

Beating Swords into Plowshares

The most daring disarmament action I ever undertook landed me in jail for eight months. On December 7, 1993, Pearl Harbor Day, three friends and I walked onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina in the middle of full-scale war games. We hammered on an F15-E nuclear-capable fighter-bomber, enacting the prophet Isaiah's vision to "beat swords into plowshares" and "study war no more."

It was at once the most terrifying and most grace-filled experience of my life.

We expected to walk through the woods and fields to the tarmac without seeing anyone, but we found ourselves in the middle of thousands of soldiers preparing for war, willing to unleash a firestorm of destruction on other human beings, if necessary, even nuclear weapons. I was so scared. We had not only trespassed on government property, we had passed large signs which read, "Soldiers are under orders to shoot and kill any trespassers on sight."

As I read those signs and thought of the risks we faced, I also thought of the many people I had known who had died from war in El Salvador. I thought of the millions--billions?--who have died from war throughout history. I recalled the great saints and peacemakers who risked their lives for peace. And I thought of Jesus, who died telling us to "put away the sword" and "love your enemies." With every step, I

took a deep breath and prayed that God would be with us and bless us and give me the strength to do God's will.

In an act of faith, filled with the presence of the God of peace, we decided to keep walking forward. When we eventually reached the tarmac, we found one fighter bomber that had no soldiers around it, and started hammering on it. I hammered twice, not even putting a dent or chipping the paint of the aircraft, but praying all the time for an end to war and the abolition of all nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

Within seconds, we were immediately surrounded by soldiers carrying machine guns. "We are unarmed, nonviolent people," I said on our behalf. "We mean you no harm. We're just here to dismantle this weapon of death."

This was not well received.

For a moment, the soldiers stared at us in disbelief with their guns continually aimed. Since they were in the midst of war games, they were caught off guard. Then one of them started shouting, "This is the real world! This is the real world!" to convince the others that the games were over, that we had disrupted their activity. Another yelled at us, "You can't do that! Put your hands up! Face down on the ground!" We were searched, pushed around, and arrested. With our faces in the ground, we joined hands, thanked God for the action, and prayed the Lord's prayer. Then we were handcuffed and driven to separate holding areas. Hours later, we were

taken to jail, arraigned and charged with two felony counts: destruction of government property and conspiracy to commit a felony.

With the blow of a hammer, my life was changed forever. I faced twenty years in prison, and I learned the bitter reality of life behind bars. I also learned new spiritual, biblical lessons about the struggle for peace, the paschal mystery, and the potentially explosive depths of nonviolence.

Talk about disturbing the peace! We had disrupted air force war games. We had walked through the “Shoot to Kill” zone in our trespassing. We had symbolically damaged nuclear fighter bombers. But we had also disturbed the peace of our own lives, friendships, family relationships, jobs, and future plans. By risking disarmament, we risked our own lives. Everything was now up for grabs.

I’ll never forget watching as one officer started yelling directly into the face of my friend Philip Berrigan, the long-time peace activist, saying, “Did you put a bomb in that plane?” Phil looked back quizzically, and asked, “What do you think we are, crazy?”

At one point around four o’clock in the morning, as we walked through the massive base, we rested on a bluff overlooking the tarmac and saw the entire base spread out in front of us, like three airports with thousands of military personnel milling about. With a shock we saw with our own eyes the scary picture of reality: while the nation sleeps, the war machine barrels on in the middle of the night, full

steam ahead, preparing for the next great war. The 75 F15-E fighters on the tarmac were on alert to bomb Bosnia. In fact, the F15-E was the weapon of choice throughout the Gulf War. It was used on Ash Wednesday, February 12, 1991, to drop two smart bombs on the Ameriyah shelter, killing over 1,200 women and children in Baghdad. Toward the end of that war, it was used to kill tens of thousands of Iraqis fleeing from Kuwait to Basrah on what came to be known as the “highway of death.” Each fighter can also carry nuclear weapons. At the time, they were the cutting edge of U.S. military technology, the force of destruction itself. If we are to ever fully worship the God of peace and learn to live in peace, one day all of these weapons will have to be disarmed.

The world is brimming with such weapons. Over 5,000 nuclear weapons remain poised today on hair-trigger alert, ready to fire on a minute’s notice. Over 36,000 nuclear warheads fill arsenals around the world, with combined explosive yield of 650,000 Hiroshima bombs. (Over 30 U.S. nuclear weapons have been involved in accidents.) Meanwhile, the trillions of dollars spent on preparations for mass destruction mean trillions of dollars taken from starving children, the homeless, better schools, jobs, cleaning up the environment, and healthcare for all.

