

The book cover features a monochromatic teal background with a painterly texture. On the left, a large, colorful circular graphic contains various elements: a blue sky with white clouds, a green landscape with a purple frog, a purple hummingbird, and a colorful spiral. A black butterfly is flying in the center. In the upper right, a palm tree silhouette is visible. In the lower right, a young girl with dark hair is sitting and reading a book. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

# hearts & hands

SECOND EDITION

CREATING COMMUNITY  
IN VIOLENT TIMES

LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ

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hearts & hands  
creating community  
in violent times

Luis J. Rodriguez

Seven Stories Press  
New York • Oakland

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*To the memory of*

Marcos Cordoba, Erik Arellano, Eddie Ramos, Alfredo Mercado, Arlene Osuna  
killed during our intense battles for justice and peace in Chicago;

*and*

Walter Guzman, Nathan Allen, and Manual “Manazar” Gamboa  
mentors, friends, and peace warriors.

*And for the 2014 edition:*

Guido De Rienzo, Delia Gamez, Anthony Hernandez, James Lilly, Frank Chavez, Darren “Bo” Taylor  
Johnny Godinez,

Lee Thompson Young

*And Native elders/teachers:*

Tlacaelel of Mexico; Macuiltochtli of Mexico and Chicago; John C. Smith of the Dine (Navajo)  
Nation

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hearts & hands



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# Preface to the 2014 Edition of *Hearts & Hands*

*I appreciate your knowledge and love and the bright loud engine of all the caring . . .*

—MY YOUNGEST SON, LUIS JACINTO, AGE 19 ON THE OCCASION OF MY 59TH BIRTHDAY IN 2013

Since the 2001 publication of *Hearts & Hands* the whole tenor and tone in the national conversation about youth development and gangs has changed. While many policy makers, thinkers and researchers have been instrumental in these shifts, this book played no small part.

*Hearts & Hands* was one of the few publications with anecdotal and documental backing that proved young people needed community, resources, mentoring, rites of passage, purpose, stories, imagination, empowerment, and attentive adults. For the past dozen years I've taken this book to talk around the country—to prisons, to juvenile lockups, Native American reservations, conference libraries, universities as well as trainings with teachers, youth workers, therapists, law enforcement and more. It has made its way to Mexico, Central America, South America, Japan, and Europe.

The book was written to challenge at least forty years of suppression to deal with troubled youth. Since the 1990s, the U.S. became the world's largest jailer: 25 percent of the world's prisoners were in the United States although the country had 5 percent of the world's population. Around 70 percent were people of color. New laws only made more lawless. Youth tried as adults. Three-strikes-and-you're-out. Gang enhancements. Gang Injunctions. The U.S. now has a \$60 billion dollar prison industry with a significant sector of privately-owned institutions—yet crime, gun violence, and gangs have only gotten worse, better organized, and spread out.

It was time to stop the madness.

When first written, *Hearts & Hands* addressed some thirty years I had working with the most violent youth as well as other young people, troubled in their own ways, all possessed of genius, amazing attributes, and range of intelligences. Compliant or defiant they all needed help, guidance, teaching, and love.

What's happened since *Hearts & Hands*? As mentioned in the book, in early mid-2000 my wife Trini and I, with our two young boys Ruben and Luis, moved back to Los Angeles (my older daughter Andrea and granddaughter Catalina joined us later). We went to the Northeast San Fernando Valley where Trini grew up among eleven siblings and two hard-working and stable Mexican migrant parents. The area was the largest community of Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States after East L.A. The Pacoima barrio, the heart of the Northwest Valley, was saddled with housing projects, gangs, low-wage migrant labor, and was a major dumping ground of landfills for Los Angeles.

Three years before our return my oldest son Ramiro had been sentenced to 28 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections. He had joined a gang at 15 and the ordeal took us all to hell and back. We worried about the increasing violence in our Chicago neighborhood in regards to our younger boys (besides, my mother had contracted Lymphoma and the first stages of Alzheimer's. I needed to be



near her before she passed on, which she did in 2008).

In 2001 Trini, Enrique Sanchez and I helped create Tia Chucha's Café Cultural & Bookstore, LLC, for profit coffee bar and cultural space. In 2003, I also began with Angelica Loa Perez and Victor Mendoza a nonprofit called Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural to incorporate the workshops, performance space, art gallery, and our own press (Tia Chucha Press). However, in a couple more years the landlords almost tripled our rent, and we had to move to a not-so-easily accessible space. We also lost all our coffee bar equipment—deli cases, refrigerators, grinders, iceboxes, shelves, and more—after two break-ins by drug-addled youths at the private warehouse space where everything had been stored. We should have quit then. But the community rallied behind us—with labor, encouragement, and people attending our events. In 2007, we disbanded the LLC and donated everything, including our inventory of books, to the nonprofit. A year later, we moved back into a strip mall, where our audiences grew.

Today Tia Chucha's houses a Mexika (so-called Aztec) danza resident group (Temachtli Quetzacoatl), a youth project (the Young Warriors), a mural arts collective, Native indigenous language and cosmology classes, and annual outdoor literacy & arts festival (Celebrating Words Written, Performed and Sung). We teach music, dance, theater, writing, puppetry, photography, and more. It's now been in the Sylmar area for thirteen years, influencing a blooming of music, mural arts, and other creativity in the Northeast Valley not seen in this formerly culturally barren area of squatter homes, stucco apartments, warehouses, and strip malls.

