

ON SEATTLE, DYING AND AN UGLY REFLECTION

Eric Johnson March 29, 2019

On a chilly night almost two years ago, in a cramped, cluttered room in a dirt-cheap motel on Aurora Avenue, I found myself sitting face-to-face with six heroin addicts. They were nice kids. They seemed tired. Wrung out. But they were honest, and funny at times, and I liked every one of them.

And, of course, they broke my heart.

I'll never forget Ace, who was 30 years old, with a closely shaved head and a slow, drawn out way of speaking. He rolled a cigarette and told me that he'd been a construction worker. "Most of my family, they don't know what I do or what I'm up to or where I'm at. I'm just kinda gone," he said quietly.

Ace said he has two kids somewhere. "Since I started using," he said, "I think about how, before, I used to vacation. I used to do stuff with people. And now it's just... all I do is try to get heroin."

I wonder where Ace is now. I wonder if he's alive. I wonder about his two kids too.

There was a guy named Josh who had the words "Hold" and "Fast" tattooed on his knuckles. He had been a fisherman and he wore a camouflage hat and talked animatedly about the trap he found himself in. "We're going to inject somewhere," he said. "Either it's going to be in your bathroom or a place the state pays for. Who do you want to clean it up? You want a nurse to deal with it? Or do you want the night-shift manager to deal with it? 'Cuz we're GONNA get high downtown! We're gonna use! Period." At one point he stopped talking for a moment and then he looked down and said, "It's sick." Josh asked me to blur his face for the documentary we were working on. He said if his parents in Boston saw him like this it would kill them.

My niece Lexi was in that room. I call her my niece, but she's technically my cousin's granddaughter. She was at my wedding, dancing in a red velvet dress with white trim, with her beautiful ringlet curls bouncing around everywhere. She was the most adorable 4-year old little girl you've ever seen.

Now she's on the streets, living in camps, battling addiction. She's in and out of housing, on and off the opiate blocker Suboxone. Sometimes she says she wants to die. It's ripped the guts out of her family, and anyone who asks, "Why doesn't the family DO something?" simply doesn't understand that it doesn't really work that way. Not the way things are set up in Seattle. .

In the aftermath of Seattle is Dying, some wondered out loud how it was that I hadn't spoken to the people who are actually suffering on the streets.

Had they taken the time to look, they would have known that I've spent the last four years talking to them.

One time in the middle of the night I sat in an alley in downtown Seattle and watched as two young men shot heroin into their arm. One was a loud, brash 23-year old who didn't want us to use his name. We called him Steve.

Steve called Seattle a "giant junkie town built around a huge needle." It was hard to disagree then, it's impossible to disagree now. He said, "Drugs and sh%\$ man? I can't be happy without drugs."

The other guy was named Nick and he seemed thoughtful and sensitive. He was handsome, and he tried to dress up as best he could to be on camera.

Nick said, "I feel guilty every day." When I met him he'd been using heroin for five years. We sat in an alley right next to the Paramount Theater. The two of them cooked their heroin and shot up right there out in the open, with their backs against the red bricks. As the drug rushed through his blood and up into his brain, Nick's eyes glazed over and his tongue thickened and he said something I haven't been able to shake. He said, "I feel like everything is going to be OK now. I feel like I pulled the blanket close on a freezing cold night. It feels like nothing could go wrong, to me or anybody."

The documentary was called, "[Demon At The Door.](#)" We talked to addicts, and the families of addicts. We went with cops up in Everett into the bramble along the river and talked to people living in ungodly horrible camps the likes of which I'd never seen before. We remembered the life of a beautiful girl named Amber who didn't live to see her 20th birthday.

I encourage you to watch the show. We didn't put any commercials in it. We didn't make a penny.

After Seattle is Dying aired, some brought up the other "faces" of homelessness. Not all homeless are addicted to drugs, some of you said. And do you know what? I couldn't agree more. Spot on. Those suffering from addiction are only a subset of homelessness. A desperate, destructive subset that happens to be ruining our city.

Before the documentary we did about heroin, we did one about homelessness. You can watch that here, too, if you'd like. Again, no commercials, no profit. At the time I simply wanted to understand what was happening.

