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Hammering swords into plowshares

John Dear | Sep. 2, 2008 On the Road to Peace

(**Note:** Another excerpt from my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, published by Loyola Press last month. After 10 years of Jesuit formation and studies in philosophy and theology, I was ordained a priest in June 1993. Six months later, I was arrested for walking onto an Air Force base and hammering on a jet fighter equipped to carry nuclear arms. It was an attempt to "turn swords into plowshares." Here's the story of my action and trial.)

It is dark -- early in the morning, Dec. 7, 1993. We will hike through woods, over fields, and onto a tarmac. On the runway, we'll approach an F-15E bomber and swing hammers against steel; then, in the spirit of nonviolence, and with whatever courage we can muster, we will await our arrest. Instead of waiting for the government to begin nuclear disarmament, we will start it ourselves.

We expect, in the mood of Christmas, a silent night. But as we near our destination, we notice a flurry of traffic. A car approaches, its headlights pointed our way. We throw ourselves behind bushes. Another car comes, then another. Do they know we're here? Should we call things off? We take stock of the situation and press on, trusting God's grace to get us through. As we reach the woods, a caravan of trucks comes near. We lie on the ground and watch them pass. We look into each other's faces, wondering what to do. "Let's go on," Phil [Berrigan] says.

We get to our feet and stumble through the dark woods under a moonless sky. Before long, we hear the burbling of a creek; we have no choice, it seems, but to wade across. The cold water reaches our knees, and we battle to make it to the other side. A hill rises along the opposite bank. Bruce [Friedrich, a Catholic Worker] climbs it to reconnoiter. He reports that a car, its lights on, sits not too far off. We sit, collect our wits, pray in silence.

I finger the hammer in my coat pocket. I have engraved it with words dear to my heart: "Swords into plowshares," "Seek the unarmed Christ" and "Love your enemies." I wonder what it will be like when we're caught. Will we be shot at? I feel the chill of fear. I've had it all day and it won't let up. I try to console myself with memories of the great peacemakers and martyrs -- Gandhi, King, Romero, Ellacuria, Donovan, Ford.

We decide to keep moving. Lynn [Fredriksson] proceeds first, then Bruce, then Phil, then me -- over the hill, along the forest's edge. The tarmac appears in the distance. Another caravan approaches and we lie motionless until it passes. Then we scurry over to a grove of pines. We peer about, and there it is, sprawled before us -- the vast complex of Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, its lights glaring, trucks going every which way, airmen darting about.

No silent night at all. We have marched ourselves into the middle of full-scale war games. My eyes widen. I want time to think this through, but there is no time. Bruce and Lynn take the lead, and Phil and I follow. We steal along until we realize that no one is taking notice of us. Thereafter we walk plainly.

Before long we spy a lone F-15E -- no airmen attending it, no lights illuminating it. The God of peace has set this one aside. Lynn and Bruce reach it first and begin hammering the pylons. Then they take aim at the guidance light and the flight pod, and sprinkle blood on the fuselage and in the air intake valves.

When Phil and I arrive, the enormity of the plane surprises me. I locate the radar tracking device -- a narrow fin beneath the plane. At long last, by the grace of God, I will strike a blow for nuclear disarmament. I swing. Clang! The vibrations travel through my bones. I expect damage, but there's neither dent nor chipped paint. I glance at Phil and see instead soldiers racing toward us, raising their weapons -- just time enough for one more swing. Clang!

"Put your hammers down and come to the other side," a soldier orders. The four of us emerge and several soldiers surround us. "Put down your hammers," he repeats.

"We are unarmed, nonviolent people," I say loudly and calmly. "We mean you no harm. We're here to dismantle this weapon of death." They gape at us and freeze.

* * * *

During the cross-examination at Phil's trial, the prosecutor set fiery eyes on me, rose from his seat and pointed a finger right at me. "Who *dro-o-o-ve* the car?" he bellowed. "Who drove you and Philip Berrigan to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base on December 7, 1993?"

Who else, he was hot to know, was in on the conspiracy? I suspect he held a few people under suspicion already -- some of our friends sitting in the first row of the gallery.

I pondered a moment before offering my response. "I take responsibility for my own actions." The judge pounded his gavel and ordered the jury out. Then he turned to me and said sternly, "If you do not answer the question, you'll again be charged with contempt of court. You'll face several more years in prison. This is not an option. You have to answer the question, or you are breaking the law."

"OK," I sighed. "I'll tell."

The jury shuffled back in, and the prosecutor resumed his histrionics. "Who *dro-o-o-v-e* the car?"

A hush fell over the room and everyone leaned forward. I looked out at my friends in the peace movement, watching me with dismay in their eyes and probably thinking, Poor John; he's lost it. He's going to betray us all.

"Thank you," I said, "for pushing me to tell the truth. We've spoken a lot here about truth, and I want to speak it." I exhaled a big sigh, no stranger to melodramatics myself. "The truth is, we were driven to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base by the Holy Spirit!"

"What?!" the prosecutor cried. A gasp arose from the spectators, the judge pounded his gavel, the jury jumped up in surprise.

"Who drove the automobile?" yelled the judge, taking over.

"The Holy Spirit," I repeated. "You think it's easy to drive to Seymour Johnson early in the morning and hammer on a nuclear weapon? It could only have been an act of God!"

John Dear's autobiography, "A Persistent Peace" (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press) is now available at www.amazon.com [1]. For information about the book and his upcoming national book tour, see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.fatherjohndear.org [3].

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