When we started, Los Angeles was barely leaving the worst period of street violence in U.S. history. One report said 15,000 youth were killed in gang violence in the Los Angeles area alone from 1980 to 2000 (almost all people of color). The murder rate in South Central L.A. of Latino males from ages 15 to 24 was 70 per 100,000 (as high as Central America or South Africa, the countries with the world's highest murder rates); but for African American male youth it was 120 per 100,000. Deindustrialization, the obscene availability of drugs and guns, wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and government efforts to destroy political/community efforts all contributed. In addition, the emptiness of the economy and culture created a vacuum where a new culture of "kill or be killed," "bling bling" and deep youth disconnection from elders, rites of passage, and imaginative lives prevailed.

*Hearts & Hands* was born from these fires. The book became part of the "Breaking the Cycle with Dignity" training developed by Fidel Rodriguez and Mike De La Rocha and certified for workshops in California's juvenile justice system as well as their 2013 "Spreading the Seeds/The Healing Network" gatherings, trainings and retreats.

From 2006 to 2008 the concepts in the book were used in the writing and publication of "A Guide for Understanding Effective Community-Based Gang Intervention" under the auspices of then L.A. City Councilman Tony Cardenas (now the first Latino U.S. Congressman from the San Fernando Valley). In two years some forty gang intervention experts, urban peace advocates, and researchers took part to add, enlarge and reshape the document. Mostly African American and Latino, we all worked diligently without pay on a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach to reducing gang violence and assisting and empowering the very people affected in the more violence-riddled communities.

Innovators in this work included Darren "Bo" Taylor, Alex Sanchez, William "Blinky" Rodriguez, Kim McGill, Aquil Basheer, Tom Hayden, Hector Verdugo, Kenny Green, Robert Hernandez, and Johnny Godinez. We proved that from the heart of violence – even from among hardcore gang members—could arise the next generation of peace warriors and community leaders.

In February 2008 the Los Angeles City Council approved this guide, helping the "gang capital of the world" reduce violence in all sectors with trained gang interventionists in the streets and the support of the Los Angeles Police Department. Unfortunately, suppression continued, such as more than forty

anti-gang injunctions affecting more than seventy communities, all black and brown, that ended up squeezing poor communities instead of keeping them intact, often to make room for gentrification—the return of people with money to the inner city to push out people without.

The violence went down, but the source and quality of it did not go away. Still a bill sponsored by Congressman Cardenas based on this model was introduced in the House of Representatives in July 2013.

Trini and I also helped co-produce a 2012 documentary film, written and directed by John F. Cantu about the development of neighborhood arts called “Rushing Waters, Rising Dreams: How the Arts are Transforming a Community.” Denise Sandoval, Chicano Studies Professor at the University of California, Northridge, and I edited a Tia Chucha Press book with the same title that included essays, interviews, photos, murals, art pieces, and poetry. Our staff and board raised funds for the project to match a Los Angeles County Arts Commission grant.

The film and book were shown in community events in Pasadena, East Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, Chicago, and other cities. In the Bay Area, a young Peruvian-American took the ideas and returned to Peru to begin the creation of arts centers based on indigenous traditions, medicines and creativity similar to Tia Chucha’s. In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in one of the worst slums imaginable, as well as a prison and a juvenile hall, when the border city was the murder capital of the world, arts and poetry workshops eventually led to the creation of Mama Juana’s to honor Tia Chucha’s. In the 2006 Mexico City Book Fair, organizers established a Tia Chucha’s booth with books and coffee (manned by one of our staff). My thoughts were shared through poetry in places like the bullet-pocked city of Sarajevo, stately Stuttgart, and brightly lit Tokyo. Tia Chucha’s in 2011 organized the first Lowrider Bike & Car Show for the massive Guadalajara Book Festival (again with Denise Sandoval, a leading expert on lowriding culture).

Young Warriors, founded by then 16-year-old Mayra Zaragoza, is now working in collaboration with other organizations and schools to expand the concepts of self-discovery, self-healing and self-discipline tied to the cause of a peaceful and just community.

I carried these concepts to tattoo-faced gang members of the Mara Salvatrucha-13 and 18th Street in six prisons and a juvenile hall in El Salvador as well as two prisons in Guatemala. These were also introduced to four youth prisons and “villas” (the equivalent of Brazilian “Favelas”) in Buenos Aires and the more indigenous and rural Argentine states of Chaco and Fonseca as well as the countries of Venezuela and Peru. I presented the same ideas (and the Community-Based Gang Intervention Guide) to Manchester and London, England, mostly to Afro-Caribbean communities as well as Her Majesty’s Juvenile Offenders Institution in southern England.

“Rushing Waters, Rising Dreams”—and ideas gleaned from *Hearts & Hands*—are now serving to advocate for neighborhood arts policies in Los Angeles, other cities, and even other countries including the most deprived.

One key development: In March of 2012 gang leaders in MS-13 and 18th Street began a peace truce in El Salvador. I returned to El Salvador that summer to visit prisons, poor barrios, nongovernmental agencies, and government officials to assess, assist and advise as part of an eleven-member delegation from the Transnational Advisory Group in Support of the Peace Process in El Salvador (TAGSPPE). The group included Chicanos, Salvadorans, a Puerto Rican, an African American, and a human rights advocate from London. I hadn’t been there since 1996 when I took part in another gang peace that was later undermined by the government. This time the government was more receptive and more than a year and half later the peace was still holding, bringing violence down from 40 to 60 percent. As of this writing, MS-13 and 18th Street in Honduras—currently the country with the highest murder rate

in the world—have also begun their own peace process.

Things are changing, but as I've mentioned above too much has remained the same. By 2013, gangs have become more like businesses—and major businesses (big financial institutions and corporations included) have become more like gangs. Now we must escalate the battle of ideas to the whole country as well as the world to stop the drug wars, the suppressions, of trying to “punish” our way out of poverty, traumas and gangs.

