NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

'Violence ends where love begins': A conversation with Sr. Anne Montgomery

John Dear | May. 1, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Sr. Anne Montgomery is a legend in some peace movement circles. A member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, she has spent more than three years in prison for many civil disobedience actions against war, including seven Plowshares disarmament actions*; many years teaching in Harlem; and many years living with the Christian Peacemaker Team in Hebron, Palestine-Israel.

I first heard her speak to a packed church in Reading, Penn., in 1982 about her part in the Plowshares Eight and vividly recall my shock at her gentle proposal that some of us need to go to prison and offer our lives to stop the killings, abolish nuclear weapons and save the planet. I thought then that she was the first authentic Christian I had ever met. Recently diagnosed with advanced cancer, she spoke with me on the phone the other day from her community in the Bay Area.

John Dear: What led you to work full time for disarmament, justice and peace?

Montgomery: In the 1970s, I was working with students in Albany and Harlem. My awareness came from people who were poor and knew the government wasn't there for them. Eighteen-year-olds had just gotten the right to vote but didn't use it because they felt it was useless. I also read Jim Douglass' book *Resistance and Contemplation*, which helped me to understand the issue of nuclear weapons from a spiritual perspective, that nuclear weapons were evil and were the greatest reality and symbol of what was wrong. Then I heard Daniel Berrigan speak on the need to witness to the Gospel. The combination of my work with the poor, reading Jim Douglass and meeting Dan Berrigan challenged me to join the demonstrations and get involved.

In 1980, you joined Daniel and Philip Berrigan in the Plowshares Eight disarmament action in King of Prussia, Penn. What was that first action like?

I remember joining a demonstration in Washington, D.C., and risking arrest and learning from Jonah House in their sessions on civil resistance that we need to join a community of people who were interested in doing something, getting to know each other and planning an action together. We did a "die-in" at the Pentagon, and I was jailed for one night. Then I was invited to join the Plowshares group. Molly Rush was the only other woman in the group. I went on a retreat, said yes and did the action.

It turned out that it was easy to get inside the General Electric Plant. I helped distract the guard then went inside, and there they were -- the nuclear nose cones. We were able to hammer on a nuclear nose cone to symbolize the need for nuclear disarmament. We used the Isaiah quote as the basis for our witness: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and study war no more." We said people should start dismantling these weapons. It was a symbolic action, but it was also real because we made those nose cones unusable. I spent 11 weeks in jail. Molly and I were separated because they didn't have a women's jail in that area. Because we were separated from each other and the men, we were asked to come out to help organize the support work and prepare for trial.

In all these actions, the Holy Spirit is with us in a very real way. People are able to enter places and witness the evil that's there in a way that's unexpected. Doors open, people look the other way, and you're able to get where you want to go. Even if we are willing to try and fail, the effort is in right direction.

Tell me about your other Plowshares actions and what you learned for this nonviolent resistance to nuclear weapons.

In July 1982, the Trident Nein group went to the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Conn. Four of us got into a canoe and boarded the Trident USS Florida and hammered on several missile hatches. Five of us went to the storage yard and hammered on two Trident sonar spheres. We waited there three hours before we were arrested. We always take responsibility for what we have done. It's interesting that later, women in prison always understand our actions because of their familiarity with injustice, but they never understand why we wait to be arrested. We take responsibility.

I was also part of the Kairos Plowshares and the Kairos Too Plowshares in New London, Conn. I spent the most time in prison, nearly two years, for the Pershing Plowshares action, for trespassing at the Martin Marietta plant in Orlando, Fla. We hammered and poured blood on Pershing II missile components and on a Patriot missile launcher and displayed a banner that read, "Violence Ends Where Love Begins."

Certainly, the Plowshares Eight action stands out because it set in motion a whole movement, but the Thames River Plowshares also stands out because of the sense of vulnerability I felt in the face of our nation's addiction to power and greed, in the face of such blasphemous power. On Labor Day 1989, we swam in freezing water for an hour and a half in the Thames River in Connecticut to reach the Trident nuclear sub, which was being readied for sea trials. Three boarded it from a canoe; those of us who were swimming got caught in the tide. Some reached the side and hammered on it.

I'll never forget the vulnerability of that swim in the face of the most powerful and deadly weapon on earth. If we want to change hearts and minds we have to come from that position of vulnerability and trust in God.

What was your time in prison like?

After the Plowshares Eight, I wasn't afraid of the women in prison, that they might think we were crazy. I always noticed that the women immediately offer you something and ask you want you need. They're very welcoming. That was a big relief and a wonderful experience. There wasn't any violence usually. The women support one another, and they hunger for something spiritual. So we always started prayer groups and Scripture study groups, and the women liked that. That was always positive. But you become very aware of the injustice poor women suffer.

