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Spirit and Action

Excerpts from **Webs of Power: Notes From the
Global Uprising**

Starhawk

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outside to spur change. Words like “Witch” and “magic” and “spells” keep us from getting too serious, from thinking too much of ourselves. The use of the term “Witch” to describe myself was a political and spiritual choice I made long ago. Political because I felt that to challenge the deep misogyny in our culture, the ingrained fear of women’s power, the identification of strong women as evil, we had to make visible those underlying thought structures and challenge them, and the word “Witch” does that. I’ve used the word as a conscious identification with the victims of the Witch persecutions, and in solidarity with all the shamans and healers of indigenous cultures who have been persecuted as Witches. But to be honest, I’ve used it mostly because it was the word that intuitively felt right.

There are risks and penalties in every choice. Calling myself a Witch publicly was not always the safest thing to do, but twenty-five years have taught me that our fears can inflate the power of our opposition. There have been moments of harassment, doors that have been closed, but overall what has surprised me is the amount of openness, the welcome I’ve received in many religious communities, the shift in consciousness that has indeed begun slowly to take place.

These are choices I have made. They are the right choices for me, but I am not suggesting that they are right for everyone, or for anyone else. We each need to find our own way along this borderland, to identify the deep values that we hold and the ways in which best to express them and work for them. When we know what we stand for and are willing to risk ourselves for, what the standard is by which we measure our actions and choices, what is most deeply important to us, and what most profoundly nourishes and inspires us, we know what is truly sacred. All we need to do, then, is to put our life energies and time and creativity at its disposal, however we name or describe it.

Then the great powers of the universe, inner and outer, seen and unseen, move in alignment, and as agents of embodied love we are fed and sustained.

Introduction: The Web (Excerpt)**

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The chapters in the second section of the book are my attempts to do deeper thinking about some of the key questions confronting the global justice movement. As satisfying as the immediacy of the Internet can be, posts sent out by e-mail have their limitations. For one thing, they need to be relatively short. And the urgency with which most are written doesn’t always allow for broader reflection. When I realized I was writing an actual book, I eagerly took the opportunity to expand and stretch out a bit.

In this section, I examine our relationship to nature and place, which for me is the beginning point for creating any truly alternative culture. I share some of my own experiences in directly democratic organizing and explore some of the issues in building a more diverse movement. I reexamine non-violence and some of the pressing questions around how best to wage our struggles. Finally, I propose an economic vision based on an understanding of ecology, and some ideas about how we might get there.

All of my writing and activism comes from an alternative vision of power. Power-over, or domination, is the power we’re all familiar with, the power of a small group to control the resources or to limit the choices of others. Ultimately, it stems from violence and force and is generally backed by the police and military power of the state.

But the word “power” itself comes from a root that means “ability.” We each have a different kind of power: the power that comes from within; our ability to dare, to do, and to dream; our creativity.

Power from within is unlimited. If I have the power to write, it doesn’t diminish your power: in fact, my writing might inspire you or illuminate your thinking.

Power-over seems invincible, but ultimately it rests upon the compliance of those it controls. No system of power can afford to use force to enforce its every decree. Instead, the fear of that force causes us to repress and police ourselves. If we refuse to comply, if we call the legitimacy of the system itself into question, ultimately the system cannot stand.

Power from within is akin to what many cultures call “spirit.” The global justice movement challenges the greatest amassing of police, military, political, and economic power the world has ever seen. To do so requires great courage, and the faith that ultimately creativity must triumph over violence.

Throughout the book, I use a few terms that may seem provocative or even inflammatory and need explanation. “Pagan” as a term generally refers to earth-based traditions from Europe and the Middle East that predate Christianity. The end of the 20th century saw a great revival of interest in spirituality rooted in nature and embracing sexuality and liberatory values.

The feminist spirituality movement is especially concerned with the empowerment of women and the undermining of patriarchal values in religion as well as in other walks of life. It includes women and men who identify as Pagans, but also many who work for gender equality within mainstream religions.