Presently, Chicago, my second home, is undergoing the worst gang violence in the United States. Ramiro, who was released from prison in the summer of 2010 after thirteen-and-half-years due to a “good time,” is active in gang prevention and intervention in this city. Despite all he's been through and the crimes he's committed, I'm proud of his current dedication—he's now crime free, drug free and gang free. In the spring of 2013, Ramiro and I spoke to hundreds of young people in several Chicago elementary, middle and high schools for two weeks as well as training youth workers, teachers, organizers, and students.

Later that month I exceeded a GED graduation in the largest juvenile lockup in North America, the Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar, CA just five minutes from my house. The 30 graduates—an institution with 800 to 1000 wards, more than 90 percent of color—were proud to receive their certificates even though some of them were going to serve 25 years to life in adult prisons. They still deserved recognition. Renewed talks in San Quentin, Folsom, and Soledad state prisons also solidified how important it was not to write anyone off (When I returned to Soledad 2011, I hadn't been there for fifteen years—I met dudes who remembered me from back then).

In Lancaster prison (the only state facility in L.A. County—even though 60 percent of the state's prisoners come from there) I once facilitated writing workshops for eight hours a day every Sunday for eight months. I co-edited with Lucinda Thomas, a prison arts instructor, a Tia Chucha Press book called *Honor Comes Hard: Writings from the California Prison System's Honor Yard*. And I made long-time friends like lifer Kenneth Hartman, a published writer in his own right, and Hugo Machuca, eventually released after serving 28 years. In 2013 I worked with Kenneth on a book to end Life Without the Possibility of Parole called *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough: An Anthology published by The Other Death Penalty Project*.

After Ramiro was released from parole in July of 2013, we drove from Chicago to California (with Puerto Rican poet Eduarco Arocho). We spoke and read poetry in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Ramiro and I also took part in a white water rafting trip with 40 inner-city youth, black and brown; a Chicano and Native gathering of the Circulo de Hombres Nobles (Circle of Noble Men), including a sweat lodge ceremony; in a six-day Mosaic Multicultural men's conference in Mendocino, CA; and a spiritual service for adjudicated youth of the Camp Miller Youth Probation camp of L.A. County.

The message is that the whole and healthy development of anyone is dependent on the whole and healthy development of everyone. Why isn't this basic idea enshrined by law? That's because it's incompatible with the corporate/financial control of the economy—the profit motive trumps the social compact to make sure social needs are met. The power of deep and lasting peace is that it challenges the economic, political and cultural constraints that have blocked the transformations from taking hold.

In this context—as I stated in *Hearts & Hands*—peace and healing become revolutionary acts.

We have much work to do, but work we must to overcome the increased losses and uncertainties gripping most of the United States and the world. Lest anyone gets confused, peace does not mean passivity. And what I'm talking about is not more “gun” laws, “peace” as a program or adding to the “non-violence” industry.

I again thank Dan Simon and Seven Stories Press for reissuing this important book. And to all the unsung gang peace leaders throughout the United States and the world who have helped make a turn toward the eradication of the root causes of most violence in the industrial and post-industrial age: poverty, inequalities, class society, and state-sponsored violence and imprisonment.

First you dream. Then you have a vision of how to make this dream real. Then you plan, strategize, and organize to make it happen. But it's often character, integrity and authenticity that keep you moving forward against all odds and obstacles.

Hearts and Hands are images I found in Mexika renderings of the figure of Coatlicue (woman-with-the-skirt-of-serpents). These represent community—the nurturing mother-source of what will eventually lead to autonomous, independent, but also interdependent, human beings. We need to stop the broken promises and remove the misguided/dangerous policies —get back into accord with nature, our own natures, and our vital relationships. No proper human development, particularly our mental, emotional, psychological, cultural, physical, and spiritual aspects, can happen in a vacuum.

If we see these aspects of our being like six strings of a fine guitar, they must be periodically tuned to be in harmony, all faculties aligned, capable of great “music.” Being out of tune is part of life. So get in tune. For this we need each other—families, teachers, mentors, peers, guides, student companions, and ancestors.

The point is there's much music, dance, story, art, and poetry—and new organizational forms—that can be created even from the most discordant lives, even from the most debilitating realities. To start we'll need, as my son Luis wrote, a bright loud engine of caring.

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introduction

# What the Craziiness Is

*When the culture fails to draw out the innate beauty of its children, it's deciding to turn that beauty to violence.*

—MICHAEL MEADE

There is a wound in the land, the body politic, and the collective spirit. Healing involves going directly to the wound, not recoiling from it. The wound, the damage, can be the mother of our rebirth and the reconciliation. If revolution isn't about this, it isn't about anything.

An aim here is to help span the seemingly insurmountable gulfs in our society so that we can provide the revolutionary teaching, caring, and genuine leadership that young people today are craving—and in many cases, dying for.

I remember the day well. On April 20, 1999, two teenage gunmen rampaged through Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, with shotguns, semiautomatic weapons, and homemade bombs, killing thirteen people before shooting themselves and petrifying the nation with their fury and callousness. This was the most destructive of what had been an outbreak of school shootings in less than a two-year period. Scarcely twelve months earlier two boys, ages thirteen and eleven, gunned down four fellow classmates and a teacher in a Jonesboro, Arkansas, middle school during a prank fire drill. The previous December a fourteen-year-old shot to death three classmates and wounded five other members of a prayer group in a Kentucky school. Earlier in October a sixteen-year-old in Mississippi killed three people and wounded seven in a rampage that included a stop at his school.

From October 1997 to May 1999, similar assaults by kids occurred in towns like Moses Lake, Washington; Springfield, Oregon; Conyers, Georgia; and Edinboro, Pennsylvania. The assailants ranged in age from eleven to eighteen. Collectively they accounted for thirty-one deaths and seventy-five wounded. Then, on March 5, 2001, after a much-welcomed lull in such shootings, a fifteen-year-old high school student in Santee, California, opened fired on fellow students, killing two and wounding thirteen. Barely seventeen days later in the same school district, an eighteen-year-old senior in El Cajon High School took a shotgun and blasted several rounds, wounding five.

