

## THE HAMMER AND LOTUS OF EDMOND YU

**February 20, 1997**

The grainy photograph on the newspaper front page showed the dark figure of a man lying on the floor of an empty city bus. He had been shot and killed by the police. He was a 35 years old and his name was Edmond Yu.

If you have ever come close to the brink of disaster and been lucky enough to step back from it you will know what the edge of waiting, lasting darkness feels like. It gets into your blood and changes things forever. Some say there is very little separating that darkness from walking into the light; only a fine, fine line, waiting to be crossed. We can't predict what will happen if this line appears. All we can do is use what it leaves us.

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Edmond pulled up his jacket sleeve to show me the line of six watches along on his left arm. He was telling me how much he liked my old Timex and why I should sell it to him. This was not the first time he had tried to get it from me.

He sat there smiling, dressed in many layers of black clothing. The jackets, vests, sweaters and heavy pants, boots, all black, made him look like a giant. Seven was a special number for him. He was pointing at the empty space where the last watch should go: my watch, the seventh watch. I laughed and told him he was not going to get it from me.

But In my heart I knew he was telling me something important. Time was on my mind too. It worried me. The winter season had deepened into its hardest phase, bringing unpredictable snow storms, sudden warming spells and then freezing temperature drops. Even though Edmond was cheerful he looked exhausted. He was putting up a brave front but his eyes told another story. He was worried, too.

I looked at his face, darkened from exposure to the wind, sun and the cold. His head was closely shaved. During quiet times he stared at what was in front of him, his gaze moving out and beyond what was present in the room towards some unknown place. When he spoke he leaned forward to get closer. I bent forward too; so close I thought our foreheads would touch. It was an unusual thing for me to do, but familiar. This was the way we talked: reaching for the right words, bending low to listen, getting close to each other.

We were discussing coming in from the street, returning once again to the dilemma which always played itself out in our meetings. On this day I was showing him pictures of the Gerstein Centre because a room and bed was being held for him. I could drive him there that afternoon. He only had to say yes.

This young Chinese man had started on a long and difficult journey before we had ever met. He was attending medical school at the University of Toronto when he fell into an intense personal crisis. As his difficulties worsened he was forced to withdraw from school, even though he was regarded by many as the most brilliant student there. He was hospitalized by his family and forced to take treatment. The hospitalization was a second trauma and the beginning of a longer and deeper struggle. The promise of a future in medicine was replaced by a diminished life of medication, boarding homes and at its worst, homelessness. Life had gotten harder not better. Now he was here at PARC.

Edmond picked up the pictures of the house to study them, talking to himself about what he saw. He asked questions, paused and then answered them. I leaned closer and touched his shoulder to gently remind him of my presence.

Sometimes it seemed like Edmond was swimming into these inner conversations. It was visible and physical, his movement from charming social banter to insightful comment, then on to muttered associations and self talk. He seemed compelled to speak this way. It was at the heart of his effort to organize his thoughts; this public sorting and debating of what was important and what did not matter. Only now, he had to stop talking. He was exhausted. He had to come in from the street.

I remembered what he had said a week earlier.

We had visited a small house. It was assisting homeless men using the Out of the Cold church shelter spaces provided through the faith community. The house was new; a volunteer- run experiment and a short walk away from PARC. A bed had just become vacant and it was possible Edmond could take it. The terms for living there were open. He could stay as long as it took to find another place to live. I explained the arrangements made for him to have supper at the house. If this went well he could move in.

As soon as we arrived there I could see he wanted to stay. He ate dinner as I talked with the lead staff. This was different from his hesitation to use any of the larger

homeless hostel shelters downtown. Like many other fragile people he had good reasons for not wanting to go to those places. They were too crowded and too intense. But this house, so close to PARC, was inviting.

I heard him laughing and talking in the dining room but could see the house was unsettled. The other men looked wary of Edmond. Some appeared puzzled, others hostile. The volunteer staff was uneasy. They worried about their ability to support this unusual man who talked to himself in such strange ways. So they called the house supervisor. I knew what the decision would be before I heard it.

