Chris Henrikson: The Community Cure for a Violent Culture
by Leslee Goodman

Chris Henrikson is the founder of Street Poets, Inc., a non-profit poetry-based violence intervention program for high-risk youth in the juvenile detention camps, continuation schools and streets of Los Angeles County. Henrikson also calls it "a poetry-based peace-making organization," which uses the creative process as a vehicle for individual and community transformation.

I first learned of Street Poets at a Malidoma Somé ancestor ceremony in Ojai, California, which two young Street Poets also attended. The young people—a heavily tattooed Latino male and a shy, curly-haired female—silenced us all with the power and vulnerability of the original spoken-word poetry they shared.

Henrikson founded Street Poets in 1996. What started out as a writing workshop in a juvenile detention camp grew into a small group of writers and performers; then infiltrated Los Angeles high school classrooms with transformational results. Today, Street Poets sponsors community open mics, operates a recording studio that produces CDs of its performers' work, publishes compilations of their poetry, and engages young men and women through workshops, drum circles, nature retreats and indigenous ceremonies, outreach to youths on Indian reservations and, most recently, a mobile recording and performance studio called "Poetry in Motion," created from a converted van.

Street Poets has been featured in Steve Lopez's column in the Los Angeles Times and on radio stations KPFK and KIIS, and is the recipient of the 2003 John Anson Ford Human Relations Award from the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. The award acknowledges Street Poets as "an exemplary program for youth...that instills inter-group understanding and awareness through artistic expression by exploring their own values, assets and obstacles in order to become agents of change in their communities." — Leslee Goodman

The MOON: What inspired you to create Street Poets?

Henrikson: Self-preservation, actually. I had come to Los Angeles in the early 1990s to go to film school. I'd sold my first screenplay and for the next few years was paid very well to turn something dear to me into something unrecognizable.

I'd sold out.

As a result, I lost access to the creative side of myself. It was as if someone had turned off the spigot, and I had no flow left. I was unmoored, adrift. I was pretty freaked out by it.

I was living in Los Angeles in the period following the Rodney King unrest. One day I saw a classified ad in theWriters' Guild magazine for someone to teach creative writing to

incarcerated youth. I knew immediately it was what I needed to do. It was as if my soul said, “OK, buddy, here’s a lifeline.”

So I started going out to this juvenile detention camp once a week for two hours at a time. The director had hand-picked six young men who were waiting for me that first day as I walked in. They were so ready for this opportunity some of them even had poetry in hand. They reminded me of myself—of how important writing had been to me as a youth. One of them said, “Where have you been, man?” and I heard his question as the voice of Spirit asking me: Where had I been? It was a damn good question.

I’d been disconnected from myself.

Those two hours every Wednesday became the only portion of the week that I felt truly at home inside myself. The kids demanded a presence from me that nothing else in my life then required. We shared our pain, our tears, our histories, our fears. There was nothing else in my life at that time that involved this profound level of sharing. I began to look for ways that I could expand this quality into more areas of my life.

At the same time, some of the young men in our group were being released—right back into the fire from which they came. I felt a responsibility to keep in touch with them—and pretty soon we had a group of really good writers meeting together “on the outs.” Then the group started performing, and that bonded us together so powerfully that we wanted to keep doing it.

That was how Street Poets started—as six formerly incarcerated youth, and me, their road manager. [Laughs]

In 1999 we started taking the poetry performance out to schools. Coincidentally, this was around the time when the Juvenile Crime Initiative, or Proposition 21, was on the ballot in California. Prop 21’s campaign basically demonized youthful offenders. Prop 21 allowed the state to try fourteen-year-old kids as adults, expanded the three strikes rule, sent more juveniles to adult prisons, and so on. Street Poets became a spokes-group for the “No on 21” campaign because our members were compelling evidence of why we should give youthful offenders a second chance. We started holding open mics; we opened a recording studio; we started amplifying the voices of these supposedly “bad” kids to show what a powerful force for good they could be.

Although Proposition 21 passed, the response to Street Poets in the schools was so positive that we started expanding our workshops there. Now 75 percent of our participants are high school students from South Los Angeles.

