

# The Bridge At Midnight Trembles: My Story of Quebec City

by Starhawk

Under the freeway, they are drumming. Clad in black, hooded in sweatshirts, they pick up sticks and beat on the iron railings, on the metal sculptures that grace this homeless park, on the underpinnings of the overpass that links the lower town to the upper levels of Quebec City. They are mostly young and they are angry and jubilant, dancing in the night after two days on the barricades. From above, the cops fire volleys of tear gas. It billows up in clouds and drifts down like an eerily beautiful, phantom fog, but the dancers keep on dancing. The sound and the rhythm grows and grows, a roar that fills the city, louder than you can imagine, loud enough, it seems, to crack the freeways, bring the old order down. The rumbling of the rapids as you approach the unseen waterfall. A pulsing, throbbing heartbeat of something being born. A rough beast, not slouching but striding toward Bethlehem, in solidarity and pride.

A carnival, a dance, a battle. Images of war: the tear gas clouds, the spray of the water cannon, the starbursts of exploding gas, and yes, the rocks and bricks and bottles. No one has come here expecting a safe or peaceful struggle. Everyone who is here has overcome fear, and must continue to do so moment by moment.

In the chaos, the confusion, the moments of panic, there is also a sweetness, an exuberance. Spring after winter. Freedom. Release. The rough tenderness of a hand holding open an eye to be washed out from tear gas. The kindness of strangers offering their homes to the protestors: come up, use our toilets, eat these muffins we have baked, fill your bottles with water.

We are the Living River: a cluster within the action that sometimes swells to a couple of hundred people, sometimes shrinks to fifty. Our core is made up of Pagans, who are here because we believe the earth is sacred and that all human beings are part of that living earth. Many of us have known each other and worked together for years: others are new, drawn together from outlying places by the internet and the organizing. One woman has brought her teenage children: our oldest member, Lea, is eighty-four. Our goal is to bring attention to issues of water, we say, although our true goal is to embody the element of water under fire.

We carry the Cochabamba Declaration, which was written by a group of people in Bolivia who staged an uprising to retake their water supply after it had been privatized by Bechtel Corporation. They wrote:

### The Cochabamba Declaration:

"For the right to life, for the respect of nature and the uses and traditions of our ancestors and our peoples, for all time the following shall be declared as inviolable rights with regard to the uses of water given us by the earth:

1) Water belongs to the earth and all species and is sacred to life, therefore, the world's water must be conserved, reclaimed and protected for all future generations and its natural patterns respected.

2) Water is a fundamental human right and a public trust to be guarded by all levels of government, therefore, it should not be commodified, privatized or traded for commercial purposes. These rights must be enshrined at all levels of government. In particular, an international treaty must ensure these principles are noncontroversial.

3) Water is best protected by local communities and citizens who must be respected as equal partners with governments in the protection and regulation of water. Peoples of the earth are the only vehicle to promote earth democracy and save water."

The Declaration is the alternative. It's what we are fighting for, not against. Our goal is to bring it into the Congress Center, declare the FTAA meeting illegitimate because it is not supported by the people, and suggest they begin negotiating to protect the waters. Failing that, we will get as close as we can, and declare the Declaration wherever we are stopped.

As we are mobilizing, our friends in Bolivia stage a March for Life and Sovereignty, which is violently repressed. Oscar Olivera, one of the framers of the Declaration, is arrested, charged with treason, but then released. As we are tear gassed, so the March is tear gassed, again and again. In Bolivia, two people die, one asphyxiated by the gas. In Quebec, there are near deaths, a man shot in the trachea by a rubber bullet, asthma attacks from the tear gas, a finger torn off in the assault on the fence. In Sao Paulo the youth blockading the Avenida Paulista are brutally attacked and beaten. Broke arms, broken wrists: one of our closest friends is beaten on the head so hard her helmet is split in half, but she refuses to leave because she is a medic. At the private hospital, they refuse to treat the protestors. The police chase them away with live ammunition. Those arrested are tortured, held on their knees for over three hours in tight handcuffs while every fifteen

minutes the police come by and beat them on the back. Most are under eighteen,.

