

The Gifts of Grief

Oct. 28, 2005

by Starhawk

I woke up this morning thinking about grief. It's almost Halloween, the time of year when, we say, the veil is thin between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Here in San Francisco, we're preparing for our big, public, Spiral Dance ritual on Saturday night, busy getting all the last-minute details taken care of, dealing with the complexities of a new location and a new form for the ritual. It's easy to get caught up in the responsibilities and the practicalities...but this morning, in that twilight space between waking and sleeping, I found myself thinking of the dead.

There are so many dead this year. So many large scale tragedies. The great wave last winter that swept tens of thousands to their death in Asia. The hurricanes and floods in the Gulf Coast and the Caribbean. The earthquake in Pakistan, the mudslides in Guatemala, the simmering volcanoes in El Salvador. Natural disasters—compounded by official neglect, intensified by global warming and the destruction of wetlands and mangrove swamps and all of nature's protective systems.

And the dead of war. Two thousand American soldiers, tens of thousands of Iraqis. A constant attrition of Palestinians and Israelis. The countless war dead of Africa who have dropped out of the news. Each death a loss to someone, a huge well of grief.

My mother, who died thirteen years ago, was an expert on loss and grief. A psychotherapist, she wrote a book, "A Time to Grieve", which is still a classic in the field of bereavement. She taught me that grief is not something to fear. If we let ourselves feel our pain and loss, if we truly mourn and rage, grief has a healing, transformative power.

Cindy Sheehan, the mother of one of those dead soldiers, is taking her grief to the gates of the White House, chaining herself to the fence like the suffragists who demanded votes for women, long ago. I met her earlier this year, at Crawford, Texas, where she encamped before Bush's ranch demanding to meet him face to face, to confront him with the reality of her loss, to ask him what was the noble cause her son died for. Her vigil there was like the small waves of the sea, eating away at the buttresses of his power, a harbinger of the storm surge to come.

If compassion is the ability to feel and imagine someone else's grief, Bush and his cabal of ultra-right advisors have long seemed lacking. Moreover, they have fed on death, used death and fear and horror to buttress their power. They used the deaths of September 11 to extend their power. They used fear and ruthlessness to stun their opposition into silence and complicity as they unleashed a brutal and criminal war. Like

vampires, they have maintained their unnatural life with blood.

But the counter to this ghoulish power is real grief, real loss. True grief has the power to open the heart. It strips away lies, dissolves false differences, and reminds us that we are all vulnerable, all mortal, all clinging for our lives to those fragile cords of love that bind us to those we care about. True grief casts out fear.

"There's nothing they can do to me," Cindy Sheehan said to me at Camp Casey.
"There's nothing more than can take from me. I've already lost my son."

Standing among the pictures of the dead, at Camp Casey, I imagined the spirits of those soldiers rising up, a tidal wave of rage and anguish turning against those who caused and misuse their deaths. I see Cindy, fearless in her grief, strong in her mother-right, bringing that spectral army to the gates of the White House itself. I see them enter in, cleansing, rooting out lies, overturning every false foundation. I feel a fresh wind blowing, awakening courage, integrity, and compassion in all of our hearts.

This is the spell I would shape this Samhain season. We are in a time of great loss, facing more before the world comes back into balance. The gifts of grief are painful, but if we open to them, allow our hearts to break and in breaking, expand, then grief and compassion may save our lives.

If you are in the San Francisco Bay Area and want to join our Spiral Dance ritual it's on Saturday, October 29, 2005 at Kezar Pavilion (note new location!). 755 Stanyan Street, San Francisco 94117 (north-east corner of Golden Gate Park, off the MUNI N line). Doors open at 6 pm, ritual at 7:30 pm. For more information see the Reclaiming web site at www.reclaiming.org/rituals/samhain.html

Starhawk's mother's book is:

A Time to Grieve: Loss as a Universal Human Experience, by Dr. Bertha Simos, NY, Family Service Association of America.

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Starhawk is the author of ten books on earth-based spirituality and activism, including *The Earth Path*, *The Spiral Dance*, and together with M. Macha Nightmare, *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying*. She teaches and creates ritual with the Reclaiming network that links earth-based spirituality and activism. www.reclaiming.org, offers Earth Activist Trainings in permaculture design, www.earthactivisttraining.org and organizing and action trainings with the Root Activist Network of Trainers, www.rantcollective.net.