The MOON: How has Street Poets evolved since its beginning? How many people do you serve, and how do you serve them?

Henrikson: We serve between 600 and 700 young people through our in-school workshops, retreats, community events and rituals, and other programs each year. Plus we have about 50 or so youth and young adults who make up our core group of community leaders and performers. We have a recording studio and an art gallery we use for our community open-mic events. We just purchased a van, which we’re in the process of outfitting as a “Poetry-in-Motion” mobile recording studio and performance venue. That’s been a dream of ours for the last five years, and it’s now becoming a reality.

What we do at Street Poets is to create spaces in which students feel that they can open

up, tell their stories—and in doing so, reveal their gifts. It's an indigenous understanding that everyone is born with a gift to share and that your gift is typically located right alongside your deepest wounds. You have to be willing to stand in the pain of your wound in order to access your gift. Street Poets is here to help young people do that.

When we started going into the high schools, some of our veteran Street Poets would share their own poems first to set the depth of the conversation, and let the students know it was okay to open up. And of course, we have lots of great writing exercises. But what really makes a difference is the level of deep listening presence we bring to the classroom. This is something kids don't generally experience at school. Most teachers don't have the time or even the impulse to ask each student, "Who are you, really? Why are you here? What has your life been like?" We've found that the simple act of truly listening to someone tell their story—and letting that story move you—can be a life-changing experience—for both the storyteller and the listener. Our tears water other people's gardens as well as our own. And, as the poet Kahlil Gibran said, "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy it can contain." So we laugh a lot too.

The MOON: You're a white guy, but it doesn't seem as if race has been a barrier to your ability to create community with these kids.

Henrikson: Yeah, and I'm about as white as white gets, too [laughs]. I can trace my roots back to the Mayflower on one side of my family, and to Norway on the other. But no, it hasn't been an issue in the way most people might expect. Turns out it's not so easy to resist opening up to someone who is listening to you and your story without fear or judgment. There is something in all of us that wants to be seen and heard in that way, I think.

Also, these days, new students often meet me when I'm co-facilitating workshops with older Street Poets with whom I've been in deep mentoring relationships for as long as sixteen years. When the kids see how much we trust each other, they tend to open up faster too.

I occasionally do encounter suspicion from some of our Street Poets' friends and family members. "Who is this guy? Is he a cop, or a Jesus freak, or a Mormon?" Because those are the only white people they've seen coming around. They're suspicious of what my agenda might be. But over time, once they notice that their kid is doing better, or growing in some new direction, they often join the ranks of our organization's most devoted supporters.

Still, it would be naïve of me to say that race is not an issue. This is America, after all. The personal wounds we explore in our poetry writing workshops naturally connect us to larger, often-buried cultural and ancestral wounds that are still very much alive in our country – and that need to be excavated to be healed. In the 'hood, those wounds are closer to the surface. In more affluent, predominantly white communities, they are harder to reach. At Street Poets, we're trying try to bring the light of consciousness into some of those deeper, shadowy regions of our collective psyche. That can get complicated and messy at times, especially for a privileged white male like myself, who also happens to be the founder of an organization that serves mostly people of color struggling to survive on the fringes of our economic system. Sometimes I experience a kind of socioeconomic whiplash driving home from Street Poets to my nice wooded street in Santa Monica Canyon at the end of the day. But the truth is we're all suffering from that whiplash, whether we realize it or not. There is an unsustainable tension created by the widening gap between rich and poor in this country that must be addressed. Changing the system

is going to take a different kind of consciousness than the fear-driven one that created it. At Street Poets, we’re trying to plant the seeds of that new consciousness, one poetic line at a time.

The MOON: Don’t you get resistance from kids who have never written poetry before? Don’t they feel as if you’re asking them to do something they can’t do, might not even want to do?

Henrikson: Less than you might think. The metaphor I use to encourage them is that of wading into a river—a powerful river that is wide and flowing. At first there’s a lot of nervous laughter and joking—most of these kids think they can’t swim. But as they let the words begin to flow out of the pencil and onto the paper, the river eventually takes over and carries them into places they wouldn’t have consciously gone on their own. When a kid first experiences that surrender—and being carried by the power of the river—they’re exhilarated. And so are the rest of us who get to witness it.

