

Beyond the First Rung: An Interview with Jim Silver

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Jordy Cummings¹ (JC): This issue of *Alternate Routes* has the theme of “Capitalism in the Classroom.” So to begin I’d like to ask you, in the broadest sense, what you see as the effect of capitalism in its various forms in the classroom. Did neoliberalism introduce a different logic? What about post-crisis capitalism?

Jim Silver² (JS): In the last thirty to forty years, the era of neoliberalism, capitalism has done a lot of damage to education. Consider the case of universities. Public funding has been systematically reduced in real terms over a long period. Tuition is rising in real terms, reducing access for many, but especially for those already on the margins of our society. A high and still rising proportion of classes are taught by non-tenured faculty who are part-time, poorly paid and have minimal job security. Universities are increasingly corporatized – management is less collegial and more top-down, and private sector fund-raising has assumed enormous importance, adding to the influence exercised by corporations and wealthy individuals.

An even greater problem lies outside the classroom. One of the strongest correlations in the social sciences is that between income and educational outcomes. The higher the income, the better are educational outcomes; the lower the income, the worse are educational outcomes. Those who grow up in poverty are much less likely to succeed educationally than those who are economically better off. Since a major consequence of the neoliberal era is the growth of poverty and inequality, more and more people are left behind educationally. This is worsened by the

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dramatic changes in the global labour market. Here in Canada there are very good jobs, and very bad jobs, and ever-fewer in between. To get the very good jobs generally requires high educational achievement. So those who are poor are less likely to succeed educationally and thus less likely to get good jobs and more likely either to get poor jobs – those precarious jobs that are poorly paid, part-time, with no benefits, no security and no union – or no jobs at all. Growing numbers are completely detached from the labour market, and have few educational skills. They are the new “surplus” population. Capitalism does not need them. And the children of those marginalized from the labour market and the educational system are themselves less likely to succeed in school, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty that produces poor educational outcomes that lead to poor or no jobs, which then reproduces still more poverty in a vicious downward cycle.

This is a huge problem in western Canada, especially as regards Aboriginal people, who historically have had many negative experiences with education, and who continue to face discrimination in the labour market. Educational outcomes amongst Aboriginal people are, on average, especially low – although when income levels are factored out this is not the case; it is poverty, not Aboriginality that is the issue. This is the case with newcomers as well, especially non-European newcomers, who disproportionately experience poor educational outcomes and poorly-paid jobs. The problems of education, jobs and poverty are increasingly racialized.

Education is not just about jobs. It is about the joy of learning, the sense of self-worth that educational achievements can produce, the creation of a populace that can participate fully in the increasingly difficult decisions that face us as a society. But capitalism’s neoliberal era produces large numbers who are marginalized from the educational system, the labour market and much of civic society. Educational strategies that work well to meet the needs of those, especially adults, who have been marginalized have been developed and have proved effective, but they are non-mainstream approaches that require a commitment – both ideologically and fiscally – to meeting the needs of those least advantaged. Little such commitment exists in the age of austerity. Neoliberal governments choose instead to pour funds into correctional systems and policing. Punishing the poor is an important characteristic of the age of neoliberalism; supporting creative, alternative educational strategies for low-income adults is not.

JC: As a related question, much of the work you do surrounds building community resistance to capitalism in the classroom. You have written about and worked in adult education. Is this kind of empowerment-based approach under threat? In turn, tell me a bit about how it develops community capacities.

JS: I have written elsewhere (Silver 2013) about alternative forms of adult education, especially Aboriginal adult education, being practiced in Winnipeg's inner city. These approaches to adult education work well and produce significant numbers of graduates. A high proportion of these graduates choose to "give back" to the low-income neighbourhoods in which they have grown up, contributing to a home-grown, bottom-up form of community development that is effective. The current NDP government of Manitoba has been supportive of these alternative educational initiatives, far more than Conservative governments would be. Successive NDP governments have not invested enough in these forms of alternative education to make the gains that would be possible, but they have been supportive enough that it is worth keeping them in office given the alternative. In Manitoba now, the provincial Conservative Party is led by a former Reform Party MP who is likely to be as brutal to the inner city, and to alternative and successful forms of education in the inner city, as was the Conservative government of Gary Filmon in the 1990s.

