

# Sharing the Torch: Youth of the 60s Meet With the Youth of OWS

November 23, 2011

The evolving Occupy Wall Street movement continues to confound and surprise even its ardent supporters. Two days after Mayor Bloomberg's brutal nighttime eviction of sleeping Occupiers from Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, a massive candlelight march in support of Occupy Wall St. wound its way from Foley Square (opposite the federal courthouse), around City Hall and across the Brooklyn Bridge (police estimated 32,500 participants). As the participants marched over the bridge, suddenly in gigantic letters projected onto the side of the multistory Verizon building which faces the bridge they saw the slogans of their movement projected in giant letters: "We are a cry from the heart of the world!" "Another world is possible." "We are unstoppable." "99%." and then in rapid succession the names of all the cities across the world where Occupy-like movements are taking place. The vision was magical—a little like seeing the hand of God appear.

Three days after that event, the torch was symbolically passed from veterans of the 1960s movements for social justice to the contemporary Occupy movement in a ceremony in Zuccotti Park, which, although closed to overnight camping, and for a few days occupied only by the police, was again permeable to Occupiers. Similar ceremonies were held in selected Occupy sites around the country. The passing of the torch became possible after a "Council of Elders" was brought together in Chicago to strategize about lending their support to the Occupy Movement. Veterans of the Civil Rights, peace, farmworkers, feminist, Native American, gay and Central American solidarity movements of the 1960s-1970s—most now in their seventies, eighties and nineties—have been called out of their retirement and given a new lease on life by the OWS. Among some of the more well-known names are the Rev. James Lawson, Jr., non-violent strategist and trainer for the Civil Rights movement following the teachings of Gandhi; Dr. Vincent Harding, the historian and activist who had helped to write Dr. M. L. King's most prophetic (and, at the time, most controversial) speech, "A Time to Break Silence," which he delivered at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 a year before his death; Dolores Huerta, Cofounder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers movement; Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, student leader and activist in the Albany Movement, one of the original Freedom Singers and African American cultural historian and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock; Dr. Grace Lee Boggs, an internationally renowned writer and social activist from Detroit; Rabbi Arthur Waskow, writer and long-time peace activist working on the Israel-Palestine conflict; Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister who has worked for women's rights in Church and society and who co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative of Women, helping to facilitate a worldwide network of women peace builders, and many more.

After the ceremony in the park, the crowd reconvened at Judson Memorial Baptist Church in Greenwich Village where a two-hour discussion between the Occupiers and the Council of Elders, attended by some 300-500 people was held. It was an electric evening. One of the things I love about this movement is the genuine respect for and interest in older people that the Occupiers exhibit. They seem to understand, as so many of the young people in the 1960s student movement did not (remember the slogan: you can't trust anyone over thirty!) that we always stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. During the mass rally in Foley Square the night of November 17, the young woman who was MC-ing made a special point of celebrating the elders who were in the crowd and of giving the stage to a chorus of union retirees. My husband, who is an "elder" and has to walk with a walking stick has invariably been assisted by young demonstrators during the several "Occupy" events/marches we have participated in; they walk beside him, warning him of curbs and

other hindrances that might trip him up. They are also eager to ask us about our life experiences hoping to get some guidance for their own lives.

During the meeting at Judson Church the Occupiers wanted to know, first, what the “Elders” thought about the Occupy movement. It was a touching moment—as if they were seeking approval from their parents. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, one of the Council of Elders replied: “I never dreamed I would live long enough to see you.” Rev. Nelson Johnson, another Elder who had led the 1979 Anti-Klan march in Greensboro North Carolina in which five anti-Klan marchers were shot and killed by Klan members, replied that the Occupy movement was “one of the most beautiful things I have seen in a long time. We really belong to each other,” he said. “The warmth with which you received us is quite humbling. We want to join with what you’re doing and offer what we’ve been doing. But first, we want to hear from you.” “We are not *passing* the torch,” said Rev. Phillip Lawson from Oakland, CA, another of the Elders, “We are *sharing* the torch.” A dialogue then ensued in which the Occupiers explained to the elders how they saw their movement, what their hopes and fears were and what they needed. Another thing I like about this movement is its poetry. A kind of parable was told by one of the Occupiers which seemed to sum up their vision of the movement as the kind of “beloved community” of which Martin Luther King had spoken so many years before. The parable went something like this:

*99 of us form a circle in Zuccotti Park. We stay there all night. One of the 99 can leave to go and get some rest, to get warm, to take a shower, but another one takes his/her place. Any needs are met in the circle by the 99%. The 99% are poor. 99% is the badge for anyone willing to wear it. Over time it will grow. It will eventually begin to glow. It will take down the powers that are trying to destroy us.*

