

SOA: Talking with Kathy Kelly

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 20, 2009 NCR Today

When thinking of individuals who have dedicated their lives to issues of peace and justice, Kathy Kelly certainly deserves a place near the top of the list. Kelly, the co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, has traveled extensively throughout the Middle East - speaking with people and sharing their everyday experiences.

I spoke with Kelly on Friday in Columbus, Ga. during the School of the Americas Watch Vigil. She had just been part of an event with Pax Christi USA entitled "Iraq and Afghanistan: From Violence and War to Reconstruction and reconciliation."

More reporting will follow on the event later. For now, here are Kelly's answers to the questions, which are sometimes personal. The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

NCR: As a younger person, I'm wondering how, in the day to day, you find the strength to do your work.



Kelly: Well my answer is actually younger people. I'm really fortunate to be in pretty regular interaction when I'm home with people that are about 20 years younger than me. I like them very much and I like their energy. I've found that the energy to keep going is very much like the two wheels of a bicycle. If I'm in touch with the people whose future is so affected by what my generation has done, then I will work harder to try to offset some of the mistakes that my generation and others before me have put in place. That's sort of what keeps my going. I wouldn't call it guilt, but a sense of being responsible and being with the younger people. And, any time I can go to a high school then I really feel energized. I think, "I'm not going to walk out on these new people." And, also my memories help me. I'm never going to walk away from an Iraqi woman whose baby was dying in her arms, and just say, "well, it's politically difficult to organize around this issue."

Q: *Finding that energy, is there a way you measure success?*

A: You know, I think that fifty years ago, Dorothy Day was considered a pariah. She was not given much respect in the institutional Catholic church. But, now, if a person is studying to become a Catholic, the RCIA manual will have that person studying Dorothy Day's life. University students are writing papers, high school students are doing the "Dorothy Day experience." Lewis University named a dormitory after her. We see these

signs. I think there is a great deal of success that has happened because of the grassroots, steady efforts of people whose values are strong and who lived their lives up with their values. And, people are so much happier when they do that. That in itself is a success. You see somebody who is thriving because they are living in accord with their values, that's a success. Now, what does that do to mitigate the suffering of someone who just had to run away from their home in Pakistan? Or, whose home has burst into by US soldiers in Afghanistan? Or the child who's got the misfortune of being born into the poorest country in the world? I can't quite square that. I think that for me, being in the reality of some of the people who bear the brunt of our wars has been very, very important.

Q: *In your work you see a lot of destruction, a lot of devastation. Is there some way that you deal with that when you come home?*

A: You know, a lot of times people say that if somebody has experienced PTSD, they should speak about their experiences. And, sometimes I'm with audiences and I think, "you could send me a therapy bill." When I have a chance to speak of the experience and make it real to someone else I think, "well, at least, there was some justification for my walking away." There's no fairness at all. Why should I be home free and safe and not have to worry about bombs exploding? Somebody else can't get on that plane with me and leave. Why should I be the one who gets the medicine if I get sick? There's no justice there. But, Pax Christi grew out of people speaking about their suffering to each other. And, I think sometimes our words might be a worthwhile gamble, that they could be stronger than weapons.

Q: If I were in your position I think I might have anger at the U.S., at U.S. audiences. Is there a way that you find to deal with that?

A: I think if anything, I have to be humbled by the reality that I come back to in terms of, again, that I've walked away. How could I be angry with an audience here that doesn't even know, when I know and I make the choice to come into an area that's much safer? The worst possible scenario for me would be if I had somehow tried to make a name for myself predicated on the suffering of other people. And, that's a very real thing. So how dare I get angry with someone else? We have all invested our egos in our life work, so there's plenty for me to examine my own conscience without getting on my own high horse and getting angry with Americans. I do get angry when I hear a very strong concern for the woman and children expressed by militarists. I think, "no, that's manipulating other people's good sensibilities."

Q: *If there were one thought or one little kernel that you could get across to every person, do you know what it would be?*

A: Well I think that at this point in time, it would be to really hear the young girl in Pakistan who said that they were better off before we went there. That people all around the world where our bases are located, or our military invasions and occupations have happened, are saying that. Their lives weren't easy, but now they can't predict anything. I think that there are many, many other corruptions and sufferings that have come. We bear some responsibility and if we don't want to be that menacing force in the world we don't have to be. We really don't have to be it. We could just liberate ourselves from it, shed it, stop it. People don't want to be military menaces. They don't want to be despised by other people all around the world because we tried to protect our greed by blowing up their children. No, that sounds menacing, it's horrible.

Q: *Is there anything you wanted to add?*

A: I'm really hoping that our Peaceable Assembly Campaign will draw people of good will who share these longings, who really want to put an end to war. I hope it will draw people together in Washington, DC from Jan. 19 to Feb. 2. We're really looking at civil disobedience for ten consecutive days, with a lot of good education to happen over the process. I hope people will read our literature and think about coming.

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