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My trial postponed, Steve Kelly's on the docket

John Dear | Apr. 17, 2007 On the Road to Peace

We of the Santa Fe protest group, nine of us, had ourselves braced for trial last Thursday in federal court in Albuquerque. We are embroiled in legal difficulties for our efforts last fall to urge our senator to sign a "declaration of peace." Wary guards blocked our entry. So in the lobby elevator we sat, its controls disabled and its doors wide open. And there we held a liturgy featuring a solemn reading of the names of Iraqi and American dead.

Shortly before trial, word came down from the U.S. district attorney. A plea bargain. Would we plead guilty? If so, he said, we would spare ourselves jail time. Moreover, we could feel free to avail ourselves of the court as a forum -- censure the war to our heart's content, and no effort from the court to interfere.

Two among us took the offer; they changed their pleas to guilty. Now, they may have to testify against the rest of us, a turn of events that required our lawyer to recuse himself. Another pro bono lawyer stepped forward. But in light of the time being short, the day before, the judge granted a continuance. We're now on for May 18.

And so continues our roller-coaster ride of nonviolent resistance to America's culture of war. Emotions run high and one brims with resolve. Then winds go calm and sails go limp. So what a blessing to get a visit from my friend Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly. I've known him nearly 20 years, back to our days in Berkeley.

Steve is one of the unsung heroes of the peace movement. A six-year veteran of prison, half of those years in solitary confinement. In 1995, as part of the "Jubilee Plowshares West" he hammered on a D-5 Trident missile, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that swords would be beat into plowshares. Out of jail in June, 1996, he refused supervised release and went underground for nine months. The FBI prowled around Jesuit communities coast to coast in search of him. At the Manhattan Jesuit Community where I lived at the time, a SWAT team stormed through the doors at six in the morning.

In February 1997, Steve participated in the "Prince of Peace Plowshares" action in Bath, Maine. He and several friends boarded the U.S.S. Sullivans, an Aegis destroyer. While some hammered on missile hatches along the deck, Steve made his way to the bridge and lifted hammer against navigation equipment. Another stint in prison, this time for two years. He again rejected supervised release, and for nine months made himself scarce.

December 1999, Steve was at it again. He took part at Martin Airfield near Baltimore in the action dubbed "Plowshares vs. Depleted Uranium." There they hammered on two A-10 Warthog fighter jets, which fire salvos

of depleted uranium projectiles -- radioactive and toxic, and lasting. On impact they produce a radioactive dust that scatters and settles. It layers the earth in poisons that persist for eons.

Back to prison he went, bouncing this time among several state prisons in Maryland and Fort Dix Federal Prison in New Jersey. While he festered in "the hole," his father died, and shortly after, his sister. October 2002, the feds set him free.

Alas, his rehabilitation is going badly. Nov. 19, Steve went to Fort Huachuca, Tucson, Ariz., to vigil and pray. Here army interrogators are trained. Here they supply soldiers to Guantanamo Bay. Here they wrote the army field manual on interrogation, euphemistically called "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual." The director of Fort Huachuca is Maj. Gen. Barbara Fast, former head of Abu Ghraib.

Steve and our friend, Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale, tried to give the general a letter: "We come here to speak with enlisted personnel about the illegality and immorality of torture according to international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. We condemn torture as a dehumanization of both prisoners and interrogators, resulting in humiliation, disability and even death.

"We are convinced that the Military Commissions Act of 2006 is unconstitutional. We totally reject its conclusions. Torture is a useless and unreliable tool that leads to an accepted practice of terrorization and the rationalization of wrongdoing. We are here to repent and, because of our sense of moral and human decency, we condemn torture."

Their vigil concluded, they moved toward the gate, where officers told them to stop. Guards drew close and the two knelt down. They were seized and handcuffs applied. Then they were hauled inside and left to mull things over. Finally citations were produced and stuffed in their hands. Two months later, stiffer charges crystallized -- criminal trespass and failure to comply with a police officer. Federal charges, both of them. Steve will stand trial in Tucson June 4. He faces another 10 months in prison.

During his visit, Steve told me, "After my walk with the Catholic Worker 'Witness Against Torture' in Cuba at Guantanamo in December 2005, I feel compelled to raise consciousness and expose how the U.S. practices torture. It's been going on a long time. Both the tortured and the U.S. soldiers are victims. We are motivated to speak out against the horror of torture, and the fact that our young soldiers are being turned into torturers.

"A recent survey said that the majority of U.S. Catholics think torture is acceptable. I find that reprehensible. What a scandal. As a priest, I say torture is counter to the Gospel of Jesus. I don't think Christians should be doing this. We need to renounce torture, war and nuclear weapons. We have to learn to love as Christ loved, and abolish torture and war once and for all. So we go to trial as people accused of breaking the law, but we feel we are raising consciousness and trying to put Fort Huachuca and torture on the map."

So as it stands, I go to trial on May 18. Steve and Louie go on June 4 -- just two of many trials this summer against those who acted on behalf of justice and peace. And then there are the countless others speaking boldly against our nation's violent ways, and for God's ways of love and peace. All that is reason enough to take heart.

John Dear's latest book, *Transfiguration* (from Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from local bookstores and
Amazon.com **[1]**

. He will offer a week of classes on the Gospel of Jesus at the historic Ghost Ranch conference center in Abiquiu, N.M. (where artist Georgia O'Keefe lived) from June 17-24. For information contact, **www.ghostranch.org [2]** and **www.johndear.org [3]**.

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