

A Brave New World (remix)
Dorit Cypis, December 2011

Ghostly reflections of Hieronymus Bosch...Dante's Inferno...Dawn of the Dead... interchangeably drifted through my mind when I first entered the tent city of Occupy Los Angeles, late October, 2011. The terrain of people was bare, raw, gritty, and utterly public. I'm an artist and a mediator. I chose to show up on site frequently over the next month offering engagement and conflict transformation skills to support their capacity to perform expressions of public outcry at our culture's out of control social inequity. These are my reflections...



The Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymus Bosch, circa 1500

Each Occupy location across the country and around the globe has emphasized two interdependent strategies, externally to publically protest chronic and insidious social inequities and internally amongst themselves to develop sustainable governance and strategies for arriving at consensus amongst all participants. On November 14, 2011, the 59th day of peaceful occupation by Occupy Wall Street, New York City, everyone was forcefully evicted and a library of a thousand books was violently demolished and destroyed by local police. One book was left behind, *A Brave New World/Revisited* by Aldous Huxley, 1958, in which he expounds in essay form on the potential demise of democracy. Brave, indeed.

...At the end of July, in an office in New York's financial district, (the) proto-Occupiers met with some veterans of the protests in Spain, Greece and North Africa... Some standard leftists were pushing for a standard rally making a standard demand — no cutbacks in government social spending... (some) nudged the group to a fresh vision: a long-term encampment in a public space, an improvised democratic protest village without pre-appointed leaders, committed to a general critique but with no immediate call for specific legislative or executive action. Time, 12-26-2011

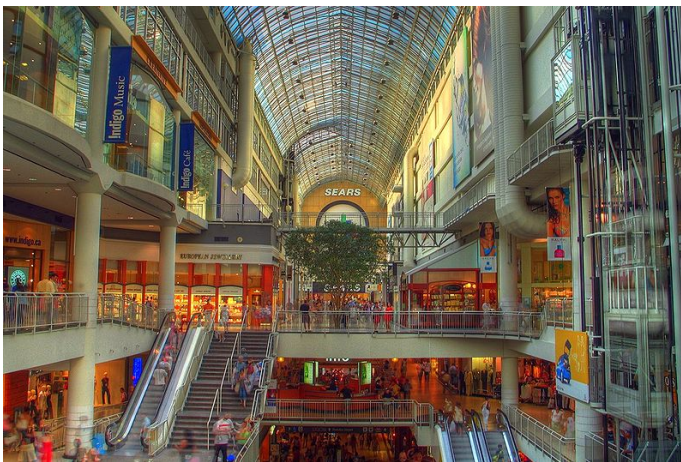
The 300+ tents of Occupy Los Angeles sprawled across 1.7 downtown public acres, seemed like psychosocial scabs at the feet of the monumental vertical Los Angeles City Hall, which they surrounded. In contrast, the terrain of engagement amongst the occupiers was horizontal. Hundreds of bodies were splayed out publicly as if on display for all to witness their daily human animal nature, in pain, in resistance, in pursuit of possibility. After decades of numbing by technology, bureaucracy, consumption and inequitable values of late capitalism, these scabs at the feet of a dying "culture" were struggling to make life, life.

"These tents here are symbolic of the humanitarian crises that the nation is facing,"
Carlos Marroquin, Occupy L.A.

People came together as strangers, unemployed teachers, medics, social service professionals, union workers, students, artists, young anarchists, Civil Rights and Vietnam era activists, spiritual leaders and many chronically homeless... foreigners to each other in every way – by generation, race, education, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and ideation. What they had in common was their



authentic drive to civically protest our culture's inhumanity, its inequality, its greed and wasted ethics, where government is no longer representative of the people, where power can be bought and sold, and where corporations are considered persons.



One core Occupy demand for economic political structures to become transparent and equitable is easy for the media understand. What is less obvious to the media is that this vision is dependent on people waking up from an old dream of passive consumerism to a participatory representative democracy where we each are accountable and responsible to one another. The Occupy call for systemic social change "in the heart of the

Empire" (Arundhati Roy), is implicitly dependent on all people having access to the skills and tools to implement change within themselves and between themselves, to recognize collusion, internalized victimization, and blind victimization of others, to

redefine the meaning of consensus as participatory representation. The overwhelming challenge for Occupy is to build the capacity for all its participants to learn democratic social engagement skills towards consensus, to build skills of bias awareness, empathic listening, negotiation, non violence and conflict transformation, skills that most folks have never been exposed to, possibly have never even imagined. Occupy, raw and vulnerable, is a great big experiment towards what reciprocity and democracy could be, a social experiment worth supporting.

