

LET THE WITNESS STAND



"Woman with Blue Shawl" by Kathe Kollwitz.

THE JAILED CHRISTIAN resister responded cautiously to my letter requesting that we begin a kind of written dialogue about her "witness" — an act of civil disobedience concerning nuclear weapons. I was

writing a book about war resisters including World War II conscientious objectors, Greenham Common peace camp participants, secular civil disobedients, and, I hoped, religious resisters. "I guess I kind of lean towards 'the anonymous monk of the fourth century' kind of work," she explained in that first letter of November 1983. Would I be willing to do the "anonymous monk" bit and talk only about resistance? I agreed, and our correspondence continued throughout most of the six-month sentence she had received after refusing probation, restitution, fines, and community service.

A year later, she was involved with three other Christians in another action at a missile silo. For this, her fourth action, she was sentenced to pay thousands of dollars in restitution and fines and received a sentence of 23 years in prison with five suspended if she agrees that she will not participate in such actions in the future.

—Holly Metz

Why do you wish to remain anonymous?

I'm a bit leery of any attention paid to individuals in resistance, having seen too much of the cult of personality that develops when the focus is on the person and not on the truth of the witness. I think this is particularly important in Christian resistance. Who we are is totally unimportant. If in our witness we somehow illuminate the truth of Christ's peace, that is more than enough.

The term "resistance" as used by the Christian peace movement is taken from the admonition

This letter-interview came unsolicited in the mail. Nearly as anonymous as the respondent, the interviewer lives in Hoboken, New Jersey.

—Kevin Kelly

of Saint Paul to "do good *and* resist evil." The point is that the doing of good, the "corporeal works of mercy" as the Church knows them (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner), is only one side of the coin. It's a message most needed by modern Christians, most of whom can say, with some justification, that their personal lives are quite "good." Paul reminds us of our dual obligation in the word "resist," and so, the use of the term. I prefer it to "civil disobedience," for civil disobedience is usually seen as negative. "Divine obedience," which is positive, and resistance, which is the active engagement, seem to fit the bill perfectly.

As for the "cult of personality," I think history has shown the danger of leaders. I was reminded of this by a statement that the antinuclear movement needs to bring forth a Mahatma Gandhi or a Martin Luther King. Both of these great men were catapulted into positions of leadership by the charisma of their personalities, and people became attached to them rather than to the truth of the morality, spirituality, and nonviolence they preached. As soon as they were gone (prison and death) the movements they led died, and the people returned to conflict and violence. Gandhi said his followers caused him more anxiety and trouble than his British adversaries, and he died considering himself a failure because he had imparted to others only himself and not the love and nonviolence that could sustain them.

How does one encourage thought, prayer, and action in others without becoming a public figure?

Do what you do and then duck — quickly. The writing and/or speaking one does can be handled in the same manner, especially if done from prison since numbers and blue uniforms are a great equalizer. Resisters are neither saints nor sinners, nor are they to be emulated for their virtue or rejected for their shortcomings; sanctity, in any case, is the province of God and none of our concern. If the emphasis is on the truth of the witness, the answer to the question, "Who was that masked woman?" ought to be, "Who cares?"

All of this is decidedly "un-American," not the way of the prevailing culture with its *People* magazines and celebrity dolls. It takes a certain wariness and an occasional blunt NO. Jesus did it, constantly referring the truth, power and glory back to the Father. We can scarcely do less.

Why go to jail?

1. Going to jail is the inevitable outcome of taking responsibility for one's acts. The maneuvers that can keep one out of jail (deals with the prosecution; accepting fines, restitution, or probation; keeping the case in the courts on endless appeal for the purpose of avoiding punishment rather than continuing the statement of truth)

would not sit well on my conscience.

2. As Thoreau said, when the true criminals (in our case the Reagans, Weinbergers and Joint Chiefs) are running around free, the only honorable place for a decent human being is in the prisons;
3. As a continuation of the witness;
4. As an embrace of the humility and vulnerability of Christ;
5. As a living-out of the fact that unearned suffering is always redemptive;
6. As a further exposing of the Beast;
7. In the mystical sense that great spiritual power is released by the mere presence of good in a place of evil, love amidst hatred;
8. The deliberate placing of one's life among the first victims of the Bomb, society's poor and outcast;
9. As a form of prayer, the modern desert monasticism.

When you plead guilty, aren't you agreeing with the government's interpretation of "criminal intent?"

The dictionary defines crime as "an act committed in violation of the law." My pleading guilty acknowledges that I did, with full intent, violate the law. In doing so, I accept no moral culpability, and so state that it is the *failure* to be guilty of breaking the law that makes one morally culpable. I take this stance because it's their law, not mine, and except for breaking it, I have no desire to be associated with it.

