On Civil Disobedience

By Mel Lavine

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Give me a minute. The Occupy Wall Street movement reminds me of a story.

Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century American essayist, poet, naturalist and philosopher, was asked by his hometown constable, Sam Staples, to pay his poll tax which he hadn't paid for several years. Thoreau declined, leaving Sam no choice but to lock up his friend. The next morning someone, believed to be an aunt, paid the tax. Thoreau wasn't happy getting out so soon, but he reasoned one night in the cooler may have been enough to make his point.

Now the moral. While he was behind bars, his good friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the essayist and poet, paid Thoreau a visit and said, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau replied, “Emerson, what are you doing out there?”

Sure, the story about Thoreau and Emerson may be apocryphal but it makes a point.

The choice Thoreau made on that July evening in Concord, Mass. in 1846 was to protest against a government in Washington that sanctioned slavery and waged a war of aggression and expansion against Mexico.

His outlook on the relationship between the citizen and the government was expressed later in a famous essay, “Civil Disobedience,” published in 1849. It failed to make an impression when it appeared but by the end of the 19th century people began paying attention. By the middle of the 20th century, “Civil Disobedience” was recognized as a classic in political thought..

An article on Thoreau in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1991) explains its significance:

"To many, its message still sounds timely; there is a higher law than the civil one and the higher law must be followed even if a penalty ensues. So does its consequences." The article quotes a well-known line from the essay: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

In a piece in Sunday's New York Times, Eduardo Porter, a member of the New York Times editorial board, took note of criticism of the occupiers of Zuccotti Park in New York and other sites around the country for the "fuzziness of their goals." But he went on to point out that despite the hard times the top 1 percent in the U.S. are reaping "a disproportionate share of the nation's prosperity." He says the protesters are on target and "might even aim a bit higher: the *real* income growth is happening in the top 0.1 percent. There are lots of bankers there, too."

The Wall Street protests may be a mix of issues and messy, but protests against a ruling class going back to the Boston Tea Party in 1773 have been as American as apple pie.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.