Almost Elderly Ocuppier's Vagabond Delight

Contributed by Tom Z
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I've been chasing the Occupy movement around the country, starting in Santa Cruz, then going to Jackson, Michigan, my hometown. Next stop was Detroit.

I gambled on the weather and lost. They predicted rain today, but it didn't happen, so I rolled out my bedroll in Detroit, way out Woodward Ave. near Wayne State University and in the bushes next to a Unitarian Church between a couple of buttresses (not the flying kind) that blocked most of the chilly wind.

Cozy enough, I drifted off to sleep. While I slept, the rain began quietly, slowly turning my pad and sleeping bag to cold mush. 'Twas a rude awakening around midnight when it really started coming down! I squirmed out of the soggy mess and into my half wet clothes. Where to go? Nothing was open, not in town and not on campus, so I walked until dawn to keep from freezing. No fun.

The Wayne State Administration Offices, the oldest building on campus, was the first thing open in the morning. I found a seldom used landing between floors with one of those old fashioned radiators that bang and pop and made it my 'office' for about three hours, drying out myself and all my stuff on that big old radiator before locating the library and student union where I slept six hours on a couch. Night Number Two was pretty much a rerun.

On the third day, I finally connected with Occupy Detroit through the internet at the Detroit Library. There was a call for volunteers to help build something way out Woodward Avenue on Golden Gate. I hopped a bus, then started walking, looking ahead down the street for something like Habitat for Humanity, you know, pickup trucks, power tools and volunteers carrying lumber and hammering away. What I eventually found were two young hippies filling a hole in the wall of a beat-up house with bottles and mud. They said they were a 'spinoff' of the main 'Occupy' a block down the street.

What I found was not at all what I expected - half a dozen black guys huddled around a tiny wood stove burning wet plywood scraps. They were 'occupying' the place. Some might say they were 'squatting'. They weren't. There's a difference. They were bringing the place back to livable, as best they could and one room at a time, as they were with three other abandoned homes on the street.

It wasn't up to code and they had no permits. Extension cords stretched up to a home two doors away with power. A five gallon jug of water came from another home. There was a flushing toilet three doors down in 'The Library'. This was not the 'Occupy Detroit' that I was expecting. No sign waving, no horn honking, no t.v. coverage. I asked what the authorities thought of this. They told me that the cops and firemen looked the other way, even wished them well, once they uttered the magic word - 'Occupy'. I hope that this is happening all over the country. Maybe it's my job to help spread the word.

I already had my train ticket, so I could only be there for that night and the next day, but it was the most revealing part of my trip and the most important friendships. No one else had responded to their call for volunteers and everyone out here was dead broke. I mean DEAD BROKE. When I mentioned that sardines were only $1.09 a can, one of them said, "So who's got $1.09?" He wasn't kidding. They're stuck out here in the sticks. Bus fare is $2 one way, which none of them have. Where would they go anyway?

They did have some other canned stuff that the downtown Occupy bunch had sent out, along with $100 for roofing materials out of the $7,000 in the Occupy Bank account. Relations between the two groups is shaky. Downtown probably thought these guys were just squatting. They sort of were. The guys thought downtown was elitist. They sort of were. Maybe I can help bridge that gap. We'll see. They said that I was the only volunteer that had ever come out here.

I wanted to do something, but they wouldn't let me. Bob, the one white guy, said, "The first day, you're our guest... The second day, you're a pest!" So I kicked back, and, that night, attended a big neighborhood bonfire up the street. It was kind of a 'Kumbaya' mixed race 60s event. Nice. Later that night, about 3 a.m., someone yelled and pounded on the heavy makeshift sliding door to our little house. I was closest to the door, so I opened it. A very angry young black man charged past me, grabbed some cans out of a cupboard and charged right back out, yelling all the time. Not nice. Bob and Tony yelled back. Then we all went back to sleep. Next morning, when I asked who that had been, they said it was this crazy guy and they wouldn't have opened the door. I probably won't next time.

Tony, older, wiser and more ambitious than most of the guys, was considering moving in permanently. Sarge, his multiple personality roommate up the street, was getting to be a bit much. Last night, he told Tony that he couldn't come into the house after dark. They had moved in the week before, after Sarge had gone off on the poor little Chinese landlord. Tony was afraid that the landlord would call the cops; then HE would end up in jail, along with Sarge.

"If the cops show up and ask me who Sarge is, I'd say, "I don't know WHO he is! He could be any one of a NUMBER of people at this moment! What is this shit? I'm fifty years old, and I can't be out after dark?!"

Tony was having a hard day. One of the other guys had walked in and told him to get his Playboy out of sight. He said it would give the place a bad reputation.

Tony looked around the trashed out hovel. "Right! There goes the neighborhood! I'm gonna give THIS place a bad reputation? With a girlie mag?!"

He looked around at the four of us. "And just WHO am I gonna' offend? I'm FIFTY years old.....and I gotta' come in before dark.....and I gotta' hide my Playboy!"

Tony went off for water, and Bob went out to run extension cords around the neighborhood. What could I do? There were a couple of trees in the back of a vacant lot across the street. Under it, tangled in the prickers, was quite a bit of downed, still wet firewood. I dragged it out and across the street and busted it up stove size, kneeing it and stomping it and using a skill saw for the bigger stuff. While I was doing this, a loud argument broke out between Bob and Shawn,who thought Bob was talking down to him, Whitie style. Shawn wanted me to side with him. I declined and went back to the woodpile across the street until things calmed down.

A little later, I got Shawn stoned. He sat quietly, watching me build and eat a sardine sandwich, before haltingly asking.
"How it start? ...This race thing."

"Well, the white guys had the guns... and the ships. You guys didn't."
Shawn nodded slowly.

"But it wasn't just us. White guys didn't run out there in the jungle and grab you guys. You'd have killed their asses! No, they bought you from the black chieftains who had captured you."
"Yeah, yeah. I know about that. I saw that movie... 'Kunta Kinte'."

He got quiet again for awhile. "You like them sardines, huh?"

Tony came in with a jug of water.

"Do you get high, Tony?"

"Well, I haven't smoked anything for six years."

"I'll go outside, then. I know Bob doesn't smoke either." I headed for the door.

"Hold on, man! Maybe it's time."

"I don't want to corrupt you."

He just laughed. I corrupted him. He giggled for hours.

I had to leave to catch a bus right after seven p.m., but I told them that I'd be back.

"You ain't coming back, man. NOBODY comes back here. Nobody even COMES here!"

They had no clock, but Tony's favorite soul show came on the portable radio at seven. Meanwhile, we were sitting around the stove, feeding it wet wood, trying to get the chili hot. It wasn't working, so we ate it warm. Someone banged on the door. "Your house is on Fire!"

It was. At least the roof was. We piled out. The woman had already called the fire trucks. They were still there when I left for the bus.

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