

# **Peace Actions: Martin Luther King Weekend 1/18/03-1/20/03 Washington, DC**

**By Starhawk**

**Friday:**

We arrived at Lafayette Park, directly across from the White House, at 9 AM in the morning. The day was cold, well below freezing, and a frosting of snow covered the ground. No one was there but us and a couple of dedicated women in Pink who were holding the vigil in front of the White House.

A couple of our group traced a labyrinth in the snow. We set up our webs, stomped our feet and blew smoke with our breath. Others began to arrive, slowly, and when the moment was right we joined hands, cast a circle, and walked the labyrinth. Some of us walked in, but not out—a simple form of light trance induction.

The day was relaxed, with women coming and going and some of us taking turns to go for tea and warmup. Around noon, when the weather had warmed and a slightly larger group had gathered, we circled up, sang and chanted. Flocks of pigeons flew through our circle, wheeled overhead and made three complete spirals above us, moving energy through the air. We spoke about the need to unbind the negative ties within us, the bindings that held the White House and the power it represented tied to undemocratic interests, and the need to weave new webs of peace and justice. We had over a dozen webs loosely framed in hula hoops, in various patterns, some like a spiderweb with radiating anchors and a loose spiral weaving them together: some like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, and some in dreamcatcher patterns. We had bundles of balls of yarn and ribbons of fabric scraps.

I asked people to think about what negative ties in themselves they wanted to release. We had originally planned to create some kind of rope construction where we could actually take apart knots as we did the releasing—but the truth is we all had some resistance to making the tangle and never quite did. It was honestly too cold to take off our gloves and I thought perhaps doing the inner work and speaking the intention might be better than constructing something which we might not actually be able to undo.

We all spoke into the circle about what we wanted to undo, and it really struck me how many of the women named 'fear'. Just then Roxanne, from the AFSC and one of the organizers, came over and told me the police were starting to make threats. We were not allowed to have over twenty-five people gathered together in Lafayette Park without

a permit, and since September 11 they were not issuing any permits for gatherings in Lafayette Park. So I suggested to the women that we break into groups, take a web, and weave into it our hopes for peace and justice, using the time to talk together.

There were also indoor spaces available for groups to go to and get out of the cold.

Women took webs and started weaving. Lisa, Ruby, Joanne and the rest of the Pagan Cluster came back from taking their warm-up break, and started weaving yarn among the trees in the park. We soon had a multicolored, beautiful web. They took handfuls of ribbons and offered them to passersby and to the school groups who were waiting to go for their White House tour, encouraging them to write their dreams or simply make a wish for peace and hang the ribbons on the webs. Most of the school groups were instructed not to talk to us, but at least one escaped control, grabbed their ribbons, and eagerly tied them on the web.

"My dream is to be a singer," one young girl cried out.

The web grew larger and the ribbons caught the wind and streamed out toward the White House, and I could see the energies of all those dreams running toward that sinkhole of power like fresh currents scouring a stagnant pool, and I felt a wave of hope and optimism and power wash through me.

Immediately, the police came over, and told us to take the web down. Lisa negotiated with them.

"You've got to take this down, or we'll cut it down," the officer said. In their uniforms, they looked less prepared for the weather than we were.

"Before we get into that," Lisa said, giving them her best All-American smile, "Don't you think it's beautiful?"

They wouldn't comment either way, but went back and forth for awhile, claiming it was a hazard to pedestrians (there weren't any) and would hurt the trees, and finally she just told them that we weren't going to take it down. The blond woman from the park police pulled out her notebook, as the men whipped out knives and began cutting it down. I just stood back, to back Lisa up if she needed it but mostly to focus our intention, that if the web were cut or taken down that would release the power of all those dreams. The woman officer wanted Lisa's name and address, for her report, she said.

"I'm not going to give you my name," Lisa said, calmly but firmly. "You see, I'm not going to participate in the nightmare any longer. I choose life today." And she walked away.

