

Letter to Occupy,

July 27, 2012

by Gordon Fellman

The Occupy movement is extraordinary. It has raised local, national, and world consciousness about vast discontent, about failing national and global economic systems, and about the astounding gap in wealth, effectiveness, and life chances between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. This is the first time since the 1930s that social class has been front and center in our society for those paying attention.

The great American movements of the latter half of the twentieth century—civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, women, GLBTQ—took years to get off the ground. Thanks to the unforeseen consequence of globalization and the rocketing rise of social media, massive numbers of people have been able correctly to identify their lack of jobs, housing, affordable education, health care, and viable life aspirations with those of millions—no, billions!—of fellow global citizens. It did not take years to get all this going. It took days. In circumstances as diverse as those in Spain, Greece, Chile, Tunisia, Egypt, Wisconsin, Israel, and Quebec, the colossal outpouring of anger shaped by extreme passion and nonviolence took away the breath of billions of participants and observers and caused those in charge of the status quo to tremble mightily.

The Occupy action itself was brilliant. Its implicit claim was that public spaces belong as much to aroused, angry citizens as they do to Sunday strollers and people taking their workday lunch breaks. Tent cities with health centers, religious spaces, media desks, and even libraries could not after their first few days be ignored by mainstream media. A twenty-four-hour presence complete with colorful posters, sheltering of the homeless, rolling discussions about everything, and call and response nightly General Assemblies were a wonder to behold.

Of course it did not all go smoothly. Occupy evolved quickly as a super democratic and quasi-anarchic movement. It had no central leadership or platform or plan. Each city's Occupy grew in its own way. Waves were made, splashes were felt, and cries were heard.

Occupy began only in October. As winter approached, ideas were abundant for how to sustain the encampments, but before plans could be carried out, police forces, in what looked like a nationally coordinated maneuver, uprooted just about all the Occupy sites.

Stage One of Occupy, which grew like Topsy and commanded extensive attention, was over. Occupiers moved indoors. Planning continued. Actions like housing the homeless and challenging megabanks sprouted up in city after city. But the sporadic nature of the actions and the decentralization of it all diluted the original passion and the initial message. And—crucially—it shrunk the public awareness that is the oxygen of a movement like Occupy.

Occupy is not over, but Stage Two has not yet come together. I will now, audaciously, suggest a Stage Two that I am convinced would rock the world.

Where the Money Is

Any social movement that succeeds has to be based on an accurate analysis of conditions of discontent and of possible ways of overcoming them. Occupy, as I see it, draws anger from two sources. One source is personal situations. Many of the people behind Occupy in this country and in the corresponding movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, and Spain were responding at least in part to having found no work commensurate with their higher educational accomplishments. No work and crushing debts (especially in the United States which is unparalleled in sticking students with gigantic education loans) are a mighty combination.

The space between those personal discontents and awareness of ghastly inequities in the larger system was as thin as tissue paper. The unbridled opportunism and cynicism of just about all parts of the finance industry, the ruthless and cunning manipulation of naïve home buyers' dreams, the masterly posting of

banking personnel in key government positions who made sure that taxes of all of us were used to bail out not poor people holding the mortgage bag but the super-rich who appear to consider themselves beyond morality and above the law—all of this became rather suddenly apparent to large numbers of people. Their anger spread like wildfire, and Occupy erupted from the white-hot outrage and discontent.

It became clearer than ever that there is something mightily wrong with a society that spends hundreds of billions of dollars bailing out banks and automobile companies but claims to have too little money for health care (the United States is the only advanced country in the world that lets substantial numbers of health dollars go to insurance companies rather than health and has no national comprehensive health care system at all), education (the United States is way down globally in measures of success in education), reversing climate change (short sighted corporations making money off pollution succeed in making this most urgent impending environmental catastrophe into a mockery or just casting it into a gigantic Bin of Denial), housing (the disaster of sub-prime mortgages has thrown millions out of their homes with nowhere else to go), and more.

