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A Threshold Inquiry:
Consequences of Contemplating Terrorism in 2002

By Ann Withorn

Last spring I wrote in *Sojourner: A Women's Forum* about a time 30 years ago when I had contemplated terrorism. My worry then was that people wouldn't understand why I wrote the piece, that they would dismiss me as just another nostalgic '60s radical.

Today I am no longer worried for me. I am afraid for all of us.

In June, State Trooper Riley and his partner came unannounced to my door asking to speak with me. He spoke with my 15 year old daughter and asked for me to call him, leaving both a cell phone and an office number. Away for a month, I figured it was about my dilapidated car, or maybe a friend who is on probation.

Trooper Riley and I finally spoke on August 7 to arrange a meeting. I asked why he wanted to see me. He wouldn't say, except that "a complaint had been filed against you and we need to meet. You aren't in any trouble," he insisted, but he did want to speak with me; it was "in regard to a publication."

Curious, I told him to come by my house at nine the next morning.

Troopers Riley and Favale arrived at 9 a.m. on the dot. We sat on my front porch on a lovely cool morning. I was nervous but had decided not to ask to tape the meeting, because I wanted to keep them talking.

Immediately I asked under what authority they were visiting me.

They reported that after 9/11 the state of Massachusetts had established a hotline for anyone to make anonymous complaints about suspicious activity. Followup on those complaints were to be carried out by the State Police Department's Division of Investigative Services. The troopers' job now, he told me, was to "conduct a threshold inquiry to determine if there was anything to the complaint."

Someone had contacted the hotline about my *Sojourner* article. It was not what I wrote in the article that concerned the troopers, ("You can write anything you want," they said). They were checking up on the caller's fear that I might "currently be involved in potentially dangerous activity."

When asked, Trooper Riley assured me that, "You have the right not to talk with us. Nothing will happen. You are not in any trouble," He said they were just mandated to follow up on any complaint. They said they had two questions for

me, which I was “under no obligation to answer.” If I didn’t give permission, they would leave. Again, curiosity got to me and I agreed to hear their questions

The first was, “Why did you write the article?” I said it was self evident from the piece. I wanted to get people to think complexly. I am a writer and a teacher and this is always my goal.

The second question: “Was the group still active?” At first I thought they meant *Sojourner*. But they said, “No, we meant the Red Coven.” That was the group of four women friends I had written about. All of us smiled at the name.

I said that if they read the article they would see that the Red Coven was never “active.” “But it is not in existence now?” Trooper Riley probed. “No, it no longer exists,” I assured him.

That was all. “A report will be filed as to the complaint being unsubstantiated,” the troopers said. I could write to request a copy of their report, which “will be on record,” they added.

In the end I told my inquirers that an anonymous complaint about a published article by a writer who makes no attempt to conceal her identity should not generate a home visit—the first time unannounced. To conduct such a face-to-face inquiry was inappropriate, chilling, and threatening to free speech and freedom of the press.

Trooper RILEY said he understood, but their job all day, every day, was “to follow up on every call where a person could be identified.” They gave two examples: a report that a Middle Eastern-appearing man came to buy a used car and then didn’t do so. (Trooper Favale volunteered, “he might not have liked the car.”) Two Middle Eastern-appearing men were seen driving a Ryder truck on the expressway (“They could have been Italian.” I said “or just Middle Eastern”).

In saying good-bye, my guests acknowledged that many people were “understandably” very upset, but personal visits were “necessary given the situation and the problems resulting from lack of follow-up. If, heaven forbid, something were ever to happen, we want to show we checked every lead.”

As soon as the troopers left I wrote a brief report on the visit. I called and e-mailed the ACLU, *Sojourner*, and my lawyer friend who, the night before, had advised me to say as little as possible but find out everything about what the troopers thought they are doing.

I didn’t cower under the bed.

First I wondered who was monitoring *Sojourner* and then lodging “anonymous complaints.” Should we just ask them to subscribe, at an appropriately high rate for informers? I joked about reviving the Red Coven, with my daughters and cats

as founding members. And I laughed about filing complaints against naive liberals, just to get them to see what it is like *not* to be “above suspicion.”

Yet as the day wore on, I realized that I was more intimidated by the friendly threshold visit than I wanted to admit. It was not a joke; it was deeply frightening.

How many people are being visited, based on what reasons? What does it mean that there is a record of the result of each visit, no matter how innocent the person being investigated? Who can access the records and for what purposes? I was very glad that I had changed the first names of my long-unseen friends. I wondered what might have seemed “suspicious” if I had let them into my house. Would my “No War but the Class War” poster, or the dust bunnies beside the refrigerator have been enough to keep my case open?

I found out that the ACLU is getting lots of calls from people who have been visited, but it is usually unable to do more than keep its own records. I thought more about the seemingly discredited George W. Bush proposal to implement a “Terrorism Information and Prevention System (TIPS) plan that would recruit 4 per cent of Americans, including postal workers and delivery people, to report “suspicious activity.”

And most importantly I remembered the deep fears that had been an integral, de-stabilizing part of ‘60s movements. By the end of that decade we knew that our government lied in order to wage an aggressive, immoral war; that it paid people to spy on all protesters, and that it killed Black Panthers and others. Indeed, it perpetrated the very profound violations of rights that drove some of us to contemplate politically self-destructive acts of “terrorism.”

My visit from the state troopers brought back far more nightmares than my own article could ever generate. It should make us all afraid . . . and challenge us all to find ways to stand up for our rights to write and say unpopular things, to try to stop a war on terrorism that itself terrorizes people abroad and in the “homeland.”

When not defending herself to law enforcement officials, Ann Withorn teaches and writes at U Mass Boston. Last time the names of her fellow Coven members were changed “to protect them from John Ashcroft and Tom Rridge, in case there is no statute of limitations for contemplating crimes against Homeland Security.” Since that strategy clearly failed, this time she has changed no names: troopers Riley and Favale are real. If someone calls the Massachusetts State Police Terrorism Tip Line 1 800 USA 5458 to make a report in regard to “any suspected terrorist threat or suspicious activity,” they might visit YOU.