Around five o'clock, a larger crowd began to gather for the procession to Farragut square. We grounded again, and Victoria, from the Women's Vigil, taught us a beautiful chant:

**"Courage, sisters,  
You do not walk alone**

**, We will stand with you  
And guide your spirit home."**

We lit candles and walked, singing, over to Farragut Square to join the Women in Black for a silent vigil. By that time our numbers had grown to at least a couple of hundred women, and we lined one whole block of the square. Although I will say that the concept of the 'silent vigil' never quite got across. Groups of women were singing and others were chatting. I've been with Women in Black in San Francisco when we lined Union Square and stood in silence with a solemn and eerie power—but I've also stood with Women in Black in Jerusalem when no one was silent for a minute but everyone was talking, gossiping, and arguing fiercely the whole time. The idea of a silent vigil is beautiful, the reality is that it's very hard to get a group to achieve and maintain silence, especially in the dark and cold when a few drums and a good chant can help hold the energy so well.

At any rate, at a little after six we pulled the line into a circle and began a spiral dance, singing:

**"We are a circle, within a circle  
With no beginning and never ending..."**

**Breath by breath, thread by thread,  
Conjure justice, weave our web..."**

By then we had two or three hundred people, and the dance wound up into a beautiful cone of power that was the climax of the day.

Then we walked up the block to the Luther Center for a women's forum. We had about eighty participants—had we arranged for some food or left a longer space for dinner, I think we might have had more. But the speakers were inspiring and succinct, we had music and libations and blessings and heard many talk about the impact of militarism on their communities. Then we took some time to break into small groups and discuss how the three evils: poverty, war and racism, named by Martin Luther King affected our communities, and how we can organize around them.

Many thanks to Victoria and Yulan from the Women's Vigil, and to Roxanne from the American Friends Service Committee, who did the bulk of the organizing.

**Saturday:** Saturday was cold but sunny. Our cluster gathered in the main hall of Union Station an hour before the march, and while some of us were thinking this was too early, it actually made it possible for us to link up, find each other, and gather our energies before walking over to the mall. Standing out in the park across from the station, watching people begin to stream out and fill the sidewalks and the streets, I felt incredibly joyful. There were thousands of people gathering, enough that I would have been happy in many, many mobilizations if that was the entire turnout—and this was just one little filament of the great river of people gathering for the march.

We made our way to the mall, claimed a spot, settled in and wove a web into a tree, inciting a reprimand from the police. The rally went on interminably—which is the mark of an ANSWER rally, and we couldn't hear the speakers very well but just relaxed. I

was enjoying sitting in the sun for a moment when Linda from Vermont came up to me and asked if we were going to try to unify the energy of the cluster before we marched.

"I'm so tired!" I said to her. "I can't do it," but then a few moments later, I looked over and some of the wonderful young women who had joined our cluster were singing and drumming and dancing with our hula hoop webs, and suddenly I began to feel energized and got up and began to drum with them. The Park Police cleared the street next to us with their horses: we got word from Charles and Lisa who were scouting that the march was starting, and we moved out and headed toward it. In back of the stage, just for a moment, the whole street was clear and we were able to spiral, singing:

**"In the face of truth, no lie can stand,  
Weave the vision, strand by strand..."**

We were behind the stage where Patty Smith was singing, and we just caught a bit of her as we marched on to join the Anticapitalist Convergence mass drum contingent. Earlier, a couple of people had apparently burned an American flag and been attacked and arrested by the police. But now no cops were near us, and the ACC were joyfully doing a great samba rhythm that periodically stopped so we could all chant:

**Drop Bush, not bombs!**

They were caught in an eddy of the gathering march, and the way ahead was blocked but Lisa and Charles found us a route around. We moved forward, but the Anti-Capitalist drummers followed us and everyone followed them, so for a moment we were leading a contingent of a couple of thousand people whom we managed to filter successfully into the line of march. The march was huge: it was impossible to see more than a fragment of it, but even the Washington Post agrees that it was the largest anti-war march since the Vietnam War, somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 people. We went on the the Navy Yard, then realized that ANSWER had not planned an actual ending or closure to the march, so we ducked into a quiet alley and had a closing circle.

