

Skot! Steppenwolf's letter opens up an area of needed discussion: the Shanti Sena Circle. Skot! does not use the term "Shanti Sena" as such, referring to the people serving in this position (the position of Family Peace Keepers) as "Family Elders."

I would like to begin my discussion by making a distinction between "elders" and Shanti Sena folks.

There is no clear definition of what constitutes a Rainbow "elder." Other terms used to refer to this undefined phenomenon are "high hippie elder," or simply "high holy." Certainly there are an increasing number of people who have been around for awhile, who are aging fast, are indisputably hippies, and are often high in one way or another. About the holy part I have no comment.

It has fascinated me through the years to watch who gets christened with the name of "elder."

Some of the people so designated absolutely deserve the respect implied in the term used by admiring (or sometimes critical) novice Gatherers.

In my opinion, the true elders of our Rainbow Nation are the people who have put in long hours in service to the Family over the years: parking cars; digging shitters; doing public relations work with the local town folks, the media, and the Forest Service; running kitchens and supply; putting together and mailing the "Howdy Folks"; spending weeks scouting and in early Seed Camp with little food (and, yes, with no alcohol); fighting our legal battles to defend our constitutionally guaranteed right of peaceable assembly; caretaking the mentally ill, the emotionally distressed, the bummed-out trippers; or dealing with the violent and predatory few who come to disrupt the peace and sanctity of our Home.

These folks have achieved a degree of wisdom, compassion, and experience in doing whatever needs to be done. They receive no pay, get no kick-backs from the Magic Hat. Some of them are not known by name to the mass of people who come to the Gatherings. Many rarely appear at the main Council Circle. They are simply there when they are needed. Over the years, they have learned who they can turn to in a crisis, who they can talk to when they need support, who can be trusted to take responsibility for a given project.

They are not perfect, being human like the rest of us. They do not know everything. They sometimes make mistakes. They often get irritable, or don't give you as much time as you'd like to have with them. They can be slow to accept strangers into their circle.

But they care deeply about the Family. They work hard on their own spiritual and moral development. They aspire to live with integrity: to be true to themselves and at the same time to speak and to act with the well-being of the community foremost in their minds and hearts.

They are generally given respect because they have earned it. People listen to them because they have something to offer, character and experience that we all can learn from.

They've been around for awhile. They look just like everyone else. They don't run the Gatherings.

There are also folks who have reputations as being "elders" who have never done anything but hold forth endlessly in the Council circle. Folks who will tell you how wonderful they are, how responsible they have been for running (or creating) the Gatherings. People who seem to know a lot of Rainbow history, but who you never see hauling water, or staying up all night doing front gate duty. They know all the "important" people and drop a lot of names (sometimes mispronouncing them). Some of these folks don't have the sense God/dess gave to an ant.

Oh, and don't forget the people who somehow seem to be superior beings because they are "medicine men." They know all the spiritually correct phrases. They wave lots of eagle feathers around. They own pounds and pounds of crystals. They tell you what you should and shouldn't do. They are quick to judge you if you do not adhere to their version of the Rainbow "party line." Some of these folks don't have the moral fiber God/dess gave to a hyena.

Elders? I think not. Wannabe's, perhaps. But they really don't get it. They want the name without putting in the service. And they fool a lot of people.

Sometimes they rip off the Magic Hat or scam on unsuspecting folk, taking advantage of their innocence. They have been known to manipulate the council process for their own personal (and usually hidden) agendas. They talk a lot, but they generally don't listen.

No wonder there is such controversy surrounding the principle of "eldership." It gets pretty confusing, when you don't know who you can trust to be honest about lending a guiding hand.

In the last few years there has been an equal amount of controversy around some of the actions and decisions on the part of members of the Shanti Sena circle. Sometimes those who are considered "elders," rightly or wrongly, are also part of the Shanti Sena Family, and vice versa. The two are not necessarily synonymous.

Oh, boy! More confusion. Well, let's stop trying to figure out which is which and who is who, and in true Rainbow fashion simply learn to live with the inspired chaos inherent in a phenomenon that exists as a result of pure volunteer energy.

Instead, let's look at some of the issues many people have tried to address over the last few years when they disagree with how Shanti Sena concerns are handled.

