“Rich in detail, context and compassion, Carole Sargent’s book illuminates how religion and spirituality motivate resisters, and how resisters build a multi-generation resistance against militarism and injustice.”

—Dan Zak, reporter for The Washington Post and author of Almighty: Courage, Resistance and Existential Peril in the Nuclear Age

“Carole Sargent tells this holy story of nuclear disarmament with compassion and insight, sharing the lives of the Transform Now Plowshares participants with deep gratitude and respect. Imagine a culture and judicial system (ours) that sends an 84-year-old nun to prison for three years for protesting nuclear weapons. Imagine a society that feels compelled to work building nuclear bombs in order to provide for their families. The call of a well-informed conscience to sacramental action, to disturb the status quo of a permanent war economy is the solution to our dilemma of the United States in the twenty-first century. May we regain our souls through the sharing of stories such as these of faith, hope, and love.”

—Martha Hennessy, a granddaughter of Dorothy Day and member of the Kings Bay Plowshares 7 and the New York Catholic Worker

“With courage and singleness of purpose, the valiant peacemakers in this book who have committed their lives to rid the world of nuclear weapons never acted alone, but always in community—be it Catholic Worker, Plowshares, family—with hearts longing to bring about the beloved community. They are beacons of hope in our divided world.”

—Clare Pratt, RSCJ, former Superior General of the Religious of the Sacred Heart
People of God
Remarkable Lives, Heroes of Faith

People of God is a series of inspiring biographies for the general reader. Each volume offers a compelling and honest narrative of the life of an important twentieth- or twenty-first-century Catholic. Some living and some now deceased, each of these women and men has known challenges and weaknesses familiar to most of us but responded to them in ways that call us to our own forms of heroism. Each offers a credible and concrete witness of faith, hope, and love to people of our own day.

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Transform Now
Plowshares

Megan Rice, Gregory Boertje-Obed, and Michael Walli

Carole Sargent
To Ardeth Platte, OP

Thanks for supporters, all the hidden, humble people . . . who are doing the real nitty gritty work behind us, following us up, writing to us in prison and making things happen that would not otherwise happen.

Anne Montgomery, RSCJ
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A STATEMENT FOR THE Y-12 FACILITY

Come let us go up
to the mountain of God
to the house where God lives.
That God may teach us God’s ways
That we may walk in God’s paths. . . .

For God will bring justice among the nations and bring peace between many peoples. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not lift swords against nations. No longer will they learn to make war. Come, let us walk in the light of God. Isaiah 2

Brothers and sisters, powers that be, we come to you today as friends, in love. We, like many of you, are people of faith, inspired by many who have gone before us, people like the prophets, Isaiah and Micah, Jesus as well as Gandhi, and the countless who call us “to beat swords into plowshares.” May we now transform weapons into real, life-giving alternatives, to build true peace.

We come to the Y-12 facility because our very humanity rejects the designs of nuclearism, empire and war. Our faith in love and nonviolence encourages us to believe that our activity here is necessary; that we come to invite transformation, undo the past and present work of Y-12; disarm and end any further efforts to increase the Y-12 capacity for an
economy and social structure based upon war-making and empire-building.

A loving and compassionate Creator invites us to take the urgent and decisive steps to transform the US empire, and this facility, into life-giving alternatives which resolve real problems of poverty and environmental degradation for all.

We begin together by preparing our minds and hearts for this transformation. And so we bring gifts to symbolize this transformation, instruments that serve life, peace and harmony, truth and healing to this nuclear weapons plant and everywhere.

We bring our life-symbols:
- blood, for healing and pouring out our lives in service and love. Our very humanity depends on lives given, not taken. But blood also reminds us of the horrific spilling of blood by nuclear weapons.
- our hammers, to begin the transforming work of deconstructing war machines, creating new jobs which address real problems, eliminate poverty, heal and foster the fullness of life for all.

We bring our truth-symbols:
- candles, for light transforms fear and secrecy into authentic security.
- flowers, the White Rose of forgiveness, acceptance of friendship and genuine reconciliation.
- the crime tape and an Indictment, which point out truth and end lies which have blinded and dulled the very conscience of nations, and serve the interests of justice for healing global relationships.
- a Bible, to remind ourselves to become sources of wisdom and to inspire our acts of conscience as we carry on.
Lastly we bring food, symbolized by this bread, strengthening us as we build this new world where people do not feel compelled to build nuclear weapons in order to feed their families. So may we break and share this bread together in joy and genuine friendship as we work together, empowered by our Creating God

TO TRANSFORM NOW!