Over 130 million people died from war during the last century. Yet we still refuse to accept its futility. Civilians, mainly children and the elderly, die needlessly by the hundreds of thousands each year. Hundreds of thousands of people continued to

be maimed by landmines, long after the wars are over. Radiation and other destructive war chemicals poison the land and water deforming newborn children and killing thousands for years to come. And still, we wage war.

If we are going to end war, dismantle our weapons, learn to live together nonviolently, we are going to have to change the direction of the world. We are going to have to renounce the intent to wage war and create a non-military society. Such change will be cost everything--everything except our lives and the lives of generations to come. Every one of us will have to participate in this socio-political-economic conversion.

For me, the cost of disarmament came in the long hard months we spent in jail after our action. For eight and a half months, from December 7th, 1993 until July 22nd, 1994, I sat in a tiny cell in the Edenton County Jail with my friends Philip Berrigan and Bruce Friedrich, contemplating our disarmament action and the God of peace who called us to enact it. During our long days in jail, we never went outdoors, never had a walk, and never had any privacy. Our cell contained an open steel toilet and cold metal bunk beds. The cell next to ours was identical. The connecting room between our cells had a TV and a narrow metal table that lined a narrow wall. The food trays were shoved at us through a slot in the door. Our fourth group member, Lynn Fredriksson, sat in the crowded women's cell in the Elizabeth City Jail.

Though Thoreau, Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, and others have advocated

civil disobedience and imprisonment as the way to social change, there is nothing romantic about jail. Prison is a terrible, terrifying experience. Today, over two million people suffer in jail and prisons, and the numbers will rise as we continue to build new prisons instead of schools, homes and employment opportunities.

The whole prison system is meant to oppress people, and it does just that. There is no way it can “rehabilitate” people or make them whole again. I do not have the words to describe what it is like to be locked in a tiny room for so long, to be treated so inhumanly, to be faced with such state-sanctioned violence. There is no way that this current system will ever make people nonviolent. We found ourselves struggling to maintain our patience and nonviolence, even after a lifetime of trying to be nonviolent. Our fellow prisoners did not have our training or background, and quickly succumbed to provocation, anger, despair, hate and violence. This was only natural since we were all treated as animals, not human beings.

I remember one night early on in one of the first jails we were in, when our group was separated and I was feeling all alone in a crowded cell with eight other angry prisoners wearing orange jump suits, when a fight broke out in the cell next to ours, and somehow, they managed to steal a broom and nearly kill one another. One person was taken away unconscious, and the floor was covered in blood. I was terrified, and turned to the psalms, where I discovered many prayers from prison to the God of prisoners. Slowly, regularly, hourly, through prayer and scripture, I was able to

move from terror to trust, from darkness to light, from fear to faith.

In the Edenton County Jail, where we were locked in our tiny cell for seven months, the claustrophobia began to eat away at me. The monotony and confinement made time stand still. There were moments of deep depression. Though I was supported by many people, still many other friends and family members denounced me and my action, and such rejection was hard to take, especially sitting all alone on my jail bunk bed. Each day, each hour, indeed, every ten minutes or so, I struggled to reject despair and cling to hope and to the God of peace. I kept reminding myself to reject the hate and indifference of the world, to choose again the transforming spirit of love for humanity that pushed me to undertake our action in the first place.

In the midst of this deprivation and degradation, we were granted a rare kind of peace. Though our action upset many people and often seemed to bear no positive result, its spiritual roots grew and bore fruit in a deep sense of personal meaning and spiritual purpose. Each day I sat on my bunk bed to center myself in the moment. Through mindfulness and prayer, I survived the daily drudgery, and could even enter the beauty of the present moment. Never before have I felt so claustrophobic, and yet never before have I been so centered in God.

My friends and I spent hours every day studying the scriptures, sharing Eucharist, writing letters and talking with one another and with other inmates. We shared our lives, our hopes, our pain, and our faith. But there was no place to go. We

sat there in peace, as best we could. Throughout the day I would try to return to that quiet center. In that stillness, helplessness, powerlessness, we surrendered our hearts to God and our lives to God's own peace.