“Witch,” as I use the term, refers to a woman or man who honors the cycles of birth, growth, death, and regeneration as the Goddess, who makes a deep personal commitment to serve that force, and who often takes on a role of responsibility in their spiritual community, as healer, ritual maker, teacher, priestess.

“Anarchist” means someone who contests all forms of hierarchy, coercion, and control rooted in domination. Some anarchists reject the state entirely, others make some accommodation with it. Anarchism envisions a world of greater freedom, where people are governed not through fear and force but through direct democracy and voluntary agreements.

practice of magic is the art of cultural storyshifting, the conscious dreaming of a new dream.

A demonstration or a direct action is a ritual, a conscious use of symbolic and real actions to direct energy toward an intention. An understanding of the way symbols move energy and of the patterns of energy flow can help us make actions vibrant and transformational rather than repetitive and dreary. When we are met with intense repression, the tools of consciousness change can help us stay grounded, calm, and focused, able to make a conscious choice about what we want to do. So magic is extremely useful in activism.

Without a spiritual base for my activism, without regular practices that renew my energies and my sense of hope, and without a community to share them with, I might long ago have succumbed to frustration and despair. Political work is hard. Results are rarely immediate and sometimes barely evident. The forces we contest are immensely powerful. To carry on for a lifetime, we need faith in something, whether it is the perfectibility of human nature, the ultimate withering of the state, or the belief that the universe is on the side of justice, as Martin Luther King said. My connection to the earth helps me believe that loss can lead to transformation, that decay can be food for something new, that all energy moves in cycles, that the universe is filled with immense creativity which is stronger than violence, and that hate is ultimately not as powerful a force as love.

There are many possible names for my form of spirituality. I sometimes use the more inclusive terms “earth-based spirituality” or “feminist spirituality” rather than a word like “Witch” — a word that most people don’t understand; a word that may label you as either evil or ridiculous; a word that is likely to cause people to discount what you say.

To move beyond our usual categories of thought, we need words that shock and confuse and shake up our usual thinking. Like any system, a system of thought needs pressure from

seasons, the spirits and the ancestors and the powers that go beyond the rational. The expression of that integration in myth and story and ceremony is what sustains and nourishes a culture and a people.

The experience of the women's liberation movement taught us that to change something as deep as our experience of gender meant challenging all the symbols and icons of the culture, including the religious symbols. In the words of feminist theologian Carol Christ, "Symbol systems cannot simply be rejected; they must be replaced. Where there is not any replacement, the mind will revert to familiar structures at times of crisis, bafflement, or defeat."¹

I admit that I do experience the world as alive and speaking. Forces and energies that have yet to be described by science are real to me. The birds, the trees, the rocks, the winds, the land itself have voices, and part of my work in changing the world is to listen deeply to them. The ancestors are present, and aid me in my work. When we cast a web of magical protection for an action, I can feel its power.

And I would rather live in an animate world. I believe we are likely to create a healthier, more dynamic, freer, and more balanced culture if we perceive ourselves as living cells in a living body imbued with an underlying consciousness than if we perceive the world as dead, exploitable matter.

The tools of magic — the understanding of energy and the power and use of symbols, the awareness of group consciousness and of ways in which to shift and shape it — are also the tools of political and social change. Dion Fortune's definition of magic as "the art of changing consciousness at will" is also a fine definition of transformational political praxis. We construct our world through the stories we tell about it, and the

¹ Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," in Charlene Spretnak, ed., *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1982, 1994), p. 73. I am also indebted to Carol for her beautiful formulation of the Goddess as "intelligent, embodied love."

Identifying as a Pagan, feminist, Witch, and anarchist is possibly a way to alarm great segments of the general public, but at least it keeps me from sinking into a boring and respectable middle age.

