

Daniel Berrigan at 89

John Dear | May. 4, 2010 On the Road to Peace

I'm in New York City this week, attending some of the peace events around the opening of the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty conference at the United Nations](#) [1], and staying with Fr. Daniel Berrigan and the Jesuit Community. This past Good Friday, Dan was arrested at the U.S. Intrepid War Museum; he goes to court in June. May 9 is his 89th birthday.

To celebrate this friend and peacemaker, I offer this week excerpts from my long introduction to a great new anthology which I just published with Orbis Books, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*. In honor of Dan, let's keep going, following the nonviolent Jesus, working for justice and disarmament, and trusting the God of peace.

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Daniel Berrigan exemplifies a Christianity that works for peace, speaks for peace, and welcomes Christ's resurrection gift of peace, first of all to the poor and the enemy. Through word and deed, he has spent his life shedding new light on the Gospel of Jesus, pointing us toward a new world of nonviolence, a new future of peace if we but welcome the gift. His life work, he would say, is modest, but the cumulative effect of his writings and actions, I suggest, show us what the church might look like, what a Christian looks like in such times, indeed, what a human response looks like in an inhuman world.

Dan knows by heart that God does not bless war, justify war, or create war. He points to a nonviolent Jesus who blesses peacemakers, not warmakers; who calls us to love enemies, not kill them; who commands us to take up the cross of nonviolent resistance to empire -- not put others on the cross ?

To my mind, Dan's writings are best understood as the fruit of his nonviolent actions and resistance, and as such, they stand within the tradition of resistance literature. But more, they join a legacy of spiritual writing that stretches from the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul through the poetry of St. Francis to the sermons of Archbishop Romero and Dr. King. Dan's writings fit in both categories: as resistance literature and spiritual writing. The genius of Daniel Berrigan is that for him, they are one and the same. All spiritual writing is political for it resists the culture of war and injustice by its very nature. All political writing for peace and justice is therefore quintessentially spiritual, for it points us toward the reign of God. This, I suggest, is the mark of a true spiritual master.

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Dan's contemplative rhythm of listening and going public puts him in the tradition of the towering prophets -- Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel -- who notwithstanding the vast distance in time, have become Dan's mentors and models. Like them, he denounces war, weapons, arms races, corrupt regimes, miscarriages of justice, assaults on human rights, and threats to widows and orphans, the unborn and prisoners. What makes Dan's critique so unique, according to one of his biographers, Francine du Plessix Gray, is his "startling" use of language. Even his opponents sit up and take note.

For Dan, the spiritual life demands our encounter with the world, and thus, nonviolent resistance to its violence, in the tradition of the peacemaking Jesus. His early poems were, in his words, "sacramental," but his later poems took on the world and its wars and suffering, he says, because he himself began to taste some of its suffering. And so, Dan teaches not a comfortable spirituality -- with its private relationship to God -- but an uncomfortable spirituality that finds God in the poor, in the marginalized, and in the enemy and evokes loving action on their behalf.

"Some people today argue that equanimity achieved through inner spiritual work is a necessary condition for sustaining one's ethical and political commitments," Dan writes. "But to the prophets of the Bible, this would have been an absolutely foreign language and a foreign view of the human. The notion that one has to achieve peace of mind before stretching out one's hand to one's neighbor is a distortion of our human experience, and ultimately a dodge of our responsibility. Life is a rollercoaster and one had better buckle one's belt and take the trip. This focus on equanimity is actually a narrow-minded, selfish approach to reality dressed up within the language of spirituality."

"I know that the prophetic vision is not popular today in some spiritual circles," he continues. "But our task is not to be popular or to be seen as having an impact, but to speak the deepest truths that we know. We need to live our lives in accord with the deepest truths we know, even if doing so does not produce immediate results in the world."