Much of the Aboriginal adult education that has been developed in Winnipeg's inner city, as elsewhere, uses a de-colonizing approach, by which adults are made aware of what colonialism has done and continues to do to them collectively. As a result, they come to see the problems they have experienced in life as being the product not of their personal failings, but of the broad social forces related to colonialism. Coming to that realization is often liberating, and enables Aboriginal people to develop greater self-esteem and self-confidence, to succeed educationally, and then, in so many cases, to give back to their communities. When individuals start to succeed in such educational settings, they bring their cousins, their sisters, their friends into the program, creating a ripple effect by which the benefits of this form of education spread beyond the individual to families, extended families and friends and neighbours. Low-income communities benefit when graduates choose to work in the communities in which they have grown up, making possible a "rebuilding from within" form of community development (Silver, 2011). In this way these adult educational approaches are transformative.

When educational strategies have a de-colonizing character, community development takes a form inspired by traditional Aboriginal values, which are collective and egalitarian. Developing the capacities and capabilities of individuals and of communities is the goal of this form of community development, and it can reasonably be argued that this is foundational for the building of a better world – a world less driven by individualism and competition than by the egalitarian commitment to ensure that no one is excluded or left behind. The transformative character of these alternative educational strategies is, for the most part, politically progressive.

JC: You make the point that literacy is the “first rung on the literacy and education ladder” for working-class people. Beyond the obvious, tell me more about how this builds the condition of possibility for improving the lives of working class Canadians. If you have any particular stories to share, that would be helpful.

JS: Literacy programs can be seen as the “first rung on the ladder” of an educational journey that can change peoples’ lives in positive ways. In Manitoba, 285,000 people have literacy levels that are below the level needed to participate fully in their communities and in the broader society. This is a shocking number. Across Canada, mainstream economists associated with the chartered banks – that is, they are not radicals – have argued recently that low levels of literacy cost the Canadian economy billions of dollars. That’s because people cannot participate in the labour market because of their literacy levels, so there is an “opportunity cost,” and because low levels of literacy correlate with poverty, poor health, poor educational outcomes, and higher rates of incarceration, adding significantly to these costs. Many of those who are illiterate become part of Canada’s growing “surplus” population. They are no longer needed, not even as a reserve army of labour. So the system – at least a system guided by the values of neoliberalism – does not need to invest in them, and has no particular incentive to do so. But literacy programs and other adult education programs, especially community-based programs in low-income neighbourhoods, are relatively inexpensive to mount, and can produce dramatic changes in peoples’ sense of themselves, and in their capacities to be part of building a better world.

In early October 2014, I spoke to people in a public housing project in Winnipeg where I had done a small research project, at the request of a community-based organization, on a literacy program in the housing complex. I reported back to a community gathering on the outcomes of the research, as we typically do in our collaborative and community-based

form of research in Winnipeg's inner city. The highlight of the event was two of the students in the literacy program, Jean and Alice (pseudonyms). They are middle-aged women who previously could not read to their children at bedtime, could not read the newspaper to learn more about the world outside their housing project, and who felt a deep sense of shame as a result. Each of the two spoke at the community gathering to a crowd of 25-30 people, and described their newfound joy at now being able to read. Jean said that she had previously had to rely on her four sons to read anything that had to be read, and now she felt a deep pride in not having to do that, and in being able to read the newspaper and become aware of the wider world around her. She is now volunteering with the kindergarten class in the neighbourhood school. She is a contributing part of the community. Her sense of dignity has grown significantly. Alice said she had not been able to read to her two older sons, and they had not done well in school, but she was now able to read to her youngest son, and he loves school and is doing well. These are, in the grand scheme of things, small gains, but for these women they are huge gains. With improved investment in such literacy and other alternative adult education programs many such gains could be made, but such investments are completely inconsistent with the neoliberal and austerity-driven capitalism of today.

Much of the political Left in Winnipeg is involved in these kinds of grassroots struggles, working closely with those who have been damaged by neoliberalism and by colonialism. This means that we are engaged in day-to-day efforts to make small changes. This may appear to be something other than revolutionary. However, I think it is our collective view that we have to be part of these local struggles, since peoples' needs are so very great. By being part of these struggles, we are connected with a part of the real world that is being seriously damaged by today's capitalism, and we are part of a process by which the capacities and capabilities of those otherwise marginalized by the system are being developed. This is the basis of change that can be positive from a Left point of view. It means that those who are poor can develop the capacities and capabilities to themselves become the agents of the change so desperately needed in their communities.

