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Nobody knows you when you're down and out

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I don't want to be left out of any of the great social upheavals of my era, so I occupied Blue Grass this week to protest Wall Street billionaires.

Between 2 and 4 a.m. on a dark and cloudy Monday morning, I marched in front of the Blue Grass Valley Bank, chanting silently because I didn't want to disturb anyone's sleep.

The Bank is locally owned and keeps its mortgages. I've banked there for almost 30 years. I can't recall a single foreclosure. If a credit default swap walked through the front door, it would be considered a robbery in progress. Tellers and customers would hide in the open vault.

Nevertheless, I was determined to make do with what little of Wall Street I had to work with.

My protest went unnoticed. No CNN reporter interviewed me. Chris Matthews didn't shout any questions at me that he then answered.

What good is protesting in the dark if you don't get any media play? I decided, therefore, to move into non-violent disruption.

I sat down in the middle of the street to stop traffic. Inspired by Aretha Franklin, I held my sign -- "It don't take too much high IQs to see what you're doing to me" -- as high as I could. No traffic stopped, because none came by. I drew no hostile crowd of pedestrians. My arm got tired.

I considered attracting more of an audience by writing a new message on the sign's blank side.

My first choice was pro-environment and against global warming: "Stop atmospheric carbon-dioxide buildup. No more exhaling." On reflection, I conceded that implementation of this policy could raise opposition among certain special interests.

My second thought aimed directly at Wall Street: "Good jobs for good people. Bad jobs for bad people. No jobs for no people." I thought that one might have been too nuanced.

And then I remembered I had left my crayon at home.

I got chilled sitting on the asphalt. No one paid attention, except for one local fat cat -- a tabby -- who wandered over and fell asleep in my lap.

I was about to call it quits when I noticed an unfamiliar figure hunched in the shadows in front of Junior's general store. I thought he might be trying to break in for the pickled eggs.

"Halt!" I said in my scariest Sergeant-Schultz voice. The cat meowed and stretched, snagging its front claws into my knee.

"Don't shoot. I'm innocent. Well, at least, I'm not *that* guilty."

I stood and walked over to confront this miscreant. Why was he creeping around in the early morning hours while a semi-solid citizen like me was occupied with overthrowing capitalism?

"You're not from around here are you," I said.

"I'm a refugee from Manhattan, from Wall Street," he replied in a hushed voice. He looked over his shoulder. "Will you help me? A crust of bread? A sip of water?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"It's better that you don't know my name. It could get you in trouble."

"What have you done?"

"I lost a...a...billion dollars."

"During your career?"

"In one hour," he whispered.

"Honest?"

"Well, honesty is a relative term that depends on the situation and the community in which you live and work. I did a trade. I bet against the Occupy Wall Street protest."

"So that's why you're running away?"

"No. It's worse. I switched sides. I then bet the protest would last more than a week, and it did. I made three billion. Now, all my trader friends hate me. And the protesters say I'm the poster boy for greed even though I always smiled politely when they booed me on the street. I pass neither urchin nor ragamuffin without offering a hearty 'Good day' and a shiny dime. Without being asked, I might add."

"Gosh darn," I said in sympathy with his predicament. I always root for the down-and-out.

He continued. "My son -- the one who runs barefoot on an organic commune and smokes pot all day -- said I was a criminal when he called for his allowance. He insisted that I route his check through my off-shore account, Universal Exports, so none of his grass-fed housemates would see who is bankrolling them."

"Maybe they'll give you a job herding free-range mushrooms."

"I could go for the simple life. My daughter keeps knitting my name into her yarns like Madame Defarge. When the Revolution comes, she says she's going to sock it to me."

"Kids! What can you do if they insist on bad puns? At least she's keeping busy."

"And my wife! The \$100,000 mink coat I gave her on her last birthday. It's now our doormat! She says I defile her home because I won't wipe my feet on it."

"Maybe you need to let her win this point," I said. "Give her something tangible. It's a self-esteem issue."

"When did being a billionaire become something bad?" he asked. "I thought making money was good, something we were supposed to do."

"It is," I said. "It's not so much that you're making money, it's that most everyone else isn't."

"Is that my fault?"

"That, I suppose, is the question of the day."

"What am I going to do? I can't go back to work. I can't go home. No one will give me a job. You're the only person who has talked to me in three weeks."

"I'm not a discriminating person. Some of my best friends are minorities."

"Maybe I could set up a displaced-persons camp here in Blue Grass for everyone who's fleeing Wall Street. We'd fit right in. We'd keep to ourselves. No one would notice."

"I wouldn't bet on that."

“So what should I do with all this money?”

“Invest it in stocks.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Build a business. Generate jobs.”

“That would mean employees. They always want more. They’re impossible to deal with.”

“Give it away.”

“Too much work...and who would pay me to give away my own money?”

“There’s only one thing left,” I said. “Put the \$3 billion in the Blue Grass Valley Bank. The passbook savings rate is 0.25 percent.”

“It can’t drop much lower. No downside, all upside. I’ll do it!”

I left him in front of the bank, waiting for it to open and holding my sign, which I gave to him without charge.

In two days, Blue Grass has become the refuge of choice for Wall Street billionaires on the run. Our arms are open. The bank’s vault is now stuffed with cash, leaving employees no place to hide.

We’ve erected a statute of financial liberty in front with this plaque:

*Give us your tired, your rich,
Your huddled few yearning to breathe free
Keep your homeless and tempest-tost,
Our gain is your loss. Ha. Ha. Ha.*

But...Occupy Blue Grass has followed. A barefoot stoner and a girl in socks are picketing *my* house. And then there’s the lady in a bedraggled mink coat carrying a sign,

**My husband left me for a free-range mushroom.
Somebody do something.**

Indeed, somebody do something.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph. D.

Land Consultant

1467 Wimer Mountain Road

Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307

540-474-3297

curtisseltzer@htcnet.org

www.curtis-seltzer.com