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Occupy Wall Street: No Demand is Big Enough

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Feature

This week we take a break from the serialization of Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition [1] to present an article inspired by the protests across the country connected to #occupywallstreet [2]. We will resume with Chapter 13 of Sacred Economics next Thursday.

Looking out upon the withered American Dream, many of us feel a deep sense of betrayal. Unemployment, financial insecurity, and lifelong enslavement to debt are just the tip of the iceberg. We don't want to merely fix the growth machine and bring profit and product to every corner of the earth. We want to fundamentally change the course of civilization. For the American Dream betrayed even those who achieved it, lonely in their overtime careers and their McMansions, narcotized to the ongoing ruination of nature and culture but aching because of it, endlessly consuming and accumulating to quell the insistent voice, "I wasn't put here on earth to sell product." "I wasn't put here on earth to increase market share." "I wasn't put here on earth to make numbers grow."

We protest not only at our exclusion from the American Dream; we protest at its bleakness. If it cannot include everyone on earth, every ecosystem and bioregion, every people and culture in its richness; if the wealth of one must be the debt of another; if it entails sweatshops and underclasses and fracking and all the rest of the ugliness our system has created, then we want none of it.

No one deserves to live in a world built upon the degradation of human beings, forests, waters, and the rest of our living planet. Speaking to our brethren on Wall Street, no one deserves to spend their lives playing with numbers while the world burns. Ultimately, we are protesting not only on behalf of the 99% left behind, but on behalf of the 1% as well. We have no enemies. We want everyone to wake up to the beauty of what we can create.

Occupy Wall Street has been criticized for its lack of clear demands, but how do we issue demands, when what we really want is nothing less than the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible? No demand is big enough. We could make lists of demands for new public policies: tax the wealthy, raise the minimum wage, protect the environment, end the wars, regulate the banks. While we know these are positive steps, they aren't quite what motivated people to occupy Wall Street. What needs attention is something deeper: the power structures, ideologies, and institutions that prevented these steps from being taken years ago; indeed, that made these steps even necessary. Our leaders are beholden to impersonal forces, such as that of money, that compel them to do what no sane human being would choose. Disconnected from the actual effects of their policies, they live in a world of insincerity and pretense. It is time to bring a countervailing force to bear, and not just a force but a call. Our message is, "Stop pretending. You know what to do. Start doing it." Occupy Wall Street is about exposing the truth. We can trust its power. When a policeman pepper sprays helpless women, we don't beat him up and scare him into not doing it again; we show the world. Much worse than pepper spray is being perpetrated on our planet in service of money. Let us allow nothing happening on earth to be hidden.

If politicians are disconnected from the real world of human suffering and ecosystem collapse, all the more disconnected are the financial wizards of Wall Street. Behind their computer screens, they occupy a world of pure symbol, manipulating numbers and computer bits. Occupy Wall Street punctures their bubble of pretense as well, reconnects them with the human consequences of the god they serve, and perhaps with their own consciences and humanity too. Only in a hallucination could someone imagine that the unsustainable can last forever; in puncturing their bubble, we remind them that the money game is nearing its end. It can be perpetuated for a while longer, perhaps, but only at great and growing cost. We, the 99%, are paying that cost right now, and as the environment and the social fabric decay, the 1% will soon feel it too. We want those who operate and serve the financial system to wake up and see before it is too late.

We can also point out to them that they sooner or later they will have no choice. The god they serve, the financial system, is a dying god. Reading various insider financial websites, I perceive that the authorities are flailing, panicking, desperately implementing solutions they themselves know are temporary just to kick the problem down the road a few years or a few months. The strategy of lending even

more money to a debtor who cannot pay his debts is doomed, its eventual failure a mathematical certainty. Like all our institutions of exponential growth, it is unsustainable. Once you have stripped the debtor of all assets - home equity, savings, pension - and turned every last dollar of his or her disposable income toward debt service, once you have forced the debtor into austerity and laid claim even to his future income (or in the case of nations, tax revenues), then there is nothing left to take. We are nearing that point, the point of peak debt. The money machine, ever hungry, seeks to liquidate whatever scraps remain of the natural commons and social equity to reignite economic growth. If GDP rises, so does our ability to service debt. But is growth really what we want? Can we really cheer an increase in housing starts, when there are 19 million vacant housing units on the market already? Can we really applaud a new oil field, when the atmosphere is past the limit of how much waste it can absorb? Is *more stuff* really what the world needs right now? Or can we envision a world instead with more play and less work, more sharing and less buying, more public space and less indoors, more nature and less product?

So far, government policy has been to try somehow to keep the debts on the books, but every debt bubble in history ultimately collapses; ours is no different. The question is, how much misery will we endure, and how much will we inflict, before we succumb to the inevitable? And secondly, how can we make a gentle, non-violent transition to a steady-state or degrowth world? Too many revolutions before us have succeeded only to institute a different but more horrible version of the very thing they overthrew. We look to a different kind of revolution. At risk of revealing the stars in my eyes, let me call it a revolution of love.