These events exploded in communities that were largely white, rural, or suburban, relatively crime-free, and dotted with churches. The general sentiment: These things should not have happened there.

So why did they?

For some time the tragedy of kids killings kids has blown up in poor urban core communities kicking off a spate of draconian laws and repressive measures. The popular perception in these cases was that they were “expected.” Events like the one in a poor Flint, Michigan, elementary school in early 2000, when a six-year-old boy shot and killed a six-year-old girl (the boy’s teenage uncle was later convicted in this case for “leaving the gun around”), further aggravated this notion.

By designating this violence as “inner city,” and only affecting black and brown communities, more policymakers, driven by interests in more powerful well-off communities, showed little empathy connection.

But we are connected. As we can see, this destructiveness can happen anywhere. The disaffection of our young people is deep—and no gated community or relatively wealthy environment is going to buffer them from the smoldering rages.

As reported by most of the media, blame for these tragic events was easily and randomly assigned to guns, violent movies, gang affiliations, video games, lack of moral training, bad parenting, bad kids. In various ways these elements do play a role in the violence, but none can hold up for long as the principal basis for these murderous assaults.

“It’s the wordlessness of the schoolyard massacre that is so destabilizing,” wrote Rick Moody. “Kids with weapons let weapons do the articulating. The triggermen themselves are notorious for their inability to explain their motives. . . . They have found the one rhetorical strategy that supervenes all others, that makes the chatter of parents and newspapers and television commentators dumb, that replies to all questions and all controversies in a final, incontrovertible splatter.”<sup>1</sup>

So if a few kids are having guns do their talking, what are they saying? How do we interpret the signals, the premonitions, the initial sparks of vicious outbursts in children who seem normal? “The murderer who talks with the voice of a child puts forth the dangerous proposal that we are all capable,” Moody continued. “That adolescence is often fatal. That only good luck distinguishes the guilty from the innocent.”<sup>2</sup>

We seem to be in a general state of depression—a cultural malaise of isolation and meaninglessness. We are feeling more rootless and hopeless than ever before, despite the unprecedented prosperity permeating our society—where consumer products strain warehouses and retail outlets; technology and rapid service is at our fingertips; TV, video games, books, music, and movies bombard us at every turn; and access to every imaginable drug, drink, and sexual release is commonplace. It’s a time when “life seems utterly devoid of purpose. No path beckons. Eventually a kind of paralytic cynicism sets in. You believe in nothing. You accept nothing as truthful, useful, or significant. You don’t value anything you’re currently doing and can’t imagine doing something of value in the future.”<sup>3</sup>

What can we do? How can we get off this continually accelerating merry-go-round? How do we regain our unmediated ties to nature, our innate purposes, and the paths of creativity and caring?

A major purpose of this book is to attempt a deeper inquiry into these issues, to engage people in an ongoing dialogue about why young people seem to be more brutal, more willing to take it to the limit, more intent on resolving issues with a total and desperate finality. This is not so much about the right “answers” as it is about the right arguments. It’s time to make sense of the senselessness.

Around thirty years ago I committed myself to making sense of the senselessness of my own life. I became politically active in the barrios of Los Angeles during the tumultuous period of civil unrest in the 1960s and early 1970s. I obtained a new direction to my life, using abilities I barely discovered I possessed. Around eighteen I let go the most virulent aspects of my adolescence, including drug use, jails, and gang warfare. To survive and stay out of trouble, I worked in factories, foundries, refineries, construction sites, and four years in a steel mill. I acquired organizing skills as well as work skills. By age twenty-five, I resumed my education and embarked on the long and arduous road to become a writer and speaker—in effect, to merge intellectual activity with an active community life.

But I never forgot my youth, the most intense period of my life. The death-defying acts, suicide attempts, drug overdoses, homelessness, and staring down of bullets described a traumatized, raging



filled, and impulsive young man. It is the same craziness that makes a teenager drive ninety miles per hour down a highway. It does no good to say this is useless behavior—the point is it's so prevalent

(sixteen-year-olds are more likely to be killed in auto accidents than any other age group).<sup>4</sup> However, as storyteller and mythologist Michael Meade has stated, “we need to ask what the craziness is.”<sup>5</sup>

For me, the street battles, drugs, and shadow-walking stank so sweet. It was the perfume of an otherwise aimless existence. Once caught in the web of a crazy life, nobody could untangle me. I had to unravel myself.

First of all, I had to want to. I had to have a vision, a sense of destiny for my life that went beyond the adolescent rages and uncertainties. I had to gain a worldview—tied to something deep in the soul and deep in the soul. Some embrace religion. Others, political or cultural awareness. Or science. Almost always the development of a worldview is linked in some way to art—music, the visual arts, dance, writing—to the intersection of external and internal energies that impel us onto a creative terrain where spirit and body, the conscious and the unconscious, the universal and the singular, the personal and the social live through us in a delicate dance.

Once I'd found a direction, I had to remove myself from the powerful pull of self-destructive impulses. I did this by helping transform the lives of other youth in my neighborhood and other parts of Los Angeles. Giving back to others, most of whom were in similar circumstances, became my way out of the madness.

A dropout at age 15, I returned to high school the following year and got involved with a Chicano student empowerment group. I became active in the neighborhood community center, which included an alternative school for teens, a preschool center, family referral and counseling, and a youth activities facility. Having been an outlaw graffiti writer, I eventually learned to draw and paint. For a year and a half I painted murals—sometimes with gang youth—for the community center, on the walls of various businesses and parks, and at a children's library. I even learned Mexika (Aztec) indigenous dance steps, which I performed at the school and in a couple of community events. For a brief time I tried my hand at amateur boxing, martial arts, and playing sax and conga drums for a garage band.