As we walked away from the house it began to snow, beautiful soft white flakes drifting down through the darkness. Nothing was said between us until we paused in a store-front door way. The emptiness of the street was overwhelming but it was time to separate and go on. Edmond could see I was upset. He put out his hand and touched me on my shoulder as I had done with him. Then he spoke softly. "Reality can sometimes be painful. There is no place in the world for me"

I touched the pictures of the Gerstein Centre with my hand. "It is time to go. We'll drive over. This will be much better than the last place we visited. Let's go see it." Edmond wearily stood up and we left together.

Edmond was welcomed by the more experienced Gerstein staff. They saw him as I did: intelligent, unusual, charming and troubled. I visited with him each day and encouraged him to rest. The support provided by Gerstein could help Edmond cope with this critical period in his life but it was a time-limited crisis service. However, due to the history and circumstances of Edmond's vulnerability we had an agreement to extend his stay beyond the normal 72-hour guidelines; to create more time for him to recover and more time for me to try and find a workable and helpful place for him to go to. The urgency and difficulty of finding this alternative in the community was a problem. He had respite care but I was worried it was simply not enough to help shift his journey from the street into housing. I had to find a place that was flexible, supportive, available and agreeable to Edmond -- even though I knew a place like this really did not exist.

On the last day of his life I went to see him. In the morning I went to look at work being done to create new mental health support beds inside one of the downtown shelters. It wasn't ready to open yet and looked like a hospital unit. I arrived at Gerstein just after lunch time and heard that Edmond had a restless night. When we

sat down to talk I asked if he would take some medication to help him sleep. I would get it for him. He didn't say no.

Edmond then asked if he could come to back to PARC with me.

"No, Edmond...the drop-in will be closed so no time now for visiting. It is better you stay here at Gerstein and rest. I will see you tomorrow."

When I got back to the west end I called his former doctor at a Chinese mental health agency. He had lost contact with Edmond over the last year. I explained the situation and my desire to get some medication support to use in tandem with the safe space Gerstein was providing. He agreed to assist with this; I told him I would get back to him after seeing Edmond again.

As we spoke, Edmond was alone on a bus with the police, and the guns were being drawn.

Edmond's death jolted a city that was beginning to notice the growing number of homeless people living and dying on the streets. But this was different. He had not frozen to death or died in a fire while trying to stay warm. He had been shot and killed by the police. Survivors with a lived experience of police contact during a mental health crisis had painful memories awakened. Their fear of the police ran deep. They wondered why this man, alone on an empty bus, was shot dead instead of rescued.

The police invited the media to gather at the shooting site. They spoke in front of an empty bus, using it as a prop to explain why the "lethal force option" had been used. The police response was based on a report Edmond had allegedly assaulted a young woman passenger while waiting to board the bus. The driver had cleared the bus and locked the doors to await police assistance. The three responding officers entered the bus and engaged Edmond in a long conversation. At the latter stage of their contact Edmond pulled out what appeared to be a weapon. He held up a shiny hammer. The officers reacted to the immediate threat they saw in that moment. One officer shot him several times; one of the bullets striking his head.

In the days following there were more news conferences, public rallies and community meetings. A candlelight vigil was held where Edmond had died. Grief and anger rippled through the crowd. As the candles glowed I closed my eyes.

I remembered Edmond as he was. He had candles too, carried in his pocket to warm his hands. He had a beautiful smile and an unusual spirit full of contrasting energy. He did things that made you notice this. There were times when he seemed to be brooding darkly and other moments when he sat very still with his eyes closed, hands clasped in prayer. He looked like a Buddhist monk when he prayed. It seemed to fit with his other, lighter spirit; the one that moved him to carefully stand on his head or joyfully sing Born Free at the PARC all-night Solstice party.

When we first met he was dressed in new, black and layered clothes and standing outside the large, run-down rooming house next door to PARC. He was facing the entrance door with his right arm outstretched. He was holding out his disability pension receipt, talking to the rooming house and himself. Within the next few minutes we were sitting down to talk with the landlord. He had been living there for 2 months and his rent was due. He wanted to pay it but the landlord would not accept it. He was evicting Edmond because he "made too much noise." He said the other tenants were complaining about Edmond talking with himself and his chanting and use of a gong and hammer. When Edmond heard this he got up from his chair. He looked at me and said. "I will not stay in a place where I am not welcome."

When I opened my eyes I noticed my watch.

