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### Weather Reports on Making a Ceremonial Village Together: Letters Home from the 9th Continental Bioregional Congress

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Weather Reports on Making a Ceremonial Village Together:  
Letters Home from the 9<sup>th</sup> Continental Bioregional Congress

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

**Arriving**

(EXPLAIN BIOREGIONALISM) We pulled into the Earthaven Ecovillage for the 9<sup>th</sup> Continental Bioregional Congress with a van full of what you might expect after traveling over 900 miles with three kids, two of whom are teenagers: multiple c.d. players headphoned to multiple kids, a book on tape on our radio, empty bags of pretzels and water bottles, pillows and blankets trampled already by muddy sandals, and that general kind of exhausted anticipation that comes of arrival.

“Is that Ted?” I asked my husband, Ken Lassman, who along with me has been coming to most of the continental bioregional congresses for the last 20 years.

“It can’t be,” he answered.

But then the tall, shaggy-headed man turned around, smiled his broad Texas grin, and in moments, we were on the ground hugging him along with other old friends, some we hadn’t seen in a decade. We started hugging the people we didn’t know either.

No matter – when it comes to making a bioregional village together for a week, one of the chief accomplishments that comes of these gatherings, it’s almost like stepping into *Brigadoon*, the mythical town that comes alive every hundred years as if only a night has passed. It’s always just the next day in the time and place we find together: outside of the times and places of our other lives, and inside a pulse that beats according to the whole body. These gatherings are about as close to utopia as I’ve ever experienced: we live side by side, tent by tent, cooking together organic, locally-grown food, drinking

water (EXPLAIN>>>>), self-scheduling ourselves in part in advance of the gathering and in large part on the spot according to the needs of the group, creating group rituals and protocols thanks to expert facilitation, and the good-natured attitudes of the participants.

This is not to say that utopia is all bioregional bon bons on earth-friendly hammocks in a light breeze. During this congress, the remnant of Hurricane Dennis swung through twice, pouring upon us over 11 inches of rain, which often came down in thunderous sheets that occasionally made it so impossible to hear one another that we had to stop talking and just listen.

There are also all the complications that you could imagine of many manner of human interaction – the fights that sprang out during the week between some of the local kids and visiting kids (“It’s no problem,” my 10-year-old son told me at one point, “we’ve taken care of it by just declaring war on them”), the lack of adequate activities for teens at the congress, the difficulty of juggling into the schedule small group time that would have allowed us to process-as-we-went what we were experiencing, and the occasional long group meetings when we seemed to be making ruts in the muddy ground by our whirling tires of group inertia.

But for the most part, the congress did function like the ceremonial village it was meant to be, creating for people like me, who, although I’m only in mid-40s, are the old-timers as well as the majority of participants, who were attending for the first time. A startling lack of prima donnas and dominating human presences made the big group discussions generally move with a lightness and intensity of interest (EXPLAIN WHAT WE DID). And we successfully used the many forms evolved over 20 years of such congresses for relating together:

- Workshops to share information, provide experiential opportunities to learn new things, such as (FILL IN)
- Clans, small groups to meet daily, to help people talk about (FILL IN>>>>)
- Big group plenaries – sessions when the whole congress came together to do whole congress business, such as the establishing of a congress coordinating council to help grow bioregionalism throughout the continent between congresses, or (FILL IN)
- Regional group gatherings to meet many late afternoons to provide networking and organizing opportunities between folks in live in close, or almost-close, bioregions.
- Rituals to provide common ground for us to begin all our days and to celebrate and witness and recognize the spiritual dimensions of what it means to live on the earth.

And it's the rituals that I would like to speak most to since I co-chaired the ritual committee along with Angelica Mendez Flores, a (FILL IN) medicine woman from Mexico.

### **The Ceremony Part of the Ceremonial Village**

Angelica doesn't speak more than a few words of English, and I don't speak more than a few words of Spanish. No matter. When we work together, as we did to a lesser extent for the previous congress held in Kansas in 2002, we can look into each other's eyes and figure out some of what's going on. Plus, we had marvelous translators

throughout the week, especially since, during lunches or dinners, when we mostly had ritual committee meetings, we would throw our arms around passing bi-lingual people, and beg them to join us.....and while they're there, to translate.