Later I participated in demonstrations, door-to-door organizing drives, youth dances, and retreats. Even when I worked in industry, I continued with these efforts in communities throughout the Los Angeles area, along with my first wife, Camila, and other young revolutionaries.

As described in my 1993 memoir, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*,<sup>6</sup> at the age of eleven, I turned my whole being over to a gang. As part of this, I took a variety of drugs, particularly aerosol sprays, but also heroin. In the gang I was not a leader; I was a good soldier. The new roles that I assumed required a more conscious participation in my life.

From 1974 to 1978 Camila and I gathered around us a number of young leaders, helping them organize activities, gain knowledge, and find places to hang out. At first they included youth from East L.A., particularly from the Aliso Village and Pico Gardens housing projects. Later, in Pasadena we worked with the local high schools, including students from the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MeCha—the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán). (Prior to my marriage in 1974, I had been the MeCha organizer for East L.A. high schools.) We supported striking bus drivers and school integration efforts, and participated in youth leadership camps and demonstrations against police abuse.

In the Florencia barrio of South Central L.A., and later in Watts—where we lived in the colonias neighborhood between the Jordan Downs and Imperial Courts housing projects—we set up a

arts/theater group with neighborhood youth (Camila had been active in teatro groups at Garfield High School in East L.A., like the Teatro Urbano). On some weekends children and young teens would come to our house for meetings and community arts events, where they displayed their dancing, singing, and acting skills while we showed politically charged films on the outside wall of our house.

We had a cadre of young people willing to look death in the eye, and as they became more active they adopted a vision of a more passionate and profound existence. We also attended gatherings in other cities that gathered youth and activists from around the country. The whole world lay before us. Our efforts were fraught with blood and will. I had been a young man who only lived for and cared about my barrio. Now I was going to places like San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago, driving vans or beat-up cars across the vast expanse of this land. As new geographical horizons opened up before me, so did those in my heart and mind.

I did not know it then, but by consciously pursuing a spiritual quest—which all youth are on, including gang youth—by opening up to the world in its pain and glory, I was moving through an initiation process. I left my barrio and my family to penetrate a new source of power. By returning to the barrio and contributing to the spiritual and intellectual growth of other young people, I was forging the character that would serve to carry me along divergent and sometimes treacherous paths.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a violent period in Los Angeles. However, they only laid the ground for a more extensive violence that would grip these streets and those of other cities in the 1980s and 1990s. But I had moved away from this. In one sense I had outgrown the gang rivalries, robberies, and street wars. Like all young people at some time in their lives, I also had to make a decision to grow up.

I won't recount here in detail all the personal setbacks I've endured over the years. Suffice it to say they involved failed marriages (Camila and I broke up in 1978), losing kids and family, drinking away my sorrows instead of facing them, failing in work, in my community commitments, as a writer, and even as a father. But by failing, I was preparing for the only success that was possible: the success that comes from having descended to the depths and learning how to gather the psychic and spiritual energies to rise out of them.

All this has gone into the writing of this book, which summarizes much of what I've learned about life and working with young people through extensive study and practice.

The majority of the lessons here came from my fifteen years in Chicago, beginning in 1985. There I participated in organizations such as Youth Struggling for Survival as well as the Increase the Peace Collaborative, the Community Renewal Society's Anti-Violence Initiative, Guild Complex's Writing Through the Prisms of Self and Community Workshops, Tia Chucha Press, the Latino Planning Committee for Peace and Justice, and Humboldt Park's Teen Reach. Only recently, in the summer of 2000, did I return to Los Angeles. A year and a half later I helped launch a center of intellectual and arts enhancement called Tia Chucha's Café Cultural (a bookstore, coffee bar, performance space, art gallery, and computer center) in the Northeast San Fernando Valley—"Where Art and Minds Meet—For A Change."

In addition, for more than two decades I have spoken at hundreds of conferences, retreats, public and private schools, universities, prisons, migrant camps, homeless shelters, worksites, churches, libraries, and juvenile facilities throughout the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Central America, and Europe.

On the day that Eric Harris, eighteen, and Dylan Klebold, seventeen, slaughtered their fellow students and a teacher at Columbine High, I was doing a poetry reading and talk to several hundred students at Fremd High School in the Chicago suburb of Palatine. Many of these students later wrote

me about how my words helped encourage them to live more intentional lives. We can't forget that the vast majority of U.S. schools did not report any violence that day.

So while today there may be an alarming number of young people who are losing it, the vast majority of teenagers in the country are not committing violent acts. They are trying to negotiate their lives, with many problems, naturally, but still somewhat intact. Many of them are responding with heroic, even if mostly quiet, ways to these problems—and often without much support from adults.

In his book, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation*, Mike A. Males reports that twelve- to nineteen-year-olds made up 14 percent of the U.S. population in the mid-1990s. They accounted for 18 percent of the country's violent crime (slightly more than their population), 1 percent of murders, 7 percent of suicides, 2 percent of drug deaths, 14 percent of highway deaths (reflecting the exact proportion of their numbers), 9 percent of drunken driving deaths, 12 percent of births, and 15 percent of HIV infections. Given the statistics, Males concludes that youth do not account for a high percentage of America's social ills.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, after studying data from the California Department of Justice—California crime figures are the most complete and consistent, as well as harbingers for the rest of the country—Males maintains that the greatest rise of violence and crime from 1980 to 1997 came from white male adults over age thirty.

To consider truly innovative responses in meeting the needs of young people, we must start with realistic assessments of what their situations consist of—away from the political spin doctors, sensationalist headlines, and general fear mongering going on today about children and youth.