Tell me about your most recent Plowshares action.

In November, 2009, five of us, the Disarm Now Plowshares, entered onto the Bangor, Wash., Trident base, cut through a fence, walked for four hours without being stopped or questioned, and cut through the last two fences where over 24 percent of all US nuclear weapons are stored in large bunkers that look like little cement huts. Our goal was to reach them. I wanted to be vulnerable in the face of these weapons. Later, the government tried to cover up that we got that far, that we faced those bunkers. They knew we were nonviolent, that we were nonviolent demonstrators. Each of us was treated differently. I was given two months in prison in Seattle and four months under house arrest.

You have traveled many of the world's war zones, and went to Iraq at least 15 times since 1990.

I go to love our enemies, but I actually don't consider them enemies because of the great hospitality the people of Iraq show us. I was with the Gulf Peace Team in 1990, just before the first Gulf War. We were a diverse international group in the desert on the border of Saudi Arabia, and we were there when the war began in 1991. It was a very vulnerable place to be, and we heard the bomber planes go over us that first night, and later saw the devastation caused by the war, the bombing of Iraq's infrastructure and the sanctions. The presence of internationals who opposed the war was welcomed by the people. It was appreciated. I went again after the 2003 Gulf War began, and I learned again that our wars are not about freedom but oil and global, political control.

Tell me about your years in Hebron, Israel-Palestine, with the Christian Peacemaker Team.

I had participated on a peace walk in Palestine, and was looking for some way to work for peace. Then I discovered CPT (Christian Peacemaker Teams). They are faith-based, ecumenical and community-oriented, and maintain a peace presence in each place, such as Palestine and Colombia, over many years. We stayed there and were consistent. You get to know the people, what they are suffering and how they feel about the U.S.

Where is God for you in this journey and work for peace?

I couldn't do this work without faith in God. Two quotations are dear to me: First, from Isaiah 2: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and study war no more." The other is from Ezekiel: "Hearts of stone have to turn into hearts of flesh." I've come to believe through prayer and Bible study about God's presence in the heart of the earth. People need to change their hearts before they can change anything else. God is love, but unless we can love each other, we can't know God. We can learn about ourselves and our own hearts of stone as we reach out in love toward others. Even though things don't change right away, and we're not immediately effective, it does happen. It just takes time. Change has to come from ordinary, vulnerable people at the bottom, because the power structure is not going to do it.

Just before he died, Phil Berrigan wrote in his last public letter on the need to "embrace our powerlessness." As we do, we become agents for the power of God to work among us. So we have to deny the self, take up the cross and follow. I recall, too, how St. Paul wrote about the Spirit groaning within the earth. That spirit gives us power and prays through us. That means a lot to me right now. Even when I feel I can't pray, all I have to do is be aware of the Spirit and try to let it lead me.

What are you learning these days as you face cancer?

I'm learning more about powerlessness. I'm learning to let go, to be detached. I've been upheld by our elderly sisters who pray for me and support me, and that power of prayer is very real to me. I feel it. So I'm learning again that God does the work, not us.

What advice do you have for those who care about peace, justice, nonviolence and disarmament?

I remember Liz McAlister saying once, "Whatever issue you work on is connected to all the other issues." That means we have to go deep into the heart of our issue. Also, people should try to join or form a community for this work of justice and peace. We want the world to become a community, and it's hard, so we have to try to do that ourselves. And we want to form a community conscience that can take a stand on these critical issues. We need other people to help us. With others, we can reflect together on how to resist, and take action that comes from a place of prayer and faith and depth.

What gives you hope?

What gives me hope are the ordinary people who get involved, who take one step out of their comfort zone and

join the work for peace, such as the many people in the streets right now with the Occupy movement. We're all learning that when we powerless people come together, we have power.

I also have hope in knowing that God's power and God's nonviolence are stronger than violence and war. Love is stronger than evil, hate, fear or war. The opposite of love is fear, and the government tries to keep us in permanent fear. But when we come together in love and struggle for peace, we are no longer afraid and we can change things. As we trust each other and God, our fear lessens. So we can't be afraid to do the right thing. Love is always stronger, and that gives me hope.

** The original version of this column said Montgomery was involved in seven Plowshares anti-nuclear disarmament actions, which is incorrect.*

***

John Dear is currently speaking about his new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], 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. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [3]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [4] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[5]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[6]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[7]*, are available from Amazon.com.

We can send you an e-mail alert every time an On the Road to Peace column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions. **E-mail alert sign-up** [8]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add On the Road to Peace to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on 04/30/2017 - 17:44): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/violence-ends-where-love-begins-conversation-sr-anne-montgomery

Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60P
[2] http://www.johndear.org
[3] http://www.fosna.org/
[4] http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1
[5] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1
[6] http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1
[7] http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1
[8] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup