

Occupy Love  
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December 18, 2011 - UUCM

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Readings:

From the gospel of Matthew chapter 25 Jesus said: 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,[f] you did it to me.'

Frederick Douglass was born a slave and went on to become one of Lincoln's top advisors on abolition. He was a man who knew more about the dynamics of oppression than most of us. Hear his words:

“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”

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Unitarian theologian, Rev. James Luther Adams claimed, "One maintains responsibility for the collective, not, finally, because it is the law, but because of love."

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Three months ago yesterday a large group of protesters gathered in Lower Manhattan and called their protest “Occupy Wall Street.” Since that first day the Occupy Movement has expanded exponentially, like a match on dry grass. Now most major cities and innumerable small towns in the US and around the world have regular Occupy encampments, street protests and meetings. I know that I've seen many of you at the weekly Occupy Nevada County events.

If you only get your news from traditional media sources – newspapers, radio and TV – you will get one idea of the nature of these Occupy protesters. But if you do your own research, attend an Occupy event or talk with those who have, or if you explore independent news sources on the internet you will begin to see a very different picture. The differences are striking.

The media, especially Fox News, would have us believe the protest movement is an unorganized group of malcontents who get their kicks stirring up trouble by blocking roadways, shutting down ports, screaming obscenities, and throwing rocks and paint at the police. They would like for their viewers to dismiss these people as nothing more than an angry mob scene of dirty, lazy, pot-smoking hippies, deserving of the beatings and pepper spray the police have been "forced" to use.

A few weeks ago potential presidential candidate Newt Gingrich said of the protestors, “Go get a job after you take a bath.”

I will tell you that is not my experience. And it is not the experience of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues, many of whom have become vocal and visible figures of religious witness to the protests in cities and towns all across north America and posted blogs and videos about their experiences online.

I think the Occupy Movement is about a large segment of Americans awakening to the cruel reality that in our society money has become more important than people and the environment, and that now it is time to turn that around.

The Occupy Movement is not without its imperfections:

One of the main criticisms is that it is not organized, that the protesters are not making any clear and specific demands. This is true. The signs held aloft at the demonstrations range from anger about our dilapidated health care system to the degradation of the environment to Wall Street greed and the massive bank bailouts

It is true that there are no leaders. The next steps for each group are determined by the people themselves in democratic meetings called general assemblies. (Sound familiar?) There is a facilitator, and everyone has a chance to speak. I watched a couple of videos of these general assemblies in action and have heard first-hand accounts from several people including other Unitarian Universalist ministers. I have to say the level of democracy, the commitment to allowing everyone’s voice to be heard is remarkable. But the flip side is that sometimes the meetings get dominated by loud and unruly people who manage to derail momentum leaving many of the others feeling frustrated and annoyed.

I’m not sure how any specific demands can possibly surface from the Movement if the participants continue to resist the emergence of leaders to provide vision and galvanize people around a clear message.

Visiting the occupy encampment in San Francisco I saw what seemed like a cross between a refugee camp and a REI sidewalk sale. Tents of all sizes were set up along rows, most of them just inches away from their neighbors. Blue tarps were strung up with rope forming a sort of makeshift covered walkway between the tents. Prayer flags waved in the bay breeze. There were a few people milling about. Some men were sitting together smoking and playing cards with a couple of pit bulls lying at their feet.

Near the entrance was a bicycle repair area. A tent was set up to provide first aid, another as a kitchen. There were port-a-potties along one side of the encampment. A table stood in front of the tents as a sort of welcome station. On it was a daily schedule of events and leaning against the legs were several cardboard protest signs with large hand-scrawled letters. There were a couple of people

handing out fliers to the tourists and the business people walking from downtown to the ferry building.

I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. That was certainly not the looks of a movement capable of challenging the power of the wealthy Wall Street bankers.

Or was it?

At the very first Occupy Wall Street protest in lower Manhattan on September 17<sup>th</sup> these words were called out and repeated by the people: "We are here to inspire a nationwide movement. To challenge the status quo of the economic system that currently subverts both our government, and our social fabric."

If part of what the Occupy Movement is about is raising awareness about the injustices of our current economic and political system in the United States then it **is** working. People everywhere are now talking about how the wealthiest 1% of Americans are making money hand over fist and not paying their fair share of taxes while many of the rest of us, the 99%, struggle to make ends meet, find jobs, pay our medical bills and keep our homes. The middle class is undeniably shrinking.

Billionaire Warren Buffet got people's attention when he said that he and other extremely rich people should be taxed at a higher rate. He pointed out that something is wrong with the system when his secretary pays a higher rate of taxes than he does.

When young people are graduating from college with zero job prospects and tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, something is wrong with the system.