Our River has banners and flags and blue cloth suspended on poles and blue costumes and water songs. In theory the action is divided into zones -- a green zone for nonarrest, safe actions; a yellow zone for nonviolent, 'defensive' actions; a red zone for confrontational actions. In practice, aside from two designated green areas, no one knows exactly where these zones are or what they are supposed to mean. Anyway, we're the blue group, something outside of the plan. We are prepared to be nonviolent and confrontational. However, many of us are ten to twenty years older than the average protestor, most of us are women, and for many of the group, this is their first action ever. Some of us are prepared to go over the perimeter, if the chance arises, to risk arrest and physical confrontation. Others are not. So the river has four streams within it. Each will follow a flag of one of the elements. The green Earth flag will always make the safest choice in any situation. The blue Water flag will rally those willing to take the greatest risks. The red Fire and yellow Air flags will support the blue but not directly risk arrest. Affinity groups may stay together to follow one flag, or decide ahead of time how they will split when a moment of danger comes. Each person in the river has a buddy, someone they always keep track of, so that no one can get lost. Our scouts, Charles, Raven, Laura and Lisa, run ahead and check routes, come back and report or phone in. At times, the river is able to stop and make a choice collectively about what to do. At other times, it is impossible to meet or even hear each other, and the flag bearers decide.

**Friday afternoon.** The River has spiraled at the gate at Rene Levesque, where the night before the Women's Action hung our weavings. As we wind up the circle, beginning to raise the power, Evergreen comes up to me with a man in tow who is decked in the Cuban flag. He is part of a small group of indigenous people who have been holding a vigil at the gate, and our group is so metaphoric, (and we never quite got the signs made that said clearly what we were doing) that somehow he has gotten the impression that we are for the FTAA. We are singing, "The river is flowing," and he is from Honduras and his land is flooded from ecological breakdown and hurricane Mitch, and the only way we can demonstrate our solidarity, he says, is to join him in his chant. "Why not?" I shrug and we begin to chant in Spanish and English, "El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido!" "The people, united, will never be defeated!" The shout has a rhythm of its own, an angry and hopeful power.

We dance on down to St. Jean Street, singing, "Fleuve, porte moi, ma mere tu restera, Fleuve, porte moi, vers la ocean." The news comes from our

scouts -- the CLAC march has reached the gate we've just left, and the fence is already down. I literally jump for joy. Quickly we regroup, and the blue, red and yellow flags decide to head back up for the gates. We move up the street, stop in an intersection. Our scouts are ahead of us, checking out the side streets. We make a circle, begin to sing,

"Hold on, hold on, hold the vision until it's born."

We begin a spiral, start to wind the power up, and suddenly I know clearly that we need to move up the hill, into the battle. I look at Willow, our Blue flag bearer, who smiles because she knows what I'm thinking. We nod, and she waves the flag. We advance forward. Up to Rene Levesque, into the avenue and out in front of the theater, singing and drumming. We receive cheers -- "Hey, it's the River." Closer to the gate, the cops are firing tear gas at the crowd. Young men run out of the crowd, shadows in the fog, and throw them back. The gas billows up and is blown back onto the police lines. We are still able to breathe, and sing, so we start a spiral. The circle grows: other people join hands and dance with us, moving ever closer to the gate, not running away, not giving ground. All along it has been hard to decide what the action of this direct action should be. Now we all see that the fence is the action. Challenging it, pulling it down, keeping up the pressure on the perimeter, refusing to go away, demanding to stay and be seen and heard.

We spiral and dance, the drums pounding against the thunder of the projectiles as they shoot tear gas canisters overhead, laughing with the sheer liberation and surrealism of it all. Until at last one shot lands close to us, the gas pours out and engulfs us in a stinging, blinding cloud, and we are forced away.

Down the hill we stop, wash out our eyes, rejoin the red and yellow flags. We help other people who also need their eyes washed. I am grateful for the training Laura gave us -- grateful to remember that I can breathe through the tear gas, though it hurts, to know how to wash eyes properly, how to rinse my throat, spit, rinse, spit before drinking.

