

LOUDER THAN WORDS

Starhawk On Street Activism And Global Justice

an interview by APRIL THOMPSON

I met Starhawk in the first week of September 2001. She and I were part of a group of San Francisco activists planning to travel to Washington, D.C., to protest meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It was to be my first large-scale "direct action": an act of protest — such as forming a human blockade around a building — whose aim is to obstruct the workings of an institution.

In the aftermath of September 11, many progressive groups chose to lie low, but Starhawk poured even more energy into mobilizing for the Washington protest, which turned into a peace rally as the U.S. prepared to go to war in Afghanistan.

Starhawk has long been identified with earth-based spirituality and the modern Pagan movement. Like many neo-Pagans, she has taken back the tarnished title of "witch," which originally referred to those Europeans — women and men — who practiced pre-Christian spiritual and healing traditions.

Though Starhawk represents a unique group with its own perspectives, her approach to global activism is all-inclusive and has drawn a diverse audience. "We're not just preaching to the same old crowd in these anti-globalization actions," the fifty-two-year-old activist writes. "People coming to our training sessions range from college professors steeped in the theory of nonviolence to teenagers clutching skateboards . . . and everything in between." Corporate globalization affects everyone, she says, and opposition to it begins with the simple question

“What kind of world do we want to live in?”

Starhawk's new book, Webs of Power, chronicles her post-Seattle experiences and outlines her vision for a world dedicated to democracy, diversity, and sustainability. She's written a number of fiction and nonfiction titles, including Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery (HarperSanFrancisco), Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics (Beacon Press), and The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess. She is a founding member of Reclaiming, a San Francisco-based network of Pagan groups. She has also just completed, with filmmaker Donna Read, a documentary about Marija Gimbutas, the Lithuanian archaeologist who uncovered the existence of a prehistoric Goddess-oriented culture in southeastern Europe.

Starhawk divides her time between a collective house in San Francisco's Mission District and a hut in the wooded hills of Cazadero, California, where she writes and gardens. When we met for this interview, she had just returned from teaching activism workshops in Europe and visiting Palestinian refugee camps as a global witness for peace. We spoke in the “ritual room” of her San Francisco home, a peaceful, artfully painted room filled with musical instruments, cushy chairs, and artifacts from around the world.

In the past year, I have spent many long evenings here, developing strategies for direct actions and hashing out disagreements with other activists. I am still not sure what we've accomplished with our hours of protesting and letter writing, but my conversations with Starhawk give me hope that, little by little, such efforts do bring about change.

Thompson: Some people think that the best way to change the system is not protesting in the streets but working from within organizations. Why have you chosen to push for change from the outside?

Starhawk: Systems don't change from within; they are too good at maintaining themselves. Systems change from the outside in, like ice melting.

I certainly respect the efforts of people who try to change institutions from within, and I think there are opportunities to make improvements. But *systemic* changes are very hard to make from within the system. To be there, you have to accept so many of the system's terms and values that you tend to be changed by it as much as it is changed by you. When you're outside the system, you can think outside its terms and imagine how things could operate differently. Many who attempt to bring about change from within organizations quickly burn out. Real change often requires bringing outside pressure on an institution. And sometimes the institution doesn't just need to change; it needs to disappear.

Thompson: But don't we need institutions in society to bring about change?

Starhawk: It depends on the institution. Certainly, institutions do a lot of things that need to be done. We need sources of energy to power our homes, for example. But did we need Enron?

Right now the earth's basic life systems are in jeopardy

because of our use of fossil fuels and pollutants. We have the technological answers to our problems. We could shift to renewable, nonpolluting energies in the near future if we put our political and economic will behind it. But we aren't doing that, because there are deeply entrenched interests whose power and money are dependent on the status quo.

I used to have hope that systems could evolve easily and painlessly; that capitalism would see the light and corporations would voluntarily change. I'd still prefer a gradual evolution, because sudden and catastrophic changes are often the most painful for the people who have the least resources. But I don't see any signs that we are going to have gradual, peaceful change, because the powers that be are so deeply invested in the structures we have now — particularly the oil interests, who are currently running the country, and, in turn, the world.

Our ability as citizens to hold these corporations accountable and responsible to communities has been eroded by international trade agreements that override local laws, and by international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which impose devastating economic policies on impoverished countries. Meanwhile, corporations are free to move anywhere in the world in search of the lowest labor costs and the poorest environmental standards.

Thompson: But aren't people opposing the World Bank or the IMF like ants trying to face down a steamroller?

Starhawk: It's easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless, but we need to remember that all of these systems rest on the compliance of millions of ordinary people like you and me. If we withdraw our consent, if we stop feeling isolated and helpless and start reaching out to friends and neighbors who feel the same way, then we have enormous power.

One of the key ways these institutions take away our power is by making us think our voices are small and worthless. It's an important political and spiritual act to say, “My voice is worth something.” We have to take civic responsibility and not be stopped by fear or a sense of powerlessness. Democracy is like a horse: you can't keep it healthy when it's locked in the barn; you have to exercise it regularly.

Thompson: How do you define “direct action”?