At the same time, the corporate world is expending considerable effort and money to draw the Aboriginal community into their fold. Business schools offer specialized programs for Aboriginal students; corporations make efforts to hire these graduates. An Aboriginal middle class is gradually emerging. Our collective efforts in the inner city are

aimed not at all at creating an Aboriginal middle class, but at contributing to a process by which those otherwise marginalized from the dominant society can take charge of their lives to build communities characterized by solidarity and lives lived in dignity.

JC: Relatedly, you've written about doing adult education among indigenous communities. What kind of challenges have you faced? What do you see as short, medium and long-term goals for shifting our practices?

JS: Adult education involving Aboriginal people brings its own particular challenges, over and above the key challenge, which is poverty and all the human damage that complex poverty can produce (Silver, 2014). Aboriginal people have had a century of negative experiences with education. Education has produced few if any benefits for the vast majority of Aboriginal people. Many young Aboriginal people see no point in struggling to succeed educationally. They are alienated from the educational system. They are alienated from many systems – the justice system, the corrections system, the child welfare system, for example. Most have experienced racism on an almost daily basis. Many have internalized the false claims of colonialism – the claims of their own and their cultures' inferiority – and this often produces a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence and in some cases even a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. This, and the constant challenges created by life lived in complex poverty, are the greatest challenge to educational success.

In the program I run – the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, located off-campus in the heart of Winnipeg's very low-income North End – we often say that the greatest challenge faced by our students, and especially our many Aboriginal students, is life itself. By that we mean that their immersion in complex poverty and the lasting impact of colonialism weighs them down, and consistently produces multiple barriers to educational success – they lose their apartment because of a bed bug infestation, or their son is in the remand centre and they're worried sick and can't concentrate on their studies, or two people in their extended families have died in the past week and they have to travel to their home communities for funerals, or they were "jumped" on the weekend and lost all their identification, or any number of other problems. Being poor and being Aboriginal makes educational achievement difficult.

On the other hand, however, approaches to Aboriginal adult education have been developed that work well. Many Aboriginal peoples' lives have been changed for the better. More of these gains could be made if

such alternative educational initiatives were expanded, and especially if they were connected with some of the very innovative job creation strategies developed in Winnipeg's inner city. The model that we use can be described as a convergence approach (Loxley, 2010), by which linkages are consciously constructed via local hiring, local purchasing, and investing locally to meet peoples' needs. Alternative educational strategies are central to this approach.

Typically, the educational approaches that work are physically located in low-income neighbourhoods, feature small class sizes, create a warm and friendly and personalized environment, make available extra supports, both academic and personal supports, and design a curriculum that relates to the students' experience and has a de-colonizing character (Silver, 2013; MacKinnon, 2013). Such educational initiatives can work well and adults can make great gains, improving their level of formal education and perhaps even more importantly, improving their sense of themselves and their preparedness to be agents of change. People who make these gains often choose to give back to the low-income communities in which they have grown up and lived. They become the agents of change that are so desperately needed in such communities.

My goal is to be part of a collective effort to expand these kinds of initiatives, and to produce more such agents of change. We are working hard to do this in Winnipeg's inner city. For example, the redevelopment of the old Merchants Hotel – previously a magnet for a wide variety of serious problems in the North End – will have a very significant impact. Merchants Corner will be a large complex over seven city lots that includes thirty units of subsidized housing for students with children, and educational space that is shared between the Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, which will hold classes during the day, and the North End high school support program, CEDA-Pathways to Education, which is an after-school program and will use the same classrooms from 4:00-8:00 PM. Merchants Corner will become part of what we are calling the "North End Community Campus," which includes other alternative educational initiatives, plus a childcare centre with a strong Aboriginal character that gives first priority to students, and the thirty units of rent-gearied-to-income student housing. The North End Community Campus, located in a one-block area on Selkirk Avenue in the North End, is a coherent and strategic approach to education for people who would otherwise be likely to be marginalized in a low-income urban space. Most of the graduates of Urban and Inner-City Studies, many of our current students, and many of the graduates of the other alternative

educational initiatives work in inner-city community development initiatives that are driven by values that are, in many important respects, the values of those of us on the political Left. Merchants Corner will create more people who, having grown up in poverty, become the source and the agents of positive change in their low-income communities. It is a “rebuilding from within” strategy.

