

## The committed life of Peter DeMott

John Dear | Mar. 3, 2009 | On the Road to Peace

Last week, Peter DeMott, 62, a friend to peace and justice people everywhere, fell from a tree he was trimming. He was rushed to the hospital and died during surgery. A Vietnam vet and a man of few words, Peter worked full time since the 1970s for peace and disarmament. Some of those years he spent behind bars for civil disobedience. His death leaves those who knew him shocked and grieving. But we also recall his life with gratitude.

"My experience in the military convinced me of the futility of war and of the sad misallocation of resources which war-making requires," Peter wrote. "My faith in God prompts me to work for a world which unifies us all by ties of love, solidarity and mutual cooperation."



I first met Peter in 1982, at a protest sponsored by Jonah House,

home of Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister. There Peter lived before moving to Ithaca, N.Y., where he and his wife Ellen Grady raised four daughters.

But stories about him preceded my meeting him. I knew that in 1980 during a protest at the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Conn., Peter passed by an official van, saw keys dangling from the ignition and, on the spur of the moment, climbed in, revved the engine, and -- in a novel enactment of Isaiah's oracle to beat swords into plowshares -- rammed the van into a partly constructed Trident sub. A spontaneous act of disarmament, he called it.

Two years later, as part of a Plowshares group, he returned to the scene of the crime. Having no van on hand, he used a hammer.

Just two days before the U.S. war in Iraq began, on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 2003, he and three friends

poured their blood in the lobby of a military recruiting station outside of Ithaca. The gesture was to disrupt plans for the impending war, the four said.

The "St. Patrick's Four," as they came to be called, brought down the government's heavy hand. But the harder the government pressed, the more attention the four garnered. With the government embarrassed and hamstrung, prosecutors could only manage to win a four-month sentence.

The sentence completed, and the war now underway, Peter, quite unchastised, traveled to Iraq with the Christian Peacemaker Team -- there in the spirit of CPT, "to get in the Way." And just two months ago, he was arrested again, this time at the Pentagon. He was to appear in court this Friday.

At the recruiting station the four declared:

We mark this recruiting office with our own blood to remind ourselves and others of the cost in human life of our government's warmaking. Killing is wrong. Preparations for killing are wrong. The work done by the Pentagon with the connivance of this military recruiting station ends with the shedding of blood, and God tells us to turn away from it.

We come here today with pictures of Iraqi people -- mothers, children, those who have been the victims of US bombardment and sanctions for the past twelve years. We come here with love in our hearts for the young U.S. service people, also victims of warmaking.

Peter and his friends put the protest in the context of America's long, noble tradition of civil disobedience: The Boston Tea Party of 1773, the smuggling of slaves to freedom in the 19th century, the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century, the Civil Rights movement of Martin Luther King, Jr.

"These few examples," Peter said, "could be amplified considerably to show that civil disobedience has helped to change unjust laws and practices in our country and has played a significant role in the realization of a more just and equitable society."

The audacity Peter exhibited in the recruiting station didn't fail him in court. At his sentencing he said he looked forward to the day when President Bush and his cohorts would stand trial for genocide in Iraq. "The war on Iraq is the crime of the century, and President Bush, President Clinton and those who have aided and abetted them have gotten away with murder". Jesus tells us that those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

And then he dared lecture the court on matters of law. "It is the responsibility of each and every one of us to nonviolently confront those who break the law with impunity, which is what our leaders have done through their use of lies, deceptions and forgeries to promote and prosecute this war. The law should promote life and the well being of everyone and should preserve and protect the earth and its creatures."

If audacity accompanied him to the recruiting station, and into court, it surely followed him into prison. In an interview with Rosalie Riegler, author of the forthcoming *Doin' Time*, he said: "I always see my jail and prison experience as part of that larger context of nonviolent, peaceful struggle for social change." The long litany of American civil disobedience -- including inevitable jail time -- grounds him, he said. The cloud of witnesses who preceded him puts his work on a noble and solid foundation.

As I ponder Peter's sudden, tragic death, I'm impressed by his faithful committed life. It recalls to mind Dr. King who, two months before he died, said that as he thinks on his life and likely assassination, he didn't want to be remembered for his awards or accomplishments. He wanted to be remembered for living "a committed

life.? Dr. King lived such a life, and so did Peter.

Many dismissed Peter?s steady work of disarmament, unassuming as he was. But he suffered for it, kept going like a quiet river when so many others had given up. Peter DeMott showed us what single-minded, faithful, Gospel peacemaking looks like. And that, in my estimation, is an amazing achievement.

We mourn his death, but we find lessons. Peter?s dying teaches us how precious life is, how fleeting it is. And thus it reminds us how important it is to spend our days working for a just, peaceful world on behalf of suffering humanity. I thank the God of peace for this quiet, faithful peacemaker. Let his example inspire us to carry on.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, A Persistent Peace (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and Put Down Your Sword, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). On April 24-26, he will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center in Stroudsburg, Pa.; see: [www.kirkridge.org](http://www.kirkridge.org). For info, see: [www.fatherjohndear.org](http://www.fatherjohndear.org).

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