Closing in on a half century of existence, I'm in the afternoon of this day called life. Only now do I feel I can contribute an ounce of cogency to this conversation. I am compelled to try because of the growing fissures between youth and elders, wealth and poverty, men and women, parents and their children, and the resultant rise of violence and substance abuse, home and community dislocation. There is also an astronomical and detrimental growth of prisons and law enforcement as the preferred remedies to what are essentially economic, political, sociological, psychological, and cosmological matters.

There is a meaningful connection between this ruptured social contract and the fact that so many have been pushed aside by the economy. "One paycheck away" is the defining phrase of this period—one paycheck away from losing one's home, education, and a place in the community. One paycheck away from a fall with incalculable consequences, even in times of a so-called growing economy. What is the phrase that defines the opposite direction? Where is the compass to a true north of victory and reconciliation?

From the segmented and conflicted class structure in our society, a new social class is emerging. Excluded from the technologically driven economy, this class is also politically, socially, and culturally ostracized. They are the exiled, the alienated, the abandoned, the demonized. Included are those on welfare, the homeless, prisoners, migrant workers, urban and rural poor (of all races including the working poor), the indigenous and the undocumented, but also former managers, professionals, teachers, artists, and intellectuals who have been unable to make a transition through the recent societal changes. They are the ones capitalism can no longer effectively exploit, and therefore value—the locked out as well as the locked down.

As the core culture becomes increasingly materialistic and profit oriented, it also becomes mean-spirited, intolerant, and devoid of a regenerative spirit. So, where do we turn when the center of the culture becomes hollow? As many others have poignantly remarked, to the margins, to the so-called periphery where everything is struggling and alive, to the "outcasts" and outlawed. Just as the

extremities of the body energize the heart, so, too, do the peripheries of a culture revitalize its heart.

Here is where the imagination of the possible expands, where change and creation find seed and root. This is also where other social classes can make a link to the developing movement for a shared future of peace, justice, and plenitude and where the needs, desires, and longings of all the people can be realized.

However, the period of possibility we are in suggests that shifts in policy won't suffice. Instead we must reorient our thinking on how young and old are joined in the political and social matrix of the land—where the people are fully activated and their dreams, aspirations, and strivings are central to what makes up community.

As Goethe once said, "Everything has been thought of before; the difficulty is to think of it again." Or we can proceed from Osip Mandelstam's statement: "Everything existed of old, everything happens again, and only the moment of recognition is sweet."<sup>10</sup>

At the nexus of the sweet encounters between old issues and new demands, something indeed is being born. Our society is pregnant with such potential. It's time our institutions, relationships, and collaborations were seen as birthing centers.

So this is a good place to start: To reimagine the issues and bring complete community attention and intention to the crisis faced by our youth and, consequently, the whole culture.

The people and events discussed in this publication are real. However, many of the names and circumstances were changed to protect those involved.

## Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Rick Moody, "In Guns We Trust," *Details*, Oct. 1998, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> Kalle Lasn and Bruce Grierson, "America the Blue," *Utne Reader*, Sept.–Oct. 2000, pp. 74–81.

<sup>4</sup> "16-Year-Olds Lead in Teen Car Fatalities," *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> From "We Must Ask What the Crazyness Is," in *To Be a Man: In Search of the Deep Masculine*, edited by Keith Thompson (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher Publishers, 1991), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Luis J. Rodriguez, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press 1993; paperback, New York: Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Mike A. Males, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths About the Next Generation* (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1999), pp. 4–6.

<sup>8</sup> "For all the talk of the fragmentation of America, there is only one division that is dangerously getting worse, and that is the gap between rich and poor," from "UnAmerican Thoughts," *The Economist*, Oct. 26, 1991, as quoted in Jeffrey Reiman, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), p. 29. Reiman adds, "In 1970, the poorest fifth of the nation's families received 5.4 percent of the aggregate income, and the richest fifth received 40.9 percent. In 1980, the share of the poorest fifth was 5.1 percent of aggregate income, that of the richest fifth was 41.6 percent. By 1994, the share of the poorest fifth had declined to 4.2 percent, while that of the richest fifth had risen to 46.9 percent. During this period, the share of the top 5 percent rose from 15.6 to 20.1 percent. By 1995, the number of poor Americans was 35.6 million, up from 30.1 million in 1990, and 25.2 million in 1980." (p. 29.)

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Michael Cole's Foreword to Urie Bronfenbrenner's *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> From Osip Mandelstam, "Tristia," *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

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part one:

# The Violence of Youth—the Absence of Elders

*With all thy getting, get understanding*

—Proverbs 4:7

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chapter 1

# Throwaway Kids<sup>11</sup>

*Out of each dead child sprouts a gun with eyes  
and out of each crime bullets are born  
that someday will find the place  
of your hearts.*

—PABLO NERUDA

Pedro was a thoughtful, articulate, and charismatic young man; he would listen, absorb, and respond. He had the sharp Spanish-African features of his Puerto Rican heritage, a thin but muscular body, and light curly hair cut short except for a small “tail” at the nape of his neck. His movements were quick and well developed due to years of surviving in the streets of Chicago. In 1993 Pedro was a twenty-year-old gang leader. For most of his life, he lived off and on between his welfare mother and an uncle. He had been kicked out of schools and had served time in youth detention facilities. He was also a great human being.

For four months that year the courts had designated me and my wife, Trini, as Pedro’s guardian under a house-arrest sentence. He was respectful and polite. He meticulously answered all my messages. My six-year-old son, Ruben, loved him and my nineteen-year-old son, Ramiro, happened to be his best friend at the time.

During his stay I gave Pedro books to help him become more cognizant of the world. Books like *Palante*,<sup>12</sup> a photo text about the Young Lords Party of the 1970s, opened him up to an important slice of history that, until then, he had never known about.