Skot!'s letter brings up several very legitimate points that need serious discussion. Obviously, he is a little confused between Shanti Sena actions and undue influence by "elders" in the family, but so are many people.

In addition, a lot of furor occurs when *any* upsetting incident happens to disturb the peace and harmony of the Gathering or any of its individual participants. As in life, there is not necessarily one right answer to a problem, nor is everybody going to be happy with every solution offered by the Family Peace Keepers.

I've heard some strange labels over the years that supposedly describe some of my brothers and sisters involved in Shanti Sena service, words that I am surprised to hear in a family devoted to peaceful respect and appreciation for the variety among us. Words like "fascist" and "elitist." I am distressed to hear that there is a feeling of division among the folks who use these words, because I have been doing Shanti Sena for many years.

I've heard people say, "Of course, we're all Shanti Sena, everybody with a belly-button is Shanti Sena, but the focalizers for the *Inner Circle* are the ones we're talking about. They are the ones who we don't agree with."

Now wait a minute, here. How did a line get drawn across our circle, dividing our family into "us" and "them"? And who drew it? Let's look at this closely and see if the line between the "us" and the "them" is real, or whether it is an illusion brought about through misunderstanding and a lack of communication. My experience has been that the Shanti Sena "Clan" (or "focalizers," or "elders," or what have you) is an open circle, not an inner circle.

Let's try to get some perspective on who and what Shanti Sena is.

It is not a hippie police force. It is most certainly *not* a vigilante group. And it's not a bunch of "Old Boy" Rainbows trying to hold onto power and run everything. Shanti Sena is a collective, loving dance that includes aspects of "Karma Patrol," crisis intervention, peacekeeping, Security, public relations, information and rumor control, city planning, traffic management, public health and safety and, of course, Hug and Kiss Patrol.

I can't give you the history of Shanti Sena, or how it developed, or even where the idea came from. By the time I discovered Rainbow, Gatherings had already been happening for several years. But in the time since I found out where "Home" really is, I have developed a pretty good idea of how it all works. So how does somebody become a "card-carrying" member of the fabled "inner circle"?

Like the shoe commercial says, "Just do it."

The Shanti Sena family did not spring full-blown from the head of a high hippie elder. It always has been, and is now, a dynamic process, with ever-changing faces and ever-growing complexities.

I didn't come to my first Gathering (Arizona in 1979) and say to myself, "I'm hot shit. I think I'll become a hippie cop and push people around." I came right out of the city, and the last time I had spent the night under the stars was in Girl Scout camp. I hadn't even been a hippie (whatever that is) for very long. Until three years before, I had been a middle class housewife raising my kids in a small redneck town in California. As you might imagine, I had a lot to learn.

Even before my first Gathering, I was completely turned on by the whole concept of Shanti Sena, which translates from the Sanskrit language as "Peace Keepers" or "Peace Center." I liked the idea that people could take responsibility for the well-being

of their own community. It fit into my belief that the only way we can ever have a truly free and peaceful world is through the commitment of individuals to make the immediate space around them safe, healthy, loving, and conscious.

Through the years, I have spent countless hours trying to do my part to make this happen: cooperating to find lost kids (or parents); being a buffer at the front gate to keep the impact from hostile law enforcement officers from affecting people coming Home; counselling with others to make the best possible decisions about how to deal with incidents of violence or accidental death; doing legal liaison and public relations; mediating with people who might otherwise knock each other's heads off; staying up all night with mentally ill folks or acid trippers who are freaking out; listening to people who are having a hard time and needing a friendly ear; watching people who are known to be a problem, and trying to keep their behavior under control.

So far, I have not been hit or otherwise injured "in the line of duty." Some people have been. Nor have I gotten burned out and stopped doing Shanti Sena service. Some people have. I still love my Family above all else on this planet, and continue to come to Gatherings. Some people don't.

I have spent hours, and even entire days, arguing or angry or disgusted or in tears over some of the situations that come our way.

It's hard to remain idealistic, impossible to hold on to the innocent belief that all people are basically good, when you deal with professional child predators, violent assholes who show absolutely no remorse, and calculating thieves who come to Gatherings with the sole intention of taking advantage of our trusting and peaceful ways.

