

# Open Letter to Keith Wilson (Portland, OR Newly Elected Mayor

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November 9, 2024

Mayor Keith Wilson,

Congratulations on your victory as the mayor of Portland. It honestly does my spirit a lot of good to see someone who is willing to take on the system instead of reinforcing it [finally] get elected.

I am writing you as one who, for about a decade now, has advocated for similar approaches to houselessness as you seem to propose. It is my aim to forewarn you of what I've come to see as the greatest pitfall of such approaches, as well as to suggest one potential work-around if and when it arises.

At the risk of coming across as dramatic, I'd not be the first among the unhoused demographic [or those who still identify with them] to suggest there is something sadistic about what Ted Wheeler has done to this town. Imagine, if you will, watching your families since of kinship undermined and eventually torn apart by a man who suddenly became empowered to control your house – the place where you and your family rely on to come together on occasion. To use the term spiritual murder in this case is no stretch.

About 14 years ago I found my street family when I had nothing else to hold onto. In the time since then I've watched how the institution of government can be weaponized as a means to take control of the environment and tear street families apart. At some point in all of that – close to a decade ago – the thought occurred to me, "why not pack a warehouse full of bunk-beds and put it on the free rental market?" I thought, 'people are homeless, not helpless, and they need options more than they need help'. Having a background in physics, I instinctively tried to poke holes in the theory which had begun to germinate in my mind. Rather than disproving it successfully, I fell down a rabbit hole – one I continue to fall down to this day.

What put the idea in my head was by staying at the shelter in Eugene, OR which back then was very different than it is now<sup>1</sup>. Back then it had a very accommodating day room which allowed people – registered 'guests' or just random passer-byes – to use the place at their own discretion. In other ways it was accommodating to – not perfect, but far better than most shelters you'd find in Portland today. Some guests stayed for over a decade. Underneath the Burnside bridge in Portland had a similar positive vibe to it as well back before Charlie Hales street sweeps in the summer of 2016 (after this it went downhill fast). The common thread I find which makes for the best outcome – moreover, a positive outcome which bleeds out into the community at large – is *permeability*; the ability for people who have no affiliation with one another or a given place to come and go as they please. It created a holistic atmosphere which brought out the best in unhoused people as it granted them a sense of belonging as well as freedom, and it had the effect that domestic folks and the unhoused intermingled together amicably as neighbors – something Portland has mostly lost today.

Anyways, as you seem to have begun to do, I too fell down the rabbit hole of 'why not'? why can't something like this work? why must our options be restricted to being treated like animals in missions, like rats outside, or to paying an arm and a leg for our own private box which [to one who has been ostracized from or has otherwise lost touch with their nuclear family] does not hold the same value as it does for the average domestic person? I'm sure you can relate; this is a rabbit hole you can fall down as deeply as you please. At many points you

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<sup>1</sup>presently it is akin to a holding cell in the sense that newly arrived guests must stay in what used to be the day room for a period of 10-20 days without leaving.

might feel like a savant for being the lone voice in the room to try to 'reinvent communalism'. Though you are far from the first, what I've found is that it is a taboo subject which must be erased from public discourse – even history books – in order to maintain the peace between domestic and communal cultures. By the quirks of human cooperation, societies tend towards social congruence, and when two incompatible ways of living arise, one is subjugated by the other. At other points you might be frustrated by how adept people can be at letting reason to die a quiet death when it tries to tell them something they simply don't want to hear. And you will feel alone. I learned to transmute my anger and frustrations and my yearnings for answers into books, the present results of which may be found in my essay (see link below if and when interested).

My thinking of late has turned towards government as an institution, which can be likened to the advent of a house which enabled a single man to take control of a specified territory.

I don't know where or in what stage you are at in your thinking, but I say this only so you appreciate how much time, energy, lived experience, and reading came before it dawned on me why such an approach does not work – its not because it cannot or should not, rather it is simply because any form of communal living is too easily sabotaged. Just a few months ago I recall an article in the Willamette Week which reprimanded a public official in the housing beaureau for in some way cutting the line on a group living alternative to traditional shelter that had arose somewhere in east Portland. On a cultural level I've witnessed what a conflict domestic vs. communal living can cause. It was, for example, more often than not nearby residents and N.I.M.B.Y's rather than any formal authority figure which I found most opposed to my presence when I slept outside. Having attended a number of meetings in Portland and elsewhere, the sheer tenacity with which they can resist appeals to reason or compassion is amazing. Virulent is the appropriate term to describe the attitudes which overtake many. My readings of history also reaffirm it is consistently the case that domestic and communal cultures inevitably tend to a tug-a-war.

