In the summer of 1997 sirens screamed epidemic causalities day and night. The rise in overdose deaths that began in 1993 resulted in the highest rates in the Western world. No action was then taken by health authorities, but Downtown Eastside activists wrapped thick chains around light poles, blocking East Hastings Street and immobilizing motorists who were handed leaflets revealing the horrific situation. A large banner with the words “The Killing Fields” was attached to the chains. We then marched to a local park where activists spoke, and a First Nations Elder sang and drummed for the sake of all living beings and for those deceased from drug overdose, and we planted a thousand crosses in Oppenheimer Park.

Figure 1. Bud Osborn, 1997. Photo by Duncan Murdoch.

Figure 2. The Killing Fields, 1997. Photo by Elaine Brière.
POEM

a thousand crosses in oppenheimer park

Bud Osborn*

when eagles circle oppenheimer park we see them
feel awe feel joy feel hope soar in our hearts
the eagles are symbols for the courage in our spirits
for the fierce and piercing vision
for justice in our souls
the eagles bestow a blessing on our lives

but with these thousand crosses
planted in oppenheimer park today
who really see them feel sorrow feel loss feel rage
our hearts shed bitter tears these thousand crosses are symbols
of the social apartheid in our culture
the segregation of those who deserve to live
and those who are abandoned to die

these thousand crosses silently announce a social curse
on the lives of the poorest of the poor in the downtown eastside
they announce an assault on our community
these thousand crosses announce a deprivation of possibility
for those of us who mourn here
the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers
the uncles, aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers
the sons and daughters the friends and acquaintances
of those members of our community
of a thousand dreams of a thousand hopes
of a thousand yearnings for real community
lost to us but memorialized today

brought finally into a unity here in this community park
this park which is the geographical heart of the downtown eastside
these thousand crosses are a protest
against the abandonment of powerless and voiceless human beings

despite these thousand crosses speak to us resoundingly
collectively to warn us that to abandon the wretched
the miserable the scorned the scapegoated
makes a legitimate place for abandonment in our society
and this abandonment will go right up the social ladder
but to truly care for lives at the bottom
will make a place for care
and this caring will ensure that no one be abandoned
these thousand crosses represent the overdose deaths of drug
addicts
who are not the only drug addicts in our society
but only the most visible the most naked because the poorest
but these thousand crosses reveal a culture
pretending to be about life and health and hope
but permeated with death and disease and despair
these thousand crosses bear witness not to a culture of care and
freedom
but of carelessness and addiction

any one of these thousand crosses could easily represent my own
death
doctors at st. paul’s hospital asked me after an overdose why I was
still alive
and that is a question each moment puts to us
a question each one of these thousand crosses puts to each of us
why are we still alive? for what purpose?
our purpose is to live in community and community is care
care for one another care for those least able to care for themselves
care for all care in action
and there is no one to care if you do not care there is no one
no one at all to care if I do not care
but it would be a betrayal
of these thousand who have died to call them victims
to victimize them in death because in truth they are martyrs
these thousand crosses symbolize the lives and deaths of a
thousand martyrs
the word martyr means one who bears witness
one who suffers misery for a long time one who is killed or
persecuted
for adherence to a belief an enculturated belief
the pain the pain of trying to live in this abusive abandoning
crushing
and excluding socio-economic system
that this pain must be individually managed the erroneous belief
that suffering can be relieved outside real community outside care

these thousand crosses of the contemporary martyrs
bear witness not only to their drug overdose deaths
but to the uncounted deaths in the downtown eastside
deaths of drug addicts from suicide and AIDS

and so we are all abandoned if one is abandoned
so we are all uncared-for if one is not cared for

but if we would speak of real health and of true community
we must let these thousand crosses direct us
toward those aboriginal tribal communities and other
real spiritual communities where when one individual behaved
destructively
the entire community gathered and asked one question
what is wrong with us? what is wrong with us
that this member of our community should behave in this way?

but in our culture we reserve this spiritual truth
and blame the individual solely for his or her fate
and the perpetuation of this lie costs us costs us heavily
costs us the lives these thousand crosses represent
costs us how many more thousands of lives?
costs us in so many ways

and from this moment here in this community park
this park of great care where the streets and alleys
and hotel rooms of the downtown eastside
the killing fields of the downtown eastside
are transformed into living testimonies and memorials
of those who have brought us together today
in oppenheimer park where children play birds sing
young people create and seniors gather
these crosses are planted like seeds in our hearts

what will be the fruit these seeds bear?
will it be a stronger commitment to compassion
and justice for every member of our community?
a commitment to those most disabled? most abandoned?
a commitment to do whatever is necessary to prevent
a thousand more deaths by drug overdose in the downtown
eastside?

will these thousand crosses these thousand seeds
these thousand memorials burst forth into new life
for those who will not have to become a martyr
to our social madness around drug addiction
but will care burst forth in our hearts
in our lives in a new way for the sake of others
and for the sake of ourselves?
I believe these crosses these seeds are already bearing fruit hope
hope stands right now right here in this park at this moment
hope is standing here hope in each cross hope in each of us

when these thousand crosses are planted in this park
who really see them are awakened
are called forth to community to care
and who really see these thousand crosses are called to be
hope soaring in the hearts of those for whom hope is gone
soaring in courage and blessing
as when eagles circle oppenheimer park.

1997