

A Terrible Beauty: For Brad Will

by Starhawk
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It's the night before the Spiral Dance, our community's annual huge celebration for Samhain, more generally known as Halloween, the ancient feast of the ancestors and honoring of the Beloved Dead, which long predates the Christian feast of All Souls. The Spiral Dance is the biggest, most elaborate ritual our community, Reclaiming, creates throughout the year, with intricate altars, a full chorus, dancers, singers, acrobats doing aerial invocations, and a spiral that might include a thousand people. Into all this, we weave some deep magic, both personal and broader than personal, involving the mystery at the heart of our spirituality—death and regeneration.

Each year I take on different roles. Some years I lead the trance, other years I might simply invoke the spirits of the land or play the drum and leave the 'bigger' roles to others. This year my role seems to involve carrying a lot of heavy objects and buckets of sand, building altars and decorating the front of the house. Or not so much actually building and decorating, as providing the materials and suggestions for others to do the creative part.

And this year I'm calling the Dead. So I've been thinking a lot about death, and singing the song we will use to sing the Dead over into a place of renewal. Just before bed, I check my email, and I learn that a young man has died, shot to death in Oaxaca where he has gone to cover the teachers' strike and the people's insurrection for Indymedia. His name is Brad Will. I stare at his picture, trying to remember if I know him from all the demonstrations and mobilizations and meetings we have undoubtedly been at together.

In Miami, my friend Andy reminds me, after a wild ritual collaboration between the Pagan cluster and the black bloc, a young man stepped forward with a guitar and began singing Desert Rat's song about Seattle, "When the Tear Gas Fills the Sky." That was Brad—alive, singing, defiant. "I will wash the pepper from your face, and go with you to jail, And if you don't make it through this fight, I swear I'll tell your tale..."

I didn't know him well, but I know so many like him—mostly but not all young, sitting in long meetings in warehouses or donning respirators to gut flood-ruined houses in New Orleans, standing shoulder to shoulder as the riot cops advance, or as the bulldozer moves forward to destroy a home in Gaza. Filing stories at midnight on electronic networks set up by young geniuses with duct tape and component parts in dusty, third world towns, eating cold pasta out of old yogurt tops and sleeping on floors. Hitching rides into war zones and crossing borders. It's as if a whole cohort of souls had arrived

on this planet imbued with the unquestioned faith that they were put here to somehow make a difference, to interfere with injustice, to witness, to change the world. Ragged, intemperate, opinionated, passionate, and above all, alive.

And now another one of the tribe is dead, shot down in Oaxaca where a five-month teachers' strike became a full-blown insurrection, the kind that radicals dream of, with streets full of barricades and ordinary people rising up against a rigged election and a corrupt, dictatorial governor. It hasn't been much reported in the U.S. papers. But Brad Will was there, with camera and computer, to be a set of eyes.

Now his eyes are closed, forever. I put his name on our list of the Dead. At the Spiral Dance, I see someone has set up a shrine to him on our North altar, where the dead are honored. I meet another activist friend there, who tells me how he remembers Brad: running into a barrage of sound bombs in a demonstration in some foreign city. "I couldn't explain to people that they were harmless," he'd said. "We didn't speak the same language. So I had to show them."

I didn't know him well, but I know how it is to walk into a situation that is dangerous, even life-threatening, how it feels to weigh the risks, to accept them, to tell yourself that you can be at peace with any consequence, and then to walk out into the street in the firm if unconscious belief that you will be lucky that day, once again. I can only imagine how it feels when the bullets rip through flesh, and your severed spirit stares back at a broken body, and in a blaze of light a different journey begins.

We Pagans have no dogma, no official Book of the Dead to outline the soul's journey. If we share any belief in common, it is simply this: that death is part of a cycle that includes regeneration and renewal. That just as the falling leaves decay to fertilize the roots of trees, each death feeds some rebirth.

Death transforms us. The tribe of world-changers has its list of martyrs—the short list of those who are known in the first world—Carlo Giuliani, Huang Hai Lee, Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall—and the much longer list of names in some other language—Spanish, indigenous, Arabic, and so many others—who die every day. And the world's religions each have their concept of that transformation, for those whose death is somehow special, powerful and meaningful: martyrs, saints, bodhisattvas. We Pagans don't like to glorify martyrs, but we know that 'sacrifice' means 'to make sacred.' In an instant, that ordinary comrade you remember singing at the fire or arguing at the meeting, someone you might have been charmed or irritated by or attracted to, or not, someone who showed no mark of doom or prescience of what was to come, becomes uplifted into another realm, part symbol, part victim, locus of our deepest love and rage.

William Butler Yeats expressed it best, writing about the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, the friends he admired and the ones he disliked, shot by the British.

"Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn,
All changed, changed utterly,
A terrible beauty is born..."

And death transforms the living. When someone close to us dies, we become someone

else. When my father died when I was just five years old; my mother was transformed from a beloved wife to a grieving widow. I changed, overnight, from a blessed, fortunate child to someone set apart, marked by a tragedy, missing something deeply important that other children had.

And so one day you are someone with a job and a family and a neighborhood in which you and your kin have lived for generations—and a day later the waters rise and you are homeless, a refugee in a strange place dependent on the kindness of strangers. One day you are a mother filled with hopes and dreams and pride, and the next day you are bereft, with a gaping hole in your heart that can never be filled.

Yet we, the living, have some choice in how we respond to death, and what transformation we undergo. My mother, out of her grief, became a counselor, a therapist, an expert in loss and grieving. Cindy Sheehan, out of her grief for her son Casey, killed in Iraq, became a woman on fire, a modern prophet calling the powerful to justice, who galvanized the movement against the war. Mesha Monge-Irizarry, mother of Idriss Stelley who was shot dead in the Metreon by the San Francisco police, became an advocate for all the victims of police violence. Rachel Corrie's parents took up the cause of justice for the people of Palestine. Grief can open the heart to courage and compassion; rage can move us to action. Out of loss comes regeneration: a terrible beauty is born.

A death like Brad's calls us all to deeper levels of courage, to be eyes that refuse to shut in the face of oppression, voices that sing out for justice, hands that build a transformed world.

More info on Oaxaca and Brad:

<http://www.narconews.com/>

<http://nyc.indymedia.org/>

SF Bay Area activities:

<http://indybay.org/>

NEW YORK CITY INDEPENDENT MEDIA CENTER RESPONDS TO THE DEATH OF BRAD WILL

<http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2006/10/77958.html>

Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of *The Earth Path*, as well as *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*; 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, www.rantcollective.org that offers training and support for mobilizations around global justice and peace issues.

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