From there the Occupiers raised many of the practical questions of strategy and tactics that have occupied hundreds of hours of discussions in their General Assemblies and work groups: How do we reach the other 99%? How do we include people of color as equals in a movement that at first was composed mostly of white people? How can the movement keep going without a physical base? How do we move the movement into communities around the country? How do we deal with the baggage that a lot of people bring into this movement? What do we draw on to deal with this since we are confronting problems that have been out there for a very long time? How do we build for the long haul? What kept you, the Council of Elders, committed to the movement? What do you, the Council of Elders, see as the mistakes of our movement? One of the Council of Elders stated that the Occupiers could not expect to literally take some experience in the past and apply it to another time. Each generation, he said, must discern its own mission. Nevertheless, the Occupiers were told, there were general things that can be learned. Any movement that has one tactic, they said, probably won’t survive. The movement has to have multiple ways of operating. Another piece of advice was the necessity of training. “All of us must enter into boot camp to learn how to become disciplined soldiers.” Yet another piece of advice: “choose your confrontations wisely. Fighting the police is not the basis for a movement. You should know that the police want a confrontation.” Another regarding the issue of space: “Who gets to name and frame the space is important.” On the issue of race: “Work on this issue with mutual respect, not guilt tripping; but you ought not to dodge the issue under the banner of unity.” In response to the question of what mistakes the Elders thought the Occupiers had made, the reply was: “We haven’t been close enough to know, but don’t fear mistakes. Learn from them. We certainly made our own mistakes, but you learn from them and grow from them.” “It is important,” another asserted, “that *you* know how powerful you are. *You* have already changed the conversation in the world.” And so the dialogue went on. Perhaps the most important piece of advice however, was to keep the movement spiritually grounded—not in any sectarian sense—but in the broadest kind of spirituality. “We have to approach this out of a spirit of

humility and love rather than wanting to win,” said Nelson Johnson. “This begins to change the conversation.” And indeed it already has.

After the dialogue in the church, the crowd reconvened in Washington Square Park. Each person was given a candle for a procession that was to walk south to the vacant lot on the corner of 6th and Canal from which a few Occupiers had been ejected by the police a couple of days before. There is an effort underway to put moral pressure on Trinity Church to find space for the Occupy movement to relocate. The procession was to have been led by a number of marchers carrying colorful, giant glowing parasols with Occupy slogans stenciled on them. The parasols were actually tents that had been erected and set on platforms and then attached to long poles that were wrapped with black and white candy-cane striped duct tape. Another thing I love about this movement is its artistic imagination! But in another bit of nonsensical police harassment meant to frustrate the movement, the police guarding the entrance to the park informed the protesters that they would not be allowed to carry the parasols as they were a safety hazard. There then ensued a period of negotiation in which it was decided that if the protesters cut the length of the poles in half they would be allowed to carry them. They did so, and the march proceeded, but the shorter parasols were actually much more of a safety hazard than the original ones would have been, as it meant that the sharp corners of the parasols were now at about head height, making it somewhat difficult for marchers on narrow streets to avoid getting struck by one of them. Fortunately, the march proceeded without further incident, marching past scores of sidewalk cafes where the uninvolved sat sipping their Cabernet Sauvignons and eating their Asian infusion salads as this strange circus marched past.

On the way down to 6th and Canal we got to talking with a young singer/musician. Serita was eager to learn about our experiences in earlier movements, saying how privileged she felt to be talking with us. After she had probed us for a while we turned the conversation to her life and what had brought her here. She had moved to New York from Galveston, Texas, she told us, and now sings with an Algerian band. While not Algerian herself, she has learned Arabic so that she can perform with the band. She joined the Occupy movement because of the devastation that is being inflicted on her home community in Texas. Giant oil and petrochemical plants, she told us, continually spew toxic chemicals into the air. The incidence of cancer has risen dramatically and she fears that if it is allowed to continue, the cancer rate will only increase until everyone is sick. After exchanging email addresses with Serita we found ourselves at 6th and Canal where the Occupy movement was passing out coffee and donuts to everyone. Another thing I like about this movement is its sense of hospitality—the provision of food, clothing, books, medical, counseling and legal services to whoever was in need when the movement occupied Zuccotti Park; and now, coffee and donuts for the marchers! Such a movement can't help but eventually win.

*Sheila D. Collins is Professor of Political Science Emerita at William Paterson University and a co-founder of the National Jobs for All Coalition, on whose Executive Board she serves.*