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# My friend Daniel Berrigan: 1921-2016

He died 10 years ago today: Legendary priest, poet, prophet and peacemaker

JOHN DEAR

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## Daniel Berrigan, 1921-2016

“One is called to live nonviolently,” Daniel Berrigan once wrote, “even if the change one works for seems impossible. It may or may not be possible to turn the U.S. around through nonviolent revolution. But one thing favors such an attempt: the total inability of violence to change anything for the better.”



In some ways, that statement sums up the life and teachings of the legendary priest, author, poet and activist Daniel Berrigan, my friend and teacher who would have turned 100 on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The only way to survive in the world of violence, indeed, to live and thrive and even make a difference, he insisted, was through the daily life of creative nonviolence.

Dan was famous for his way with words. He put an original twist on everything, making any statement for justice and disarmament more mysterious, poetic, challenging even mystical.

Twenty years ago, when I was going through his archives at Cornell for my collection, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, I discovered his unpublished notes for a talk he gave on nonviolence, probably in 1964 or 1965. He spoke of “the nonviolent mystique,” which he said was more important than “the nonviolent tactic,” and went on to speak about “the nonviolent mystique in action.” Such puzzling expressions still have the power to take us deeper into self-understanding, and the contemplative depths of movement-building.

“Nonviolence sees itself at its best, as indivisible, and at its least, as potentially universal, that is, as a way of life that is simply human,” he said. “So you always note among responsible people both a profound spiritual root and a profound political responsibility.”

Here was his point: the nonviolent person was “a person of history and a person within history, the person who believes that history has a future, the one who within normal times can save normal times from their idolatries—neglect of the poor, growing bourgeois selfishness, weapons of war, and the other realities around us. So the nonviolent person is a person there. Period. In normal times, in crucial times.”

That, to me, as his friend, editor, fellow priest, and now literary executor, sums up the extraordinary, prophetic life of Daniel Berrigan: he was a person of nonviolence within the history of violence who through mystique and action helped transform the times and even history toward nonviolence. I don’t know what greater compliment can be paid of anyone.

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I first met Dan soon after entering the Jesuits in the early 1980s, at the Kirkridge retreat center in Pennsylvania. We stayed up late that first night talking. I remember asking him how in the world I could ever work for peace.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked me. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t live in fear. Live in faith and hope and peace.” I was shocked. No one ever said such things to me. I decided then and there to give it a try. Later, I realized: we all need a teacher who tells us not to be afraid.

Right from the start, I saw his fearlessness. To me, he was Gandhi. He was a tower of faith, so it felt like I was sitting with St. Peter or St. Paul. In fact, I had never meet anyone before who exhibited such faith. I’m not sure if I’ve ever met anyone like that since. Dan believed in God and Jesus, but as the God of universal love and as the instrument of that daring, universal nonviolence love, and he acted like he believed. And paid the price. Dearly. He let the chips fall where they may, as he used to tell me. But no matter. He kept going, right until his last breath, trusting in the God of peace, cursing the false gods of war and violence, adhering to the nonviolent Jesus, and doing what he could to spread the revolution of Gospel nonviolence.

The next morning, Dan stood in front of a little podium before our small group of retreatants and started to talk about Jesus, using the letter to the Ephesians as his text. He said:

**The world is a kingdom of death, and into this world walks the great Yes of God, the Christ, bringing trouble and all sorts of dislocations, unmaskings, law-breakings, and truth-telling. The disarmed God and the disarming of God in Christ is the great scandal of history. We are not yet a disarmed church because we are not yet worshippers of a disarmed God. God comes to us disarmed in Christ ... Christ does the wrong things, in the wrong places, at the wrong time, to the wrong people. Today, we are asked to live out the drama of the disarmed**

**Christ in a world armed to the teeth. To confess Jesus these days is to work for disarmament, justice and peace.**

I was astonished then, and I'm still astonished. I know these quotes by heart because I still have the notes I took that morning long ago. Dan told me that following Jesus meant working publicly for peace and justice. If you are not working for peace and justice, you are not following Jesus. It doesn't matter how pious you are, how connected you are to a religious institution. Discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus in a culture of permanent war and violence requires radical, active, creative, public nonviolence.

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Daniel Berrigan was born on May 9, 1921 the fifth of six boys. He grew up in Syracuse; entered the Jesuits in 1939; was ordained a priest in 1952; and published his first book of poetry, "Time Without Number," in 1957, which won the Lamont Poetry Award. Dan quickly became well known as a poet, and published a book a year from then on, some 50 books of poetry, essays, theology studies, journals, plays, and scripture studies. At Dan's 85th birthday party, Kurt Vonnegut said to us, "For me, Daniel Berrigan is Jesus as a poet."