The view has been expressed by different resisters that harsh sentences heighten the contradiction made evident by their situation, such as peace camp participants being imprisoned for failure to "keep the peace."

In general, I'd say it's the *charges* rather than the sentences which heighten the contradiction, e.g., conspiracy and sabotage lodged against non-violent people while international terrorism is labeled justifiable defense. Harsh sentences expose the system for what it is (intent upon its violent madness) and name the resister for what he/she is (a direct threat and challenge to that insanity). A personal quirk, but I prefer the honest, "hanging" hizzoner who does the bidding of his master to the liberal judge who tries to reduce the issue to nothing more than a polite difference of philosophical opinion. Gandhi once said the judge who truly represents the political power structure is duty-bound to punish those who confront that structure within the harshest limits of the law. I agree. Justice does not lie in lenient sentencing as a gesture of the sincerity and good will of the resister. Justice in the courts



Powered by a mobile generator, Larry Cloud Morgan jackhammers a silo casing in a resistance action called Silo Pruning Hook.

Silo Pruning Hook

can only come about if the judge is willing to leave the bench and join the resister in an act of conscience. I ain't seen it happen yet.

Are you a member of a particular church? And why?

I'm Roman Catholic and love the Church with all my heart. As a friend once said "She may be a whore, but she's our mother." Which is not, of course, to say that her sons and daughters need be bastards. The why is simple: Word, liturgy, sacrament, truth, life. Who can refuse such a gift?

In the New Testament, reconciliation is emphasized, not the overthrowing of one order for another. How does this apply to resistance to violence?

The electoral process simply supplants (legally and peacefully) one political structure for another; revolution puts into place (illegally and violently) a new hierarchy. Both require power and the manipulation of power to maintain themselves. Both require an enemy, an underdog, a win/lose scenario (moral, emotional and spiritual violence). Nonviolent resistance by its vulnerability and powerlessness calls for *mutual* repentance, conversion and healing, or reconciliation.

This element of reconciliation can easily be missed in a "mass movement" that sees civil disobedience as political tactic or strategy. The result is a peculiar marriage of the electoral and revolutionary (peaceful and illegal) processes without the heart of love and reconciliation. Even the smaller, spiritually-based resistance runs the risk of committing moral and spiritual violence unless the emphasis is clearly on the truth of nonviolence rather than upon us as individuals. Reconciliation, unlike the other processes, requires as much of us as it does of the "other." The result is community.

What is your opinion of the "just war" theory and its application? (I am thinking of the French bishops' statement that nuclear weapons are acceptable as a deterrent.)

Much more important for our discussion is the fact that the American bishops said the same thing. Simply put, "just war" is not Christian; it has no basis in the words or acts of the unilaterally disarmed Christ. It denies the Lordship of Christ and delays the Kingdom by its trust in earthly power and might. It is not even internally consistent: Just war is okay because the loss of innocent lives (the term "innocent life" is itself un-Christian; Jesus refused violence against the soldiers as well) is "indirect and unintended."

As the bishops mentioned in private discussion, to condemn all war and preparations for war would require naming as sinful all military service, work in military industries and payment of taxes. Too risky.

"Martyr" means witness, in Greek. In light of today's resisters, is the word martyr applicable or appropriate?

It ought to be appropriate and applicable. Martyrdom was the norm of a faith that, if lived obediently, was always in direct conflict with the illicit secular power structure. Only since Constantine, when the Church bought in to the imperial nation-state, has martyrdom ceased to be the expected outcome of Christian life. We resisters are in the process of buying out. That this witness will be required is indisputable; that any of us will be up to it remains to be seen.

Is a mass nonviolent movement, such as Gandhi described and helped enact in India, desirable, or possible, in the U.S. and worldwide?

Assuming (I do and will) that *true* nonviolence, the engagement of one's very life rather than a political tactic or strategy, requires a deep spiritual base — the willingness to literally "lay down one's life," an understanding and acceptance of redemptive suffering, and the sense that we're dealing with God's time, not a 5-year plan for success. No, a mass movement is not possible. What passes for it — low-risk actions, interchangeable bodies, the emphasis on action as media-event — has some initial educational value and can be considered a starting point for more serious resistance. But mass anything tends to have little depth and assuming (I do and will) that the Beast is deadly serious, we will need to come up with something worthy of the opponent.

Why did you choose a particular form of resistance (e.g., blood spilling) especially in certain places?

