

Monday, July 30, 2007

### **"Numbers don't matter. What matters is your commitment to peace."**

When my friend and mentor Jun Yasuda was doing a days-long dry fast (with just one drink at the midpoint) in 2000 for Mumia Abu Jamal on or near his prison grounds, an interviewer asked her on day five of her fast, in her very cold tent, how she expected to influence many people by doing her action so far from the nearest city and often with few people seeing her other than the prison workers. Jun-san responded: "Numbers don't matter. What matters is your commitment to peace. Gandhi was just one person, and he did very simple things. He walked to the ocean [in protest of a British monopoly on salt]. He fasted. He was one person. But he was very conscientious. We should be too. Think of one person fasting outside the White House. That act has spiritual power. More, maybe, than big numbers." I first learned about Jun Yasuda soon after Gulf War I started, and when I was feeling torn about doing business as usual during a war that I strongly felt was started too prematurely, at my then corporate law firm in downtown Washington, D.C., which, fortunately, I left in July of that year to join the Maryland Public Defender's Office. To try to get some balance, during lunchtime I would visit the White House-facing Lafayette Park two blocks away, to be with the anti-war demonstrators. On one of my visits, I saw a Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist nun drumming to the beat of the odaimoku, composed of the words "Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo" (here being chanted by my subsequent and current friend and teacher Sister Takako Ichikawa, who is at Nipponzan Myohoji's Washington, DC, temple, whose webpage I maintain here). Having taken to Japan and Japanese, particularly with my business trip there five years before, I found an opportunity to speak with this intriguing woman, Jun Yasuda, who was fasting on green tea for a month for peace. She was at once soft-spoken and driven to spread the message and spirit of peace. Jun-san invited me to the celebration of the end of her fast. When I arrived, I asked her thoughts on the overlapping of Bush I's order that same day to end the Gulf War, which coincided with Jun-san's pre-planned day to end her fast. Her only response was to give me a knowing smile, unless it was a smile of recognition that the miso soup was ready. True to her proclamation that "numbers don't matter -- what matters is your commitment to peace," Jun-san became my key teacher for being peaceful internally and externally. Although I never became a full pacifist and believe strongly in individuals knowing how to self-defend against physical attacks, I have turned my focus on Jun-san and her teachings many times when I have been tempted to react with anger at opponents, rather than with powerful calm. Fortunately, particularly by now, I usually avoid expressing such anger. I have written here and here about how critical and powerful have been the peaceful and harmonious path to me, both personally and professionally. Often I am helped on this path by others who have struggled to attain and maintain internal and external peace while so much turmoil, injustice, unfairness, and violence surrounds them. Although I do not primarily pursue this path from a religious perspective, many, but not all, of these role models do, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. Here is an overview of some of these people. In 1999, I joined Jun Yasuda and other peace marchers at the last day of a New York prison peace walk, for several hours across from the United Nations, praying and drumming for peace and holding banners for peace. There, I met a woman who told me about sometimes spending time at Jonah House, a peace community in Baltimore. I had heard of Jonah House, and had been interested in meeting the people there. She gave me the e-mail contact, and I got on Jonah House's e-mailing list. By the end of that year, not only did I meet everyone at Jonah House, but I joined with Ramsey Clark to defend four Plowshares activists, two of whom lived at Jonah House, those being Susan Crane and Philip Berrigan. Defending the Plowshares activists brought me not only the ability to overlap my strong desire to defend pro-justice activists -- although to this day I still do not agree with their approach of hammering on armaments -- but led me to a lifetime of deeper learning about living and following the peaceful path, without ever changing my religion. I have written here about the Plowshares activists who I defended: Elizabeth Walz, Susan Crane, Stephen M. Kelly, S.J., and the late Philip Berrigan. They all are remarkable people who are willing to pay the high price of living their convictions of taking the radical peaceful path to stop war. While defending the Plowshares, I also met their many supporters, friends and, in Phil Berrigan's instance, family members. One of them is Elizabeth McAlister, who is Phil's widow. As I stood outside the courthouse after both sides had rested, with the jury to deliberate the next day, Liz invited everyone to give me a group hug. The Plowshares and their supporters are all about hugging, spiritually and literally, and I deeply felt their positive spirit. That evening, during a gathering of the Plowshares' supporters, I spoke with Liz about my struggle about this being the first time I would not give a closing argument at a criminal trial. Before trial, Phil Berrigan and Elizabeth Walz went pro se, with Anabel Dwyer as their standby counsel, Susan Crane went with Ramsey Clark as her attorney, and Steve Kelly went with me as his lawyer. The defendants had decided to stop participating in the trial after the judge prevented any substantive testimony from their depleted uranium expert witness. Instead of lecturing me about my duty to follow my client's wishes, Liz encouraged me to look within me for the answer. This helped me incredibly at feeling more peaceful the next morning when, in reply to the judge's invitation for me to make a closing argument, I said "Good morning everyone, good morning Steve [who, joining the decision of all defendants, stayed in the courtroom lockup, with the judge piping the proceedings to them by speaker]. Defendant Steve Kelly chooses to make no closing argument." Before the defendants stopped participating at trial, and during the case

