

The Life of Resistance

A Conversation with Philip Berrigan

Philip Berrigan has been speaking out for peace, justice and nuclear disarmament since the early 1960s. As part of the Baltimore Four and the Catonsville Nine, he helped lead the movement against the Vietnam war and spent several years in prison in the early 1970s. In 1973, along with his wife Elizabeth McAlister, he founded Jonah House, a community of nonviolent resistance in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1980, with his brother Daniel and the Plowshares Eight, he entered the G.E. nuclear weapons plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, where he hammered on an unarmed Mark 12A nuclear nosecone to "beat swords into plowshares."

By 2002, Phil Berrigan has spent over eleven years of his life behind bars for anti-war and anti-nuclear demonstrations. I interviewed Phil in the Spring of 1993 in Oakland, California, where I was living and working at the time. Six months later, on December 7th, 1993, Phil and I went to Goldsboro, North Carolina, hammered on a F15E nuclear-capable fighter bomber, and spent eight months together in a county jail cell.

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The Gospels tell us to read "the signs of the times." What do you see as "the signs of the times," the essential questions confronting us now as people of justice and peace?

On the one hand, we have seen the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, and we need to be clear that it was an entirely different empire than our own. And then, of course, we have the situation in Eastern Europe and the introduction of democracy in the old Warsaw-pact nations.

On the other hand, we're seeing the slow disintegration of the American empire. We're going the same route as the Soviets. The U.S. hoped that the arms race would bankrupt the Soviets and drive them into submission to us because they couldn't support a war economy to the extent that we could. They couldn't be an equal partner in the arms race, that was our hope. Reagan used the term "roll back." We rolled the Soviet Union empire back into Western capitalism. So that happened but now we're going the same route as they did.

Could you describe what makes the United States an empire?

The central imperial ingredient is our possession and use of nuclear weapons. They are used partly to enforce our will around the world, particularly in the third world and in aspects of the fourth world, but in addition to that, they maintain the status quo.

The military is the prime weapon of the administration, the national leadership, to enforce the status quo at home. That means a narrowing group of elite control more and more of the wealth. One/two-hundredth of our people control thirty-seven percent of what this country produces.

The military is the leading vehicle to continue this inequality. They are slowly disintegrating the middle class and creating a two-tiered society. That's happening right now. These are all aspects of an empire in decline.

Many of us have been struggling to respond to a whole variety of issues and injustices--from the death penalty and U.S. intervention in Central America to homelessness and the Persian Gulf war to racism and sexism--yet at the heart of all these problems is the continued presence of nuclear weapons. What is our responsibility in light of the government's continued willingness to destroy the planet?

As they say, the bomb makes every other issue redundant. I believe that to be overwhelmingly true.

The fact that we are complicit in the presence of the bomb, because we help pay for it, and that we allow its deployment and possible use--and we have threatened to use it at least 25 times unilaterally during the 47 years of the Cold War--destroys us spiritually, morally, psychologically, emotionally and humanly, in a broad general sense.

Our complicity in the bomb makes us incapable of dealing with lesser social and political problems that are in reality spin-offs of our dedication to the bomb.

We have the intent (to use the old judicial expression) to use the bomb under certain circumstances. The American people are drawn into that. When they paid their income taxes on April 15th, they paid for it. They also pay for it by their silence or by their active involvement in warmaking (in a war plant) or by their active involvement in the military.

So the bomb is destroying us spiritually, morally, psychologically, emotionally and humanly.

What should our response be? What can we do about this?

The only conversion that is real today is a conversion that accepts responsibility for the bomb.

This conversion turns one's life around so that one is free enough to witness against this inhuman, incredibly wicked manifestation of our demonization and our insanity.

We all have to take responsibility for the bomb. This conversion and new responsibility will breed all sorts of life-giving, salvific benefits in our lives. It will create the new human person, the new creation, the just social order, that the scriptures speak about.

On Easter Sunday, 1991, you boarded the U.S.S. Gettysburg at the Bath Ironworks in Maine and participated in a plowshares action to begin the process of disarmament. What was your message there?

We were two and a half hours on that hell ship at the Bath Ironworks in Bath, Maine. The U.S.S. Gettysburg had returned from sea trials and they were ironing out a few

bugs and so it was there at the Ironworks. It was completely unguarded and we went aboard before dawn, at 4:30 in the morning. We had complete latitude to do anything that we wanted to that ship.

But you have to keep the symbol clear. You have to restrain and discipline yourself so that you don't go into an orgy of destruction. It is important that the symbol speaks for itself, rather than cluttering up or smothering the symbol by getting into maximum destruction. Otherwise, people see the destruction and focus on that rather than on the sense of responsibility towards that hell ship and its counterparts in the Air Force or in the army.

So, we didn't do maximum destruction. We didn't go up to the bridge or go the engine room even though we could have. There was nobody on board the ship deterring us. We merely used blood and hammers on the missile hatches. Then we went looking for security because there was no security on the ship at all. We brought a sergeant back to the ship and told him what we had done. Later on, he called the police when we wouldn't leave and we were arrested.