For most religious resisters, the particular form of a witness is determined by the symbols that speak to us most clearly of the heart of existence — life, death, resurrection. Bloodpouring expresses at once the horror of the death work of nuclear sites, the blood of Christ shed in redemption,

our own willingness to endure suffering rather than inflict it upon others, and our vital connection with all humanity in the beloved community. Other symbols spring from biblical texts, e.g., the use of hammers from the Isaiah*injunction to beat swords into plowshares, or from the liturgy, e.g., the celebration of Eucharist (bringing life into a place of death) or ashes from burned money or tax forms in repentance for our misuse of resources and our complicity in nuclear murder. Some are dictated by a particular situation, e.g., the symbolic use of Interdict in response to the bishops' failure to condemn just war and nuclear deterrence.

The site is limited only by imagination since the nuclear monster has its tentacles everywhere, but the choice will determine the type of witness. For example, it would not be particularly meaningful (though lots of fun) to bash the White House with hammers, though nothing is more appropriate when faced with a Trident sub. Some differentiate between purely symbolic acts (blood pouring) and disarmament actions. I tend not to make this distinction for myself because none of us has ever confronted a live nuclear weapon, and, other than symbolically, I'm not sure what we could safely do with it if we were to do so. One form seems to lend itself more readily when the focus is on the human element, the second when the matter to be dealt with is the physical property itself. Both are essential. For most of us, the choice is made after much prayer, and if acting in community, through much reflection. Also essential is the element of celebration, play, and pure fun. Resistance is serious but seldom grim.

The trick is not to take yourself too seriously. When you get people conspiring together in celebration, you're going to have fun. I wouldn't act in situations where this element is missing.

Part of the ability to celebrate and have fun comes in the ability to renounce the fruits of one's actions, which is quite the opposite of the military, where the fruits are the only things that count (number of enemy killed, territory conquered). We know that life has already overcome death, love overcome hatred. Our individual acts will not end the arms race, but our love and fidelity and obedience will. So we can relax and enjoy. The fact that we do mystifies and sometimes angers others. I was once told by a Secret Service agent, "Stop grinning! You're in serious trouble." I'd never had so much fun in my life. It feels good to do good, even when handcuffed to a wall for four hours. So much of what we do stifles the human spirit. Most Americans hate their work (therefore ulcers, tranquilizers, early heart attacks) and hate their families (divorce, refusal to have children, child neglect and abuse). So many don't know why they live as they live except that everyone lives that way and it's hard



Helen Dery Woodson sledgehammers external pipes of a midwestern missile silo.

Silo Pruning Hook

to stop. Resistance begins with a kind of liberation from that spiritual death, and the feeling after acting is one of enormous freedom and joy.

Should acts of witness become "useful?" (That is "political" via exposure to the press, or as teaching devices, or to promote further discussion, and therefore, future actions?)

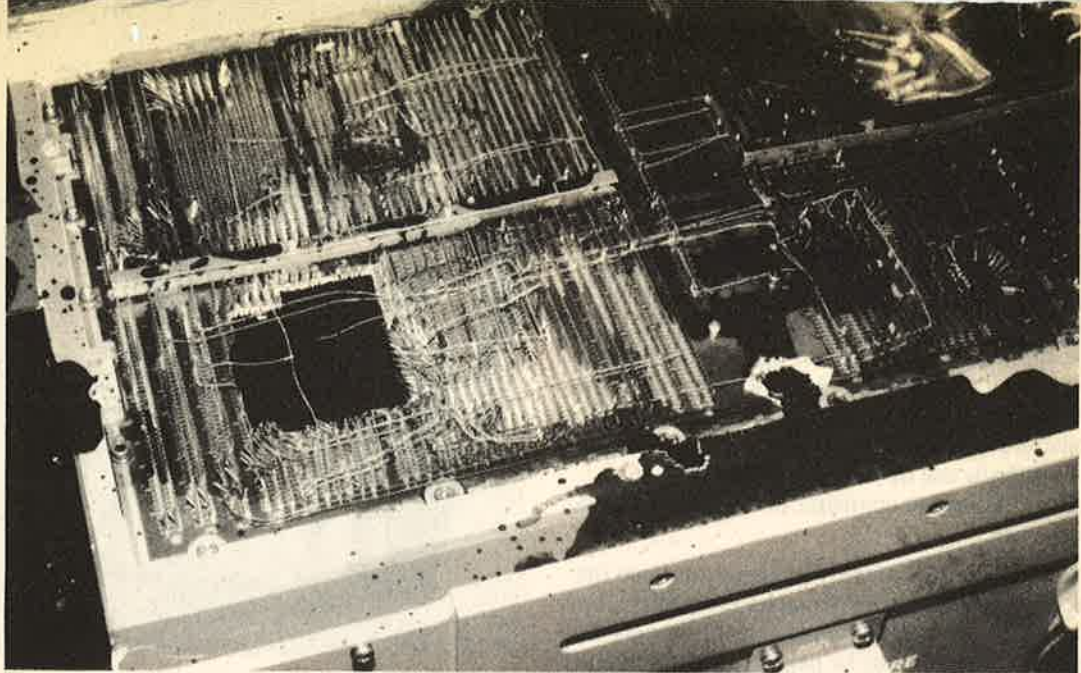
In the age of media, nothing done publicly (and little that's done privately) can escape becoming "political" or "useful." to make use of that exposure, to teach and promote discussion is entirely appropriate, but that's a far cry from planning the witness as a media event (in which case it's not a witness at all). It doesn't even make sense. *The Day After* and Helen Caldicott on the Donahue Show reach millions; our seminars, discussion groups and newsletters reach thousands, and you don't have to do six months for them. An act of conscience is acceptance of personal responsibility for peacemaking, a confronting of the Beast with our lives, a statement of truth; its value lies within itself or not at all. To manipulate it into the arena of the political is to deny the power of God's grace to work its mysterious, mystical magic (as in the silent prayer of contemplatives or the suffering love of a slum worker who no one can name, as in the Chassidic legend of the Just).