The ritual committee, in charge of forging and presenting all the daily and special rituals of the community, consisted of an ecumenical hodgepodge: a Wiccan woman, a radical Christian, a few people who study Native American traditions, a Jew (myself) with Buddhist leanings, and (WHAT IS ANGELICA?). The premise we began with, evolved over many bioregional gatherings, was that because so many in our generations have been wounded by traditional institutions of religion, it's essential to tell people, as much as it's possible, the content of coming rituals so they can decide for themselves if they wish to participate or not. We also were guided by a common desire to create ceremonies that helped further the creation of community and would work well being translated (SPEAK OF TRANSLATION EARLIER) by making each ritual as inclusive, simple and clear as possible. Finally, we wanted to offer the community rituals that would help us hear more of and celebrate different spiritual traditions without stepping on believers, non-believers or those in between.

In other words, we were often walking gingerly through the minefields of the religious wounds of our collective body while, at the same time, keeping our eyes on the living earth, that common ground literally under our feet (even if it was wet at the moment) that brought us together (ELABORATE).

### **Weather Reports: Letters Home**

July 11, 2005:

Dear friends,

Rain. So much humidity that my sleeping bag is always damp. Thick green, layers upon layers. Small, light mosquitos. Rushing cold water. Today the outer eastern bands of Hurricane Dennis seem to be all about -- starting last night with popcorn rain, then rushing rain, fierce rain, light rain, dappled rain, stopped rain, and more rain.

We stood in circle this morning under the orange-yellow tent beside the council hall. We began with the Cherokee morning song, "hey a-wahoo, hay a-wahoo, hay a wa, hay a wa, hay a wa, hay a wa, wa-hoo." We sang to the four directions. Then we have the intention of the day, first introduced by me as opening ourselves to learning from each other and the other species. We introduced silence into which anyone could step into the circle and offer a song, poem, gesture, dance. There was a plethora of rounds given -- we sang "We are hollow bamboo," "The river, she is flowing," and several others. Angelica came and spoke of how intentions are not always enough, and asked her to give what we could to each other, and also release, breathe out, what limits us. She smoked us in the circle, and then we sang the Cherokee morning song to the four directions.

Right now the rain has paused, the green out this window shines and shimmers a bit in the light wind. Lunch is on the breeze, and then the rest of the day encompassed in trails through the woods, standing in circle, eating and laughing, getting bitten by various insects, peeing in the woods, dancing over a bridge, avoiding the poison ivy, and hanging out in the cafe here, admiring the myriad and creative dwellings all around that show us how sustainability and community work here.

Love and beauty to all,

Caryn

July 12, 2005:

Hello everyone!

We have learned many things at this congress so far, including what happens when you're at a bioregional congress when the outer bands of Hurricane Dennis sweep through. In an obvious word: rain. It rained so hard for about 24 hours that often, when sitting close up with someone, even in the council hall (a building), you would have to yell for that person to hear you. The rain, beginning Sunday night, came in waves, alternating between light and thunderous, but mostly thunderous. It was the beat of the sky, constantly the backbeat of our night and day and night again. When I facilitated an ecopoetics workshop -- outside under a big tent, we wrote and spoke to the rhythm of the rain. And David Abram, if you're reading this, at one point, I said your name, preparing to read something you wrote about the reciprocity between our bodies and the earth, and the skies suddenly opened up. Scott, helping facilitate beside me, looked up at the sky and said, "okay, David, enough!"

Walking paths in hard rain, and in the dark in the hard rain (without a flashlight as I did a few times), was also an earth-connecting experience, learning to trust my tentative step, hoping for something solid to land on (and not a Copperhead as Ken almost stepped on last night). So much rain too -- coupled with some good wind -- that most people, from what I gather, had watery experiences one way or another in their tents. My son's tent filled with water, and so he slept in our big tent, everything in it damp to soaking.

We lay upon wet with wet over us.

