

## Magical Tools for the Aftermath

# Stale Grief and Frozen Fear

by Starhawk

THREE MONTHS AGO, we woke to images of flame and dust, of huge planes crashing into towers, of structures crumbling: the Tower card from the Tarot brought to life. In that attack, thousands of people lost their lives. The lives of their families, their friends, their co-workers, will never be the same.

Since that day, thousands more have lost their jobs. People who worked for the airlines, the catering companies, the tourist industry, my neighbor's brother who used to run seaplane tours of the San Francisco Bay.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, have lost their liberty. We still don't know how many immigrants have been detained, "disappeared," held without being allowed to contact their families, without legal counsel or due process.

And thousands more have lost their lives, homes, or families in Afghanistan, victims of the battles, of our bombs, of delayed or nonexistent aid, of starvation and cold.

All this on top of the everyday pain of the world's great injustices, the suffering of the hungry, the death of small children from bad water or lack of medicine, the clearcutting of ancient trees, the ongoing assaults.

Since 9/11, any struggle we were engaged in for justice and human liberty got harder. Any resources available for works of compassion and healing were diminished. Any open psychic space for imagining new possibilities was

narrowed.

And the threats just keep on coming, whether in the form of anthrax or new pronouncements by Al Qaida, or in the form of Patriot Bills and the announcement of secret military tribunals, increased police powers, the abrogation of every treaty that guarantees a human or environmental good or limits destructive weaponry.

A thin film of normality, like an oil slick on a raging sea, has covered the turmoil. We're urged to behave as normal, that is, to shop. But nobody feels much optimism or holiday cheer. Anyone with the least sensitivity to the earth or the collective mood opens up and hears a chorus of anguished shrieking.

We are not done with our grief, but we are now urged to cover it over. Grief gone stale turns into depression and despair.

Alongside the grief lies the fear: a fear that is being continually aroused and manipulated, for people in fear are easily controlled. Fear makes us inflate the power of the authorities and accept the limited choices they pose to us. Fear

can make us repress ourselves, censor our speech or even our thoughts, curtail our opposition. Fear narrows our focus, makes it hard to see what is directly in front of us. Since 9/11 we've all been in a state of free-floating anxiety, braced against the possibility of a new disaster.

Jon Young, director of the Wilderness Awareness School, tells a story about a famous trapper, a man who could capture even the wildest and most wary wolves. His secret was to block their trails and interrupt their normal pathways, throwing them into a state of anxiety. In fear, they were less alert to cues from the environment, less able to take in information, easier to trap.

We are like those wolves. The attack of September 11 disrupted our normal functioning, threw us off of our usual trails, broke through the bubble of denial which generally shields us from confronting our mortality and brought us smack up against our vulnerability in the face of death.

To maintain our vision, direction and passion at this moment is a challenge. We need to honor our grief, to leave room for it in our rituals and our actions, to speak about it honestly and clearly. And we need to face and transform our fear.

As Witches, we have the tools we need to transmute our energetic and emotional states. Magic, the art of

changing consciousness at will, teaches us first to recognize what state of consciousness we're in, and then to make a choice about what state we want to be in.

### Recognizing fear

FEAR OFTEN masquerades as something else: hunger, general tension, irritability, anger. Generally, humans would rather feel mad than scared. When we're afraid, we pick fights with our loved ones, yell at the bus driver, fire off those 3 a.m. emails we never should have sent. We eat our way through two pints of Ben and Jerry's, get drunk, start smoking again, watch too much TV, sleep with someone we should have avoided, put up with humiliation or abuse.

Take a moment, and think about a time when you've been afraid — maybe even panicked. Let your body return to that moment; let it take the shape of a living sculpture of fear. Notice how your breathing changes, where you hold tension. Can you remember your internal dialogue? The feel of the energy? Your emotions? What choices you felt you had? What information you did or did not take in?

What can you note about this state to help you identify it?

When the argument starts, when you head toward the refrigerator or the bar, when you put down the morning newspaper, stop for a moment. Take a deep breath, feel your feet on the ground, and ask, "Am I afraid? What am I afraid of?"

### Releasing fear

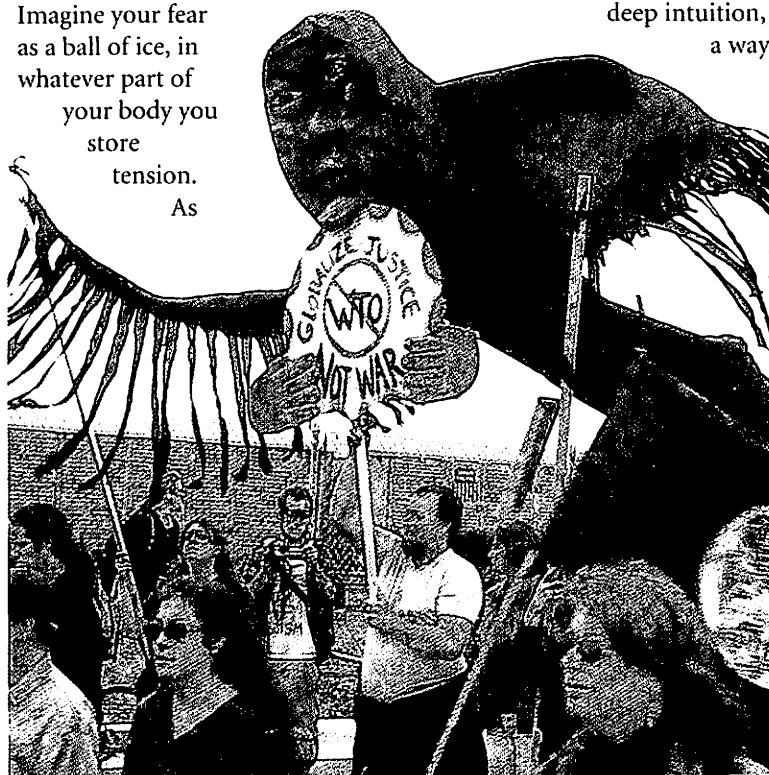
FEAR IS information: it tells us that somewhere in our environment we are perceiving a threat. Fear pumps up our adrenaline and mobilizes our reserves to flee or fight, but that state of arousal can become exhausting and draining when fear is chronic. Fear does not lead to good decisions: in fear, we miss information and we tend to accept limited choices. So we need to know how to release fear and move toward

