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THE BATTLE IN SEATTLE

THE STORY BEHIND AND BEYOND THE
TO DEMONSTRATIONS JANET THOMAS

THE BATTLE IN SEATTLE

THE STORY BEHIND AND BEYOND THE WTO DEMONSTRATIONS

JANET THOMAS



FULCRUM PUBLISHING
GOLDEN, COLORADO

*To Thomas, Nicole, and Michael and to Josh, Molly, and Emily—
who are at the very beginning of their lives.
May we not let them down.*

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TIMETABLE

WTO* Protest Events in Seattle, November 26, 1999 (N26)
to December 6, 1999 (D6)

N26, N27: International Forum on Globalization (IFG) Teach-In with scholars and policy makers representing civil society from around the world. All events are sold out. The WTO Ministers come to town.

N28: Forum: The WTO and the Global War System; Jubilee 2000 Prayer Service at St. James Cathedral.

N29: Forum: The impacts of the WTO on Health and the Environment, with national and international speakers; demonstrations begin downtown; college students from around the country and civil society from around the world converge upon Seattle; there are excited TV interviews with trade leaders and economists; thousands pack an interfaith service for economic justice; at the Seattle Center the People's Gala unfolds with the likes of Tom Hayden, Jello Biafra, and documentarist Mike Moore dancing in the aisles.

N30: Thousands of students rally at the University of Washington, Seattle Central Community College, and other locations around the city and march to downtown Seattle; thousands of environmentalists, feminists, farmers, and human rights activists rally and march to downtown—all in protest of the policies of the WTO; intersections are occupied by turtles; students sit down in the streets, in front of hotels, and around the Convention Center; tear gassing begins; the Forum on Labor Rights/Standard of Living/Human Rights takes place at the United Methodist Church; the big international Labor Rally takes place at Memorial Stadium and 30,000 more people march downtown; KING-TV news announcers proudly point out that they will not be interviewing any protestors.

The tear gas escalates and rubber bullets fly; many arrests; Paul Hawken is gassed and outraged; Madeleine Albright is stuck in her hotel room; Seattle Mayor Paul Schell gets calls from D.C.; labor leaders can't get to the head of their parade; the

WTO can't get to their opening ceremonies; nor can they get to their private meetings in hotel rooms; the police can't move quickly in their battle gear. Violence increases and people are hurt by tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and truncheons; some windows get broken; the no-go zone is announced—people can't get to buses, taxis, or their cars; people are herded by the police out of the downtown no-go area and up into the nearby neighborhoods of Capital Hill where residents are arrested for going to, or coming from the corner store. Police violence continues into the night; hundreds are arrested.

The same video loops of violence—the broken window at Starbucks and the dumpster fire in Seattle—are shown repeatedly on television around the world. Hundreds are arrested, no media asks why, none of the WTO ministers ask why, the mayor doesn't ask why, the police chief doesn't ask why. The fire department does ask why they should hose people, noting that it hurts, then refusing to do so.

D1: Forum on Women/Democracy/Sovereignty/Development at United Methodist Church; more arrests, rallies, marches, demonstrations, tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. Labor takes a stand and the steelworkers lead a parade.

D2: Forum on Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology: Food Safety and Security at United Methodist Church; more arrests, rallies, marches, demonstrations, tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. Citizens surround the jail in a support vigil for those arrested.

D3: The people of the Northwest get fed up and take to the streets en masse for democracy and civil rights. There are negotiations with the police and the long vigil at the jail continues. The dissension at the WTO escalates. It's announced that charges will be dropped and people released.

D4: The front page headline in the *The Seattle Times* is "Talks collapse; meeting ends." The WTO ministers go home.

D5: Continued vigil at the jail.

D6: Last person out of jail, free buses and free parking downtown for Christmas shoppers.

*The WTO is a global governing body consisting of trade ministers from countries around the world. They are appointed to the WTO by government leaders and typically represent the corporate sector. The WTO has its own hierarchy and subsequent conflicts. Decisions are made behind closed doors that can challenge the sovereignty of local, state and national laws if such laws are considered by the WTO as deterrents to international trade.

