

Only Poetry Can Address Grief:

Moving Forward after 911

By Starhawk

In the middle of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence march in Washington DC last month, I found myself nose to nose with a line of police attempting to push the crowd back. I was facing an angry but very short policewoman so in my case it was actually nightstick to bosom. "Get back, get back!" she was shouting, but our line was not giving ground. I explained to her, calmly and I thought, quite reasonably, that we were not going to get back, because there was nowhere for us to go.

I think of that moment now as a metaphor for where what I like to call the Global Justice movement is today. We are facing an array of forces telling us to get back, to disperse, to leave the scene. The forces of the state, the media, all the powers that support global corporate capitalism would like to see us go away.

But we have nowhere to go.

We have nowhere to go because the conditions we have been fighting have not gone away. The disparity between rich and poor has not grown less, the attempts of the corporate powers to consolidate their hegemony have not ceased, the environment has not miraculously repaired itself, and our economic and social systems have not suddenly become sustainable. We're on the Titanic; our efforts to turn the course of the ship have just been hijacked, and we're churning full steam ahead into the iceberg.

We don't have the luxury of defraying action to a more favorable moment. We need the movement to keep moving forward.

How do we do that in the face of increased repression and much potential public opposition?

I. Stand our ground:

First, we don't panic, and we stand our ground. Fear is running rampant at the moment, and every effort is being made by the authorities to increase and play upon that fear. While the general public may fear more terrorist attacks, we in the movement are equally or more afraid of what our governments may do in restricting civil liberties and targeting dissent. But either way, fear is the authorities' greatest weapon of social control. When

we are in a state of fear, we're not taking in information, we're unable to clearly see or assess a situation, and we make bad decisions. We're more easily controlled.

We can learn to recognize fear, in our own bodies, in our meetings, in our interactions. When fear is present, just stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and consciously set it aside. Then ask, 'What would we do in this situation if we weren't afraid?' From that perspective, we can make choices based on reasonable caution but also on vision.

II. Acknowledge the grief:

911 threw us as collectively into a deep well of grief. We have had to face the awful power of death to intrude on our lives, to sear us with pain and loss, to reorder all our priorities and disrupt all our plans, to remind us that we walk the world in vulnerable, mortal flesh.

The political task that faces us is to speak to the depth of that grief, not to gloss it over or trivialize it or use it to further stale agendas. **If we simply shout at people over bullhorns, recycling the politics, the slogans, the language of the sixties, we will fail.** The movement we need to build now, the potential for transformation that might arise out of this tragedy, must speak to the heart of the pain we share across political lines. A great hole torn has been torn out of the heart of the world. What we need now is not to close over the wound, but to dare to stare more deeply into it.

To comprehend that grief, we must look at the possibility that it was present within us before the 11th, that the violence and death of that day released a flood tide of latent mourning. On one level, yes, we mourned for the victims and their families, for the destruction of familiar places and the disruption of the patterns of our lives. But on a deeper level, perhaps many of us were already mourning, consciously or not, the lack of connection and community in the society that built those towers, the separation from nature that they embodied, the diminishment of the wild, the closing off of possibilities and the narrowing of our life spaces. This frozen grief, transmuted into rage, has fueled our movements, but we are not the only ones to feel it.

With the grief also comes a fear more profound than even the terror caused by the attack itself. For those towers represented human triumph over nature. Larger than life, built to be unburnable, they were the Titanic of our day. For them to burn and fall so quickly means that the whole superstructure we depend upon to mitigate nature and assure our comfort and safety could fall. And without it most of us do not know how to survive.

We know, in our bones, that our technologies and economies are unsustainable, that nature is stronger than we are, that we cannot tamper with the very life systems of the earth without costs, and that we are creating such despair in the world that it must inevitably crack open, weep and rage. The towers falling were an icon of an upcoming reckoning we dread but secretly anticipate.

The movement we need to build now must speak to the full weight of the loss, of the fear, and yet hold out hope. We must admit the existence of great forces of chaos and uncertainty, and yet maintain that out of chaos can come destruction, but also creativity.