Michael Walli  Greg Boertje-Obed  Megan Rice shcj
Transform Now Plowshares
Editorial Note

Sr. Megan Rice, SHCJ, died shortly before this book’s publication. However, the author consulted her on all of it, and she was pleased with the cover. She is shown tucked safely between Michael and Greg, whom she considered her protectors, just as when they entered the free-fire “kill zone” of a nuclear warhead facility.

A few days before Sr. Megan died, Sr. Clare Pratt, RSCJ, and the author visited her at the Holy Child Center in Rosemont, Pennsylvania. She beamed contentedly, but was uncharacteristically frail and quiet. Both sisters received Holy Communion from a volunteer minister while the author was out getting their lunch. They enjoyed a time of shared silence, and then Sr. Clare sang “Let Us Break Bread Together” to Sr. Megan. After the food arrived, Sr. Megan took two crackers from the lunch, held them up, and then handed them to her guests with a questioning smile. An attempt to share Eucharist, perhaps? Before they left, one of them placed sunflower blossoms in individual cups all over her room. They didn’t know it would be their last visit. She slipped away later that week surrounded by SHCJ sisters and family members, including her namesakes Megan #2 and Megan #3. Those sunflowers, a universal symbol of nuclear disarmament, were all around her.
The book now remains just as it was when she was with us. The author didn’t wish to revise into the past tense, and it is still dedicated to Sr. Ardeth Platte, OP, as Megan surely would have insisted.

So in union with the communion of saints, we hope you will join us in saying (and praying), with abundant gratitude for her life’s work, Sr. Megan Rice, SHCJ, ¡Presente!
Liturgical Press initially imagined this as a book about one anti-nuclear activist, Sr. Megan Rice, written by a different author. I came to the project in early 2017, when Rice and I were neighbors in Washington, DC. I was living in the Catholic peace community that became Anne Montgomery House, and she lived at the Sisters of the Holy Child house on Newton Street NE, just three blocks away. The original author stepped back and generously recommended that I take up the project. At Rice’s insistence, the scope grew. She showed me that this book must be about the larger community of Plowshares, because you can only make sense of one activist by discussing all of them. So with the blessing of Liturgical Press director Peter Dwyer, editor Barry Hudock (who first conceived of this book), editor Stephanie Lancour, and publisher Hans Christoffersen, it now extends to Plowshares more generally.

Rice’s life has already been told in rich detail. Especially helpful is Washington Post reporter Dan Zak’s Almighty: Courage, Resistance, and Existential Peril in the Nuclear Age, and I eagerly recommend it.¹ Zak artfully interweaves her story with those of fellow activists Greg Boertje-Obed and Michael Walli, in the context of the growing threat of nuclear weapons. I am grateful to him for meeting with me,
returning Rice’s papers and other documents he used, and allowing me to compare my original material with his meticulous work.

To understand why this book needed to be broader than others in the “People of God” series, it helps to consider the collective nature of the anti-nuclear movement known as Plowshares. It is not an established organization. Instead, it is a name for a series of interrelated peaceful protest actions at nuclear facilities and military bases that depend on the discernment of a group formed for the purpose. Each disperses after all of its members’ prison sentences end. The less visible often do the most to support those in the media spotlight. As Dominican sisters Ardeth Platte (pronounced “Platty”) and Carol Gilbert put it, “We always talk about a circle. Everybody in that circle is as important as everybody else. Whether they’re home praying, or they’re the person that might drive the car, the person that might do support work in prison, they’re all part of that circle. Whenever there’s a Plowshares action, the media highlights one or two people and then they get all the press. They get all the stories. It goes down that way historically. But it might not even be correct.”

As longtime Plowshares activist and Catholic Worker Paul Magno said at an event he moderated on the evening of the first day of the Transform Now Plowshares trial, “Lots of people do lots of things to make this hammer fall.”

For that reason, this book focuses on the trio known as Transform Now Plowshares. In the very early morning of July 28, 2012, Rice, Boertje-Obed, and Walli entered the Y-12 National Security Complex, a federal nuclear facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which billed itself proudly at the time as “The Fort Knox of Uranium.” As veteran Plowshares activist John LaForge commented to the movement’s newspaper of record, *The Nuclear Resister*, “Uranium processed [at Y-12] puts the ‘H’ in our H-bombs.” It stores enough of
that element to make ten thousand nuclear bombs, and the Y-12 Plowshares action became the largest breach in US nuclear security history. Rice received three years in prison, while Walli and Boertje-Obed received longer sentences of five years. However, just two years later a higher federal court reversed the most serious conviction, for sabotage, and the trial judge released them from any further prison time. It marked an important win for Plowshares in an appeals court.