During that time, my spirit was sorely tested. I was confronted by everything--my many limitations and powerlessness, my inner violence and desire for nonviolence, faith and faithlessness, hope and despair, sorrow and joy, loneliness and community. (I recorded the whole experience in a diary that was later published as a book entitled, *Peace Behind Bars: A Journal from Jail*.) With the help of my friends, I endured the ordeal. And my conviction and hope for disarmament deepened. I believed even more that we were right to hammer on those fighter planes; that the God of peace calls the nations of the world to disarm now and renounce war forever; that in fact more and more people will have to engage in such nonviolent civil disobedience if we are going to have a future of peace.

Our government will never dismantle its nuclear arsenal unless ordinary people of faith like us demand it. The government can only promise future bloodshed and the death of millions with its weapons of mass destruction. But we hold God's promise of peace if we put God's way of nonviolence into practice. And so, we must all insist that war, nuclear weapons and systemic injustice be abolished. We must begin the process in faith, knowing that God will use our small actions, multiply their impact, and let them bear the good fruit of peace for future generations.

My friends and I were tried, found in contempt, re-tried, and finally, in four separate trials, found guilty, seven months after the initial action. Eventually, I was sentenced to several months under house arrest and three years of supervised release, and set free from jail.

What an ordeal to stand on trial for enacting nuclear disarmament! The government and military authorities took every step they could to insure that the jury would not agree with us, or hear the truth about these weapons of destruction, or the many international laws which outlaw them and command ordinary citizens to prevent preparations for genocide.

At the first trial, we were issued an *in limine* motion by the judge and the federal prosecutor, working together, stating that we were not allowed to discuss any of the following items: the U.S. military; nuclear weapons; international law; the Nuremberg Principles; the Necessity Defense; the U.S. government; the crimes committed by the military at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and other U.S. military bases; war crimes committed by the U.S. government; U.S. government foreign or domestic policies; the Bible, theology, philosophy, divine law or natural law; and God. "Other than that, you can say whatever you like!" we were told.

We stood up, objected to this silencing of truth, protested the charade of the court which so clearly defended the legality of war and U.S. weapons of mass destruction, and were immediately found in contempt of court. The judge declared a

mistrial, and we were sent back to jail. The whole episode was unnerving, if not terrifying, and yet, as we reread Jesus' courtroom experiences before Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate and recalled other trials by prisoners of conscience throughout history who spoke the unpalatable truth, we were heartened and filled with a grace that we had not experienced before.

At one point during our four separate trials, I was called to testify on behalf of Philip Berrigan, my friend and "partner in crime" who has been protesting war all his life. I sat on the witness stand, right next to the judge who seemed to hate us, and the jury who seemed to think we were crazy, and looked out at the packed courtroom. "What did you see Philip Berrigan doing on December 7th, 1993?" Ramsey Clark, the former U.S. Attorney General asked me on Phil's behalf.

"I saw Philip Berrigan standing up for life and peace and humanity," I responded spontaneously. "I saw him trying to tell the country that the only way out of our enormous problems is through immediate and total disarmament, so that those billions of dollars spent on war and these immoral weapons could be spent on real human needs. I saw Philip Berrigan trying to stop the mass murder of war, to call us back to the sanity of peace, to uphold God's command that we beat swords into plowshares."

This was not well received. When the prosecutor got his chance to cross examine me, he shouted angrily, "Who drove the car?" He wanted to know who drove

us to the military base, to catch others who tried to help us, and to charge them also with conspiracy to commit a felony. "I take responsibility for my own actions," I replied, refusing to give out any further information. "I accept the consequences for what I did, and will not incriminate anyone else."

The judge dismissed the jury, and told me in no uncertain terms, that I was under oath, that I had to answer the question, and that if I did not, I would face additional years in prison for contempt of court.

Alright, I said. I will announce who drove us to the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

The jury was called back in, the crowd sat on the edge of their seats, the judge appeared delighted, and prosecutor triumphantly asked his question again.

"Thank you for insisting that I tell the truth," I answered again spontaneously. "You have helped me by pushing me to state the truth about our action for nuclear disarmament on December 7th, 1993. We've spoken a lot about truth and the need to speak the truth in court, and I want to speak the truth. And so, in all truth, we were driven to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base--by the Holy Spirit!"

The courtroom exploded. The judge yelled at me and pounded his gavel, the prosecutor shouted at me, and the spectators applauded. I was hauled out of the courtroom and my testimony stricken from the record.

Yet I felt strangely liberated. Who in their right mind would walk through a

“Shoot to Kill” zone, hammer on a nuclear-capable fighter bomber, accept the consequences for such dramatic action, endure prison, and still try to be nonviolent, contemplative, hopeful and loving? Such nonviolent undertakings or experiments in truth as Gandhi called them, could only come about through a life of prayer and faith. “It’s not easy to walk onto a military base and call for disarmament,” I said as they hauled me out in handcuffs. “Our action could only have been an act of God!” Instead of the terror I had known, I now felt exhilarated! I had spoken the truth! God wants us to disarm.

