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We Are the 1% ... And We Stand With the 99%

Not everyone at the top of the economic system thinks it's a fair one. Why Jesse Estrin—and many others—decided to stand with the rest of us.

by **Jesse Estrin**

posted Nov 09, 2011

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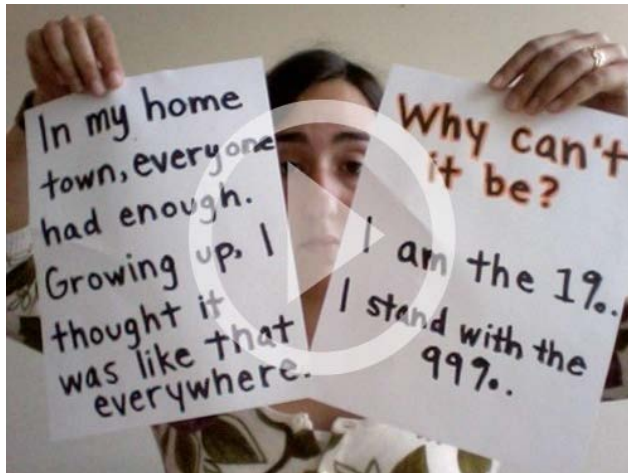


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I first realized that I came from wealth when I discovered that not everybody's family had more than one house.

It was a further revelation when, growing up, it dawned on me that not everybody else went to the same kind of school I did. I began to understand that my experience of elementary and high school – going to nicely furnished schools with state-of-the-art facilities in a safe neighborhood of West L.A., and with very little diversity and an obsession with getting students into Ivy League colleges—was not the experience of the majority of other children my age. When you are surrounded by peers in the same financial bracket as yourself, it can take some time to recognize the bubble that separates you from the rest of society. This bubble is what I eventually came to understand as privilege.



Jesse Estrin: "I love my family but feel great sadness at the system which has allowed my family to accumulate such wealth at the expense of so many others. This is a

It was a long and bumpy journey to come to terms with what this privilege of wealth meant, especially in light of the glaring differences of experience that I began to see all around me. By the time I made it to college, and began to get involved with social and environmental activism, I would find myself in the confusing position of listening to angry insults and generalized stereotypes about "rich people." My new friends—people I respected and admired—were adamant about social justice but had a great amount of anger and resentment toward people with wealth. It was extremely awkward for me, and I found myself keeping my background hidden—even to close friends—and never outing myself as someone who came from wealth. I felt a tremendous amount of embarrassment and shame around it. Interestingly, I discovered that many of my friends who also came from wealth felt the same way. It was actually very isolating. It wasn't cool to be a rich kid.

It wasn't until I discovered [Resource Generation](#), an organization that works with young people to leverage wealth and privilege for social change, that I found a network of other young people with

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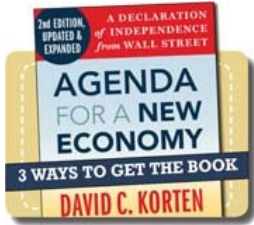
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time of collective grief. It has reached a new level. In my opinion it is the beginning of the Great Turning, and I would like to stand up as one of the people who see it coming, and contribute to a renewed vision of a healthy, just, and beautiful world."

similar backgrounds who wanted to talk about these taboo issues in order to make a difference in the world. Attending a conference they put on and meeting other young folks who came from the upper class and who shared a passion for social and economic justice was incredibly meaningful. I realized that for most people today, money remains a taboo subject that no one ever wants to talk about openly.

This is often especially true for those who *have* money, and many of the people I met at Resource Generation had families that were strict about never talking about wealth or where it came from. To break out of the silence and actually talk about money was itself a liberating experience.

Furthermore, talking about the ways it was most often accrued (through an unjust economic system with complex and subtle relationships to racism, classism, and oppression) was incredibly challenging, but at the same time empowering. It was through my own inner work around these issues—through workshops, conferences, and conversations with others—that I came to realize my shame and embarrassment about coming from wealth didn't need to paralyze me and keep me silent. Only after I did this did I feel empowered to try and understand how I could best use my resources to change the social issues I felt most strongly about.

When the *Occupy Wall Street* protests began, I decided it was time for me to step up, publicly out myself as a part of the 1%, and share my outrage at the injustices that are occurring globally. I have to admit that this was scary for me, because I didn't know what kind of reaction I would get. After all, this was a movement of and for the 99%, many of whom seemed to have anger towards the 1%. With the streets of San Francisco crowded with protesters shouting "We are the 99%!" and "Whose streets? Our streets!" I was less than excited to walk out into the open with a giant sign confessing my status as the 1%.