By the mid-1960s, with his brother Phil, Dan became a leading voice against the war in Vietnam. On October 22, 1967, there was a massive mobilization on the Pentagon. Dan took a busload of Cornell students to the protest and suddenly, they all marched forward to face arrest, so he joined them. He was the first priest in U.S. history arrested in the cause of justice and peace, and with that, believe it or not, opened up a new tradition in the Catholic Church that continues to this day.

In February 1968, he traveled to North Vietnam with Howard Zinn. While there, the United States bombed Hanoi. They hid out in a shelter for a full week as U.S. bombs fell above him. He got the point. He was ready to up the ante.

On May 17, 1968, a month after the killing of Dr. King, Dan and Phil and seven others entered a draft board house in Catonsville, Maryland, took some 300 draft files out to the parking lot and, in front of the press, poured homemade napalm on the draft records and burned them. He then distributed one of the greatest statements in resistance literature:

*“Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, for the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise.”*

Their action attracted massive press coverage around the country, even the world, and eventually led to over 300 similar demonstrations that systematically ended the draft and hastened the end of the war. You will not read this anywhere, nor will you hear about this on Ken Burns' PBS documentary on the Vietnam War. There is no mention of the Berrigans, though I tried my best to reach out to the prestigious filmmaker.

The draft board raids were the key. In the days before computers, when type-written records were it, the destruction of paper records throughout the Northeast meant that thousands of young men could not be drafted to kill for the US! The days of the Vietnam War were numbered.

Dan and his friends were, of course, found guilty. He spent the summer of 1969 writing his popular play, “The Trial of the Catonsville Nine,” but the war only worsened. So instead of reporting to prison, in April 1970, he went “underground.” For months, Dan traveled around, speaking to the media, appearing on the national news, writing major articles against the war, and infuriating J. Edgar Hoover and his henchmen.

In the summer of 1970, he appeared one Sunday morning in a Philadelphia church to give the sermon. “We have chosen to be powerless criminals in a time of criminal power,” he told the congregation. That August, he was

arrested on Block Island, Rhode Island, and sent to Danbury prison where he barely survived the next few years.

Dan became one the most well-known priests in the world, if not its most well-known, the world's first radical priest since Edmund Campion was hunted down by the British royalty. He consistently called the Church to abolish the just war theory and return to the nonviolence of Jesus. He was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, interviewed by none other than Dick Cavett, and referred to in songs by Paul McCartney ("Too Many People") and Paul Simon ("Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard"). Given the church scandals of today, it's hard to imagine his radical daring-do.

While underground, for example, Dan wrote an open letter in the Village Voice to the Weathermen, inviting them to reconsider their violence and use the tactic of nonviolence in their resistance to the war.

"The death of a single human being is too heavy a price to pay for the vindication of any principle, however sacred," he wrote.

That, I submit, is his most important teaching and worthy of reflection for the rest of history.

In other words, he said, there is no cause however noble for which we will ever again support the taking of a single human life. We do not kill people. We do not support killing. We do not kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong. We work to stop the killing. And so, we will not join the U.S. military, we will not send our kids into the military, we will urge young people to quit the military, and we will resist the military and its wars for the rest of our lives. The future is a world without war, a new culture of justice and nonviolence that we can barely imagine, but is within our grasp if we dare work for it.

One of the most amazing aspects about Dan and Phil Berrigan was that they kept at it. The press grew bored, the crowds stopped showing up, their book

sales dwindled, the movement died, the world worsened—and they kept at it. That is one of their greatest legacies.

On September 9, 1980, Dan, Phil and six friends, walked in to the General Electric headquarters in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania and hammered on unarmed nuclear weapon nosecones. The Plowshares Eight were arrested, convicted and faced up to 10 years in prison. Theirs was the first of some 100 “Plowshares actions”—including the one I did with Phil in North Carolina in 1993, for which I faced 20 years in prison. Here’s what Dan said during his famous 1981 trial:

The only message I have to the world is: We are not allowed to kill innocent people. We are not allowed to be complicit in murder. We are not allowed to be silent while preparations for mass murder proceed in our name, with our money, secretly ... It’s terrible for me to live in a time where I have nothing to say to human beings except, “Stop killing.” There are other beautiful things that I would love to be saying to people. There are other projects I could be very helpful at. And I can’t do them. I cannot. Because everything is endangered. Everything is up for grabs. Ours is a kind of primitive situation, even though we would call ourselves sophisticated. Our plight is very primitive from a Christian point of view. We are back where we started. Thou shalt not kill; we are not allowed to kill. Everything today comes down to that — everything.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Dan spoke each week around the country. He continued to publish a steady stream of poetry, essays, journals and then, a long series on the Hebrew prophets. He served as a hospital chaplain in a New York hospital for the poor, and then at St. Vincent’s Hospital, ministering to AIDS patients. In 1984, he traveled to El Salvador and Nicaragua, and later published his journal from the experience, “Steadfastness of the Saints.” In 1985, he traveled to South America where he helped out in the movie, “The Mission,” with Robert DeNiro, Jeremy Irons and Liam Neeson.

