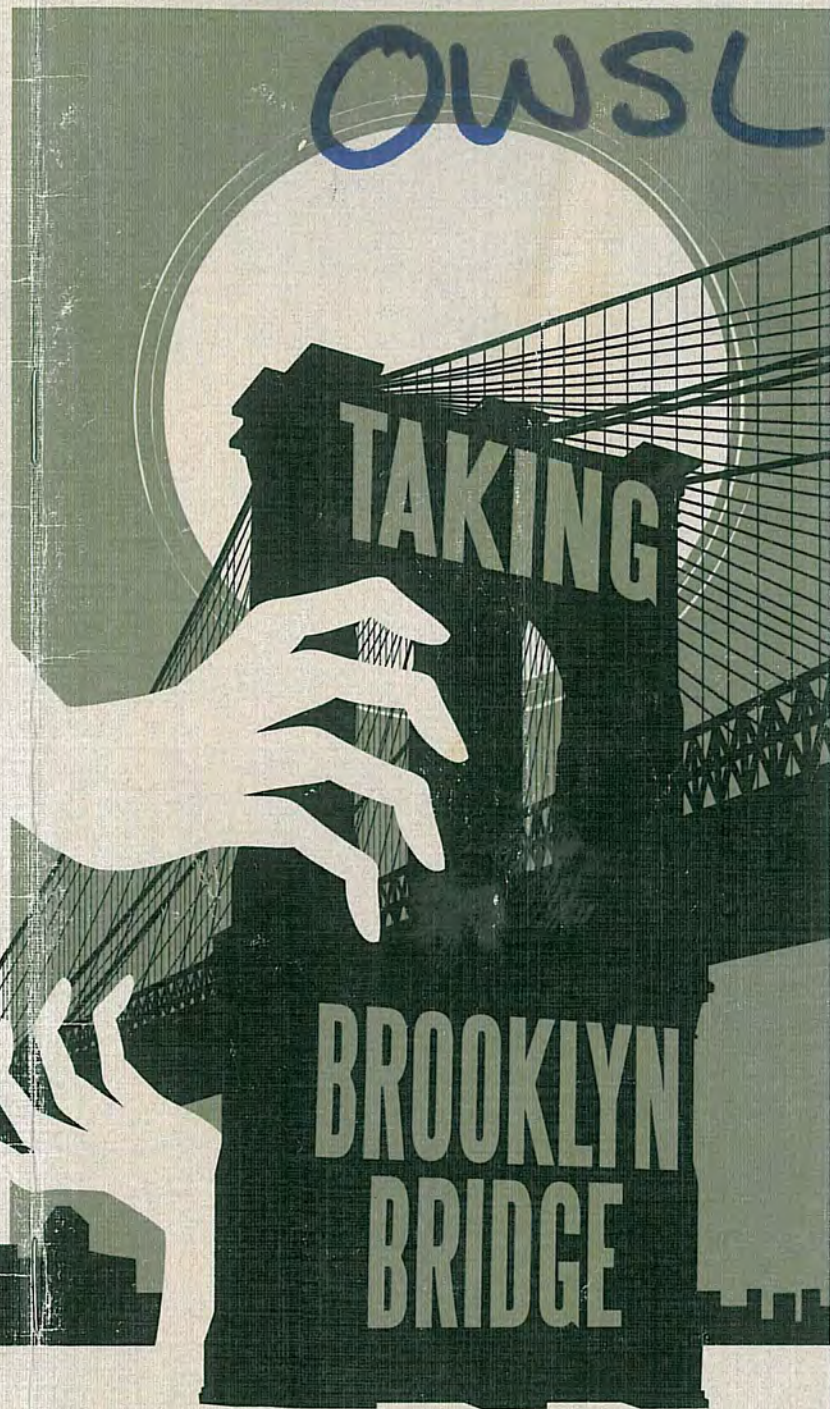


STUART LEONARD

OWSL

AMERICA
CAN YOU
HEAR US
NOW?



OCCUPIED MEDIA

PAMPHLET SERIES

C/O ADELANTE ALLIANCE
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PAMPHLET SERIES

Stuart Leonard

Taking Brooklyn Bridge

Stuart Leonard is a New Jersey-based writer and poet. This poem is part of a larger unpublished collection called *American Spring*.

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Produced and edited by Greg Ruggiero

Occupied Media is a joint project of
the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series
and Adelante Alliance

Special thanks
to poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti
for encouraging this publication
and also to the Committee on Poetry, Inc.
for generous support

Archived by the Tamiment Collection
at New York University

A portion of the proceeds from this pamphlet
benefit St. Mark's Bookshop in NYC

Occupied Media | Pamphlet 2
First Printing: November 15, 2011

ISBN: 1-884519-32-8

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PAMPHLET SERIES

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*We have frequently printed the word
Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat
that it is a word the real gist of which still
sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding
the resonance and the many angry
tempests out of which its syllables have
come, from pen or tongue. It is a great
word, whose history, I suppose, remains
unwritten, because that history has yet to
be enacted.*

—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, (1871)

Taking Brooklyn Bridge

I apologize Walt Whitman,
when I was young you spoke to me,
I would sit in the old church cemetery
surrounded by the tombstones of patriots
reading you out loud to the stray cats
and you came to me, you sang to me,
showed me myself in everyone and everything,
taught me a democracy of the soul, to live
in the rough and tumble world with dignity,
to grant that same dignity
to the people around me.

