

# **A Witch at the WTO - Pangaia Magazine Article**

By Starhawk

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Up until the end of last November, I was a reasonable person. Granted, I have been a Witch for my entire adult life, and some people might consider that unreasonable. I've also been a political activist all my life, but I'm no longer a young, wild-eyed radical. I'm forty-eight years old, beyond mature and into over-ripe, a responsible adult who contributes to society, pays taxes and does the dishes after every meal. Many might consider me conservative: I comb my hair, my body piercings are limited to one in each earlobe, and I cannot boast of even a single tattoo.

I hadn't been arrested since the Gulf War. (Well, there was that time at Headwaters, but that was one of those symbolic cross the line, wait a few hours to get arrested and then get released kind of things that hardly counts.) Nevertheless my political plate was full with work organizing our community here around development issues and countering the conversion of forest land to vineyards, doing support for a group in El Salvador that teaches sustainability, teaching and writing about the Craft and building our community on a nonhierarchical model of power.

I was reluctant to go to Seattle to protest the meeting of the World Trade Organization. Many people in the broad communities linked to the Reclaiming tradition had been organizing for months, but in my secret heart I felt my time would be better spent reading Timber Harvest Plans and writing letters to the local authorities. Nevertheless, I couldn't stay away. I went, in the end, because of an old woman I met a couple of years ago in the mountains of El Salvador.

Three of us had gone with Marta Benevides, who directs the sustainability project Reclaiming helps support, to visit one of the co-operatives in a remote area of the countryside. We'd spent the day walking their land, seeing the fields where they dreamed of planting fruit trees and coconut palms, the eroded hillsides they hoped to reclaim, and the black cliffs where victims of the Death Squads were executed during the war. That night we celebrated a simple ritual together. The women of the co-operative had laid out altars in the four directions, marked by beautiful flowers and candles. Miguel, a young man who had traveled to Guatemala to learn the Mayan traditions which had been stamped out in his own country, spoke for his community. Hermano Daniel, a Nahuat man who worked with Marta, blew the conch shell. I, my fellow Reclaiming teacher Aurora, and my

stepdaughter Amie invoked the elements out of our North American Pagan traditions.

We passed a shell around, and let each person speak from the heart. I said something about listening to the land, and offering something back. Then the old woman spoke. She was tiny, bent from a lifetime of hard work, dressed in a simple, handwoven skirt and cotton blouse, and her voice was soft and shy. Marta translated her heavily accented Spanish. "But Senora," she said, "Our traditions have been lost. We no longer know what offerings to make. And if we did, we don't have the right plants and fruits any more. They no longer grow here."

I looked around that circle and felt a powerful sense of identification. These people were who I would be had I been born in their place. They were struggling with some of the same issues we struggle with. We too, have lost our heritage. We too no longer know what offerings are required, or where to find the right plants and fruits our ancestors knew. Yet the lives of the people in that circle were immeasurably harder than mine. Their resources were fewer; their dreams were dreamed against overwhelming odds.

The WTO is the culmination of a centuries-long process of colonization and exploitation which has robbed that old woman of her heritage and her fruits. The indigenous people of El Salvador were massacred in the nineteen thirties to consolidate the power of the ruling families, who amassed great wealth from plantations where workers were virtual slaves. Today, their descendents who have been driven from their land work in the prison-like conditions of the foreign owned factories called maquiladoras for four dollars a day. The maquiladoras are set up in "Free Trade Zones," where safety, labor and environmental laws are suspended.

"Free" is a lovely word, but applied to Free Trade, it is totally misleading. The only freedom involved is the freedom of corporations to move capital around the globe, the freedom of speculators to manipulate money markets, and the freedom of the rich to extract more money from the poor. We are living in a world in which 358 billionaires own as much wealth as the poorest 2.5 billion people, in which one man, Bill Gates, has an annual income equal to the entire nation of Pakistan!

In fact, the Uruguay round of GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) which set up the WTO severely limits human freedom. Under its rulings, scientists can patent life forms merely by describing their DNA, and then make it illegal for farmers to save seeds or for societies to use traditional plants without paying a royalty to a foreign corporation. WTO rulings override elected laws of nations. Under their rule, the state of

California is being sued for banning poisonous additives in gasoline. The U.S. cannot ban products made by child labor, or tuna caught in nets that destroy dolphins, or shrimp harvested by methods that kill endangered sea turtles.

The European Union cannot ban hormones in beef. Every environmental, labor and safety law can be challenged as "restraint of trade." Rulings are made by unelected bureaucrats in closed-door proceedings in Geneva. Its proceedings are secret and there are no public records of their deliberations. The WTO tribunal is not accountable to any body of citizens and there is no process of appeal. In effect, it establishes global corporate rule that supercedes national sovereignty.

For me, activism has always sprung directly out of my Witchcraft. Believing that the earth is a living being, that nature is sacred, and that everything is interconnected just seems to lead logically to certain conclusions: that environmental destruction is a Bad Thing, that injustice and oppression and poverty are not so good either, and that blowing up the world with nuclear weapons would make the practice of my religion rather difficult. Holding these opinions, I've always felt obligated to do something about them.

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