Throughout those years, Dan formed and participated in a little Manhattan peace group, which he named “Kairos.” There we met with friends every other Tuesday night for 30 years — one of the greatest experiences of my life. Every few months, we planned nonviolent actions and got arrested against some injustice, usually at the military recruiting station in Times Square or the Riverside Research nuclear weapons laboratory (until they closed it!) or the U.S.S. Intrepid War Museum on the Hudson River. Along the way, Dan was supported by our two greatest friends—actor Martin Sheen and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark.

By the mid-2000s, Dan was frail and tired. He was never sick; literally, he never suffered any major disease, never had cancer, never had surgery. In fact, he never took a pill! But he began to spend long hours every afternoon in bed. By 2010, he was actively declining. We moved him to the Jesuit infirmary in the Bronx, where I visited him every three months over the next few years until his death.

What people do not know is that he was resented, if not actively, hated by other Jesuits since the 1960s. No Jesuit should become that famous, no matter what, so he was despised by many. I remember that during practically every visit to the Jesuit infirmary during those years, most of the other Jesuits would avoid him so as not to have to speak with him—all because of his public stand for peace. Some would not get in the elevator with him. His friends and relatives, on the other hand, surrounded him with love, and he knew it. And so, he felt loved till the day he died on April 30, 2016, one week before his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday.

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I spent a thousand evenings, maybe thousands of evenings with Dan, over the decades, and he would always stop the meal or the visit or the trip, and insist that his guests go around and share about their lives, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. Every occasion in his presence turned into a life-changing, spiritual experience. In that sense, he really was a Christ-figure.

He was concerned about our lives and what we were doing with the precious gift of life, especially faced with this all-consuming culture of death. “What are we doing with our lives? What does it mean to be a human being? Can we become people of nonviolence?” These were questions I heard Daniel Berrigan ask repeatedly.

You can find clues in his poetry and writings:

*A fairly modest urging—  
Don't kill, whatever pretext  
Leave the world unbefouled.  
Don't hoard.  
Stand somewhere.*

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*The trouble with our state  
was not civil disobedience  
which in any case was hesitant and rare...  
— our trouble  
the trouble with our state  
with our state of soul  
our state of siege —  
was  
civil  
obedience*

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*Walking by the sea  
I put on like glasses  
on a squinting short-sighted soul  
your second sight  
and I see washed ashore*

*the last hour of the world*  
*the murdered clock of Hiroshima*

“We have assumed the name of peacemakers, but we have been, by and large, unwilling to pay any significant price,” he wrote in *No Bars to Manhood*. “And because we want the peace with half a heart and half a life and will, the war, of course, continues, because the waging of war, by its nature, is total — but the waging of peace, by our own cowardice, is partial. There is no peace because there are no peacemakers. There are no makers of peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war, at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.”



Dan taught us to let go of results and to work for justice, disarmament and peace as an ordinary part of our day-to-day lives, whether or not it would make a difference. Do the good because it's good, he said. Speak the truth because it's true. Work for peace and justice because that's what the God of peace and justice wants. Do what we can, and leave the outcome in God's hands. From now on, nonviolence and nonviolent resistance are our ordinary day-to-day life. Just trust that it will one day bear good fruit.

When I went to him for advice as a 22 year old novice, he said: “All you have to do is close your eyes to the culture and open them to your friends.” When my friend Ken Butigan sought him out for advice, Dan said, find a good group of friends that you can pray with and march with, and everything will work out.

“Some people argue that equanimity achieved through inner spiritual work is a necessary condition for sustaining one’s ethical and political commitments,” he once said in an interview. “But to the prophets of the Bible, this would have been an absolutely foreign language and a foreign view of the human. The notion that one has to achieve peace of mind before stretching out one’s hand to one’s neighbor is a distortion of our human experience, and ultimately a dodge of our responsibility. Life is a rollercoaster and one had better buckle one’s belt and take the trip. This focus on equanimity is actually a narrow-minded, selfish approach to reality dressed up within the language of spirituality.” This again is quintessential Berrigan.