III. Develop a new political language:

Faced with the profundity of loss, with the stark reality of death, we find words inadequate. "What do I say to someone who just lost his brother in the towers?" a hard core New York activist asks me. "How do I talk to him?" The language of abstraction doesn't work. Ideology doesn't work. Judgment and hectoring and shaming and blaming cannot truly touch the depth of that loss. Only poetry can address grief. Only words that convey what we can see and smell and taste and touch of life, can move us.

To do that we need to forge a new language of both the word and the deed. We on the Left can be as devoted to certain words and political forms as any Catholic was ever attached to the Latin Mass. We incant "imperialism" or "anti-capitalist" or "non-violence" or even "peace" with an almost religious fervor, as if the words alone could strike blows in the struggle.

Those words are useful, and meaningful. But they're like the cliché that the bad poet turns to. They are the easy first answer that relieves us of the work of real expression.

Lately I'm hearing some of my most political friends say, "I can't go to another rally. I can't stand hearing one more person tell me in angry tones what the answers are."

What if we stopped in the middle of our rallies and said, "But you know, these issues are complex, and many of us have mixed feelings, and let's take some time for all the people here to talk to each other instead of listening to more speeches."

If we could admit to some of our own ambiguities, we might also find that we are closer than we think to that supposed overwhelming majority of war supporters, who in reality may have deeply mixed feelings of their own.

IV. Propose our own alternative to Bush's war:

Defining the September attacks as an act of war rather than a criminal act has only dignified the perpetrators. Going to war has turned us into Bin Laden's recruiting agency, rapidly alienating the entire Muslim world. Bombing Afghanistan has made us look like thugs to the Muslim world, (and to everyone else with a heart and sense) and bred thousands of new potential ready-to-die enemies. The bombing, by preventing relief trucks from delivering serious food supplies before winter, now threatens to impose starvation on up to seven million Afghans.

In spite of what the polls and the media tell us, I don't necessarily believe that the bulk of the U.S. population is frothing at the mouth with eagerness for Afghani blood. The phrase I kept hearing is a plaintive "We need to do something." Bush's program is the only one laid out for us. The attacks are real, and devastating; simply calling for 'peace' and singing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" does not address their seriousness. If we oppose Bush's war, we need a clear alternative.

Diplomacy does not mean weakness. It means being smarter than the opposition, not just better armed. Diplomacy also does not mean simply issuing ultimatums backed by bombs. It means actually understanding something of the culture of the people you're negotiating with. It means actually negotiating, offering a carrot as well as a stick, being willing to let the other side come out with something less than total humiliation. If the goal of the war is truly to get Bin Laden, well, the Taliban just offered to deliver him to a third country. This could be moment to switch our policy, to negotiate, to work with and strengthen international institutions and the U.N., to begin to deliver massive and meaningful humanitarian aid to the region. Any or all of those acts would increase our long term security far more than our present course.

V. Expose the real aims of the war:

We have about as much chance of doing any of the above as I have of being offered a post in the current Administration. All the indications are that Bush wants a war, to establish U.S. hegemony in Central Asia and the East, to forestall an Asian alliance that might oppose our vested interests with interests of their own, to take control of rich oil resources of Central Asia and provide a safe passage for an oil pipeline across Afghanistan, to deflect from the illegitimacy of his own presidency, to implement the entire right wing agenda. We need to continue educating the public about those aims and about the real consequences of the war. To do that, we need to talk to people-not just at rallies and teach-ins, but in our neighborhoods, our

workplaces, our schools, on the bus, in the street, on talk shows, with our families. It can be easier to march into a line of riot cops than to voice an unpopular opinion where we live, but we've got to do it and to learn to do it calmly and effectively. And while we're talking about the war, we need to make the connections to the broader issues we were working on before the eleventh of September. The war can be an opening to challenge racism, and to spotlight the U.S.'s historic role of training, arming, and supporting terrorists-including Bin Laden and the Taliban in previous years. In an age of terrorism, does an economy entirely dependent on oil-based long distance transport really make sense? (Especially as it didn't make sense before, but never mind that.) The Anthrax scares are a perfect opportunity to push for true domestic security in the form of a well-funded, functioning public health system, availability of hospital beds and medical care, support for local food producers, development of alternative energy resources, etc. The right wing has used the attacks and the war to justify their agenda, but with a little political judo we can redraw their picture of reality.