Other examples of related Winnipeg inner-city initiatives include, to name but a few, social enterprises like BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development) and MGR (Manitoba Green Retrofit), which hire from marginalized communities and provide training to do useful work – renovating and retrofitting buildings and a range of related tasks, for example. People otherwise marginalized become productive members of society, doing useful work that produces in them a sense of dignity. Most of those working in such jobs experience a process of healing from the damage of racialized poverty and colonialism. Their lives are improved; their families are strengthened; their communities are healthier.

JC: Affordable and accessible housing are intrinsically connected with the education of a democratic polis, and you have written about them extensively. How do you connect the two? It seems to me, using Michael Lebowitz’s idea – out of the early Karl Marx – that this is to foster “rich human beings” or what the labour activist Jane McAleevy calls “the total worker.” She wrote about how workers unite with community members to demand not merely a better collective agreement but better housing. What can we do when so many people are poor and on the streets or shelter system while condos and luxury homes sit empty?

JS: Housing is a central part of the daily realities of Winnipeg’s inner city and of the people who live there. Poor housing is a daily experience. As an important social determinant of health, poor housing contributes to ill health, lowered educational outcomes, difficulties with employment. Decent and affordable housing, by contrast, is foundational – it is the basis for the building of a better life.

The heart of the problem with housing in Canada, and in Winnipeg’s inner city, is that some ninety-five percent of housing in Canada is produced by private, for-profit builders and developers. They build what is profitable, which means single detached dwellings in the suburbs or high-priced condominiums downtown. They do not build low-income rental housing, because low-income people can’t pay enough in rent to make such buildings profitable, and the builders and developers are in the business of making profits. This means that if low-income rental is

to be built, it requires some kind of subsidy, and it is governments that can provide those subsidies. But the federal government abandoned social housing – that is, subsidized housing for low-income people – in 1993 and later that decade off-loaded responsibility for housing to the provinces, which are less fiscally able to produce subsidized housing. The result is a cross-Canada crisis in low-income rental housing. There is a lack of supply; rents are unaffordable; in Winnipeg's inner city many private rental houses are poorly maintained and over-priced by landlords. The NDP government in Manitoba has been exemplary in producing low-income rental housing and in renovating existing stock, and their efforts have made and continue to make a real difference. But the problem continues, because the backlog is so great and because the federal government, which has the real fiscal capacity, is for the most part not involved in solving the low-income rental housing crisis.

The housing crisis in Winnipeg's inner city can, however, be seen and is seen as an opportunity, particularly when viewed through the lens of a community economic development model shaped by a convergence philosophy. Deteriorating housing can be renovated and retrofitted; inner-city residents otherwise disengaged from the labour market can be trained and employed to do this work; social enterprises can be created to organize such activity and to supply materials for the purpose. The result of using this approach in Winnipeg's inner city has been increased employment of those typically seen as hard to employ, improved housing quality, reduced heating and water bills for low-income people, strengthened families and healthier communities.

The production of low-income rental housing and the financial support of those organizations engaged in a convergence approach to housing and other inner-city issues is a good example of why so many of us in Winnipeg continue to support the provincial NDP government, despite its limitations. Subsidies are essential if low-income rental housing is to be built, and governments have to provide those subsidies. To produce low-income rental housing in the volumes that are needed is very costly; only governments can do it. The provincial NDP government is doing it, despite its fiscal limitations, while also supporting many of the community-based organizations that do excellent community development work in Winnipeg's inner city.

JC: In your work with the working classes of Winnipeg, do you see a difference, in terms of levels of consciousness of their class interests, between Winnipeggers and people from other parts of Canada? Tell me about the differences and commonalities you see.

JS: Many of those we work with in Winnipeg's inner city are not part of the working class. They are part of capitalism's surplus population. They experience "complex poverty" or "spatially concentrated racialized poverty" (Silver, 2014; 2010). They are either completely detached from the labour market – in many cases inter-generationally – which is a key factor in street gang activity (Comack et al., 2013) and in children's involvement in survival sex, for example, or they have low-level jobs –cleaning motels or seniors' residences, for example. Few appear to be active in retail-level service sector jobs, probably a function of racism, given that so many entry-level service sector jobs require direct interaction with the public. Our work in the inner city produces jobs, and growing numbers are employed in such jobs, although most of the community-based organizations in which they are employed are dependent upon government for all or most of their funding, and so this employment is precarious in its own way – subject to changes in governments.