Indeed, a recent report suggests that upward mobility, also known as the American Dream—the chance to move forward in education, income, status, and life style—is now lower in the United States than in just about any other industrialized country.

The people who are responsible for this mess—corporations and politicians—are not stupid or evil. Rather they are acting the way their positions in society demand that they act. They are sucked into huge machines demanding that profit and power, not decency and compassion—rule, have always ruled, and shall rule until the end of time. They probably mean well, but their training is so severe and successful that it is very hard for them to pull away from it and see the world anew. And to discover how they could save us all—including themselves—from our impending devastation.

Those masters of finance, industry, and politics can find their way beyond the profit and power nexus, but this is among the greatest challenges facing those who seek a just society. The 1 percent have staked their all at maintaining the social order in its current form or a reactionary earlier form where they would have even more money and power than they do now. There is no greater challenge on earth than figuring out how to end the dominance of that 1 percent. They need some jolts, gigantic bolts from the blue, in order to be motivated to get off the money and power dime. Some of them understand this and will go with change. Others will fight it tooth and nail. The challenge is there either to persuade those others to move from greed thinking and values to social, planetary thinking and values or to wrest their power and wealth from them nonviolently. There is no greater challenge facing those who envision liberating, universal change and who commit themselves to working for it.

The first step is to recognize the claim that there is not enough money for housing, education, health care, and climate change reversal is simply a lie, one of the greatest deceptions of all time. It is a fraud motivated by short sightedness and assumptions made by mainstream economists rather than by stupidity or evil.

The 2008 crisis and its aftermath have led even some mainstream economists to question their assumptions that a market system works best when it is unconstrained and makes lots of money for investors. Alan Greenspan, who headed the Federal Reserve for almost twenty years and whose policies are heavily responsible for our economic catastrophe, has admitted that he had put too much faith in assumptions that the market system works best with few controls. If the economic profession is as shaken as it seems to be, this is surely the time to work with dazed, smart economists as well as those who knew the limits of free market thinking all along, to shift the economy toward human and planetary well-being and sustainable economies as alternative visions. These goals, given public airing, would surely satisfy everyone who decided to look at the larger survival picture rather than just the small-bore profit one.

I am beating around the bush (the burning one, that is). What I mean to say is that there is plenty of money right now for superb health care, outstanding education, housing for everyone, healthy food, infrastructure repair, and reversing global warming. There is abundant money, scads of money, reams of money, tons of money to meet all these needs. The claim that there is not enough money is a diversion, a tall

tale, a ruse meant to keep the big bucks in the hands and pockets of the 1 percent rather than spreading it around for the benefit of all. The case for cutting back on government supports for just about everything but war is, in short, one big lie.

It just happens that the endless piles of money needed for meeting real human needs are stored in places that some clever people have convinced most of us are sacred: tax loopholes, tax breaks for the 1 percent, and the military budget. It seems to me that Stage Two of Occupy has got to reveal to everyone that the money is there and to demand that it be freed for saving us all and our planet. Here's how to do it: through one gigantic universal political movement, crossing all boundaries and divided into three parts.

1. End Tax Loopholes

Demand that citizen overseers, working with attorneys general and tax officials and elected in contests not financed by the 1 percent, have powers of inquiry and enforcement to plug all loopholes that allow the 1 percent to pay less than their fair share of taxes.

Nobody can spend hundreds of millions of dollars, let alone billions. Or needs to try. Nobody truly earns those big bucks anyway. They gain wealth by inheriting a starter fortune upon which to build (think Romney here), and/or they make it by underpaying workers and outsourcing much of what would allow the United States to maintain a vibrant economy, and/or they make it by stripping workers of organizing rights and health care benefits and pensions, and/or they make it by hiring extremely clever if unprincipled lawyers who devise ways for them to pay little or no taxes, and/or they make it by promoting products that are unhealthy and even dangerous, and/or they make it by creating grotesque conditions for workers in third world countries who work at starvation wages at best, and/or they make it by buying politicians who rig laws in their favor in return for hefty financing of political campaigns. And so on.