Although it has been positive for the Plowshares phenomenon generally that Megan Rice is mediagenic, hungry news cycles tended to focus on her for problematic reasons. First, her age (eighty-four when she went to prison in 2014). The words “octogenarian” or “senior citizen” occur in almost all of the coverage from the 2010s. As a Seattle Times reporter said of an earlier Plowshares action that directly inspired this one, “It wasn’t so much an A-Team, as an AARP Team,” leaving the troubling impression that the older the activist, the more the action is rendered cute rather than serious. Second, stories focused on her gender, as if being a woman makes civil resistance extra newsworthy. And finally, journalists puzzled over her vocation. Catholic sisters can receive objectifying treatment in secular media, with their protests presented either with the cliches of innocence (“a winning smile . . . quiet concern for everyone but herself,” went one such description), the mouse that roared (“the notion of an octogenarian nun breaching a high-level nuclear facility guarded by machine guns and tanks”), worthy of condescension (“that young lady there brought a Holy Bible,” said congressman at a hearing on the Y-12 incident; “if she had been a terrorist, the Lord only knows what would have happened”), or slap-with-a-ruler ominous.

Journalist and nuclear energy expert Frank Munger noted that the event had made Y-12 an object of humor: “Instead of being compared to the nation’s gold standard, Y-12 se-
curity was suddenly ‘Second to Nun’ and the butt of other jokes and slogans.” When *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who consistently gives Catholic sisters some of their best major media coverage, wrote admiringly that Rice had “masterminded a break-in,” she responded, “Plowshares actions strive to be the result of genuine, communal discernment. There can be no ‘mastermind.’”

Comedian Carolyn Castiglia, an occasional commenter on HLN Headline News, appeared in a warmhearted segment, defending Rice against a colleague who suggested she wasn’t “all there”: “No, she’s totally all there! Why would she be afraid of prison? Prison is a step up from a convent, you know what I mean? She’s used to wearing uniforms, she’s used to eating simple meals. She walks into prison, and she’s like, ‘Oh cool, we can talk here?’ I love this lady. She’s a fierce feminist. I want to know her.” It was a cheerful approach, but it also highlighted why Rice inadvertently got more media than Walli, Boertje-Obed, or most previous activists, and why Transform Now Plowshares became iconic less for the principle of the thing and more for the quirks.

If we can cease thinking of Megan Rice merely as a spunky sister with nothing to lose who raised a ruckus, then we can view all Plowshares activists as they are: principled citizens from various walks of life who make choices according to prayer and the call of their well-formed consciences. To present Transform Now Plowshares in this more accurate context is to leave readers with a much more interesting (and perhaps terrifying) possibility: what if any of us might be called to do something this risky and bold?

Does this mean all of us should participate in a Plowshares protest action? It is difficult to speculate, because Plowshares isn’t quite like anything else, not even twentieth-century movements such as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin’s Catholic Worker, Catherine Doherty’s Madonna House
Transform Now Plowshares

apostolate, or the disrupt-the-Vietnam-draft actions of the Baltimore Four and the Catonsville Nine—the latter burning draft records with homemade napalm in a Maryland parking lot—from which it arose most directly. Plowshares has surely been controversial even among peace activists who debate it vigorously. It disturbs people.

But then, so did John the Baptist.

Speaking of prophets, it is notable that even though global people of faith disagree endlessly about what constitutes scripture, the books of Isaiah and Micah from which Plowshares takes its name aren’t controversial. The two prophets are venerated among many major religions: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christianity; Mormonism; Judaism; and Islam. So when we read Isaiah 2:4—“they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”—and Micah 4:3—“He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”—let us bear in mind that most people of faith in the world understand these passages as being relevant to our own lives and times. As Ardeth Platte commented, “When two prophets do the commissioning, it is very relevant.”

So, given that a majority of the religious world believes a sword somewhere must eventually find its way into the form of a plowshare for Isaiah and Micah to be fulfilled, then if not nuclear weapons, what?

If not now, when?
And if not us, who?

