

LETTER FROM CHEMUNG COUNTY JAIL, PART 2
by SANDRA STEINGRABBER, April 19, 2013:

“Why I am in Jail on Earth Day”

This morning—I have no idea what time this morning, as there are no clocks in jail, and the florescent lights are on all night long—I heard the familiar chirping of English sparrows and the liquid notes of a cardinal. And there seemed to be another bird too—one who sang a burbling tune. Not a robin—wren? The buzzing, banging, clanking of jail and the growled announcements of guards on their two-way radios—which also go on all night—drowned it out. But the world, I knew, was out there somewhere.

The best way to deal with jail is to exude patience, and wrap it around a core of resolve and surrender. According to New York state law, all inmates upon arrival are isolated from the general population until they are tested for tuberculosis and that test comes back negative. Typically, that takes three days. Isolation means you are locked inside your cell with no access to the phone (the phone for cell block D happens to be located, tantalizingly, four feet from my bars—just out of reach); no access to books (the two books I have in my cell, lent to me by an empathetic inmate, are the Bible and Nora Roberts’ Carolina Moon, which is a 470 page paperback whose opening sentence is, “She woke in the body of a dead friend.”); and, of course, no access to wi fi, cell phones, e-mail or the internet.

I am writing with a borrowed pencil on the back of the “Chemung County Inmate Request Form,” which is a half sheet of paper. I am writing small and revising in my head. (Forgive the paragraphing—I’m trying to save space.)

Yesterday, I was told that no medical personnel were available to administer my TB test. When I was called down to the nurse this morning, she asked why I didn’t have my TB test yesterday. Of course, she was available yesterday. The resulting delay means that I will join the prison population and be released from 24 hour lock-down on Monday, rather than Sunday.

Frustration will be counter-productive and place me closer to despair.

Let-it-go surrender, ironically, keeps me in touch with my resolve.

So, Monday, which is Earth Day, I will emerge from my cell and join the ecosystem of the Chemung County jail, where the women's voices are loud and defiant. Stingray, (not her actual nickname) broke a tooth yesterday. When she showed it to officer Murphy's Law (that's his actual nickname) and said, "the other half is in my cell," Murphy's Law replied, "So, you think the tooth fairy's going to come?" And then he left.

But she stood at the iron door and called for pain meds, over and over in a voice that I use for rally speeches. Full oration. Projecting to the rafters.

Stingray is six months pregnant.

She got her pain meds.

Stingray is my inspiration. How can I use my time here—separated from the whole human race by the layers of steel and concrete—to speak loudly and defiantly about the business plans of a company called Inergy that seeks to turn my Finger Lakes home into a transportation and storage hub for fossil fuel gases? It is wrong to compress and bury explosive gases in salt caverns beside and beneath a lake—Seneca—that serves as a source of drinking water for 100,000 people. It is wrong to construct a flare stack on the banks of this lake, which will contribute hazardous air pollutants, including death-dealing ozone, into the air. It is wrong for DEC and EPA and FERC to turn a blind eye to a company that has, for the last 12 exceeded its permitted discharge of chemicals into this lake. It is wrong for a company to claim that basic geological knowledge about the bedrock itself, is a proprietary trade secret and hide it from the public and from the scientific community. It is wrong to deepen our dependency on fossil fuels in a time of climate emergency.

I could express these ideas more eloquently if there were coffee in jail. There is not.

I was lead to cell #1 in block D of the Chemung County jail by three things. One is the decision of Inergy to industrialize the Finger Lakes region where I live and, in so doing, aid and abet the fracking industry by erecting a massive

storage depot near the birthplace of my son. I consider this an act of desecration. That's what biologists call the proximate cause of my decision to commit an act of trespass by blockading the Inergy's compressor station driveway.

The ultimate cause is a commentary published last fall in the journal that all biologists read—Nature—by Jeremy Grantham, who is not a scientist, but an economist. (www.nature.com/uidfinder/10.1038/491303a) He noted that all the projections for climate change—even the worst case scenarios—were being overtaken by real-life data. In other words, our climate situation is worse than we thought—even when we assumed the worst. Mr. Grantham then exhorted scientists who have this knowledge to be bold—noting that no one is paying attention to this data: “Be persuasive, be bold, be arrested (if necessary).”

So, here I am, ringing the alarm bell from my isolation cell on Earth Day. May my voice be as un-ignorable as Stingray's.

The third reason is this one: seven years ago, when my son was four years old, he asked to be a polar bear for Halloween, and so I went to work sewing him a costume from a chenille bedspread. It was with the knowledge that the costume would almost certainly outlast the species. Out on the street that night—holding a plastic pumpkin with KitKat bars—I saw many species heading towards extinction; children dressed as frogs, bees, monarch butterflies, and the icon of Halloween itself—the little brown bat.

The kinship that children feel for animals and their ongoing disappearance from us literally brought me to my knees that night, on a sidewalk in my own village. It was love that got me back up. It was love that brought me to this jail cell.

My children need a world with pollinators and plankton stocks and a stable climate. They need lake shores that do not have explosive hydrocarbon gases buried underneath.

The fossil fuel party must come to an end. I am shouting at an iron door. Can you hear me now?