Story: <https://bit.ly/2I0qTBw>

I've learned a lot about homelessness over the years. My wife works at United Way of King County, where decent and amazing people work tirelessly to improve the lives of people living in the margins of society, people who are fighting to make a go of it. I've volunteered at the United Way's Community Resource Exchange, an incredible event in which the homeless are treated with dignity, and are connected to dentists and barbers and doctors and a hundred other things. They receive clothing and food, and make phone calls to loved ones.

And one of the things I've learned is that we don't see the majority of the homeless all that much. They're sleeping in shelters or cars. They're waking up and going to work or school. They're staying with their kids at Mary's Place, or crashing on couches til things get better. They're the ones who want the housing, the ones who reach out for help.

Seattle is Dying wasn't about those people. I think most of you know that. The idea was never to conflate those who are experiencing hard times with those who are battling destructive addiction, but instead to acknowledge the difference. And the show wasn't about the thousands of good people in our communities who've made it their life's purpose to bring comfort to those who struggle in this world. Those people are saints. I am in awe of them.

But this new thing we're seeing? The tents in the dirt and on sidewalks, the sprawling camps surrounded by giant piles of garbage and stolen bikes and a million other things ripped off from the homes and stores and cars around them? The feces and the needles and the filth? The rejection of housing, the crapped out RV's, the repeat offenders who are arrested 50, 60, 70 times and keep getting sent back onto the streets? That's drugs. Plain and simple. I've asked the cops that patrol the camps. I've asked the people in the camps themselves. The thing that is destroying Seattle and so many other cities is heroin and methamphetamine. And here's the thing: everybody knows it. But nobody says it.

Well, we said it. We said it loudly, and millions heard it and tens of thousands of you responded. I'll say it again here if you'd like: We don't have a homeless crisis, we have a drug crisis.

And so when it was finally spoken, and the police told us what's really going on, and the citizens voiced their outrage, and the business owners explained how they are under siege and nobody's doing anything about it... well, then, some people said, "Why didn't you talk to city leaders?"

I'll tell you why. Because we hear from them all the time. Because they can call a press conference whenever they please and we'll show up. Because when they speak we put it on the news every single night. I didn't speak to city and county leaders because what they're doing isn't working, and hasn't been for a decade.

I wanted to give voice to the thing that is spoken of at every social gathering, in every coffee shop, at every school, and over beers and at churches by young people and old people and liberals and conservatives. I didn't know what to call the thing at first. Then I decided to call it, "Seattle is Dying."

"You're demonizing the homeless!" a few people said. "Misery porn!" someone spat. Some took exception to me describing one person as a "wretched soul." I thought everyone knew what the word "wretched" means, but maybe not. It is defined as, "very unfortunate in condition or circumstances." The man in question, sadly, was indeed a wretched soul.

The simple truth is that we held up a mirror to the city of Seattle. We didn't show you anything that you don't see every single day. We simply reminded you that we no longer notice the pain, suffering and death that is all around us. That we are numb. Some people didn't like what they saw in the mirror. You know what? I didn't like it either. "It's awful to watch," some said. Yeah. That's the point.

We showed one man in crisis on the streets of Seattle. And like so many others, the video of this man was hard to look at. The man fell to the ground and couldn't get up. He rolled and moaned and crawled and howled. People walked by, the way they always do. They see it all the time.

One online news site tracked the man down after our show aired and gleefully trumpeted, "Man used as proof that 'Seattle is Dying' tells his story." The writer said that in the documentary, the man is "assumed to be homeless,"

oblivious apparently to what millions have understood perfectly well: that Seattle is Dying was never about homelessness. Not for a single minute. It was about narcotics. It was about horrible addiction DISGUISED as homelessness.

The story claimed that the man no longer uses drugs, except for methadone. The man said something about a sciatic nerve problem that could have been giving him problems that day. The article said the man, "struggled to explain why he was sitting on the street that day," and left it at that. I'd love to believe all of that, except I know otherwise. In fact the man himself told us otherwise.

That day, on 3rd and Pine, the most notorious stretch of heroin and meth trafficking in the region, the gentleman in question was lurching on the ground and his pants were falling off. The raw tape, much of which wasn't included in the documentary, shows our KOMO cameraman leaving his camera and approaching the man. He helped him grab hold of a mailbox to pull himself up. And when he was up, the same cameraman reached down and helped the man pull his pants, which were down around his ankles, up over his bare buttocks. The man's phone and wallet had fallen onto the ground, and our cameraman picked them up and gave them back to the man. There was exactly one person on the corner that day who actually helped the man in question. He wore the letters KOMO on his jacket.

