

Cancun Journal #15: Monday 9/8/03 and Tuesday 9/9/03

The Actions Begin!

9/8, Evening

I'm sitting at the Convergence Center, waiting for the Pagan Cluster meeting to begin, feeling bad. I'm exhausted, I'm hot and covered with sweat and so is everyone else around me. In spite of the best efforts of some of the best organizers I know, we're about to have our pre-action spokescouncil and I have no idea what action we even have in mind. In spite of all the meetings and the organizing, nothing is organized. We're still waiting for the caravan to arrive so that we can finalize plans and our word is that they want to march at 8:00 a.m., which I know we're not ready for. People keep coming up and talking to me and I finally ask them to just go away for a moment and let me feel really, really bad, in a somewhat comfortable chair.

But then our cluster gathers and Elizabeth goes out and brings me back some food and my mood begins to improve, slightly.

We make a circle, do a quick bit of trance meditation in one corner of the Convergence Center while people sneak past us to go to the bathroom. We decide to meet the next night and go out to the sacred tree by the WTO conference, if we can get there, and do another short ritual.

The spokescouncil meeting is the largest yet, and with close to a hundred people packed into a fairly airless room the heat becomes unbelievable. Sweat is pouring down and many people are sitting with heads tossed back, mouths open, panting. It's like a sweat lodge, without the purifying spiritual aspects. The meeting moves slowly, as most of the group is stunned into lethargy. I'm trying to hold the image of the action as a kaleidoscope. All the pieces are there, they are just still in flux, shifting with every turn of the collective mood. And I'm still trying to hold the vision that we will shake down into a coherent pattern at the last minute.

We can't really make any decisions until the caravan arrives. And the caravan is late. We get news, in the middle of the meeting, that they are blocked at a checkpoint outside Merida.

Our media team quickly calls the press, who drive out to cover the story and hopefully be the pressure that will spring them loose. Our group has already decided that we will blockade the bus station if the caravan is blocked, and I suggest we take a break to see what happens, but reconvene in case numbers are needed. Finally we are released from the oven.

Word comes back--the caravan is free! We go get some food at Mario's, the restaurant down the block that has good fish and outdoor tables and a waiter who is dear friends with the local cops. Then we head out to the stadium to greet the students.

The busses arrive, and I see Mary Carmen, and Ellie, and Everardo, and all the others. They are glad to be there, but there is trouble in the caravan. They are exhausted after two days on the busses, and some don't want to camp in the stadium that has been provided, and they are having a meeting that seems intense and interminable. Everardo really wants us to stay and we do for a while. I fall asleep on a cement bench in reach of the not-so-sweet smell of the porta-potties, which already stink from the day's forum which was held in the same space. Finally Lisa says she will take us home and come back. I don't argue, I'm past the point where I can stay up all night and be functional in the morning.

9/9, Morning

We wake up early to get down to the stadium for the supposed 8:00 a.m. start of the march, although none of us believe for a moment that the march will really start anywhere near 8:00 a.m. I am still feeling bad, still exhausted, but adrenaline starts to kick in as I gather my action gear--bandana in a baggie, a lime to soak it with, my water bottle, goggles, and drum.

At the stadium, the students are camped on the grass and thunder growls above us. Lightning flashes down, but there is no rain, and the sky clears. The Pagan Cluster gathers and circles up and begins a small ritual for healing and protection.

We ground, sinking our roots into the earth, and a man who has been with the students but seems a bit older comes up and joins us. We say something to honor Mother Earth and he nods and says, "Tonantzin, Pacha Mama..." and other indigenous names and I translate for him as we call for healing and protection. He joins in our ceremony and at the end introduces

himself as Kanik, the power of the sky.

I am feeling better, letting go of my expectations of what the action could be, and accepting the reality of what is--that we all need time to meet and organize and group up, and that we are actually doing what we need to do.

The students are having a big meeting in the center and we gather up our cluster and then start to organize the internationals. I'm looking around at lots of people sitting in circles and having intense discussions and it is finally beginning to look like an action. We finally have a large mass of internationals together and we can actually organize affinity groups and spokes, that can then join the students' spokescouncil.

The students plan to march to the entrance to the hotel zone, and make an ofrenda, an altar, in the road. Gloria from Cuernavaca, whom Lisa and I met at the student encampment in early August, is initiated into an indigenous tradition and she and Kanik and other shamans will lead the ceremony. I take her aside and say I have waters of the world with me--water from sacred sites and political actions all over the globe, and she invites me to place the water into the ofrenda.

The students have organized into three blocs, according to risk level. The white bloc is the safe block, who will try to avoid all confrontation with police. The violet bloc will focus on the carnival, and the orange bloc will be for defense, to put themselves between the police and the demonstrators, to give others a chance to escape. There is also a small Maoist group, the group that likes to provoke police, who are the wild cards in the equation.