We decide to flow on, to the blockade on the Cote d'Abraham a few blocks away. A couple of young people beg us to stay, to go back up the hill, and I'm tempted. They want the energy we bring, and they feel safer when we're there. But we hear that the Cote d'Abraham gate could also use some energy, and the mission of the River is to flow, so we go on. We could use ten, a hundred Rivers.

The gate at the cote d'Abraham is a stage -- elevated above the lower city, it closes off one of the main thoroughfares where three highways converge. A crossroads. We can look out over the lower city and the faraway hills where

a red sun is about to set. When we arrive, the energy feels fragmented. Some people are drumming and dancing, others milling around, some tossing things at the police lines behind the fence, others just not quite knowing what to do. We synch to the beat of the drummers and begin a circle that grows and grows. Three or four hundred people are holding hands when we begin to spiral. The drummers move into the center and we wind and wind the spiral until the chant gets lost in the drum jam beat. Behind us, Donna has moved over to the fence and is scolding the police, especially the one woman among them. "How can you do this? You -- a woman! A Canadian! What are you thinking of!"

The area has been so heavily gassed that many of us can't stay long. The energy peaks, not into a cone of power but into a wild dance. Our scouts report that riot cops are massing down the street, heading toward us to clear the area. I ask the drummers to stop for a moment so we can inform people but they just shrug, 'so what?' They won't let a little thing like a police attack interrupt their music. The river flows on. Behind us, we can look back and see the spray of the water cannon, arching high in the air, filled with light like a holy and terrible rain that plays upon the black figures who hold their ground below..

**Saturday morning:** About twenty of us gather in the house where we're staying. Everyone is braver than before. I am awed. Some of us have been activists for decades, and carry into the actions a slow courage that has grown over many, many years. But some of our people have made that internal journey in one night.

All along I've been carrying a feeling of responsibility for these new people. I know they are all adults; they have made their own choices with their eyes wide open. But still, I know that many of them would not be here in this place of danger if I hadn't urged people to come. And it's one thing to decide, in the safety of your home, to go to a demonstration. It's another thing to face the reality of the chaos, the tear gas, the potential for violence.

I am here, I have done my best to inspire and encourage other people to be here with me, because as scared as I might be of the riot cops and the rubber bullets, I'm a thousand times more scared of what will happen if we aren't here, if we don't challenge that meeting going on behind these walls. Even if the river seems placid, I can hear the roar of the waterfall in my ears. In the beauty of the woods, in the quiet of the morning when I sit outside and listen for the birdsong, in every place that should feel like safety, I know by the feel of the current that we are headed for an irrevocable edge, an ecological/economic/social crash of epic dimensions, for our system is not sustainable and we are running out of room to maneuver.

The mostly men running the governments and the corporations and the economic institutions of the world seem incapable of grasping reality: that nature is real, and has limits and needs of her own that must be respected; that neither human beings nor forests nor oil reserves can be endlessly exploited without causing great damage to the world, that the basic life support systems of the planet are under assault. In the meeting we are protesting, the Congress protected by the fence and the wall and the riot cops and the army, they are planning to unleash the plundering forces and remove all controls. Water, land, forests, energy, health, education, all of the human services communities perform for each other will be confirmed as arenas for corporate profit making, with all of our efforts to regulate the damage undermined.

And I am here because I am inspired by the incredible courage, the energy, the commitment of the mostly young people in this struggle. And because I have felt, all along, a vortex of forces converging on this time and this place, and that a cadre of Witches is just what is needed to work those energies. And what I hear from my friends now confirms my feelings. "I know, now, why you do this." "This is what we have been training for, all these years." "This action itself is a training ground. We're just beginning."

We circle, sing, raise power, and make our decision. We will go to the labor march, whose leaders have planned to walk safely away from the wall. But we will join the groups that plan to break off and return to challenge the perimeter.

**Saturday afternoon:** I am standing in the alley with Juniper who has never been in an action before and with Lisa who has been in many. There is an opening in the wall, but the riot cops stand behind, defending it, their shields down, impermeably masked, padded and gloved and holding their long sticks ready to strike.

