

Reclaim the Commons

a message from Starhawk

We never thought it would happen here, in San Francisco--a major mobilization on a global justice issue. We never thought any of the institutions of corporate globalization would schedule a meeting in this hotbed of activism. But we weren't taking into account the biotech industry, with its tentacles deeply embedded into neighboring Silicon Valley to the south of us. They are having their major annual meeting, Bio2004, at San Francisco's Moscone Center in early June, at the same time the G8 will be meeting in Georgia. And we are rising to the occasion with a mobilization we have named Reclaim the Commons, which will extend beyond the issues of genetic engineering and bio-warfare to include the whole arena of corporate control of our economy and our governments, and link the environmental, peace, and racial justice movements. We are calling on everyone who can to come to San Francisco June 4-9, for a convergence that will include teach-ins, trainings, gardening projects and urban transformations, a Really, Really Free Market, marches, and direct action linked to our sister mobilization in Georgia. Come check out our web site at www.reclaimthecommons.net.

For months, we've been organizing, meeting, planning, and making connections with local and neighborhood groups. We want to do this one differently--not just to protest biotech, but to embody our vision of a world of sustainable abundance and real democracy, where we take back the commons, all those things that are necessary to sustain life, that are our common heritage and the common trust for generations to come after us. Our statement of unity says:

"The Commons are the universal heritage of people and all living things. They are everything needed to support healthy life on earth: air, water, food, shelter, health care, energy sources, and our genes. They are what is needed to sustain culture: our multicultural heritages, education, information and the means to disseminate it, essential human services, public spaces, and political space. They are equally the land, its forests, the oceans, and all ecosystems. In sum, the Commons are everything that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations."

So we've also been propagating plants and making links with community gardens, covering greenhouses and seeding long-term projects that can help provide healthy, organic food in the inner city, examples of sustainable energy and ecological solutions, a memorial grove for youth killed in street violence, and common gathering places. We've been starting plants to give away at the really, really free market and breeding worms for compost and fertilizing tea. We're planning actions that will be exuberant, creative, visionary, and inspiring as well as confrontational.

But we need help. We need money, to be blunt about it. All the usual sources of money for this sort of thing have dried up this year. Foundations that fund activism are

funneling all their money into getting Bush out of office--a goal we support. But we see this mobilization as attacking the root causes of the lack of democracy that put him in office in the first place. We need tens of thousands of dollars to rent a convergence space in high-priced San Francisco, print and distribute our flyers and outreach materials, feed, house and provide emergency medical care for those who will come, and to realize our visions.

So we're asking directly for help from our community, asking you to help water the garden. We know that a lot of you don't have a whole lot of money, and we know that there are lots of appeals for the money you do have. But no garden can grow without some fertilization, and if we want to realize our dreams and visions, we need to provide the resources and support for them. You can donate directly from the web page, www.reclaimthecommons.net, or through the address below. Donations can even be tax deductible, letting you buy a few more plants for us and a few less bullets for Iraq.

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And as a little thank you in advance for your support, I'm including here the first installment of "Traveller's Tales from Possible"--to be continued on the Reclaim the Commons web site: www.reclaimthecommons.net and my own, www.starhawk.org.

Thanks so much, Starhawk

Travellers' Tales from Possible: What Is This, Anyway?

"Another World is Possible" has long been the slogan of the global justice movement. But what would that world look like, and how would it work? Would it be any different, really, from this one? Fortunately, we can now answer that question with an eyewitness report from Possible, which exists just on the other side of This Reality. Beware, you too might slip through, and never be the same again. To an awakened imagination, anything is possible. So if you don't like ours, dream up some possibilities of your own.

Traveller's Tales from Another World Part One Welcome to Possible (as told to Starhawk)

It takes a certain kind of person to maintain a tight knot of anxiety in the pit of the belly when a chorus of frogs is happily croaking in the morning fog outside your window, and the scent of honeysuckle drifting in. But as a lifetime New Yorker, and a science writer for the New York Times, I'd had plenty of practice maintaining tension. The arias of the songbirds, the lemony scent of herbal tea brought to me by my hostess, the lavender-scented fresh sheets on my comfortable bed all made me nervous. I missed the slight

chemical taint of the dehydrating, artificially cooled air of the Marriott, where I should have been staying, the comforting traces of someone's stale cigarettes, the homey conversation of the early morning talk shows on TV, the bad coffee from the automatic coffeemaker.