I apologize Walt Whitman,
I let the song fade into the din
of everyday life, there are excuses
I could make, I will not make them,
I did not carry your song through the streets,
I worried about the strange looks
and awkward postures
I might see in those who needed to hear it.
I got complacent, I was informed,
yes, informed, I read the papers,
watched the news,
debated over dinners, knew full well since
the days of Reagan
what was happening to the common people
like me

that you taught me to love, watched as we
were turned
from citizens to consumers to the dispossessed,
and I did not rise up, I did not take to the streets,
did not risk or struggle, did not sing your song
that you so generously gave me.

Over the years I saw the passage of events,
I began to wonder why I and so many others
did not pour into the streets when our votes
were laughed off and our presidency stolen by
fools and plunderers, I wondered why I
and so many
others did not challenge the brigand government
when they led us into the unjust war,
did not let them
know that the battle we would wage
here at home
against that corporate sponsored, oil sopped war
of lies
would be far more passionate and just,
I began to wonder why so many citizens
did not see that
they were being sold out, duped with
the frivolous,
hyped by the hollow, bankrupted by spurious
ideologies.

And this unrest began to churn within me,
as I watched the fall of the people, watched
as the great common people were being baited
and cheated by robber barons who would
delight in rekindling the gilded age,
to gloat from
their palaces at the miserable, and I wondered

how this could be, how I could be watching
the country
I grew up in, the heirs of independence,
the tough,
decent, imperfect, hardworking people I
venerated
lose the freedom that so many before us fought
and died for.

There was a silent book on the shelf, your book,
Walt Whitman, I had kept the exact same copy
I discovered as a youth, inert on the shelf,
the song
you taught me muted in the dark, and I was
the same
as that book, a song stifled in the closed pages,
serving no one, a dusty decoration.

Then I saw the people who occupied Wall Street
on the news, heard their chants, read their signs,
was drawn by their passion and courage,
and I realized I had watched and wondered
for far too long, that I was perhaps even
more guilty
than those who had perpetrated and even
profited
from the disaster they now expect us to pay for
because I had done nothing.

My family and I came to stand with the
occupiers, to be one with them,
to raise our voices and march with them,
so, that, at the very least,
true freedom and real democracy would not
be ground down
without a struggle, that we could look in the

mirror and know
we fought for the just cause, not only
for ourselves,
not only for America, but for all people,
now and one thousand years from now,
to tell humanity, to teach them, that freedom
is not
purchased on a shopping spree, does not glow
on a TV screen, cannot be put on a credit card,
freedom is a responsibility that
one must choose to bear
each and every day and no one can carry it
for you,
that you must fight for the freedom of others
in order to have it yourself.

I came to atone for my apathy,
I came to teach the future vigilance,
better to be loud, be awkward, be dirty,
be flawed,
you who are to come, make the people
uncomfortable
because they are too timid to join you,
make the leaders uncomfortable
because they know you are unafraid,
I tell you that it is better to be
one of the great democratic
people than it is to be a lord or a peasant.

We began to march from Liberty Square, toward
the Brooklyn Bridge, and we chanted and sang
and called to those who watched to join us,
and there was a feeling in the air, a passion that
joined together every hearty soul, we all knew
we were on the side of the just, that we meant

no harm to any person, that we sought no more
than what was fair and sought it not only for
ourselves,
and several times on the march my eyes welled
with tears,
my emotions overwhelmed by the chaotic,
brilliant
beauty of those marchers, of that which we
marched for.

The long line of the protestors wound beneath
the towers of those who would squander
the world,
devouring all that is good with their
insatiable appetites,
making our way to the Brooklyn Bridge
and when I saw
the towers of the bridge before me I started
to laugh,
what better way to pay back Walt Whitman than
to honor
his song at the crossing to Brooklyn, to march
across the bridge
over the waters he crossed so many times, the
bridge that poets
have embraced as a symbol, not only of
ingenuity and progress,
not only of endeavor and perseverance, but as a
symbol of democracy,
of the great crossing of humanity from
tyranny to freedom.

They are here Walt and I am with them, the
African father
pushing his daughter in a stroller, she holding a

sign that proclaims
she too will fight for her future,
the old man singing
"Happy Days Are Here Again" with wit
and irony,
the veterans who know only too well of betrayal,
the young girl
with bright fiery hair whose strong voice chants,
"We got sold out, banks got bailed out!"
the unshaven college boy who has slept
in the park for two weeks seizing the future
with determined hands,
the middle aged lady, vibrant and experienced,
rallying us
to raise our voices, the mother and daughter
holding a sign
that reads – *America, Can You Hear Us Now?*
All ages, all races,
all voices, songs and chants overlapping,
strangers becoming comrades.

