

WEBS OF POWER

notes from the global uprising



STARHAWK

With the 1979 publication of her book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (HarperSanFrancisco), Starhawk became a central figure in the modern revival of indigenous European religions, better known as Paganism. More recently, she has been active in the worldwide movement against corporate-led globalization. Her activism and spirituality come together in the Pagan Cluster, a group whose actions are memorable for their rowdy creativity and panache as much as for their message.

At a recent protest against the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, the Pagan Cluster and other groups filled Market Street, San Francisco's main artery, waving homemade flags and pounding drums. The activists blocked traffic and handed out fliers describing how the FTAA would allow corporations to take over public resources and sue foreign governments who pass environmental or labor laws that might "restrict trade." Curious onlookers were treated to a street-theater spoof of "corporate school," featuring nutrition by McDonald's,

physical education by Nike, and math by the World Bank: we lend you \$1 million; you give us your healthcare system, your schools, and your water.

Starhawk has been an activist since the age of fifteen, when she handed out anti-Vietnam War balloons in Beverly Hills, but the 1999 "Battle of Seattle" was a turning point for her. For two days, forty thousand people protested the policies of the World Trade Organization, calling them exploitative and undemocratic; she was among nearly six hundred protesters who were arrested and jailed. The success of the action — they prevented the WTO from meeting as planned — inspired her, and the police violence hardened her resolve.

Since then, Starhawk has participated in many large-scale protests against corporate globalization and has trained activists in Europe and the Americas. But it's her passionate writing that has drawn her the most recognition and praise.

Her latest book, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (*New Society*), includes some of the journals she kept during anti-globalization protests. The following excerpt begins with an account of her participation in the April 2000 blockade against a Washington, D.C., meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The activists used the same tactics that had worked in Seattle the previous fall, but this time failed to prevent the delegates from entering. The action succeeded, however, in drawing public attention to the debate.

The excerpt is followed by an interview in which Starhawk discusses her experiences and suggests strategies for future action.

"Webs of Power" is excerpted from *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, by Starhawk. © 2002 by Starhawk. It appears here by permission of *New Society Publishers*, www.newsociety.com.

— April Thompson

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

WE HAVE BEEN BLOCKADING ALL DAY IN A GIANT spider web: an intersection entirely surrounded by webs of yarn that effectively prevent movement into the street. The intersection is held by a cluster from Asheville, North Carolina, that includes many labor-union members. We are blockading arm in arm with the ecofeminist Teamsters. In front of the police barricade, a group of protesters are "locked down": sitting in a line with their arms chained together. Their supporters

surround them, bring them water, administer sunscreen, and hold the keys to the chains.

I can't express how happy I am to be part of a movement that includes ecofeminist Teamsters. They ask us for help in shifting the energy, which is loud, raucous, and confrontational. I join the group of drummers in the center. I don't have my own drum today, just a bucket, which works fairly well, except when it falls off the rope tied around my waist. I start to drum with the group, because the only way to shift a rhythm is first to join it. With the help of some of the singers in our group, we manage to shift into a song: "We have come too far, / We won't turn around, / We'll flood the streets with justice, / We are freedom bound."

This magic is played out against a background of stark but unacknowledged fear. In all our discussions, I don't think we ever simply said, "I'm afraid." I haven't said it because I've pushed the fear so far down it doesn't easily surface, and because what I'm most afraid of is that someone else, someone I persuaded to come to this action, will get hurt. The group seems to project calm and confidence, when really what might help us all the most would be simply to say, "I'm scared. Are you scared, too?"

We're scared because we are out on the street, risking arrest in a city that has been turned into a police state. Sixty square blocks have been barricaded off. Yesterday six hundred people were arrested in a preemptive strike at a peaceful march. They weren't warned or allowed to leave. Our Convergence Center was shut down in the morning, and thousands of people were arriving that day to be trained. Our puppets and first-aid supplies were confiscated. Although the puppets were eventually released, the medical supplies remain under lock and key.

