

Seed, Soil & Light: A Young Revolutionary's Journey by Rina Patel

I haven't discovered what hasn't already been discovered. The ancestors before us meditated on these things...I think the problem [with humanity] is obvious. We fall short...we can do better. I wouldn't be in the world doing what I do if I didn't think we can do better.

Three to four houses had recently burned down in Tommy Joshua's North Philadelphia neighborhood. In an empty lot behind his home, Tommy came to figure out the origins. The youth of the neighborhood used that space to hop around on the furniture, play with the debris, and kick the wood.

One Wednesday afternoon, Tommy was on the second floor of his home and heard commotion in the backyard. The next day, he heard the same commotion. This time he was downstairs and went back to see what was going on. He noticed a couple of teenagers looking down, their cheeks glowing, focusing on a match and piece of paper. Initially, they didn't see Tommy, they were so concentrated on the flame. "They were shocked because this old head is telling us to come talk to him and we're [the kids] about to burn down this home, so they ran off", Tommy recounts.

After this encounter, Tommy was fascinated, but also deeply disturbed. There were kids running around the neighborhood with no after school programs. Tommy remembers telling himself, "They are good kids, but without guidance and opportunity, the neighborhood will burn down. So how can I stop it?"

After that day, Tommy created a standalone basketball court in his backyard. The next day, he waited for them to show up. Around 2:00-3:00, Tommy noticed the kids coming in and started to play basketball by himself. Noticing the kids were starting to pick up stones and throw them at him, Tommy continued to play, dribbling the ball by himself. Finally, one of the kids started to play with him and the rest soon decided to join in. That day they played a game against him and he let them win. "The purpose was working together as a team...although I am bigger and stronger, they can do it, too", Tommy told me.

From that day, a mentoring program grew. The boys started to ask "Brother Tommy" to come back each day. Tommy came back day after day, but this time with books. There were no more fires in the neighborhood. That was 10 years ago.

From this experience, Tommy learned an important lesson in creating the necessary environment for communities to self-mobilize. It taught him the importance of having a supportive, safe space where youth can grow and collaborate.

As we sit under a tree at the edge of the re-built North Philly Peace Park, Tommy took me back through time as he carefully shared his inspiring journey. With deep family roots in

North Philadelphia, Tommy explained how Viola Bond or “Cousin Vie”, as they lovingly call her, settled up north. While working in the fields of Brown Summit, North Carolina as a young girl, she had a heat stroke and began to go blind. Although her eyesight slowly declined, she continued to work in the tobacco fields and eventually moved to Philadelphia in 1940 by herself. She worked at a cigar factory where she was able to save enough money to buy a house on 25th and Master in North Philadelphia. As the great matriarch of the family, she called the rest of the family to the north. She was a woman of faith who had friends from all walks of life and would never turn away a person in need. She set the standards for Tommy and the rest of his family.

Tommy recalled hearing stories of Cousin Vie. She was known to be the first person to plant vegetables around their neighborhood in North Philadelphia. During a time of increasing gang violence, Cousin Vie ran a tight ship. She also ran a speakeasy and boarding home where she housed Tommy’s mother, aunts, and other family members. Inspired by these stories, Tommy reflected on how his family’s culture and values have had a deep impact on his work.

From an early age, Tommy questioned the suffering in the world. His earliest memories are of the broken school system, dysfunctional families, and homelessness. He turned to his mother for answers and she lovingly created a supporting environment for him to explore, learn, and grow.

With wonder, Tommy shared, “We were filled with creativity and wanted to have fun and solve problems. That was my childhood, running the streets. I covered every square inch. Every block was a new adventure, a new village, a new place to build, new youth and stories, sights and sounds”. Looking back on his childhood, Tommy experienced violence on the streets, but wasn’t aware he was growing up in a neighborhood that statistically had the highest rate of crime and poverty.

Embedded in his DNA, Tommy has spent the past 20 years as a community organizer and the past 10 years as an educator in the Philadelphia public schools.

At 16 years old, Tommy left his “village” with the belief of awakening neighborhoods to spring into action and self-organize. His work took him to Baltimore, New York, and other cities along the East Coast where he worked with a variety of organizations and people.

Eventually, he felt called to come back and work in the place he feels rooted, the neighborhood he grew up in. In the midst of organizing, Tommy enrolled in Temple University where he struggled to attend class. Overcome by pressing social issues going on in the community, he recalled running around and not taking care of his health. Shortly after, Tommy was diagnosed with Leukemia and took a medical leave from Temple. For three and a half years, Tommy battled Leukemia.

There were many times he was told he was going to have a week or a month left. Even on his deathbed, Tommy maintained a sense of humor, joking with the doctor about the single digit days he had left.

At one point, his condition grew worse and he spent weeks in the hospital. “All of a sudden I got a sort of infection and I sat in that state for 3-4 days”, he told me. “Maybe on one of those days I remember making peace...I used to run, seeking to build and change, but I’m in a hospital room now and physically, I can’t move. My eyes work and my mind works, but that’s it. I don’t look like myself anymore. I am bald headed. I had no power. I had to watch my family members come far and wide come in tears because I was leaving

them. But you can't do anything and it makes you think wow! All the selfishness of life, all the vanity of life, it doesn't mean anything".

"So I discovered some things on my sickbed about life", he continued. "They had me way up in the hospital. I would look out the window down at the people walking...little dots...going to and fro getting out of taxis or stores. I would say I would trade anything to be the little dots down there than be f'ed up like this. That was in the early stages when I was self-loathing because I felt like I let everybody down. It wasn't supposed to end like this. But I made peace with 'self', the world, the source. During this period I feel like a profound fortification took place where I told myself I wasn't going to be afraid or lie anymore. Because what I found was that we don't have to. Nothing is worth more than living a free life and following your heart".

