

all poor people are evil

Posted by

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PEJ News - Janine Bandcroft - i imagine, during the days before and during nazi germany, many were afraid to question the motives of the government. they didn't want to believe the signs suggesting that something really awful was going on. they wanted to believe that their government, and their neighbours, were honourably intentioned, that they were doing the best they could, that they really were the 'nice' people that they presented themselves to be.

<http://web.mac.com/jbandcroft>

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Janine Bandcroft

PEJ News

August 23, 2006

today i attended the north park community meeting about the temporary homeless shelter proposed by the st. john the divine church. it was a rather hostile environment, and i felt compelled to write about it. my report is included here, and also published online at <http://web.mac.com/jbandcroft> in 'janine's blog,' and at <http://pej.org>

for the earth,
janine

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i've heard that it exists, but i've never actually really experienced blatant poor-bashing before.

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why can't they just get jobs? they should be moved out of town, onto the ferry and off the island. they're drug addicts, and criminals. they'll make the neighbourhood more dangerous. someone else, in some other neighbourhood, should deal with the problem.

the divine shelter is just a band-aid solution, they said, it's not worth the effort. when i tried to talk about causes of poverty, however, i wasn't allowed to speak. so much for our alleged 'free' society - the bullies hijacked the meeting, and consideration of who's ultimately responsible for poverty lost out to blaming the victims.

i imagine, during the days before and during nazi germany, many were afraid to question the motives of the government. they didn't want to believe the signs suggesting that something really awful was going on. they wanted to believe that their government, and their neighbours, were honourably intentioned, that they were doing the best they could, that they really were the 'nice' people that they presented themselves to be.

i think the same thing is happening today. they see increasing numbers of poor in the streets, they make a quiet promise to work harder at their jobs lest they should lose them and end up there themselves. they work, they receive their paycheques, they pay their bills, and then they work some more. they don't stop long enough to think about their work - is it fulfilling? damaging to the environment? is it necessary? who's benefitting from it? who's it hurting? they believe, ultimately, that 'work' is the answer.

in nazi germany they believed the same thing. arbeit macht frei - work will set you free.

i'm not suggesting the north park community, now confronted with the reality of a 40 bed shelter operated by the cool-aid society and situated in st. john the divine church basement, are fascists. i'm really not. i am suggesting, however, that they're being taken in by propaganda and lies perpetuated by some government officials, and some of the corporate media. 'what about the washington dc based corporation that refused to book their conference here because we have panhandlers and tacky t-shirt shops?' (how many conference, i asked have been cancelled because victoria dumps its shit directly into the sea?) last night one television media news show chose to follow the divine shelter story with an accusation that squatters burned a vancouver heritage building. maybe they did - but i would prefer to follow due process and bring suspects into a court of law rather than allow the media to inform me about who has committed which crimes and why, and what activities might lead to what other ones.

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sadly, the general population seems to have accepted that the corporate media has the ability and the right to investigate, to know, to accuse, and to report their convenient conclusions as if they are the final and highest authority over all events everywhere. why in the world anybody would believe anything the corporate media reports - after they failed to provide us with information or follow an investigative line of questioning around the 9/11 attacks, after they lied so blatantly about the circumstances surrounding the invasion of iraq, as they continue to distract our attention away from the dire consequences of global warming - is beyond me. suddenly anyone the media says are 'terrorists' truly are. and if they want us to believe that homeless people are all drug addicted lazy criminals, then so be it.

but when they drum up the anti-poverty sentiment, they influence important community decisions, including public policy. this afternoon, still reeling with disbelief from the horrific experience of the morning, i crossed paths with cindy l'hirondelle who has researched and reported on the merits of a guaranteed livable income ( <http://www.livableincome.org> ). cindy told me the last time we saw such a poor bashing theme from the media, in the early 90s, the ndp government of the day slashed and burned the social welfare safety net. one wonders which is the chicken and which is the egg - does media endorse and influence what government is planning, or is public policy the result of media manipulation?

