

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 29, 2013 at 11:57am

New book on civil disobedience reads like a peace movement retreat

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week, the Sierra Club announced that for the first time in its 120-year history, it encourages its members to participate in acts of civil disobedience with 350.org and The Hip Hop Caucus against the evil Keystone XL pipeline Feb. 16-18 in Washington, D.C.

"Civil disobedience is part of a great American tradition," Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club, said on NPR the other day. "It's helped to bring our country out of its darkest hours. And so we believe that civil disobedience will help us to create a breakthrough political environment where we're able to achieve solutions to climate change that have eluded policy makers over the last several years."

Let's hope so. Of course, Michael Brune is right. In every major movement in our nation's history -- the abolitionists, the suffragists, the labor movement, the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement -- the breakthrough occurred when good people broke bad laws and accepted the consequences. But we seldom hear about our own historic legacy of civil disobedience in the mainstream media. We're rarely told about its connections with spirituality and faith -- how, for example, Jesus practiced civil disobedience repeatedly and was eventually arrested, imprisoned and executed for it. Instead, we're dismissed for attempting it, as if we dare think that we ordinary people could make a difference.

Along comes oral historian Rosalie G. Riegler with two massive new books that put the questions of civil disobedience and its consequences front and center. They are the fruit of many years of hard work and hundreds of extensive interviews, and should be required reading for anyone interested in civil disobedience and its consequences. Let me recommend first *Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family and Community*. Next month, I'll write about the second volume, *Crossing the Line*.

What a fascinating read. Gleaned from 200 interviews, Riegler offers 70 conversations with people who have gone to jail or prison over the last few decades to oppose war and nuclear weapons. *Doing Time for Peace* tells their stories, their rationale, their motivations, their preparations; the actions, trials and imprisonments; the problems they encountered; the lessons they learned; and the sense of meaning they discovered. It's an astonishing achievement, a collection activists will return to for the rest of our lives.

Here we have homemakers, carpenters, social workers and teachers -- and the well-known practitioners such as the Berrigans, Liz McAlister and Kathy Kelly. Many of the resisters are Catholic Workers who spend their lives going from soup kitchen and shelter to jail and prison for peace, then back again.

The book is divided into the following sections: anti-Vietnam war resisters; the Berrigans; Plowshares activists; Catholic Workers; resistance community members; resister families; and recent activists who have been imprisoned for protesting the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Dan McKanan's introduction gives an excellent overview of the legacy of civil disobedience worth the price of the book itself.

He quotes Henry David Thoreau's famous mandate: "Under a government which imprisons anyone unjustly, the true place for a just person is in prison." I remember reading those words in a seminar while I was a college student at Duke University and being electrified at Thoreau's insight. Later, I found the same teachings in the Gospel. I've been privileged to meet and know many of the resisters featured in this book, and I continue to learn from all of them and to struggle with this hard truth.

I'm a big believer in the power of story and wish those of us who struggle for disarmament and justice had time to share our stories with one another, that together we could reflect on our life journeys out of the culture of violence and war and into the life of nonviolence and peace, and the necessary nonviolent resistance that comes with peacemaking. In a sense, Riegler makes this possible by gathering together these interviews from nonviolent resisters across the country. Their stories are amazing, provocative and moving, and reading them is like being on the best peace movement retreat ever. They give me hope that indeed there is a strong movement of committed peacemakers trying to follow Jesus, using the tactics of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and resisting our culture of war. In some ways, these humble resisters are the real leaders of the country, even if we never hear their voices on NPR or the nightly news.

"Prison is not an easy place or a safe place," my friend and longtime activist Frances Crowe explains. "It's very hard. But there's also a wonderful sense of community. In 2004, I was arrested in New York City. We blockaded the recruiting station at Times Square and eighteen of us were arrested. The women were all together in one tiny cell. It was a rich, rich six hours. We started by each one telling what aches them the most. It was beautiful. Then we went around again and talked about what we were doing about it, what we were working on in our community. Then the last one was where we find our joy and hope. And that was just great! When they told us after about six hours that we were going to be released, we felt we'd been really privileged to have that sharing together in a way that we wouldn't have out in the world."

"What we do is very little, we know," my friend Kathleen Rumpf shares as she discusses her 1983 Griffiss Plowshares action. "People ask me all the time about effectiveness and I just don't know. I could go nuts if I asked myself if I'm effective while I'm in a jail cell. I want to be effective. All of us want to be. But I also have to let go of that. This is a witness that goes beyond being effective, that goes into what

I believe we should be doing, into faithfulness."

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"Our idea was always of a Gandhian campaign, never primarily civil disobedience," Jim Douglass explains with his wife, Shelley, as they tell stories of their resistance against the Trident base near Seattle and the infamous nuclear White Train, their repeated arrests and jailings. "Leafletting was primary, not civil disobedience. We always felt there has to be a context, and the context has to be agape or Gandhi's vision of satyagraha, truth-force. In a sense all life is a Gandhian campaign or a Gospel story. The idea is not to do leafletting or civil disobedience or anything else; it's just to keep following the truth as deeply as you can. And if you keep doing that more and more deeply, they kind of converge, I believe, at the Cross."

It's so refreshing to hear how people have chosen to respond to war, nuclear weapons and empire, how they have been willing to suffer for their nonviolent resistance, how thoughtful they are about these serious choices. *Doing Time For Peace* inspires and challenges, but most of all offers a shining collective wisdom, which I think boils down to, if you will permit me, sharing in the Paschal Mystery -- the cross and resurrection -- of Jesus.

"Do serious stuff but don't take yourself too seriously," activist Mike Miles advises. "And have a sense of history -- how long it's been going on. I remember we used to think we were doing something new. Then you find out that people have been doing this forever." *Doing Time for Peace* gives us that sense of history.

"Why are these people jailed when they acted for peace?" Bill Quigley asks in his afterword. "National and international laws are violated repeatedly in the cause of war. Why are there no presidents in jail? No generals? No secretaries of state or defense? No war profiteers? Why just these people acting for peace?"

"Despite the years in jail, these are stories of hope," Quigley concludes. "St. Augustine told us that hope has two beautiful daughters -- anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and the courage to do something about it. The hope of the people in this book gives us all reason to think more deeply about what we can do for justice and peace and the courage to do something about it."

I highly recommend *Doing Time for Peace* for the stories, the inspiration, the hope and the lessons learned. May it push us all to continue doing what we can for justice and disarmament.

John Dear will lead a retreat on nonviolence with Roshi Joan Halifax on Feb. 15-17 at the Upaya Zen Monastery in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak for the abolition of nuclear weapons with Martin Sheen and Archbishop Desmond Tutu at an international anti-nuclear conference March 2-5 in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in Pennsylvania. 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. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* 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*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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