

From POW to POC

Fifty-four years ago on the third day of January I was captured just outside of Bastogne, Belgium and sent to a German labor camp. One year ago on the twenty-second day of January, having been tried on a misdemeanor charge I was found guilty and sentenced to serve time in a Federal Prison Camp. Was it not for those intervening fifty-four years, comparing my three months as a Prisoner of War with my six months as a Prisoner of Conscience, I might have said the latter "was a piece of cake." But that would be going too far.

"From POW to POC" is an apt even serendipitous assignment. The first words in my presentence statement to the court and the Judge a year ago were: "Strange as it may sound, today began for me in WWII. As a Prisoner of War in Germany, I often witnessed the suffering warfare inadvertently inflicts on innocent people. On one occasion after a long day's march I stumbled on the body of a tiny girl no more than three years old. She had been killed by a misdirected bomb from bombers I had earlier cheered on their way as they flew overhead."

In the days and weeks ahead I wrestled with questions I had never thought to ask. Who or what is an enemy? How do we become such? How do I become such? Although I would not have thought to label it so, it was a time of real spiritual turmoil for me. I also told the Court "Today I do not regret my military service, but I fervently hoped and vowed back then, naively, that never again would I be involved with the killing of innocent people. In a strange way (perhaps not so strange) I felt complicity in the death of that little girl, and it helped to shape the rest of my life." Thus, I told the Court, if I remain silent—in the face of the atrocities committed by graduates of our SOA—if I do not speak out, my silence gives assent, and I become an accomplice again.

In the years since I have had the opportunity and occasion to speak out many times on many issues. I've been arrested five times, gone to trial three times, was given probation once, had the case dismissed once and, as you know went prison once.

LETTERS: *Something special in our water.*

In prison I learned many things:

- Many inmates are eager to help a newcomer get adjusted and learn the ropes
- "Don't get sick and don't get hurt"
- What everybody knows . . . Don't try to break up fights
- What everybody knows . . . "Naturally prisoners will claim innocence"

- I deserve to be here; you don't!

Bitterness about the injustice of the justice system—excessive sentences: mandatory minimums which take no account of special circumstances or an unblemished past; over-zealous, ambitious prosecutors and judges going for maximums to prove they are not soft on crime; offers of minimum sentences or reduced charges for names of other possible suspects. When they either wouldn't or couldn't name others they wound with the maximum: Use of tainted witness; lies to get accused to plead out; threats to involve family members using conspiracy charges to coerce a guilty plea.

Intimidation is clearly the name of the game. And it reminds me of the SOA. Of course pressure to name names and save yourself some prison time or members of your family the risk of indictment with you is only psychological torture. And a minimum sentence of three, five, or 10 years is far from equivalent to being physically tortured, sometimes to death. Nevertheless the tactics are similar to those that have been taught to Latin American military personnel at the SOA and which they use against their own people. A purpose for our training that is never acknowledged is intimidation—to inhibit civilian dissent, to keep their people frightened and passive.

It was much milder form of intimidation, but that is precisely what our government was about when they gave a bunch of nuns, teachers, vets, social workers and clergy the maximum for a misdemeanor. They hoped and expected to intimidate and thus silence demonstrators against the SOA.

And, of course, there are people in prison who are innocent. Following the release after fourteen years in prison, of a man exonerated in two killings, the Deputy D.A. said “In a sense the system worked, although it took some time.”

In Columbus, Georgia protesters' numbers have grown from two or three to seven thousand in eight years. We gather there on or near the anniversary of the brutal murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her fifteen year old daughter by graduates of the SOA. On that occasion we memorialize all the victims of the School. As preparation for our vigil and for possible participation in civil disobedience the word *discernment* takes on special meaning and importance. We are always asked, especially those who decide to risk arrest, to take a pledge of nonviolent resistance which includes the requirement to show respect for those who oppose us and defend them against any abuse. Everyone is encouraged to do what I think Joyce was thinking of when he determined to discern "what the heart

is and what it feels." Each is encouraged to encounter the reality of experience and discern their own nature and the various biddings of their conscience.

In November, 1998, the government discovered that anger and violence are often counterproductive. Seven thousand people came to vigil and 2,319 crossed the line onto the base, risking arrest.

The Army surrendered. Intimidation had not worked. You can imagine the reaction of those of us who continued the vigil and then received word that the Army was releasing everyone, arresting none. But it is not the Army I want to focus on. It is the vigil -keepers and the peace-seekers who crossed the line that are notable. The sense of community, of solidarity that had been achieved in just few days was a tiny miracle. Seven thousand people of all ages, people with white hair, black, red, green and purple hair; people with ear rings, nose rings, and who knows. There were Catholics, Protestants, Jews, unaffiliated people, and Unitarian Universalists. There were Native Americans, pagans, deists, theists, atheists, et al. 7,000 people jammed into a very small space, long lines at portapotties, difficulty moving from one place to another . . . and I never heard a cross word while I was there.

The "line-crossers" had been taken by bus off the base via another exit and released several blocks away. As they approached on foot an open corridor through the crowd was formed for them so that they could reach the front and pass by the platform where some were singing to them. As people passed through the corridor they were cheered, had their hands shook, patted on the back sometimes stopped by someone they knew for a brief hug. And the faces . . . one woman, almost my age, her face beaming kept saying, "Oh my, oh my, I feel like a celebrity."

And there were men and women with glowing faces and tears running down their cheeks. I watched and wondered. And then it dawned on me. They were tears of joy and relief. Relief that their action had not cost what they feared it might, but it had changed them. There is a joyful exhilaration in risking something with others for the sake of some deep-down fundamental conviction that has to do, I think, with belonging and caring-with loving. It is a spiritual experience. That final day ended with a worship service which was concluded by a young Native American whose demeanor, alone, was enough to keep all 7,000 of us attentively quiet. He sang a chant of peace for us and then ended by hoping that he and we would all be the same kind of people the next day at home that we were that day there.

A Spiritual experience. I'm sure that you each have your own unique sense of its meaning, if you are not totally puzzled by it. I don't believe it can ever be

adequately defined, only described and perhaps not then. But these words by Alice Walker might help.

"There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment, and still be at peace. During my years of being close to people engaged in changing the world, I have seen fear turn into courage. Sorrow into joy. Funerals into celebrations. Because whatever the consequences, people standing side by side have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other enough to be that--which is the foundation of activism."

[Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*]