Willow moves forward, begins to read the Cochabamba Declaration. The cops interrupt, shouting something, and move out from behind the fence. Their clubs are ready to strike: one holds the gun that fires tear gas projectiles and points it at us. Lisa and I look at each other, one eye on the cops, the other on the crowd behind us. "What do we want to do here?" she asks me. The cops begin to advance.. "Sit down," someone calls behind us, maybe someone we ourselves trained to sit in this very situation. We sit down. The cops tense. Juniper begins to cry. I am going to tell her she doesn't have to be in the front line, but she smiles through the tears and says, "It only gets good when you start to cry," and I know that nothing could make her leave. We are holding hands. I consider whether we should link up, make a stronger line.

We pass the Cochabamba Declaration back to someone who speaks French and begins to read it out loud. I pass my drum back, hoping one of my friends will pick it up. I see one of the cops slightly lower his baton. Another wavers: their perfect line now shows some variation. They are beginning to relax.

A rock sails out of the crowd behind us, flies over our heads and lands at the cops' feet. In a second they are on alert, moving toward us. "NOOOOO!" the whole crowd behind us cries in one outraged voice to the thrower of the rock. "Peace!" they call out to the cops, raising their arms and flashing peace signs. In the front line, we are still, holding hands, waiting. Breathe and ground. The cops slowly relax again.

From behind, someone passes up flowers. Heather brought them in the morning, saying she wanted to do something nonviolent, give them to the police. I remember thinking that hers was an idea so sweet that it belonged in some other universe than the one I anticipated being in that day. She had not looked too happy when I explained that we intended to follow CLAC and the Black Bloc up to the perimeter. "People might think we're supporting them," she said. "Well, we are supporting them," I explained. At least, for some of us that's what we feel called to do -- to be right up there with them in the front lines, holding the magic, grounding the energy, not preaching about nonviolence but just trying to embody it. Now Heather and her flowers are here.

Lisa gets up, holding out her hands to the cops in a gesture of peace, and attempts to give them the Declaration. I watch, holding my breath, ready to back her up if they attack. "We can't take it," one of them whispers to her through clenched teeth. She lays it at his feet. A young man comes forward, lays down a flower. A woman follows with another. Somehow, in that moment, it becomes the perfect gesture.

Everyone relaxes. After a time, we decide to make our exit. The River must flow on. Others move forward to take our place. We snake back to the intersection. Behind us, the young men of our cluster are helping to take down the fence along the cemetery. We begin a spiral in the intersection: masses of people join in with us. From a rooftop above, two of the local people shower us with confetti. We dance in a jubilant snow. The power rises, and as it does an absolute scream of rage tears out of my throat. I'm drumming and wailing and sending waves and waves of this energy back at the Congress Center, and at the same time we are dancing and confetti is swirling down while behind us the tear gas flies and the fence comes down.

When we stop, a woman comes up with news. The only way to be heard in the din and thunder is for the cluster to repeat each sentence. The news becomes a chant:

"I've just heard," "I'VE JUST HEARD!"

"That so much tear gas," "THAT SO MUCH TEAR GAS!"

"Has been blown back into the Congress Center," "HAS BEEN BLOWN BACK INTO THE CONGRESS CENTER!"

"They've had to close down the meetings for two hours." "THEY'VE HAD TO CLOSE DOWN THE MEETINGS FOR TWO HOURS!"

We erupt in cheers.

In front of the gate on St. Jean Street, five young men and one woman stand, their backs to the massed groups of riot cops behind the barrier, their feet apart, one arm up in a peace sign, absolutely still in the midst of chaos, unmasked, unprotected, in a cloud of tear gas so strong we are choking behind our bandannas.

We file behind them, read the Cochabamba statement, and then flow on. They remain, holding the space as their eyes tear, steadfast in their silence, their courage, and their power.

When the Bay Bridge fell in the last San Francisco earthquake, we learned that structures resonate to a frequency. A vibration that matches their internal rhythm can bring them down. Beneath the overpass, they are drumming on the rails. The city is a drum. Massive structures tremble. And a fence is only as strong as its point of attachment to its base.

-- *Starhawk*

("The bridge at midnight trembles" is a line from a Bob Dylan song, Love Minus Zero/No Limits.)

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