Carole Sargent
Acknowledgments

There have been scores of Plowshares actions in many countries—the United States, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and Great Britain—and the actions now span more than forty years. Jack and Felice Cohen-Joppa, who together edit The Nuclear Resister; Art Laffin of DC’s Dorothy Day Catholic Worker; formerly imprisoned activist Susan Crane; and the late Sr. Anne Montgomery have chronicled Plowshares and related disarmament actions since the first one in 1980. They estimate there have been about 101 as of 2021. Not everyone involved with Plowshares has done so out of a biblical faith conviction, but many have, and many of the secular ones—whether they called themselves Plowshares or not—were inspired by it.

Abundant thanks go to so many who advised on this book, gave interviews, corrected errors, and calibrated my understanding. Thanks are especially due to (alphabetically) Jackie Allen-Doucet of the Hartford Catholic Worker; John Amidon of Veterans For Peace; Mary Lou Anderson of the Western Shoshone Nation; Quaker chaplain John Bach of Harvard; Ellen Barfield of Veterans For Peace; Anne Bennis of Trident Nein Plowshares; Frida Berrigan; Willa Bickham of Viva House; Chief Johnnie Bobb of the Western Shoshone
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So yes, in keeping with Liturgical Press’s People of God series, this book began with the life of one Catholic sister, but now it is an account of the journey of many activists. This is a narrative of their collective story, one that continues to unfold into the twenty-first century.
PLOWSHARES SACRAMENTS: “EVERY MOVEMENT OF OUR BODY WAS A LITURGY”

After anti-nuclear activist Sr. Ardeth Platte died on September 30, 2020, members of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker held her memorial service in her garden. The coronavirus pandemic was in full roar, which meant no big funeral, but this was a cloudless October morning and a lovely time to gather outdoors at least six feet apart and masked. Veteran Plowshares activist Kathy Boylan, who lived in the same community, created an altar featuring Platte’s hammer, a pair of bolt cutters, and a coil of crime scene tape. One of her friends that day brought sunflowers in a vase and placed them to the left. Beside them sat a basket of white roses. Michael Walli also grew sunflowers that dotted the garden, now at the end of their season.

Plowshares is visual and, arguably, liturgical. When Platte had described how she and fellow Dominican sisters Carol Gilbert and Jackie Hudson had approached the silo of a Minuteman missile to hammer on it and paint a cross in their own blood, she said, “Every movement of our body was a liturgy.”¹ Art Laffin continues this image: “For me, the actions that I have been part of were deeply spiritual, even sacramental.”² Megan Rice agreed, “Oh, it was totally a liturgy. That’s why we went in, you know, to prayerfully be at the site. And expose and oppose what was happening there. And you know, in the name of the mind and heart of God, and for restoring justice to our planet. Not only to our country, but to our planet. Restore the possibility of the value of justice reigning on the earth, which is the kingdom of God.”³
Daniel Berrigan wrote, in his 1982 book Portraits of Those I Love, “We do not stand there to play God or to form a theater of cruelty or absurdity. Our acts are simply extensions of the sacraments (baptism, eucharist), celebrations of the liturgical year (Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter, Holy Innocents).”

Bill Frankel-Streit is a former priest now married to fellow activist Sue Frankel-Streit. Before they were married, they participated in the ANZUS (Australia/New Zealand/United States) Plowshares action in 1991. They entered Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York, choosing a day just before the bombers made airstrikes on Iraq, considering such strikes “blasphemous.” When asked about actions in this context, he replied, “It’s like any sacrament. How do you gauge the effectiveness? Well, you don’t. How do you gauge the effectiveness of Eucharist? You don’t. You just surrender to it, and trust and have faith that something is happening. As Dan Berrigan said, ‘We do what is right, just, and good, and leave the results in the hands greater than ours.’ Which is what any sacrament is about.”
CHAPTER THREE

Jonah House Led to Plowshares

Greg Boertje-Obed, Michael Walli, and Sr. Megan Rice have all lived at Jonah House at different times. This Baltimore faith community was founded in 1973 by Elizabeth McAlister, Phil Berrigan, John Bach, Sr. Judith LaFemina, and Fr. James LaCroce, after a year of meetings and discernment, a process that typifies Plowshares. Ever since Phil Berrigan, the Josephite, appeared with his brother Daniel, the Jesuit, in their clerical collars on the cover of Time magazine in 1971, looking more like Jimmy Cagney’s gangster character than Pat O’Brien’s priest in Angels with Dirty Faces, they had been controversial rebel icons both within their congregations and in the world at large. Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister left their respective religious congregations to marry, but in many ways they retained their deep formations. The goal was to feed the hungry and preach peace, and it remains effective in the nuclear resistance, central to the mission of Plowshares.