When millions of families are losing their homes because the Wall Street banks discovered they could make more money dealing in high risk loans, something is wrong with the system.

When corporations are able to donate large sums of money to support anti-immigrant legislation so they can make billions of dollars by detaining immigrants in private detention centers, something is wrong with the system.

When health insurance companies lobby against a single-payer health care system so they can continue to profit from denying sick people coverage, something is wrong with the system.

I believe the Occupy Wall Street movement has opened our eyes and ears and helped many people give voice to their pent up anger and frustrations.

My awareness has certainly been raised.

Many of us are learning now how the government deregulations of the last thirty years have played a role in bringing on this current economic mess.

Harvard law professor and policy advocate Elizabeth Warren explained in an interview that for the first 140 years in this country we'd have some kind of economic crisis every ten to fifteen years.

There is an unmistakable pattern. She says, “Then we hit the Great Depression. And coming out of the Great Depression we put three new regulations in place: Glass Steagall which divided our community banks from the Wall Street investment banks, FDIC insurance, and some SEC regulation on Wall Street so you can invest but they can’t cheat you too directly. For the next fifty years,” she goes on to say, “we have no bank failures, no major crises. It works! Then in the early 1980’s we go with the idea of getting rid of some of this regulation and what happens? Late 1980’s: Savings and Loan crisis; should have been a warning. Late 1990’s long term capital management, hedge funds; should have been a warning. Early 2000’s Enron; should have been a warning, but we let it go. And where did we end up? In the biggest crises since the Great Depression.”

The latest collective effort by the Occupy Movement was to Occupy the West Coast ports, shutting down shipping operations from Tacoma to San Diego last Monday. Reading the CNN coverage on Tuesday made my stomach turn. It made the protestors out to be a wholly unwelcome presence – even by the very workers whose plight they were trying to lift up.

But I know more of the truth because a colleague of mine who was present at the Oakland Port posted on his FaceBook page an open letter written by several port truck drivers. The letter thanks the Occupy protesters and goes on to detail the many ways the shipping companies have systematically disempowered the workers over the last twenty years. Truckers are no longer allowed to unionize or organize for fair treatment. They lost their employee status and protections and were recategorized as independent contractors. One example of what it has meant to have been stripped of their rights as employees is that they no longer have access to the employee bathrooms with running water at the ports. These men and women have resorted to carrying empty bottles in their trucks.

I had no idea.

But because of the Occupy Movement I now know that a Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports has been formed, and a bill was introduced earlier this year that would strengthen port truckers’ rights and make the shipping industry responsible for cleaner air.

The Occupy Movement is about shining a bright light on the fact that justice means different things for different people. Last month a woman in Mississippi was sentenced to three years in Federal prison for food stamp fraud. It seems she had a history of criminal drug offenses and in Mississippi that makes a person ineligible for food stamps. But desperate to feed her two kids, she lied on her application.

She ended up paying all the money back and according to the federal guidelines she should now have to serve two to eight months in jail followed by probation. But the judge in her case found a loophole that permitted him to serve her with up to five years. He said, "The defendant's criminal record is simply abominable .... She has been the beneficiary of government generosity in state court."

Now let's compare that with the fraud settlements for the CEOs of Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank. These people intentionally lied to their shareholders, and they are also recipients of government generosity – they have received billions of dollars in bailouts and government guarantees. And yet these men have not done jail time. In fact, most of these guys have kept their jobs.

So if you get busted for drugs it turns out you can make yourself ineligible to receive food stamps and go to prison for three years.

But like Citigroup, you can be a serial fraud offender, repeatedly dragged into court for the same offenses financially crippling millions of people, repeatedly ignore court injunctions to abstain from fraud, and this does not make you ineligible to receive \$45 billion in bailouts and other forms of federal assistance.

Something is wrong with the system.

The Occupy Movement is about igniting a sense of hope.

I've heard people in interviews at the Occupy protests say that they are no longer paralyzed with apathy and despair; they are now angry as well as hopeful. And I think anger is the only appropriate reaction when we realize what is going on. Anger in a social situation acts like pain within our bodies. It is a signal that something is wrong. Anger can be energizing. It helps motivate us and helps move us from apathy toward action.

We have to be careful though, I know that for me it is easy to submit to the seduction of self-righteous anger. It can feel so good and powerful to be angry, to know that I am right. But staying rooted in the anger is not productive. I'm a little worried that some folks in the Occupy Movement have become addicted to that feeling of being in the right, to the point of seeking out opportunities to clash with the police. To me that is missing the point. It is impossible to be creative when you stay mired in anger.