The rain isn't the only thing landing on -- there are also the insects, out in full force, driven from the trees or dirt in multitudes by the storm (then again, I could just be imaging this while counting the no-see-um -- but sure feel-um -- bites on my legs).

There are also the joys of this place -- the rain so tremendous that it's more of a Gonzo-Fellini experience than a sad one. The cold water in the streams rushes over toes and ankles as we walk across. The green climbs in story after story, tunnels of lights shimmering upward, the leaves shined to high gloss because of the rain. We saw a small red lizard under a dead branch, and a groundhog standing on the edge of the road.

There were also the things we did in the rain: workshops on bioregionalism, permaculture, mapping, energy, ecotheater, and more. Hanging out in the White Owl cafe (new favorite place) to drink beer or soda late at night, laughing in small groups and perusing the clothes and jewelry for sale from south of the border. Sitting under the tented eating area, meeting and checking in (clans or impromptu clans). And during lunch, a man and woman -- both of white hair and spontaneous energy -- took off their clothes during a downpour so intense everyone stopped eating and watched in awe (inspired of course by the downpour), and they pranced through the flowers.

During dinner, I facilitated a wonderful and awe-inspiring meeting between people from six countries and in two languages, to plan a ritual that came to several people: building, out of careful and well-thought-out visualization, a bridge between what we believe and care about on this earth, and the leaders of the World Trade Organization, currently meeting. The ritual will be held tonight at 7, and the general plan is to create a space in which those who feel so called can step into the center and do this intense



visualization while others who feel so draw circle around the visualizers and send them light, love, energy.

This morning -- in a shock of sunlight -- we gathered in morning circle for the Cherokee morning song, the intention for the day (gratitude) and the calling out of what we're grateful for while Angelica smudged us all, more singing, an explosion of announcements, and then an incredible and stirring presentation by the founders of the bioregional movement. Organized and planned by Ken Lassman and Gene Marshall, it featured an astonishingly all-encompassing and moving talk by Gene on bioregionalism - - and the ideas/philosophies/passions behind it he discussed in terms of reinhabitation, legitimate governance, human scale, consensus-based process, ecofeminism, and ceremonial companionship. Ken, Laura Kuri, Bea Briggs, Glen Makepeace, and a wonderful man from the Dominican Republic stood up and said why we were bioregionalists. Glen reminded us that we make a ceremonial village together, and one of its main functions is healing.

Lunch, and now the plenary is happening -- our first one, to be followed by "open space," time open for workshops and meetings as needed and desired by the group (and we'll have more open space in future days). In the evening, we'll do the ritual to reach the members of the WTO, and then cultural sharing, and surely more dancing, singing, and more of it all in and out of the rain.

love to all,

Caryn

July 13, 2005:

Hello everyone,

Hurricane Dennis liked the congress so much that once he swung through, he rested a bit elsewhere, and then come on back in -- wild, thick and unrelenting rain for a while this afternoon, and added to that, we had lightning strikes very close. There's now a beautiful and impressive hole in the ground right next to the White Owl Cafe (where some of us like to hang out -- it is DRY), where the lightning struck down.

The congress continues to go well though, although wet and well. Some of us have moved inside -- our family of five is now installed in the Hobbit House, Rod Rylander's amazing Hobbit-like house (round door and all, and gardens growing on the thatched roof). Others have moved in elsewhere. There's a 70-80 percent chance of rain for the next few days, so what can we do? We walk and talk in the rain, we marvel at the surprises of sun, and everyone is sometimes completely soaked.

The ritual last night to try and reach the WPO was very powerful for all of us (I believe I can say this based on our faces) in attendance. It felt like something connected, and it connected deeply. Some of us went to the center and sat in a circle, seeing the faces of those we were trying to communicate with about the need not to pass rules that would increase irradiation, destroy local economies and communities, and devastate health care and healthy food production. Some of us sat in a circle around the ones in the center, sending energy to the center ones and holding the space. Thanks to Angelica and Alrick (sp?) who created this and held the space.

