Occupying Our Time

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
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When you walk out of South Station in Boston, you see the Rose Kennedy Greenway stretching out in front of you where the old elevated highway used to be, and the first segment of that you come to is a marble plaza called Dewey Square. You are at the edges of the Financial District, and the area is ringed with skyscrapers of impressive design. Everything is shiny – glass, granite, steel – and hard-edged. But when you cross the street from the station into Dewey Square, you enter a very different world, the world of Occupy Boston.

There is a circle of young people sitting on the ground having a discussion about discussions, how to make sure everyone is heard, how to reach consensus.
A few feet further on, a standing crowd is gathered around a young man on a ladder with a bullhorn, and he is asking the crowd for suggestions on a topic to discuss and a black man comes forwards with a tale of being accosted by a drunken white a couple of nights before, and the drunk was using racial slurs and the speaker told us how he stifled his normal reactions because he realized the fellow was drunk. A few feet further on was the beginning of the tent city, probably 40 or 50 normal camping tents, most of them closed up, pitched very close together. At the head of the tents was a food tent, and I went there and got a plate of hot pasta that was free for the asking, though I made a donation.

Was this the Beloved Community or the Kingdom of Heaven? It was a bit like a music festival, but there was no music and we were not in a grassy field. Most of the people were under 30, though there was a sprinkling of grey hairs. Some were actively holding up signs so the traffic could see, but most seemed at ease, trying to teach and learn from each other.

It was odd because most of us were passing though, but I knew that some of these people were living here. They had carved out a little residential zoning in the midst of the highest commercial real estate in the city. And they were doing exactly what their counterparts in Wall Street and dozens of other sites around the country were doing. They were more engaged in being than doing.

They recall the Diggers in 17th Century England, making their point about property and wealth by claiming a bit of land right in the middle of town and saying, “this is common land.” But the Diggers wanted to do away with all private property, and I don’t think that many of the occupiers have that aim.

It’s worth pointing out that there have been other “occupy” movements in America.

During the recession of 1894, Coxey's Army of unemployed Midwestern men descended on Washington' some 6,000 of them camped out on a farm in Maryland. They were populists angered by the policies of the Cleveland Administration, which was cozy with the robber barons of the time. Frank Baum may have been inspired by Coxey's Army in writing the Wizard of Oz a few years later.

A much larger group, the Bonus Army, came to Washington in 1932; these were about 17,000 World War I vets trying to claim the bonuses that had been voted for them. They set up a tent city in the Anacostia section of the District of Columbia, but the Hoover administration cleared them out -- then the voters cleared out the Hoover administration. When the same demonstrators came back early in Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, he invited the leaders in for tea.

Some of you may remember that Martin Luther King and his Southern Christina Leadership Conference planned a Poor People's Campaign to march on Washington in 1968 to highlight the growing income inequality in this country. King was assassinated but the organizers went ahead with the plans, and a tent encampment called Resurrection City sprouted on the national mall for a few weeks. But the call for an economic bill of rights was overshadowed by the other events of that election year and went nowhere.

So there is a history of occupation movements in this country, but each is tied to the issues of its time. What are the issues that our occupiers are trying to highlight?

The sorry state of our country which gives rise to this movement is aptly summarized in a remarkable talk given by Bill Moyers in October to the party celebrating the 40th birthday of Public Citizen, and reprinted in this week's issue of the Nation (thank you, Betsy!)[1]. It is so well-researched and written that I will quote extensively from it here.

For forty years, Moyers reminds us, there has been a quiet but effective coordinated strategy by the big business interests in this country to have government respond to their interests. It begins with a memo written by a lawyer named Lewis Powell for his friends at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Powell was on the board of Phillip Morris which, like all tobacco companies, was fighting to keep government regulations off its back so it could continue to deal death. The Nixon Administration had acceded to the demands of environmentalists after the first Earth Day, and Powell was scared that this portended greater regulation in the future.