More to the point, the professionalization of government services is by now an epidemic. It is professional bureaucrats who make their hustle on the struggles of others who you ought to be mostly wary of, as it is them and all they represent that your schemes mostly threaten. As was done in the past, and still to this day, any holistic approach which seeks to maximize efficiency by enabling people to do for themselves by coming together *as a community* were systematically ripped apart so that citizens will be reliant on the 'services' of government and/ or social workers in line with them who like to descend from above with their 'solutions'. If you've not realized this is going to be your greatest threat, I will bet you will before long.

Before then I predict you will come to accept that what you are proposing is indeed to [re-]legitimize communal living, not merely enhancing the use of shelters as we presently conceive of them. This is because [from what very little I've read about you] your plans seem to operate along the lines of 'build it and they will come'. What you may find however, is that street people are free spirits who actually do have a modicum of self-respect, and many of them either will not come or if they do they will not behave unless or until someone is willing to speak up with phrases such as 'tenant rights' or 'quality standards' when it comes to shelters.

People have a right – just as you do – to come and go from whatever domicile they subscribe to or which they establish for themselves. People know in their hearts they deserve a right to be able to access all parts of a place 24/7 to do the things they need to do. And because it was forged in them via millions of years of evolving through group selectivity which shaped their genetic code and hardwired their minds that they are tribal creatures, they know they both need and deserve a meeting grounds – a place they can relax with those they call kin; people who are in the same boat as they are and who share their struggle – their street family.

It is the greatest lie being proliferated by 'housing first' beaurocrats that 'homelessness' is a housing issue – first and foremost it is a family issue. From its inception thousands of years ago, the private home was, and it remains to the present day, all about the nuclear family. For those who have no family, current strategies amount to shoving street people into boxes then wondering why they pick up bad habits as a means to reconnect themselves with their street families, or otherwise do not find the motivation to maintain their own private domicile as the average domestic person does. Like housing, a persons willingness to perform labor cannot be extricated from the notion of family, as family is the greatest motive behind why we humans do what we do.

Imagine, if you will Keith, if someone told you and your family you had to wait outside in the elements for as much as an hour on the pissed on sidewalk every time you wanted to enter your living room, and that where you sat, what you did, and how long you were welcome were all to be dictated by someone else. What would that do to your family? A family needs a living room with a couch – a place to RELAX around one another,

and they need FREEDOM to be themselves.

Whatever your schemes are, if you think the free-birds of the west coast will magically tuck their tail between their legs and shape up just because someone gave them a bed somewhere – you are setting yourself up for a hard lesson.

But soon after you dare say the words 'quality standards' or 'tenant rights' you will meet your greatest threat – government bureaucrats. I will not be surprised if and when they aim to undermine whatever you do. Ultimately, I think you will come to accept as I have that it is a mistake to think that reforming shelter systems is possible without first reforming that which regulates them – government.

## Suggestion:: AI in Government

Having pissed in the wind for a decade and having been broken me in ways no one ought to be broken, I have come to the conclusion [or realization] that one cannot reform housing or education without first reforming the thing which regulates them – government. These things do not change unless or until government changes, mainly because government as we know it today won't allow these things to change. It was a realization which has put me and my advocacy in check as I now accept the scope of all one needs to study or [in your case] be prepared to deal with just to reform shelters. Any principle or plan which aims to affect what amounts to a vital organ of society [communal environments in general] perhaps ought to account for the possibility that success can only be achieved over a very gradual time-frame; one which may well extend beyond the bounds of any one persons political career.

First off, it is a mistake to think that communalism can be separated from communism [as defined as the governmental control and distribution of resources]. I never fancied myself a communist, and still I do not identify with many of those who do [or did]. Still, it was a mistake for me to think of myself as something other than a communard. This is because it is not possible for one to be an advocate for changing the fundamental unit of organization on which the institution of domestic government was founded [the private home] without claiming to be advocate for changing government itself.

To return to the analogy of government being likened to a privately controlled house [e.g. private property], the introduction of which empowered a single man to control the environment within its delineated territorial bounds, this house had the effect of breaking the relations of the extended communal/ tribal family. From this the nuclear family, monogamy, and then patriarchy were born. These things – the private home, the nuclear family, monogamy, and patriarchy, and also a fragmented and sedentary way of life in which human tribal instincts are reduced to a cheap commodity – are the defining features of what I call 'domestic life'. As a stagnating river breeds disease, the domestic existence gives rise to territorialism and nativism – the notion that I belong here and you don't, and this is a notion we find at many forms of bigotry and conflict (it is, for example, largely why people are fighting in the middle east right now). To be governed according to what territory a person inhabits rather than according to what group they belong was among the most potent organizational shifts in human history. Likewise, perceiving oneself as a member of a geographic territory rather than as a member of a group of fellow human beings – the rise of individualism in general – was among the greatest paradigm shifts, and it is an outlook governments continue to foster without acknowledging its dangers.

