

Passcode Redwood: Keeping Repression in Perspective

by Starhawk

November, 2001

Every day when I check my email or look through the alternative newspapers or turn on the radio, I hear something that arouses my fear. A new bill threatening our civil liberties has been passed, or is being passed, here or abroad. An activist has been stopped at an airport, a border; a student has been prevented from flying because of a book he was carrying. Most of these stories are true: some, because of the way they are framed or the lack of full information, are more in the nature of rumors.

We need to know these stories, to monitor the level of state repression that is happening. But each one also contributes to the climate of fear that surrounds us. Every act of repression creates ripples of anxiety, alarm, and rumor that amplify its power. When we're afraid, we make bad choices and often do the work of the oppressors for them, stopping ourselves from speaking out and taking risks. We need to keep that fear in perspective, and remember that acts of resistance can also have a broad impact.

Here's a true story:

On November 12, 2001, I was travelling to Ottawa for the protests against the IMF/World Bank/G20 meetings, together with Lisa Fithian, my friend and fellow member of the R.A.N.T. trainers' collective. We were stopped by Immigration at the airport, questioned and searched, for about five hours. My computer was seized to be examined by Canadian Intelligence, and Lisa was required to return the next morning for an interview to determine whether she could be allowed to stay in Canada. At that meeting, she was told she could leave Canada voluntarily on the next plane, or be arrested. She chose to be arrested in order to stay in the country and fight the decision, and to make a political stand around the issues of freedom of speech and open borders. Within hours, our story became one of those bouncing around the internet and reported on by at least the Canadian media. Lisa's choice became a powerful political act.

Those are some of the bare facts of what was, of course, a complex, emotional and stressful incident to live through. On the vast scale of repression, what happened to us was a relatively small incident, but there are some important lessons to be learned from it.

Repression is spotty and somewhat random:

When we hear about someone being stopped at a border, or taken off a plane, we immediately think, "No one can get through! We won't be able to travel!" We don't generally hear about those who do get across with no difficulties, or think of the thousands of leftists and activists who are flying every day with no problems.

Three other friends of ours from San Francisco went through Immigration at the Ottawa airport at various times. It was clear to Immigration that each was going to the protest -- and all got through, even though two had arrest records, one had dreadlocks, and one had a baby with a tiny Circle A anarchist T-shirt that said, "Infantile Leftism" on one side and "Don't trust anyone over 30 pounds" on the other.

The authorities are not omnipotent:

It's easy to inflate the power of the authorities. Agents of the state try to make us believe they are all powerful and omnipotent. "I know everything," the official at Immigration told me when I asked how he knew I'd been arrested in Seattle. But in fact, he didn't know everything. It became clear in the course of the evening that there were vast and significant realms of information about both me and Lisa, information which had never been secret and had at least at one time been a matter of public record, which they didn't know. Not only that, but a lot of what they do know is wrong, or so distorted as to not actually be useful to them. The more they focus on collecting and trying to make sense of that information, the more confused they'll be. The woman at Customs who was carefully reading every scrap of paper among my belongings was staring for a long time at the manual for my cell phone. I wondered what was so interesting; finally I noticed that on the back was a note that said, "Pass Code Redwood" -- the code that lets me check my messages. For all I know, the Canadian authorities are now trying that code on every potential ecoterrorist file in their jurisdiction.

Encountering repression is a learning experience:

We made a lot of mistakes. Had we not flown directly into a city which was about to host a protest, we probably wouldn't have been stopped. Lisa, in fact, originally was waved through Immigration: I was stopped because their computers showed I'd been arrested in Seattle at the WTO protests. We now know that this is a potential problem, and next time I want to go to Canada, I'll be prepared and can take steps ahead of time to pre-clear my name through the Canadian consulate.

Lisa was tagged when I went up to her to tell her I was going to be delayed.

I was simultaneously trying to call our support people and a guard was yelling at me to get off my cell phone. If I had stayed quietly in the Immigration line and let her go through, she would have had no problem. If we'd been more alert, watching out for each other, I wouldn't have felt the need to contact her. We hadn't prepared a strategy for what we would do if we were stopped, hadn't thought ahead about how we would answer questions. I had cleaned out my bags and pockets before travelling, but not nearly as thoroughly as I could have. The Customs Inspector found leaflets from a 1997 Earth First! Action at Headwaters forest tucked in the back of a jacket pocket I had forgotten about (definitely suspicious when you factor in Passcode Redwood!) I had phone numbers written on scratch paper that had old emails on it about past actions. We were not as well prepared as we should have been. But then, we are not international spies or clandestine operatives. We're activists, trainers, and organizers who work openly and we've spent our time developing skills like talking to the media or preparing people to deescalate police violence rather than honing the tradecraft of an operative in a Le Carre novel.