The MOON: Will you share some of the more powerful experiences you’ve had as a result of Street Poets?

Henrikson: Wow. That’s hard. I’ve been doing this work for seventeen years, and there have been so many powerful experiences. What’s coming to mind right now is a youth retreat at Big Bear, California, which took place a few years ago. I brought along a hard-core gang member, I’ll call him Julio, who had just been released from juvenile detention. I basically strong-armed him into coming with us—because it’s really important for someone returning from an experience as dehumanizing as detention to powerfully reground themselves in nature—and also in community.

We were a group of about sixty guys, ages fourteen to twenty-one. Julio was eighteen. As soon as we arrived, Julio saw a kid he had robbed a couple years before; someone he had jumped and beaten and left bleeding on the sidewalk. Julio turned pale and whispered to me, “I know that guy; I know that guy! But I don’t think he recognizes me.”

A day later, Julio pulled the kid aside and asked him, “Do you know who I am?” When the kid said “No,” Julio confessed … and the two of them entered into a really deep conversation. Julio told me later, with tears in his eyes, “He forgave me.”

On the last day of the retreat, Julio stood up in front of the whole group and talked about the guilt and shame he carried from all the things he’d done as a gang member. He began to tell the story of “someone here I hurt,” while acknowledging that there were others to whom he’d never be able to apologize. Then he broke down. He couldn’t continue, until the young man he’d victimized walked across the room and embraced him in front of everyone. Shortly after that, six younger guys who had been flirting with the idea of creating a gang of their own to “protect themselves” from some neighboring gangs, stood up, one by one, and disowned that idea, once and for all. Julio’s remorse was so real and raw that it inspired a complete shift in their attitudes about gangbanging. Many lives were saved that night.

The MOON: Wow.

Henrikson: Yeah. That was a “large scale” transformational moment, but there have been thousands of smaller, more intimate ones. Kids standing up at open mics and sharing something they’ve never shared before, in front of people they don’t know. Kids being transformed by the positive response they get to their poems in a workshop.

I want to share with you another couple of experiences, which weren’t so positive, but which were very instructive.

The first was when one of our inner circle—a young man named Eric who’d made tremendous positive changes in his life and even had begun to teach with us—got killed on his nineteenth birthday. Part of me died with him that day, a naïve part that somehow believed that being in Street Poets would protect our guys from the worst that their environments offered them.

Then, two days later, another of our kids, I’ll call him Isaac, who’d just graduated from high school—a miracle in itself, because he’d been heavily involved in drugs—came in to tell me thank you and goodbye. I said, “What do you mean ‘Goodbye?’ You just graduated from high school, man. You’re going to college. We’re good.”

But it turned out that he’d been jumped into the gang the night before. And he’d been jumped in by older guys—thirty-year-olds—which meant that he was in at a level that would make it very difficult to get out. He was scared to death, and I felt utterly powerless to be able to do or say anything to help him.

Several months later I asked him to meet me for lunch in a Mexican restaurant. He’d been running the streets and looked horrible. After a few minutes of conversation, I noticed a snake-like, black mist moving up from his belly, through his heart and around his neck, and up into his face. I didn’t have any idea what I was looking at, so something in me said, “What was that?”

Isaac seemed startled and said, “You can see that?”

I got chills and said, “Yeah.”

Isaac smiled, and he looked away. When he looked back, he said, “He wants to talk to you.”

For the next five minutes I proceeded to have a conversation with something that I can only call an entity—something that was not this kid—who very aggressively and territorially said, “Back off. You don’t know what you’re dealing with. He’s mine.”

Yet while that entity was doing all this posturing, I remembered thinking, “He’s scared, and feels threatened by the love I have for Isaac. That’s why he’s acting so aggressively.”

At the end of the conversation, this snake-like thing settled back down into Isaac’s belly, and Isaac returned, unaware of the conversation that had just transpired. He’d blanked out.

I took him outside into the sunshine, had him take some deep breaths — I did what I could think to do. But afterwards I realized, “I need new mentors.” They didn’t teach me how to deal with this kind of thing in film school.