VI. Develop our vision:

Despair breeds fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism.
A world of truly shared abundance would be a safer world.

The policies of global corporate capitalism have not brought us that world. They've been tried-and found wanting. We need to replace them with our own vision.

The global justice movement has often been accused of not knowing what it wants. In reality, we know clearly the broad outlines of what we want even though we have a multiplicity of ideas of how to get there. I can lay it out for you in five short paragraphs:

We want enterprises to be rooted in communities and responsible to communities and to future generations. We want producers to be accountable for the true social and ecological costs of what they produce.

We say there is a commons that needs to be protected, that there are resources that are too vital to life, too precious or sacred to be exploited for the profit of the few, including those things that sustain life: water, traditional lands and productive farmland, the collective heritage of ecological and genetic diversity, the earth's climate, the habitats of rare species and of endangered human

cultures, sacred places, and our collective cultural and intellectual knowledge.

We say that those who labor are entitled, as a bare minimum, to safety, to just compensation that allows for life, hope and dignity, and to have the power to determine the conditions of their work.

We say that as humans we have a collective responsibility for the well being of others, that life is fraught with uncertainty, bad luck, injury, disease, and loss, and that we need to help each other bear those losses, provide generously and graciously the means for all to have food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, and the possibility to realize their dreams and aspirations. Only then will we have true security.

We say that democracy means people having a voice in the decisions that affect them, including economic decisions.

VII. Develop our strategy:

We might begin by acknowledging that we have had a highly successful strategy for the past two years. Since Seattle, what we've done is to oppose every summit, as a means of focusing attention on the institutions of globalization that were functioning essentially in secret, and delegitimizing them. Systems fall when they hit a crisis of legitimacy, when they can no longer inspire faith and command compliance. Our strategy should continue to work toward creating that crisis for the institutions of global corporate capitalism. In the meantime, in spite of all appearances the government may already be creating that crisis for itself. For ultimately, nothing delegitimizes a government faster than not being able to provide for the physical or economic security of its people.

Now our strategy needs to broaden and become more complex.

Contest the summits when and where we can, but perhaps with some new tactics that clearly embody the alternatives we represent.

Turn more of our attention to local organizing, bringing the global issues home and making organizing and activism an ongoing, sustained process. And find ways to make that process as juicy and exciting as some of the big, global actions. Find ways to link local issues and actions regionally and globally. Start to build the alternatives: alternative economic enterprises on

new models, directly democratic systems of governance such as neighborhood or watershed councils or town meetings, everything from alternative energy co-operatives to community gardens to local currencies. Look for ways to let those alternatives delegitimize the status quo.

VIII. Organize openly:

In times of increasing repression, the strongest way to resist is not to hide, but to become even more open in our organizing and our communications. The more out there we are, the harder we'll be to brand as terrorists. The more faces they photograph at rallies and marches, the less meaningful any single face will be. The more information they collect, the less they'll be able to collate, analyze and make sense of it all. And if they read my email- they're welcome to read my email. Somebody ought to, and I don't have time to read it all myself. Maybe I could pay one of them a small extra fee to sort it for me and send me a summary of the high points....

Security culture either has to be so good you can outspook the CIA, or it simply makes you look like you have something to hide and attracts the attention of the authorities. And it makes it extremely difficult to mobilize, educate and inspire people. Yes, there are actions that depend on surprise, but with a little cleverness we can figure out how to do that in a basically open setting. "And tonight, each affinity group spoke receives a sealed envelope-open it at five A.M. tomorrow and it will give you two alternative beginning points for your march. Flip a coin to decide which one to go to..."

IX. Make our actions count:

Political action may well become more costly in the next months and years. That simply means we need to be more clear and thoughtful in planning and carrying out our actions. Most of us are willing to take risks in this work and to make sacrifices if necessary, but no one wants to sacrifice for something meaningless or stupid. We can no longer afford vaguely planned, ill considered actions that don't accomplish anything-and believe me, I've done more than my fair share of them.

