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'Bidder 70' focuses on climate activist Tim DeChristopher

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Edward Snowden's revelation earlier this month to *The Guardian* that the U.S. government keeps phone records of nearly every American is shocking, disturbing and, alas, to be expected. We've become a culture of unbridled corporate greed, unchecked violence and global warfare that serves the 1 percent and hurts the world's poor, hungry, sick and children, not to mention the earth itself, so it's no wonder Big Brother is monitoring us all. Every day, we lose a little more democracy to the system, and unless we all stand up, speak out and take action, we will find ourselves in some new kind of "global totalitarianism."

But like millions, I'm deeply moved by Snowden's bravery. For me, he's a hero in the Gandhian/Christian mode who risked his life for truth in an effort to wake up 300 million Americans about the reality of our national security state.

He reminds me that in the end, positive change for truth, justice and peace comes when people take nonviolent risks. Many people are making great sacrifices for humanity and creation, and it's that selfless spirit that makes the difference.

An excellent new documentary, "Bidder 70," tells the story of another young hero's great risk on behalf of the environment. It's a moving film with an inspiring message calling us to work on behalf of the environment and humanity. It also takes us through the step-by-step experience of the consequences of a serious civil disobedience action.

On Dec. 19, 2008, in Salt Lake City, grad student Tim DeChristopher entered the Bureau of Land Management Oil and Gas lease auction, the Bush administration's last-ditch effort to sell off our national park lands to the oil companies, as if he were an oil company rep. He was asked if he was a bidder, so he

said yes and was given a paddle. He started bidding and won 22,000 acres of pristine Utah wilderness surrounding Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. He bid \$1.8 million with no intention of paying for it and was arrested.

His civil disobedience action brought the auction to an abrupt halt and saved forever that beautiful wilderness land from oil company destruction.

A month later, Barack Obama became president, and on Feb. 4, 2008, new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar invalidated the entire auction. But the Obama administration indicted DeChristopher on two federal felonies, facing penalties of up to 10 years in prison and \$750,000 in fines. He spent two years awaiting his trial, which began Feb. 28, 2011. He was sentenced to almost two years in prison. (I interviewed him there two years ago.)

Filmmakers Beth and George Gage started filming "Bidder 70" right after Tim's arrest. They followed his case and filmed his public appearances, his nine trial postponements, the rallies, his conviction, his sentencing and his eventual jailing.

Tim was released in April as "Bidder 70" premiered. It's amazing now to see Tim walking around the red-rock cliffs near Moab, where I was last week, on land adjacent to Arches National Park, which he saved, reflecting on his action, the consequences and the need to take new risks for the earth. "To see the land look this beautiful and know that it will now remain this beautiful," he says, walking through Arches, "I could never regret what I did."

"We have to break out of the political system we're in and find a new way forward," he tells a crowded church one month after his arrest. "That's the task before us." With that, he starts to cry and apologizes for getting so emotional. "This is the prime moral imperative of our generation. ... The most loving stance we can have for those people is to fight them."

"If you look at the facts, it's hard not to feel despair," he says at one point. "But if you look at the movement, it's hard not to have hope: hope that we're not just going to survive, but that we're going to completely overhaul the system and create a more just world."

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"Nonviolence does not mean being soft," he explains. "It's strong peaceful resistance."

"Bidder 70" features interviews with Robert Redford, Plowshares activist John Schuchardt, and anti-Vietnam War activist David Harris.

"All those guys on Wall Street are taking the country down, and not one of them is going to jail," Redford says, "but they're sending this kid to prison for 10 years. It's unconscionable. It's profoundly wrong."

"Bidder 70" is worth getting and showing to your peace group, church group, youth group, classroom, environmental group or family. It will inspire you to take a stand for truth, justice and peace and do what you can for truth, justice, the poor, disarmament and the earth. "Bidder 70" will be available next month from firstrunfeatures.com.

On June 25, DeChristopher is scheduled to be on "The Late Show with David Letterman." Then he moves to Boston to start Harvard Divinity School, where he was offered a full scholarship. He hopes to get a theological background to continue his climate change activism and serve as a Unitarian minister.

Edward Snowden and Tim DeChristopher remind me of Cesar Chavez's famous quote: "When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determine what kind of men and women we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be human is to suffer for others. God help us to be men and women."

Edward Snowden, Bradley Manning, Julian Assange, Tim DeChristopher and so many others have taken great risks and made enormous sacrifices for us all. The best show of gratitude we can make is to take our own new risks and steps for truth, justice and peace, that we might ease the suffering of humanity, create new cultures of nonviolence, end corporate greed and global warfare, and protect creation itself.

John Dear will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. John is now working with the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* 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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