As the marchers cross the bridge on the
pedestrian walk way
we see that a radical few have veered off onto
the road,
blocking the traffic, arms linked, faces resolute,
an infectious spirit fills the air,
there is no way I can not join them,
my family and I climb the rail,
with many hands reaching out to help us,
we jump down and walk with them,
this is not a day
to be a pedestrian, it is a day to agitate.

Many more come clambering down and you
can feel the tension rise,
the police growing in number,
the people marching, earnest,
a point has to be made,
the bridge has to be taken,
and then we see the barricades
before us, the crowd jamming together
as those behind us
keep coming forward, the police now closing in
from both sides,
we are trapped not quite half way
across the bridge,
and many are firm that they will not just leave,
some climb on dangerous girders
to escape as others
call out to them to be careful,
others sit and get ready
for their arrest, some are confused, not knowing
that they
would come to this end,
I see an older man, the first I think
to be arrested and there is both strength and
weariness on his face
as he glares at the police with fearless eyes,
and though as it turned out
we had been stopped there
and would go no further,
our true momentum was not halted,
I knew we had triumphed, because we had
taken action,
the people had risen, and with no violence
or hatred,
we had shown our willingness
to risk and struggle for our liberty,

and while it might seem a small thing to some,
an event to go largely unnoticed,
not as bloody as
a battle, or news worthy as a riot,
I knew that we had come to the Brooklyn Bridge
and given it the meaning
poets had sought to give it in their words, we
had brought
the rough, sacred spirit of democracy to the
Brooklyn Bridge,
we had restored Whitman's song to its very
birthplace,
for he had called to us, the future, in his song,
he sings to us now,
he knew that we would be here,
he stands with us, chants with us,
and here I am on the Brooklyn Bridge on a day
as important
as any day that has ever passed,
watching Walt Whitman
above the bridge towers,
sounding his barbaric yawp
above us, calling down the sign of democracy,
calling us to remember,
not just one amazing day,
but the task to come –
Sing on – Sing on – Sing on!

*"There came a time when the risk to
remain tight in the bud was more painful
than the risk it took to blossom."*

—Anais Nin

MORE INFO

• OCCUPY WALL STREET

Occupy is a leaderless democracy movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. Inspired by the Egyptian Tahrir Square uprising and the Spanish *acampadas*, we vow to end the monied corruption of our democracy.

www.occupywallstreet.org

• OCCUPY TOGETHER RESOURCES

An unofficial hub for all the spokes of the Occupy movement's growing wheel, providing useful links, videos and information, including how-to guides, news and the "Occupy Together Field Manual."

www.occupytogether.org

• NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD

Thousands of movement volunteers have been arrested exercising their freedom of speech and assembly while participating in Occupy actions. If you or someone you know needs legal assistance or has been the victim of excessive police force or brutality at a protest or gathering, contact the National Lawyers Guild, a non-profit federation of lawyers, legal workers and law students who join in at Occupy protests, monitor police activity on the street and in jail, and are dedicated to the need for basic change in the structure of our political and economic system. NLG has been providing invaluable legal advice to movement folks who get inadvertently arrested at protests, as well as those who consciously commit civil disobedience.

Occupy Protest Support: www.nlg.org/occupy/

Occupy Support Legal Hotlines:

New York City: (212) 679-6018; Los Angeles: (323) 696-2299;
Washington, DC: (202) 957 2445; Chicago: (773) 309-1198; San
Francisco: (415) 285-1011; New Orleans: (504) 875-0019;
Baltimore: (410) 205-2850; Buffalo: (716) 332-4658; Minnesota:
(612) 656-9108; Michigan: (313) 963-0843; Portland: (503) 902-
5340; Boston: (617) 227-7335; Philadelphia: (267) 702-0477

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The Open Magazine Pamphlet Series has been publishing movement-oriented voices for democracy, freedom and a sustainable future since 1991. The series has had the privilege to work with some of the most committed and brilliant activists, scholars and revolutionaries of our time, including Howard Zinn, Angela Davis, Noam Chomsky, Manning Marable, Subcomandante Marcos and the Dalai Lama. Occupied Media Pamphlet Series is a special project launched with Adelante Alliance to participate in the movement through the printed word. Also available now: Pamphlet 1: *Occupy* by Noam Chomsky.

occupy@adelantealliance.org

• ADELANTE ALLIANCE

Adelante is a Brooklyn-based non-profit community organization dedicated to promoting social justice for low-income Spanish-speaking immigrants through community organizing, leadership development and popular education. Adelante is actively participating in Occupy and the effort to expand "personhood" for all people, immigrants included, not corporate entities. We believe that social change through education and community building is the key to a better future.

Additional copies of this pamphlet are available for \$3.50 each.

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