We should never carry out an action that involves significant risks, unless the following five points are addressed:

1. We know what our intention is-are we trying to raise public awareness, delegitimize an institution, influence an individual, end an immediate wrong?
2. We have a clear objective and know what it is--are we trying to close down a meeting, deliver a petition, pressure an official to meet with

us, provide a service? What are we trying to communicate, to whom, and how? What would victory look like?

3. We make sure the acts we take, the symbols we use, the focus we choose and the tactics we use reflect our intentions and objectives. We resist the temptation to do extraneous things that might detract from our focus.
4. We have an exit strategy. How are we going to end the action? How are we going to get out once we get in?
5. We have ongoing support lined up for afterwards-legal, medical, political support, people willing to offer solidarity if needed.

X. Use tactics that fit the new strategy and situation:

All of us are rethinking our tactics in the light of the current situation. We often argue tactics on the grounds of morality-is it right or wrong, violent or nonviolent, to throw a tear gas canister back into a line of police? To break a window? We might do better to ask, "Do these particular tactics support our goals and objectives," and "Are they actually working?" Those who advocate highly confrontational tactics, such as property damage and fighting the cops, are generally trying to strike blows against the system. But at the moment, the system has been struck harder than we could have imagined, and is reeling toward fascism, not liberation. In the present climate, such tactics are most likely to backfire and confirm the system's legitimacy.

Many classic nonviolent tactics are designed to heighten the contrast between us and them, to claim the high moral ground and point out the violence of the system. But many of those tactics no longer function in the same way. Static, passive tactics become boring and disempowering. Symbolic, cross-the-line arrests don't seem to impress the public with our nobility and dedication any more, even when they are noticed at all. Mass arrests may be used to justify police violence, even when the arrestees were completely peaceful. When the police cooperate in making the arrest easy and low risk, the process confirms rather than challenges the power of the state. When they don't, even symbolic actions are costing heavily in jail time or probation. The price may well be worth it, but there's only so many times in a lifetime we can pay it, so our choices need to be thoughtful and strategic.

We need a new vocabulary of tactics, that can be empowering, visionary, confrontational without reading as proto-terrorist, and that work toward a crisis of legitimacy for the system. We also need tactics and actions that prefigure the world we want to create, but that do so in a way that has some edge and bite to it.

Here are a few we are already using that could be further developed:

Mobile, fluid street tactics: Groups like Art and Revolution, Reclaim the Streets, the Pink Blocs of Prague and Genoa and the Living River in Quebec have brought art, dance, drums, creativity and mobility to street actions, and developed mobile and fluid street tactics. Such actions are focused not on getting arrested (although that may be a consequence of the actions) nor on confrontations with the cops, but on accomplishing an objective: claiming a space and redefining it; disrupting business as usual, etc., while embodying the joy of the revolution we are trying to make. In Toronto on October 16, snake dancing columns of people managed to disrupt the financial district in spite of a very tense police presence. The Pink Bloc has sake danced through police lines. The Pagan Cluster in Quebec City and DC was able to perform street rituals in the midst of a dangerous situations, in ways that allowed participation by people with widely varying needs around safety. The Fogtown Action Avengers in San Francisco combined an open, public ritual which distracted the police from a surprise disruption of the stock exchange carried out by an affinity group dressed as Robin Hood.

Claiming space: Reclaim the Streets takes an intersection, moves in a sound system and couches, and throws a party. A Temporary Autonomous Zone is a space we take over and then exemplify the world we want to live in, with free food, healing, popular education, a Truly Free Market where goods are given away or traded, workshops, conversations, sports, theater.