Given this, how would you define our vocation to be people of nonviolence, people of resistance, in these times?

Nonviolence in the best sense is a strict and definitive social justice. It means putting into practice the one law isolated by Paul in the letter to the Romans. He said, "You will have fulfilled the law if you bear the burdens of one another." Paul says in that same context that there is only one law, to love your neighbor as you love yourself. In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, the neighbor includes your enemy.

God is perhaps most apparent to us and present to us through the enemy--through the warmakers, who make nuclear hostages out of us; through the politicians who lie to us; through the generals who supposedly protect us yet in reality protect the rich; and on and on and on. They're our true enemies and we have to love them and to work for their conversion. All of that comes under the heading of "nonviolence."

We are expected to do good, to do justice in our lives and we're expected to resist evil. The scriptures, especially the New Testament, make it very clear that evil has to do with systemic evil, with major institutions which are the habitat of the principalities and powers. And the state is the main power and principality, especially an imperial state, our own government.

What is the role of community in this vocation of nonviolent resistance?

Community is one of the convertibles of nonviolence and resistance, which is to say they are the same thing from different reference points. We can't imagine a true community without it being dedicated to nonviolence and doing resistance to evil and to the state. We really can't imagine a community without that.

Community building was the first public act of our Lord. That says something about the priority Jesus laid upon community. This tiny band of ragtag people were to be a kind of microcosm of the new social order, the "kin-dom" of God, where people live as sisters and brothers and treat one another with justice and love. Jesus placed this

primacy on community. After several years of instructing and serving them, he risked being abandoned by them and being betrayed by them and that happened.

One good commentator, an Englishman by the name of Dodd, writes that Jesus won them over finally because he forgave them. After the resurrection, Jesus forgave them, and they became disciples and apostles because he forgave them.

You helped found and have been part of the Jonah House community since 1973. What part does community play in your life of peacemaking?

I couldn't conceive of continuing to make peace without having the blessing of community. On the one hand, it's a supremely powerful human unit and on the other hand, it's the most fragile of units. It depends upon the Spirit and a spirituality which is not so much individual but communitarian, social, political and nonviolent. I cannot imagine myself living apart from community.

We have agreed to resist war for the rest of our lives. We believe this is a Gospel imperative. It's implicit in the command to love our enemies.

We hold all things in common, according to the pattern of the Acts of the Apostles. We do common work together. We share the drudgery of community, such as the cooking or the laundry or cleaning up the house or working to serve our poor neighbors (because we live in a poor neighborhood). We are either constantly planning resistance or doing it.

Many people around the country and the world think the problem with nuclear weapons is over, and yet it's not. What can you suggest regarding the need to keep working for nuclear disarmament?

John Mitchell, Nixon's attorney general who went to jail for Watergate, was once speaking to a bunch of journalists and they were asking him questions and he grew exasperated with the reporters and he said, "Stop listening to what we say and start watching what we do!"

I think we ought to watch what they do and not so much what they say because they consistently lie. They don't lie consciously. They lie because they're involved with warmaking and war is a big lie. Any adherence to war and any promotion of war will draw people into lying. They lie without realizing it. Bush and Cheney lie without realizing. They're involved in a huge lie. They're just expressing a facet of this lie. They habitually lie.

Fiscal appropriations are very important. The fiscal appropriations for 1993 are \$282 billion dollars for warmaking. That is more than the rest of the world spends on warmaking and here we are five percent of the world's population. We've been doing this for years and years. We've been leading the arms race and we've been contaminating the world with this war fixation, this war mentality, this business of war as economy and systemized structure.

So, I would say that we have to continue resisting war as long as we live. The U.S. is claiming to be the only superpower in the world and you don't maintain a superpower status unless you are armed to the teeth. So, the U.S. will continue with

weapons development, star wars, and a permanent war economy, because to do otherwise, is to shift the status quo and redistribute the wealth here in this country. The last people who want to do that are the one/two-hundredth who control thirty-seven percent of what the country produces, and their representatives, the president and the official terrorists in Washington. We need to keep resisting this business of making war.

Many people say to me, "Nonviolent civil disobedience is no longer needed. It's use in history is over." I tell them that's not true. Would you agree that part of our nonviolent resistance means we need to continue to risk arrest in opposition to nuclear weapons?

One way to look at our responsibility is from the angle of law. We don't know anything about this law that we have. People who purport to be Christians don't know anything about the biblical treatment of law and the fact that human law is always under the judgment of God because it's a sign of rebellion against God.

Nuclear weapons are legal, right across the board, from making and processing them to running them through Pantex down in Amarillo, Texas and deploying them. It's all legal, every step of the way. What does this say about law? What does it say that we legalize every measure that could destroy the world? What does it mean that it is legal to destroy the world through toxic poisoning?