clarity.

Take some deep, slow breaths into your belly. Feel your feet on the ground. Tell yourself that just feeling that physical contact with the earth can help bring you back to yourself, to a state in which you can make a choice about what you want to do.

Imagine your fear as a ball of ice, in whatever part of your body you store tension.

As



you breathe, imagine melting the ice, letting that ball dissolve back into water that can feed the earth.

Imagine that space where the fear was filled with the light of clarity. Shine that light on your problem or situation. How does it look to you now? What choices do you see that you have?

### Don't freeze up

AT THEIR worst, fear and panic leave us paralyzed, unable to make any choice at all. Journalist Robert Fisk, who spent 25 years covering the war in Lebanon, said that the lesson he learned about survival was, "Do something. Don't do nothing."

In high-stress situations of immediate danger, we often need to make a decision, fast, without adequate

information. Think back to times when you have made the right decision out of your intuition. How did that choice look and feel? What was your inner state when you made it? What cues did you use to guide you? What was your inner dialogue?

When you recognize the feel of your deep intuition, you can create a way to call it up, an

image, a short summoning spell, a place on your body you can touch. We call this combination of visual, aural and physical cues an 'anchor' to a particular state of consciousness.

Again, use it, make it part of your daily practice,

so that moving into this state becomes easy and automatic.

### Getting support

AS WITCHES, we have many sources of support. We can turn to our friends and lovers, and ask for help. Sometimes simply admitting our fear to another person can help release it.

We can also draw support from the elements, from the Goddess and Gods and the ancestors. We have allies in all the worlds, and they want to help us. All we need to do is ask.

If you have particular allies for this time, or for a specific situation, work with them. Put them on your altar, make it a daily practice to communicate. Write a prayer or a spell or song you can

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whole. Please feel free to contact your SpokesCouncil representatives with questions and ideas.

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use to call them. The more alive and present they are to you on a daily basis, the easier it will be to feel their support in a tight situation.

### ANTIDOTES TO FEAR

GIVING SUPPORT, silently cheering somebody on, sending out positive or healing energy are good antidotes to fear. All are also high energy states.

Gratitude is an antidote. Make it part of your daily practice not just to call the elements, The Goddess/Gods/ancestors, but to thank them.

Compassion is also an antidote, as is love. I admit that the last months have brought me up to the limits of my own compassion, which peters out when it considers police who torture students, or John Ashcroft. Those who preach compassion often exhort us to feel it for our enemies, for those who oppress us. I have to admit I generally can't go there, and I'm not

even sure I should, because often that so-called compassion becomes blame and judgment toward their victims: "The poor police felt threatened, so the protestors were being violent!" I need to start with compassion for my allies, for the victims, for that person who is so annoying but is really on my side. Being in the state of compassion is enough to function as an antidote, even if my compassion is less than global.

Here's a very simple meditation: Breathe in with gratitude for all the gifts of the elements, the ancestors, of life; breathe out with love, silently cheering for your allies, sending compassion out as far as you can reach.

### FINDING A VISION

FROM THAT space of clarity when fear is released, we can consider and speak for our own vision of the world we want. When we refuse to accept limited choices, new possibilities open up. When we communicate that vision, others are also inspired. When we act in the service of what we love, we find courage. When we act with courage, when we bring gratitude and compassion to counter terror, we ignite love all around us. No flames of destruction can prevail against that backfire, burning stale grief and frozen fear to fertile ash. Some seeds will only germinate after a fire. When the smoke of the aftermath clears,

new growth may surprise us.

For more news and resources, [www.starhawk.org](http://www.starhawk.org)

Starhawk is the author of many books on Goddess religion, from "The Spiral Dance" to "Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Tradition." She is a feminist, activist, teacher, Witch, gardener, drummer, and one of Reclaiming's founders.

More responses to September 11 and the aftermath — pages 6-11.

## DC Protest

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written, we grab the sheet all along the edges, and everyone pulls. A rip appears and the sheet splits. More tears, more rips until the sheet and the things we hate are shredded into small strips.

We all join together in a big drumming circle. Soccer is being played, drums are being drummed, there is dancing and singing, all while surrounded by riot police doing their best to look intimidating. Magic.

There are rumors that some of the Black Bloc are planning to try "something." Tension is rising. We want to calm things. We drum and some dancing resumes. Squads of riot police



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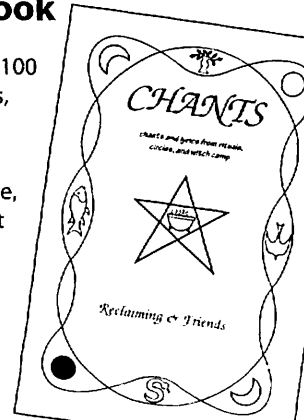
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