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'Crossing the Line' tells stories of dedication to nonviolence, civil disobedience

John Dear | Feb. 26, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Going to prison for nonviolent civil disobedience against American war-making does wonders to clarify one?s relationship with the U.S. government. I highly recommend it. When I reflect back on my life, it seems I have been preparing for civil disobedience, facing jail or trial, or undergoing probation regularly for 30 years. I?m mainly engaged in writing, speaking and teaching peace to build up the anti-war/global peace movement, but periodic civil disobedience and nonviolent protest have become for me a way of life. Along the way, one meets the best people.

Given our culture of permanent war-making, I think nonviolent resistance to the U.S. government is a spiritual and moral requirement. For me, it?s a prerequisite of discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus. Of course, most people think I?m wrong, if not downright crazy. But I don?t know how one can read the Gospels and not conclude that we are summoned to carry the cross of nonviolent resistance to empire.

Volume two of Rosalie Riegle?s massive oral history project, *Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace [1]* (Cascade Books, 2013), makes me realize I?m not alone. This massive collection of interviews with U.S. anti-war resisters (along with *Doing Time for Peace*, which I reviewed [2] last month) provides an unprecedented historical record of nonviolent resistance over the last five decades and shows how many of us have quietly given our lives to resisting American war-making and practicing nonviolence.

Reading *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or most Catholic book publishing catalogues, you would never know such people exist. Here is an entirely new kind of spiritual reading pointing to a new kind of Gospel living. Riegle has gathered hundreds of conversations in these two volumes, and they testify that throughout the U.S., a small but determined group of resisters continues to speak the truth and take action for peace. It?s like reading about participants in Gandhi?s movement, the civil rights movement, the early church movement or, for that matter, the Gospels themselves, which record Jesus? daily campaign of civil disobedience actions.

This second volume features 65 oral narratives from those who have committed civil disobedience here in the U.S. in opposition to our wars. It will interest all those active in peace and justice movements, all those searching for ways to promote peace, all those in need of hope.

Crossing the Line is broken into 10 sections of interviews: World War II pacifists who went to prison for opposing the war; activists from the 1950s; Vietnam War draft resisters and those who destroyed draft files; U.S. Plowshares activists; European Plowshares activists; School of the Americas protesters; those who have been in and out for prison throughout their whole lives; stories of those who felt challenged by the movement and were changed by the experience; priests known for engaging in civil disobedience; and war tax resisters.

Many in this book are my friends and heroes. I was especially touched by Judith Malina?s description of sharing a cell with Dorothy Day in the late 1950s for their anti-nuclear civil disobedience action in New York City; the testimony of my priest friends Steve Kelly, Bill Bichsel, Louie Vitale and Jerry Zawada; the hilarious stories of

longtime resister and former priest Frank Cordaro; and most especially, the tales of plowshares activists who hammered on nuclear weapons and endured kangaroo trials and tough stints in prison.

One amazing story comes from Ireland, where five activists walked onto Shannon Airport shortly before George W. Bush?s war on Iraq began and hammered on a U.S. Navy war plane. They had learned that U.S. war planes were stopping there to be refueled before flying on to Iraq. They called themselves the ?Pitstop Plowshares,? but the Irish media dubbed them the Shannon Five. *Crossing the Line* features interviews with two participants, Deirdre Clancy and my friend Ciaron O?Reilly. After three years and three trials, the five were famously acquitted.

?If we can do it, anybody can do it,? Clancy says. ?There was something that carried us through it all. I believe it was grace or the Holy Spirit because there?s no way we could have gotten through it without imploding unless we had some sort of spiritual support.?

?In any sort of war resistance, people have to work on three actions,? Kelly reflects:

> The first is the disarmament itself, violence converted into something beneficial for humankind, something benign. The next action is to convince the judge or a jury that what we did was right. So the courtroom is a second action. It?s one of the more dangerous rooms of the Pentagon, an extension of the Pentagon?s agendas as the moral and legal legitimator of nuclear weapons. We try to put the whole system on trial, but here in this country, we?re often prevented from putting on a defense. The third action is the jail time. Another witness. You enter a place where you?re not ever in control. So it?s another action, to take on a dehumanizing system that is very much an extension of the system outside.

Dorothy Day?s granddaughter, Martha Hennessey, quotes her grandmother?s famous call to resist the Vietnam war, to ?fill the jails?:

> I think we?re aware that our government is doing wrong, most of us, anyway. But we don?t -- or feel we can?t -- do anything about it. Millions of people all over the world protested before the Iraq War started and it still happened! Where is Congress? Where?s the media? Have we ever had this level of connivance in reporting? We should be filling the streets, protesting the dreadful things that are being done with our tax dollars and supposedly in our name. I?m grateful and proud that I had the experience of prison. It helped form me as a person, and I know now that I have the courage to stand up to this very scary authority and that I could survive it. So let?s fill the streets! Let?s fill the jails!

?I know that a significant amount of the violence that I?m addressing on the outside is also in me,? Cordaro says. ?So it?s a catharsis thing, an exorcism. It?s trying to get rid of the violence in you as you address the violence on the outside. Our efforts at this point are puny. Pathetic. And we make mistakes. Lots of them. But we have to keep trying. Keep trying.?

?Civil disobedience is not our problem,? Howard Zinn once wrote. ?Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders?and millions have been killed because of this obedience . Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves . (and) the grand thieves are running the country. That?s our problem.?

Crossing the Line offers an array of people who repeatedly break through our national civil obedience and speak out against every variety of war, weapons, capitalism and fascism. It?s a heartening book, one that will encourage you not to be so civilly obedient while our nation assassinates and bombs people around the world, maintains thousands of nuclear weapons, ignores the starving masses and helps destroy the earth. These stories will help us get in step with the civilly disobedient Jesus and inspire us to cross the line for peace.

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This week, John Dear is speaking at the peace conference in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker [3]," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [4]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [5]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6] explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [7]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [8] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [9], *Put Down Your Sword* [10] and *A Persistent Peace* [11], are available from Amazon.com.

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