

A Year After Seattle

Seattle was the most powerful spell I've ever been part of, changing global consciousness, awakening thousands of people to their collective power

OF ALL THE FILMS I've ever seen, the one that has had the deepest impact on my spiritual life is *The Titanic*. I see it as the perfect metaphor for our times. Today, the back pages of the newspaper are filled with stories about how the U.S. and other rich countries are undercutting the global warming negotiations at Den Hague, while forty per cent of the Arctic ice and seventy per

cent of the ocean plankton are already gone. The ship has hit the iceberg, but the passengers are still dancing unawares, and the officers in charge of its direction are still maintaining that it cannot sink.

It's in this context that we need to understand what happened in Seattle a year ago, and what has been happening ever since. Seattle was a revolt among

the passengers, an attempt to force the Captain to turn on the damn lights and change direction. It joined the full force revolt that has already been underway for years in the third class steerage compartments below decks. And it was probably the most significant single action I've ever been involved with, in thirty-five years of activism.

Many Reclaiming Witches were in Seattle. We created ritual and did magical activist trainings. Some of us also did nonviolent direct action trainings, facilitated meetings, helped the medical team, cooked, provided moral support and healing for traumatized blockaders, drummed in the streets, and went to jail. In fact, the "Seattle model" of organizing of affinity groups, spokescouncils, trainings, a convergence center, drums, puppets, color, joy and imagination brought to protest, was in some ways a legacy of ideas and practices Reclaiming has both been rooted in and contributed to. Reclaiming takes much of our form and structure from the culture of direct action in the Bay Area in the eighties,



**Photos from Seattle 1999,
by Ben Read**

when we were beginning. And over the years we've brought magic, ritual, theater and drumming to actions. Several of the main organizers in Seattle were Bay Area folks who directly inherited that tradition, and consciously tried to organize a protest that was visionary, creative, and fun.

When you take action as a Witch, you move through the streets as a sort of multidimensional convoy of spirits, ancestors, and parallel realities. What you do in the physical world becomes a spell, letting loose forces in other realms. You can draw on those forces to open up possibilities in the physical world. Magic and activism are both "the art of changing consciousness at will." Seattle was the most powerful spell I've ever been part of, changing global consciousness, awakening thousands of people to their collective power.

Seattle also sparked a new upsurge in Reclaiming and broader Pagan activism. Many of us went to Washington DC last April to blockade the World Bank and the IMF. Reclaiming folks were at the Republican and Democratic conventions. My partner David and I went to Prague in August to do early trainings for the September actions there. Several of us were at Vandenberg Airforce Base in October to protest the militarization of



space. Our friends and allies were at the School of the Americas. We're in the forests, we're out there supporting the U'wa and protecting the Ichetucknee and doing endless smaller demonstrations and countless hours of organizing in our own communities.

What do Witches bring to an action? In Washington, we also offered magical activism workshops and rituals. The night before the action, we charged balls of yarn for people to take to the blockade. Six months later, a young

woman came up to me at a conference. "I was at that thing you did in Washington," she said. "You know, where we were throwing yarn around."

"Oh, the ritual?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right." She went on to tell me how terrifying that day had been for her. The morning had begun with a raid on the Convergence Center, which had been shut down just when we were expecting thousands of people to arrive for nonviolence trainings. People's homes had been raided, and other activists had been arrested in their van with lock-down equipment. Police had filled the streets all day, and the rising tension was palpable.

"I was so scared, I didn't think I was going to be able to do the action," she said. "But after the ritual, I felt calm and strong. I could get up the next morning and go to the blockade, and it was all right."

At a meeting, another young woman comes up to me. "I need to find people I can work with who want to do action from a place of spirit," she says. "If I don't, I'm going to self-destruct."

Magic teaches us how not to self-destruct. Grounding, centering, staying calm in crises, calling forth our allies on every level, sensing and shifting energy are the skills of political action as well as

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magical ritual. The inner discipline I've cultivated in order to guide a cone of power in a spiral dance is exactly what I need to stop a charge of horses by sitting down in front of them together with a large contingent of the young anarchists in the black bloc. The skills of reading and shaping energy are as vital for facilitating meetings as for priestessing. And to sustain our activism, we absolutely need the ability to witness and transform profound emotions of grief, rage, fear and despair.

Of course, when we say that magic is about changing consciousness, we must acknowledge that the consciousness most likely to change is our own. In Seattle, around the third or fourth day in jail the younger women around me all agreed that they had been radicalized by the experience, that their lives would never be the same. "Yes, but I already was a radical!" I said. "What's going to happen to me?"

What happened to me was that the political struggle took center stage. The balance shifted. Before Seattle, I had a sane, reasonable life that let me do good spiritual and political work while still spending long hours walking in the woods and supporting myself and my family. Now I've let go of almost all my usual teaching in order to focus my



Ben Reed

major energies on building a movement that can turn this ship around.

I'm not alone in this transformation. A growing number of the most psychically sensitive and wise Witches I know are feeling the same thing: not a sense of panic but a calm, dead sure knowing that the iceberg looms, and that nothing else matters as much as changing the collective course we're on.

That change won't come easy. For it's not just a matter of replacing the helmsman ballrooms on the top and

stifling steerage pens below. It means reconceiving the whole notion of captains and chains of command. It means spinning and weaving and hoisting sails to replace the smokestacks.

We are likely to suffer great losses along the way. Already small Pacific Island nations are disappearing below the waves as the ocean rises. Already most of the salmon and most of the redwoods are gone. The forces of repression grow more and more willing to brutalize those who stand against them, and the power they can command sometimes seems invincible.

But I don't believe we'd feel called to do this work if it were hopeless. I smell a change in the wind.

This coming year will bring more opportunities to organize, and to act. As I write, activists are out in the woods defending the forests. Major actions are brewing to stop the April meetings of the FTAA, the extension of NAFTA throughout the Western Hemisphere. Vandenberg will be targeted again in the spring, and a thousand other demonstrations, protests, and campaigns will be organized.

What I bring to this next year of action is what I've learned from years of leading the mammoth, tangled spiral at our ever-larger Spiral Dance Ritual. There's always a moment when

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Anne Hill