Juniper's fourteen year old daughter, Geneva, and her friend Ava were quite taken with the black bloc. "You've been trying to get me to come to these demonstrations for years," Geneva told her Mom, "but you never told me the black bloc was dead sexy!"

"Those eyes, under those masks," Ava said, "You just want to walk with them all day long. And that rebellion thing....that's cool!"

Lisa and I were committed to the action preparation meeting for the next day's civil disobedience, so we made our way back uptown to St. Stephen's Church and conducted a mix of meeting and training for a crowd that grew, to our pleased surprise, to be about two hundred people. And in the space of about three hours, we managed to get people roughly trained, briefed, formed into affinity groups, and organized into some kind of spokescouncil decisionmaking process.

I had not thought there was a quorum for a Pagan Affinity group, but there turned out to be about fifteen people from our cluster willing to risk arrest, so I decided I would join them. Then we went home to get some rest.

## Sunday:

The intention for the day was to mount a nonviolent civil disobedience to show our opposition to the war in Iraq and to honor the spirit of Martin Luther King. Iraq Pledge of Resistance took the lead in the organizing, and their philosophy is very strict, classic pacifism. They were joined by Catholic Workers and Quakers and others who decided they wanted a relatively low-risk action so that the maximum number of people could participate.

The problem with doing a low-risk, strictly nonviolent civil disobedience on a Sunday in Washington DC is that it's hard to find an appropriate target. For me, the power of an action comes when you are directly interfering with an oppressive institution or situation, and I don't generally like to participate in arrest actions that are purely symbolic. But in this case, there seemed to be some worthwhile goals for even a symbolic action. It would serve notice to the Bush junta that there were not only massive numbers of people willing to march and demonstrate, but a significant force of people willing to take stronger actions to end the war. It would follow the march with another strong action. It would allow some people to take their first step into direct action. It seemed an appropriate way to honor Martin Luther King. And for me, it seemed the obvious thing to do with the webs we'd been weaving all weekend was to take them into the White House, or as near as we could get.

The plan was to march to the White House, demand entrance to petition our government, and if refused, various groups would do various things, from kneeling and praying to weaving our peace webs onto the fence.

So we all met up in Farragut Square on yet another cold and frosty day, and marched together to H street which runs along the back side of Lafayette Park. At that point, the police had put up barricades to block off the park and the entrances to the White House. They said they would allow twenty five people through to get arrested, but they wouldn't arrest any more than that.

Over at the Justice Department, the ANSWER coalition youth and student march had started. They came through to the street we were on, complete with their sound truck and screeching bullhorns chanting all the old chants from the Vietnam War:

**"Hey hey, ho ho,  
George Bush has got to go!"**  
...at a high and painful volume.

At one point, some of them climbed over the barricades and got arrested. There was a lot of tension between the organizers of the civil disobedience and the ANSWER truck, and to give all the background to it and all the reasons why a broad spectrum of the movement does not like ANSWER would take a long time, but suffice it to say that ANSWER is notorious for not playing well with others, not listening to others concerns or respecting their space, and they take up a lot of space, at a high volume that makes it almost impossible to hold any other energy when they are around. There are broader political issues, but at that moment it was truly a matter of volume and style. You had

the older pacifists who wanted a solemn, prayerful vigil, our Pagan Cluster who wanted a joyful, jubilant vigil, and all you could hear in the vicinity of the truck was a kind of rote, angry chanting. The leaders—and they do have them—were not working with our spokespeople to share space. In fact, they were telling us to fuck off. But the youth on the march were high energy and having a good time, and none of them were doing anything I consider remotely violent.

Eventually, we moved the civil disobedience crowd down to the end of the block. A young organizer from ANSWER came over to ask why we couldn't all be together and support each other, in case the police tried to arrest us. We were trying to explain that the people on our side of the street intended to get arrested, and that for their own safety the ANSWER march was better off away from us. After some negotiation—including the proposition that they should give us the microphone on their truck to explain to their people what we were doing (I was interested to see if they would actually go for that), the situation was resolved by the truck simply moving away.

