

Cancun Journal #18: Friday, 9/12/03

Victory!

It's 1:30 pm and I'm so, so happy! We did it. We got through all their security, got right up next to the convention center, and blockaded the roads for three hours, completely snarling all the traffic in the hotel zone just as the delegates were out for their dinners. All those scattered, disparate kaleidoscope pieces shifted and shook down into the perfect, perfect pattern. And up until the moment we did it, I didn't believe we could pull it off.

Here's how we did it:

The day begins well, with the news that a small team has hung a huge banner that says "Que les vayan todos/WTO Go Home!" on a giant crane outside the conference center. They have been dancing naked three hundred feet up in the air, and the authorities just don't know what to do. I wake up feeling exhausted and sick, but the news cheers me up.

All day we are meeting, planning, and preparing. Over breakfast, Rodrigo and I make up a new Spanish verse to one of our chants:

"Somos el viento que sopla
Al imperio que colapsa."

"We are the wind that blows the Empire down." I'm still not sure if we have logistics or communications or a tactical plan, but at least we have a song.

The Pagan Cluster meets in the morning, practicing the song in the convergence space. We quickly firm up our logistics, and goes out to the park to do a ritual of protection and success, asking for the way to be opened and for a bit of fog around the eyes of the security personnel. The fog is necessary as we are all in our tourist garb around the convergence center all day. At home we've spent a good half hour advising Karla on just the right shorts to wear with her blouse, and Josh on what to do with his hair. I have this pale green pants suit that is truly the

perfect outfit, it looks just like something a tourist would wear in the tropics to pretend she was having some revolutionary adventure in the jungle, but it actually has just the right pockets and roll-up sleeves and fit to be practical action garb. Come to think of it, I am having some revolutionary adventure in the jungle.

The logistics are complicated, and the communication system is cumbersome, and I won't tell you exactly what they are until after the action is over. But the basic plan is make our way there in ones or twos or small groups, on public busses or taxis or with rented cars, and then converge at the action point at the agreed-upon time. Lisa and Juniper and I look respectable but we also have Brush in our car and his best efforts at looking like a clean-cut tourist boy fall short of the mark. He's wearing some kind of dark brown pants that look as if he's slept too many nights in them, and a dirty brown shirt too heavy for the weather, and a string knit cap over his unwashed long hair, and altogether he looks like someone who lives in the woods. But we want him with us, because he's brilliant and kind and we like him, and because of his excellent tactical and scouting abilities.

Juniper and put our drums in the trunk, hidden under beach towels. We provide ourselves with cover: Doritos, potato chips and Coke. We breeze through the checkpoints, and park outside the Plaza Caracol, the big shopping mall right outside the Conference Center. Lisa pulls up and parks the car right in front of a cop. People are looking up and we see the giant banner, still hanging, with the authorities unsure of how to get it down, or what to do about the climbers attached to it. We look up for a while, admiring it, then start to walk toward the mall. A young man from Indymedia who is walking around with his press pass hanging comes dashing up to Brush. "Hey, don't you remember me?" he says loudly. "We met in jail!"

The Security forces are looking at us and I'm hoping they don't speak English as I hustle him away. We wander around the mall for a bit, drink some coffee, wait out a sudden rainstorm. As we emerge, another dreadlocked, crusty young Indymedia friend comes dashing up to us to point out the state of the banner removal project above. We shake loose from him, now truly sure our cover is blown, then try to talk our way through police lines to go to our meeting point in the building that houses both the Hard Rock Cafe and the Rainforest Cafe. I'm trying to explain to the security guard that I need to get a T-shirt for my stepson at the Hard Rock Cafe, but since I'm pretending not to speak Spanish he doesn't really understand. Finally we give up and decide to just go around the long way, back through the

parking lot, across the street and through a plaza, back across the street and through a pedestrian shopping alley, and then up a metal stairway that is part of their new security installations, allowing them to barricade the street.

Now we're having a rather hilarious interlude as various groups gather, mill around, and pretend not to know each other. Everyone seems to be in costume as surfers or some sort of tourist, looking cleaner and more spruced up than normal. Even Brush now has a new T-shirt he just bought in the mall. We carefully avoid catching each others' eye as we stroll casually from the cafe to the balcony, over to the gift shop, down to the ice cream store. Lisa, Brush, Juniper and I spend a long time standing on the curb in front of the cops discussing where to "eat," until we begin to feel suspicious.