in chief of the first defendant, Susan Crane, in walked witness Bishop Thomas Gumbleton as a character witness to Susan's peacefulness. I had spoken with Bishop Gumbleton before trial, to arrange his appearance and testimony. The bishop title had never gone to his head, and he invited me to call him by his first name. When he walked into the courtroom, all the dozens of Plowshares' supporters stood in profound respect for him, in a fashion that seemed to go well beyond being thankful for someone as high-level in the Catholic Church as a bishop understanding and supporting Plowshares actions of hammering on armaments and pouring the activists' blood on them. Apparently as a price of expressing such views and taking part in one or more direct actions himself, Bishop Gumbleton eventually became a bishop without a parish. His peacefulness is captured on this video. Among the Jonah House members during the Plowshares trial were Dominican Sisters Carol Gilbert and Ardeth Platte. They both served federal prison time, along with Sister Jackie Hudson, for a subsequent Plowshares action against nuclear weapons in Colorado. Here is an excerpt from a documentary on their Plowshares action, on which you will hear Carol Gilbert speaking. Here is a video of their return to the site, where you will hear Ardeth Platte speaking. Ardeth Platte has a very infectious calm and serenity about her. One day she was telling me about her experience at a peace action outside the Pentagon during holy week. One particular Pentagon police officer would see the protesters there every year. Ardeth told me that she felt she had touched his heart this time around. She only had love for him, and no animosity that he was spending his working hours protecting the war machine that she so much wants to dismantle. Carol Gilbert, like numerous other Plowshares activists, does not seem to fit any stereotype of someone who would risk prison for an action that might not even draw much public or press attention. She seems to share Jun-san's view that "numbers don't matter -- what matters is your commitment to peace." She exudes kindness. Phil Berrigan passed away in late 2002, and I write briefly about it here. At Phil's wake, I saw little sadness and much joy, although I figure the sadness still was there. There, I finally got a chance to meet his brother Dan, who, like Phil, remains without any big ego and with a big heart, without his worldwide fame changing that. Here is a video about the Catonsville Nine action that I first associated with Dan and Phil. A more recent peace action in which some Jonah House members participated is in video here. Their powerful demonstration was in support of the Guantanamo prisoners' rights. About a dozen chained themselves to the White House fence, which was the concluding point of the demonstration. Those who did not pay a fine for their arrest were convicted this month in separate rapid-fire bench trials in federal court, and sentenced to time served. Prompting me to write this blog entry at this time was learning about the recent passing of Harmon Wray, a peace activist whom I have never met. Thanks to Susan McDonald at Research & Writing Blog for blogging about him. Harmon Wray's very peacefulness is captured in this video, in which he proclaims: "The worst thing you can do for your country is support it when it fails to live up to what it says it believes in." A commitment to non-violence "takes more guts in many ways than military action does." Each day, I do my best to learn to live peace with the lessons and examples from the above-discussed pacifists, even though I am not a full pacifist myself. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:05