My name is Alice Stickly, I'm a successful journalist in an extremely competitive field, and I want to go home!

But let me get hold of myself, and start from the beginning, with the who, what, where, when and why, as they taught us in the journalism school at NYU, even if the how has me mystified.

Yesterday, I was on my way to San Francisco to cover the biotechnology industry's biggest annual get-together, a massive flocking of journalists, lobbyists, CEOs, and management and marketing teams, and here and there a few actual scientists. It was an ontime, nonstop flight from La Guardia. No boxcutter-wielding terrorists attempted to hijack it; no anthrax was piped through the ventilation system, and nothing whatsoever exploded. I spent the flight napping and worrying about nothing more than would there be protestors at the convention, and could you get a decent margarita at the Marriott? Everything was completely normal, unless you count the fact that my luggage arrived on time and undamaged. I picked up my bags, and walked out of the baggage area at exactly midnight, through a big, black gate like a metal detector. Then things began to get strange.

I remember thinking, "How odd, a metal detector as you're leaving...it must be some new antiterrorist device," when everything changed. A mist rolled in, as if all the fogs of San Francisco coalesced and slipped through the airport's revolving doors. I found myself walking down a long hallway. I could hardly see beyond my face, but I kept going, as if some mysterious force was drawing me. A banner loomed out of the mist ahead of me. It proclaimed, "Another World is Possible!" It was the slogan from the World Social Forum, in India this year. I didn't think much of it--after all, this was liberal San Francisco. But a few yards further on, a second banner read, "An Otherworld is Possible." And beyond that, "Welcome to Possible."

I blinked, feeling a sudden nervousness. Where was I? What had happened? Had I gotten onto the wrong plane? In thirteen years of professional journalism, hundreds, thousands of trips, I had never before so much as misplaced a ticket. Was something wrong with me? But even if I'd somehow gotten on the wrong plane, I hadn't been in the air long enough to get to India. Besides, the conference was in January and this was June. Could I be losing my mind?

Just then I noticed a booth to my left, glowing through the fog with its own pearly light. A bright colored sign read, "Dazed and Confused Traveller Orientation Station. Welcome to Possible!" A beautiful young woman behind the desk beamed at me and gave me a big smile.

"My name is Glinda. Can I help you?"

"What's happened? Is this San Francisco?" I asked.

Her deep brown eyes gazed at me kindly. "Yes and no," she said. "Perhaps you'd better come in and sit down."

Inside the booth was a small, comfortable armchair, and Glinda sat me down and poured me a cup of what she said was a soothing tea of valerian and St. John's Wort. I could have used a whiskey, frankly, but I was in no shape to complain.

"What do you mean, yes and no?" I asked.

"Have you ever heard of the theory of parallel realities?" she asked.

"I'm a science writer for the New York Times. I've heard of everything."

"We're not sure just how it began. It might have had something to do with voting patterns, or the time our mayor decided to register gay and lesbian marriages. Anyway, for a long time many of us had been feeling that San Francisco represented a somewhat different reality than the rest of the country. And gradually that Otherworld seemed to become, well, more and more real. One day we woke up and discovered that reality had divided, like an amoeba. And every now and then, someone like yourself slips through."

"Holy Sweet Jesus," was all I could say, reverting to my mother's favorite expression. Would I ever see her again? What would this do to her hypertension?

"Don't worry," Glinda reassured me. She was beaming at me with just that doe-eyed, New Age, treacly smile that made me want to hit her. What about Jason, my fiance? What about my job? What would they think if I didn't show up for my assignment?

"Our helpful Indymedia technicians are working on ways to bridge the reality gap. In the meantime, you'll be a guest of the city."

With worries churning around in my brain, I let her bundle me into an oddly silent taxi that brought me here, to Mercedes' guesthouse. I lay in bed, shuffling my worries as if they were a definitive hand of cards I was damned if I'd put down. Until...with the stress, and the jetlag, and the fact that it was now close to 4:00 a.m. in New York...in spite of myself I fell sound asleep.