Another rally was planned for The Grange Park, close to the Chinese neighborhood he often visited. Edmond had sheltered in that park during an earlier homeless journey, years before I met him. On the night before the rally I went upstairs to get my things. I was invited to speak and I was thinking about going for a quiet drink. I needed to compose my thoughts and make some notes. As I walked into my office I found something strange waiting for me. It was a carpenter's hammer, lying on the top of my computer keyboard.

When powerful messages are sent they arrive like flash lightning. You feel them in your body. I knew instantly that this hammer was a message from Edmond no matter how it had come to find me. The hammer is one of our oldest tools. It is a symbol of strength and transformation. When most people see a hammer they do not think of it as a weapon. What comes to mind is fixing what is broken and building what is needed. So I took the hammer to the rally, to talk about why a homeless man had died with a hammer in his hand.

Across the world a young Tibetan woman was visiting with the Dalai Lama. She owned a small store on Queen Street stocked with Buddhist artifacts, literature and Tibetan

cultural items. Edmond had been a regular visitor in her store, dropping by to explore his interest in Buddhism and absorb its welcoming atmosphere. Her husband had called her to give the news of Edmond's death. She and the Dalai Lama lit candles and prayed for Edmond.

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Awareness may shape what we make of the world but it's not the only force guiding us. The year after Edmond's death someone set a fire near a stairwell that destroyed the old rooming house where he had lived before his eviction to the street. Two people died, fifty others escaped. Like Edmond, they had to face another danger after the fire was put out. They were homeless.

The old building called 1495 Queen was a disaster waiting to happen. It provided poor quality housing with a simple management plan; get the most profit possible from the most vulnerable people. When the fire broke out on a September afternoon it shut down the neighborhood for 20 blocks. A cloud of smoke hung over the noise of fire trucks, police and other emergency vehicles lined along the street. Community residents and PARC staff rushed into the building to help people get out to safety, bringing tenants together in the drop-in when there was assurance PARC was safe from catching fire. Then the work of providing emergency relief support began, going late into the night and on and on over the days, weeks and months following; a great effort to resettle everyone who had lost their home.

The scope of the fire relief response was so large PARC had to be helped out by many community partners to carry it off successfully. The courage and determination of the fire victims made a compelling story. It described who they were, the barriers they faced and why they were compelled to live in such a risky place. The fire was a reminder of what happens when you deny people the hope of a safe home. And it provided the incentive needed to bump the people who had been displaced from there to the top of City's long housing wait list, into subsidized housing.

It was a sweet and bitter ending to the fire relief effort because its success revealed a larger and meaner truth. There were thousands of people needing affordable social housing who could not get it. With government funding to meet this need taken away, they were being left behind on waiting lists many years long and getting longer. It seemed like it took a near-death experience to get past this barrier and into a home.

For the next seven years the burned out building lay very still. Its exterior street façade was intact but the hole in the roof caused by the fire was open to the heavens. Rain and snow fell into the building's shell. Deeper down, in the abandoned apartments, sat the charred heaps of clothing amid overturned chairs, tables and other personal belongings of the people who had lived there.

Birds nested along the roof edge showering its entrance with their droppings. Windows close to the street level were shattered and replaced with plywood. Periodically, signs of forced entry through the rear of the building could be seen from its alley laneway. It was known that some people, desperate for shelter, were trying to use the place even though this was an extremely risky thing to do. Every so often city inspectors came by to have a look around and make sure the property was secured against trespassing. It was a dangerous place. The passage of time and the elements were working on it. The building was like an old tomb, awaiting re-discovery.

Against that backdrop of decay the work inspired by Edmond's life and death began to appear. A group of survivor activists, front line workers and supporters were researching how to create a survivor-led Safe House which provided extended and peer-based supports to people in a homeless/mental health crisis. They saw this model successfully used in other countries and the need to bring it to Canada.

Some of the group's early advocacy found its way into the coroner's inquest held to review the circumstances of Edmond's death. The jury recommended: improved police training, expanded crisis response resources including the exploration of a Safe House crisis model for use within the mental health system. But its final recommendation was the most eloquent one of all: *Build Supportive Housing*.

Across the years Edmond's story was being kept alive. The Safe House Project told it over and over in conferences, community forums and press releases as it worked to create a resource which could have prevented his death. The survivor community gathered in the Grange Park every year to re-tell the story of the first vigil. They brought candles, flowers, faith and love. We said the same thing year after year: one day we would make something to show how the world could welcome all the Edmonds trying to find their way home.