The Long Stone Gaze

After getting off Interstate 95 in Baltimore and passing the Inner Harbor and Orioles Stadium, you enter Bridgeview-
Greenlawn, with nary a lawn, just treeless streets and stark row houses. People sometimes approach cars at stoplights to beg. Then you hang a left, passing the chain-link fence of a tire-recycling company, find the double mailbox, and suddenly the scene changes from bleak city to lush oasis. Jonah House sits on the property of St. Peter’s Cemetery, and the diocese lets it remain there in exchange for tending the grounds. You might feel you’ve gone back a century when the circa-1890s stone statue of Catherine O’Grady gazes past you from the prow of her funereal ship. Next to a nearby fig tree, also in white stone, an angel interrupts a child at play, gently steering her shoulders from this life toward paradise. Under a pine near the house stands Phil Berrigan’s monument, a sturdy Celtic cross that reads “LOVE ONE ANOTHER.” Elmer Maas, who participated in the very first Plowshares action as one of the “Plowshares Eight” in 1980, has a marker nearby designed by an artist in the community.

Thirty or so friends came together in 1995 for an old-fashioned barn raising to build the current house, replacing the first location, a rowhouse in Baltimore’s Reservoir Hill neighborhood. It is spaciously comfortable, with picture windows, a long dining room table that looks handmade, and abundant plants enjoying plentiful light. The basement that opens to the outdoors has always been a food pantry, serving scores of people each week, some who beg at the cars
waiting at stoplights. When the COVID crisis began in 2020, Jonah House partnered with Tubman House in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood to care for more people.

Jonah House is connected in spirit and history to nearby Viva House, founded and run by Brendan Walsh and Willa Bickham. Walsh was Daniel Berrigan’s theology student at Le Moyne College in 1962–63. He became a member of the International House that Berrigan founded. He and Bickham met Dan’s brother Phil in 1967 and worked with him for thirty-five years. They knew David Miller—credited with being the very first American to burn his draft card for Vietnam, for which he was sentenced to Lewisburg Penitentiary—as Miller and his wife Catherine were both Le Moyne graduates and close friends of Daniel. Walsh and Bickham became part of the support committee for the Catonsville Nine, and Walsh was one of the drivers who took the Berrigan brothers to the Catonsville draft board in May 1968.2

The couple founded Viva House shortly thereafter as, in part, a place for hospitality to activists. Many draft resisters lived with them, including Tom Lewis and John Hogan of the Catonsville Nine and Jim Harney of the Milwaukee Fourteen. The FBI often watched the house and questioned the neighbors. Today Viva House is so iconic that in 2007 it was even featured in an episode of the acclaimed HBO series The Wire, with the couple playing themselves.3 McAlister and Berrigan helped Bickham and Walsh begin and grow Viva House as part of the Baltimore Catholic Worker community. Bickham in turn helped Berrigan and McAlister find the original Jonah House site.

There are many homes in Baltimore that have a careful coat of paint put on by some of the most famous jailbirds in America.

Garry Wills4
Jonah House is named for the prophet who served his time in the belly of a whale, and the name also reminds some people of the leviathan of the US penal corrections system. John Bach says that there was an actual little ivory statue of Jonah that the early founders liked, so they used the name when setting up the house’s first checking account. Author Jim Forest, a longtime friend and collaborator of the Berrigans, considers the name appropriate, since Jonah tried to warn and save Nineveh just as the activists in the house want to warn and save America. The founders designed Jonah House as a place where activists could be known, understood, and—in their characteristically edgy way—nurtured. Although most priests and sisters make annual retreats to refresh the spirit, it was not always possible for Plowshares activists and other Catholic Workers to find retreat directors who could understand and appreciate their unique and exhausting work. Many church leaders disapproved of it. So Jonah House became a designated stopover. It held training sessions on civil resistance, teaching its members how to take direct political action together, including how to do a “die-in” at the Pentagon, how to get arrested (everything from what to wear to how much money to bring to bail yourself out), and how to run discernment weekends that are the usual run-up to a full-blown Plowshares action.

