

Spells and Counterspells: Why Act Now?

By Starhawk

The days are short and cold, the streets are uninviting. The political climate seems as chilly as the winter winds, and everybody is saying that 9/11 changed everything. Why take action now?

The government, the media, even some of our own allies warn us that public opinion is no longer with us, that repression will be high, that any action we take will be too costly both personally and politically, that we should hold back and wait.

But The WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the other institutions of corporate capitalism are not waiting. They continue to meet, to argue for a new round of trade negotiations, to impose policies that result in a widening gap between rich and poor, and a staggering global death toll. And as winter nears, the potential rises for massive starvation in Afghanistan if relief trucks cannot deliver supplies because of our bombs.

And so on bad days we hear our own inner voices murmuring, 'It's hopeless. We've lost. The forces we face are too strong for us. Give up.' These voices seem reasonable, sensible. But any Witch can recognize a spell being cast.

A spell is a story we tell ourselves that shapes our emotional and psychic world. The media, the authorities tell a story so pervasive that most people mistake it for reality. We're fighting a righteous war against the Source of All Evil, and everyone supports Bush, and corporate control is the only way to be safe and to provide what we need, and to question is Evil, too.

The counterspell is simple: tell a different story. Pull back the curtain: expose their story for the false tale it is. Act 'as if'.

- Act as if we weren't doomed, as if what we did in the next weeks and months could shift the balance of fate.
- Act as if the movement were coming back stronger than ever, attracting thousands and hundreds of thousands who have had their eyes opened by the war.
- Act as if this movement were the most creative, visionary, inspiring, funny, welcoming, transforming and truly revolutionary movement that had ever been. As if we had new language, new tactics, new ways of communicating that could waken the dormant dissent and the sleeping visions in every heart.
- Act as if a whole new public dialogue was beginning outside the boxes drawn by our traditional political lines and our TV sets.

- Act as if all the different factions in our movement were learning how to support each other, how to work in true coalition and act with true solidarity. As if all who should be allies were able to come together and work for our common goals.
- Act as if we were going to win.

November, two years after Seattle, will see the WTO meeting in Qatar November 9-13. Imagine hundreds of Seattles springing up in the many local and regional actions being planned, opposition rising up all over the world.

The IMF and the World Bank have rescheduled their meeting for Ottawa on November 17 and 18. Imagine the demonstrations now being called against them and against the war astounding the world, confounding the police, shutting down the meetings and revitalizing the movement.

The School of the Americas Watch is having its annual action that same weekend in Fort Benning, Georgia. Imagine that action getting the attention it deserves, awakening the conscience of the people of the United States to the role our government has played in training state terrorists around the globe.

But won't these actions alienate and polarize people? Maybe, if they're ill conceived, gratuitously violent, or simply a matter of screaming the old slogans of the sixties over bullhorns. Or if they're timid, apologetic, whining, they may simply leave people bored and yawning. But our silence will not change public opinion, will not educate people or get them thinking again about larger issues. Actions that are creative, vibrant, confident and visionary, actions that directly and clearly confront the institutions we oppose and pose alternatives can be empowering both to those who take part and to those who hear of them. We need to advance, not retreat, to take the political space we want and claim it. If we silence ourselves, we're tacitly agreeing that our protests are indeed some distant kin to the terrorists' acts. If we insist that our voices be heard, that open dissent is not terrorism, but the deepest commitment to democracy, once the inevitable vitriol wears off, we'll find that we've gained legitimacy and shifted the ground of the dialogue. The longer we wait to claim that space, the more rigidified the patterns of oppression will grow. We need to act now, while the future is still fluid, and set the pattern ourselves. Since 911, I've been to more rallies and marches than I can count. I've marched with Gandhian pacifists and white-haired women in wheelchairs. I've marched with dancing, drumming Pagans. I've marched with Socialists and militants screaming about imperialism. I've marched with black masked anarchists surrounded by riot cops.

And you know what? It's been okay. The police have behaved like police behave, sometimes restrained, sometimes provocative, occasionally vicious-but that's not new. At times we met counter demonstrators, but never been more than a handful. And we often received unexpected support. I've seen construction workers flash peace signs at the Black Bloc.

Of course, our fears aren't just based on fictions. The authorities command real force, real tear gas, real clubs, real guns, real jails. Real people do die, go to prison, suffer. So might we.

But fear makes things worse than they are. Fear limits our vision and our ability to take in information, makes the power holders seem omnipotent, and leads to our suppressing ourselves, saving the authorities the cost and trouble of doing it. And despair leads to paralysis.

The counterspell for fear is courage: facing the possibility of the worst and then going ahead with what you know is right. The counterspell for despair is action in service of a vision. The counterspell for paralysis is stubborn, persistent passion.

Even if we're wrong, if nothing we do does makes a difference, courage and passion are a better place to be than hopelessness, cynicism and fear. If the authorities repress us, that's better than becoming people who repress ourselves. If we see our dreams ripped out of our hands, that's better than never daring to dream at all.

And if we tell our own stories with enough intensity and focus, we'll start to believe them, and so will others. We'll break the spells that bind us. We'll start to want that other world we say is possible with such intensity that nothing can stop us or deny us. All it takes is our willingness to act from vision, not from fear, to risk hoping, to dare to act for what we love.

-- *Starhawk*

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