I spent the morning wandering in the rain with a group of about eighty people I was trying to train in nonviolence. The church we were headed to was flanked by police and so overcrowded we could not possibly squeeze in. We set off for a park, but a runner informed us that the police were throwing people out of it. Finally I just stopped on a corner and said to the group, "Look, you can come back and be trained in the afternoon, or we can just do it in the road."

"Let's do it!" they cried, and so we ducked into an alley, arranged a fallback point in case we had to scatter, and I trained them right there, with police cruising half a block away.

We are afraid of the police: they have guns, clubs, tear gas, pepper spray, and all the power of the state at their disposal. They can beat, gas, or jail us with relative impunity. What's hard to grasp is how much they are afraid of us. Some of our group are wearing black and covering their faces like the anarchist protesters in Seattle who broke windows and made the police look bad. Mostly, I think the police are afraid of the unknown: Someone in the crowd could have a bomb. Those bubbling vats in the Convergence Center kitchen could be homemade pepper spray instead of lunch. Those bottles of turpentine could have some more nefarious purpose than removal of the paint we used on banners.

Now the two groups, police and protestors, each perceiving themselves as righteous and the other side as potentially vio-

lent, are squaring off on the streets of our nation's capital.

WILOW, EVERGREEN, AND I ARE RETURNING FROM a trek to the bathrooms, which are blocks away. We see a makeshift barricade blocking the street. A dumpster has been dragged into the middle of the road, and a few broken pieces of furniture lie atop it. A couple of cars have been lifted up and set down at forty-five-degree angles. Our much-debated nonviolence guidelines state that we will not damage property. The cars are unharmed, but moving them has certainly put them in harm's way. It is an action right on the edge of what the guidelines allow — but then, many people are unhappy with the idea of having guidelines at all and agreed to them only with the greatest reluctance.

Behind the dumpster, a circle of protesters are engaged in a heated debate about the barricade. David, my partner, is in the middle of them. As I listen, I soon learn what has happened: The young man in black, the tall Rasta from the Caribbean, and some of the others have built the barricade. David has been taking it down even as they built it up. Now they are having a council meeting. A young woman from the ecofeminist Teamsters is facilitating.

The people who built the barricade see it as protection. We've heard rumors that the cops are running people over with motorcycles. David sees the barricade as a danger to us, upping the ante of confrontation and potentially provoking violence. Most of the barricade builders are young; he is middle-aged and looks and sounds like somebody's dad — which, in fact, he is. He's somebody's granddad, for that matter. He's also a man who burned his draft card in the sixties and spent two years of his youth in federal prison. His lifelong pacifism is staunch and unshakable, and I've never known him to back down on a matter of principle. Next to him, a young, black-clad, masked protester — his outfit identifying him as a member of the anarchist black bloc — is listening thoughtfully to the discussion.

I look at that circle and see all the tensions, fears, and hopes that have surrounded this action. I've been here for close to a week, leading trainings, going to meetings, and sitting in on every council. I know that we have deep divisions among us on the question of how this action should be conducted. In the councils, the strongest voice generally belongs to those who want a more confrontational action, who chafe against the nonviolence guidelines and are ready to do battle in the streets. But in the nonviolence training sessions I've held, and on the street itself, I hear the voices of those who feel the guidelines are vitally important and who want a stronger commitment to nonviolence, to communication as well as confrontation.

This is the kind of issue that has torn movements apart. Those of us who are old enough to remember the sixties have seen it happen again and again. We know how easy it is for this energy to turn sour and dissipate. We've seen strong organizations come apart over questions of tactics. Much greater than any fear I might have of the police is my fear that this blessed, wild, unlooked-for movement, this rising tide of rage and passion for justice, will founder in the same way I've seen other

movements founder; that we'll end up denouncing each other instead of the IMF; or that small splinter groups will take us too quickly into forms of actions so extreme that our base of support will dissipate.

This energy is rare and precious. It's the one thing that can't be organized or created. When it's present, it's unstoppable, but when it goes, it's gone. And in thirty years of political activism, I've learned how quickly it can go.

