

## Cancun Journal #5: Saturday, 8/30/03

### Trainings in Mexico City

Saturday morning: I wake early after the best night's sleep I'd had in a week. Carmen and I have breakfast and I packed up and we headed out to meet the students. We take a bus to the metro and a train down to the University station, where we all meet under a big mural. We are supposed to meet at 10:00 but it takes over an hour for everyone to show up. One of the young men comes over and talks to me very intensely, a nervous smile on his broad face. His voice is soft and I have a hard time understanding him, but finally I realize he is asking if there are groups in the United States that work on sexual diversity issues. He mentions that he belongs to a group working for the rights of homosexuals, and suddenly I understand why he seems so shy. I assure him that there are, many, and that there are many lesbians, homosexuals, transgendered people, and others, and I try to translate the concept of 'queer.' He tells me he wants to come to Cancun, and starts elaborating all the things he has already gotten but I don't know what all the words are that he is using. He wants to wear a crinoline in the march, he confides. I assure him that that would be delightful, having a sweet vision of a whole affinity group of big-bodied Mexican men dancing in crinolines up to the police lines. It would be something different, at any rate.

Finally we start off, guided by Letty, who is a religious sister who works in the neighborhood of Los Pedregales which is supporting our efforts. Last time we all took a big bus to a gym, but this time we take mini-busses, the shared taxis called 'combis,' to an ecological park where we will be camping. The park is in a sweet neighborhood, not rich but full of trees and plants and little storefront shops and restaurants and some of that festive air of a place where people go to enjoy themselves.

We set up a circle of tents, and begin the training. Everardo has given me an agenda he compiled from suggestions I'd

emailed him, and we start with introductions. There are about forty students, representing a variety of different groups. I ask them to divide into pairs and talk about where in their lives they feel power, and where they feel powerless or vulnerable. They share for a few minutes, then come back and speak to the whole group. "I feel powerful when we take action together," one says. "I feel vulnerable as a woman, but also powerful in a different way," another says. Many say how they feel power when we can act as a group, and support each other, and feel vulnerable when they are alone or isolated.

I talk a bit about different kinds of power: power-over, the power that comes from a gun or from the state, the power to control resources or inflict harm--that power we're all familiar with. But there's another kind of power. "Poder" in Spanish means both "power" and "to be able." There's a power that's our ability to be able to do something, and that power grows when we act together. We don't have control over the police or the power they represent, but we do have control over how we act and organize to increase the power we can have together.

These students are beautiful, young and exuberant. They range from seventeen-year-old Ellie with her wide smile and freckles and flowing hair hennaed to a deep orange-red, to one of their feminist professors who has brought her delightful, nine-year-old daughter, also named Ellie. There are blondes with sharp, European features and darker, broader indigenous faces, the whole range of Mexico, although all of them have some degree of privilege in order to be students. Their comments show that they are thoughtful and politically sophisticated. They are also always ready to break into a laugh.

I have them stand up, and we do a sequence about fear and grounding. I ask if anyone has ever been afraid in an action--and yes, they have! Many of these same students were in Cancun two years ago, when the police beat people brutally. I ask them to show me with their bodies what the fear looks like, to become a sculpture of fear, and feel what gets tense and how they are breathing, or not. And how easy it is to get knocked off balance. I push Carmen and she reels back, laughing, pushes me back, and soon then are all happily knocking each other around. Then I ask them to consciously relax, take some deep breaths low in the belly, feel their feet on the ground, their contact with mother Earth, and to tell themselves that just breathing and feeling our feet on the ground can help us stay in a state of awareness where we can be calm and can make a clear decision about what to do in any

situation. We try pushing each other now, and feel how much more solid people are. I recruit some students to play police: to take rolled-up newspaper batons and try to push people back. "If you need to be even stronger," I say, "imagine you have roots in the ground, like a tree."

We move on to practice many permutations of grounding and moving and awareness. They are milling around, trying to stay grounded and aware. I snatch a young woman and wrestle her to the side like an undercover cop. We break into 'affinity groups'--the small action circles that make decisions together and carry out actions, and while they are discussing their regroup plans and identifying calls, I get one group to take the batons and attack the others. Mayhem results, with wild chases across the lawn and the young guys tackling each other and wrestling each other to the ground, and some of the young women jumping into the fray. They play rough, and I stand back, admiring their sheer physical exuberance and hoping that they will all survive the role play. I deliberately haven't tried to set strong safety limits. Part of the purpose of the training is to let them experience a taste of the fear and danger and chaos of a real action, and learn to respond from that calm place where we can make thoughtful choices. And Cancun may be a very rough action. The police have been brutal there before, and we have every reason to think that they could be again. If the rough-and-tumble of the role plays proves too stressful for someone, it's a good indication that they should think twice about dancing with the riot cops in the action, and play some safer role.