Starhawk: Direct action is any action that openly confronts oppressive power. We often think of demonstrations or civil disobedience or other attempts to disrupt the operations of an oppressive system, but it could also be providing an alternative. I was involved with an extremely successful needle-exchange program started in 1990 by a San Francisco group called Prevention Point. We gave drug users an opportunity to exchange used needles for new, clean ones, to help prevent the spread of AIDS. At that time it was illegal to hand out needles, but we knew it would save lives, so we did it anyway. After a few months, the media finally did a story on our program. When interviewed, the mayor and the police said they didn't really want to arrest us, because we were doing something necessary. In the end, local officials managed to do an end run around the state laws and legalize the exchange. It became a model program.

Thompson: You've said that you went to the World Trade



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Organization protests in Seattle reluctantly, the way you went to synagogue as a child. During the protests, you were arrested and spent five days in jail. It became a turning point for you.

Starhawk: In my forty years as an activist, the Seattle blockade against the World Trade Organization (WTO) was the single most successful action I've ever been involved in. Yes, I went a little reluctantly, mainly because I was so busy doing local political organizing in the Cazadero hills, where I live: working on land-use issues and contesting timber-harvest plans. But I felt pulled to Seattle. It was clear that the WTO could make anything we achieved at a local level irrelevant, because it has the power to override U.S. laws. For example, a law was passed banning the import of shrimp caught in nets that kill sea turtles; but the WTO ruled against that law, calling it a "restriction of trade." There have been many, many such rulings that undercut our labor and environmental laws — not to mention our national sovereignty.

The WTO is part of a larger move toward globalization with a very clear agenda: to give corporations unrestricted access to the world's resources and to privatize all the resources and services that have traditionally been public. Proponents of globalization claim that this will somehow create so much wealth that everyone will benefit. In reality, it has resulted in a huge transfer of wealth from the poor and the middle class to the rich. In the U.S., 1 percent of the people own 40 percent of the resources. Even if you invest in the stock market, you're

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not necessarily part of the wealthy class: the top 1 percent of stockholders control nearly 50 percent of the market. Small investors are at a huge disadvantage.

Meanwhile, Americans work more hours than the citizens of any other industrial country on earth, even Japan. On average, we work four hundred hours more a year than Germans. We all feel it. Everyone I know is working harder just to stay afloat. We have less time to spend with our families, less time to spend being citizens and actually exercising our democratic rights. That's not an accident or a personal failing.

Thompson: What have the protests really accomplished?

Starhawk: In Seattle, we set out to blockade the WTO meeting on the grounds that it was illegitimate, because there was no way for citizens to have input. The WTO's decisions are made by secret tribunals, it doesn't keep public records of its meetings, and its members are not appointed or elected in any public or democratic way. This is an entirely undemocratic institution that impacts all our lives. We have a right to say that it shouldn't exist, that its trade agreements should stop right now.

Direct action takes away the aura of legitimacy around these institutions. When they can have their big summits with limousines and fancy dinners and the media hanging on their every word, it reaffirms the notion that they are the experts making decisions based on what's best for all of us; that they are safeguarding our economic good. But when they start having to meet in remote places like Qatar, or to erect fences around their meetings, it makes apparent the lack of democracy and

the inherent violence in the system.

We had enough people in Seattle that we were able to surprise the police, block the meeting, and stop that round of negotiations. I think our success empowered a lot of smaller, poorer nations to resist pressure from the larger industrialized countries. It also focused attention on a system that had not been much publicized. Most people didn't know what the WTO was. Direct action puts a spotlight on issues that people haven't noticed before and creates a sense of urgency about them. People think, *Maybe I should pay attention to this. Maybe this actually has some impact on my life.*

Over the last three years, we have interrupted every single international economic or trade meeting around the globe. It's an amazing achievement when you realize that there isn't some central coordinating committee bringing people together for these actions. Groups have spontaneously self-organized.

I think that, in those three years, the once unquestioned global economic system has seriously lost legitimacy, in part because of our efforts, and in part because reality has caught up with it. We've seen Enron, WorldCom, and other business scandals. We've seen Argentina, after it implemented the IMF's policies, go from having one of South America's strongest economies to having a nonfunctioning one.

Thompson: So how can we take advantage of this rise in public consciousness?

Starhawk: Now that these institutions can no longer base their legitimacy on promises of economic prosperity, they are basing it on fear. Their message is: if you don't go along with the system, the terrorists will get you. We have to call upon our friends, our communities, and ourselves to resist fear and act with courage and vision.

The first step is to reassert the value of community. We need human enterprises to make, create, fix, and transport things, but we need those enterprises to be rooted in and responsible to communities. Most people on this planet value human life above profits. Our enterprises need to serve those values. We need to work for something meaningful, not just to enrich somebody else. The enterprises we engage in have to be in balance with the natural community, too, and with all the various races, genders, cultures, and religions within the human communities.

We need a world not just of sustainability, but of real abundance. We don't want one of those grim, gray economies where the commissar tells everyone what to do. We need abundance, and not just of food and shelter and clothing, but of beauty and joy and pleasure. That abundance can come from our enterprises *if* they're in harmony with the natural world. We can't sacrifice clean air, water, wilderness, and habitat in order to make ourselves happier, because without those things, we can't sustain happiness — or life.

(end of excerpt)