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Awakened and gifted with a second chance at life, Tommy continued his work. He dove back into his studies, this time enrolling at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania to study political science and sociology with a focus on the the communist movement in Southeast Asia. He continued his work in the Philadelphia schools and developed a multimedia education program in one of the local high schools. It was during this time that North Philly Peace Park was in its beginning stages.

During a time the city was facing issues with food deserts, cuts of social service programs, and a shutdown of two schools in the neighborhood, Tommy gathered the initial group of individuals to join the movement of North Philly Peace Park. Tommy talked to anyone he could, gathered a diverse group of individuals, and together they decided the first garden was to be on 16th and Ridge. However, distrust between the members caused the group quickly fall apart. In 2012, with a few standing members, they decided to take their initiative straight to the 2400 block of Bolton Street.

After three and a half years of distributing more than three tons of locally grown vegetables, creating educational programs, and constructing a school house, their project came to a brief pause. In 2015, Philadelphia Housing Authority's redevelopment project put the North Philly Peace Park on hold. PHA fenced up the property around the time of harvest, creating fear throughout the community. The community people took the fence down and stood their ground.

"There's no way to reverse what is starting", Tommy admitted, "...open green space, community led development, people are going to create new programs and be rooted..." By the time Peace Park was to be stopped the park had already had over 1,400 volunteers, an operating budget of over \$230,000, and a staff of 8 people. They were able to mobilize tremendous resources and human power. The school building alone was a 9 month process and by the end of the construction, they had hired their own teachers and enrolled 160 children. On Saturdays, they had a community-run academy for the children and youth. That year, they even organized the Philadelphia Urban Colony Fair which gathered 600 people from Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

After they refused to give up the land, the PHA offered a 1 year contract for 2 lots. Their friends told them to take the contract, but Tommy Joshua resisted: "The land is already ours. The purpose of this is to bring in a new system that starts from the communities", Tommy explained.

Eventually, they were forced to shut down operations. Although their constructed

schoolhouse still stands, they are unable to use that piece of land for the North Philly Peace Park. “We loved that land on Bolton Street...even though it saddened us to leave, we didn’t feel welded to a piece of land. Every piece of land is our home.” The community banded together stronger than ever before and geared up for a community-led rebuild on 22nd and Jefferson. On July 15th 2016, they collaborated with local community members, the University of Pennsylvania’s Design School, Habitat for Humanity, and Hip Hop Party to revive their vision of Peace Town.

Explaining the vision of Peace Town, Tommy shared, “When I see the under utilization, poverty, and devastation of human beings and then I see lots with trash it blows my mind. It can’t be. Something has to give. How can we make end roads to these big institutional challenges we face? Do we wait for politicians to pass legislation that will create quality schools? This is not going to happen unless the people take proactive action like the Peace Park had to do”.

With a smile on his face, looking out into the garden, Tommy continued, “We need to let the soil and plants recharge our DNA. We need to create a new paradigm of how we need to live and exist based on the land. This is the future of what we would like to see for Peace Town. We would like to see a new society develop around ecology- self, love, hard work, creativity, unity, vision. We have a plan to remake it from a place of want, poverty and violence to a place of abundance, creativity, safety, and security. We know we are capable of doing it”.

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Peace Town is a “new city” that will include Sharswood, Strawberry Mansion, Brewerytown, Francisville, and other neighborhoods clustered in North Philadelphia. North Philly Peace Park will serve as a cornerstone to this new city which will be married with ecology and people who respect and work with the land. The vision is to actively work with the city of Philadelphia and other major cities across the United States to replicate the model of what North Philly Peace Park is now becoming.

“This is what I’m trying to tell the developers”, Tommy explained. “You can build schools, you can build houses, you can build roads, you can build nice shiny avenues with stores, but it’s all about the people”.

As our discussion came to a close, Tommy tells me the next steps of North Philly Peace Park are to make leaps in their organizational structure. They are also hoping to construct a new school house by the end of the year.

As the North Philly Peace Park volunteers begin to think about scaling the project, they remain grounded in the small moments that make up the greater picture. Tommy shifted our conversation to Pointillism, a technique of painting in which little dots are used to form a picture. He explained, “Change is the dots, not the entire picture”. What makes this revolutionary at the end of the day isn’t the whole picture, but the little dots, the decisions that are made moment by moment, day by day. It’s each person, each soul that works, not just the dirt, plants, and wood. This work is not measured in money, power, or title. It is loudest inaudible. Nobody sees it but you.

The epicenter of Tommy’s work revolves around the belief that the true nature of humans is goodness. As we grow older, we define each other by our bad habits and actions rather than the goodness we see when we hold a baby for the first time. As he pointed to the baby plants, Tommy explained when we look at a plant grow and produce fruit, it doesn’t

look like a selfish creation. The true nature of creation is balanced. It is at peace.

“I believe there’s a lot of wisdom in nature and I believe it has the answer, in fact”, said Tommy softly, “When we observe nature, we observe the laws of balance and the laws of reciprocity. It’s obvious when a seed goes into the ground and the seed is given the soil and sunlight and if it is allowed to grow up that seed will produce fruit. That tells me all things have the potential already inside. If you let the seed ‘be’ everything will be okay. My mission is to see to it that seeds will grow and won’t be obstructed and denied the opportunity to produce fruit. Human beings have to be reminded of themselves and pushed to greatness”.