I emphasize that the people who make oceans of money and dodge taxes should not be hated or scorned. Our problem is not with them but with the structures that permit and even encourage them to act ruthlessly in order to achieve the two prime goals of profit and power, the goals that all but drown alternative goals of sustainability, planet preservation, and decency and compassion for all.

2. Increase Tax Rates on the Rich

Demand a graduated income tax, returning in the United States to taxation levels of the Eisenhower era, which taxed the super rich beyond a certain point at levels up to 90 percent. It is a myth that low taxes on the rich stimulate the economy. They don't. The United States economy did far better when taxes on the very rich were high than it does now that taxes on them are low.

For a very detailed analysis of how returning to earlier tax rates would make a gigantic difference in our society's ability to solve problems, see "[Eisenhower Era Income Tax Rates on the Upper 10 percent of Families Would Immediately Erase the Federal Deficit.](#)"¹ Dwight Eisenhower was president of the United States from 1953 to 1961. He had earlier been Supreme Allied Commander of anti-Nazi forces in Europe during the Second World War.

The culture of the 1 percent obsesses over making ever more money and, most likely, appearing in the *Fortune Magazine* list of the 500 richest Americans. Money becomes a narcotic, an obsession that the rich can no more control than can any other addict manage their intake of alcohol or drugs. Insisting on ever more wealth is not an economic triumph; it is a tragic mania. The 1 percent have to insulate themselves from the feelings and realities of most of the 99 percent and therefore have really *to cut off their own humanity* in order to meet the rigorous demands of an economic system that has spun out of control.

¹ <http://www.cpegonline.org/workingpapers/CPEGWP2011-2.pdf>

Imagine the electric excitement of a political movement that would energize and thrill vast majorities in all countries where the 1 percent is able to enjoy tax dodges and ridiculously low taxes. Add to that the relief of enjoying the great amounts of money societies will have when those tax dodges and low tax rates end, the biggest pile of all, a mountain of money aching to be used for meeting real human and planetary needs rather than profit addictions:

3. Reduce Military Budgets Drastically

Although humans have suffered war for about 10,000 years, we are at a point in history where there are far better ways of resolving conflicts. Fully respecting the training, hopes, and sacrifices of warriors, I think they are especially well positioned to see that war is not the best way to make money for investors or to change whatever conditions wars are intended to change. The United States is now the premier war-making country in the world, *and its military budget is greater than those of all other countries combined*. The United States also sells tens of billions of dollars worth of war materiel to countries—many of them like Saudi Arabia on the anti-human rights far right. Billions of taxpayer money—*our* money—finance arms fairs that promote those weapons sales.

Heads of state classically try to show their masculinity by leading nations into war. They often find war a useful and necessary payback to war contractors (also called defense contractors) who help finance their election campaigns. They also use war as a way of distracting their populations' attention from their real problems by diverting anger at the institutions and injustices of their own society toward a manufactured enemy instead.

As war winds down, it will still be necessary for nations to maintain small militaries capable of defense. Offensive war should be defined by the International Court of Justice as a crime against humanity and punished by massive economic boycotts and ending of diplomatic relations with any state that initiates a war.

U.S. wars in particular, following the Second World War, have ended in nothing useful to anyone. The division of Korea remains a blight for everyone concerned. The war in Vietnam, spilling over into Cambodia and Laos, killed millions and gained nothing of consequence for the United States or any southeast Asian country. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have increased wealth for oil barons and war contractors but nothing else of use to anyone. Millions have died to keep the war machine going. Whether it ever was necessary, war is no longer so now.

In the last hundred years or so, a major alternative to war as a way to end conflicts has emerged and has grown considerably: nonviolence. Gandhi and King are the best-known masters of it, but by now there are countless examples of successes of nonviolence. As far back as 1905, the governments of Sweden and Norway were preparing to go to war. Troops were massed at the border between the two countries. Norwegians and Swedes in large numbers insisted there be no war. The governments acceded to that demand.