What else but love would motivate any person to abandon the quest to maximize rational self-interest? Love, the felt experience of connection to other beings, contradicts the laws of economics as we know them. Ultimately, we want to create a money system, and an economy, that is the ally not the enemy of love. We don't want to forever fight the money power to create good in the world; we want to change the money power so that we don't need to fight it. I will not in this essay describe my vision - one of many - of a money system aligned with the good in all of us. I will only say that such a shift can only happen atop an even deeper shift, a transformation of human consciousness. Happily, just such a transformation is underway today. We see it in anyone who had dedicated their lives to serving, healing, and protecting other beings: people, cultures, whales, children, ecosystems, the waters, the forests, the planet.

In the ecological age, we are beginning to understand that we are connected beings, that the welfare of any species or people is aligned with our own. Our money system is inconsistent with this understanding, which is dawning among all 100 percent of us, each in a different way. I think the ultimate purpose of Occupy Wall Street, or the great archetype it taps into, is the revolution of love. If the 99%

defeat the 1%, they will like the Bolsheviks ultimately create a new 1% in their place. So let us not defeat them; let us open them and invite them to join us.

If Occupy Wall Street has a demand, it should be this: wake up! The game is nearly over. Jump ship while there is still time. In my work I meet many people of wealth who have done that, exiting the money game and devoting their time to giving away money as beautifully as they can. And I meet many more people who have the skills and good fortune to earn wealth if they wanted to, but who likewise refuse to participate in the money game. So if I sound idealistic, keep in mind that many people have had a change of heart already.

Some might call these ideas impractical (though I think that nothing other than a change of heart is practical), and seek to issue concrete demands. Unfortunately, though no demand is big enough, yet equally any demand we would care to make is also too big. Everything we want is on the very margin of mainstream political discourse, or outside it altogether. For example, it might be within the range of respectable policy options to tighten standards on industrial-scale confinement meat operations; but how about ending the practice completely? Congress wrangles about whether or not to reduce troop levels by a few thousand here and there, but what about ending the garrisoning of the planet? Any demand that we could make that is within the realm of political reality is too small. Any demand we could make that reflects what we truly want is politically unrealistic.

Shall we fight hard for something we don't even want? It is fine to make demands, but the movement cannot get hung up on them, much less on practicality, because any remotely achievable demand is far less than what our planet needs. "Practical" is not an option. We must seek the extraordinary.

We might come up with a list of demands, something we can all stand behind, albeit each with a secret reservation in his or her heart that says, "I wanted more than that." I encourage those in the movement to recognize such demands as stepping stones, or landmarks, perhaps, on the road to an economy of love. Let us never mortgage a greater to a lesser. The means of the movement, more than the ends, will be the genesis of what comes after the debt pyramid collapses. Occupy Wall Street is practicing new forms of non-hierarchical collaboration, peer-to-peer organization, and playful action that someday, maybe, we can build a world on.

We must learn the lessons of Egypt, where a people's movement started with the amorphous demand to end intolerable conditions, and, as it discovered its power, soon turned to demand the ouster of the president. That demand would have been too big at the outset, too impossible; yet at the end it proved to be too small. The dictator left, the protestors went home without creating any lasting structures of people power, and, while some things changed, the basic political and economic infrastructure of Egypt did not.

Occupy Wall Street should not be content with half-measures, even as it encourages and applauds the tiny hundredth-measures that might come first. It should not let such concessions sap the strength of the movement or seduce it into neglecting to foster its organizational network. Occupy Wall Street is the first manifestation in a long time of "people power" in America. For too long, democracy has, for most people, meant meaningless choices in a box. The Wall Street occupation is stepping out of the box.

Our job is to take a stand for a world that is truly beautiful, fair, and just, a planet and a civilization that is healing. For a politician or a financier, even a small step in this direction takes courage, for it goes against the gradient of money and all that is attached to it. I think that the task of Occupy Wall Street is to provide a context for that courage, and a call to that courage. With each step taken, the necessity of far larger steps will become apparent, along with the courage to take them.

To those holding the reins of power, let us say, We will be your witnesses and your truth-tellers. We will not allow you to live in a bubble. We will not go away. We will show you who you are hurting and how. We will make it awkward to do business, until your conscience cannot stand it any longer. We know, in the beginning, many of you will try to escape us; perhaps you will leave Wall Street for suburban corporate offices on private land where there is no "street" for us to hit. You might also retreat further into your ideologies of globalism and growth that deny the obvious. But nothing will stop us, because our tactics will constantly shift. In one way or another, we will speak the truth and we will speak it loudly. Where speaking the truth becomes illegal, we will break the law. We will not wait to be invited. We will enter, in some way, every physical and ideological fortress.

The truth is dwindling rain forests, spreading deserts, mass tree die-offs on every continent; looted pensions, groaning burdens of student debt, people working two or three dead end jobs; children eating dirt in Haiti, elders choosing between food and medicine... the list is endless, and we will make it no longer possible to hold it in disconnection from the money system. That is why we converge on Wall Street, and anywhere that finance holds sway. You have lulled us into complacency for long enough with illusions and false hopes. We the people are awakening and we will not go back to sleep.

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beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible? We don't want to merely fix the growth machine. We want to fundamentally change the course of civilization.

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