One evening, Pedro was talking with a couple of girls at the bottom of the stairs, two flights below the apartment. I had just arrived by cab from the airport following a speaking trip. Although I worried Pedro would trigger his ankle monitor—he had to stay within the hundred-foot limit—I walked upstairs, put my bags down, and began a chat with Trini. When I heard a commotion downstairs and Pedro yelled out my name, I knew he was being jumped. I ran down the stairs like a herd of wild elephants and saw two guys beating up on Pedro. I came out swinging (I hit mostly wall and a lot of air). The two guys took off as this heavy-set Mexican rushed toward them.

Pedro was down, but unhurt. I walked out and the two guys were still there. One cowered behind the wheels of a delivery truck. The other, cornered at the entrance of a Laundromat, picked up some kid’s bicycle to throw at me. I confronted them both, saying that regardless of what beef they had with Pedro, as long as he stayed with my family, they would have beef with me. I’m sure they contemplated jumping me. But they hesitated and fled. In reality I was out of breath and vulnerable. Those young guys could have taken me, except that I acted as if I could hold my own.

For some time after, Pedro and I laughed about that incident. It also strengthened our friendship because he knew I would jeopardize myself to safeguard his presence in my home. His stay with us passed



without further problems.

When Pedro was released from house arrest, he moved out of the neighborhood with his girlfriend and her small boy. She later had his first child. He found a job. Although he remained a leader of the gang, he also talked about struggle, about social change, about going somewhere. It appeared his life was making a turn for the better.

Then, in November 1993, Pedro was shot with a .44 and was hit in his back, a leg, and a hand. He lived, but he was not the same after that. During his hospital stay the same gang that had shot him ambushed and killed Angel, a friend of Ramiro's and Pedro's. An honor student at one of the best schools in the city, Angel was on his way to school. News accounts the next day failed to mention this, reporting only that he was a suspected gang member, as if this fact justified his death.

In the overcrowded room of the public hospital where Pedro was recovering with tubes taped to his body, and with fellow patients coughing and moaning nearby, I tried to persuade him to get his boys to chill. I knew Ramiro and the others were all sitting ducks. Pedro went through some internal turmoil, but he decided to forbid retaliation. This was hard for him, but with tears of rage falling down his cheeks, he did it.

Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. In early 1994, Pedro allegedly shot and killed one of the guys believed to be behind Angel's murder and his own shooting. He was a fugitive for about a year until he was captured, tried, and convicted. In 1996 he was sent to Stateville Prison to serve a forty-year sentence.

I tell this to convey the complexity of working with youths like Pedro, youths most people would rather write off, but who are intelligent, creative, and quite decent. The tragedy is that it is mostly young people like these who are being killed and who are doing the killing. I've seen them in youth prisons, hospitals, and courts throughout the land. Given other circumstances, these young people might have been college graduates, officeholders, or social activists. Unfortunately many find themselves in situations they feel unable to pull out of until it's too late.

Youths like Pedro aren't in gangs to be criminals, killers, or prison inmates. For them a gang embraces who they are, gives them the incipient authority they need to eventually control their lives, the empowerment that other institutions—including schools and families—often fail to provide. Youth without the proper community guidance, gang involvement can be disastrous.

In August 1994 a media storm was set off when eleven-year-old Robert Sandifer of Chicago, known as "Yummy" because he liked to eat cookies, shot into a crowd and killed a fourteen-year-old girl. A suspected member of a Southside gang, Yummy disappeared; days later he was found shot in the head. Two teenage members of Yummy's gang were later convicted on charges surrounding his death. Hours before his murder a neighbor saw Yummy, who told her, "Say a prayer for me."

This is a tragedy, but without a clear understanding of the social, economic, and psychological dynamics that would drive an eleven-year-old to kill, we can only throw up our hands. While the Columbine High School killings received more attention (fifteen people dead in one day is a good reason), the fact is that in poor urban communities young people may know a dozen or so friends and acquaintances killed over a school year. They are traumatized and confused, but the consideration that these deaths receive is usually scant or, as is often the case, focused on their "innate" predilection for violent and criminal behavior.

Yet it isn't hard to figure out the array of forces behind much of this violence. Yummy was a child of very real and chosen policies during the Reagan years, of substantial cuts in community programs, the worst job loss since the Great Depression, of more police and prisons and few options for recreation, education, or work. He was a boy who had been physically abused, shuttled from one foster

home to another, one juvenile facility after another. At every stage of Robert's young life, he was blocked from becoming all he could be. Yet there was nothing to stop him from getting a gun, using it, and being killed by one in return.

No "three strikes and you're out," no trying children as adults, no increased prison spending will address what has given rise to the Pedros and Yummys of this world. Such proposals deal only with the end results of a process that will continue to produce its own fuel, like a giant breeder reactor. They are not solutions.

In 1993, along with Patricia Zamora, who at the time worked with Casa Aztlán Community Center in Chicago's Mexican community of Pilsen, we organized a nucleus of gang and nongang youth to help them find their own answers and to conceptualize their own organizational structures in their own interests. By June 1994 some thirty people gathered in my backyard, ready to start a new youth organization. They came mostly from the predominantly Puerto Rican area of Humboldt Park (my son's friends, and Pedro's homies) and Pilsen, two areas known for gang violence and marked by crowded three-story brick flats, trash-strewn vacant lots, graffiti-scarred alleys, family restaurants, corner bars and liquor stores, carnecerias, store-front churches, and used-car lots.

The group agreed to reach out to other youths and hold retreats and weekly meetings, and to organize a major conference. All summer they worked, without money, without external resources, but with a lot of enthusiasm and energy. The leadership consisted of kids with names like Pinkie, Jungle Boy, Jay, Jay, Chupa, Bobo, Cholo, Satan, Puppet, Chuckie, Mexico, Frosty, and Mugsy. My kids, Ramiro and Andrea, and their mother, Camila, were also there.

