

Pagan Cluster

at the G20

story by
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photos by
Jason Scarecrow



In mid-September 2009, the Pagan Cluster put out a call for activists to come to Pittsburgh to protest at the G20 summit and the International Coal Conference, which were both (not coincidentally) being held there the same week. This summit was one of many leading up to the United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen, Denmark in December.





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“It was no accident that the G20 chose to meet in Pittsburgh, the heart of Appalachia where the three great rivers meet,” the Call to Action read. “Coal is so important that the local university hosts an annual international coal conference to promote policies that protect its dirtiest practices, including mountaintop removal and long wall mining. The G20 leaders have chosen to meet in Pittsburgh during this conference so they will be ready to defend coal company interests at the upcoming climate talks.”

In spite of all of the intelligent reasons not to go – finances, danger, responsibilities at home, dreams of other trips that would be much more tropical and serene – Jason (aka Scarecrow) and I felt that we simply had to be there. Making sure that the G20 knew that there were people out there who cared deeply about the earth and her many children felt essential.

TUESDAY: SEEDS OF PEACE SAGA

It’s been an up-and-down day. For the last several weeks, the City has been denying permits, revoking permits, and employing routine police harassment that has hindered our organizing.

Seeds of Peace, which provides food and other support for direct actions, has borne the brunt. Their bus was impounded for a minor parking violation, fined over \$200, and chased off private properties by the police. One woman, who was a cook at last year’s Free Activist Witchcamp, was jailed for giving her nickname instead of her legal name to an officer. She’s been in jail five days for her egregious crime.

This morning the ACLU filed an injunction against the police to attempt

to stop harassment scare-tactics. We were determined to show support – but first we had to go into the streets. That’s what we came here to do – sing chants about the Earth, do rituals for coal, create altars of the sacred, and in so many other ways to bring the unheard voices of Mama Gaia into the conversation.

Court is a hard place to be. The bailiff looked like an English Bulldog with an upside-down “u” for a mouth. The judge looked bored, which he probably was, having already decided to ignore our request for help.

Next to me sat a red-haired Seeds of Peace woman and her partner, both looking young enough to be at Teen Earth Magic. I kept peeking at her as the witnesses recounted their stories about cops coming in the middle of the night with weapons and no warrants, moving the bus again and again, being stopped and searched without probable cause — the whole thing. I wanted to take her into my arms to protect her.

The judge ruled against us, which was no surprise. As we walked out of the court room, we received a phone call from the folks at the Seeds of Peace buses. The cops were now at their third location — a church — demanding to speak to the property owner.

We can’t even find a place to park a bus.

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WEDNESDAY: THEATER OF THE POSSIBLE

Ah, turkey bacon. It's a lovely way to start your day. Especially when it's accompanied by eggs, pancakes, grits, fresh fruit, and orange juice.

Lest you believe we out here in Pittsburgh are shivering in the cold, hungry and calling with shrill voices to uncaring ears, let me tell you a bit about my day.

We began the day by sleeping in and then getting together at one of the Cluster houses, where a whole spread was laid out before us. It was nice to stuff my belly and have a slow, chatty morning.

That afternoon we headed back out into the streets again. We ended up being about 40 or 50 people strong, carrying banners with images of earth, wind, sea, and fire, with words like "change," "power," and "sustainability" on them.

Deborah, in a spiffy purple hat, opened the march with a beautiful monologue about climate change

beyond the false solutions of green jobs and cap-and-trade carbon credits. "We can't just change the lightbulbs; we need to change our lives."

From there, a song bubbled up and out, "We are rising up, like a phoenix from the fire, brothers and sisters, spread your wings and fly higher." After all of the stalled, frazzled energy of the last couple of days, it felt good to be unencumbered and free. We marched down the Boulevard of the Allies and down to the headquarters of PNC Bank, a major investor in "Clean Coal" here in Pennsylvania, and then to Point State Park where Al Gore's big concert was being held.

This is where we staged our Theater of the Possible: a skit about living in right relation with coal and the Earth. The skit starred four Pagan Cluster folks as "suits" who are sequestered, composted, and reborn as the good solutions we dream of for our world: alternative energies, community gardens, bike lanes, etc. It ended with the creation of a coal altar and the crowd calling out their visions, then everyone singing together: "Take me down to the coal, take me down, where the earth is whole. Take me down in your embrace, where I can see your ancient face."

Almost all of the coal on this planet was created during another period of mass extinction in our history. In fact, it was the sequestering of all that carbon underground as coal and oil that made it possible for life on earth to continue at that time. Coal has witnessed the entire evolution of the human species; it is literally the bones of our ancestors. In right relationship with it, we could learn so much — perhaps, if we listened, we would hear the answers we so desperately need right now. The altar was about that listening.