Off my room is a small balcony where Mercedes, my hostess, had set a lovely breakfast of homemade scones, fresh cream, and eggs which she said come from the chickens I could hear clucking nearby. I'd trade it all for a plastic room-service omelet or even the tasteless lasagna on the plane yesterday.

Mercedes was looking at me sympathetically out of her big, brown, eyes, but I refused to be soothed. She was so beautiful she annoyed me, with her glossy black hair and her face that could have come straight off a Mayan carving, and that damn smile. No one has ever mistaken me for a beautiful woman, although I'm fashionably thin, chicly dressed, and the price of my every-six-weeks haircut could support a small village in the Third World.

A chorus of songbirds competed with the cackling of hens objecting in principle to the omelet made of their scrambled potential offspring. I had a wide view of the garden, which extended over the full interior of this block of row houses. All the old dividing fences had been taken down, and the result was truly charming, at least, for anyone capable of being charmed by a garden. I'd lost that capacity years ago. Minor in botany at Smith College, I'd had a summer job writing catalog copy for White Flower Farm. Three months of trying to describe every scrawny scabiosa in mouthwatering prose left me hoping to never see another iris that wasn't already safely dead and entombed in some expensive and tasteful arrangement.

I thought back to my last breakfast with my fiancé Jason, his eyes darting anxiously to the clock, the cell phone in his jacket pocket ringing, the worried frown line between his eyes as he stared at the morning paper. Actually the same line formed between my eyes whenever I thought of my job. The conference I was supposed to be covering started tomorrow. I HAD to get back by then.

But this was an extraordinary garden, I had to admit. Mercedes handed me a basket, and suggested I might like to pick some berries for dessert. I wandered out, along a small path edged with alpine strawberries. Near the kitchen door, a raised spiral mound grew every kind of fresh herb a cook might need. Tubs of fragrant water lilies spilled over into miniature waterfalls that flow over rock beds and into a small wetland of reeds and cattails. Round, raised beds were thick with lettuces, arugula, radicchio and sorrel, or newly planted with baby squash and young tomatoes. The path wound between berry bushes and around fruit trees, with apples just beginning to swell and plums almost ripe. Another fork dove into a small wilderness of native shrubs and berries. All in all, it was quite delightful and took my mind off my anxiety.

Deep in the center of the garden was a large pond, surrounded by rounded stones and full of water lilies, water hyacinths, and paddling ducks. All the little streams and rivulets and waterfalls seemed to converge here, and a large frog sculpture spouted a fountain from its mouth that splashed happily into the pond. Two small children lay on their stomachs, scooping tadpoles out with a glass jar. They scrambled up to their little feet when they saw me, beaming and thrusting a dripping jar into my face. I shuddered. I hate children, as a rule, noisy little rugrats. But these were extremely polite, introducing themselves as Tad and Lily, beaming with those obnoxiously bright, healthy faces that looked as if a bad thought or a whiff of air pollution had never brushed across that glowing skin.

"Look, you can see its legs starting to grow," Lily said to me, holding up the jar for my inspection, where a hapless tadpole thrashed. "That one will be a red-legged frog. They're rare, but I bet we have a thousand here." She gave me a big smile, flashing perfect teeth that appeared to have never crunched a Fruit Loop or sucked a Pepsi in their short life. She had the big dark eyes of those poster children who gaze so pathetically out of direct mail appeals for aid to the Third World, but hers were glowing with health and happiness. Tad, in contrast, was as blond and blue-eyed as a miniature Leonardo di Capria.

"We're the Frog Block," Tad explained. "Every family on the block has at least one pond or water barrel where frogs can breed. And we grow catfish, too, and water chestnuts."

"Don't you have terrible mosquitos?" I asked.

"No, silly," Lily said. "Mosquitoes can't breed in moving water. That's why we have the fountain."

"And fish eat them," Tad added.

"The next block over is the Hummingbird Block," Lily said. "You should see their garden--it's so beautiful, with so many red flowers. Pineapple sage and trumpet vine and honeysuckle."

"And the block on the other side is the Songbird Block," Tad said. "They have all these really cool bird feeders and nesting boxes, and they plant things for the birds, like sunflowers, or flowers that attract the insects birds like to eat."

"I wouldn't like to live there," Lily said. "Nobody in that whole block can have a cat."