**“I know that the prophetic vision is not popular today in some spiritual circles,” he continued. “But our task is not to be popular or to be seen as having an impact, but to speak the deepest truths that we know. We need to live our lives in accord with the deepest truths we know, even if doing so does not produce immediate results in the world.”**

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“If you are going to spend your life resisting death,” he told me when I was 22, “you better learn how to live life to the full.” He both resisted death and lived life to the full more than anyone I have ever known. He walked every day, enjoyed healthy food and a drink or two every evening, and loved friends and laughter and nature and poetry and books and people. At the end of our regular daily community evening Mass, before drinks and dinner, he offered the (hilarious) ritual announcement: “We’ve been good long enough.”

Dan lived as if the resurrection of the nonviolent, revolutionary, executed Jesus was true, that the worst had already happened, that the outcome was

indeed in better hands than ours, and that despite the evidence, there is reason for hope, and all we have to do is go forward and enact that hope in organized grassroots movements of disarmament, justice and peace.

“Jesus didn’t have a mean bone in his body,” he said to me and friend once when we were having a mass and a picnic in Central Park. It was Easter Sunday—I don’t remember when—and I was commenting that I was appalled that Jesus even came back, and that he remained so nonviolent and loving after all he been through, including his arrest and execution. His response remains with me to this day. Dan taught that the resurrection of Jesus meant we were called to carry on his campaign of nonviolence, and live out the “slight edge of life over death.”

This was the breakthrough of Daniel Berrigan in modern Christian history. Here’s a favorite passage he wrote in an obscure publication long ago, which I hold as one of his greatest teachings:

“Once there was a dead man, a criminal, a subject of capital punishment. And lo! He refused to stay dead. He stood up. As the authorities shortly came to sense, this was an earthquake in nature; in the nature of law and order, in the nature of death, the nature of war. For in the nature of things, as defined by the nation state (a great one for deciding what the nature of things is) — dead men stay dead. The word from Big Brother, the word that gives him clout, inspires fear, is—a criminal, once disposed of, stays disposed!

Not at all. Along come these crazies shouting in public, “Our man’s not dead, He’s risen!” Now I submit you can’t have such a word going around, and still run the state properly. The first nonviolent revolution was, of course, the Resurrection. The event had to include death as its first act. And the command to Peter, “Put up your sword.” So that it might be clear, once and for all, that Christians suffer death rather than inflict it.

All worldly systems and arrangements are simply by-passed by the Resurrection,” Dan said on another occasion. “If death has no hold over

people, in the sense that they've exorcised their fear of death — then what's left worth fearing, or worth hoping, from any worldly structure? They deserve, one and all, the feisty appellation conferred on them by Dorothy Day, 'The filthy rotten system.' I take it she was referring to their main function, multiplying the metaphors and means of death. The end of such a world, as she realized, was not only near. The end has occurred.

Dan walked and talked and practiced resurrection. Dan referred to all his peace work as living in the resurrection. That's why I define resurrection as having nothing to do with death, having not a trace of violence in you. Resurrection means total nonviolence. Dan knew our survival was already guaranteed, so he said, we need not be afraid, or violent or discouraged. We are heading toward resurrection! Here, in my opinion, is his greatest teaching:

Since 1980 and all the Plowshares actions, some of us continue to labor to break the demonic clutch on our souls, of the ethic of Mars, of wars and rumor of wars, inevitable wars, just wars, necessary wars, victorious wars, and say our no in acts of hope. For us, all these repeated arrests, the interminable jailings, the life of our small communities, the discipline of nonviolence, these have embodied an ethic of resurrection. Simply put, we long to taste that event, its thunders and quakes, its great Yes. We want to test the resurrection in our bones. To see if we might live in hope, instead of the thicket of cultural despair, nuclear despair, a world of perpetual war. We want to taste the resurrection. May I say we have not been disappointed.

That's the gauntlet that Dan threw down before us — to taste the resurrection, to pursue the heights and depths and length and breadth of creative nonviolence.

Despite the insanity of the world and the times, we have been given a beautiful example of a Gospel nonviolent life. Like Dan, we too can stand up and say No to racism, war, greed, poverty, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction. We too can base our lives on loving kindness, building community, practicing nonviolence, speaking out publicly, advocating

for a new culture of peace, and spreading the vision of a new nonviolent world far and wide. This is the mission, whether or not we make a difference, and like Dan, we can go forward, knowing that we, too, will not be disappointed. May we carry on his mission of peace and nonviolence, and herald the coming of a new world without war, poverty, racism, nuclear weapons or environmental destruction, a new culture of justice and peace.

—May, 2021

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