Finally we decide to move the group on, to the area by the sacred Ceiba tree at the Northeast side of the convention center. This means looking for people and trying to decide how to speak to them without seeming to know them. I ask a whole lot of people for the time. Some of them even have watches. For a short while, there are all these little knots of people circulating, asking each other for the time and then asking someone else again and it must be clear, we're sure, that something is going to happen, but it doesn't, yet.

Juniper and Lisa head down the road to look for stragglers, and Brush and I head back across the staircase over the road, through the alley and the plaza, across the parking lot and behind the barricades to our sacred tree, where we've decided to form the group up. But no one else is there. Brush walks up to talk to a group of people, one of whom turns out to be some kind of security guard, but very sweet and helpful, trying to give us directions and ask us where we are going. "Where do you recommend?" I ask, but he doesn't know the English word and we are still pretending for some reason not to speak Spanish, and meanwhile out of the corner of my eye I'm looking for others and nobody turns up. We are closer and closer to the time the action is supposed to start, and I realize we have made a big mistake trying to move the group, that they are all probably trying to find their way around the barriers and are now scattered. We are right by our sacred tree and I go over and touch it for strength and comfort, feeling sick at heart. I go sit down, close my eyes, and visualize a circle spinning itself around all the action and the activists, bringing us together, weaving us into a whole. But more and more time is passing, and Brush and I are still alone. We call Lisa, who says she's on her way.

I see Luis stroll up and a few others--then Rio and a group are getting into a taxi. Elizabeth comes up to tell us that Rio says the location has been changed back to the Hard Rock Cafe. I feel sick. It's two minutes to action time, I don't know where everyone is, I don't know where everyone is supposed to be or where I'm supposed to be, or what to do.

And then, a little way up the street, five people come out into the road and form a line. The cars stop. We begin strolling, then striding, then running up to them. We skirt the barricades and take the road. A security guard tries to stop us and we weave past, stand behind the students, and begin to form a circle. Out of nowhere, others start to join us. Some sit down with the students, others join in the circle. I whip my drum out of the black bag that's covered it, and we begin to sing and spiral. Two big busses and a mass of cars are stopped behind the students and the internationals on the front line with them. The circle grows bigger and the line grows longer and we spiral and sing, while the news media begins to gather.

"We are the rising of the moon,
We are the shifting of the ground,
We are the seed that takes root,
When we bring the fortress down..."

Now the news media are out in force, their big cameras in our faces, and crowds have gathered on the bridge and the sidewalk behind the fences. We keep dancing. The traffic is in the most glorious chaos. The convention center is in between two roads that split into a circle here on the point of the island, and a group peels off and goes over to blockade the second road. We start to see cops massed in front of us and hear rumors that others are behind us, but we just keep dancing.

And then suddenly our Green Bloc friends appear. Erik and John Henry come up through the police lines carrying two trees, a banana and an almond. They place them next to our spiral, and we move the spiral over to circle them. They become the heart of the dance, as the rest of the affinity group begins to make an ofrenda around them of corn and beans and grain, arranged in a spiral. The convention center looms up directly behind us: the fortress of power, and we have entered in behind the lines and brought the trees of life and the sacred seeds. The dance grows, and goes on and on until we are dripping wet in the sticky heat, and the sun goes down, and in the falling dark we raise a clear, beautiful tone like a sweet trumpet blast that can blow the walls of power down.

"Somos el viento que sopla,

Al imperio que colapsa."

The students are chanting political chants in Spanish and the rhythms mesh. The police have still not moved in, and now the circle grows even bigger, so we begin to sing again and start a new, slower spiral:

"No army can hold back a thought,
No fence can chain the sea,
The earth can not be sold or bought,
All life shall be free..."

One of the Mexican delegates comes up to Rodrigo. "You know what," he says, "I've been in those meetings for three days, and you're right, they are bullshit. My boss will probably fire me tomorrow, but I don't care." He joins in the spiral dance.