Eventually the Edmond Yu Safe House Project finished its work, defining a new homeless crisis response model that could have helped someone like Edmond find their way home from the street. Even though the government funding needed to build it never came to pass, no one was surprised its public donations kept growing. There

was a deep belief that Edmond's story was not finished, only waiting for what would happen next.

It came with the rousing of 1495 Queen from its long sleep. A new city council was asked to report on derelict properties suitable for conversion into social housing. The burned rooming house next to PARC sat ready, a high-profile site well-suited to this direction and ready to test this opportunity. Here was the chance to turn what had put Edmond Yu onto the street into a place that would have taken him off it. People speculated how this might happen. What would it take for 1495 Queen to become supportive housing? The neighborhood was changing. Not far from PARC you could see the steady creep of money. Small and familiar local stores were turning into upscale shops, wine bars and high-end restaurants. But you could also hear and see the diverse chorus of voices responding to what Edmond had said on that snowy night, determined to make the housing which would have encouraged him to say .... *There is a place in the world for me.*

Seven years of waiting had passed but the waiting was now over. When the opportunity to make a proposal came, PARC submitted a plan to transform the old rooming house into the kind of housing Edmond's memory inspired. It was referenced by safe house principles, to ensure the direct involvement of survivors in its development, its future staffing and the recovery support options it would provide to the community living there.

There were still many miles to travel. The building was a more dangerous wreck than ever. Rebuilding it presented many challenges with years of hard work still to come. But for Edmond's community, the submission of this proposal was a future already written. There was a feeling of conviction in the air. New housing that would heal was coming. It would be anchored by his name and story: Edmond Place

The watch Edmond had wanted, the seventh watch, was still on my wrist. The dial on that watch had made thousands of turns since the day of his death.

## **February 20, 2010**

It felt odd. This was going to be the last annual memorial before the construction of Edmond Place was finished. Before the next anniversary of his death rolled around, there would be 29 new homes built in his memory. Thirteen long years had passed to get to this day.



Earlier in the week I had printed off some large photos of Edmond Place to show how the work was coming along. The front, side and a rear lane views showed the changes in the building's appearance, the scaffolding and construction hoardings around the site. A big sign out front blared HOME. The photos were placed in an envelope and stuffed into my bag. I planned to pass those pictures around at the memorial. It was going to be a happy event.

I had a morning meeting to attend before the noon memorial start. For some reason I decided to clean out the back pack I carry. I am not sure why I did this because I usually like to carry a lot of work around with me. The only thing left in my empty bag was the envelope of 8x10 pictures of Edmond Place. I had a quick look to make sure they were there and closed it up.

I left early so I could walk to the meeting. I had only walked a short distance before I had to stop. In front of me, at the edge of the sidewalk, was a line of framed photographs. When I saw them I felt an odd physical sensation, a strange feeling of convergence with the past. I remembered finding the hammer. I bent down to look at them. They seemed to have been laid out in a sequence. Four frames with color images. The fifth and largest frame was empty.

The first one was a butterfly, a symbol of change and its inevitability, commented on by the Buddha who said the butterfly was special, because it did not know its own mother. The second image was a starfish lying on the ocean floor. The starfish is a symbol of direction but not the kind which the stars in the sky guide. It represents the direction of our unconscious mind and thoughts. The third frame held a waterfall, cascading over rocky ledges, the symbol of endurance and fortitude.

The last photograph was of a lotus. The lotus flower seed contains the tiny miniature leaves of the fully grown flower. This is one of the reasons it is revered as a symbol of rebirth and wisdom across many cultures. The lotus is born complete. It grows in muddy water, disappears each night below the surface and rises at dawn every morning.

I picked up the four framed photographs and put them into my empty bag. Then I began to walk away, leaving the empty frame lying on the street. But the further I walked the more uneasy I became. It felt like I was trying to wake up. I thought about the empty picture frame I had left behind. Why had I done that? I turned

around and went back. The empty frame still lay where I had left it. As I bent down I knew why I had been compelled to return for it.

I reached into my bag to pull out the pictures of Edmond Place housing and placed one in the empty frame. It was a perfect fit.