"What's amazing," I say to the group, "is that we're having this dialogue at all. Under all this tension and in the middle of the action, we're willing to discuss this and listen to each other. That may be as important as anything else we do on the street today."

The black-masked anarchist, the Rasta, the ecofeminist Teamster, and the other affinity-group representatives — even David — all nod in agreement. Eventually, a compromise is reached: David will not take down any more of the barricade, and no one else will add to it or build it up. I don't know which amazes me more: that the barricade builders agree, or that David does.

By the end of the day, the dumpster has become a giant drum, a symbol both of our differences and of the process we use to resolve them, a living testimony to the true democracy we have brought to confront the systems of political and economic control.

THE BLOCKADE IS OVER FOR THE DAY. THE MARCH and rally are done. We are lying in the shade, napping after an exhausting day, when someone comes running.

"The cops are trying to sweep the park! There's riot cops over there in the corner!"

We really can't believe the police would do something so unprovoked and stupid, but a few of us go to see what is happening. A line of park police on horseback are threading their way through clumps of people seated on the grass. We follow the horses out into Constitution Avenue, where they form a line and begin trying to push the crowd off the street. Half the crowd is panicking and the other half is shouting at the cops and challenging the horses. In a moment, many people are going to get badly hurt. I have to get to the front of the crowd. I catch hold of some lightning bolt of energy and streak through, checking myself as I go: *Is this really for me to do?* I know it is because suddenly I'm there, yelling, "Sit down! Sit down!" And I sit down myself with enough conviction that others follow suit. In a moment, the crowd is sitting or lying in front of the horses, who stop.

I am sitting with my legs out, and a horse stands with its feet between my ankles. One of my arms is outstretched as if to say, *Stop!* I can't seem to put it down. The horse is very big. The policeman on its back will not look me in the eye. Down the line, a cop tells a young woman protester, "I don't want to trample you, but if my boss orders me to move forward, I'll have to." I've been teaching people for twenty years in nonviolence workshops that horses do not like to walk on uneven ground and won't trample you if you sit or lie down in a group in front of them, but I've never tested this theory before. The horse



RACHEL ELLIOTT

shifts its weight. I remember how we called on the spirits of the land itself to support us. I can feel all the rings of magical energy and protection being sent to this action. They surround me like ripples in a pond, except they converge on me instead of dispersing out. I still cannot put my hand down.

Half the protesters around me appear to be part of the black bloc. In this moment, though, we have total solidarity. There are no more questions of tactics or style or guidelines; we are simply there together, facing the same threat, taking the same stand, feeling the same fear.

We all sit, frozen in time. I reach up and let the horse sniff my hand. The horse and I, we're in complete agreement: he doesn't want to step on me, and I don't want him to, either. Behind us, someone from the Committee for Full Enjoyment begins a chant: "It's not about the cops; it's about the IMF!" The crowd takes it up, and the energy becomes more focused.

Then I see a second line of horses behind our horses, facing the other way. The crowd facing those horses begins to panic. They're yelling at the horses and trying to push them back and throwing horse manure at the cops. The horses are dancing and stumbling and being pushed into our horses, who will have nowhere to go except on top of us. We begin shouting at the other crowd to sit down. They don't listen. "Sit down, sit down!" we chant. Finally they get it. They sit. The horses stop. We breathe again. (At some point in the melee, one young man

does get stepped on and is left with a broken leg.)

Now the horses are trapped. They have nowhere to go. I look up at the policeman, who still won't meet my eye. "Officer," I say, "you have created an incredibly dangerous situation here: for us, for yourselves, for the horses. What were you thinking? And how can we get you out of this?" I am fully prepared to try to negotiate with the crowd to let the horses out, but he still won't look at me.

From one side, the riot cops move in. They begin literally throwing people aside until they clear a passage for the horses to file out. We stand up and follow them into the street, chanting, "Whose streets? Our streets!" At the other end of Constitution Avenue, a line of riot cops stands, batons at the ready. We are willing to be arrested, but they don't move. They simply hold their position as the drums thunder and the victory dance begins.

(end of excerpt)