The American 9/11 legacy - screened through more than a decade of shock and awe, of learned collective fear of the other - is slowly turning towards a social protest movement that is enfolded with self-critique. After months of living with one another Occupy participants are recognizing that solutions cannot come from old rhetoric or social positions that we have internalized, positions that have divided us from one another, rendered us strangers to public life and human engagement. It takes courage, time, and commitment to form a collective trust. How can listening to another's wounds, especially when expressed through unconscious emotional affect, compel us to stay even though our pattern is to shut down or run back into the safety of our acculturated individuation?

Through November, emails flew by my computer screen, requests from Occupy folks for specific on site mediation and conflict de-escalation capacity building skills - the downtown Farmers' Market that used to take place at City Hall and was tragically displaced by Occupy, the Occupy Finance Committee rife with internal mistrust amongst its members, the anarchist drummers disturbing neighbors with too much noise, an assault on a young woman, rampant misunderstandings, miscommunications, people feeling left out, betrayed, thieving, bullying, whining, bottomless need for attention, illness, hunger, and so on. None of this is unusual compared to an afternoon at Small Claims' Court. The human psyche screams 24/7. What is different about the resonance at Occupy is that it is public, visible, audible, raw, vulnerable, and visceral.

At OLA there have been upwards of 30 committees, each taking on a self initiated charge: Wellness, Demands and Proposals, Financial, Sanitation, Food, Welcome, Media, Free University, Sanctuary, Kid Village, etc. Meetings went on during the day in preparation for the evening's General Assembly where all are invited to participate in voice and vote. Early on the Occupiers attempted to arrive at 100% consensus on every issue. Needless to



Etching, Dante's Inferno, Gustave Dore, circa 1865

say this was next to impossible especially in Los Angeles, the American wild west of individuality and civic disengagement. Day after day the struggle at the GA was a straining to agree when disagreement was inevitable. Refusal is easy compared to learning to listen to positions you may not agree with, teasing out human emotions of anger, fear and mistrust that unravel dialogue. What would it take for new voices to have the space to express words the speaker her/himself may never have uttered before?

There was plenty of frustration and anger at Occupy, but few walked away. What unfolded over the next weeks was a conviction that we must find a way to speak and to be listened to, no matter how intolerable the experience. Having for so long felt divided and alienated by cultural categories of separation that have trumped participatory democracy, commitment continued to develop consensus strategies. The occupiers, frustrated by how

non-transparent social institutions have become, with how isolated and withdrawn people have become, arrived at the recognition that to run away from social conflict is collusion with the problem. Who doesn't cringe at Penn State University's blind eye to children having been raped by a superstar football coach? How is that any different from the greed of the 1%? Occupiers, living 24/7 with one another, choose



not to run away from the tensions that inevitably arise between them. Every day is another day to once again confront each other, meet and work through the tensions, find a new order for civic engagement. Most of us would be horrified to engage this way in public! Occupy consciously chooses to make their struggle publicly visible, impossible as this may seem.

I witnessed many OLA groups struggling with the consensus process, often unable to stand back to evaluate and critique the process and the contexts in which it was used. Few understood either consensus or the complexity of the context they were in. Often participants were new to the process and fairly blind to the variables, let alone the issues that were being addressed. Nevertheless a process was cobbled together and evolved with repetition over the days, weeks and months. Consensus used in a fairly homogenous group or a group framed by fewer shifting variables [i.e. working at the same employment location], can work. But in circumstances of fluid cultural differences and strong individuation, lack of civic engagement skills, and rampant psychophysical wounds, it is hard won. Consensus begs for other group processes and skills that build emotional intelligence to support it - bias-awareness, somatic movement for sensory

recognition, creative engagement including cultural exchange (film, dance, theater, art), critical evaluation, conflict engagement, creative negotiation, empathic listening.... etc.

The Indignados (the Outraged) protesters in Spain, 2011, again sounded “Yes We Can”, the Obama-mania slogan of 2008. In 2008 I wondered to myself, “How Can We?”. Desire for hope was kindled but where were the tools? Enter the global communal protests of 2011. The Facilitation manual used by Occupy Los Angeles and other Occupy locations comes via adaptations initiated by the protesters of Madrid. The Non-Violence vision that emboldened Arab Spring is similarly being espoused by Occupy. Today key strategies of communal protest are being shared globally.



Occupy offers us an image of courageous personal vulnerability for the sake of making social change real - an image of a visceral real time human movement sprawled out before us, if we care to look. Occupy is a tapestry of infinite there-ness, like a cross section of an anthill: each ant equal and with an individual voice, each moving a dust particle as part of the pursuit of collective ant-ness, personal and social. Occupy is humans facing humans in their bareness, with wounds exposed, limitations declared, passions clear, discovering themselves as they have never been: patient, respectful, emotional, open, raw, reciprocal, empathic, human.

Existing at many sites and with no site Occupy has become a state of mind, of heart and spirit that we each must take on and spread through daily individual and collective actions. Protest the "empire" while self-witnessing how each of us may be colluding in small ways. Live reciprocity and generosity. Listen empathically and choose when to take decisive action to enliven a Brave New World.