My sense though is that Americans are feeling more and more hopeful that change is possible, and are seeking creative responses. As the liberal Christian social justice activist Jim Wallis put it, "Occupiers are creating space for a new conversation about economic fairness...and it's a good conversation."

The question I keep coming back to is "How do we make meaningful and lasting change?"

Henry David Thoreau said, "For every thousand hacking at the branches of evil, there is one striking at the root." And I have no doubt that money in Washington is the root. What is called lobbying is essentially a system of legalized bribery.

It would be wonderful if the big bank CEOs hearts would, in one astonishing moment of recognition, one bright flash of compassion, grow two sizes like the Grinch's heart did in the story we heard earlier. But I don't think we should hold out for that Christmas miracle this year.

The bully on the playground isn't going to give you back your lunch money because you ask him to. What does he do? He says, "Make me!" He says, "What are you gonna do about it?" Power concedes nothing without demand. This is what the Wall Street CEOs are doing. They've had a multibillion dollar bailout from taxpayer money – yours and mine. And no one is holding them accountable. They are essentially saying, "What are you gonna do about it?"

Last January the Federal Supreme Court reversed a century of legal precedent and ruled that corporations have first amendment rights the same as a natural person, and that the government cannot impose restrictions on their political speech. This means that any attempt to regulate the influence of corporate money on politics infringes on the free speech of corporations. The bullies have rigged the system.

And what are we going to do about it?

It seems to me the only way to win against a much more powerful force is the same way we would confront a bully on the playground. We spread the word, shout out to our friends what is happening, and we slowly begin to outnumber the bully. And this is what the Occupy Movement is doing.

It is true that the Movement is leaderless and that there is no one unifying message. All the most successful social movements in our history have been focused on a specific issue and have had clear leadership which spoke with one voice. Time will tell if this intentional choice by the original organizers will ultimately cripple its power and effectiveness. But so far I'm seeing many localized direct actions which may or may not add up to real and lasting change.

Community groups are forming in around the country to organize in creative ways.

Tomorrow night there is a meeting in the Madeline Helling Public Library in Nevada City to strategize around the national effort to put forth an amendment to the constitution to end corporate personhood. A website for this particular effort says that similar meetings are taking place in town halls across the nation in the middle of December.

On Friday night our own Occupy Nevada County group made national news. Did any of you catch that? The Rachel Maddow show on MSNBC told the story about how a local group of the Occupy Movement "in a small town in the middle of nowhere" successfully postponed the eviction of a family in Nevada City.

Here's what happened: Last Wednesday night at 10pm, members of Occupy Nevada County's Foreclosure Work Group got a distress call from homeowner Stephen Merryweather who was facing imminent eviction at 6am the next morning. The Occupiers, not knowing entirely what to expect, arrived Thursday morning, well before the sun came up, in the lightly falling snow, to meet the people they had come to comfort and assist, and hear their stories. In talking to the bank representative they were able to appeal to his humanity and delay the eviction several weeks allowing the family to stay in the house through the holidays.

There is picture of our own Matt Wilson-Daley on the MSNBC website holding a sign.

Here is something I believe is true. The Occupy Movement is ultimately about love.

Underneath the anger is the deep soul knowledge that the injustices so many in our nation are currently living with are simply wrong. There is something wrong with the system itself. And we as a people of faith are called from this deep soul knowledge to help change the world.

We know in our bones that we are a part of the interdependent web of all life. We are inseparable one from another. What we do to the least of these we do to ourselves, to God, to Earth, to Life Itself.

I know too that creativity at times appears as chaos. And that chaos is frightening and uncomfortable. This Occupy Movement is radical, it is leaderless, and it is a lot of times chaotic. But I believe it is also grounded in the principles of truth and justice and direct action. The civil rights movement was also radical and sometimes frightening and chaotic.

It is easy to get diverted by the media's misconstruction of the events, the inner-city encampments and their clashes with police - all the chaos and the hoopla. But I think it is ultimately far more useful to focus on the very real issues that have inspired this movement.

Let us say that the Occupy Movement has initiated the conversation – a conversation long overdue. In its clumsy, chaotic and disorganized way it has highlighted fundamental failings and injustices that were being ignored or obfuscated by our corporate media and corrupt politicians.

As Goerge Packer has so eloquently put it, “The most important facts about our society, widely known but seldom mentioned, are now the first order of conversation....in this sense OWS has already done its work. No one should expect this protean flame to transform itself into a formal political organization with a savvy strategy for enacting reforms and winning elections. That is someone else's job.”<sup>1</sup>

Could that “someone else” be you? Could it be **us**? The Occupy movement has named the bully on the playground. Now it is calling out to its friends.

My friends, now is the time.

Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup> All the Angry People by George Packer. The New Yorker. December 5, 2011.