As soon as I had that thought, new mentors started showing up in my life. One of them was a West African shaman named Malidoma Somé whom I met for the first time at a men’s retreat sponsored by Michael Meade’s Mosaic Multicultural Foundation. When I told Malidoma about my experience with Isaac, he told me, “If you can see it, you’re meant to work with it.” So I started studying indigenous healing methods in both African and

Peruvian traditions and began incorporating what I learned into our work at Street Poets.

The MOON: Why? What is the benefit provided by indigenous rituals and ceremonies?

Henrikson: Indigenous cultures understand that we have to face our pain in order to heal: "you have to feel it to heal it." Our culture prefers to give us antidepressants to mask the pain so that we never deal with it. Instead, we run from it, or we project it onto other people or nations — and then try to wipe out our pain by wiping out those people.

That's why I've said that to heal a violent culture we need more pain. The average American might not understand that, but indigenous peoples understand it. When the pain finally gets bad enough that you can't escape it, your heart breaks open. And when the heart opens, your vision expands. You start to see possibilities to which you were blind before.

The MOON: Do you think the horror of the massacre at Sandy Hook might have broken open the hearts of enough Americans to face the violence in our culture?

Henrikson: I think it's still too early to tell, but it clearly broke open the hearts of those closest to the tragedy, and of many Americans, who, perhaps, were already primed for that kind of transformation. Of course, an incident like that can also be used by those who fear change to compound the problem. Still, the kind of collective mourning that has occurred around this tragedy gives me hope for the future. And I know from my own experience with grief that, when we surrender completely to it, it has the power to open doors we didn't even know were there.

The MOON: What else do indigenous cultures have to offer us?

Henrikson: Indigenous cultures also understand—and practice—the power of ritual, which provides a safe channel through which emotion can be expressed. If, as a culture, we're going to choose to feel our pain so that we can heal, we need to have a safe container in which to do that. Rituals provide a space in which people can break apart and still be held.

For example, this kid Isaac, with whom I had the energetic snake experience, later completed an earth ritual where he dug his own grave. If you've never done it, let me tell you, it's an intense experience. When you get about two feet down, the significance of what you're doing starts to work on your psyche. Then, when you've got a hole dug deep enough, you get buried up to your neck and left there. Someone stands vigil and the rest of the group, the community, retires to a fire to hold space from a distance.

Over the space of four or five hours, Isaac "cooked" in the earth. And he began to experience and release all these layers. He screamed; he laughed demonically; he cried. At one point, he said he was ready to get out, but when we came to dig him out he changed his mind and said, "No, I'm going to stay here until the earth releases me."

Like a lot of people, Isaac had done things he couldn't undo. He realized he had given up the right to live his life for himself any more. He was going to have to live for others now – to be a source of healing for others. In any case, the act of being buried in the earth was instrumental in helping him to achieve that realization. Imagine what would happen if our society as a whole, which is also responsible for atrocities it can't undo, experienced that kind of awakening.

In any case, a few minutes later, we came back and Isaac was sitting outside his

grave—which is actually quite an amazing accomplishment. When you're buried in the earth, packed down, with all that weight on you, you can't move. It must have taken a super-human effort—or the earth cooperating in his release—for him to dig himself out.

This is the healing power of ritual.

Many of the kids we serve through Street Poets are so caught up in guilt and shame at the things they've done that they're emotionally locked down. Almost all of the kids in gangs have a common energetic vibration rooted in fear—they carry hostile predatory energies. Usually it took hold in them when they realized that they weren't safe: their parents were abusive or absent; their uncle was raping them; the streets were threatening. They took on these hostile energies as a way of protecting themselves, and so long as they stay in the gang, these energies keep them stuck.

We help the kids understand themselves on an energetic level—perhaps you might say a soul level—so that they remember that these energies are not who they are; not who they came here to be. We ask them to go back to the circumstances that created the opening for this hostile, parasitic energy to come in, and to acknowledge that this energy served them for a time. Perhaps they needed protection; they needed someone stronger than they perceived themselves to be to handle their lives. But now they may not need this energy any more. In fact, this energy may be causing irreparable harm to themselves and others. This energy allows Isaac, for example, to check out, while the snake carries out some crime. Then Isaac comes back and has to deal with the consequences.