Tomorrow the actual G20 convention begins. I have a feeling things might heat up.

THURSDAY: TEARS AND TEAR GAS

The most recent Twitter texts from our Communications people:

12:16 am - Units are responding to hotmetal bridge for reports of protestors gathering.

12:06 am – Student dorms blocked by police with weapons.

Lots of police need fuel, can't find fuel. Trying to get tanker truck to fuel humvees.

11:51 am – Forbes and S. Craig, protestors breaking out windows.

Police not responding to other calls. "All units are in Oakland."

11:30 pm – RIOT POLICE MARCH DOWN FORBES, SENDING STUDENTS SPRINTING TOWARDS TOWERS. TEAR GAS SHOT AT CROWD.

Giving dispersal order – probably 200 people at least there. Almost entire perimeter is surrounded by riot cops.

Near cathedral of learning & heinz chapel: POLICE JUST PILED OUT OF BUDGET TRUCKS. SOUND CANNONS BEING FIRED AT CROWD. COPS HAVE GAS MASKS ON.

11:00 pm – Radical marching band playing on the steps of cathedral, and riot cops continue to launch smoke bombs at them.

Gray 2000 Chrysler town and country w PA registration — get the fuck out of there! The police are looking for you!



Pagan Cluster activists take a breather at the G20 actions. Follow the Pagan Cluster on the Living River elist. Email quarterly@reclaiming.org. Photo by Jason Scarecrow.

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I didn't really want to go out dancing. It was a really long day today — the first day we've seen chemical weapons, the first we've seen broken windows, the first day I've felt real fear.

We wove through the streets, corralled here by the cops and then there, finally being blocked in on two sides and given the order to disperse. This announcement was followed by a weird, creepy beeping, kind of like a siren, but somehow different. Suddenly, I began to feel very ungrounded, then scared. Plumes of tear gas started wafting up ahead at the front of the march and I was suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to take off. I just couldn't be there anymore. And so I left — pulling a grudging Jason along with me.

I was overwhelmingly, out-of-my-body afraid, and not acting like myself. As we walked, I worked to ground the energy through my feet, noticing each step connecting me to the earth. I touched the part of my body where I have the feeling of groundedness and the memory of the redwoods at witchcamp anchored into my body, and said my magic word. I walked and grounded, walked and grounded. We ran into more cops, and my breath quickened until we were safely away. I went back to grounding.

It was only later that I learned that the strange sirens I'd been hearing were sound cannons called LRADs — devices that play a subsonic noise that disrupts the equilibrium of your inner ear and causes you to become confused, disoriented, unable to think straight or move with your usual balance. Although some of the fear and feeling of overwhelm was my own, and brought

about by the reality of the violence of the situation, I had also fallen prey to this weird device, which in me disrupted my very thought patterns, and certainly my energy body.

At home that evening, Lisa received a text from the Bash Back collective, inviting everyone out to a dance party later in the evening. A dance party! Lovely.

Unfortunately, the “dance party” had very little dancing in it. We stopped at Caribou Coffee for a pit stop and as I pushed the doors open, I saw kids pushing dumpsters down the street, yelling obscenities instead of chants.



They led the dumpsters down into the intersection, right in front of a police van, and turned them over to block the street. And then the smashing began. A moment later, further down the street, I saw smoke — not tear gas, but the smoke of a fire, of something burning.

I looked up at Jason. What I was thinking was mirrored perfectly on his face: The cops are going to be pissed. Best to get the hell out.

Within moments, the streets were full of cops in riot gear, curious college students, shop owners, and the smell of burning trash. We circled around the small plaza where the cops had corralled a large group of protestors — not the ones who had done the window

smashing or dumpster burning, but a different group that had been talking to G20 delegates earlier in the evening.

They brought in the sound cannons again, and started lobbing tear gas into the courtyards of the university, sending whole packs of students screaming and running for safety.

As we moved away, I glanced back towards the protestors who'd been trapped in the plaza, and felt a horrifying sinking in my stomach and saw in my mind's eye visions of what was to come. Tears (natural ones) sprung into my eyes. No one deserves to be tazered or gased because they broke a window — or

happened to be hanging around someone who did.

I'm back at Anne's and we've just finished talking about our plans for tomorrow, and I again wonder why I'm here. It's rather glamorous, I suppose, to be a traveling climate-change activist. But isn't there a more direct

route to saving the world, one that doesn't involve so many cops and so much violence?

I don't want to sleep just yet, because every time I close my eyes, a line of riot cops appears behind my lids. It's been happening all day. They live behind my eyelids now, a constant, unwelcome, haunting force in my life.

FRIDAY: OUT WITH A BANG...