You can bet that those who do the best job of making their witness useful are the ones who have their eye on the Spirit first and the TV cameras a distant second.

I don't place much emphasis on the interpreting and explaining of particular actions and witnesses so that they become "comprehensible" to the public (this as opposed to telling about the Bomb and the need for resistance in general, which I fully favor). Let the witness stand alone.

Why?

Lots of reasons. First, because I think it *can*



About \$33,000 worth of damage was done with household hammers to a prototype navigation computer for an Air Force F4-6 fighter jet by John La Forge and Barb Katt. For ten months, they prepared for the action, surrender, interrogation, trial, conviction and prison term (six months, suspended). Photo courtesy of the FBI.

stand alone. The sight of a flag or presidential seal or Pentagon pillars and steps lying drenched in a pool of human blood is a very eloquent statement. That it is quite readily apprehended by those who see it is made clear by the insistence of the authorities in referring to "red paint" or a "red fluid." Likewise, the meaning of a smashed nosecone, B-52 bomber or Pershing missile launcher is unmistakable, proved again by the authorities' frequent claim that there was no significant damage, nothing really happened.

But more. The age of communication and its technology is used to obfuscate rather than to clarify, to remove us from reality rather than to penetrate and illuminate reality. Endless talk abrogates the need for right conduct and action; people are lulled into a sense that they're doing something if they attend a seminar, read a book, question and listen to a resister.

In his book Faith and Violence, Trappist monk Thomas Merton said of conventional struggle: "If the oppressed try to resist by force — which is their right — theology has no business preaching nonviolence to them."

A sticky matter, certainly, and one we all deal with sooner or later, First, maybe, the distinction between understanding and condoning. Theft may be morally wrong (or prostitution or any one of a number of acts), but when the act is committed by a person in desperate need of money or goods to support life, it can be seen in a different light than if it is done in greed or malice. Second, we need to look at who caused the situation, where the violence originated. Since it is *our* violence to which the oppressed respond with force, it is morally difficult to hold them to standards of behavior that we ourselves refuse to follow. Not at all consistent.

But (with regard to the quote) I think I would put the emphasis on Merton's last premise, that theology has no business preaching nonviolence to them. I'd say that theology has no business preaching *anything* that is not backed by example and right conduct.

Can one evil be considered greater than another? It seems pompous to assert to people in the Third World that their struggle for land reform or against oppression is less vital than the largely First World resistance to nuclear weaponry.

The biblical perspective of the sacredness of each life militates against the concept of one death through injustice being less evil than the death of millions. When we assert that resistance to nuclear war is *the* priority, we are simply stating two simple truths. First, the Third World has no meaning unless there is a Third World. Nuclear war cancels their struggle as it cancels them, as it cancels us; it is the one mistake of which we cannot repent and make amends. Second, the Bomb is the ultimate symbol of those perceptions that form the base of the injustice under which the Third World suffers — power, wealth, the state, national interest, security. To reach the point at which the First World is willing to lay down its weapons is to reach the point of spiritual disarmament, the soil from which justice will blossom.

Do you believe that war is a permanent affliction of humankind?

I believe that conflict is a permanent affliction of humankind. But war as a response to conflict need not be permanent and cannot be, or we (and our conflicts) are finished. An old dog can learn new tricks. Or, from the Christian perspective of conversion and the Gospel, a new dog can learn old tricks. ■