It says something about law. It's like the law under which Christ was crucified. The rulers said, "We have a law and under this law, he has to die." He was executed, legally.

You spoke on Good Friday at the prayer service and nonviolent demonstration out at Livermore Labs in California about our call to become, like Jesus, "outlaws." What did you mean by that?

I meant that we can't keep the law of God and keep human law as it stands today in the imperial United States. We have to make a choice between the two.

We have talked before about Gandhi's insight into nonviolence, how he wrestled with power and powerlessness, and the Gospel way of nonviolence which involves powerlessness. How do you understand the role of power and powerlessness in our nonviolence?

We should recall as frequently as possible that the temptations of Christ in the desert (as recorded by Matthew and Luke), which are stereotypes of all human temptations, are really temptations to power, whether religious, economic or political power. We need to remember that our Lord did not succumb to those temptations to power.

The alternative to succumbing to the temptation of power is to embrace powerlessness. One then becomes an agency through which the power of God can work. One becomes a vehicle for divine power. But that means that the ego has to be suppressed along with its natural instinct to power. We have to deny the self, take up the cross and follow. We have to embrace powerlessness.

That means we have to place far more emphasis on the development of human community rather than on the development of a mass movement which would speak power to power. We have to avoid that assumption (especially in a time of federal election) that "if our mass movement is strong enough, then we'll get political change."

We're called to something different. We're called to serve the poor, resist the state and be ignored, ostracized and sent to jail because we do that.

Part of our nonviolent resistance means then risking arrest and being willing to go to jail or prison. How does the witness from jail and prison and that powerlessness speak to society?

This witness speaks to society because a person goes to jail innocent. A person goes to jail condemned under a law which is the fundamental problem. The law is the problem. It legislates murder, exploitation, intervention--everything the American empire is doing. All of it is made legal under the law. One is condemned under that law. But we are to stand outside the law and become outlaws.

That is something which is inescapable from the Gospels. Our Lord was an outlaw. As Paul would say, Jesus was the only person without sin and he was condemned under the law. In Galatians, Second Corinthians, and Romans, Paul makes clear the judgment of God against human law which condemned God's son.

Today, we are condemned to being hostages of the bomb. Legally, we've been held hostage by the bomb for the last 47 years. If nuclear war breaks out, it will all be legal. We'll be killed legally. That's a commentary on the law and the essential nature of human law.

We spent Easter Sunday together keeping vigil out at the Concord Naval Weapons Station which stores nuclear weapons and ships weapons around the world. What is your understanding of resurrection in the age of nuclear weapons and the U.S. empire?

Living out the resurrection today means turning away from the violence in our lives and taking responsibility for the violence of the state.

We don't often hear from Christians or theologians about the fact that we are commanded in the New Testament to have a certain relationship with the state. We are to hold the state accountable, to resist the state and call it to justice to the point where it evaporates from view and you know longer need it. We may only need the state to help pick up the garbage, fix the potholes, deliver the mail and do those innocuous chores. If we had our druthers, it would go out of existence. We would have a community of sisters and brothers living in justice and peace with one another.

We resurrect to the extent that we take responsibility for the victims of the state. On the one hand, we have to take personal, private and interpersonal responsibility in league with one another. On the other hand, we have to take public, social and political responsibility for the crimes of the state.

A voice for the victims has to be raised and we're in a position to do that. That's what the denial of the self and taking up the cross is about, becoming a voice for the victims of the state.

You often speak about the connection between hope and faith. How is hope connected with faith?

We are hopeful in so far as we are faithful. Having faith means we haven't given up on the world. It's a very simple concept. We tend to make it very complex but it's not. It's simple. We haven't given up on the world. It's God's world and God has certain, revealed plans for this world and its people. Together, we are be part of the "kin-dom" of God, where people live as sisters and brothers. When we believe that and live accordingly, we generate hope. We are a hopeful people.

If we aren't living that life, acting on faith and generating hope, we'd be despairing, hopeless or disbelieving but that's impossible as long as we strive to act faithfully. Hope is automatic then.

As one theologian says about faith, "If we conclude that we are faithless or do not have faith, we should try to act faithfully, to act as if we have faith, and then we will have faith!"

We have faith because we act faithfully and God sanctions our faithful action and reinforces our faith with grace. But it's up to us. We're free agents.

How would sum up your message today?

The disarmament of our nuclear weapons needs to be a priority for us. Peacemaking needs to be our priority. Peacemaking is not only a central characteristic of the Gospel, peacemaking is the greatest need of the world today.

We have to have peace. If we don't have peace, we have nothing. And we don't have much of it yet. We don't have a peaceful relationship with the environment or with one another or with other nations and that means that we are really at war with God. If we can't handle the exquisite creation that God has entrusted to us in stewardship, if we can't have a peaceful and just relationship with creation and with one another, how can we have a solid relationship with God?

If we can't have that peaceful relationship, we hold in contempt the fact that we are really daughters and sons of God. But we are daughters and sons of God, and that means we are called to be peacemakers.