Winnipeg and other western Canadian cities are distinctive in Canada because of large and still rapidly growing Aboriginal populations, a significant proportion of whom are struggling with complex poverty and the damage caused by colonialism. Many still suffer from the inter-generational effects of the residential schools and colonialism more generally, and an astonishing proportion of them have at some point in their lives been institutionalized. In fact, in Comack et al. (2013) we use the term "trauma trails" to describe, among other things, the long and largely uninterrupted trail of institutions in which Aboriginal people have been incarcerated – residential schools, youth detention centres, the "sixties scoop" (by which many thousands of Aboriginal children were seized from their homes and sent away from their parents, often to other cities and even the USA), Child and Family Services (10,000 children, over eighty-five percent of them Aboriginal, are now in the care of CFS in Manitoba, in foster homes or group homes), and provincial and federal penal institutions, which in western Canada are wildly disproportionately populated by young Aboriginal men and, increasingly, women. Relatively few are the Aboriginal families that have not been touched by this institutionalization, and this adds to and reproduces the complex poverty and related trauma that are such a central part of so many Aboriginal peoples' life experience. The results are many – street gang activity as a form of resistance, low levels of formal educational attainment, poor health (diabetes, for example, is an epidemic), the constant struggle with racism, the connection of racism and poverty to

the tragedies of missing and murdered Indigenous women, low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence as the result of the internalization of colonialism.

Our efforts in Winnipeg's inner-city involve our working with people there, as allies, finding ways to create educational approaches that are relevant and that will produce collective benefits, and finding ways to create employment in which inner-city people feel comfortable and can earn a living, and finding ways to support families in building healthier futures for their children. In this work, we spend a great deal of time listening and learning. Many inner-city people themselves, and particularly inner-city Aboriginal people, have a deep understanding of the character of the problems they face, and of the kinds of solutions that will work. We learn from them and work alongside them. The result is that many of us who come from progressive political backgrounds have become relevant to the lives of those who are poor. We are not disengaged from, but rather are deeply involved with, the complexities and challenges of real-life, day-to-day struggles and the search for real solutions.

JC: The late French socialist theorist Andre Gorz coined the very useful concept of “non-reformist reforms.” These are reforms that don’t fundamentally overthrow the system as a whole, but nevertheless are reforms that actually decommodify aspects of our daily lives, and can help develop our capacities to build a better world and engage in transformative politics. On the other hand, this is counterpoised to “reformist reforms,” in other words, reforms that may indeed provide immediate help to people in need, but actually serve to reinforce the status quo and disempower popular activity from below. How do you see the work you do as fitting in this continuum? It seems to me much of what you do is the former, that is to say, “non-reformist.”

JS: The question of “reformist” versus “non-reformist reforms” is an interesting one in the case of those of us working in Winnipeg’s inner city. One interpretation might reasonably be that we are engaged only in “reformist reforms” – those that provide immediate help to inner-city people and that don’t challenge the status quo. It could well be argued that what we do here simply keeps the bottom from falling out of the inner city, as it has done for example in Detroit. Many of the community-based organizations with which we work closely are involved in healing those damaged so greatly by colonialism and racialized poverty. It is responding to immediate and terrible problems.

I think, however, that the case can be made that overall, our work is, at least potentially, much more than that. The alternative forms of education, especially adult education, that have been developed here in Winnipeg's inner city, and the innovative job creation strategies, really do develop the capacities and capabilities of people, and enable them to play an active and productive role in the communities in which they live. Much of the work of community-based Aboriginal organizations is aimed at healing at a pre-formal educational level, and can appear to be a classic case of "reformist reforms," but Shauna MacKinnon has been able to show in her work (MacKinnon and Stephens, 2008) that these organizations enable people to take small but exceptionally important steps in developing their agency. I have argued (Silver, 2006, Chapter 5) that Aboriginal forms of community development, rooted in the traditional Aboriginal values of sharing and community, can lead from personal healing to individual agency to collective engagement, thus leading to stronger and healthier families and communities. Some young Aboriginal people are beginning to organize in ways that are exceptionally creative and attractive. Their aim is not to overthrow the system, but rather to create a space in which they can live in a dignified and decolonized fashion, as Aboriginal people, while emphatically *not* being a part of the crazed competitiveness and greed of the capitalist system. Their approach to change is emerging from their experience of racialized poverty, and of colonization, and is rooted in the Aboriginal cultural re-awakening that is part of what is happening in Winnipeg's inner city, and which is built in large part upon traditional Aboriginal values, which are non-capitalist values. I would argue that these can legitimately be seen as non-reformist reforms.

