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When conscience and a passion for peace lead to jail time

by Colman McCarthy



DOING TIME FOR PEACE: RESISTANCE, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

By Rosalie G. Riegler

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In March 2004 Rosalie Riegler, a professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan from 1969 to 2003, was one of eight Catholic Worker peace advocates arrested for trespassing at Nebraska's Offutt Air Force Base, the command center for the military's entire nuclear arsenal. At her bench trial, Riegler lucked out. She received no jail time. Her punishment was a verbal punch from the judge, scolding that she "was old enough to know better."

Maybe. If she didn't know better, it was clear she wanted to know more, starting with questions about the other disturbers in the Offutt Eight. What motivated them? And questions about the much larger community of war resisters who take to heart Albert Einstein's advice: "Never do anything against conscience, even if the state demands it." What effect, Riegler wondered, does imprisonment have on those who defy their government's military violence with acts of personal nonviolence? Do marriages and relationships endure while one partner is in a cell and the other is home raising the children? How do the willingly incarcerated deal with the reality that American militarism rolls on unabated? How do they

feel about of getting free room and board at the government's expense, when the money could be used in a social program?

Detailed and insightful answers to those and other questions can be found in the pages of *Doing Time for Peace*. For three years after the Offutt experience, Riegler interviewed 173 conscience-driven people who took deliberate actions, from destruction of weapons to burning draft cards, to resist the war policies of a government that Martin Luther King Jr. called the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world." Withholding complicity with leaders who wage and fund the violence, they joined the tradition of imprisoned dissenters that include the sung -- Eugene Debs, Norman Thomas, Dorothy Day, the Berrigan brothers, David Dellinger, Howard Zinn, Joan Baez, Ammon Hennacy -- and the unsung.

It is mostly the latter grouping whose words Riegler gathered with an MP3 recorder with a lavalier microphone. "They come from metropolitan areas and from family farms," she writes, "from Seattle and San Francisco, from Baltimore and Boston." Their jail and prison experiences range from the notorious Los Angeles County Jail to Alderson Federal Prison. "Some have spent years in prison, some just a few days in jail. Some served "easy time," some carry lasting scars."

At sentencing time, nearly all came before judges who, like the berater who laid into Riegler, had neither sympathy nor empathy for the accused. One exception was federal Judge Miles Lord of Minnesota. At sentencing time in 1984 for John LaForge and Barb Katt, whom a jury found guilty of doing \$37,000 damage to the computers of the Sperry Corporation, a nuclear weapons firm, Lord asked: "Why is there one kind of justice for the rich who are making weapons to bring down the Earth and a totally different kind of justice for these two who have very few resources and just want to prevent nuclear war?" Lord, who would likely have been appointed to the Supreme Court had his Minnesota friend, Hubert Humphrey, won the 1968 presidential election, sentenced LaForge and Katt to six month unsupervised probation. No sentence at all, in other words.

Riegler, whose earlier works include *Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out For Peace and Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her*, graduated from St. Mary's College in South Bend, Ind. She lives now in Evanston, Ill., to be close to her children and grandchildren. "Dorothy Day changed my life," she writes of a chance meeting in 1968. Inspired, "I became active in nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam War and helped to found the Saginaw Valley Peace Watch in Saginaw, Michigan, where I lived for 40 years."

In the closing pages of *Doing Time for Peace*, which stands as a major contribution to the literature of conscience, Riegler writes of those she interviewed: "We must ask ourselves. Why were these people jailed when they acted for peace? 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?"

What we need to wonder is whether the passion for war resistance is fading, the energy all but spent by a generation of pacifists that had Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan on its hands. Instead of nuclear annihilation at the top of the threat list, today we have global warming appearing to edge it out. While speculating on whether doing time for peace has passed its time, it's worth remembering that going to prison for peace has nearly always been a part-time action amid a full-time commitment. Riegler offers examples: Willa Bickham and her husband, Brendan Walsh, who in 1968 started Viva House Catholic Worker in Baltimore; Jim and Shelley Douglass, who serve families at Mary's House Catholic Worker in Birmingham, Ala.; Claire and Scott Schaeffer-Duffy at Sts. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker in Worcester, Mass.; Liz McAlister of Jonah House in Baltimore; Bill and Sue Frankel-Streit of the Little

Flower Catholic Worker House in Virginia; Frank Cordaro of the Des Moines, Iowa, Catholic Worker; Arthur Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House in Washington, D.C.

These former inmates have long been engaged in another method of doing time, bonding for life with victims not of military wars but economic wars waged daily on the hungry, the jobless and homeless -- the prisoners of poverty. Standing with those victims can demand as much heroism as defying the wars of guns and drones, and may surpass it.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace and is a former *Washington Post* columnist.]

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