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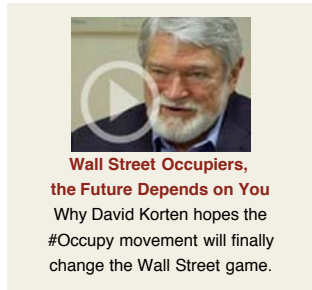
While millions are struggling for survival, taxes for the wealthiest 1% have gone down! This is simply unacceptable. And the thing is— it is unacceptable to every other person of wealth that I know.



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Why David Korten hopes the #Occupy movement will finally change the Wall Street game.

I remember my heart beating as I made my sign, and seeing my friends—many of whom I had never told about my economic status—reading it for the first time. It took them a moment to process it. I was surprised and relieved to feel supported by all of them, who encouraged me and commented that it was a powerful form of solidarity.

And this is the same reaction I found at the protest itself: Most of my fears quickly subsided as I found myself welcomed and embraced by the whole range of diverse people marching that day. I was embraced as an important part of the equation whose voice also needed to be heard, and whose solidarity is needed in the collective call for equality and justice. And although I know that cross-class alliances may not always be easy or smooth—

considering the tensions that can often exist—I realized it is important for me to speak out about my story, even in the face of struggles or challenges that can come with it.

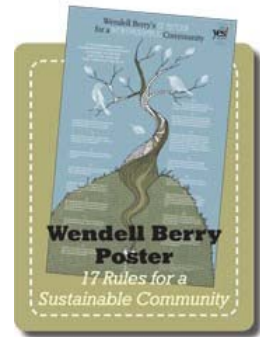
As it became clearer how, by being born into the upper class, I was given many unfair advantages in jump-starting a successful career, I became appalled at the accusation that many people aren't "successful" because they don't "work hard enough." While I and many others have more than we need, I am surrounded by friends who are struggling to make ends meet, get health care, and pay back massive student loans. While millions are struggling for survival, taxes for the wealthiest 1% have gone down! This is simply unacceptable. And the thing is— it is unacceptable to every other person of wealth that I know. That is why I—and many others in the 1%—are standing with the 99% in demanding a more just and equitable distribution of wealth. This will require effort from all sides—100%.

As people who have first-hand knowledge of how the economic system is tilted in our favor we have an obligation to speak out about it rather than remain silent and continue to receive its benefits.

Social activist and Buddhist Joanna Macy writes about what she calls the "Great Turning," our current moment in time as an epochal and historic transition toward a life-sustaining civilization. As I have tried to make sense of the suffering and injustice I see all around me, I am realizing that if we are to survive, we will have to see a rapid and major shift that includes not only economic change, but ecological and spiritual



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transformation as well.

One of the sayings that my grandmother used to tell us, over and over, was “to one whom much is given, much is expected.” I come from a family deeply committed to philanthropy and social justice, and have recently joined the board of my family’s nonprofit foundation dedicated to progressive and grassroots philanthropy. I have come to believe that those of us who have benefited the most from the system need to step up—especially at this point in time—and give back. As people who have first-hand knowledge of how the economic system is tilted in our favor, we have an obligation to speak out about it rather than remain silent and continue to receive its benefits.



New from YES!

Get the book on the movement that started with Occupy Wall Street, featuring articles by Naomi Klein, David Korten, Ralph Nader, Chuck Collins, and the activists who started it all. (Royalties go to support the Occupy movement).

Advocating for more equal taxation is one of the few concrete ways that those with wealth can stand up united to give back to the whole. This is critical if we are going to build a large and cohesive movement around redistribution of wealth and long-term change to our economic system.

At the end of the march in San Francisco we ended up on the front steps of City Hall. I found myself drawn to a group of people playing drums, singing, and dancing. Somebody came over and handed me a drum, and before I knew what was happening I was pulled through the pulsing rhythm and into my heart in the way only music can do. With our signs laid on the ground, suddenly we became a group of people using our bodies and voices to express our dissent, our desire for change, our anger, and our pain; but also our hopes, our dreams, and the pure, untouched human impulse to celebrate and make music in the face of it all.

Here for me was the defining image, the common heart of the movement, where all class difference falls away, where race and gender and sexual preference merge and entwine, and it is simply hearts coming together to forge a new way forward. This was enough to fill me with inspiration and with hope for the future.

Long after I picked up my sign and headed home, it was this image, this feeling of the pounding drums and stomping feet, that stayed with me and made me feel connected to and included in the very heart of this movement. And for this I feel grateful.

Jesse Estrin wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions for a just and sustainable world. Jesse is studying Depth Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute, and has recently finished a Masters degree in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness from the California Institute of Integral studies. He is interested in studying the intersection of the ecological, social, and spiritual dimensions of our current economic crisis.

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