

RNC Update Number 12: Guantanamo on the Hudson

by Starhawk

“Guantanamo on the Hudson” is what the activists and media dubbed Pier 57, the site where all of us who were arrested during the RNC protests were taken. The name is on the one hand an unfair comparison—we were interned there for days, not months and years, we were not hooded nor beaten nor deprived of all of our human rights. But perhaps you have to be locked up for a short time to appreciate how long that time can drag out, how endless twenty or thirty or forty hours can seem, and then appreciate what it must be like to be sequestered away for months and years, denied communication with the outside world, denied lawyers or any system of law through which you can demand your rights. A couple of days of baloney sandwiches, feeling how hungry you get and how wistfully you dream of real food cooked by someone who loves you, and you can appreciate the Palestinians on hunger strike for better conditions in Israeli jails, where they can be held for six months at a time on ‘administrative detention’ with no trial, and that six months can be renewed for as long as the authorities want. A day or two suffering the boredom and fear and frustration and waiting, the sensory denial and discomfort, the restriction of choices and freedom that jail represents, and you can appreciate the rage of those who are condemned to whole lifetimes intertwined with this system. Those statistics—that one out of three African American men under 35 are in jail or under the supervision of the criminal justice system, that if you are black you have a better chance of going to prison than to college—begin to become real, and the horror of it moves from being something you can appreciate with your mind to something you feel viscerally, with your body. Most people believe that there are two types of people in the world—criminals, others, who deserve to be in jail, and those who don’t, us. Once the door slams shut, those distinctions start to break down.

But let me just tell the story. When I left off in my last update, I and about ten to fifteen others from the Pagan Cluster had just been arrested with much of the Code Orange affinity group from the Bay Area, blocking traffic just south of Herald Square. We were handcuffed and loaded into a paddy wagon, and driven to the pier where we were lined up, our stuff was taken and bagged, and we were placed into pens, the women separated from the men.

The pens were big chain-linked enclosures in the huge, covered pier, that could each hold up to a hundred people or more. There was a narrow, metal bench around the edge but nowhere else to sit down or lie down except the floor, which was filthy asphalt, covered with stains and grease and old diesel fuel. Delylah had already warned us that people were coming to the medics with mysterious rashes after contact with the ground, so I tried to stay off of it. The pier was also loud, echoey and with the constant noise of machinery and motors, so conversation was difficult.

Our group and some of the Code Orange women had gone in as Jane Does, withholding our names until we saw whether or not we would have the numbers and the necessity for a jail solidarity stand. As we grouped up in the pen and began talking to others, we realized that the vast majority of prisoners there had not intended to be arrested or planned for it. There were women in white who had been part of the War Resisters' League funeral march from Ground Zero to the convention. Over a hundred of them had been arrested before they ever left the park, surrounded by police and not given a chance to leave while they were still legally on the sidewalk and attempting to obey all police orders. There were women in frou-frou costumes and feather boas and thrift-store cocktail dresses who had been part of the roving street party action, scooped up before they got out of Union Square. There were others who had been rounded up at orientation spots or in impromptu marches, and plenty who had not been part of the protests at all but had been in the wrong place coming home from work or stepping out to get milk for their coffee. It became clear that the jail issue most people would be concerned with would be getting out as soon as possible, not trying to stay in and exert pressure on a system that had enormous resources. So we switched our strategy, figured out some simple ways to communicate with each other, and settled in.

While the physical conditions at the Pier were abominable, in other ways the situation reminded me of the mass nonviolent direct actions we had done in the eighties, around nuclear issues—the situation was frustrating and uncomfortable, but no one was getting beaten or tortured, people of color were not getting removed and singled out, there were none of the horrors some of us had faced in Genoa or Miami. There were a few incidences of brutality, and one man, Cory, was pepper sprayed with his contact lenses on during his arrest and then left in a paddy wagon for two hours with no medical care. But overall, in spite of the whole campaign of propaganda that preceded the actions, even many of the police were sympathetic. As I was taken out to have my property cataloged, my arresting officer told me that he respected what we were doing, that he was a Democrat and didn't like Bush, either, and that no one in the Pier was a criminal in his eyes.

