

Documents from the front line

This section is intended to include material of a non-academic, practical and immediate nature, representing ongoing psycho-political process – including manifestos, course hand outs, leaflets, petitions, round-robins and epherma of all kinds. All contributions will be gratefully received.

Occupy London Stock Exchange Camp at St Paul's Cathedral, London, UK

SUZANNE KEYS, London, UK

ABSTRACT These notes provide an impression of one example of the worldwide “Occupy” movement, that of Occupy London Stock Exchange, and the involvement of psychotherapists and counsellors in response to the call for welfare assistance. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: Occupy London Stock Exchange; Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility; welfare assistance

15 NOVEMBER 2011: ONE MONTH IN

The situation at the Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) camp is changing hourly so it is hard to step aside and take stock, and I am in awe of the activists I've met there who are able to process a continual barrage of information and keep on top of a range and complexity of issues in the intense and ongoing media spotlight. My involvement as a counsellor/psychotherapist has been in response to the following call for welfare assistance (Occupy London, 2011):

After just over two weeks, our tented city standing in the protective shadow of St Paul's Cathedral is a becoming a real community. But we are still part of London and we share some of the problems of that great city.

London is the 5th wealthiest city in the world and one of the world's major financial centres—yet, despite this apparent prosperity and technological progress, there are still Londoners without homes, structure and support. What happens in London every day is merely a reflection of the increasing global disparity between rich and poor and unfair distribution of wealth.

*Correspondence to: Suzanne Keys, London, UK.
E-mail: suzanne@abcfilm.clara.co.uk

At the same time, the austerity measures imposed in the UK where tax revenues have been used to fund bonuses have led to a further decline in the quality of our society. Essential services are being cut or privatised and those with real and complex needs are being left out in the cold. Now more than ever, those who are homeless or have mental and physical health problems or addiction issues need support from the communities they live in. We are all part of the 99 per cent.

Occupy LSX is trying to be a welcoming space. We hope that people will take the time to talk to each other, help each other out and overcome their differences to create a better society.

This means that our camp is becoming a beacon for those who feel that they do not have a stake in society, for vulnerable and marginalised people. They and we are all part of the 99 per cent.

It is often said that you can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable members; Occupy LSX aims to create a better society, but we need your help.

We will not abandon or ignore the most vulnerable members of our society. We are aware that many vulnerable people are coming to the camp (including people with mental health issues, alcohol and drug problems) and we believe that we have to address these problems head on rather than the ad hoc fashion we have to date. If this camp is to aim to be part of creating a better and more just society we need to tackle these issues pro-actively.

I wanted to respond to this call with others from Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR), a UK-based forum for therapists who wish to influence and broaden the political process by:

- contributing psychological perspectives to debates on current social, cultural, environmental and political issues;
- developing new ways of dialogue that integrate the personal and political into our daily lives;
- engaging in dialogues with policy makers and with the media in ways that acknowledge diversity and discourage polarised thinking;
- generating action and launching campaigns. (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, 2011)

In response to this call, some of us met up at the camp, ended up in a meeting with camp members on welfare strategy, and became part of the process of setting up a welfare tent. We also became part of a wider process which included thinking through the issues of inclusion and exclusion on the camp; what safety and care mean; finding out about and liaising with whatever local services are there to signpost and refer to; as well as offering to go on the rota to be there and receive and respond to whatever people and issues there are around the welfare tent. We also picked up that there is some potential for activist burn out, and so we are trying to find ways to offer one-to-one support to activists in an accessible way which does not increase burdens but which may provide space, hopefully away from the intensity of the camp, where they can offload and be heard.

This is a volatile, changing, complex, frightening and exciting situation to be part of, at times overwhelming and at others incredibly life-affirming. I have had extraordinary conversations, and been part of group processes which make any other decision-making group processes to date seem inadequate. I am amazed by the structure alongside fluidity, the organisation alongside chaos, and the openness to the emergent; and the hope alongside the facing of grim realities about inequality and oppression and discrimination and dehumanisation of the current dominant all-pervasive economic system. What has most struck me so far in this

process is how generosity begets generosity, and how a gift economy can function in community. This particular community has now received donations totalling over £20,000 in the one month it's been here. When I was there I met all kinds of people coming with all kinds of gifts, including duvets, clothes, time, money, and music, and not expecting anything in return but just wanting to be part of, alongside, or to support the occupation. Setting up an alternative community on the pavements in the middle of London is a totally crazy thing to be doing, a community, moreover, which includes working groups on interfaith, sanitation, legal issues, media, education, a meditation tent, and a kitchen full of donated food with a critically acclaimed chef cooking vegan food and feeding all that come regardless of who they are . . . and a community which is engaging creatively and in an open-ended and embodied way with complex political ideas, liaising with police, local authorities, church, media . . . a community which includes those with serious drug and alcohol dependency and what some might see as "enduring mental health problems", and being welcoming to anyone who is there on the streets who wants to step inside a tent or to walk around as tourists.

It is the first time I have seen dialogue in action in such an open, inclusive and politicised way. It is inspiring and it is tapping into something which seems unstoppable, despite the threat of eviction and what has just happened on Wall Street (i.e. following one hour's notice of eviction, police in riot gear began removing protesters from Zuccotti Park, New York). There is an energy here at Occupy London which is making what seems impossible possible. The experience has also enabled me to be more integrated in the world in terms of my work, my personal and my political being. I have also felt a deep connection with fellow therapists in terms of us supporting each other to do whatever we feel we can do in response to this call.

REFERENCES

- Occupy London. (2011). *Occupy London call for welfare assistance*. Retrieved November 19, 2011, from <http://occupylsx.org/?p=760>
- Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility. (2011). *PCSR: Locating psychotherapy and counselling in a socio-political context*. Retrieved November 19, 2011, from <http://pcsr-uk.ning.com/>