

A Sad Day: For Rachel Corrie

**by Starhawk
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Yesterday was a sad day. The third anniversary of the death of Rachel Corrie, crushed by a bulldozer in Rafah, in the Gaza strip. All day the sky glowered, dark and oppressive, while from time to time drenching showers rained down, as if nature herself were weeping.

Three years since Rachel was killed; three years since we opened fire on Iraq. Three years ago, I was in the West Bank, running down to Gaza to support the team that was with Rachel, bank to Nablus to support my friend Neta Gola as she gave birth to her first child, bank to Rafah to support the team that was with Tom Hurndall another young ISM volunteer, when he was shot by an Israeli sniper. Yesterday, I was cleaning mouse shit out of my own pantry, hearing Neta on the radio as I drove down to the city in the pouring rain, talking about the Israeli raid on the police station in Jericho, where she had gone to try once again to intervene in the violence.

Three years. The war in Iraq devolves into one of those tragedies where most of the players end up dead. The Bush administration, although discredited in every meaningful way and low in the public opinion polls, still has enough power to avoid impeachment or censure, threaten Iraq, to press Congress to legalize its illegal spying, pack the Supreme Court with justices likely to overturn Roe vs. Wade. There's a lot to weep for, or perhaps, scream about.

But today, what I'm thinking about in the rain is that a play about Rachel Corrie, based on her writings and emails, entitled Rachel's Words, has been 'indefinitely postponed' by the New York Theater Workshop, under pressure from some elements in the Jewish community.

I'm sad as a Jew. Even though we go to great lengths to separate the Israel and its actions from Judaism and Jewishness, for all the best political reasons, even though I'm far more of Pagan than a Jew in my practice, I was born and raised as a Jew. Jewish ritual and thought and education formed my character and way of being in the world, along with Jewish ideals of social justice and intellectual freedom and pride in being a nation of stubborn survivors of oppression.

I was raised to believe that Jews were special, that our heritage of suffering had made us more sensitive to the suffering of others, that our religion focused on life on earth, not life after death, and that the God of justice we believed in called us to make justice, here and now, for everyone. That the legacy of the Prophets was the legacy of courage,

to speak truth to power, to challenge the authority of rulers and kings.

What is so threatening, what we can't stand as Jews, is that Rachel's story makes us the oppressors. Her life, her own acts of simple courage, challenge all the "What can we do?" and "We have to's" that justify the daily humiliation of Palestinians.

When I've been there, confronting soldiers at checkpoints or in villages, I hear it over and over again: "What can we do? We have no choice."

A prophet, today, might wander the desert and the superhighways, the Temple Mount and the shopping streets of both Tel Aviv and New York, crying out, "There is always a choice!" Every moment of our lives, we make choices, and our choices define who we will be.

The fact that I'm home, cleaning mouse shit out of the pantry, is a choice. I'm not on the front lines, today. The depth of the mouse droppings reflects the amount of time I've not been home over the last years, and that elements of my personal life have finally clamored for their share of attention.

The other day, I found a wounded mouse in a trap, caught only by one paw. Even though I'd set the trap to kill it, my immediate instinct was to think about how I could save it. It was a cute, helpless little thing, its eyes bewildered and pleading. Could I somehow release it without getting bitten, set its broken leg? I quickly realized that was an insane idea. I could have just thrown it outside, to let some predator deal with it, but it seemed kinder to kill it myself, cleanly and quickly.

I covered it with a newspaper, so the poor, shivering thing wouldn't see the blow coming, and got a baseball bat. I tried whacking it with the bat, but at the last moment my muscles rebelled, shrinking away from the deed, and the mouse must have sensed something coming and ducked, for when I pulled the paper off, it was untouched by the blow, and even more terrified. I tried again, and again, and kept missing. I began to feel like I was caught in an awful nightmare. Instead of quickly ending the mouse's suffering, I was in fact torturing it. At some point, I found myself thinking, "I am a kind, compassionate person. Why am I beating this mouse to death?"

I am a kind, compassionate person, and from the mouse's perspective, I am a monster. I'm not sure why I'm telling this story, except maybe to speculate on compassion. Compassion is generally considered to be a good thing, but I've seen people invoke it in a way that seems to turn their brains to mush. "I know Bush is doing bad things, but I do bad things too, and we need to send him love and compassion." That's not compassion—that's Stockholm syndrome, the psychological phenomenon whereby kidnap victims or hostages or abused children come to identify with those who hold power over them, and want to please them. I, or you, might from time to time kill a mouse, but we haven't lied to the American people, caused the death of over 2500 soldiers and hundreds of thousands of deliberately uncounted Iraqis, to name just one of Bush's sins. Scale counts. There is a long continuum between killing mice and feeding your neighbors through a wood chipper. The distance between those acts matters: and it is a continuum.

Compassion is being able to see the perspective from which our acts are monstrous,

even if they are the best choices we can make. The mouse has a point of view, too. It's not trying to infect me with Hanta virus or foul my food. The mouse is just being a mouse, trying to survive, attracted by the warmth and wealth of my kitchen. It was a horrible thing to have to do. It left me shaken up, for hours. But it was a much worse day for the mouse.

Compassion is remembering that. We are human beings. By our very existence, we experience suffering, and we cause suffering. We can do our best, however imperfectly, to make choices that minimize that suffering. And we will still sometimes do monstrous things.

Let's not carry this metaphor too far. Palestinians are not mice. Nor are Iraqis. Even terrorists are human beings, with a human capacity for reason and communication. We have many more choices in dealing with human beings than we do with mice.

At the very least, let's be willing to look in the mirror and see our own monster faces. To own our choices, and take responsibility for the suffering we cause. If any religion, any political system, is to retain real moral authority, it must call us to do just that.

We need to hear Rachel's words. I wish, this spring, that they could be read aloud at every Seder table, chanted from every Rabbi's pulpit along with the weekly Torah portion, discussed in Hebrew school classes and debated in Temple youth groups.

Then, maybe, as kind, compassionate monsters, we could start to make real choices. We could ask ourselves, what is it costing to defend this house? To build walls of concrete around it? Whose blood, whose death is it built upon? Why are we walling ourselves into a new, reverse ghetto of our own making?

What are we choosing to become?

Rachel's Words will be performed at Riverside Church in New York City on March 22, hosted by Amy Goodman and James Zogby and with a stellar cast of speakers. See: www.rachelswords.org/

Starhawk is the author of ten books on activism and earth based spirituality, including *The Spiral Dance*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *The Earth Path*. A lifelong activist for issues of peace, environmental balance and social justice, she has made four trips to the West Bank and Gaza with the International Solidarity Movement.

Her songs for Rachel Corrie, cowritten with her brother, songwriter Mark Simos, can be found and downloaded free at www.songsforconscience.com.

To receive Starhawk's writings, go to her website or send an email to Starhawk-subscribe@lists.riseup.net, with 'subscribe' in the subject line.

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