

RNC Update Number One: On the March from the Democratic National Convention to the Republican National Convention

by Starhawk

We're marching out of New Haven, this band of about sixty people, some of whom have marched all the way from Boston. I've joined the DNC2RNC march for two days, the group that is going on foot from the Democratic National Convention to the Republican National Convention. Last night we presented a program to the local community on Palestine issues. Tonight, Juniper and I will do a training for them in nonviolent direct action.

We walk past the ivy-covered stone buildings of Yale University, past the town green and the elegantly simple Colonial churches, out on streets of wooden houses to the highway.

Another march is also leaving New Haven this morning, the Stone March, organized by September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. They are pushing a caisson all the way, with a gravestone in it inscribed, "Unknown Civilian Killed in War." It's very moving to see them, to think about the loved ones they've lost, the losses going on every day in Iraq and Palestine, in the Sudan and all over, those who have no one left to remember and mourn.

Our march is pulling a small wagon with a tree sculpture on it, which seems to have a wayward mind of its own about where to go. We pass a lake and wetlands and on for miles on the side of the road, the New England suburbs of huge houses set back on acres of lawn, the intervals of sprawl, convenience stores and gas stations. The march goes at a delightfully slow pace. For once, I'm not struggling to keep up, and I have leisure to talk to people and get to know them. Some are old friends from other actions, veteran activists. Jesse is my age, another middle-aged radical in the Pagan Cluster, from Philly. Cedar is a gray-haired woman from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. David M. helped organize for Miami and has been on the conference calls for the True Security Cluster.

Others are new to activism. I talk to a tall, blond young man who details yachts and teaches scuba diving for a living—this is his first big protest. Some are just out of university, trying to decide what to do with their lives. Others have never made it that far in school. They range from neatly dressed, respectable looking solid citizens to black clad, dreadlocked, patched and pierced punks, but all are walking together on this march, living together for a month, working out agreements and negotiating their disagreements.

We stop for lunch at a campground, and have a meeting to try and hammer out nonviolence agreements for their entry march into New York, which they have decided

to do as a theater piece, coming in masked and marching as a Zapatista insurgency.

Masks are illegal in New York and they risk arrest. I listen to the discussion. I'm not part of the march, and it is not my place to enter into the decision making around this, but I am interested in watching the process and occasionally trying to help it along.

Rick, who is from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, tries patiently to facilitate. The group has agreed on a nonviolence statement, but what does that mean in practice? No one wants to do any property damage on the march, but some people very strongly do not ever want to tell anyone else what to do or not do. Is chalking the sidewalk 'vandalism'?

These discussions are never easy, and for a long time now we've avoided them by not having agreements or guidelines. As frustrating as they can be, I think it's a healthy sign that we are having them again. Many of us have felt that in the current climate of repression, and in a city as traumatized by extreme violence as New York, that actions conducted with explicit statements of OUR nonviolence would be the most effective thing we could do.

After lunch, I take off for the afternoon to catch up on some other work, rejoin the group in the early evening where they are camped in a local park. Juniper is marveling at the energy of these young women and men who have marched nearly ten miles and are now playing a wild game of ultimate Frisbee. We gather up most of the group and begin our training while dinner is cooking. I ask the group for a show of hands on how long they've been activists: many raise their hands at two years but only two or three of us at five years or more. It's clear that many of them don't have a lot of street action experience, and those that do, have as their base of what is normal the heightened repression and general brutality of the recent era. I say just a few words about how different the movement looks from a longer perspective, that when we face such scrutiny, surveillance, and repression we often want to hide and we develop a security culture that, if we're not careful, we internalize as suspicion and lack of trust. But that there can also be power in organizing openly, standing openly for what you believe, not hiding your face or name but saying, "I stand behind what I do and I'm proud of it and willing to take the consequences." In all the discussions of tactics and agreements, this is one aspect of traditional nonviolence that I fear often gets lost.

We start with grounding, awareness exercises, teaching people how to acknowledge and let go of fear, how to pay attention to what is around. We play out a couple of snatch scenarios—undercover cops grabbing someone out of the crowd, in part just to get them used to responding as a group. Juniper is a great partner—but she's newer to training and we didn't end up with time to go over the training and explain all the parts.

As a result, I end up on autopilot a lot of time, doing parts that she could have done with a little more preparation. We set up some hassle lines to practice de-escalating violence, and try out some blockade tactics, with exuberant youth launching themselves at the blockade lines, leaping and clambering over each other. Ah, to be that light and flexible and fearless!!

Then we break for dinner. A couple of the participants are local people, who've just happened by and joined in, which is wonderful. They thank us, and we line up for the dinner Seeds of Peace has cooked out of their bus, and try out the portable composting toilet that Casey has helped the group set up—part of the ongoing permaculture efforts.

After, it's getting late and dark, the group is smaller, and we concentrate on role plays. By the time we're done, it's after eleven. We say goodbye, and climb back into the truck we've borrowed to drive back to New York City, listening to the CDs that the wonderful singer David Rovics gave me the night before when we met in New Haven. One of my favorite of his songs is, "After the Revolution": "I'm going to spend a couple of years catching up with my friends and lovers, sleeping 'till eleven, warm beneath the covers..." Yes!

The website for the march is www.dnc2rnc.org

For the United for Peace and Justice March on 8/29 see: www.unitedforpeace.org

For the A31 Day of Action see www.A31.org

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