Domestic governments tend towards centralization, and it is the centralized governors role to impose the authoritative supremacy of the foundational organizing units of domestic society (the nuclear family and the private home). It is one explanation for how and why private property rights have come to take precedence over humans ability and right to survive on the streets. You being a family man, I won't be surprised if and when you in some way bend and twist things to this end as you certainly will be tempted to do at some point.

Not being considered a member of any extended family, the domestic citizen is spared the necessity of getting to know and interact with any but [perhaps] nearby residents. Likewise, they are largely spared the necessity of learning self-governance. In a domestic society such things are reduced to inconveniences rather than necessities. But in a communally decentralized government, a governor [e.g. a tribal chief] is keenly aware that his or her power largely amounts to 'soft power', and so it is the role of the decentralized governor to simply remind people of their extended family, and to help in what capacity he or she is able to strengthen and heal these bonds. The conscious cultivation of social intelligence is not a convenience in a communal society.

The silver lining to the 'am I a communist' question is this; though the government ownership and control of goods may remain the defining quality of communism<sup>2</sup> what constitutes 'government' is open to change. 'Communism' as it is popularly conceived of today is actually a mere extension of the principle of domestic government; that one person or group of persons ought to control the house which others have to inhabit [centralization]. But when all members of the the house have an equal say in the distribution of goods, 'communism' is more appropriately defined as a pure and true democracy [decentralization].

Consider that the general trend in the evolution of governments for centuries now has been from centralized to decentralized forms; monarchies to parliaments to our modern democratic-republic. It does seem the natural trend is heading towards a true and pure democracy – towards communism. To quote John Stuart Mill on the matter,

...human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, self-protecting; and they only achieve a high degree of success in their struggle with Nature in proportion as they are self-dependent, relying on what they themselves can do, either separately or in concert, rather than on what others do for them.

The former proposition—that each is the only safe guard in of his own rights and interests—is one of those elementary maxims of prudence which every person capable of conducting his own affairs implicitly acts upon wherever he himself is interested. Many, indeed, have a great dislike to it as a political doctrine, and are fond of holding it up to obloquy as a doctrine of universal selfishness. To which we may answer, that whenever it ceases to be true that mankind, as a rule, prefer themselves to others, and those nearest to them to those more remote, from that moment Communism is not only practicable, but the only defensible form of society, and will, when that time arrives, be assuredly carried into effect. For my own part, not believing in universal selfishness, I have no difficulty in admitting that Communism would even now be practicable among the élite of mankind, and may become so among the rest.

And I have wrestled with the question of whether accepting communal living – even tolerating its availability for others – is something the general populace would desire. I have long known that sometimes people don't know what they want until they see it, for we as people have a tendency to let our knowledge be confined to what we have observed. When we say 'shelter' today what comes to the mind of many persons is nothing good, but this is something that we are capable of changing. In either case, it is inescapable that the notion of a commune is either accepted by people as a whole or it is rejected outright. As I've noted already, for whatever reason societies tend towards social congruence.

The question in my mind is whether people have had a fair chance to determine what they want? Portland's last mayor often used the phrase 'the will of the people', but in today's society there is no such thing as a 'collective will' as will is a thing which has been shaped (it has direction/ purpose) and then it needs to be honed (so it has power). Presently, we are largely lacking the means to shape a collective will, let alone sharpen its focus and enhance its powers. Though I've yet to study the issue in detail, I believe the original democracy in Athens, for example, did not pass laws unless or until every person with a right to vote had engaged in-person with one another and had achieved a majority consensus. Achieving a consensus in a group is like making a decision as an individual in that one can do all in their power to educate themselves in an effort to make good decisions, or one can choose not to. The present system of tallying a vote after a few years of digesting tabloid news and facebook comments is not what I'd consider cultivating a collective intelligence or forming any consensus.