These reforms, it is true, are not aimed at overthrowing the system and creating in its place a socialist society. They are aimed at enabling the very poor – and in western Canadian cities especially, Aboriginal people – to build alternative ways of being within a cruel capitalist system. These are ways of being that are rooted in such concepts as sharing and community. As we head toward ever-greater global economic crisis and ever-more climate disasters, these ways of being will increasingly be seen as attractive, and in that sense may well be "non-reformist reforms."

JC: Keeping the previous point in mind, you have also written that Manitoba's New Democratic Party must return to its social democratic roots. You point out the past achievements of social democracy which are not inconsiderable in central Canada. You offer a compelling alternative vision of provincial social democracy. With that said, how would

you respond to the charges that with the combination of low-levels of struggle from below, and the mechanics of capitalism right now, that this type of social democracy is impossible. What kind of agency would make it possible in Manitoba or in any other province?

JS: In the work that we are trying to do in Winnipeg's inner city, governments play a large role, for better or worse. Manitoba's NDP government plays a positive role. They do not do enough, and we work hard to push them to do more. But the difference between their approach and that of Manitoba's Conservative Party is so great that we believe it is essential to offer critical support to the government. The needs of those who are poor are so great that it would be difficult to justify our *not* being a part of these struggles. As a result, many of us who are on the political Left and outside the government are actively engaged in the inner city, doing what we can as allies to promote positive reforms. In that work we have been, by and large, supported by the NDP government, and in return we offer the government support, and constantly push them to do more.

NDP governments could do more, much more. This is possible. There is enormous wealth in Canada, but over the past thirty to forty years most of the gains in our collective wealth have been appropriated by the wealthy. They ought to be taxed, and those tax revenues ought to be put to work to solve the kinds of problems being discussed here, and to build an environmentally sustainable future. Doing so would produce enormous societal benefits. More people educated and employed – it is possible to create many jobs, because there are so many needs to be met – would increase tax revenues, and reduce government expenditures on health and corrections and social assistance, for example (Silver, 2014, Chapters 5 and 6). Done in an aggressive and systematic and long-term fashion, with governments taking advantage of their capacity to educate the public and win broad-based support for such an approach, this is possible. It may or may not happen, but it is possible.

By abandoning the realm of electoral politics and the real-world struggles of those most damaged by neoliberal capitalism and the politics of austerity, the broad Left has created a great empty space into which a mean-spirited political Right has marched, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. These narrow-minded right-wing ideologues do not have the support of the majority of Canadians, but that majority has difficulty seeing any viable alternative. That alternative, I believe, is best built by active engagement in struggles, including electoral struggles.

JC: It's a difficult struggle right now for those of us in academia, social movements and policy circles with truly progressive politics. What gives you hope in these dark times?

JS: I'm not quite sure that my attitude could be described as hopeful. These are, in many important respects, dark times. Personally, I enjoy the challenge of being actively engaged in low-income communities, contributing whatever skills I might have to progressive struggles, and learning something new and interesting every day. How much potential this kind of work has to stave off future disasters, I don't know. But there is in my opinion no real alternative to involvement in the struggle at a grassroots level, and to thinking and talking and writing about the character of that involvement and what it may mean for building a better world. I appreciate Gramsci's slogan, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," and think of that phrase on those days when the going is especially tough. Many days are like that, but we win the occasional battle, and one of the important things learned by those of us involved in the great social justice organization of the 1990s here in Winnipeg – Cho!ces – was the importance of celebrating victories, no matter how small. To celebrate victories, you have to be involved in struggles.

Being involved in struggles – in the case of many of us in Winnipeg's inner city, struggles alongside those who are particularly poor and marginalized and racialized and colonized – implies a belief in the importance of human agency. Marxism has made enormous contributions to our understanding of the dynamic structures of capitalism, but perhaps in doing so has under-estimated the importance of human agency in the process of change. I think that the work we are doing in Winnipeg's inner city is especially focused on the importance of human agency in the process of change. In working alongside those in the inner city our objective is to produce, from within the ranks of the poor, and in many cases the racialized and colonized poor, the human agents of a form of change in which the poor themselves become the means by which their poverty is overcome – in ways and toward ends that they themselves determine. The alternative forms of education and related initiatives that many of us are involved with in Winnipeg's inner city are an important part of this process.

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