Our friends who have credentials from NGOs or media are now feeding us information. Behind the wall, riot cops are massed. Down the street, they are putting up barricades. Brush, Juniper and Lisa go out to scout, and call back to give us updates. Our group gathers for a quick conference. "If you want to be sure to get out, get out now," is the advice. Some leave, but most of us stay. The students are asking for our solidarity, and while none of us want to get arrested we just can't leave. This is a powerful moment of nonviolent direct action, completely peaceful, completely disruptive, and I am not going to walk away in the middle of it, whatever the consequences. We begin to group up and meet. The students link up in the road, and begin to discuss what to do. Now we're having an assembly in the road, a demonstration of democratic decision making right under the walls of the closed, autocratic meetings of the WTO. Valerie and Emily are both translating and facilitating, and doing an awesome job. We send negotiators to talk to the government and the police. They come back saying that if we leave voluntarily, we can go free. We decide to stay longer. They offer us busses to take us away. We demand to be allowed to march. Juniper, Lisa and Brush have been trapped on the other side of the barricades, and keep calling in. Lori Wallach, one of the policy experts on the WTO from the NGOs, comes over and passes on advice from the press. Maude Barlowe from the Council of Canadians is trapped on the other side of the fence, wishing she could get through to join us. The discussions take a long time. Luke, who has been one of the major movers of this action, makes a stirring speech from the front line about the wisdom of saying enough is enough, and getting on with the next day's organizing. We continue to discuss, but finally agree to get on the busses, with media accompanying us to make sure they go where they are

supposed to go.

We ride back to Cancun in a triumphal procession. The students pop through the skylights of the bus, and ride on the top, terrifying me more than the threat of riot cops. But they hang on, and we sing and chant and cheer through the long ride back around the lagoon and back up from the airport.

We arrive at Ground Zero to cheers of joy. The students are dancing on top of the busses, the Koreans and all the supporters are drumming and cheering and laughing. I get out and give Gloria a big, big hug. Many of the students who did this action were in the encampments with her and Lisa and me, and we are very, very proud of them. Everyone is hugging each other and laughing and crying tears of pure joy. I can hardly remember when else I've felt such pure, unadulterated happiness--except maybe in Seattle, when we shut the meeting down. It has all been worth it--the stress and the exhaustion and the sleeplessness, the fifty hours of meetings, the grueling work, the moments of frustration and near despair. We have shown that all their police power and weapons and barricades and fear mongering cannot, after all, keep us out, that the voice of a determined people is a force to be reckoned with, that we cannot be left out of their equations or excluded from their deliberations, that there is a power stronger than force or fear.

One of the Koreans begins beating a rhythm on his metal drum, comes over to me and motions that I should join him with my drum. We begin drumming together, and the Koreans begin dancing. They are wearing circular straw hats against the rain, and their matching beige vests emblazoned "No WTO," and they hold out their arms, waving them gracefully like the wings of leaping cranes as they rock from foot to foot. The students join in, and the rain comes down like a benediction. I pass my drum to one of the students, and we are a perfect multicultural mesh of Korean gongs and Latin rhythms and sweating human bodies, dancing in the rain with complete, abandoned joy.

At the end of the dance, the Koreans form up in the circle and sing a Korean song and dance together. Then they motion to me that I should drum and we should sing. The Pagans form a circle and begin our song, and others join and we do another spiral under the moonlight, that gathers in all the energy and joy of our victory and raises it up in a pure release of power. In the silence after, I drop to the ground and put my hands on the earth. In many places, I've felt that this gesture of grounding embarrasses people, feels too conventionally religious. But here it is perfectly understood. We all touch the earth, blessing the

Mother Earth, the Madre Tierra. The Koreans crouch in a deep bow. I offer gratitude to earth and wind and sky, to fire and rain and the moon and the courage in the hearts of all of our companeras and companeros who have brought us this moment of victory. Then the Koreans lead us over to the altar for Lee, which is covered with flowers and wreaths and banners and candles. We offer prayers and songs, and light candles. As each person places their candle, we sing a Celtic lament. When we end, the stillness is profound, and potent, like a hovering indrawn breath in the midst of the labor that will bring a new world to birth.

-- *Starhawk*

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