At that point, the police came and said they were going to clear the street, that if we didn't move they would move us---but not arrest us. It was a bit surreal after our last action in DC when the cops had surrounded our cluster on the sidewalk, trapped and arrested us, and done the same to hundreds of other people who were drumming in Franklin park, not doing anything illegal and not wanting to get arrested. Now, when we were fully prepared to be arrested, they were refusing. But the decision was made to move to the sidewalk and go over the barricades, two by two, "Gandhi salt march" style.

Now, Gandhi's salt march, where lines of people walked up to police who beat them brutally on the skull until they fell, to be replaced by other lines, is not the greatest recruiting image for those who are going to actually do it. But going over the barricades seemed the only possible way to get arrested. We massed at the barricades, and our cluster picked a tree, wove a web into its branches, and hoisted up our hula hoop webs. We had agreed that if we couldn't get to the White House, we would leave them at the point of confrontation.

Two of the main organizers started over the barricades. Because of their desire to keep the tone utterly nonviolent and not do anything that the police might find threatening, they were moving slowly and deliberately. That meant the police could simply push them back. It became clear that this tactic was not going to either get us over the barricades or arrested, and we regrouped and decided to simply take the street. So, at the opportune moment, we all swarmed out through the police lines and sat down in the street. The cops did start dragging people back, somewhat reluctantly. We held them off for a while. A young woman in our cluster pulled out a baggie full of bloody tampons, and wrote No Blood for Oil on the street. A couple of the police were shocked and disgusted when they figured out what the blood was. Our medical people were a bit alarmed, thinking she'd been hurt, but then realized she wasn't. I was saying a silent prayer:

**"If blood need be spilled, let this be it. Let the life blood of women that flows without injury, the birth blood that flows from the womb when a baby is born, be the only blood spilled."**

Blood magic is powerful. A wave of something shivered through the air, and headed for the White House.

I felt that our action was as complete as it could be. We had made our symbolic point, although we hadn't been arrested, and done our magic. Lisa came up to me where I was sitting on the street, and hissed, "We need to find a way to declare victory."

Somehow in the utterly peaceful melee, the cops had managed to hit an older woman on the head and injure one man, and they brought in an ambulance to take them away.

When it left, we all moved onto the sidewalk, marched back toward Farragut square, joining with a contingent of anarchist drummers and taking over the street. At the square, Gordon stood up and declared victory, then I asked Lisa to explain the spiral dance. She made a short speech about resistance, we made a circle, and had a beautiful spiral with several hundred people, the drummers in the center, and everyone making up whatever chants they wanted.

When it was over, the Pagans gathered, opened our circle for the weekend, and immediately started to shiver with the cold.

### **Monday:**

There were marches and meetings and forums and services commemorating Martin Luther King, but I admit that our household was exhausted, and didn't do any of them.

We went to the hospital to visit a young woman activist, Carol, who was severely injured some weeks ago when she was hit by a bus on her bicycle, read the newspaper coverage, then had lunch, and went to the airport.

### **Conclusion:**

This weekend marked an incredible level of public opposition to the war and support for peace. In fact, I'm rather awed at how successfully, in a matter of months, we've built a peace movement in this country. To get such massive numbers out on the street, before the war has started, with no draft looming, is phenomenal. But beyond the big actions and marches, there were small actions and vigils and blockades all over the country. During the first Gulf War, when we had large demonstrations and quite militant actions in the Bay Area, there was a complete media blockade and no coverage.

This time, there was massive, worldwide media coverage that was actually fairly supportive. Even back in October, the media attempted to minimize the numbers that turned out for the big marches. This time, the Washington Post didn't even contest the estimates of 300,000 to 500,000.

During the Vietnam War, it took about seven years to build a popular opposition this large. The fact that we've done it in months says something about the level of popular awareness and discontent.

Now the challenge is to keep the momentum going and building, and to broaden the issues from simply opposing the war to the larger economic and political issues that have gotten us into this situation.

But today, I'm feeling good! Hopeful, optimistic, and basking in a sense of victory. And

whatever happens, I intend to enjoy this moment.

-- *Starhawk*

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