Street services and alternative services: Groups like Food Not Bombs have been directly feeding the homeless for decades. One of the most successful direct actions I've ever been involved with was a group called Prevention Point that pioneered street based needle exchanges for drug users to prevent the spread of AIDS. In DC in September, during the Anti-Capitalist Convergence's Temporary Autonomous Zone and during the Sunday peace march rally, the Pagan Cluster set up an Emotional Healing Space that offered informal counseling, massage, food, water and hands-on healing. The IndyMedia Centers provide alternative news coverage and a powerful challenge to corporate media. The medical and legal services we provide during an action could be expanded. Guerilla gardeners could be mobilized in new ways. Imagine a convergence that left a community transformed by community gardens, with toxic sites healing, worm farms thriving, and streets lined with fruit trees.

Popular education: One of the values of mass convergences has been the education and training we've been able to provide for each other, from teach-ins on the global economy to climbing instruction. Almost every Summit has had its CounterSummit. Most of these have followed the rough

format of an academic conference, with presenters talking to an audience or facilitating a discussion. But many more interactive and creative ways of teaching and learning could be brought into them: role plays, story-telling circles, councils. We could hold a giant simulation of a meeting, with people role playing delegations and grappling with the issues on the table, but from the starting point of our own values.

People are hungry to talk about the war, about their fears and beliefs and opinions. The Zapatistas give us the example of the Consulta-a process of going out to the people to both listen to concerns and mobilize. We might halt the speeches at a rally for ten minutes to let people talk to each other. Or do away with the speeches altogether, and instead ask groups to facilitate smaller-group discussions on their issues and tactics, run short training sessions, offer games or dances or rituals. And we could develop ways to create instant Public Conversations as actions and as education. Caravans can bring discussion and education out of the urban centers, and could embody alternative energies and possibilities, running their vehicles on vegetable oil, bringing solar panels to power sound systems.

These are just a few ideas that can stimulate our thinking and awaken our creativity.

XI. Renew our spirits:

These are hard times. Many of us have been working intensely for a long time and are now seeing the possibility of our hard won political gains being swept away. Fear and loss surround us, and many forces are at work trying to make us feel isolated, marginalized and disempowered. At best, the work ahead of us seems overwhelming.

If we are going to sustain this work and regain our momentum, we need to allow ourselves time to rest, to go to those places we are working so hard to save and be open to their beauty, to receive support and love from the communities we are working for. We need to nurture our relationships with each other, to offer not just political solidarity but personal warmth and caring. Death and loss rearrange our priorities, teach us how much we need each other, and make it easier to drop some of the petty things that interfere with our true connections.

Many activists mistrust religion and spirituality, often for good reasons. But each of us is in this work because something is sacred to us-sacred in the sense that it means more than our comfort or convenience, that it determines all of our other values, that we are willing to risk ourselves in its service. It might not be a God, Goddess or deity, but rather a belief in

freedom, the feeling we get when we stand under a redwood tree or watch a bird winging across the sky, a commitment to truth or to a child. Whatever it is, it can feed and nurture us as well. For activists who have some form of identified spiritual practice, now is a good time to seriously practice it. For those who don't, it might still be worth taking time to ask yourself, "Why do I do this work? What is most important to me? What does feed me?"

The answer might be grand and noble, or it might be small and ordinary, hip hop or sidewalk chalk. Whatever it is, make it a priority. Do it daily, if you can, or at least regularly. Bring it into actions with you. Let it renew your energy when you're down. We need you in this struggle for the long haul, and taking care of yourself is a way of preserving one of the movement's precious resources.

The goal of terrorists, whether of the freelance or the state variety, is to fill all our mental and emotional space with fear, rage, powerlessness and despair, to cut us off from the sources of life and hope. Violence and fear can make us shut down to the things and beings that we love. When we do, we wither and die. When we consciously open ourselves to the beauty of the world, when we choose to love another tenuous and fragile being, we commit an act of liberation as courageous and radical as any foray into the tear gas.

There is nowhere left to go, but forward. If we hold onto hope and vision, if we dare to walk with courage and to act in the service of what we love, the barriers holding us back will give way, as the police eventually did in our Washington march. The new road is unmarked and unmapped. It feels unfamiliar, but exhilarating; dangerous, but free. We were born to blaze this trail, and the great powers of life and creativity march with us toward a viable future.

-- *Starhawk*

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