In the pens, all the groups doing actions, which had never quite come together in mass meetings or spokescouncils before the day, met up at last. Anarchists and pacifists mixed together. The War Resisters' League action had attracted an older, gray-haired crowd, many of whom were highly experienced at nonviolent direct actions. One woman and I realized we had been in jail together over twenty years before, at the Livermore Weapons Lab in the Bay Area. The street party seemed to attract a younger crowd. And over the evening, more people came in from Herald Square, where actions continued. A group of a couple hundred had started an impromptu march in the streets, and eventually arrested. Another affinity group had blocked a bus full of delegates, whipped out Abu-Ghraib style hoods, and sat in the road with them on for over half an hour. The energy was high and almost festive, although people were tired. Our objectives had been to cause some disruption to the convention, to pierce through the bubble of insulation that surrounded the Republicans and put the protests into their face. And to demonstrate that Bush could only be nominated by rounding up and jailing hundreds or thousands of people who actively withdrew consent from his policies. And in that we succeeded.

The night wore on, and we got more and more tired. I sat on the bench and slept

sitting up, either leaning back awkwardly on the chain links or cradling my head in my hands and leaning my elbow on my knee. At intervals, we all woke up and started talking. One of the older women mentioned she had to get out to teach some classes. We asked her what she taught, and she said, "Tap dancing." Then she gave us a wonderful, impromptu lesson. Before we knew it, half a dozen of us were learning to tap and shuffle and were singing old show tunes, trying to remember all the words to "Give my regards to Broadway...remember me to Herald Square."

Eventually I got so tired that I took a spare sheet of paper from the receipt I'd been given for my belongings, put it under my head, steeled myself to ignore the grease and lay down on the floor, where I fell asleep, grateful for my own natural padding.

At dawn our cell block was marched out to busses and taken to the main jail. We had a moment of hope that we would be getting processed out soon, but we had merely shifted our waiting to another site. We were put into a big cell, with steel bars and a concrete bench and a toilet and sink. The toilet was half-screened by a low wall which made it much more civilized than most holding cells I've been in where the facilities are open to public view. We waited. A young, very thin woman in our cell began breathing hard, having a panic attack and Delylah and I worked on her to ground and calm down. We had just about succeeded when the guards came in to take her to the medics, probably the worst thing for her.

We waited. The day passed in different stretches of waiting and processing. We were taken to be photographed, then to be fingerprinted on their computerized machines—which don't always work very well, especially if you're a bit older and the grooves on your fingerprints are worn. We were divided and reshuffled so it was hard to stay in any one group. I lost Delylah, but spent most of the day with Lisa and Juniper. At one point, we spent hours in the Yellow Cell which actually had a few mats on the floor, and I passed out and slept deeply. When I woke up, some of the other older women were suggesting that we try to help those who had not intended to get arrested to collect names and organize themselves. We began talking to the group about taking control of our time and space in the jail, about how lucky we were to be together and what an opportunity it was to organize. And about privilege—how for most of us this was an anomalous experience, different from our everyday lives, but for people of color, jail and prison were too often the fate the system prescribed for them. We tried to organize a talent show but it was a shy group, so Lisa and Juniper and I sang some of our chants for everyone, stirring a bit of healing energy into the mix.

I felt calm and meditative throughout the day. All the work, the meetings, the calls, the details were either done or couldn't be done. My cell phone was locked up and I knew this process would take a long time and that nothing much that I could do would affect that—and that in the vast scheme of things it wouldn't be a very long time at all. The guards were behaving like reasonable human beings, responding to our requests for water or for more or less air. They even provided soy cheese and a box of fresh peaches for some of the women who could not eat wheat or dairy. And many of them also seemed sympathetic. While I was waiting for the medical screening interview, one of the New York City cops, a big, friendly, funny guy, advised us not to be too forthcoming with our complete medical history—that if we had something currently wrong or had immediate needs, to report it, but if we had, say, a childhood history of

asthma that was not currently active and mentioned it, we would spend extra hours waiting at the hospital to be examined. It was just what I would have told everyone in a jail training if we could have gotten everyone to take a jail training before this. Later he told me he'd been injured on September 11, was just waiting out four more months to early retirement, had compromised lungs from 29 straight days at Ground Zero, searching for his captain who died in the attacks. One of the facts we had culled for our action flyer was that the EPA had certified the air at Ground Zero safe on September 13, when they knew it wasn't. And that hundreds of police and firefighters and rescue workers now have permanent lung damage, along with thousands of other New Yorkers.

