

An Open Letter to the Pagan Community

by Starhawk -- December, 1999

Dear friends,

I want to thank you all for all the energy, healing, and concern I've felt from you over the past week. I'm out of jail now, and recovering rapidly from bronchitis. I've been through one of the most intense and powerful experiences of my life-- and I've had a few! Physically, it was often very hard. But over and over again I would look around at the other women I was locked up with, and realize that there was no place else in the world I would rather be at that moment.

Magic works. So many people were sending me protection that I had some very surreal experiences. Just one example: When we got arrested, clubs were smashing down on people to the left and right of me. Cops were throwing protestors to the ground, smashing their faces in the concrete, splitting a head or two. And I was arrested by a reluctant young man who I could tell picked me especially so he could be sure I wouldn't be brutalized and asked me politely after I was handcuffed if I would like to sit on the curb.

I saw incredible acts of courage around me. On Tuesday, our group held a blockade line in the only section that remained peaceful and festive all day. We received whiffs of tear gas blowing in from afar, but were never attacked by the police. Around the corner, however, was a war zone, where groups of blockaders held their lines against horses and while being beaten, tear gassed and pepper sprayed. I was not myself hurt or beaten or roughed up. But I was locked up, for five days, in a high-security real live jail, complete with concrete cells and iron bars and lights that never turn off, even when you're sleeping.

Along with over five hundred other people, I was handcuffed, shackled, stripped of all my personal possessions, and subjected to the force and control of other human beings who, let's just say, did not have my personal welfare at their heart. What criminal act did I commit to warrant this treatment? I walked in a peaceful procession to exercise my constitutional right to freedom of speech, and refused to relinquish that right. When ordered to leave, I sat down.

The media is working hard to portray the protests as a violent riot. Do not believe them. In reality, there were thousands and thousands of peaceful protestors in Seattle and a tiny handful of people who broke windows. The

police did not pursue the windowbreakers-- in fact, when one of them was surrounded and subdued by a group of nonviolent protestors the police refused to arrest him. While the police complain that they "were not prepared for the violence", in reality they condoned and possibly instigated the vandalism that did occur, and that is dwarfed by the immense violence of the police, who used tear gas on peaceful protestors, pepper sprayed handcuffed women in their cells, shot nuns with rubber bullets, beat seated blockaders with billy clubs, ran amuck and terrorized whole neighborhoods.

What the police were truly unprepared for was the power of nonviolence-- not to mention magic! None of the media seem to have a clue as to how the blockade was actually organized. The Direct Action Network, the group I worked with, had been preparing and training people for months. Thousands of people went through nonviolence trainings, to learn how to respond peacefully and courageously in the face of brutality. I helped to give some of the trainings and have the deepest respect for the organizers. We practiced ways to protect each other in dangerous situations and prepared for jail solidarity to prevent individuals from being singled out.

Those who took part in the blockade on Tuesday and the civil disobedience on Wednesday were organized like the Craft has been organized for centuries-- around small groups, affinity groups-- kind of like covens-for-the-action. Each group made its own strategic decisions by consensus, and included both people willing to risk arrest and those who wanted to offer support. Groups sent representatives to spokescouncils where the actions were co-ordinated and overall decisions were made. There was no top down leadership telling people what to do-- and in emergency, high stress situations, small groups could quickly make their own decisions and take action.

The power of this model, I've come to believe, is that the police simply cannot see this kind of organization. Our plans were made in public meetings, there was no way to keep our strategy secret-- yet after months of preparation we were able to completely surround and blockade the Convention Center and hold it closed for the first day of meetings.

Magic helped. We were, of course, working magic on every level, from rituals we offered before the action to a meditation on shared intent that Margo Adair taught us, to the trancework some of us did in our own circles, to the WTO spell (an ice sculpture that melted throughout the ritual) we had as an altar at the Spiral Dance. We worked magic in jail, as well. We sang songs, told stories, shared meditations, and learned to ground and call on the elements. About fifty of us held an impromptu ritual while waiting in a holding cell for arraignment and later danced the spiral dance. We practiced

"the art of changing consciousness at will"-- and it worked. The guards, the threats, the violence and the concrete could not keep out the love, commitment and true joy we shared.

The women I was with in jail were mostly young, but amazingly strong, caring, thoughtful, intelligent and politically aware. There were also a sprinkling of older women whose courage and humor were an inspiration to us. I was hungry, sick, exhausted and in pain a lot of the time-- but I was never for a moment unhappy to be where I was. Instead, I experienced a depth of almost radiant happiness like a pure current in a roiling river that I could tap into whenever my spirit started to flag.

In one of our rituals, my friend Willow had invoked the Green Man and reminded us that oxygen is his breath and he is everywhere. When I lay in my airless, torturously overheated cell at night, coughing and feverish and struggling to breathe, I could call upon him through such air as there was and visualize the cool, moist scent of the redwoods by my home. I'd close my eyes and see the ancestors marching with us in great rivers, turning the tide. And I could feel a depth of strength in myself that I didn't know I had.

It was the most powerful initiation I've ever experienced. Why did we do it? I did it because I am a Pagan and a Witch. I know that in the vast, broad Pagan world out there, we don't all share the same politics-- but I think there are some core things that we do share and the WTO touches all of them. We worship nature. The WTO is part of a global attempt to elevate profit as a value that supersedes nature or any other value. It overrides the laws we have made through our own democratic governments, and in fact becomes a metapower that makes elected governments ineffectual.

Although I've been a lifelong pacifist, I know there are many Pagans in the military and I trust that they believe they are there to defend our democracy-- which the WTO makes null and void. I don't know any Pagans, regardless of politics, who enjoy being bossed around by outside forces and told what to do. The level of police violence and repression that was called out to attempt to protect this ministerial is an example of the kind of force we can expect to face in a corporate controlled world.

We won. The WTO will never, now, be able to quietly assume power and consolidate its rule outside of public awareness. Whatever happens with it, and whatever new strategy they devise to meet the same ends, the issue has been brought to the public table. And a new generation of young activists have been through a life-changing experience. A few uncomfortable

days in the company of heroic and beautiful women seems a very small price to pay.

Again, thank you all for your energy. I was deeply touched to realize how many people were concerned for me. I truly believe that were it not for all the energy and healing, I would have been much, much sicker-- and I've never gotten over a case of bronchitis so fast in my life!

Love and bright Solstice to you all,

Blessed be,

-- *Starhawk*