

WE NEED ROSES ALONGSIDE OUR BREAD

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Hearts Starve, As Well As Bodies;

Give Us Bread, But Give Us Roses, Too.

—“Bread and Roses,” James Oppenheim

Lawrence, Massachusetts (1912)

Every story has many beginnings.

One of mine starts in Ansonia, Connecticut, the factory town of 20,000 people where I grew up, a place of heavy machine manufacturing. The town’s nickname is The Copper City. I spent 18 years in this factory town, home of Farrel-Birmingham ball bearings, an old union town, where fair pay and fair work were what we knew was right. Working is in the DNA of the town itself.

Many paths are circuitous and unpredictable. My grandparents on both sides were Eastern European immigrants. They left their homes for the reasons most people do: life became impossible in the countries where they lived. My mother’s family went from Romania to Grand Forks, North Dakota. My father’s father traveled from Vilna, Lithuania, to Johannesburg, South Africa, and then to Ansonia, Connecticut. Reasons why things happen always come after. My grandfather was a learned man. In Ansonia, he was a merchant in a factory town. He sold men’s suits and family shoes, and wrote

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letters in English for anyone who needed them, at an oak desk in the back of the store, called Oscar Cohen's. Factories and workers were part of our lives. What we see and how we see it has been one of my lifelong obsessions. Maybe one reason is that what my ancestors saw outside their windows in different times and different places was so different from what was outside my own window as a child.

In Ansonia, I saw big brick factories, and the Housatonic River running right through town, and a crooked Main Street connecting us all.

Because stories are not linear—not really—my life floated by. I wanted to be a writer, and I thought, in the misguided way of the young, that writing would be easier in New York City, the city I've now lived in for most of my life. Books were my theology, my belief system. It was the '70s, and the world was turbulent, and vocal. Demonstrating for what you felt was a part of every day. The world was a mess, and the response of so many of us was to protest: to join together and stand in the streets. To figure out ways of making the world better, even a little.

I held many jobs. I've never been on a track of any kind. I'd work for a while, and then travel, going to live in another country, to see what life might look like there. And I rationalized all my jobs, saying that they were part of the stories I would tell. Every single thing has the potential to be a Good Story. That was good enough for me.

Years went by, the way they do.

Through a college friend, a man named Stephen whom I had met at a party because he had memorized the entire book of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel* (a feat I admire to this day), I met Dr. Paul Sherry. He was a wise theologian, a disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant ethicist who wrote serious and significant books about public affairs and social policy. Paul was born in the hard coal regions of Pennsylvania, in a town of miners and their families. He loved the town, and his life was shaped by the people he met as a boy; people he was determined to help as much as he could. He studied union organizing with Saul Alinsky, but Alinsky and oth-

er union people felt he'd be happier as a man of the church, and he ended up going to Union Seminary.

Paul became a Protestant minister and, later, the publisher of The Pilgrim Press, an illustrious old American publishing house. They say it was the first.

He hired me to publish books on social justice. My job interview question: Is justice a theological or philosophical idea? I said: Both.

I've worked on books since high school; putting them together, fixing sentences, ordering chapters. My mandate at Pilgrim was to acquire books that were about social issues: death row, labor, income inequality, homelessness. Paul was a high-minded man, someone who worked in a variety of ways to make life better. He talked a lot about justice, and injustice, and what we could all do. He hoped that books could change people's minds, could affect the social dialogue. He believed in books the way I did.

Although I've never been without a book alongside my bed, they were always novels, stories, poems. At Pilgrim Press, I started thinking about books as advocacy tools; books as stories that could change the way the reader thought.

We would have lunch with potential authors every day. Many were academics or theologians of various kinds, and they were often ponderous, often dull, but one day, Paul brought a labor leader into my office, a man named Moe Foner. Moe came from a family that helped shape the left wing of the labor movement, the famous Foner brothers. When we met, in the '80s, he was running Bread and Roses, the non-profit cultural arm of 1199, a union with a long history on the left, including working with Dr. King during the Sanitation Workers' Strike and protesting against the war in Vietnam. It was a union of low-wage hospital workers and homecare workers, largely women of color, who joined picket lines and marches as part of their work.

Moe was a tall, funny, extremely persuasive talker. He could sell anything to his listener, and often did. At lunch, he would share many ideas he had for books, but two in particular struck a chord. He

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wanted to reissue a book about the Bread and Roses strike, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, where women and children fought for child labor laws. The book had been written by his friend, William Cahan. For the cover, we would use a beautiful Ralph Fasanella painting. Fasanella was an artist from the Electrical Workers Union. Moe helped send him to Lawrence, Massachusetts, to paint the town where the strike had taken place.