With time and awareness and community and sometimes ritual intervention, our Street Poets shed these hostile energies and entities. They can say to these non-authentic parts of themselves, "Thank you for your service, but I'm calling the shots now." As they do this, they reclaim their lives.

This is where the importance of community comes in. So long as the kids are in the gang, the gang reinforces the fear-based predatory energy. The youth remains enslaved by fear and aligned with death. It's very hard for someone to break out of that trap alone. But with a community of people committed to healing, kids can stop running from their pain and face it for what it is. That's when they see that it's no longer as threatening as it once was—or that they are not as powerless as they once were.

You can't heal from the past by yourself; you need others to witness your pain and your healing; someone to remind you that if you go through the pain you can claim your gift. It's truly a hero's journey—and with support, these young people undertake it. And make it. Bottom line, that's what Street Poets provides.

The MOON: What does your experience with Street Poets tell you about community in our larger culture?

Henrikson: I think it was author M. Scott Peck who said "Community is the fruit borne of shared brokenness." But unfortunately sometimes it feels like the last thing we want to share with each other is our brokenness. Our culture is obsessed with pain suppression. We don't want to deal with our own pain, and we certainly don't want to hear about other people's pain. So we numb ourselves with alcohol, drugs or pharmaceuticals, and we distract ourselves with television; with consumption. The sense of isolation and meaninglessness is everywhere in our society. You see it in guys who shoot others who look just like them on inner-city streets. You see it in Iraq and Afghanistan. When we don't deal with your own fear and pain, we project it onto other people. That's what gangs

do; that's what our country has done since the landing of the Mayflower…from the genocide of Native Americans, to slavery, to the war on terror. As a nation, we'll stop projecting our fear and pain when enough of us have done our own healing. The good news is that, under the surface, things are beginning to shift now, and the big fear-driven systems like the military, the prisons, even, arguably our consumer-based economic system, are beginning to erode. As that continues, it will be essential that new ways of being together emerge. In my experience, the most inspiring new ways are rooted in very old ways.

The MOON: How can we create healthier communities in the larger culture? What can replace the isolation many people feel—not just in inner cities, but in the suburbs and middle-class communities, too—where antidepressant use and alcoholism and conspicuous consumption are rampant?

Henrikson: One of the simplest and most important things to do is to invite nature back into our lives. There is magic in nature. Try unplugging your television set and building a fire pit in the back yard. For millennia, that is how humans nurtured community. We sat and told stories around the fire; we sang songs; we danced and drummed. We all need space to be ourselves and we all need people who know who we are and who can remind us of our gifts when we forget them.

For indigenous people, fire is also our connection to the ancestors and to the spirit realm. If we're not spending time in nature on a regular basis, or gathering around a fire at least once a month, we're missing the opportunity for connection with each other, and with the people who sent us here. With those spirits on the other side who still have the capacity to assist us.

It's insidious: if you were trying to cut people off from their sense of connection to spirit; if you were trying to colonize people and manipulate them for your own purposes, you'd invent TV and computers to keep them "entertained," and to pump them full of messages you want them to believe—such as, you're not okay the way you are, you need a certain look, certain clothes, a certain car, a certain lifestyle—all artificial needs that get programmed into us. So that's the first step in creating community: reclaim yourself and unplug from external manipulation.

I'm not saying that technology is all bad – but there is no substitute for immersing oneself in nature, in the elements—in the earth, in the ocean, which is deeply healing; in the mountains, taking a hike. It sounds simple, but that kind of activity enables answers to come from within us. We each have knowledge in our bones of what it really means to be human. I'm not saying to change who you are; I'm saying turn off the things that distract you and take the time toremember who you are. To remember your own true nature.

You're not 'Puppet' or 'C-Mafia' from this 'hood or that gang. You're much more than your chosen profession, your race, gender, sexual orientation, or age. You're someone who was born with a purpose, who is here to give a gift, to provide medicine – not just for your own healing, but for the healing of others. This is good news – and well worth celebrating. That's one more place where community comes in.