I felt for him. I could feel how much he cared personally for his friend who'd died in the towers, I could sense his rage at the system and that even though I was at that moment his prisoner, not much truly divided us. I've seen a lot of police brutality over the past few years. I've faced plenty of cops who were truly unreachable and fascist and enjoyed wielding their power. I'm very wary of naïve attempts to reach out and have dialogue with those who are your captors. The Stockholm Syndrome, that human need to identify with those who hold power over you, is real and easy to be seduced by. But in this action, more than any time since the milder actions of the 'eighties, I felt the real possibility of alliance that crossed the lines. And we need those alliances. An agenda of fascist control can only be put into place if the enforcers go along with it. If they refuse, if they stop supporting the authorities with their obedience to orders, the system will fall.

Eventually, I got out, around 1:30 AM on September 2. I met with a lawyer from the National Lawyer's Guild who told me what my charges were and that I would be arraigned before a judge and could enter a plea. She also told me that she had bad news: that there were police outside waiting to arrest me as soon as I got out. They were from San Francisco, or from Suffolk County, and could I think of any reason why they would be waiting for me? I couldn't, actually. I had no outstanding warrants or even, to my knowledge, parking tickets in San Francisco and I had never been to Suffolk County, as far as I knew. She went to check out the rumor while I practiced grounding and staying calm—when she came back, she told me it was a false alarm, that they had been waiting for someone else, poor soul, and were gone. I pled guilty to a minor traffic violation, which does not go onto a criminal record, agreed to pay a fine, and was released. Why? Well, unlike the hundreds of people who were illegally arrested that night, I actually had been blocking traffic, and one aspect of nonviolent practice is the willingness to accept the consequences of your actions.

I was greeted by the jail support vigil, a big group who were camped out across the street from the jail, and who rushed forward with big hugs. I gave the legal people my legal information, and had the medical people check me out, and then ate some food. Lisa and Juniper were released earlier, but most of our cluster were still in jail. So I joined the vigil, sleeping for a while on the pavement in a warm pile with some of the cluster, then on the floor of the van some of our support people had driven down in from the Vermont Witch Camp, then finally went home to bed for a few hours.

We spent the next day mostly at the vigil, waiting as the rest of our cluster slowly trickled out, and as throughout the day the lawyers tried various tactics to get the

guards to speed up the slow process of release and get people out. New York has a 24 hour policy—after that prisoners are supposed to be brought before a judge or released. Eventually a judge told them to release 450 prisoners by 5 pm on Thursday 9/2 or face a fine of \$1000 a piece, but apparently they had budgeted for fines as people were still held for hours.

At the end of the day on Thursday, we went down to Union Square for a closing gathering while Dubya made his acceptance speech. The energy in the square was beautiful—so many people out and doing so many creative actions. Our cluster did a spiral dance near the Gandhi statue that attracted every drummer in the park and turned into a hot, ecstatic circle of drumming and dancing. There were guitarists strumming and people in small groups making speeches and Code Orange was circulating through the park in a line of people with strips of cloth binding their mouths that said things like 'Fear' and "Repression' and other strips across their brows saying "Freedom" and "Resistance." It seemed as if everyone had brought the art and street theater and flyers and ideas they didn't get to do on the action day, and that democracy did truly begin where the barricades ended, as the call to action had said. The gathering eventually turned into a strong, spirited march to the convention center, while inside, we learned later, Bush's speech was interrupted twice by protestors.

We spent the next days cleaning up and debriefing. At some later point—when I can stay awake for more than two hours at a stretch, I'll try to write more of an assessment of all that went on. But for now, let me just say this:

For five days, while the Republicans met in New York City they were met with massive resistance, with every form of nonviolent protest imaginable—from huge, permitted marches to small, breakaway marches, from confrontations at their parties to disruptions of their speeches, from street theater to blockades, from conferences to parties in the park, from parody to poetry to mass direct action. In spite of vicious campaigns of disinformation and propaganda directed against protestors, we were met with overwhelming support from ordinary people and even with sympathy from many of the cops and guards. In spite of massive pre-emptive arrests, we continued to fill the streets. We came as close as we've come yet to a mass, popular uprising. The connections and trust between various groups are stronger now than they were when we started. We overcame fear, and showed at least a glimpse of the world we want to create.

Donations for the action can be sent to:

RANT
1405 Hillmount St.
Austin, Texas
78704
U.S.A.

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Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* and eight other books on feminism, politics and earth-based spirituality. She teaches [Earth Activist Trainings](#) that combine permaculture design and activist skills, and works with the [RANT trainer's collective](#), that offers training and support for mobilizations around global justice and peace issues.

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