We also had plenaries today and yesterday, and in today's, the idea of forming/reforming a coordinating council was introduced succinctly by Ken Lassman (and developed by Ken and Gene). We also went through the always-difficult and

sometimes-frustrating process of figuring out what kinds of breakout groups we wanted to work in, and from there, we formed groups looking at the likes of bioregional organizing, arts and spirituality, education, and much more.

I write this in the light of the oncoming women's and men's circles, soon to happen. And tomorrow we spend the morning with John Seed doing a Council of All Beings, and in the afternoon, it's local work projects at Earthaven.

love to all,

Caryn

July 15, 2005:

Hello,

The rain and rushes of it have somewhat subsided with just occasional storms, which seem like not even worth mentioning considering what we've seen. Maybe it's the weather -- or the place -- or the time, but being here has felt even more profoundly like being in a ceremonial village than before for me. Perhaps the rain makes the core of our lives just seem much more ancient.

There has also been ceremony extraordinaire and in large quantities since last I wrote. On Wednesday evening, we had the men's and women's circles. In the women's circle, we stole Alberto Ruz's great idea from what he did with the men's circle in Kansas in '02, and we arranged ourselves in a spiral, starting with the oldest -- Joyce Marshall, 71 -- to the youngest -- Anakesta (sp?), 4 weeks. Each woman stood and said whatever she wanted, and it was one of the greatest experiences of my life to hear what was said. Maybe it was the arrangement of age, but what came through was a profound outcoming

of what it feels like, what it means to be a woman in her 60s or 30s or teens. While it would be a breaking of confidence to go into specifics, I can say that certain themes emerged more at certain ages: times when sex and love were massive parts of our lives, times when being alone or doing passionate work or connecting with children and grandchildren filled our days. I marveled at each woman, and like many there, I felt deeply honored to hear what my elders and youngers said. It is true what Cathy wrote: we of middle or elder age are in very good hands when it comes to the younger women. I was completely dazzled by all, but so overwhelmed with gratitude for the women in their 20s and younger especially -- for their vision, beauty, eloquence, clarity and wisdom. For their strength and courage.

After sleep --- this time with my family in the Hobbit House ("I feel like Gandaf," Ken said, bending to get into the round door) -- I woke Thursday morning to make my way down to the beginning Council of All Beings with John Seed, which went from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Again, it was extraordinary and also a way to truly touch base with the ordinary: the ordinary and massive pain and despair, beginnings of anger or life-long rage, numbness and the guilt and shame that sometimes come with it, quiet or loud confusion about what to do -- all in response to letting ourselves feel what we really feel, who we really are, in relation to the devastation of the living earth. People expressed all of the above with weeping, crying, pounding the floor, trembling, yelling, holding still, swaying, shaking, speaking or holding silence. We also evolved into listening to John tell the story of the universe, and then assembling into councils, where we spoke for another species. I sat down in my group a bit late, and leaned over to Glen after hearing a few people speak as rabbits or owls. "Can I be a plant?" I asked. "You can be the sun," he

answered, "Anything!" Eventually, we merged into lunch, and then working around Earthaven (although I went to do laundry since our clothing was starting to grow our food). Anyway, for more information on the Council of All Beings -- including many exercises local groups can engage in -- please google John Seed's name and follow, follow, follow.

The evening exploded into the magic and power of Latin American night: stories, songs, slides, power point presentations and more on the astonishing variety, depth and extent (truly mind-boggling in how many thousands of people are touched by bioregional ideas and approaches) of bioregionalism in Mexico, South America, Puerto Rico, and many other places. We were fed Mexican candies and passed bottles of tequila, and eventually, we did what we had to do: salsa and other drum-invoked dance. And there was also a beautiful presentation of eco-theater scenes interspersed with two-harmony singing by Gene and Joyce Marshall from Texas (which, since it's its own country, might as well be part of Latin America).