Fortunately, most Shanti Sena efforts do not deal with such hard core cases. Most often, we are dealing with more mundane problems, such as how to keep twenty thousand people from running us over at the front gate so they can park right smack dab in the middle of Main Meadow. Or how to get someone to understand why they really don't want to build their own personal campfire right under a tree, with no shovel, no water available nearby, and no rock-lined fire pit.

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Usually, simple communication works, and people come to agree that they don't have a leg to stand on in insisting that they be an exception to the few commonsense guidelines they are asked to observe.

Yes, the principle of "no exceptions" has occasionally been violated, but by and large, even people who are often accused of "taking privilege" respect clear and sensible self-limitation on their right to do as they please. Anarchy at its best.

Sometimes, communication fails. I've been incredibly frustrated at times by the obstructiveness of people who do not understand the complexities of a certain situation, and who do not appear to *want* to understand. There are hundreds (well, okay, maybe dozens, but sometimes it feels like *thousands*) of people whose sole objective in coming to Gatherings seems to be to

confront and obstruct others in working together for what should be obvious as being in the best interests of the Whole.

With no badges, no courts, and no jails, how do we achieve reasonable cooperation? That's when creative problem solving or guerilla action is called for.

Thus, for example, the construction of pole or rock gates that are only opened (in theory) for those with compelling need, to drive past the last "no vehicle" point. If the folks acting as gatekeepers get grumpy and growly on occasion, please forgive them. It is a frustrating job. On at least one occasion, I have resorted to lying down in front of vehicles to make sure that they did not run a gate. I've seen others lose patience after failing to achieve understanding, get a gang of hippies together, and drench an unsafe fire pit with twenty gallons of water.

Rude? Maybe. Elitist? I don't think so. Effective? Undeniably so.

And how have we *decided* to do these things? Simple. The people who are taking responsibility for the gates, the people who pass by the unsafe fires, or whatever, just *do* it. Who else can? If it's you doing it, then it's you making the decisions about it. If your decisions or judgement have been poor in a specific instance, someone who has some sense can usually communicate the need for a change, and you, being also a sensible person, will voluntarily agree a change is necessary, and make it so.

And if you don't see the need for keeping cars out of the Gathering site, or for fire safety, you probably shouldn't be trying to be a very active Shanti Sena person. Go wash dishes, or dance in the sunshine, but stay out of making policy decisions about the health and safety of the Gathering. You obviously have no sense, or you are brain-dead, or you want to be an exception yourself.

And if you can't or don't want to take responsibility for the health and safety of the Gathering, but question the way others are doing it, become informed, make suggestions for improvement— but, please, don't be obstructive.

Note that we're talking about the light-weight Shanti Sena issues here, not the biggies.

So how do you handle the really serious offenses, ones in which someone gets hurt, or could have been hurt?

My personal opinion is that anyone— ANYONE— who perpetrates an act of violence against another person at the Gathering should be removed *immediately*. Well, almost immediately. Two problems come up which must be dealt with each time an incident occurs.

The first one is that we are not a court of law. We have no business to put ourselves in a position of judgement, of pretending to determine "guilt" or "innocence." Nor should we fall into the error of believing that it is our place to "punish" an offender.

Our job is simply to determine if someone was injured, who did it, and whether the offender is likely to represent a continuing danger to the community. Then we take whatever steps are

necessary and appropriate to ensure that the safety of the whole is protected.

The second problem is that there are many well-meaning, naive folks in the family who operate on the assumption that everyone is basically good. They will block any suggestion that people be removed from the Gathering because they believe that people who hurt other people just need healing and that the Gathering is the place this healing can happen.

There was a time that I myself believed that to be true. After many years of Gathering, however, and after having worked in "the real world" as a rape crisis counselor and a crisis intervention counselor, I have changed my mind. There are people who, as Skot! points out, do not wish to be healed. There are also people, I believe, whose time to be healed has not yet come; and perhaps even people for whom healing is not *possible* in their current incarnation.

In any case, we need to bear in mind that there are people who come to our Gatherings who are not of good will and intention, and they present a real threat to the safety of our family. Every culture on Earth has recognized in some form the need to protect the small, weak, or peaceful folk from the predatory. Little as we like the reality, this is exactly why laws and police forces are originally formed. Obviously, abuses have occurred throughout time around the need for such laws and the enforcement thereof; but the need of them is real.

