

Occupy Toronto: Now a Holy Place

I am a chaplain at the University of Toronto, a man of God, have been all my adult life. I have lived in suburbs and ashrams and communes, but I have never seen such a wonder as the community that has grown up in the Saint James Park at King and Jarvis Streets. To my mind, the park is now a holy place.

Let me explain. Whenever I have visited famous holy places, and I have been to a few in India and here in the West, I have always felt I was a guest in a kind of haunted house. The place was always commemorating someone who used to live there or what they did. There was usually a temple or a cathedral and lots of gold trimming, but it was all about what once had been.

Occupy Toronto exists today – though perhaps for not much longer. In itself, it is a dynamic exercise in faith, hope and charity – if by “charity” we mean love of humanity. Faith that a better tomorrow is possible, hope that positive change can be realized through nonviolent means, and care that no one is left behind.

Saint James Park today is also the home of a great sacrificial spirit. It is not easy sleeping in a tent in the cold rain or near freezing temperatures. But the occupiers do it. Why? To further their dream of a just society for all of us. They also know that they could be rudely awakened at night and sent to jail. Still, they persevere.

Here is the news: The culture most of us live in is not good for the spirit, our emotional health. Richard Wilkinson, Professor Emeritus of Social Epidemiology at the University of Nottingham, has documented what happens when the haves and have-nots fall out of reach. Cultures with more equal distribution of income have better health, fewer social problems and are more cohesive than places where the gap between the rich and poor is greater. According to Professor Wilkinson's studies, the poor and rich alike thrive in a more egalitarian culture, such as found in Denmark or Japan.

The Occupy Toronto community is an inspiring example of true democracy. I have never seen anything like it. The meetings are open. Everyone may speak. And everyone listens. One of the advantages of not having a microphone is that to hear, everyone *must* listen. Meetings are every evening at 6 pm. All are welcome. There is a decorum comprised of hand signals and it works.

In just four weeks, the people at Saint James Park have created that most rare of dynamics in a gruff urban centre. They have actually developed a community with a health centre, logistics, sanitation, free kitchen, security – where everyone is welcome and to a remarkable degree, everybody cares. People actually know each other. This is precious beyond measure.

Nobody runs Occupy Toronto and nobody controls it. It is completely self-governing. I know this is an affront to the “powers that be.” It can seem terribly threatening. (“Somebody, quick, do something!”) Nobody could control Jesus either. Or Muhammad. Or Moses. Or the Buddha. That's how it is. When inspiration strikes, the fear of imprisonment or worse vanishes. Instead, the vision lives. The vision of a culture more respectful of Mother Earth, where livelihoods are just that, and our democratic deficit is erased.

We all know what the Toronto police can do. They are very capable of turning the Occupy Toronto encampment upside down and returning the park to “normalcy.” But there is a growing consensus at Zuccotti Park, in Tahrir Square, and around the world that you cannot evict an idea, an inspiration whose time has come.

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