In just the last year, huge numbers of people in Tunisia and Egypt overthrew despised dictators nonviolently. Millions of students in Chile and Quebec brought those countries' higher education systems to a standstill with nonviolent calls for making high quality university education available to everyone who wants it. The effectiveness of Occupy itself has been tied very closely to its nonviolent behaviors. On those occasions when violence was employed, nothing good came of it. This is the time in history to move from violence to nonviolence. Much is known by now about how to do this. The ideas and the training are there for the asking.

Except for the very few countries without a military (Costa Rica is the best known of these), this is the time to campaign for reducing military budgets by half over a three-year period and then by half of what remains, over the following three year period. The money harvested from these campaigns should be used for meeting real human needs for jobs, education, housing, health care, and more and for reversing climate

change to the extent that that is possible. There is enough money for all of this. It is in raising taxes on the 1 percent, ending tax loopholes for all corporations and individuals, and drastically reducing military budgets.

Campaign Financing and Democracy

There should be no private money in any elections. Governments should allocate the same amount of money to everyone running for office. Corporations, unions, and private wealthy persons should be forbidden to contribute even a dollar to political campaigns.

One of the oddest judicial decisions of our time or any other is the bizarre notion that money is a form of free speech. It is said that “money talks,” but it really doesn’t. The person with the money does the talking, and the money short circuits persuasion, which is the main technique for using free speech in politics.

The ordinary person who gives 50 dollars to a politician’s campaign is not equal to the very rich person who puts in 10 million dollars. *Money is not speech*. Rather, it is a form of bribe, pressure, intimidation, coercion, seduction. It is a way for very rich people—those in the 1 percent—actually to buy politicians who are then obligated to make political decisions in favor of those who paid them to get into office. In a democracy, words are free speech. Money is a tool for manipulating. Money is not free speech; it corrupts free speech.

To Vote or Not to Vote in 2012

Barack Obama may be a good campaigner, but he has disappointed so many of his 2008 enthusiasts that countless of them are most likely to decide, in anger or seeming indifference, not to vote in 2012 or at least not to urge others to vote for Obama. Many of you, whose employment or lack of it has been hit so hard by the great recession, are surely among those who will condemn the entire United States party system as hopelessly corrupt in its genuflecting endlessly to the 1 percent and bowing to their ultimatums.

Well, as corrupt and disappointing as our political system is, it is simply not true that there are no differences between the two major parties. My late brother used to say that one has to vote Democratic if for no other reason than that Democratic presidents appoint far better, fairer, more decent, and compassionate judges than Republican presidents do. Consider that in terms of Supreme Court appointments. George W. Bush was appointed president by a 5-4 Republican Supreme Court majority whose written decision defending that action is considered by countless lawyers including some on the right to be the worst written Supreme Court decision they have ever read. Consider that that same 5-4 Republican-appointed majority gave our electoral system to the 1 percent in the Citizens United decision defining money as a form of free speech and asking for no accountability whatsoever from rich donors to campaigns.

But it potentially will get worse than that. Those of you considering not to vote in the 2012 presidential elections, listen to this: Obama or Romney, whichever is elected, will likely appoint one or more members to the Supreme Court. If Romney appoints, then the resulting Supreme Court will almost certainly overturn *Roe v. Wade*. When women lose the right of choice, when they return to coat hanger abortions and back alley butcher abortionists, when those women are degraded and numbers of them die, how are you going to tell your friends—and yourself—that it did not make any difference who became president?

When the Supreme Court validates overturning rights to free speech and separation of religion and state and makes legal the further brutalization of workers and the unemployed, when the Supreme Court upholds the travesties of justice fueled by a privatized prison service in whose interest it is to keep prisons filled and spend as little as possible maintaining them, when the Supreme Court misses no opportunity to turn the nation over completely to the corporations and billionaires to live obscenely high off the hog while tens of millions of their fellow citizen live lives of quiet desperation—then tell me it did not make any difference who became president in 2012.