Today we began with a morning circle, small clan-like meetings, the usual teaming announcements, and then plenary. And we did some big things: we approved the new plan for the coordinating council presented by Ken and Gene a few days ago. And we approved a slate of people who will basically work hard on email, phone conferencing and in person to hold the congress together between congresses. Who we are? Ahh....the list, and as some of you might see, most of the people on this list were core organizers for congresses, and others have ample experience in much-needed areas, so the collective wisdom and experience is deep (Now it's time to eat again, the wind blows lightly through this window, the sun is almost out, and my clothes are only slightly wet. Life is

good, and we miss many of you not here, but we carry you in our hearts (Stephanie Mills, Alice Kidd, David Haenke, David Abram, all of KAW Council, Laura Ramberg, Dixie Lubin, Marnie Mueller, you great Planet Drum folks, Suzanne Richman, and so many others -- deep apologies if I didn't name you right here).

hugs to all,

Caryn

July 16, 2005:

Hello,

Yesterday, it hardly rained, and that was somewhat disconcerting at this point. We were sitting in the White Owl cafe last night, eating hot apple pie and drinking beer with Peter Bane, talking about the weather. Daniel (our 16-year-old son) spoke about the lightning strike near the cafe the other day, the one that left the big hole in the ground. Later he told me it was like every strike of lightning and beautiful sunset, and a whole rock concert all happening in a second. His ears rung and body shook (he was about 15 feet away). "How much rain do you think we had, about 3 or 4 inches?" I asked Peter. "More like 10 or 11," he said. And he told us stories of last September's hurricanes sweeping over Earthaven. Our kids' favorite story was of the man in his car at Earthaven, quietly reading CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD when he heard something at his window. He turned to look and saw rushing water. He managed to get out of the car fast enough to run to higher ground before his car took

off down the creek. No word on whether CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD went with him or

the car, but the non-book version surely made its point.

We've also been comparing insects here with our bioregional insects. At lunch yesterday, Joyce, from Texas, and I listened as something announced there would be a workshop for dealing with chigger bites. It seems some of the people here refer to no-see-ums as chiggers. "I know chiggers, and these are not chiggers," Joyce said. Later, our son told us that we could import these chiggers back home where our chiggers, far more devious and deeply-probing of the nether-regions of the body, could whoop 'em. In any case, some of us are peppered with chigger-no-see-um evidence.

Last night, we had a committee meeting to plan tonight's closing ceremony (although there will be a closing circle Sunday too). We plan to start with an All Species parade to the council hall followed by the children singing, and then a memorial service for people very dear to this movement who have passed on: Fiz Harwood, Sue Nelson, Leah Garlotte, and a few others. From there, the eldest among us will give the children a blessing, and the children will lead us in a few more songs followed by big dance.

There is overall a lot of energy, particularly among new people, and many young people to the movement. A lot already is coming out of the congress,

particularly along the veins of education and organizing. And as usual, there's enormous bouts of inspiration and regeneration happening among us, the kind of thing almost invisible and yet it keeps the home fires burning long after we pack up our damp clothes and red-mud-stained tents, taking some of the local chiggers and dirt and rain and opening, widening green of this place home with us. Years ago, between the Mexico and Kansas congresses, Ken said to me that the bioregional movement in the U.S. especially was in a coma, and what were we going to do about it? After the Kansas congress, we realized the movement was awake and sitting up on its bed, but not yet in motion. Now the movement is walking across the room, putting its hand on the door and getting ready to step out. My dream is that this movement strengthens itself into a long-distance runner, spanning the continent with energy and grace, helping people see another way to live, another way to be -- in conscious relationship and balance with our home places.

from the mountains and the quiet green of this moment,

Caryn

*EarthLight's* general guidelines are as follows, however, we are open to new forms and creative approaches.



- Essays which impart or explore the spiritual dimensions of our relationship with the natural world
- Articles which give inspiring and empowering examples of people creating new, less environmentally destructive modes of being on this planet.
- Analysis of the cultural forces responsible for the environmental crisis
- Poetry

In all cases, we prefer writing which is wrapped around personal experience. At this time, we are more interested in "practice" and less in "theory." We feel that our readers want to hear about how theory -- there is a lot of it out there -- is consciously or unconsciously working its way into sustainable, psycho-spiritual changes in lifestyle.

We encourage both new and established voices. Length: *usually* 2000 words or less. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, with SASE. If possible, submit on a Macintosh-compatible diskette.

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