Sr. Carol Gilbert, OP, explains that most Catholic Workers prefer the term civil resistance to civil disobedience, because the former describes activity that is legal, the latter illegal. They avoid strictly illegal actions on principle, as their purpose is not to break the law but to call us to a higher law. Gilbert said that resisters remind the world of the Nuremberg principles defining what constitutes a war crime: (1) crimes against peace, (2) crimes against humanity, (3) violations of the laws of war, and (4) conspiracies to
commit the first three criminal acts. Occasionally, albeit rarely, judges agree.\textsuperscript{8} International human rights lawyer Francis Boyle compares civil resisters to law enforcement, with a duty to hold our government accountable to its own Constitution and to its treaties with Native Americans and others. “Today’s civil resisters are the sheriffs,” he wrote around the time of the troop surge during the Iraq war in 2007. “The Bush Administration officials are the outlaws.”\textsuperscript{9}

“Resister” has a double meaning when you look at it carefully: Re-sister.

\textit{Art Laffin, Dorothy Day Catholic Worker}\textsuperscript{10}

Unlike retreat houses where sacred texts and religious books were the only reading and conversation fare, at Jonah House it was also normal to add multiple newspapers each day, while engaging in near-constant social analysis. The Pacifica news organization’s radio program \textit{Democracy Now!}—where most of the house’s residents have been featured over the years—became a soundtrack. “Everybody knew the routine of Jonah House,” recalls Mary Novak. “We’re up at six, prayer at seven, and we’re listening to Amy Goodman at eight.”\textsuperscript{11} Books such as Howard Zinn’s \textit{A People’s History of the United States} and William Stringfellow’s \textit{An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land} and \textit{My People Is the Enemy} became essential in the early years. This admiration for left-leaning intellectuals was mutual, with Zinn speaking at his friend Philip Berrigan’s funeral, while Goodman recorded it for \textit{Democracy Now!}

The community had only one television, hidden out of sight. Early members perceived quotidian broadcasts as both inaccurate and mind-numbing, although that position has
softened somewhat. In lieu of TV in the evenings, guests such as Anne Montgomery who had “rolled in” (an early Jonah House term for coming off the road for a respite) would join the gathered circle after dinner and share quite literal war stories from her travels in the combat zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, or her exploits being arrested for anti-nuclear activities.

Jonah House differs from Catholic Worker communities in how it functions in the world. Members needed the flexibility to go places freely, whether to the picket line or to prison, so the house couldn’t serve the poor the same way Catholic Worker houses did. Instead, the community painted houses so that when something came up, such as an impending Plowshares action, they would be free to act. However, this could lead to misunderstandings. In some media profiles, for example, Michael Walli was identified as a “house painter,” but it is rarely noted that all of the Jonah House residents from a certain cohort painted houses. They chose the work because it went quickly and paid in cash, which enabled Jonah House members to stick to their ethos of not paying taxes to fund government violence in all its forms. Dull, repetitive painting could also become a form of prayer. As John Dear recalls in his 1995 incarceration memoir, Peace Behind Bars: A Peacemaking Priest’s Journal from Jail, “When [Phil Berrigan] and Liz McAlister are painting houses (to earn a living), Phil takes hours to contemplate the Lord’s prayer and the Magnificat. Liz does the same: no formal prayer time, no long wordy prayers—just a life of contemplative prayer.”

Greg Boertje-Obed said, “[Y]our schedule was flexible. You could go to demonstrations, you could go to jail. There were enough people that the painting could continue with a few people away. Now they mow lawns.”
In fact, knowledge of painting became an asset during the trial for Transform Now Plowshares. Boertje-Obed challenged the government’s assertion that the cost of cleanup was over $7,500 after their action by questioning the need for one hundred gallons of paint for one defaced wall. He estimated one gallon would have been plenty.\textsuperscript{14}

So far the description isn’t that much different from other notable intentional communities, such as Viva House, Twin Oaks in Louisa, Virginia—the oldest continually-running commune in the United States, long-known for nonviolence and political action—or Fr. Edward Guinan’s Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV) in Washington, DC, which famously advocated for the homeless in the 1980s. CCNV activist Mitch Snyder met the Berrigans and John Bach while in Danbury Prison, joined their book group, and embraced their radical Gospel. Although he became the most famous face of CCNV before his 1990 suicide, it was the day-to-day commitment of the Paulist priest Guinan, who founded it, and the visionary leadership of Ed and Kathleen Guinan together after he left the Paulists, that built it into a city icon. These groups lived simply and cheaply as part of their radical solidarity with the working poor.

