

Hold the Vision

September 14, 2001

The world has changed in the past week. An act of violence and horror has cost the lives of thousands, and shattered all of our plans and expectations for the future.

We who have been working for global justice now face an enormous challenge. Since Seattle, we've built and sustained a movement in spite of continually escalating police violence and attempts by the media to paint us as violent thugs. Genoa did not intimidate us, and momentum was growing for the demonstrations in Washington DC at the end of the month. Public opinion was shifting, and the whole edifice of corporate rule was losing legitimacy.

The terrorist attacks of last Tuesday could undermine all of our work, at least in the short term. They are the perfect excuse for the state to intensify its repression, restrict civil liberties, and for anyone who speaks out against blind retaliation to be demonized.

The mood of the country is potentially ugly. People are scared. They're angry. Their sense of power and invulnerability has been badly shaken, and in the U.S., they're not used to it. They're grasping at anything which can restore their sense of power over their lives, and in a violent society, that means punishment, retaliation, war.

And many of us activists are also scared. I know how easily I can sink into fear and despair right now. I'm scared of the repression that might come, scared of being personally targeted, scared of the loss of our liberties, scared, yes, of further attacks. But most of all I'm scared for the movement, which I believe is crucial to our survival as a species.

And yet I also believe that the current crisis can be a great opportunity, if we can only see how to grasp it. Extraordinary times create extraordinary openings and possibilities. Our usual patterns and ways of thinking are shattered. When structures fall, something new can be built.

To do that, we have to behave in extraordinary ways. We need to acknowledge our fears, but not act out of fear. Fear leads to bad decisions and constricted vision, just when we need to see most clearly.

"Hold on, hold on, hold the vision, that's being born," our cluster chanted in Quebec City.

It may be that the most radical thing we can do right now is to act from our vision, not our fear, and to believe in the possibility of its realization. Every force around us is pushing us to close down, insulate, retreat. Instead, we need to advance, but in a different way. We're called to take a leap into the unknown.

As a movement, we've often been accused of lacking a clear vision of the world we want. I think we do have a vision, that includes diversity and rejects uniform, dogmatic formulations. But within all its varied forms there's a clear common ground: we want a world of liberty and justice for all. It sounds downright patriotic but if you think about its

ramifications, they are revolutionary. And we want a world in which no one has to fear violence, which is the ultimate violation of freedom.

There are many voices right now trying to mobilize people around fear, anger and blame. As radicals, tried to mobilize people out of guilt, or shame. This is the moment to reinvent our approach, our strategies and our tactics, to believe in the possibility of moving people to act from hope, to act in the service of what they love. What would this look like? It would mean embodying the world we want to create in our own movement, and in our actions.

Times of grief and anguish can strengthen our bonds. Right now, more than ever, we in the movement need each other as never before, and we need to treat each other well, to cherish and care for and support each other and become the community we like to imagine. Our solidarity must go deeper than we've ever known before. Solidarity means listening to each other with respect, and being willing to protect and support people with whom we may disagree on many levels, or who might simply irritate us. Solidarity means strengthening our practice of direct democracy, our openness and communication with each other, our willingness to bring everyone to the table and give everyone affected by a decision a voice in making it. It means putting aside our usual internal politicking and maneuvering and treating each other with openness and trust. This is not simple to do. But in a moment when the ordinary patterns of life around us have been shattered, shifting our own patterns of behavior may actually be easier. Perspectives change, and the issues that last week seemed so important now seem trivial.

What would this look like tactically, say, in DC two weeks from now? First, we'd have to deliberately drop our assumptions, whether they are that confrontation is always the strongest action, or that nonviolence is always the most moral action, or that direct action is always our strategy of choice, or that a march and a rally with speakers are the ultimate form of politics, and ask what makes most sense? What is most visionary?

I'd like to see whatever we do involve some kind of process of mutual discussion and education around our visions of alternatives. And I'd like to see us think of ways to take that outside of our own groups and into the community, and to bring in voices from the community to teach us about their issues and concerns. That could be a consulta, a teach-in or maybe a learn-in, where we go out into the community and ask people how issues of power and inequality affect their lives, or what their visions are of the world they want. In a time of fear and despair, calling people to consider their visions could be a powerful form of action.

I also think it's important, symbolically and politically, that we make some kind of strong, visible presence in the streets, that we don't voluntarily relinquish the one political space in which we've been able to have a significant impact. But I also think it's important that what we do in the street be appropriate to the moment. A mourning procession, a vigil or rite of healing might make sense right now: a standard march with shouted slogans and printed signs would be offensive. But it's hard to predict what the mood or situation of the country will be two weeks from now. We could be heading into a full fledged war, and a large march might be a needed and powerful statement.

Direct action is a powerful tool, but like a chainsaw it's not the tool you want in every situation. Direct action points a spotlight on an issue, can directly interfere with an

unjust group or situation, and delegitimize an institution or policy. Used at the wrong moment, without a strong base of support, it risks legitimizing the very institutions we seek to undermine.

Many police have just given their lives because they stayed in a dangerous situation helping other people get out. A lot of us in this struggle talk about being willing to die. They just did. Whatever we feel about police as tools of the state, now is not a good moment for a heavy police confrontation. In fact, although generally I'm against negotiating with the police, in this case I'd certainly consider that it might be a wise and even a generous thing to do. As individuals, the police are of a class that doesn't gain from the policies we oppose. Let's not write off the possibility that some of them could be brought to support us.

I want peace, not war. But calling for 'peace' at this moment does not sufficiently address the fear, anger and powerlessness people feel. I'd like to see us call for justice:

- Justice for the victims of this week's terrorist attacks.
- Justice, not blind vengeance—meaning that we need to know clearly and certainly who carried out the attacks before we retaliate.
- Justice for the Arab Americans who live among us. They deserve our support and protection.
- Justice for the people of other countries who could soon become our victims.
- Justice for the many, many victims of ongoing terror around the world, and recognition of the part we have played in supporting and forging that terror.
- Economic and environmental justice.

These are my thoughts at the moment. They could change as the situation changes. But mostly I suggest that we all begin a creative thinking process, that we consciously choose to set aside our fears and our depression. I suggest that before we agree to do anything we've done before, we consider at least three creative new alternatives. I think we should show up in Washington, if not in the numbers and way we expected, then in some other dimension of strength, and hold open the possibility that we can create not just a protest, but moments of public beauty that can transform the world. Finally, I want to say a word about faith. 'Faith' and 'religion' are being thrown around and served up to us in ways that are at the moment rather sickening. Religion of any denomination can motivate the worst acts and be a rationale for hate. And yet it's hard to get through times like these without faith in something.

I don't generally like to inflict my spirituality on people who might not want it. But I feel moved to tell you what's getting me through the night, along with the love and support of my community. It's the faith that there is a great, creative power that works through the living world toward life, diversity, healing and regeneration. That power works in us, in our human love, in our work for justice, in our courage and our visions. We don't need priests or ministers or even Witches to contact that power for us: we each have our own direct line. It exists within us, infinite, unlimited. Ultimately, it is stronger than fear, stronger than violence, stronger than hate. I wish you all deep contact with whatever feeds your soul, and nourishment from whoever and whatever you most love.

-- *Starhawk*

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