Yes, the truth shall set us free.

In the end, at my sentencing, I was allowed to make a final statement before the judge. “These weapons of mass destruction,” I said, “like the cremation and gas chambers in Nazi Germany, are a moral and spiritual disaster. They not only have the potential to destroy the planet, but their very existence already implies our spiritual destruction. They are our modern idols. Instead of worshiping the God of peace and life, we worship these idols of war and death. The choice before us, then, is to carry on silently, passively, in complicity with our culture’s preparations for mass murder, like the dutiful Christian citizens of Nazi Germany, running their gas chambers and cremation ovens, or to speak up, break the silence, dismantle these weapons of death, call for a culture of and serve the God of life.”

Though our action was frightening and jail was often horrible, our faith in the

living God deepened, as did our trust in the truth of nonviolence. Those were difficult days, but in retrospect, I see how that fiery ordeal purified us and led us deeper into the Holy Spirit of peace. Our prayers for peace bore fruit not only in our symbolic action, not only in the subsequent public debate throughout North Carolina and across the country, but in the grace we experienced in prison and the strength we were given to endure those days. I hope that experience of prayer, faith and nonviolent action will continue to push me beyond the culture's limitations and the nation's boundaries to horizon of nonviolent love, to the God of peace.

When my co-defendants and I finally emerged from behind bars, we realized we were already free. Despite the best efforts of the North Carolina courts and the Bureau of Prisons, we emerged totally unrehabilitated to the ways of the culture. We came out "worse than ever," ready for more, eager to give our lives for the disarmament of the world. We were filled with the Spirit of God, and felt a great joy and peace that the world could never give.

I spent over ten years preparing for that action, preparing for prison, preparing to risk my life in nonviolent civil disobedience for the sake of disarmament. I know that we are only beginning to build a worldwide movement for nuclear disarmament and the abolition of war, and that great sacrifices will have to be made by thousands of people around the world in the decades to come if we are to realize the dream of peace. And though it was more than difficult, like a deep sea plunge into the depths of

despair and darkness, it was the greatest act of faith, hope, and love that I have yet experienced. I felt God's presence in our action, and God's abiding presence in the hellhole of my jail cell. Indeed, when I entered my jail cell, it seemed like Jesus was sitting there waiting for me, saying, "Where have you been? Come on in and join me."

I realized that everything written about imprisonment for the sake of conscience and truth, from St. Paul and St. Edmund Campion to Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. is true: God comes close to prisoners and peacemakers. If I ever feel the Spirit of Peace pushing me again in that direction, I hope I will have the courage to take up the challenge, to walk that long road, to accept that cross, because I know that it opens the door to resurrection and the gift of peace.

Since 1980, there have been over sixty such "Plowshares" actions. And though not everyone is called to enter a military base to hammer on weapons of mass destruction, everyone can work for nuclear disarmament and the abolition of war.

Whether we speak out, join a peace organization, fast and pray, vigil, preach, write, lobby, organize or demonstrate for an end to war, we can all do something for peace. We can all engage in nonviolent, public action for the sake of humanity. We can all take another step toward a world without weapons and war. We can all allow God to disarm our hearts so that God's dream of a disarmed world will come true.

In the nineteenth century, when slavery was perfectly legal, many brave people risked their lives for the impossible dream of its abolition. At that time, Henry David

Thoreau wrote: “If one thousand, one hundred, or if ten people whom I could name--if ten honest people only--aye, if one honest person in this state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership and be locked up in the county jail, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once done well is done forever.”

Likewise, our prayerful, committed actions for nuclear disarmament and the abolition of war spell the end of all weapons of mass destruction and war itself. We are witnessing the beginning of the end of war. Though these times are difficult and deadly, they are exciting and hopeful because a new time is being born.

However we put our hope for peace into practice, we all must do something. Each one of us must undertake the climb to God’s mountain of peace, where we will hear God’s commandment that the nations disarm, and decide to put that vision into practice and study war no more, as the prophet Isaiah foresaw long ago. His words still ring true. They show us the path to peace. They invite us to the life of peace.

Come, let us climb the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may instruct us in God’s ways, and we may walk in God’s paths. For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of God from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation

shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.

(Isaiah 2:3-4)

(From *Living Peace*)