Without engagement people cannot form common fictions and philosophies which serve to unite them. And societies do require philosophy, even if it entails a degree of subjectivity – even outright fiction. Tribes once held themselves together by contriving myths that they had all descended from a common ancestor. From here religions were contrived, then the fiction that we separated church from state in conjunction with a host of legal fiction which now hold society together<sup>3</sup>

There is no replacement for face to face engagement, and the power of oratory is sadly a dying art. Today, the closest thing we have to what Athens did is two minute speeches once a month which are unidirectional

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<sup>2</sup>before the advent of private property, for examples, property was in many cases inherited according to what tribe one belonged to, and it was tribal customs rather than parents who had the final say in this.

<sup>3</sup>my favorite: land is a fictitious commodity.

rather than a true back and forth dialect between people. And the microphones given to us at council meetings are facing the wrong direction – they face us at representatives instead of towards one another. Electronic means of communication [e.g. facebook] are no substitute as most communication is actually not articulated, rather it is chemo-receptive and visual, or at the least it is auditory.

This is important because it may well be the case that honing the conscious and collective will of the people is the only means to combat the trickery of the government bureaucrat.

Communalism is in our blood, and it is not going away anytime soon.

All of that taken together, the question in my mind becomes this; if people were empowered to steer society in their chosen direction, would they steer it more towards communal living? If it were people as a collective and informed whole who got to engineer the physical environment instead of certified urban planners, how different would society look, and in what direction would it tend, Mr. Wilson?

What I'm getting at is this; you don't have to force communalism down peoples throats; they might do it naturally. And if not, then nothing is lost, because a history of attempting to force communal practices on anyone has shown that this method does not work anyway. But I will say to the defense of communalism; it has been given a bad reputation because varying forms of communism and/ or socialism have been implemented in a backwards fashion in the sense they required people share resources before they shared spaces. Simple put, when you keep people separate, they will act separate. And again, nothing should be or needs to be – or at this point even can be – forced. All people need is to be empowered to take control of the environment for themselves. From here they will reinvent communalism in their own way.

It is this underlying principle, not any specific plan, which is important, and it was my greatest error to think for years that I could contrive a plan which could reinvent communalism for all. It is a mistake I ask you to learn from. Nature evolves according to principles rather than plans. That we've come to perceive everything through the lens of a plan rather than a principle is perhaps the greatest paradigm shift which domestic life has caused. There was a time when people once asked one another, 'what are your beliefs?' rather than 'what are your goals?'. In government it especially proves true; that a representative has a plan is often more important to people than whether it will work or if it obeys any underlying principle.

AI might be a powerful tool to achieve the ends of evolving towards a pure democracy, and this in turn may be an indirect way of achieving the ends of communalism [the work-around]. But in the seminal words of Karl Polyani come to mind; "too much change, too fast, is never a good thing". A pure democracy, implemented unthinkingly or too quickly, has a very bad record. Human group psychology left unchecked is dangerous waters. What people do when left to their own devices can quickly devolve into the realm of terrifying<sup>4</sup>

Still, I wanted to put the notion in your mind so that you do not feel helpless or cornered if and when every member of the governmental bureaucracy you rely on to implement your schemes turns on you. It [AI allowed into government] might be a tool which you can use to kindly remind your enemies they are replaceable [not to recommend you actually do so]. Starting small – say implementing an AI for public records requests – might be a suitable first step.

I've come to see societal change as having two general forms; the first is in line with the aforementioned quote by Karl Polyani; too much change, too fast, is dangerous. It backfires as the system as a whole seems to detect when opportunists try to exploit new technologies, wars, or other things as a means to achieve their own ends. The other form of change is like planting a seed, the fruits of which you know you won't be around to see. At best, you hope to die knowing you planted it, and that it will grow because it aims to do so in a way which is in harmony with its surroundings – surroundings which will in turn nurture rather than strangle the planted seed. If planted wisely, surrounding trees will grant it sunlight, rain will bring it water, insects will dig it channels to receive nutrients [or whatever they do], etc. This – bringing all the elements which are essential for life to grow –, not merely planting a seed, is a more proper definition of creation. Reminding people of the extended family is the more proper definitive role of government.

I will close also saying that you are not alone, but neither will it be you people see if and when your schemes work out. Either the commune comes to fruition by the will of the people, and they see it as their own creation, or it does not come to fruition. In the words of Lao Tzu, "Of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, "We did this ourselves.".

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<sup>4</sup>A book I recommend here is Gustav Le Bon's seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*.

Thank you for your service, and for [I hope] coming to the defense of my family. It is my sincere hope there will be no need for me to harrass you as I have past mayors, and that this then will be the last you hear of me.

– Wayne W. Gazzola

<https://github.com/wwignes88/Essays>