Dan finds the wherewithal to set his face against the tide of war in large part because of his daily Bible study. Indeed, like his brother Philip, Dan is a rare biblical person, one who wrestles with the Word of God day and night. "Open up the book of Jeremiah and you do not find a person looking for inner peace," Dan notes. Jeremiah cries out against injustice, then rejoices in the fulfillment of God's justice, he observes. "Jeremiah goes through mountains and valleys. That kind of richness I find very appealing, whereas the kind of spirituality that looks for a flat emotional landscape brought on by the endless search for inner peace and equanimity I find disturbing, a quest that goes nowhere."

"I draw from the prophets a very strong bias in favor of the victim and a very strong sense of judgment of evil structures and those who run them," Dan writes in his latest book, *The Kings and Their Gods*. The prophets and Christ, he writes, talk "about the God who stands at the bottom with the victims and with the 'widows and orphans' and witnesses with them in the world, from that terrifying vantage point which is like the bottom of the dry well that Jeremiah was thrown in. That vantage point defines the crime and sin; that point of view of the victim indicts the unjust, the oppressor, the killer, the warmaker. And the message is very clear. It's a very clear indictment of every superpower from Babylon to Washington."

Dan reaches such unlikely conclusions because he is thoroughly immersed in the text. He dares think that God can be taken at God's Word, most notably, in the Gospel message of Jesus. "I've been maintaining a new discipline," he told me casually a few years ago, at the height of Bush's war on Iraq. "First, I get as little of the bad news as possible. I only look at *The New York Times* once a week, if that, and occasionally the BBC. Second, I spend more time than ever with the good news, reading and meditating on the Gospel every morning, to be with Jesus."

That, to my mind, is the job description of the modern day biblical prophet -- aware of the world, immersed in the Word of God, a kind of Barthian recipe for readying oneself to announce the Gospel in word and deed. Deed especially. It is Dan's nonviolent direct action which gives Dan's words such vigor and power. But it is his words that unpack his deeds and vision and inspire so many others.

"The Word of God is spoken for the sake of today," Dan writes, "for ourselves. If not, it lies dead on the page. Lift the Word from the page, then -- take it to heart. Make of it the very beat of the heart. Then the Word comes

alive -- it speaks to commonality and praxis. Do it -- do the Word." This is the advice of a post-modern spiritual master. And it rings true because its ancient wisdom was first tested by the early saints and martyrs.

His message is a consistent Gospel word -- "Do not kill. Do not support the culture of killing. Do all you can to stop the killing." He put it succinctly in an influential open letter to the Weathermen: "The death of a single human being is too heavy a price to pay for the vindication of any principle, however sacred."

Over the decades, Dan has stayed faithful to the Gospel journey of peace. He keeps on walking the road to peace, one mindful step at a time, whether others do or not. "We walk our hope and that's the only way of keeping it going," he says. "We've got faith, we've got one another, we've got religious discipline and we've got some access that goes beyond the official wall."

"Peacemaking is tough, unfinished, blood-ridden," he told one interviewer. "Everything is worse now than when I started, but I'm at peace. I don't have to prove my life. I just have to live." The point for Dan is to be faithful to the God of peace and the Gospel of Jesus.

"Nobody can sustain him or herself in the struggle for a nonviolent world on the basis of the criterion of immediate success," Dan writes. "The Bible gives us a long view rather than the expectation of a quick fix. All of us are in grave danger of being infected by this American ethos that good work brings quick change, rather than the older spiritual notion that good work is its own justification and that the outcome is in other hands besides ours."

"The good is to be done because it is good, not because it goes somewhere," he says. "I believe if it is done in that spirit it will go somewhere, but I don't know where. I don't think the Bible grants us to know where goes, what direction. I have never been seriously interested in the outcome. I was interested in trying to do it humanly and carefully and nonviolently and let it go."

Daniel Berrigan remains faithful to his vocation and the vision of peace, calling us to do the same -- whether we're successful or not. The focus, he teaches, is on the God of peace, and so, "the outcome is in better hands than ours." With that, he insists, we can live in hope.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to:

<http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. He will teach a course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., see www.ghostranch.org. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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