And at one point the cameraman said to this man, "Sir, are you high on drugs right now?" And the man answered, "Yes."

I wish the man well. I'm glad he has housing. But what happened on that corner was not caused by a sciatic nerve, and Seattle is Dying was not about housing.

Some have wondered accusingly if I took my marching orders from KOMO's parent company Sinclair. I smile to myself at that notion for this reason: the idea for Seattle is Dying came from me and me alone. No Sinclair bosses told me to produce the show, in fact we told THEM we were producing the show. The words, the ideas, the concept came from me. There was no interference. Seattle is Dying came from me. From KOMO. That is the truth.

The take away from Seattle is Dying, though, is something far more profound than petty sniping between media organizations, or a few comments on Twitter. The take away is that a sleeping giant has been awakened. Regular hard-working people who knew something terrible was happening but couldn't quite articulate it, have stood up and raised their voices. The messages and the notes and the e-mails have come by the tens of thousands. Parents with kids addicted to heroin have written, and cops and firemen and hospital nurses. Those who are suffering from

addiction have written, and those who somehow licked the disease too. Hundreds of people who got fed up and moved away from the city they loved have reached out. Democrats and Republicans alike have said, "Thank you for telling the truth." Some of them are angry. All of them are sad.

And, some are apparently oblivious. I understand that the PR agency Pyramid Communications is working to create a "counter-narrative" to the Seattle is Dying documentary. Someone forwarded me one of their e-mails. It included, "today's toolkit and resources to support coordinated communications in response to KOMO's 'Seattle is Dying'." And, amazingly, a hashtag, [#SeattleForAll](#).

And, I hear there's going to be a volley of op-eds coming soon, attacking what we've done.

I guess they want to break the mirror instead of addressing the reflection.

I was hoping for action. A re-assessment. An honest look at what we are doing in Seattle, and not doing. Instead we're getting a PR campaign. A "counter-narrative".

In the summer of 2015 I spent a night wandering the streets with my niece Lexi. She had a blue hoodie on and her hair was pulled back. She was skinny and tired looking, but she was still Lexi: funny, smart as a whip, charismatic in the way that she always had been, even as a child. That night in Pioneer Square she ran into a big, friendly looking guy named Darnell. Darnell's street name was Detox.

Detox gave Lexi a big bearhug and then said, "You heard about Tex, right?" Lexi said, "No." "Tex is dead." "How did that happen?" "Overdose."

The next time I saw Lexi she told me that Detox was dead too. He died of an overdose under a bridge. They found him three days later.

And then that night in the motel room on Aurora, Lexi introduced me to Ritchie. Ritchie was thin, he seemed high, and he wore a baseball cap and had a chain around his neck. He looked me in the eyes and said that sometimes he used narcotics six or seven times a day, depending on how much money he could get his hands on. He also told me that he had an ex-wife and two children.

Ritchie was smart, and he seemed educated. Deep, even.

We talked about heroin and what it felt like to use. He said the stuff was incredibly powerful. I replied with a question: "Does it feel better than love? Does it feel better than family?" His eyes were glazed and he shook his head searching for words. "No, it doesn't compare at all. The feeling of heroin is wonderful, don't get me wrong," he said, "but everybody and anybody who knows the feeling of love and the warmth of family knows that there's no comparing to that."

He talked haltingly about the last conversation he'd had with his father, who told him that he was afraid of getting a phone call telling him that Ritchie was dead. As he recounted that phone call Ritchie said, "It absolutely killed me inside." I thought for a moment that he might cry. The next time I saw Lexi she told me that one week after that discussion in the motel room on Aurora, a week after he talked about love and family and how the drug had stolen it all away, Ritchie died alone in his tent.

Seattle is Dying.

I put that show together for Lexi. And for Ritchie. And Darnell. And Tex. And the man who was screaming silently on the street. And the man who fell down on the corner. And Nick in the alley. And every addicted person who buys their drugs openly on the streets of Seattle and uses them there too, because the cops stop arresting when the prosecutors don't prosecute and the judges don't sentence and eventually nobody feels safe or protected anymore. And I put the show together for the people whose lives are reeling out of control with nobody willing to intervene in them because... why? Because we are so compassionate?

I hope to God that all of their wretched souls find some peace. The ones who are still alive, anyway.