Romney promises if elected to overturn our new health care system, which is far better than what preceded it, his first day in office. He promises to let the Keystone pipeline go forth that will according to environmentalists do untold damage to water systems and land from North Dakota to the Gulf. In thrall to the most reactionary elements of the Republican Party, which have taken over his rhetoric and perhaps his mind as well, he will likely move to make contraception illegal and to overturn laws allowing gays to marry. If he is elected because you refused to vote for Obama, who would do none of those things just listed—then tell me it did not make any difference who became president in 2012.

If Obama is re-elected, it will be the task of all people seeking to end the abuses of our current system at last to hold his feet to the fire. Demands to fix our society and fix our planet will be best served by freeing up hundreds of billions of dollars wasted on military expenditures including maintaining around 1000 United States military bases around the world and preparing for endless wars rather than learning how to live in peace. And those demands will best be met by denying corporations and the very, very wealthy in that 1 percent the opportunity to take advantage of tax dodges and refuse to pay taxes they are supposed to pay and ought graciously even if reluctantly to pay. Those demands will best be met when the 1 percent acquiesce to the quite reasonable insistence that they pay much higher rates of taxes just as they did half a century ago.

The 1 Percent Is Not Homogeneous

The 99 percent/1 percent formulation promoted by Occupy is brilliant. Not since the 1930s, when unions were strong and there were serious political parties challenging “free market” thinking, has social class—the study of the hows and whys of the haves and the have-nots—been on the front burner in United States society. But now it is, and the 99/1 vocabulary is now part of common discourse.

As our society moves ahead in confronting its monumental problems, though, it is useful to move past stark binaries like 99 percent *versus* 1 percent. That formulation, implicit or explicit in much of what Occupy has analyzed so far, unfortunately sets the stage for the 1 percent, through control of police forces, media, education, and politics, to find ways to intimidate and subvert Occupy. It also assumes, incorrectly, that everyone in the 1 percent thinks and acts just like everyone else in the 1 percent.

That is not true.

There are numbers of millionaires and billionaires who are not only sympathetic to Occupy but who call for higher taxes on themselves and their fellow 1 percent'ers. These more visionary and understanding members of the 1 percent—Warren Buffett is the best known of them—know about global warming, they know about intolerable greed and corruption, they know no one is entitled to endless billions, and they know about the outrages and injustices of the system of which they are a part.

And they are most probably movable. The point is not to hate the 1 percent or scream at them but to invite them into the analyses and strategizing necessary to save us all. There are in that 1 percent people who clearly understand the collapse of morality and decency and justice in our society and who would, if asked, most likely join forces with the 99 percent in bringing about the changes that would benefit everyone.

Actions for Major Change

The time is ripe for a bold move to capture the imaginations of the 99 percent and of those parts of the 1 percent already leaning in that direction. It will be necessary and possible to persuade as much as possible of the 1 percent that working on everyone's behalf is more in their interest than is the profit-power nexus that they have been taught trumps everything else on earth. We could see as a goal an eventual combining of the 99 percent and the 1 percent to make a society where 100 percent agree to bend their talents and hearts to building a world of justice, sustainability, and survival of our planet itself.

