

Bioremediating New Orleans 3: Miss Eva's House

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By Starhawk

I spend the morning in the lower Ninth Ward cleaning up the yard we intend to bioremediate. It's a small yard in front of a modest, brick house that withstood the hurricane and the breaking of the levee. On one side, a mound of rubble, trash, rotted drywall and garbage fills the driveway. Similar mounds line the street, a barricade in front of every house, leaving narrow pathways through which we can enter the yard. They remind me of the way the snowploughs would pile drifts along the Minnesota streets of my childhood.

As we arrive and begin to suit up in protective Tyvex, masks and gloves, an official arrives from the company that has the contract to clear the streets. He offers to send a crew that afternoon to remove the piles in front of our house. We are thrilled: then we can begin to work on the yard without mountains of garbage leaching back into the ground.

I begin moving the china which the Common Ground crew who gutted the house has carefully placed on the walkway in the side yard. Some of it is very close to the garbage pile, and I'm worried that the machinery the crew will use might crush these frail survivors from the flood. I move dishes, wineglasses, cups and saucers. Statures of saints, crosses encrusted with china paste flowers.. Flowered china plates with gold rimmed edges, embossed platters, a cut glass candy dish shaped like a heart.

Gradually I begin to get a picture of the woman who lived in this house. She's a Catholic. Her taste in china is very similar to mine. She had children, perhaps grandchildren, that she loved. Her dead refrigerator sits out front. On it are stickers with children's faces—the kind that school districts now give out with the yearly school pictures printed on them. Most are blurred and faded. One or two show a bright, smiling young girl with a dark face and neat braids.

Grandchildren, maybe great grandchildren? This woman's name is—I sincerely hope still is—Eva. I hope and believe that she evacuated in time, and is still alive, and will come back. And that when she does, she'll be glad to find these white and silver cups. I can see her serving coffee to a special friend, or pouring tea from this pale blue and yellow teapot with the silver rim. I find a certificate from a Senior's program, damp but still legible. Then I find a plaque—To Our Beloved Aunt Eva, on her 95th Birthday. It's dated back in 2002. The woman who lived here is nearly a century old. I take her books of photographs out to the yard to try and dry them out and save some of the pictures. One or two are still intact: a baby of fifteen months, two teenage girls who might be twins, flanking a tall, rangy, teenage boy. But the pictures have all run into abstract amoebas of shapeless colors, like the blurring of lives that have faded even

from memory.

Juniper spends the afternoon poring over data. We look at the maps together, pondering the geography of contamination. Why is this cluster of arsenic here? Could it be the golf course nearby? But why the barium, the cadmium? Could there have been a smelter here long ago? A landfill? The archaeology of toxicity. No crime can truly be hidden forever, no taint disappears. The soil knows. The earth holds its memories in molecular bonds of clay and silt and sand. Every toxin leaves its trace.

When I was a child, my mother, a psychotherapist, used to tell me stories about her clients instead of fairy tales. I was fascinated by the process of delving into someone's past, tracing back the veins of emotional toxicity to their source. Today I'm thinking about the similarities to this work. The contaminants in the soil reflect the history of social toxicity, the taints in our thinking that allowed a society to locate a smelter in a poor community, to claim the high ground for the privileged.

We don't yet have techniques to test the soil for the lingering anguish of slavery, the ongoing depletion of poverty, the scars of abuse, the miasma of hopelessness. Nor do we yet know how to bioremediate racism, corruption, or greed. But it's my hope that healing the poisons in the soil will also in some small way help to heal the toxins in the soul. The cures for both arise from this simple understanding: we are all connected. We all live in Miss Eva's house. Her name means 'life'.

Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of *The Earth Path*, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and other books on feminism, politics and earth-based spirituality. She teaches [Earth Activist Trainings](#) that combine permaculture design and activist skills, www.earthactivisttraining.org and works with the RANT trainer's collective, www.rantcollective.net that offers training and support for mobilizations around global justice and peace issues.

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