"They can, they just can't let it go outside," Tad corrected her.

The children proceeded to escort me around the garden. A swathe of native plants meandered through the area, providing habitat for native insects, birds, and wildlife. Fruit trees were underplanted with fava beans, herbs, currants or artichokes, in what the kids called "guilds"--kind of plant support groups, as they explained it, with some fixing nitrogen, some attracting beneficial insects, others bringing up nutrients from deep in the soil, and some, presumably, encouraging the others to talk about their feelings and unashamedly admit their deepest traumas. One bed was covered with a domed chicken house, woven of willow. The chickens were happily scratching the dirt and consuming kitchen scraps.

"That's our chicken tractor," Lily said. "They eat our kitchen scraps, dig and fertilize the garden bed, and give us eggs to eat. When the bed is ready, we move the whole dome to a new bed and plant the old one."

Beyond the chickens, a raised spiral bed was planted with strawberries, and I spied many ripe, red ones. I remembered my errand.

"Can I pick some of those?" I asked the children.

"Help yourself to anything you want, except from the beds right by people's doors," Lily said. "It's all common."

"But what's to prevent someone from just taking it all?" I asked.

The kids looked shocked. "Who would do that?" Lily asked. "You'd feel just terrible, sitting alone in your house eating strawberries and thinking that nobody else had any."

"The most fun part of the garden is sharing," Tad said. "And there's enough strawberries so everyone can have as much as they want, anyway."

It was clear to me that I'd fallen into some Otherworld, some different social order. I considered informing them that all such altruistic ideologies had been discredited by harsh experience and the failures of Soviet Communism, but why spoil their innocence? I just hoped, for their sakes, that they'd never reverse my little accident and fall into the real world, where the vultures would eat them alive. I picked strawberries, and the children showed me a few hidden vines of ripe blackcap raspberries and red currants.

"Be serious, now," I said to Mercedes as we ate berries and cream on the balcony. "This commons business can't really work. It never has. Someone always overstocks the sheep or whatever, and ruins it all."

She just smiled, basking like a cat in the sun. "You're working awfully hard at being unhappy."

"Working! That's what I should be doing--working! At the job I struggled and waited and planned and plotted and worked my posterior off to get! Do you have any idea how hard it is for a woman--a woman!--to get to be a science writer for the New York Times! And how important this assignment is--the assignment I'm going to blow because some weird glitch in reality has me trapped in some hippy gardeners' utopia! "

"I'm sorry. I forget how upsetting this must be for you. But won't your boss understand?"

"Understand what? You just can't call an editor at the New York Times and explain that you missed an important assignment because you fell into another reality. Believe me!"

Mercedes sighed. "We do have to get you back, somehow. I know the Indymedia technicians are working on it--not just for you, but for the others. There's been a steady trickle of Slippers over the past few years. Many don't want to go back, but some do."

"And how many have gotten back?" I asked.

"We're working on it."

I couldn't help myself, I began to cry. "My mother has high blood pressure," I sobbed. "This will kill her. And Jason--he's expecting me to have dinner with his law firm next week. We're supposed to announce our engagement."

Mercedes patted me on the shoulder, looking deeply distressed, and handed me a fresh handkerchief so I could blow my nose. I'm not one of those women who cries attractively, and I knew my nose was red and my eyes puffy.

"Your poor mother," Mercedes said sympathetically. "You must be terribly worried. Well, there's only one thing to do. To hell with those slowpokes at Indymedia. We'll have to go find the Wizards Collective."

"The Wizards Collective? What is that?"

"They're very mysterious. Nobody knows exactly where or how they meet. But they are widely believed to have synthesized the most sophisticated virtual reality technology with magic. Some people think they're responsible for the reality split that removed us from your world. And they are rumored to be able to manipulate time."

"How do we find them? Follow the Yellow Brick Road?" The thought that my fate hung not just on a bunch of wizards, but a collective of them was extremely depressing to me. I had briefly been part of a women's collective my first year in college. I'd attended three, long, grueling meetings where we never could agree on anything, and decided that I much preferred a clear hierarchy where someone, preferably me, could just tell everyone what to do.

"We'll begin where everything begins in this city," Mercedes said. "At the Garden of the Commons."

To Be Continued

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