Visiting “Occupy Wall Street”, October 24, 2011

Yesterday was “Grandmother’s Visiting Day” at Occupy Wall Street. Mar Peter Raoul and I were probably the only Grandmothers visiting, but, since everybody had a sign, we thought of putting that on ours. Mar’s Grandson, Jordan Eck, 21, had scrounged two comfortable chairs for us to perch our weary frames on near the South edge of Zucotti Park where he has claimed the space for his bedroll on the concrete walkway of the park which stretches a long East-West New York City block and a short North-South one. It’s not a very big park - the Wall Street area is so full of buildings (except for the empty Ground Zero spaces one block away from the park) that it is amazing that there is any park other than the cemetery at Trinity Church.

Jordan’s bedroll space is right next to the medical tent where doctors, nurses and physical therapists come and go day after day to take care of any medical problems that may arise in the enclave. It’s a good spot, so to speak, but it’s shrinking due to increasing overcrowding as the population of the occupation continues to grow. Jordan came across a discarded folding table on a nearby street the other day; during the day it is used by the Liaison Committee with the Homeless and at night he places it over his bedroll and someone sleeps on top- bunk bed style. Maybe colder and colder weather will cause this upward trend in the occupation’s census to slow or maybe the authorities will call an end to it and clear the park as they threatened to do again yesterday morning. That “police emergency” caused Jordan to remain at the park, leaving us up at Grand Central waiting for him to arrive and escort us down to his new “home.” It was worth the wait to have someone showing us around down there and explaining the inner workings of such a happening.

Jordan arrived in the Big Apple from Binghamton on October 1st. He’s an intelligent and articulate young man who should be in college and, hopefully, will return to college in the near future, but money is short and job prospects are as short in our nation as tuitions are high - so, we’ll have to wait and see while we hope and pray. In the meantime, he is passionately working on this daring project and he is delighted about the media coverage it is getting as the movement spreads across the country and around the world. The movement’s message, according to Jordan, is that the capitalist economic system is failing the common people big time and needs to be changed drastically. There is one man who walks around the park all day carrying a sign in nasty language which is in total disagreement with that and any other stated purposes of the “cause.” Jordan admits that even with the improving organization of the dedicated organizers - the long list of committees for every purpose from sanitation in the park to food service to sign making etc., etc., etc. - that in spite of these things, life gets more difficult as more hangers on move in who seem more interested in mooching the system than in supporting the cause. He’s on a committee to keep the peace among them all. In addition, as in any “town” there are those who, like Jordan, like the sound of the continual drum circle at the west end of the park and those who don’t enjoy the drums which, of course, echo off the walls of the tall buildings.

Sightseers (like visitors) mill around the park’s perimeter, reading the signs, listening to the drums and sometimes interacting conversationally with the demonstrators. Police cars line the streets and policemen hang out on the edges of the enclave. Most of the participants are young. It’s not an easy life even for Jordan, who has experienced the dump life of squatters in Calcutta with his college professor/activist Ma-Ma Mar. He walks two blocks to a bathroom he knows to
be available; he worries about B.O. and may have to just discard the clothes on his back soon; he picks up every little piece of paper and is working on completing one of those puzzles which, when all filled in, get the holder a free Whopper from Burger King (all food served in the park is vegetarian and is coming in from donors all over including countless pizza pies every day ordered by sympathizers from as far away as Cairo, Egypt).

Jordan’s Grandma was pleased with the diversity of the occupiers. This diversity was especially evident in the small area set apart as “Sacred Space.” A strangely dressed man was circling the small altar of special objects. He was smoking something, and carefully blowing the smoke toward the altar’s contents to purify them? It takes all kinds I guess. A Buddhist monk sat cross legged on one of the stone benches “preaching” quietly to a circle of people gathered around him. A girl sat reading from the Tao de Ching. I had brought my Book of Psalms (paraphrased by the same Stephen Mitchell who had translated her version of The Tao) and I showed it to her and pointed to Psalm 15:

Lord, who can be trusted with power,
and who may act in your place?
Those with a passion for justice,
who speak the truth from their hearts;
who have let go of selfish interests
and grown beyond their own lives;
who see the wretched as their family
and the poor as their flesh and blood.
They alone are impartial
and worthy of the people’s trust.
Their compassion lights up the whole earth,
and their kindness endures forever.