

Occupy Wall Street: The Return of Mr. Jones



The Occupy Wall Street movement has arrived, just in time for the fall colors. It's one of those moments that makes us old hippies nostalgic. We kind of wonder what Abbie Hoffman might have made of the energy, the drive and the lovely messiness of this new, squalling child.

40-some years ago, the game was played a little differently. The agitators had read Marshall McLuhan and tried to apply some of his ideas. Some of them worked, and some didn't. They also learned a few things from the industrial complex they fought against: how to create a core message, frame it for hot and cool media, and organize people in a concerted fashion.

It may have been the organization that did them in. The social psychology of any group can render it vulnerable. Not so much to the outside forces that oppose it, but to the internal pressures and to human nature itself. Somewhere between the Id and the Ego, that old power demon emerges to defeat the higher ideals of the Superego, and some kind of hierarchy takes hold.

The call for an agenda, and for some type of organization in the Occupy movement, reveals our collective weakness. Faced with the difficult task of democracy, we fear the chaos of a jury with no bench, the chorus of many voices singing in different keys. Maslow would have drawn our attention to what he called the "belonging needs" we all carry around.

When faced with this crowd on the street, our tribal instincts make us ask which side of the barrier we should stand on. We're all, by definition, part of that 99% the Occupy movement claims as their own (if you're part of that 1%, you're probably not reading this). The art of this new strategy is in its appeal to our patriotism. Not the flag waving kind, but the pull to acknowledge that we are all in this mess together.

As others have pointed out, we're confronted with some old problems. What to do when the few find a way to grab way too much and then try to protect it with politics. The solutions will require people to act together, not as an angry mob, but as a coalition of neighbors and citizens. It's as if we are re-forming the republic, trying to find a way to reclaim the right to self-governance on a larger scale. We gave it up, in some sense. Distracted by the modern bright lights and blinded by the complexity of too many rules, we let it slip away.

The first step, after leaving the comfort of the couch, may be to recognize that it won't be easy, or fast, or both. The machinery of our modern times is broken, and there is no manual to follow. We begin with the challenge of mutual recognition, the foundation for consensus. Then, we have to let go of the baggage we carry from childhood: we don't really need permission to fix what's broken. Then, we have to read. The laws of the land are written down, or they were before we tried letting the market police itself.

Pick a smaller part, or it will bury you. And then look at the bigger picture. Work up and down the ladder of abstraction until you can see where it may have gone wrong. Talk to the members of the coalition, to the others in the 99, and propose something that will level the playing field, even if it means the pie may get a little smaller at first. Most of us could get by on a little less while we find a way for everyone to make it on their own merits.

It will feel strange at first. Reaching across that barrier and convincing your fellow citizen that there must be a better way. And it's up to us to make it happen. It's an old thing, and one of those crazy old poets captured it:



You hand in your ticket
And you go watch the geek
Who immediately walks up to you
When he hears you speak
And says, "How does it feel
To be such a freak?"
And you say, "Impossible"
As he hands you a bone.

And something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?

Bob Dylan, Ballad of a Thin Man

Don't be afraid to make the first gesture.
We all have a stake in this movement, even Mr. Jones.

Steven Peterson, 2011