The Cahan book was full of photographs taken by Lewis Hine: schoolchildren working in the textile mill and pictures of the town of Lawrence. The story of Lawrence, Massachusetts, was a large, important American story that many were unfamiliar with. It was a story about how women and children banded together, with the help of the Wobblies, and how they changed the child labor laws, and the history of American labor.

Maybe it was how Moe told the story, or how ignorant I was of labor history, but the combination of culture and narrative in working history seemed, very suddenly, like what I wanted to do. Even more: what I had to do.

His second idea was to create an exhibit, at the Bread and Roses Gallery at 1199's headquarters. 1199 was the only labor union with a full-time gallery. It was a small space in the lobby of the union's headquarters at 310 West 43rd Street. As part of his notion of providing both Bread and Roses, Moe felt it was important for union members and staff to have the opportunity to see art of all kinds on a regular basis.

He wanted to create an exhibit with quotations from labor history, called Images of Labor, assigning the quotations to a wide range of artists, to creatively depict what it meant to be a worker. Working, in our society in particular, is such a complicated notion. Many people don't want to be thought of as workers, although, of course, we all are. They want to be understood in other ways—as professionals, maybe; implying that the work that professionals do is not exactly work but, rather, a higher vocation.

How is it that some ideas become intrinsic parts of our lives? My guess is that—like so much of life—mystery, chance, and fortune all

play a role. And for me, language does too.

Bread and Roses seemed to belong together in an important way, a way that I too wanted to tell people. The work Moe did was the work I wanted to do: combining culture with work and working people.

Bread and Roses became my own ideology, my own reason, my own path.

I worked alongside Moe for many years. Being with him was to listen and to learn. And, of course, to talk. Conversation was his way of life, and mine too. It was through talking that he convinced, that he plotted and planned, that he won and he lost, over and over again. He was a person who didn't believe in the word NO, and I too came to believe that NO was an unfortunate concept that could be overruled.

A tireless fighter for working people and for culture, Moe lived in a way that involved figuring out how to make living better for large numbers of people, particularly those in his union, District 1199. They were largely low-wage workers, mostly women, who worked in hospitals, whose job it was to take care of other people. Moe's job was to take care of them by giving them art: theater, music, beautiful posters.

At a certain point, although it's not a clear moment, not a day or a month or even a year, I started creating programs of my own; coming up with my own ways to illustrate bread, and to generate roses of infinite varieties, and then to add as many roses as I could to every struggle. Those roses took many forms. Beautiful posters were my most common effort because, in a very basic way, beauty is both inspiration and hope. We all need beauty on our walls, no matter where those walls are, no matter what our walls look like. I have always known, intuitively, that life is better with beauty, and that beauty has many forms. Calendars and theater performances, writing classes, storytelling, and even poems are ways of providing roses, ways of showing that culture is a benefit that everyone deserves.

Unseenamerica was one of the programs I started; a way for workers and immigrants and unemployed people to tell their stories in their own voices, from their own perspective. The idea was to

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create a visual history by those inside that history, showing what life really looked like. Showing what people, everyday people, actually see, and what they think of what they see. Thousands of photographers, from migrant workers to nannies, were part of union-sponsored classes. Their pictures, their visions, and their lives became part of a visual historical archive, and were shared in hundreds of exhibits in as many places as we could find, from the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., to city halls and classrooms.

Partnering with WDI about 10 years ago was another fortunate and unexpected path. A gifted young photographer, Zoeann Murphy, sat next to me at an information lunch one day. She wanted to use her art form for the greater good, to make the world a little better.

Zoeann came to work at Bread and Roses, in the *unseenamerica* program. She taught classes and helped photographers and teachers. We eventually worked together with WDI throughout New York State, and helped working people capture their lives through their pictures. The pictures were shown in one of the most visited exhibits at the New York State Museum in Albany, an exciting launch created by WDI, in order to showcase how workers see our lives. This led to WDI launching *The Art of Labor*, an inspired statewide effort to generate working stories, in many different ways.

When I left Bread and Roses a few years ago, I wanted to be able to provide more roses, to keep planting what I could, around the State of New York, as well as around the country.

With WDI, I was lucky to be able to continue planting and creating roses, and to continue to envision ways for working people around the state to tell their stories, in all the ways we can imagine.