

Vision and wisdom meet in Occupy support group

Joan Chittister | Dec. 8, 2011 From Where I Stand

There's a new group in town that you ought to know about. They just may be the beginning of a bridge between a climate of despair and a vision of new life for us all.

It's obvious that social change is in the air again. But thanks to this new group, it may be about to happen differently. Up until now, change at least initially has commonly pitted one part of society against another, Republicans against Democrats, north against south, white against black, the old against the young.

In 1922, mainstream types said of the young women who picketed the White House on behalf of women's suffrage, "They're destroying the family." Women who knew their place, "nice" women, turned their faces away from such a disgusting sight, ashamed of females who would act so boldly. "Upstanding" men dragged the women off to prison to force-feed them for wanting to do something as obscene as casting votes.

The vote came, of course, as necessary change always does. Eventually, even "nice" women did it; upstanding men accepted it; family life survived it. But nobody learned much. Almost a hundred years later, we're still suspicious of those who dare in every generation to suggest a change in systems that may have served the last era but is argued to be destroying this one.

So the temptation if not, in fact, the well-worn strategy is to brush off new social impulses of the next generation like the Occupy Wall Street movement as some kind of youthful rite of passage. Rebellion, we like to think, is simply part of growing up. It's hormonal, we say. Or, if not biological, certainly a sign of cultural permissiveness: If someone parents, teachers, the courts had simply been tougher on these kids when they should have been, they would be docile, obedient keepers of the system now.

"They're traitors," people said of the students who overturned recruiting tables during the Vietnam War protests.

"Who do they think they are?" people said of young African-Americans who dared to wait for service at lunch counters during the Civil Rights protests.

"They're a disgrace," people said of the young women who marched down streets in the '60s shouting for equal opportunities, equal pay, equal access, equal rights.

The basic attitude seems to be that if we just ignore them turn our heads, let them sit in the parks and freeze as winter comes or pepper spray them and arrest them for loitering, they will eventually go away.

But what if it's not a generational thing? What if the elders of society are just as concerned about economic justice and disparity as younger people are? Then who do we blame for the upheaval? Or, to put it another way, what happens to a society when wisdom and energy merge?

The fact is, that is exactly what's happening. A Council of Elders has appeared on the scene.

A newly organized, independent group of leaders from many of the defining American social justice movements of the 20th century a veritable who's who of social change in the United States over the last 60 years has risen up anew, this time in solidarity with OWS.

You know these people; if not by their names, certainly by the breadth of their hearts. You have heard their cries for justice, seen their protests for peace, followed their steady, steady demonstrations of care for the dispossessed everywhere.

The Organizing Committee of the Council of Elders includes Rev. Vincent Harding, Rev. James Lawson, Rev. Philip Lawson, Dolores Huerta, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Dr. Grace Lee Boggs, Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah, Marian Wright Edelman, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Rev. Dr. George Tinker, Rev. John Fife, Rev. Nelson Johnson, Joyce Hobson Johnson and, because of their generous spirits, me, as well.

Their statement of solidarity reads: "As veterans of the Civil Rights, Women's, Peace, Environmental, LGBTQ, Immigrant Justice, labor rights and other movements ... we are convinced that Occupy Wall Street is a continuation, a deepening and expansion of the determination of the diverse peoples of our nation to transform our country into a more democratic, just and compassionate society."

To be clear that they are about more than writing statements, this group of leaders -- seasoned by all the social justice movements of their day -- [started a Facebook page](#) [1], [launched a website](#) [2], [uploaded a video to YouTube](#) [3] and sent a delegation of older people to Zuccotti Park in New York City, to Justice Herman Plaza in San Francisco, and to Los Angeles, Oakland and Washington, D.C., to speak with demonstrators. They went to encourage this generation's young people, who are bringing to consciousness a national awareness that our wealth is in our people and our resources, well developed and well used, not in our banks. They went to bring the flame of peace and economic justice from one generation to the next.

The elders are going to be among the Occupiers, they say in their public statement, to "applaud the miraculous extent to which the Occupy initiative has been non violent and democratic, especially in light of the weight of violence under which the great majority of people are forced to live, including joblessness, foreclosures, unemployment, poverty, and inadequate health care."

And that's true, of course. But they are also a sign and voice for those of the 99 percent whose very years attest to the truth of the need for a new economy, a new spirit, a new soul among us as a people but who cannot go to the parks of the cities themselves.

The elders bring the credibility of wisdom and age and experience to the zest and vision and hope of youth.

After all, these elders have, over the years, been Occupiers themselves. They occupied the whites-only lunch counters of the country. They occupied the segregated schools and exclusive male clubs and closed male boardrooms and nuclear sites and the Pentagon. They are the veterans of marches into the midst of dogs and water cannons. They are the voices of farm workers and garbage collectors and dependent women. They have given their lives to bring life to many without ever taking a life themselves in the doing of it.

They are a living sign of a democratic revival started by their generation but still unfinished.

Most of all, this new Council of Elders has something to say about patience: Grace Boggs, now 96 and author of *The Next American Revolution*, writes to all those with an Occupier's heart: "We must reflect in our communities on why these systems have become so dysfunctional and what we need to do ... to create new systems and then decide on appropriate local and national actions. ... Revolutions take Time!!! Progress does not take place in straight lines."

I agree.

From where I stand, however, I think the trajectory to justice may be straighter, shorter, clearer when the generations join together to make a new future out of the best ideals of the past. Get to know these people. Go to their website. Watch them on YouTube. Join them on Facebook. They may very well be a new kind of lifeline for us all: one that joins and does not divide. One that speaks for the good of all rather than only for the good of some.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/20/2017 - 15:54): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/vision-and-wisdom-meet-occupy-support-group>

Links:

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Council-of-Elders/273415606030497>

[2] <http://www.nationalcouncilofelders.com>

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUgd4_hGDMo