Their efforts culminated in the Youth '94 Struggling for Survival Conference, held that August at the University of Illinois, Chicago. More than 150 young people and about 30 adults attended. A few gang members set aside deadly rivalries to take part in this gathering. They arrived by bus, on foot, or on rides from parents and teachers. They came from Humboldt Park, Pilsen, Logan Square, Little Village, West Town, Rogers Park, Uptown, the Southside, the Northside, and the Westside. Even students from suburban high schools and colleges participated. They held workshops on police brutality, jobs, and education, and peace in the neighborhoods.

There were a number of mishaps, including a power failure that blacked out the whole building. Yet the young people voted to continue meeting. They held their workshops in the dark or with sporadic flashes of cigarette lighters, raising issues, voicing concerns, coming up with ideas. The adults—parents, teachers, counselors, resource people, and a video crew from the Center for New Television—were there to boost what the young people had organized. Later some of them established Video Machete—a production group organized by Chris Bratton and Maria Benfield—that has grown into a major training and filming organization for youth and have presented screenings in New York City, Chicago, and Taos.<sup>13</sup> (Chicago has pioneered such efforts, including the internationally known Street Level Media.)

Unfortunately the building personnel told us we had to leave because it was unsafe to be in the building without power. Casa Aztlán agreed to let us move to several of their rooms to continue the workshops; I felt we would probably lose half of the participants in the fifteen-minute ride between sites. Not only did we hang on to most of the youths, we picked up a few more along the way. In Casa Aztlán's flooded basement, adorned with crumbling plastered walls, we held the final plenary session. The kids set up a roundtable at which it was agreed that only proposed solutions would be entertained. A few read poetry, including Ramiro. It was a success because the young people wouldn't let it be anything else.

Over the years Youth Struggling for Survival (YSS) grew and brought together young people from

twelve different Chicago communities and surrounding suburbs, including Aurora. Several hundred young people have gone through the organization's processes. Our elders base increased to more than a dozen, including several families. We worked also with organizations like Barrios Unidos of California, which organized several peace summits in the 1990s; the Mosaic Multicultural Foundation's gatherings around themes of youth, violence, and the veritable place of mentors and elders; and the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. In addition, YSS incorporated spiritual experiences, including Mexika, Lakota, and Navajo traditions, such as the purification sweat ceremony, guided by respected teachers in those traditions. YSS set up Day of the Dead altars, honoring mainly the young people who have died in street gang wars, and, once, a Mexika-style pyramid made of bamboo and paper for a ritual pageant event in the Logan Square neighborhood.

In 1997 PBS-TV aired a segment on YSS for the series "Making Peace," produced by Moir Productions for the Independent Television Service. Viewings of the series resulted in more than two hundred community meetings across the country. And we have linked with similar groups in the United States as well as in Europe, Mexico, and Central America.

As is bound to happen in this kind of work, there were some terrible setbacks. Three of our young leaders were killed and others ended up behind bars, including Ramiro, convicted in 1998 for three counts of attempted murder.

Yet YSS's positive impact is undeniable. Over time community organizations—Alternative Senn/Youth Net, Youth Options Unlimited, Family Matters, Public Allies, the Chicago Foundation for Women, Chicago Association House, Youth Services Project, Strive, Yollocalli Youth Center and Radio Arte, the Quantum Project, Aspira, the Aurora public schools, and the Music Theater Workshop—hired many of our leaders. A few of our members set up their own businesses, and many have gone to college.

A number of these young people have spoken at schools, conferences, juvenile facilities, and Native American reservations. They've attended gatherings in Santa Cruz, El Paso, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Kansas City, North Carolina, Atlanta, and San Francisco, as well as in Canada, Italy, and Cuba.

By reaching out to assist other youth from falling into the traps of violence, drugs, and alcohol—even though some of them were still themselves active with these—they have contributed to changing themselves. One young man, who once held his brother as he lay dying from bullet wounds in the streets of Pilsen, gave an impassioned talk to children in the Pine Ridge reservation, warning them not to emulate the big city gangs, which some of them were beginning to do. "You have a beautiful culture, with great traditions," the Mexican youth said. "You don't have to end up lost like many of us. We may not make it, but you have a chance to do something about your own future." For young people who beforehand had not seen more than five blocks of their own neighborhood, to reach out so far and so wide has been crucial in helping them see the vastness of what's possible in the world, as well as in meeting other young leaders who are trying to accomplish similar goals.

YSS is but one example of young people tackling the issues head-on. There are hundreds more across America, rising in number every year. The point is that for a long time young people have organized themselves for their art, music, and well-being—on their own terms. They've already taken major steps in running their own lives their communities, even their schools. The question may then be whether the relationships between adults and young people are mutually respectful and beneficial.

I've learned that people like Pedro are not "lost causes."

But then, as a wise man once said, the "lost causes" are the only ones worth fighting for.

## Footnotes:

[11](#) This piece originally appeared in a different form in *The Nation*, Nov. 21, 1994.

[12](#) The Young Lords Party and Michael Abramson, photographs by Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

[13](#) Since its founding, Youth Struggling for Survival has received a 1998 Neighborhood Award from the Chicago Council on Urban Affairs and a 1999 Self Education Foundation Award (cofounded by William “Upski” Wimsatt). In 1997 the group was designated one of the eleven most promising youth leadership programs in the country by the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. In addition YSS has been supported by sources like the Mott Foundation, Chicago’s Community Trust, Crossroads Fund, Donnelley Foundation, the Milarepa Foundation, the Red Moon Theater, and, most importantly, members of the community, primarily in the form of hours and hours of volunteer time.

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