Today I found out why I'm here. We left around eleven for an unpermitted feeder march hosted by the CMU students. It wasn't what we'd planned to do, but it was the perfect thing for me — there

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were kids with marching drums, and others dressed up in hazmat suits with signs that read things like “Climate Change, FAIL” and “There is no Planet B” on their chests and backs. Infused with this kind of creative, quirky energy, we set off toward downtown, where the larger permitted march was to begin.

We started on the sidewalk, took one lane of traffic, then a second, and eventually the whole street. This, of course, brought the cops. They spent some time zooming up and down the farthest left lane of traffic to clear it in their cars and vans, sirens going off, but other than that seemed content to let us go where we were going.

We swelled through the poor neighborhood, where our chants were met with enthusiasm and blessings like, “Whatever you’re protesting, you’re probably right,” and “Don’t let them stomp you!”

We kept going, grooving to the drum beats, taking the streets with our voices and feet to manifest the ideal

of freedom of expression. That creativity, that abundance of diverse voices, grew exponentially when we joined up with the larger (permitted) march. There were all kinds of people there: labor guys wearing hard-hats and t-shirts; Code Pink ladies with their fuchsia dresses and gray hair; a whole host of Tibetans with flags and traditional garb; hula hoopers for peace; a motley group with a huge white dove

puppet; you name it, it was there. I saw signs about universal health care, specifically single-payer health care, as well as ones about climate change, jobs, and economic class issues. Seeds of Peace came, too, renewed and ready to serve lunch to the thousands — literally thousands — of people that had come.

We filled the streets for blocks and blocks. At the front of the march was a group carrying flags for the dozens of countries not represented by the G20, all fluttering in the breeze that occasionally graced us with relief from the hot humid day.

Behind us was the Black Bloc, huge and intense and powerful in a way that



Jason Sorenson

I’ve never seen them before —proud and strong and direct, like a lion shaking its main, uncowed. Sometimes they would shout things like “Basta aqui capitalista,” a short chant that gathered power very quickly. Or whenever the cops were around: “You’re sexy, you’re cute, take off your riot suit!”

As we made our way downtown, the police presence doubled, tripled, quadrupled. They lined up four and five rows thick down every block, weighed down with rubber bullets, pepper spray, tear gas, rifles, dogs, sound cannons, batons, the works. Every bank had a line of National Guard out in front of it, and every intersection had either a

SWAT humvees, one of the black LRAD vehicles with a sound cannon, or a platoon of horse-mounted cops. How can I possibly convey what 6,000 armored police officers is like? It feels like marching through a tunnel of hot, bubbling, bristling danger. It feels like the walls are closing in on you.

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It was more police than one would have imagined for a permitted march, or really for anything short of a full-scale invasion of extra-terrestrials.

We marched across the river on a yellow-railed bridge, and suddenly, a couple of blocks away, I saw the glass-walled Convention Center where the G20 was meeting. I was in eyeshot of some of the most powerful people in the world, people who were making decisions that would effect billions of people and animals and other beings.

Those people have the power to change things so that we either sink or swim, I thought. There they are, using that power, totally sequestered and removed from all of us. I was stung into stillness, curiosity, frustration, and awe.

I wanted to tap into my deep magic, to do something that would make a difference energetically and carry to them. I said a prayer, but couldn't think

of anything beyond that. The march moved on, and the moment was over.

EPILOGUE: FINAL THOUGHTS

Afterward, a friend asked me what had stayed with me since the G20 – specifically, where I think the next steps lay.

What came back to me most powerfully was a delegation of human-rights protesters from Africa marching illegally down the street, wrapped in traditional garb and chanting. I felt a sense of quiet awe at their presence – as did the riot cops, who seemed unable to move against them. I overheard one cop say to another, “If these people meet up with those other guys, the shit is going to hit the fan.” Yet still, he did nothing.

In that moment, I saw Civil Disobedience at its best, at its heart. I saw the kind of power that I hope that I can cultivate in myself, that I dream of for the Pagan Cluster and the movement as a whole.

It's the kind of power that cannot be touched by violence, and so does not

have to resort to it. It's magic: a strong, focused magic that demands attention and respect. It is stronger than the riot cops with all of their weapons. It is stronger than broken windows. I believe that African delegation could have gotten all the way to the convention hall if they'd wanted to – or, at least, much closer than the rest of us. Their determination and energy was palpable.

I don't exactly know how to get there, but I think that our spiritual practices give us the potential to be that kind of force, to express it in our own way.

We are the ones we've been waiting for, and we are dawning. I'm going to be there when it happens.

Riyana adores the magic of song, women's blood mysteries, herbalism, and incorporating the magic of other mystical traditions into her work. She has taught at Free Activist Witchcamp, Teen Earth Magic, Witchlets in the Woods, and within her local community in the Bay Area and in Black Rock City, Nevada.


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