Sure it's a pipe dream. So was the demise of cannibalism. So was the end of human sacrifice. So was the release from slavery. So was religious freedom. So was free speech. So was the civil rights movement. So was the anti-Vietnam War movement. So was the women's movement. So was the LGBTQ movement.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident." And so it will be with the world's first global political movement, to return the wealth of a society to all its people to be used for the benefit of everyone. That idea was ridiculed for at least a century and a half. Now we are in Schopenhauer's stage two, when the idea is violently opposed. We can and must hold on long enough for the idea to become accepted as self-evident. That will require a huge amount of work. Here is how it can be done:

1. *Redesign Occupy as a global (not national) movement.* Even though the three sources of plenty of money are all but obviously apparent in the US, all or nearly all countries are structured with a 1 percent that maintains more than its fair share of wealth by avoiding paying at full tax rates and taking advantage of tax loopholes. Except for Costa Rica and a few small island countries, all nation-states spend far more on defense than is in any conceivable way necessary. Helping the super-rich to par with funds they do not need joins with lowering military spending to create funds needed to meet everyone's real human needs. Or b) Work to transform the Democratic Party from within. The Tea Party has done this to the Republican Party. It can be argued that it is time now for a progressive counterpart. Or work on both a) and b).
2. *Embrace nonviolence as the main method of working for social change.* Local chapters of the global movement could engage in comprehensive trainings in the theory and numerous techniques of civil disobedience and other forms of nonviolence. Countless nonviolence successes would be studied carefully as would failures. Change would proceed with respect for everyone, including opponents.
3. *Oppose cruel structures, not people.* It was tempting in the sixties as at most times in history to identify an "enemy" and demonize it. This practice is so familiar that it is all but automatic for countless activists and bystanders alike on the left as well as on the right. The problems we face are in the *structures* that train people to behave cruelly far more than in the people themselves, for if the people who abuse are replaced in structures that remain the same, the abuse will be repeated. It is time to replace hierarchical structures, and their power wielded from the top down, with horizontal structures, where people learn to identify and solve problems *together*. This is what some people call the difference between *power over* and *power with*.
4. *Design a slogan that will crystallize the movement and its vision.* "Our planet, ourselves" might be one possibility. "Sustain our planet, sustain our lives" is another. "Wealth belongs to all." "Compassion and joy trump profit and power." "Share power, save planet." "We are all in this together." The possibilities are endless.
5. *Work for change cooperatively.* Fighting within Occupy and any other change groups reflects old patterns of assuming that one has to "win" rather than that one has to solve problems in community. For some months, countless Occupy encampments explored democratic decision making and did it with a clear sense of community. Much of that fell apart eventually. Anger out of control, insistence on having one's way, reluctance to look inward to learn what interferes with acting calmly and effectively, and ties to this generation's versions of "political correctness" have all interfered with the further development of Occupy.

It is hard to take all this into account. But positive social change does not come from only wishing for it or spending just a few months on it. There is no greater task for any of us/all of us than figuring out how to survive the political and environmental crises of this era. This is infinitely more challenging than making money and living comfortably. As successful change comes, it will be discovered that working with

others for genuine human dignity and liberation and environmental sustainability is infinitely more rewarding, too.

Gordon Fellman is a sociology professor and chair of Peace, Conflict, and Coexistence Studies at Brandeis University.

For information about his book *Rambo and the Dalai Lama*, visit <http://people.brandeis.edu/~fellman>.

Related Articles

- The Camp Is the World: Connecting the Occupy Movements and the Spanish May 15th Movement by Luis Moreno-Caballud and Marina Sitrin – <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/the-camp-is-the-world-connecting-the-occupy-movements-and-the-spanish-may-15th-movement>
- Oakland's General Strike and the Mobilizing Power of the Occupy Movement by Sam Ross-Brown - <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/oaklands-general-strike-and-the-mobilizing-power-of-the-occupy-movement>
- Praying with Our Feet at Occupy Oakland by Michael Lerner - <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/praying-with-our-feet-at-occupy-oakland>
- Read the NSP's *Occupy* brochure by Michael Lerner – <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/read-the-nsp-occupy-brochure>
- Nonviolence vs. "Diversity of Tactics" in the Occupy Movement - by Sean O'Brien, Phil Lawson, Matthew Edwards, Kazu Haga, Melissa Merin, Josh Shepherd, Paolo, and Starhawk - <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/nonviolence-vs-diversity-of-tactics-in-the-occupy-movement>