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From: **Jim Forest** <jhfo...@gmail.com>

Date: Thu, Dec 28, 2017 at 9:12 AM

Subject: Re: "More on the theory and practice of Nonviolence... ONE TRUE WAY ... Love" by Kara Speltz, CW Oakland, CA

Dear friends,

The current discussion of weapon damage as a method of war resistance that has been ignited by Tom Cornell's article on nonviolence in the current Catholic Worker has got me thinking.

One of my problems with property destruction is secrecy. If you tell the people making or guarding the weapons that you were coming, they would not let you in. It is that simple. The only way around it is to take pains not to be expected. You are obliged to be secretive. There are events in life where secrecy is necessary, even contexts in which life-saving actions are difficult or even impossible unless there is secrecy. For example here in Holland, my home since 1977, one had to be highly secretive about the people you were hiding during the period of German occupation. Think of Anne Frank.

My guess is that even in circumstances where the only way to save life and struggle against evil powers is to live and operate in secrecy, everyone pays a price. What I noticed in the resistance groups I was a part during the Vietnam War was how much suspicion there was within the groups preparing major acts of civil disobedience. Inevitably there were worries about FBI infiltrators. Time and again the question was, "Is so-and-so to be trusted?" Various people were suspected of working for the FBI and were forced out of the groups they were a part of. For those wrongly suspected it could be deeply embittering. Eventually, in courtrooms, it became absolutely clear who the actual informers were. I don't recall the people suspected of spying ever having been the right people. Ironically, sometimes it was people who had been trusted the most who turned out to be helping the FBI. (Think of Boyd Douglas, mailman for Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister, in the Harrisburg case.)

So we are talking about forms of action in which secrecy is a given and about the suspicions that secrecy, of its nature, tends to generate, and the possibility that considerable interpersonal damage may be the consequence of misdirected suspicion. Apart from other factors, this ought to make us very cautious about getting involved in actions in which secrecy is essential.

Another issue that must be considered: Things very rarely go as planned. In the case of the Milwaukee Fourteen action, in which I was a participant, I am still troubled by the cleaning woman — an elderly refugee — who discovered us emptying files inside the draft boards, was deeply upset, and tried to call the police. When two members of the group restrained her, she became hysterical. What if we had caused her to have a heart attack? What if she had died? While I don't regret our action, what we did could have gone very badly off tracks and generated headlines that centered on a dead cleaning lady.

Another problem that has long bothered me was the way in which people were at times manipulated — "guilt-tripped" — into taking part in high-risk actions. This is not only a problem of actions aimed at property destruction but just about any act civil disobedience likely to result in long sentences. Any group involved in trying to get other people to take part is going to have to struggle with the temptation to become manipulative. The kind of civil disobedience in which I was deeply involved came to involve a lot of guilt-tripping. At that time we had people who tended to talk about actions in which there was a likelihood of long prison sentences as being "Serious." As in: "Are you ready to take part in a Serious action?" One felt the capital "S" in the way such questions were asked. Anything that did

not involve the risk of long-term imprisonment was dismissed as less than serious if not inconsequential

While we are all called to be peacemakers, we are each in the permanently awkward position of having to work out what that means in my particular case — who I am and what God calls me to do with my unique mixture of gifts and tendencies and limitations. This involves ongoing struggle with not only demands that governments may make but also our peers and heroes, and that last part is often even more difficult. The most important thing I can possibly do is what God leads me to, which may seem quite minor to others, even to those whom I most admire. But if I do otherwise, however useless or irrelevant or unimportant or meager it seems, I am leaving my conscience behind.

The shaping of one's conscience is about as hard a piece of work as I can think of. It is the search for one's real identity, finding out who we really are. It is finding out what it would be like to fully recover in ourselves that it means to be made in the image and likeness of God.

A question raised by all this is, of course, what do we make of Jesus throwing the money-changers out of the Temple? Is this the prototype for Christian resistance to militarism?

It is a lightning-like event in Christ's life: turning over the tables of commerce in a place of worship and using a whip to drive away the money-changers. If the story does nothing else, it should at least shave away the sugar-coating that often gets put on Jesus. The Lamb of God breathed fire.

Yet it is striking to notice that Jesus didn't enter the armories of the Roman occupiers or their collaborators. He didn't even disarm his own disciples. At the time Jesus was arrested, Peter had a sword. Jesus' last miracle before the crucifixion was to heal the injury Peter caused. Only afterward did he tell his followers that whoever takes up the sword will die by the sword. (I suppose Peter intended to strike a deadly blow in Jesus' defense, but all he did was chop off an ear; it seems Peter wasn't very skilled in handling weapons. In the gospels we hear no more of Peter's using a weapon. He seems to have thrown away his sword that night and never got another.)

The point is that Jesus did not force Peter or anyone to be disarmed.

Most of the civil disobedient actions I was closest to — all during the Vietnam War — involved the destruction of draft records. After that war finally ended in 1975, the Plowshares movement gradually emerged with its focus on damaging weapons. Some of these actions have helped raise awareness important questions, but I wonder if the damage caused makes it any more likely that the people who make the weapons or want them are brought closer to disarmament? I can imagine that if I had a gun and someone damaged it or stole it from me, I would be inclined to get another and maybe even two. I think I might become more suspicious, more fear-driven, more dependent on police and armies.

I understand that for those now in prison for Plowshare actions raising such questions probably makes for hard reading. I recall writing to Dorothy Day from prison, taking issue with her criticisms of draft record burning. I didn't change her mind, but her response made clear that she had a deep sympathy for what motivated me. She pointed out that we were performing one of the major works of mercy: visiting the prisoner.

In Christ's peace,

Jim Forest