crime, but are really about the tender nature of people’s comfort zones.

The turning point came when the Seattle Office of Civil Rights published a report condemning the proposed ordinance, saying that the new laws would unequally and pointlessly impose additional legal and financial burdens upon people who were already struggling to survive.

“The language of the ordinance reflects an assumption that certain individuals who receive citations will not pay the fine or appear in court. Whereas this assumption is well-founded, the greater penalty these individuals then face is problematic. The mechanisms of the ordinance – from civil citation, to criminal misdemeanor, to potential involuntary testing and treatment – are highly unusual and serve to create a consequence disproportionate to the offense committed. And as noted above, these consequences will likely be felt disproportionately by vulnerable populations.”

Initially, the report had all the impact of a nerf ball. It was like no one said anything, and the City Council was steamrolling toward an 8-1 vote. Then we held a joint press conference with The NAACP and the ACLU in support of the report’s findings, making the point that youth in communities of color were among the “vulnerable populations” in question.

That this was about handing police a tool to use against those who simply make some people nervous. We picked up a few more council members who were more accountable to those communities. Again, bringing the dimension of race into what was more typically described in purely class terms made us stronger. The new Mayor announced that if the ordinance passed, he’d veto, because, in his opinion, “Seattle is better than this.”

From there, we picked up, at the eleventh hour, the fifth vote on the council to sustain the veto, and this very high profile fight over panhandling, in which the Downtown Seattle Association and their allies had invested tons of political capital, crashed and burned.

It took a few years for the downtown interests to regroup and come back, but we knew they would. And they did. Two years ago, the Seattle Hotel Association and the Seattle Convention and Visitors Bureau launched a new initiative called the “See It, Send It,” campaign. The idea was that when someone saw a sign of “street disorder,” — a homeless kid with a pitbull, a panhandler on a sidewalk — they’d take a photo and send it to the Mayor and City Council demanding something be done.

What was interesting was that while they argued that these activities threatened downtown commerce, the facts didn’t really support that. Seattle was listed in a tourism magazine as one of America’s downtowns that felt most safe. Tourism revenues were at an all time high, and convention center booking projections were at an all time high as well.

The economy was recovering from the recession, and the construction that had stalled when the housing bubble went bust was back on. A big waterfront renewal project was in the making, South Lake Union was being upscaled by Paul Allen and Amazon, and there were plans for a big new luxury hotel where now there is only a Greyhound station.

And once again, amid all these signs of Seattle becoming a glittering city for the rich, poor people were in the way, and the debate was about whether people “feel safe.”

Then, something unusual happened. Instead of engaging in the same old polarized debate, downtown interests, human service providers, public interest lawyers, cops, prosecutors, and elected officials, started talking about how we can focus on lasting solutions to create a downtown that works for everyone.

How could we, instead of beating up on poor people with new laws that don't fix anything, address the shortages of critical housing, mental health, and treatment services that are the real issue? Create alternatives to arrest and incarceration for vice crime, like prostitution and low-level drug dealing, that lead to housing and treatment? Have coordinated street outreach that tailors solutions to the people in need? Advocate to legislative bodies at all levels of government for funding priorities we can all agree on?

What we wanted to do was do take the initiative from the opportunists, who play on insecurity and fear, and build a space where people can come together. We wanted to move people from just seeing whatever piece of the elephant they happened to be hanging onto to seeing the elephant itself.

See It, Send It died on the vine, and the dialogue has since become much less polarized and more productive. Last week, the David Watkins, President of the Seattle Hotel Association, went to the press and said we need a panhandling ban in Seattle. It went nowhere. Literally within days, he'd withdrawn his proposal. He was given to understand that the players he needs to get traction just aren't on board. The phrase I've heard over and over again around that table, coming from all sides of the debate, is, "We can't arrest our way out of this."

The tensions are still there. Seattle rents are still rising at the highest rate in the nation. The new \$15-an-hour legislation notwithstanding, the city is rapidly becoming unaffordable to many. We're a corporate friendly city that's addicted to density and growth and expensive coffee drinks, but we've blunted at least some of

the meanness. Over in Burien, just 11 miles south, they just passed a law against offensive body odor. That wouldn't happen here.

I like to think that at least part of the reason is that over the past twenty years, Real Change, in this city anyway, has helped create more of a culture of caring.

Homelessness, I think, isn't just about poverty and abandonment. It's about dehumanization. When I was at Boston Jobs with Peace, my board president was an MIT professor emeritus named Lisa Peattie. She taught urban planning, had been all over the world, and is one of the most amazing people I've ever met. And she said to me once that, once you define someone as less than human, you can do whatever you want to them.

That, more than anything, that sense of homeless people being defined as a despised class and all the unimaginable horror that comes of that, is a huge part of why I do the work I do.

I've come to understand Real Change as a project of humanization. We have these three hundred or so people out selling the paper every month, making some money for themselves, and each of them is this hub of human relationship. There's this wonderfully subversive thing that happens, where the commodity relationship of offering a newspaper for cash leads people to suspend their negative judgments and engage with people as human beings.

And we've brought that insight — that poor people aren't going to win economic justice on their own, that we're all in this together — and that the way to build power is to organize across our differences and bring everyone to the table, and

moved it to the center of how we operate. Real Change has people on staff who used to be vendors and people who used to work on Wall Street and everyone in between, and that's the secret to our success.

I'll tell my favorite vendor story, about a guy I haven't seen for ten years, but I've seen the same transformation countless times.

Richard was as alone and isolated as they come. Subterranean self-esteem. Heroin addict. Profound stutter. Looked at the ground when he talked. He was a little guy. Maybe a hundred pounds. You'd think someone like this wouldn't succeed at selling a streetpaper, but you'd be underestimating the motivational value of heroin addiction.

After a year or so, Richard got on methadone, but something much more profound happened as well. His whole manner changed. He stood up straighter. He looked you in the eye. And his stutter became almost unnoticeable. He became one of the vendors who'd take new ones under his wing to show them how it's done.

I interviewed him for a vendor of the month story I was writing, and this is when it clicked for me that Real Change wasn't just about economic opportunity and organizing. That we were really about personal transformation.

He said, "Tim, I used to hate people. I hated everybody. My whole life, people have just kicked me around. And I gave up on them, and I gave up on myself. When I started selling Real Change, for the first time, people cared about me. And I started caring about other people."

I think that, at the most basic level, this is where change happens.

When I talk to our vendors, I don't see myself as any different from them. I'm still in touch with that stoner of a seventeen year old who didn't see a whole lot of options for himself. We've built an organization on the idea that we can come together to care for each other, and when we do that, we change ourselves, and when we do that, the bigger changes that can transform the world might follow.