We also did some things right. We stayed calm. We never showed either anger or fear. We remained confident and cheerful, in spite of starting out sick and exhausted. We remained friendly to all the authorities and enlisted their friendship without ever falling into the trap of trusting it. We cooperated with every reasonable request, and some unreasonable ones when we assessed that objecting would get us nowhere. And we never wavered in our inner conviction that we have a right to cross borders to protest global institutions which themselves transcend borders, and that letting us into Canada would serve the interests of Canada. Which is to say, we identified the interests of Canada as being with the service of democracy, which includes open dissent, not with the policies of the IMF/World Bank/G20, or with those of the police or Intelligence services. We never saw ourselves as enemies of the state, but remained proud of being who and what we are.

Repression can be fought:

Why did Lisa choose to go to jail, and risk being banned from Canada for life? Repressive systems cannot function if they actually have to use force to back up every ruling or decree. It becomes too costly for them. Instead, they rely on our compliance, out of fear or out of hope of some gain. The more we refuse to comply, the more we undermine their power. Had Lisa gotten on the plane and gone home, she would have been safer, but there would have been no challenge to the system's authority. By staying, she forced the system to defend itself, costing it time, money, staff power, and public censure.

Of course, resistance is also costly. While Lisa was debating what to do, she asked two questions, "Is there a larger political gain to be made here?" and "Do I have support? Is this a battle the local organizers want to fight?" The answer to both was "yes." Canada is presently debating two "Anti-Terrorist" measures that would restrict civil liberties, and the local organizers saw her arrest as an opportunity to raise the issue of how these bills would target democratic dissent. We received great support from the Global Democracy Ottawa coalition and all the groups organizing the action, from Mothers and Midwives and the Ontario Public Interest Research Group who helped us find legal counsel, set up press conferences and take care of all the practical details. Through our networks we could alert people around the world who called, wrote, and put political pressure on the Canadian authorities. Without that support, her choice might have been an act of fruitless martyrdom rather than an effective political strategy.

We won. After two days, Canadian Immigration released Lisa and allowed her to enter the country without conditions. We were officially welcomed to Canada by Svend Robinson, the NDP Minister of Parliament. Throughout, we got good media coverage and were able to draw attention to the dangers of restricting civil rights.

We need a larger solidarity:

All those phone calls, faxes, emails, and letters you are urged to make or send really do make a difference. Public opinion is starting to shift, to question the loss of our civil liberties. We have many opportunities to mobilize it in favor of real democracy.

To do so, we need to nurture the broad solidarity we already have in the movement. That means we need to be careful to check out stories and rumors before we spread them, to be sure support is really needed or outrage justified before we ask for it. And when it is, we need to be committed to backing each other up. The small acts, the faxes and phone calls, are as important as the large acts -- they are what make it possible to take the risks of noncooperation, and they build the momentum that can turn the tide.

Real repression is growing. Again, what happened to us was small. Currently, eleven or thirteen or fifteen hundred people (now Ashcroft is saying six hundred) have disappeared into indefinite detainment by U.S. Immigration. Thousands of other are subject to questioning and interrogation simply because they happen to be Middle Eastern. Grand juries are being convened in Oregon to investigate "ecoterrorism."

We may each get our turn to be on the front lines of the struggle. Hard as that is, when we know we have support, each battle can become an opportunity to strengthen our movement instead of letting it fragment, to raise the costs for the system, to shift public opinion and make people crave real democracy. We're very grateful to all those who supported us, from offering us free legal services to calling the Canadian embassy on our behalf. Next time, if it's you, you can count on us to watch your back.

Copyright (c) 2001 by Starhawk. All rights reserved. This copyright protects Starhawk's right to future publication of her work. Nonprofit, activist, and educational groups may circulate this essay (forward it, reprint it, translate it, post it, or reproduce it) for nonprofit uses. Please do not change any part of it without permission. Please keep this copyright notice with it. Readers are invited to visit the web site: www.starhawk.org.

*** NOTICE: In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes.***