

The Zip Code for Wasilla, Alaska Begins with 99-, & Other Observations

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Public Enemy Number One

It used to be the police identified the carrying of guns and knives as a public threat. Here it is, 2012, and it's changed. In Portland, OR, and many cities across the country, if you want to get the police to notice you, just carry a packed tent. If you want to push the envelope, also carry a piece of cardboard and a Sharpie. These are times when a citizen carrying a tent in the vicinity of a downtown park (or even more telling, a bank) doesn't just open up the possibility of police questioning but runs the chance of activating the entire police force with hundreds of cops (including those on loan from neighboring jurisdictions) pouring onto the scene and ignoring public safety threats elsewhere just to keep that citizen from getting any bright ideas. I imagine a time before the year is out when the TSA will require that tents only fly in checked bags and schools will show Scared Straight style programs that illustrate how tent pitching leads to a life of violent crime and early death. It's just that kind of world where we live.

The 99 percent vs. 99 cents

As a kid, I never could figure out 99. Back then, and just as it is now, almost everything you could buy was priced with a 99 at the end. To a kid's mind, nines are much greater than ones. You might be able to afford something that costs one dollar, but 99 cents? Forget about it. It's way too much. Even as an adult, I think 99 seems ridiculous. Does it fool anyone into thinking a price is actually lower when there's a 99 at the end?

Yes, it does.

An endless parade of advertising has conditioned the American mind into thinking that the number 99 means you're getting a good deal. Ninety-nine pricks the ears. I don't know if the Occupy Wall Street activists who crafted the "We are the 99 percent" slogan were thinking about this, but if your aim to win over the hearts and minds of those who have suffered most from the bastardization of the American Dream by a select few, a message centered on the idea of 99 is not a bad way to go.



On the Five Percent Nation

Occupy is not the first social movement based on a math exercise. During the 1960s, an offshoot group of the Nation of Islam called itself the Five Percent Nation, which became popularized (mostly among the 5 percent) through hip hop acts like Eric B. and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, and the Wu Tang Clan.

Here's how the math works: First, take the sum of everyone. Then subtract the power-mad and misdirected souls who are hell bent on rigging the status quo in their favor. This group totals 10 percent. Then take away all the people who blindly do or say (or buy) anything they are told. This group accounts for 85 percent.

Who does that leave? The five percent who can see through it all and shoulder the responsibility of pushing back against the 10 and educating the 85.

The concept seems accurate to me. What changes over the course of time, though, is what it takes to create a better understanding among the 85 percent on how the tyrannous tenners are ripping them off. More below.

1968 & 2004 & 2012

There are moments in our recent history when everybody gets it. 1968 was that kind of year. In 1968, everybody knew that the Vietnam war was a mess and could see the sinister pattern in political assassinations. Nuance was lost on no one. It happened again in 2004. Everybody understood that the Iraq war started on the pretenses of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist and that Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was a slanderous smear on John Kerry.

Yet in both 1968 and 2004, despite everybody getting it, people did not act in unison. If anything, the emergence of mutually agreed-upon facts caused people to entrench themselves in their political positions more deeply. 1968 saw Richard Nixon elected president; in 2004, Bush was re-elected. The saving grace was that both elections were close, but that counts for nothing.

The Occupy movement uncovered a deep-rooted anger toward bullying corporations (and banks, in particular) and an indifferent government. It's an anger that reaches far beyond the handful of protesters who took to the streets and parks across the country. 2012 is shaping up to be another moment when everybody gets what's happening. What will take it to turn out different from 1968 or 2004? More below.

99 Percent of Us Are Writers

On November 17, Occupy protesters aimed to disrupt business at street-level banks for a moment or two. I was in downtown Portland, Oregon when police shot a stream of pepper spray into the face of a protester. Caught on camera, it will become one of the enduring images of the Occupy movement.

It was bad timing on the part of the police, as it was nearly 5 p.m., and the banks were about to close with or without protesters outside. Just a few days earlier, Port-





Historically, what did in the Black Panthers and New Left were their own excesses. Likewise the J. Edgar Hoover F.B.I., whose intent was to suppress dissent, fell to its own excesses.

It might be the newness of the movement or my own wishful thinking, but the Occupy movement seems to have learned something from the past. It appears to be excess proof. It's powered instead by ideas with a basis in justice. It's a movement of faces and voices not based on the personality of its most energetic activists. There are no plans to run Occupy candidates for office or mobilize around elections. The aim is education; for example, encouraging people to move their money to small, local banks. Occupy is less a political force than a state of mind, which is just why it stands a chance to make significant change and endure.

While the danger isn't in succumbing to its own excess, Occupy must be wary of becoming passe. There is a hazard in Occupy co-opting too many messages and letting the focus drift. It's not easy to stay on top of it when the country is as chaotic as it is damaged. My hope is that the movement keeps pressure on bullying corporations (with a focus on banks) and an indifferent government that stands around doing nothing.

Remembering Oil

Keeping the focus on banks is crucial for the Occupy movement (and for as important as it is for the message not to drift). It's also worth noting that the Gulf oil spill happened just a year ago yet the major oil companies are not an Occupy target.

A few years ago a free DVD called *Eureka* (from something called Shell Film Productions) came in the mail to millions of magazine subscribers. The cover showed a what looked like a handsomely aging scientist in a jungle backdrop, the Indiana Jones of the oil industry. I couldn't wait to watch it, as I get a kick out of oil company environmental propaganda. Sure enough, the story presents a 20-minute multi-cultural narrative revolving around the scientist, his young son who inspires his environmental breakthrough, and the inquisitive reporter getting at the heart of the story, but what's fascinating about *Eureka* aren't the bald-faced lies Shell wants to tell about the effect of oil exploration on the environment. That's would have been the message in a previous era. What's astonishing is that the people making the film sincerely believe that oil extraction is a sustainable and environmentally beneficial practice. It's not a film about bending the truth as much as it is creating an alternative version of the truth (that happens to be ridiculous) that the good people of Shell believe in their hearts and minds.

After the film was sent to millions of magazine subscribers, bloggers ripped it apart. Realizing how out of touch reality the video was, Shell tried to suppress viewings by pulling it off youtube each time someone posted it. Enough time has passed now and



interest has waned. You can find it easily by searching for 'eureka' and 'shell.'

While the Supreme Court and Mitt Romney assert that corporations are made of people and should be treated as people, maybe it's worth thinking of them that way. A shift might have (or might not have) occurred in which corporate leaders are less motivated by rape and plunder to serve their own self-interest than a distorted idea that they are serving the public interest.

This is an unfinished thought. I see a connection to what the Eureka video says about corporations and the Five Percent Nation, though I don't know what to do with it other than declare there is a road of excess in need of occupation. Q

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