one thing is clear - the loudest mouths stole this morning's meeting at st. john the divine. it was facilitated by a couple of police officers, who tried to present according to an agenda that included representation from the city, the cool-aid society, and the clergy. they were interrupted continuously from a handful of bullies - homeless people are drug addicted lazy criminals (it's not really fair to paint them all with the same brush). they should just get a job (many of them are unable to work, for various reasons). they should be driven out of town (how do you suggest we do that?). we already have the needle exchange in our community, why can't someone else take the burden of housing them (agreed - the problem is enormous and other municipalities should be involved). why not use the building next to street link (because the owner wants \$10,000 a month in rent). people won't be safe, the drug dealers will hide in the bushes and attack the children who'll be attending the day care across the street (there'll be an increased police presence in the community).

harold munn, the rector at st. john the divine, tried to explain that the church's decision to offer the empty basement as shelter space was a direct response to the need for a compassionate solution to an increasingly challenging problem. "this is the kind of thing a church normally does ... we offer dignity in whatever way we can."

but the decision was made before the community was consulted, was the common cry. and

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they have a point. as usual, all the pieces were in place - the funding, the staffing, the location - before the idea was brought forward. i'll bet the condo development across the street happened without any community consultation, too. the divine shelter organizers consulted with the north park executive, apparently, but some members of the association weren't invited to that meeting. judging from today's response, the idea would likely have been shot down by those same loudmouths that guided the meeting's direction today, at whatever stage in the planning it was presented. where will you get the funding (that's all been taken care of). who will staff the shelter (that's all been organized). what about an increased police presence ... etc.

i sat through it as best i could, this morning. i didn't interrupt the speakers, but i did vocally challenge the bullies when they interrupted. i waited patiently for a turn to speak. all i wanted was three or four minutes to put it all into perspective.

here's the street newz perspective that i tried to share:

poverty is created. we live with an economic system that demands a certain percentage of unemployment. the world bank and the international monetary fund demand that governments implement structural adjustment programs that take tax money out of social spending and redirect it so that corporate wealth increases. just yesterday, i said, going a bit off topic but not really if you want to know how poverty and environmental destruction are connected and how fascism grows, just yesterday it was reported that steven harper, in power as prime minister with less than 40% of the nation's vote, reached an agreement with corporate logging executives. they're going to consult with washington dc when deciding the future fate of bc's forests. so when you're talking about 'work,' what are you really talking about? most employment is destructive in some way. some people are brain injured, or can't work for various reasons, as charlayne pointed out. others choose not to participate in the destruction of the planet. i applaud st. john the divine and their compassionate response, offering space so people can sleep safely. sure, it's only a band-aid solution but, as someone (i think it was don mctavish from cool-aid) stated, when someone is cut the first thing you do is stop the bleeding. then you can work on finding the source of the problem and fixing it. i hope the community can find their hearts and embrace this project and, finally, don't forget we all live on stolen native land.

but they didn't want to hear any of that. almost as soon as i started i was interrupted. rudely. consistently. inconsiderately. we know all that, someone said. that has nothing to do with it, someone else explained. i was completely shut down. they don't want to support the shelter because it's a band-aid solution, but neither do they want to consider the source of the problem. maybe they enjoy scapegoating the poor. we're an easy target. we don't have much

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power, and we certainly can't defend ourselves if we're not in the room, or allowed to be heard on the rare occasion that we're offered an opportunity to speak. even the police officer facilitating the meeting, who had said a lot of sensible things, allowed this heckling to continue. of course he's on the same team that allows the daily devastation of the planet, for profit.

this afternoon i sat on the street with a native panhandler. he's from the nu-chah-nulth nation, he told me, and he has a home there whenever he wants it. he likes to live off the land, he remembers when he and his brother were young and they would canoe all by themselves. he didn't understand my frustration. anger, he understood, but my frustration baffled him. i've been an environmentalist for so many years, i explained, trying to live gently and with consideration for all other creatures. but every day i'm confronted with bozos who continue to encourage the devastation of the planet without any care or concern. the corporate media has the potential to educate, to offer alternatives, but their advertising encourages endless consumption. the native man reminded me what's really important - being able to go to a friend's home and share a cup of tea or coffee. having friends makes you rich, it's just that simple.

he's right, of course. but i can't sit idly by while greedy monsters destroy my planet and deny my brothers and sisters a safe place to rest their heads at night.

i guess, for some, it's easier not to think about the causes of poverty and environmental devastation. and fascism thrives as a result.