

## The Spiritual Lessons of Homelessness

Posted May, 2007

Site: [http://www.newconnexion.net/article/05-07/Lessons\\_of\\_Homelessness.html](http://www.newconnexion.net/article/05-07/Lessons_of_Homelessness.html)

Accessed: September 11, 2007

Vicky Thompson



He was injured - his neck broken in a car accident. He couldn't find work. He had no family to turn to for support. He lost his apartment, forced to leave his home in Portland. He ended up at a campground for the homeless near Ashland, searching for cans to pay for pitching his tent in the cold Oregon rain.

It was hard adjusting to being homeless, but his hunger won out over pride. The first time he ate a sandwich from a dumpster, a young boy out with his mother stared at him with pity. Tears falling on his soiled clothes, he knew the taste of despair.

It was from these depths that he finally heard the voice of God, calling him to be his instrument. Writing down these messages on hundreds of notepads, he became a famous author, selling millions of books on his conversations with God.

Neale Donald Walsch knows what it's like to be homeless. He knows what it's like to be an invisible member of society, a shadow huddled outside in the darkness looking in through the window. The film *Conversations with God* tells about the lowest point in Walsch's life.

And yet there are more stories of people right here in Portland, living on the streets.

**Homelessness at Home**

*Transforming Homelessness in Portland: What Can You Do?* is a 10-minute film produced by Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program, Portland Community Media and P:ear. The film personalizes the plight of everyday people caught in the downward spiral of homelessness.

"Anyone of us are three bad events away from being homeless," says Tim Rooney, a community media facilitator at Portland Community Media, who provided production assistance in making the film. "You lose a job, you get sick, there's no medical insurance. Any of those things can happen to any of us."

The film painfully exposes the world of homeless youth. Nearly 90 percent of youth in the P:ear program were in school before they became homeless, according to Joy Cartier, assistant director of P:ear, which offers education, art and recreation to affirm the personal worth of homeless and transitional youth.

Cartier, who is featured in the film, paints a vivid picture of how homelessness can happen to anyone: You're in high school. You're captain of the soccer team, you're a straight-A student, you're involved in extracurricular activities. And then you tell your parents that you're gay. They kick you out and they won't let you back in. What do you do?

The Oregon Runaway and Homeless Youth Coalition estimates that nearly 24,000 Oregon youth are homeless, coming from rural, suburban and urban areas. Homeless youth are between the ages of 12 and 21, without a stable residence and living away from their parent or guardian - in shelters, with friends, in vehicles or abandoned buildings, or sleeping on the street.

According to Outside In, a social service agency serving low-income adults and homeless youth, young people end up on the street for many reasons, but most run away from violent and abusive homes.

### **Like a Phoenix Rising**



Healing from the inside spiritually changes your impact on the world outside, according to Gregorio Acuna, executive director of the Fuego Phoenix Rising Healing Center in Portland.

"Getting them to look at that as a possibility gives them hope," says Acuna, who uses traditional Native American healing rituals to clear mental, emotional, physical and spiritual blocks in homeless youth, giving them a fresh start in finding their life's path.

Funded by the Templeton Foundation, Fuego provides holistic treatment services, including folk healing, tarot counseling, yoga, qigong, art, music and sound healing.

The program uses spiritual tools in practical ways to help youth find their inner power. Fuego is the only homeless youth center in Oregon that uses tarot card readings as a part of the intake process, and it's been a successful method for helping clients open up, according to Regina LaRocca, who does tarot card readings at the center.

"They were able to engage because there wasn't an authority figure actually interfacing with them. It was just the cards. It turned out to work better," says LaRocca. She found that Latino youth are especially attracted to tarot card readings, which are an accepted tradition among families in Mexico.

Fuego and Outside In work together to provide complementary services for homeless youth. Outside In refers clients to the healing center, where youth can focus on what they believe is important and meaningful. This in turn helps Outside In work more effectively with clients, according to Heather Brown, youth department director at Outside In.

"The way that they provide services is different from what young people often experience going into traditional service centers," says Brown. "They really connect with young people in ways that make them feel seen and heard and respected."

This is vital, according to Fuego's Acuna.

"Spiritually, I feel like we just want to be here to help validate what they have already have inside of them, and to stop looking at them like they're lacking something and that's why they're homeless," says Acuna. "It may be that we're not validating the light inside of them."

Sound healing, a popular activity at Fuego, is attended by five to 10 youth each week. Sound healers Ryan Powell and Kristin Bowen use toning, mantras and traditional instruments including the didjeridu, Tibetan bowls, drums and flutes to guide a healing meditation. Clients settle into the safe environment, letting the sounds wash through them.

Brandon, a regular visitor to Fuego, shared that during a sound healing session he had a vision of a fiery bird taking on different forms, dancing gracefully in the air. The 18-year-

old has been traveling for the past year, including trips to Florida and Colorado, searching for a place to call home. He plans on going to music school to study classical guitar.

Dennis, a 24-year-old from Portland who comes to Fuego for energy healing, also has musical aspirations. He'd like to use his musical talents to launch a record company, using music as a healing tool. He'd also like to open a shelter to provide more services for older homeless people. Fuego has helped him to focus his vision.

"It reminds myself of who I really am. It brings my spiritual self more out. It has definitely helped me broaden my experience and my knowledge," he says, noting that the program has helped him to find his path as well as a new job.

Finding the inner voice gives people new direction, Acuna has found. "Just that alone creates stabilization when you can start a process of focusing and directing your energy, directing your vision," he says.

Acuna believes that the journey of the homeless back to stability is a common journey that we all take. "In the end, we're all going to the same place. We're all going to have to face our own selves and our own unhappiness. It's the same journey. It doesn't matter where we're at in the hierarchy of finances or the social structure, we all have to look at that," he says.

### **Voices from the Street**

Sisters Of The Road, which provides meals and work experience programs for the low-income and homeless community in Portland, gives a voice to homeless men and women. *Voices from the Street: Truths About Homelessness from Sisters Of The Road*, based on more than 500 interviews with people who've experienced homelessness, includes personal stories and solutions to the problem.

The interviews present a candid look at life on the streets, and the courage people call on to remain in touch with their inner selves despite the challenging conditions:

"There's somebody up there telling me they're watching over me. But now it's like inside myself ? inside myself I have a friend. I know it's the Lord."

*For more information, visit Fuego at [www.gofuego.org](http://www.gofuego.org), Outside In at [www.outsidein.org](http://www.outsidein.org), P:ear at [www.pearmentor.org](http://www.pearmentor.org), Portland Community Media at [www.pcmtv.org](http://www.pcmtv.org) and Sisters Of The Road at [www.sistersoftheroad.org](http://www.sistersoftheroad.org).*