What made Jonah House special was a particular kind of activist formation that occurred within each participant. As Paul Magno, a Georgetown University alumnus who has lived at Jonah House at various times and who traveled with Megan Rice throughout Europe after her release to share the message, explains, “Jonah House became a graduate school of nonviolent resistance that has incubated scores of individuals, communities, and movements. They have the wherewithal to do this kind of work for decades, rooted in faith and in critical analysis of the world we live in. [People learn to see] through the ‘BS,’ as Phil might have seen it, and
speak and, more importantly, act sacrificially [with] the humane possibilities God made us for.”

Rice lived at Jonah House off and on before and after she left Nigeria. Life in the Jonah House community could take a physical and mental toll, but she felt up to it. Decades of harder living in Africa left her exceptionally well prepared for early mornings and physically demanding actions. Rice met Phil Berrigan at Jonah House and felt great respect for his work, but from a cultural and emotional distance after so many years living abroad. She felt most connected when they did outdoor things with the group, like chopping wood.

To understand why she needed the Berrigan influence to become an activist, and then why she needed to leave, it helps to know more about Phil, who sometimes got lost in the shadow of his more mediagenic brother Dan, but who, in Plowshares and Jonah House contexts, has an interesting central role.

“He again,” he shouted, pointing one large fist at [Phil Berrigan’s] head. “Good God, I’m changing my religion.”

A Catholic FBI agent at the arrest of the Catonsville Nine

Berrigan’s Skirmishes with Empire

The legacy of Josephite Phil Berrigan and his Jesuit brother Daniel is essential to understanding the origins of Plowshares. Although they are both foundational, they can also run away with the story, and one key point of this book is that Plowshares isn’t the work of a few stars, but of many committed people working at a grassroots level. Therefore we’ll consider Phil Berrigan’s life but then move him off the stage, since so many other activists have played such vital roles. Much of
what follows is drawn from his 1996 memoir, *Fighting the Lamb’s War: Skirmishes with the American Empire*.

After a tough childhood in a home that was both loving and violent, Phil Berrigan’s formation—odd in the story of a life rooted in peace, but typical in Plowshares—truly started in the Army. He was a combat soldier in World War II’s Battle of the Bulge alongside his older brother Tom. While their more literary brother Dan, who had physical limitations, entered the Jesuits and became a noted poet, Phil Berrigan was eager to fight what he perceived as a just war. Religious and also trusting his country’s stated reasons for entering the war, he wanted to “join the hunt for Adolf Hitler, to hack him into pieces, and to count the demons as they flew out of his wounds.”  \(^{17}\) He also wanted to punch his father back somehow.

By his own account he became a “highly skilled young killer,” capable with a bayonet and a submachine gun. He witnessed atrocities, such as the time he and a buddy stumbled into a subbasement stacked with bodies in bombed-out Muenster, Germany, where Nazi doctors had performed experiments on corpses. While getting sluged by a father who also loves you while growing up, and then being trained to kill people in a war you learn to loathe, is not a typical background for a future pacifist, it placed him beyond any criticism that peaceniks are either weaklings or unpatriotic. It also made him ready-to-die brave, which is part of why Plowshares has such an edge.

After graduating from the College of the Holy Cross on the GI Bill, he joined the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart (known as Josephites), a religious community of Catholic priests and brothers known for its charism toward and with people of color. Berrigan chose this direction out of his disgust over the blatant, relentless racism he witnessed
in the military toward African-Americans who fought the war. While Megan Rice was finishing her master’s degree in the 1950s, Phil Berrigan was ministering in DC’s historically Black Anacostia neighborhood. When she left for Nigeria in 1962, he was serving a seven-year stint of ministry in a Black New Orleans parish. He eventually came to understand the priesthood as part of the power structure and hence compromised. Connecting racism, poverty, and militarism (taxing the poor to build bombs rather than schools), he began to write. His long pieces in *The Priest* magazine and *The Catholic Worker* newspaper about racial issues in the South made white Christians uncomfortable and brought the censure of his superiors.

Meanwhile his Jesuit brother Dan published his first book of poetry, winning the Lamont Poetry Prize and eventually, after more publications and growing prominence, being nominated for a National Book Award. The Berrigans combined their budding fame with a mutual sense that the priesthood meant more than reinforcing the prejudices of the white, suburban nuclear family and supporting the war-strong US status quo. Emulating French “worker priests” they met in Europe, who walked with their people on the picket lines and hauled nets with fishermen, the Berrigans gradually stepped into meatier roles.