The role plays and the trainings are fun, kind of like playing war when you're a kid. I've come through these actions remarkably unscathed, maybe because I'm middle-aged or because Witches all over the world are beaming me protection. But the real violence that we're facing is always there in the background. I'm watching these students happily pummeling each other and praying fervently that they won't be coming back with real broken bones ten days from now. I'm thinking about the French students Lisa and I trained in Genoa, long and lean like a pile of tumbling greyhounds the night before the action, and about Vincent the day after, with a head swollen up like a monstrous alien from the beating he received. He'd gotten hit on the head in the alley when the police attacked the pink block in what was supposed to be a safe area. He went to the hospital, where the police arrested him, took him down to the station, pinned his arms back and smashed his head down on the desk over and over again. His image swims in a deep pool and if I stir it at all, others surface: The raid on the Genoa

Indymedia Center later that night, standing at the windows after we escaped being beaten, watching stretcher after stretcher come out from the school across the street where the cops broke bones and left pools of blood and scattered teeth behind. Palestine--hearing the story over and over again from the team that was with Rachel Corrie when the bulldozer crushed her as she tried to stop a home demolition; remembering what a beautiful face Brian Avery had, how when I first saw him I was struck by it's delicate strength, and then seeing him in the hospital with his jaw and cheeks shot to pieces by a soldier in an armored personnel carrier in Jenin that drove up and opened fire. And Tom Hurdall--getting the news that he'd been shot when we were taking a break from a training in Beit Sahour, and agonizing with Ghassan B., the sweet young Palestinian trainer, about whether we had failed to include something that could have saved him in the training we'd given him just the week before. Tom was on the border in Rafah, where Israeli soldiers in a sniper tower were firing at a group of children. He ran in to save them, pulled a young boy out to safety, went back for two young girls, when a soldier lowered his line of fire and shot him in the head. Now he lies, months later, in a coma, on life support that keeps him breathing but with his mind and spirit shot away and no hope of recovery. His image is like a ghost, haunting the field where these other bright, creative, precious young men and women are joyfully whacking each other with rolled-up newspapers and laughing and debating how best to react when the clubs get real.

There are other images, too--visiting the family of Akhmed, who was shot down in Gaza on his doorstep the night Rachel died when he went out to smoke a cigarette, the tales I heard over and over from people there about their losses, the constant shootings and beatings and arrests. And standing in Jenin last summer, my back to the zone of destruction where the Israeli Occupation Forces destroyed 400 homes in the spring, watching the TV in a shop show pictures of the victims of the latest suicide bombing in the Hebrew University--body bags coming out of other young students who could have been my cousins or brothers or girlfriends or me at an earlier age.

And maybe under all of that, the favela I visited in Brazil, the tumble of plywood shacks above a stinking, garbage-filled, raw sewer of a river, and the kindness of the woman who invited us in, who'd lived there for twenty-seven years, raised a family of fourteen, in a few crowded, boxlike rooms of cardboard and tin.

Perhaps that is the worst violence, the endemic, hopeless poverty inflicted by the system we are fighting against. And the relatively minor violence we face, and the pools of grief we

carry, are the price for that other world we still say is possible.

I don't stir up that pool of grief very often in the midst of preparing for these actions. After decades of doing healing work and rituals designed to open people up and let emotions flow, I've grown to understand the virtue of containing them. I know the pool is there, and it's deep. When I had down time this summer, I found myself crying every day about Rachel and Tom. But at this moment, I can't. These students want to replay the role play, over and over, trying different tactics and responses. I suspect it's therapeutic for them, replaying a trauma to gain some control over it.

We take a break for lunch, then try a new scenario--a march with police blocking it. Some of the marchers decide to play a militant bloc, hurling 'stones' of rolled up newspaper at the cops and approaching with a wooden barricade. I reap my karmic reward when a plastic bottle hits me smack in the face, hurled by a young woman who is deeply apologetic afterwards. I consider that the strength of her throwing arm is a feminist triumph, and it makes up for my sore lip.

By the end of the afternoon, I'm exhausted. I take a short nap in the sun during a break, and we move on to a discussion of tactics and a model spokescouncil, and a night time session on actions and strategies, poring over diagrams and maps.

It's raining and I don't have a tent or sleeping bag, so I get taken home by Carlos, one of the supporters from the neighborhood. He's a sweet, middle-aged man who says apologetically that his home is very poor, but I assure him that if it's not at risk of being blown up before morning by an occupying army it will be better than some places I've stayed. In reality, it's a modest but comfortable home shared with a constellation of sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews, including one adorable young girl who grins at me all evening long, and a very cute puppy. Carlos has retired from working for the state-run electrical utility, and we talk about the attempts to privatize electricity and the Enron scandals and blackouts in the U.S. I show him pictures of my micro-hydro system and he shows me a picture of the members of his community organization together with some of the Zapatistas in their masks down in Chiapas in a kind of sister community they support. Mexico has a tradition of locally based, radical community organizing that is strong and vibrant, some of it sparked by the radical church-sponsored base communities of the eighties. He shows me other treasures: a carved replica of a Mayan drum, an invitation to an exhibition of photographs at

the cultural center in the park where we are camped. His sister who serves me tea is has her work in the show. I sleep in a real bed, another precious night of sleep.

-- *Starhawk*

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