INTRODUCTION

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

—Mary Oliver, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet,
in “The Summer Day” from *House of Light*

On Thanksgiving Day 1999, my son, Colin, and I took an afternoon stroll along the edge of Ballard, a Seattle neighborhood fondly referred to as the Scandinavian capital of the country. We’d driven down from San Juan Island earlier in the day to share the traditional holiday meal with friends who live on Ballard’s west side. It was bright and sunny; the waters of Puget Sound were clear and quiet, as were the streets we walked.

We got down near the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, which link the saltwater excitement of Puget Sound with the freshwater harbor of Lake Union, and noticed that a small grocery store was open. Colin wanted a bottle of water, so we went in. Still it was quiet. We’d seen no one else out walking on the streets and very few cars, and there was no one in the store but the clerk. We wished him a happy Thanksgiving. He was soft-spoken and shyly attentive. I recall being quite struck by his gentleness, and, like the ferry workers earlier in the morning, he seemed extra kind on this holiday when everyone else was off with everyone else.

As we walked toward the counter, I was telling Colin that I was planning to go home to the island early the next morning because on the following Monday, I was thinking of coming back to Seattle to participate in WTO week. We got to the counter and the gentle fellow said, “Just a minute, please,” and disappeared. When he returned he was happy and animated as he handed each of us a bright green bumper sticker that read: “WTO. If it doesn’t work for working families, it doesn’t work.” In small letters at the bottom it read “AFL-CIO.” The gentle man, who had

overheard our WTO talk, was no longer shy. “Yes, you go, you go,” he said with a surprising fervor. And so I went. The rest, as they say, is history.

* * * * *

WTO week in Seattle was a global tailspin at the end of the century, a fly in the face of the new millennium, an elephant in the ointment. It was an unruly uprising of the masses, a divine intervention, a traffic nightmare, a human rights activist’s dream. The cab drivers didn’t drive; the longshoremen closed down the ports on the entire West Coast; the peasant farmers came to town; the students spoke up and sat down; good people taught; and the people reigned. Many voices, in many languages, were all saying the same thing at once: “Down with Corporate Colonialism. Up with Global Economic Justice for Everybody Right Now Everywhere.”

Yet the issues are rife with a quieter complexity. The economic imperative behind the things in our lives links us all together—sometimes in wealth, sometimes in poverty. Often in a gray shaded area where we are unaware of the impact of our decisions, our choices, our yearnings. When we yearn for more, more, more while so many others yearn for just enough, our own spirits as well as the health of our human family members suffer. How did this happen? How did we get into this frenzy of acquisition in which stuff has come to equate with spirit, consumerism with patriotism and human worth with human wealth? Money has never bought happiness and it never will. Yet we continue to behave as though sometime, somehow, it will happen, and finally, after all is said and bought, we’ll be happy. Is it this fragile hope that has driven the corporate ethic to such obsessive profit-making? And is anybody out there happy yet?

It’s a corporate illness that pervades our culture, and we’re all part of the equation. We have been taken in by our own mythology—the mythology of materialism. Money has become the ultimate meaning and there can never be enough. Yet those at the “top,” whose worth is measured by numbers, can be as destitute as those at the “bottom,” who are struggling to meet their most basic needs. Who’s to say who is poverty stricken? Spiritual poverty, too, causes hunger, dis-ease, and death. Why the obsession with money?

I’ve never had much of the stuff, so it’s an easy question for me to ask. But I have had a job that took me to places I couldn’t afford to go, so I have lived in the lap of luxury for days at a time. As editor of *SPA*

magazine, I would leave the messy, pencil-driven world of publishing behind and go off on a “business” trip to experience luxury. It was nice. I liked it. I spent a week in a big fluffy robe at a spa in Florida and got pampered beyond recognition. I wallowed in Roman baths in Rome. I even got to go to a private spa in Hawaii with Fabio, which would have cost a mere mortal more than \$20,000—even without Fabio (who is a very lovely man behind that lovely face and in spite of that lovely hair). Sometimes I’d wonder what it would be like to live in that realm, where money really does talk its way through your life. I think I would be very afraid of what it would say.