"Fight back and fight back hard, [Powell] urged his compatriots. Build a

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[1] "How Wall Street Occupied America" by Bill Moyers
https://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/11/04?print

movement. Set speakers loose across the country. Take on prominent institutions of public opinion—especially the universities, the media and the courts. Keep television programs 'monitored the same way textbooks should be kept under constant surveillance.' And above all, recognize that political power must be 'assiduously [sic] cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination' and 'without embarrassment.'

Moyers continues:

"Powell imagined the Chamber of Commerce as a council of war. Since business executives had 'little stomach for hard-nosed contest with their critics' and 'little skill in effective intellectual and philosophical debate,' they should create think tanks, legal foundations and front groups of every stripe. These groups could, he said, be aligned into a united front through 'careful long-range planning and implementation…consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and united organizations.'

The memo came to light as Powell was nominated to the Supreme Court, but its advice had already taken hold. The Chamber of Commerce mobilized swiftly. Here's how Moyers describes it:

"Within two years the board of the Chamber of Commerce had formed a task force of forty business executives—from US Steel, GE, GM, Phillips Petroleum, 3M, Amway, and ABC and CBS (two media companies, we should note). Their assignment was to coordinate the crusade, put Powell's recommendations into effect and push the corporate agenda. Powell had set in motion a revolt of the rich. As historian Kim Phillips-Fein subsequently wrote, 'Many who read the memo cited it afterward as inspiration for their political choices.'"

"They chose swiftly. .... In 1971 only 175 firms had registered lobbyists in the capital; by 1982 nearly 2,500 did. Corporate PACs increased from fewer than 300 in 1976 to more than 1,200 by the mid-'80s. From Powell's impetus came the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Manhattan Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy (precursor to what we now know as Americans for Prosperity) and other organizations united in pushing back against political equality and shared prosperity. They triggered an economic transformation that would in time

touch every aspect of our lives."

Now let me ask you to look at the UU principles on the back of your order of service. Our Second UU principle calls us to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations and our fifth principle calls us to promote the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. Both of these principles are upset by a system where the rich control politicians and administrators to bend to their private interests.

And that is what has happened. Moyers goes on to say that the wealthy

> "were not content with their wealth just to buy more homes, more cars, more planes, more vacations and more gizmos than anyone else. They were determined to buy more democracy than anyone else. And they succeeded beyond their expectations. After their forty-year 'veritable crusade' against our institutions, laws and regulations—against the ideas, norms and beliefs that helped to create America's iconic middle class—the Gilded Age is back with a vengeance."

Or as Garry Trudeau's Doonesbury aptly described today's politics, a fox in every henhouse.

What we have seen is the disappearance of the commons, the ignoring of the public interest in favor of the private. But the public interest, public goods and services, are what has made this country.

Public roads, public bridges, public airports, public schools, sewer systems, courts, police, fire and emergency medical services, harbors and ports – oil of these public supports of our common lives is what allows people to make money in private enterprise. And they are essential to the American dream, the ladder of opportunity by which people born into poverty are not locked there forever.

Now all of that is under attack, and since the election of 2010, the attack has become more naked. The recession of 2008 hit state and local governments particularly hard, but the political forces dominating the state and federal governments since the Tea Party became active have prevented much relief from going to state and local sectors, with the result that unemployment in the public sector – the teachers, police and firemen – is far worse than in the private sector.

But this was the plan; since 1980, many in this country had bought the line that government was the problem. In 2008, the economy was brought to the edge of ruin by private speculators, and no one was big enough to save it but the government. You would think that might have caused some soul-searching among those who thought government the source of all evil, but in fact it redoubled their belief, and they have, at the state and local level, set out to prove how bad government is by systematically starving it.

The reason I went to Boston yesterday was not to hang out at Occupy Boston, but to hear former UUA President John Buehrens give a lecture at Kings Chapel entitled "To be an Effective Justice-Seeking people." The title and speaker together had been enough to get me to endure a 4-hour bus ride up and back; and it was well worth my time. For as Moyers has said, we have witnessed an effective campaign for forty years to decimate the public sector, to erode our common stake. Can we, as religious people, mount an equally effective campaign to restore it?