From our vision of the web at the women's potluck, we dreamed up an action in which we asked women all over the world to send us weavings, which we then placed on the fence erected to keep protesters away from the Summit, transforming it into a gallery of art. It is my hope that this book will continue weaving connections that can be useful both to those who are involved in the global justice and peace movements and to those who are seeking some way to comprehend and have an impact on the political and economic forces that surround us. "Another world is possible!" is the slogan created at the World Social Forum in Brazil in 2001. Another world is also necessary, for this one is unjust, unsustainable, and unsafe. It's up to us to envision, fight for, and create that world, a world of freedom, real justice, balance, and shared abundance, a world woven in a new design.

Spirit and Action

"We the indigenous are not part of yesterday; we are part of tomorrow." — Subcommandante Marcos

For thirty years and more, I've been walking that edge where the spiritual meets the political. For me, the two have always been integrated. My spirituality is rooted in the experience of the earth as a living, conscious being, and names this world, nature, human life, sexuality, and culture as sacred. And so I feel compelled to take action to protect the earth and to work for a world in which human freedom and creativity can flourish. The edge where two systems meet can be a place of great fertility in nature. But edges and borders can also be sites of enormous conflict. Spirituality can bring

life and vibrancy and imagination into activism — but the mixture of religion and politics can also fuel the most extreme and destructive acts and lead to systems of great repression. Shouldn't progressive people rightly be wary of mixing the two? Of letting go of a sound, rational basis for our actions?

We should be rightly suspicious of religion when it means a belief system, a dogma, a set of standards for determining who are the Worthy People and who are the Others. The root meaning of the word “re-ligio” — “relinking” has more to do with connection than with discrimination. Still, it's far too formal and systematic to convey what I'm talking about. Language is always a problem, because the English language doesn't have the word I want, a word that doesn't split “spirit” from “matter” or “nature” but integrates the sacred and the mundane, the high and the low, the dark and the light — a word that conveys the sense of living in an animate and generous universe. I am left with the word “spirit” or “spirituality” by default.

The type of spirituality I embrace is one that encourages us each to have our own relationship with the greater creative powers, that teaches us not what we should believe but how we can learn to listen, that sees spirit embodied in nature, and that honors the body, the earth, and the everyday. While we draw from the past and respect the wisdom of the ancestors, we are not trying to live in yesterday or abandon the post-modern world, but rather to find those practices and modes of awareness that can lead us into a viable future.

In some places, among indigenous people or among my neighbors in the Northern California hills, the integration of the spiritual and the political is understood and expected. In other areas, in Europe with its history of disastrous Nazi meldings of the two, among hard-core militants or Marxist intellectuals, linking the two may seem like a strange and dangerous idea.

Why bring ritual, magic, spirituality into action? Why mix up a clear, clean militant critique of the world with woo-woo, mumbo-jumbo, New Age fluffy stuff?

The first reason is that a part of our humanity needs symbols and myth and mystery, yearns for a connection to something broader and deeper than our surface life. That part of us is powerful and dangerous: it can call us to the most profound compassion or justify the worst intolerance, lead us to sacrifice for the greater good or to commit mass murder in the name of our ideals, open us to a wider experience of life or imprison us in a narrow moralism, inspire our liberation or function as an agent of our repression. Progressive movements are understandably wary of it, for we have all seen the religious impulse fuel hatred and holy wars and justify extreme oppression. But we ignore it at our peril, for if a movement of liberation does not address the spiritual part of us, then movements of repression will claim that terrain as their own.

The events of 9-11 showed us how deep our need for expression and communal connection in moments of deep pain really is. When normality is shattered, when we face death and loss, when we encounter great fear or great hope as we do in activism, we need some framework within which to find meaning in our experiences.

Fundamentalisms of all sorts, whether religious or political or academic, appeal because they provide a coherent system of meaning. We need alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding that lead to tolerance, compassion, and freedom. And we need to express them in ritual as well as in rhetoric if they are to touch the aching wounds of the soul.

The struggles of indigenous peoples are in many ways the soul and inspiration of the global justice movement. To really understand those struggles, to truly support them, we who are not indigenous must at least be able to imagine what it is like to live in a bonded relationship to place, in a deep integration with the land, the plant and animal life, the wind and sun and