Money cannot live our lives for us, but the corporate illness that defines value in numbers of dollars and amount of stuff is trying to convince us that it can. That it’s what makes life worth living. But *life* is what makes life worth living. Money can come between us and our lives. It can actually keep us from being happy, from being human, just as a terrible lack of it can deprive us of what we need to be human.

A few years before I fell into the world of high living through publishing, I had a job cooking at a Buddhist retreat center where money really was no object. Fifteen people were in silent retreat for a year. Not only was there no money floating around, nobody could talk about it either. And for some, there was no touching it. One visiting teacher, Ajaan Pabakaro, came out of the Buddhist forest tradition of Thailand, in which money cannot be touched, nothing can be asked for, cars cannot be driven, and the one meal of the day is to be eaten before noon. Ajaan Pabakaro is a tall, handsome (imagine Fabio with a shaved head) American who first went to Thailand on R&R from the Vietnam War, where he was a fighter pilot. The Thai forest tradition caught his heart and his mind, and he returned there after the war and trained in the Buddhist path based on *Vinaya*, the Buddha’s strict monastic code. Out of the jet fighter and into the fire. During his New Year’s teaching weekend at the retreat center, Ajaan Pabakaro was accompanied by an assistant who handled his money and mediated his life with the world in which he traveled. Being in his presence was like hanging out with the real Santa Claus, the one who fits down the chimney into our hearts and gives us what we really need, undivided and loving attention. He could see right to the core of our yearning. He was happy, funny, and utterly penniless. What does money have to do with anything? And why does it have to do with everything?

These are the questions underlying the questions that were raised during WTO week in Seattle. And they are questions for us all—whether we are highly paid corporate execs or highly busy peasant farmers. Our

lives are formed by our attitudes about money and what it means to us. How having it or not having it serves our quality of life, and life itself. WTO week was ripe with the meaning of money, yet it was issues and individuals that enlivened the streets and took hold in the hearts and minds of those of us who were there. The confluence of people on the streets was nothing short of stunning. The international nature of the crowd—farmers from South America, union groups from Canada, activists from India, Africa, Asia, and Europe, indigenous peoples from the Northwest and around the world—was a rising tide of inspiration. There were moms with kids, students with stamina, and labor leaders with big bellies. It was a great ruckus, a carnival of cause. It had all the grace and grandeur of a global family reunion—complete with teenagers

and turtles, misfits and ministers. It was a parade, and everybody came.

But you had to be there. If you weren't, it was a week of shame, a shocking example of violence and mayhem, a blight on Seattle's shining reputation, a disgrace.

The discrepancy between being in the experience and then seeing it portrayed in the press was like cuddling up with your teddy bear and waking up with a crocodile in your bed. It was a bad dream. A repetitive bad dream. Over and over and over, the rest of the world was exposed to the same loop of burning trash cans, black-masked marauders, and broken

windowpanes. It seemed as though every coffee bean in the city was on fire, every dot-com in jeopardy, every shopping opportunity destroyed. It was a desecration of Christmas. It was a bad joke.

What really wasn't funny was what *wasn't* shown on TV. The extensive police violence against nonviolent people, the systemic economic violence against much of humanity, the unrelenting violence perpetrated against individuals fighting for human rights and freedoms all over the world, the ever-increasing rate of hunger, disease, and illiteracy among so many people, whose countries' resources are serving the profits of outside companies rather than the needs of the population. All these issues, along with the growing concern about our environment, our farmers, our labor community, our food, our young people, were

**"Some may remember the
final days of the old century,
when the World Trade
Organization was in town, as
dark days in Seattle. I won't.
I'll remember those glimpses
of a renewed and restored
human community."**

—The Reverend Tom Quigley,
president-director, Church Council
of Greater Seattle