That is a huge question, and Buehrens and the other two speakers yesterday tended to shy way from proposing big solutions. It is not for religious bodies to speak of whether capitalism is better than socialism or what balance of private/public ownership of land and other productive assets is the best.

What we are called to do is bear witness to the suffering, to pose the questions, and to engage in dialogue about them. Nate Walker, the UU minister from Philadelphia who was one of the respondents to Buehrens' talk yesterday, has done that beautifully. After his congregation had studied ethical eating for a few months, he preached a sermon about the morality of the practices of the food giant Monsanto and published the sermon on the web. He was then contacted by the board of Monsanto and invited to dialogue with them, and he went out to St. Louis to meet with the board, and he has now challenged them to adopt a code of ethics that says they will do no harm.

This kind of engagement and dialogue serves as a model for justice seeking. Remember that in our second principle, we covenant to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We need all three. We are confronted with an injustice: the top 1% of income earners are getting richer while the bottom 99% are getting poorer. Moreover, the 1% have captured enough of the government so that they simultaneously insist on a plan for lowering the deficit and refuse to raise taxes on themselves in order to lower it, simultaneously insisting on spending cuts to programs affecting the common welfare and refusing cuts in the defense budget. There is injustice aplenty.

But we need to have equity in dealing with this injustice. The Occupy communities across the nation are showing us a thing or two about decision-making. They have evolved a process they call horizontal decision-making where every voice is heard, and they stay with the issue until they have reached some sort of consensus. I have not seen this personally, though I have seen videos about it posted on the Internet. It seems a cumbersome decision-making process, but maybe, as the chant says, this is what democracy looks like.

But the third element here is compassion. I think this value requires us to go about seeking justice without demonizing anyone. This is a tall order. The recklessness and greed of the traders of subprime mortgages, derivatives and credit default swaps did not just hurt them,

but has hurt us all, whether we are retirees trying to live on less after the devaluation of our portfolio, or a recent college graduate up to her ears in debt who can't find a job.

This may and should make us mad, but it is counterproductive for that anger to be channeled into hatred. We are called into respectful engagement. We need to keep in mind the humanity of all of those involved in the system, and exercise a little humility about our own analysis or the search of solutions.

It brings to mind a photo posted on Facebook of an occupy sign that read "What Do We Want? Respectful Discourse. When Do We Want it? Now would be agreeable to me, but I'm interested in your opinion." Can a movement which is founded in kindness and respectful discourse make headway against an aggressive campaign to promote private interests?

Yes, because our requirement of compassion doesn't mean we can't bear witness. We need to counter the notion that there are private realms where one can go about making money without affecting anyone else. We can tell the story of the lifeboat full of passengers saved from a sinking ship, and the boy who was caught trying to drill a hole in the bottom. When the passengers said, "what are you doing?" he replied, "hey it's Ok, I'm only doing it under my seat." We have a duty to point our that the common interest, the public interest, is more important than the private.

This is why UU ministers and lay people are getting involved in these movements all over the country. Here on the Cape, many from the Falmouth UU congregation have been regulars in that town's demonstrations, and the church itself is renting space to Occupy Falmouth for a social dinner next week. I have attended two demonstrations and two common meetings in Hyannis, and at the last of these on Friday I talked to a couple from Harwich who said a group is organizing in the Orleans/Brewster/Harwich area. I said if they needed a space to meet, I would be glad to talk to the Board here about it.

Because of the age demographics of Cape Cod, we are unlikely to see any tent cities here, and so Occupy Cape Cod is a bit of a misnomer. What we are occupying is our time, and we need to consider how we can best occupy our time to meet the challenge posed by this well-financed campaign of the last forty years to tear down the common interest and promote the private interests.

As you ponder that, I leave you with the words of Si Kahn from the song I sung earlier:

When those who work for profit
Try to tear this country down
All we have to stand on is our common ground
And it's only we can find
Our way back home from here

We are custodians of all that we hold dear.
Amen.