

Reclaim the Commons: Daily Update

We've Begun!

by Starhawk

Thursday, June 3, 2004

Reclaim the Commons has begun, our extremely ambitious mobilization here on our own home ground in San Francisco. Tonight will be the first evening of the teach-in. Yesterday, Wednesday, we began moving into our convergence center, after many cliff-hanging dramas. As of Monday, we were still trying to get an agreement signed for a different space that had many problematic features, not least that we were subleasing and the owner ran a business upstairs. As time grew shorter, the guys we were renting from grew more and more nervous, and more and more restrictions slipped into the agreement. Then, at 4:30 in the afternoon on Memorial Day, I got a call from one of our group who is a realtor, that a new place was available. It's huge. It's beautiful. And it's two blocks from Moscone Center, where the big biotech convention will be. It has a front room 40' by 40' that we will fill with plants, seating circles, a bubbling fountain and a couple of ponds: our permaculture garden lounge. We have space for meetings, big spokescouncils, trainings, for the medics and the media team and Food Not Bombs and artmaking and a kids' space, all under one roof.

We're nesting, washing the floors, collecting old chairs, couches, tables, and rugs, and filling the place with plants. Next door to us is a junk shop and some of us have been happily shopping. I've pulled off what has to be some ultimate Sustainability Coup by bringing down all the cardboard that covered the solar panels we had installed on our house last winter, to be recycled into puppets and signs. I'm setting up tubs to define seating areas and filling them with sample plant guilds, feeling that somehow I've swapped karmas with Martha Stewart--she's in trouble with the law, and I'm arranging flowers.

I have a really, really comfortable bed, so high you have to hop onto it, with a mattress thick and firm. And I actually get to sleep in it this time. I'm working with friends that I've done political work with for twenty-five years, in a town where I don't have to study the map and learn the streets because I already know them.

And yet so much of San Francisco feels strange to me. I normally spend very little time downtown, or in the warehouse district south of Market where I've been searching for space. Yerba Buena, the park and arts complex that sits atop Moscone Center where the biotech convention will be held, is a big, public project that displaced a Filipino neighborhood and a lot of poor elders when it was built. I've taken my Goddess daughters to movies at the Metreon and to Zeum, the wonderful, interactive youth museum in the park. They've ridden on the carousel and performed in plays at the Arts

Center. I've never before done a ritual there, under the gaze of high-rises in the heart of downtown, but two nights ago we chanted for the full moon and planted crystals in the grass. Downtown at night is almost empty, a few passersby strolled on the paths, but we were mostly alone in an eerie quiet as the moon rose and the waterfall fountain that border the park sang behind us. The action has begun.

Friday, June 4

It's astonishing how many people in San Francisco seem to be abandoning their couches just at this moment. We keep getting calls from someone scanning Craig's List on the internet to go pick up a couch here, a refrigerator there. I achieve my main ambition of the day, and get my hair cut. After that, it's just directing traffic, answering calls, planning the trainings, thinking about who might facilitate the meetings, and then finally rushing off to the teach-in at the Unitarian Church.

Brian has been nervous all day, worried about the turn out for the teach-in. It's been hard organizing it because this one had virtually no funding, and the money that did come came late. We printed up a great broadsheet months ago and then had no money for weeks and weeks to print more. We're so late getting the convergence space partly because no one believed we had money to rent it until a few weeks ago. It seems like all the progressive funding in the country is being sucked into efforts to defeat Bush. A worthy cause, certainly, but just another example of how the current administration is sucking the lifeblood out of anything that truly feeds and nurtures the spirit.

Still, with almost no resources we've accomplished a lot. The space is up and running, the calendar is on the walls. Erik arrives in late afternoon with a U-Haul truck filled with plants, wine barrels, and eager permaculturalists, and we begin setting up the Garden Lounge. We place the barrels to define seating circles and traffic flow, and start to fill them with plants. We arrange the plants in guilds, which, I explain to our eager helpers, are plant affinity groups. In permaculture, we try to group plants that support each other and fulfill different functions--nitrogen fixers that take nitrogen out of the air and change it into a form that plants can take up in their roots for fertility; insectaries that attract beneficial insects; dynamic accumulators that take up minerals in their roots. We're grouping those things that grow together: a barrel of berries, elderberry and a small maple, all forest edge plants. I've made another that's a moon garden, all white and silver-gray plants that are also drought tolerant insectaries. By tomorrow's press conference, we'll have a bubbling fountain and a pond in the center. I pull a few out for the kids' room, velvety lamb's ears, scented geraniums, a strong smelling native sage. We also have hundreds of tomato plants to give away at the Really, Really Free Market.

Many of these plants were propagated months ago, in a day up at our ranch in the Cazadero Hills when all the neighbors came by to snip cuttings and pot up wild seedlings. I have to say a special thanks to Mer, who kept those starts watered in our greenhouse for months, all through the heat waves of March.

When I arrive at the teach-in, there are only a few people there, and my heart sinks. But I'm early, and as time goes on more and more arrive, until finally the hall is filled and overflowing. I give an overview of the mobilization, and then we hear from a panel

on GMOs and food. The facts are alarming, but we are also on a rising tide of victory. Just a couple of key facts:

Monsanto's stock is down 40%.

Although biotech companies claim to be feeding the world, 85% of GMO crops are herbicide resistant varieties of corn, canola, and soy that contribute to an enormously increased use of chemicals that kill the life of the soil. The other main crop is BT cotton, which is supposed to produce its own natural pesticide, and which has been a big failure. Anuradha Mittal talked about how the governments of a number of Indian states had to bail out farmers who planted it.

Biotech claims to be cutting edge science, but actually it is stifling science. Ignacio Chapela, the UC Berkeley biologist whose lab discovered the genetic contamination of original races of corn in Puebla and Chiapas, told how the graduate student who did the fieldwork was branded a "bioterrorist" and blacklisted, and how many other scientists who investigate the dangers of GMOs are cut out of grants, jobs, and professional support.

The FDA waived safety trials for GMO foods.

And much more. But as usual, no more time to write this morning. Check the website at www.reclaimthecommons.net for more, and check the Indymedia page for interviews. And if you're in the Bay Area, come down to 960 Howard. Plan to march with us on Saturday--meet at UN Plaza at 11 AM in the peace march. And come to the other activities, especially the action day, June 8. Greenbloc and Pagan clusters will be at 4th and Howard at 6:30 AM--bring plants to create the garden in the streets!

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