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Activists fast, call for Guantanamo closure

Jake Olzen | Jan. 25, 2011

COMMENTARY

The Witness Against Torture (WAT) community, including many peace activists and Catholic Workers, just completed a twelve day Fast for Justice. The fast started on the 9th anniversary of the establishment of the U.S. military?s Guantánamo Bay detention camp -- Jan. 11 -- and ended Jan. 22, two years to the day President Obama signed an Executive Order to close the facility.

The anti-torture activists chose only to consume juice and water as a witness to demand the closure of Guantánamo, Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan, and other secret prisons, said WAT organizers.

Currently 173 men remain detained in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, many of whom have been cleared for release by the Guantánamo Review Task Force. The Center for Constitutional Rights and Amnesty International have demanded that the other men held indefinitely at the camp they be charged and given fair, open trials in federal court.

Fasting is an important part of many religious and spiritual traditions. In its varied forms, fasting can be understood as an act of repentance or mourning; a way to purify one's heart, mind and body; a practice in self-discipline; an expression of solidarity; or, as used most notably by Mahatma Gandhi, an expression of political principle with the power to move hearts and minds and change policies.

For WAT activist Justin Norman, who traveled from Des Moines for the week?s events, his fasting is particularly connected to Guantánamo, where dozens of inmates have engaged in hunger strikes to protest their abuse.

Matt Daloisio, a WAT organizer, wrote: ?My fast, as an act of cleansing, represents the need for the United States to rid itself and atone for the crimes of torture and indefinite detention. It is an expression of hope that Obama will heed his own words, close Guantánamo, and restore the rule of law.?

While there has been overwhelming encouragement and admiration for the commitment to fast with over 125 activists and supporters fasting in Washington, D.C. and other cities nationwide, there are those who question the usefulness of such an act. Indeed, like many other tactics in nonviolent social change, it is hard to measure the specific effect of such a powerful witness of self-sacrifice.

Consider the case of Cesar Chavez's 1968 fast.

One of the more publicly noted fasts, Chavez had been inspired by Gandhian nonviolence and embarked on a twenty-five day, water-only fast to call for the end of rising violence in the farm fields and to counter the criticisms against his nonviolent campaign for worker justice in the United Farm Workers (UFW).

In a letter read by Rev. James Drake for Chavez at the end of his fast, Chavez said:

?It was a fast for nonviolence and a call to sacrifice. When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men (sic) we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness (sic) is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man (sic) is to suffer for others. God help us to be men (sic)!?

To be sure, Chavez's fast brought the wavering UFW together into a stronger union and community committed to nonviolence, even at great personal risk to his own life.

?Cesar Chavez,? wrote author Randy Shaw in Beyond the fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century, ?believed in Gandhi's adage that 'if you really want to do something, be willing to die for it.' For Chavez, 'doing something' meant using nonviolent tactics, which he saw as having 'the power to attract people and to generate power.'?

In the same spirit of Chavez's nonviolence, Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence in Chicago, noted the creative, inventive power to fast and to fast in community:

?Fasting helps us develop our focus. By altering our every day schedules, displacing ourselves from normal routines, we gain a chance to build a community yearning for a different world.?

Bev Rice, a retired nurse from New York city, said, ?I believe expressing the need for the United States to make significant changes in our foreign and domestic policies calls upon its citizens to follow nonviolent direct actions, including fasting, to urge our government to address these issues.?

For this reason WAT fasts as a moral witness and atonement against the crimes of torture and indefinite detention.

In fasting and action, WAT comes together as a community of hope, to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: ?Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? (Is 58:6)?

Said Daloisio: ?So we continue on calling out to set the prisoner in Guantánamo free. We say to Congress, Mr. President, the Federal Courts, the Department of Justice: Charge them or let them go.?

[Jake Olzen is a member of the White Rose Catholic Worker community in Chicago. He was in Washington for the Witness Against Torture fast and activities.]

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