The Infernal Noise Brigade marching band forms up and begins to play. They look impressive in their black and orange and silver costumes, marching in slow step while playing drums and trumpets, pipes and trombones, and they consciously use the energy they create to help move the crowd and influence the tone of the action.

The Pagan Cluster joins the ofrenda group, helping to carry bags of earth and sacks of corn and beans and seeds, and we are up toward the front of the march, with a beautiful painted mural of people in resistance on a banner in front of us, and the band behind.

We move out into the streets. The police have blocked traffic

and the street is empty. The police have a very minimal presence--there is none of the heavy, intimidating presence that many of us have grown used to. The spirit is beautiful but the heat is grueling. The sun blazes down, a burning, searing force. Medics and volunteers circulate through the crowd with water and aloe vera. But just walking at a slow pace, even standing still, is a major effort. I'm drinking and drinking and sweating and sweating, and occasionally wondering if I'm going to pass out.

But I'm happy. We are finally moving, marching together, Mexicans, students, internationals, all together, singing and chanting, drumming and carrying our flags and banners.

We reach the intersection by the entrance to the hotel zone. The police have built a big fence across the road, of moveable barriers, with wide buttresses behind to make them hard to tip over. The police are barricaded behind the barriers, and the space in front is open. We circle up and begin the ceremony. Gloria asks for silence, and we have it for a moment or two. The shamans move in and call the elements. "With the permission of the earth, the air, the fire, the water, with the permission of the ancestors, the elders, the youth..."

For a moment, the energy is focused and powerful. We are enacting the drama of this time... the energies of life and color and music, of earth and seed and sacred water, laid out in a mandala pattern in front of the barricades and the massed police and the power of force. I'm feeling the energy very strongly and feeling the other shamans stirring and working it in their own way, and as I place the water the kaleidoscope shifts, revealing a pattern of beauty and change.

On the sculptures above the fountain in the midst of the intersection, a young man swathed in black waves a red flag.

Then the wild piece plays itself out--the small Maoist group charges the police line, the orange block tries to move the crowd back, the focus is disturbed. But that's the way of actions in the midst of the street. We finish the mandala, people are milling around the fence and searching for shade. The Maoist group mounts another assault, forming into a block, counting down, "cinco, quatro, trece, dos...", and charge the fence, leaping onto it, only to be pushed back. It appears more like an athletic event than a serious assault, and the police stay behind their barricades, without reacting on the crowd. But this is the very spot where students were attacked two years ago and badly beaten, and sensitivity is running high.

But all ends peacefully. The march moves back, and some of the Pagans wade in the fountain. I am letting go of my own disappointment at not having an action more directly impactful on the meeting, but I am reconciled to doing what we can do. I've learned, from this, that we really can't plan actions in coordination among groups that haven't actually ever had a chance to meet and coordinate. And it's still the first day.

We head back to the Parque de Palapas, to eat and drink and relax. Now the mood is more like a festival or vacation, and I sit with Gloria to talk about the ritual. She feels that it was very important for the students to go back to the same spot where they were hurt before and have things go well.

There's a debrief meeting for the students but a few of us head out, instead, to the IFG forum just inside the hotel zone to listen to Vandana Shiva and others remind us why we are doing this. The morning's blockade has had an unfortunate impact on the forum. Because the road was closed, many people couldn't get there, and numbers are down. We feel bad, although we had no control over any of it and doubt that the students would have changed their plan because an NGO was holding a forum further down the road. But the IFG folks are our friends and allies, and it's a shame there aren't thousands thronging the forum. More people start to come as we listen to the speakers, and the space fills.

However, we have to admit that numbers are low everywhere. The WTO chose their site well, for them. There aren't huge numbers of internationals who have been able to spend the money or devote the time to get to this spot, so far away from most of the major centers of resistance. The Mexican students and campesinos have raised money and come on busses, but it's a week-long to ten day trip which means again that numbers are limited to the most committed. And unlike most mobilizations, there is really no local base in Cancun, no real community of resistance in this tourist town.

We head back to the Casa de la Cultura, where the eco-village has been going strong, with many people flocking around to see the exhibits and sketch their own diagrams at the pump. Two women are sitting by the showers, waiting their turn--as it happens, these are the only installations for bathing and washing in this area, although there are some showers for the women inside the auditorium. I'm so glad we did it!

Then another meeting, followed by a long meeting at the student's encampment. We're all feeling a bit more grounded,

more confident, and it's fascinating to watch the students' process, in many ways similar to ours, in many ways different.

There's a small group of us, the hard-core meeting connoisseurs, who are deeply interested. The students don't have what we think of as facilitation: one person calls on speakers, someone keeps track of proposals, people get up one after another and make speeches, but we can't quite figure out when or how proposals are addressed. However, they eventually make decisions, and are certainly no less organized than we are.

But I decide to tear myself away, and go to bed.

-- *Starhawk*

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