It's quite clear that some people, for example child molesters and rapists, should be taken out of the Gathering and turned over to the local authorities. Why? Because if we simply take a dangerous offender out of the Gathering, we put him or her on the streets of the local community. It is morally, socially, and ethically irresponsible to do so. In addition, there are times that the victim exercises his or her right to press charges. In cases of assault, sexual or otherwise, I believe it is the Family's responsibility to support whatever the victims see fit to do in order to protect their safety and re-empower themselves.

What about the others, those who probably don't represent a threat to the outside community, but have certainly assaulted someone at the Gathering and present a clear and continuing danger if they remain?

Even for those people who have committed an offense, and for whom healing is possible, I don't believe that being "put on probation" is going to do it. Healing from angry, hateful, violent, or explosive behavior can take a long, long time, as well as an intense focus of energy from many other people to keep the rest of the family safe while the healing work is being done. Impractical at best, and in the context of the Gathering, in my opinion, almost always impossible.

Given that healing of some people *is* a possibility, what is the best way to make sure it happens? Given also the possibility that some offenders— perhaps even those such as the one Skot! is discussing— truly love the Family and really are looking for healing and love, what is the best approach to make sure it happens without our brothers and sisters being physically, verbally, or emotionally abused in the process?

I say, 86 'em. Tell them why. And tell them they can take a year to think about it, then come back and try again. If they are willing to abide by certain agreements appropriate to the original circumstances, they can stay. Otherwise, they keep getting kicked out until they get it and are safe to be around peaceful people.

There is in current, mainstream healing methodology a term called "enabling." I believe that allowing an offender to remain in the Gathering sends the wrong message. By being patient, we are enabling him to stay stuck in his behavior. If he is, indeed, still capable of being helped, and he does truly love the Family, depriving him of it for a year might be the best wake-up call we could give him, and therefore also the most loving act towards him.

So this is what Shanti Sena Councils are for: to deal with the worst-case scenarios, including the very difficult business of protecting the People from injury by a *known* offender. I have participated in many such councils through the years, and I hate the need for them. They are always painful, and I have not always liked their outcomes. But I do recognize the need for them, so I participate; I want my voice heard.

Of late our Shanti Sena councils have not been working well, so I would like to propose a standardized way of dealing with such incidents. I believe that the following process would answer most of the problems that we have been having recently, and about which Skot! and many others are justifiably concerned. It would also give everyone who really wants to be involved a chance to fully participate in the decision-making process, and hopefully avoid the feeling of powerlessness that many seemed to have felt over the Om I God Hot Springs incident.

First of all, I don't think the Main Council Circle is the place to make these decisions. I would like to see regular Shanti Sena Councils held to discuss general policies and specific problems. They should take place at the Cooperations/-Communications/-Coordinations Area *every day*, as well as at need when a specific situation arises; and be announced at Main Circle so interested people have the opportunity to participate. While everyone is welcome to add their input, the purpose is focussed, and meetings are facilitated if necessary. A formal consensus process should be used in making decisions; a decision-making council might look something like this:

- 1) The problem is stated. Who was involved, where and when, who else was present, and what happened?
- 2) Discussion is held. This should be limited to discussing options of what action should be taken: including historical guidelines, as well as considering what the injured party wants/needs. A time limit for each person might be appropriate (two minutes, for example).
- 3) A proposal is stated. Proposals should be specific, clear, and concise: what is the proper action to be taken, as well as exactly who is going to take responsibility for carrying it out.
- 4) Questions and objections are presented.

- 5) Revised or alternative proposals are stated.
- 6) When it seems that a specific proposal might fly, it is re-stated; the group is asked if everyone there can live with it.
- 7) If everyone can live with, make it so.
- 8) If not everyone can live with it, 4, 5 & 6 are repeated until there is a resolution that everyone can live with.

*(Please note that the phrase "I block" is not used at any time in this process; instead, a specific proposal is worked out and consensus is reached by determining if everyone can "live with it.")*

Let's work together on the issues that concern us all. We can communicate and cooperative in a much more effective way than we have been; it just takes the willingness to agree on a little more structure than we've had up 'til now. We can have all the spontaneity and chaos that our little outlaw hearts desire in almost all other phases of the Gathering. But in this one area, I don't think we have that luxury any more. Let's grow up and deal with it! And thank you, Skot!, for bringing it so clearly into the forefront of discussion.