In 1964, when Rice had been in Nigeria for two years and sensed the tensions that would lead that country to civil war and famine, Phil and Dan Berrigan were publicly protesting the Vietnam War in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, with Joan Baez, Rabbi Abraham Feinberg, A. J. Muste, David Dellinger, and many other famous activists. They were all over the papers in the United States, but Rice never heard of them and would not until she returned to New York on her first home leave.
On October 17, 1967, Phil Berrigan and three other demonstrators—the press dubbed them the Baltimore Four—carried out a dramatic public protest. Phil Berrigan wrote, “Tom Lewis, David Eberhardt, Jim Mengel, and I did walk into the Baltimore Customs House. We did attempt to destroy draft records, pouring our own blood over licenses to kill human beings. . . . Vietnam was burning. Watts, Newark, Detroit were burning.” Eberhardt, a poet and musician from a prep school background, went to Oberlin and then dropped out of the Peace Corps. He returned to Baltimore and felt bored teaching at Boys Latin Prep while trying to become “a real person.” Participation in the Baltimore Four animated him, and his only regret is not joining the subsequent Catonsville Nine. He eloquently describes how the preparation of three institutions—prep school, college, and prison—gave his life meaning, and after serving twenty-one months he worked for twenty years within the system, devoting himself to Offender Aid and Restoration, “one of the few ex-convicts who actually found a career because of my prison experience.” He joins many others in framing his prison experience as essential formation for a life of resistance and contemplation.

The Baltimore Four inspired a better-known action that caught Rice’s attention. The protest by the Catonsville Nine on May 17, 1968, essentially became the mother of Plowshares. Phil Berrigan had not even been sentenced yet for the Baltimore Four action when he engaged in yet another shocking protest: “On May 17, 1968, eight friends and I struck again, this time at a draft board in Catonsville, Maryland, where we carried hundreds of draft records into the parking lot and doused them with homemade napalm. . . . We watched the records burn, we prayed, and waited to be arrested.”
The homemade napalm was a protest against the US military’s use of napalm on civilians in Vietnam. Some say Catholic Worker Tom Lewis found the recipe—gasoline and laundry soap—in Georgetown University’s law library. Others have credited it to Jesuit Richard McSorley locating it there, specifically in a Special Forces handbook, but in his autobiography *My Path to Peace and Justice*, McSorley does not take credit for it. Fr. McSorley, who comes into this story later, had been invited to join the group but did not, a decision he attributes to being too concerned about saving his “own sweet skin,” using Dan Berrigan’s words about himself, and one that he, like Dave Eberhardt, later regretted. McSorley was a passionate Catholic Worker who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr., in Selma and who perpetually agitated publicly against ROTC on Georgetown’s main campus. His picture hangs today at the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house in Washington, DC, which he cofounded. He inspired many activists, including his student Paul Magno.

“A moral straight line runs from the Baltimore Four and Catonsville Nine to the Plowshares,” says Magno. “These actions commenced in September 1980. Their most recent incarnation, the Kings Bay Plowshares 7—a group of seven activists, including Jonah House cofounder Liz McAlister, who entered the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in protest against nuclear weapons on April 4, 2018—takes place just shy of fifty years after Catonsville, on the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King’s martyrdom.”

*From the Statement of the Plowshares Eight*

*We commit civil [resistance] at General Electric because this genocidal entity is the fifth leading producer of weaponry in the US. To maintain this position, GE drains $3*
Transform Now Plowshares

million a day from the public treasury, an enormous larceny against the poor. We also wish to challenge the lethal lie spun by GE through its motto, “We bring good things to life.” As manufacturers of the Mark 12A reentry vehicle, GE actually prepares to bring good things to death. Through the Mark 12A, the threat of first-strike nuclear war grows more imminent. Thus GE advances the possible destruction of millions of innocent lives. . . .

In confronting GE, we choose to obey God’s law of life, rather than a corporate summons to death. Our beating of swords into plowshares is a way to enflesh this biblical call. In our action, we draw on a deep-rooted faith in Christ, who changed the course of history through his willingness to suffer rather than to kill. We are filled with hope for our world and for our children as we join in this act of resistance.23

Actions Become Plowshares

The first Plowshares action, commonly referred to as “the Plowshares Eight,” happened in 1980.24 It was conceived in prayer and reflection by Anne Montgomery, RSCJ; Dan and Phil Berrigan; Molly Rush, a founder of the Thomas Merton center in Pittsburgh; John Schuchardt, a lawyer and Marine first lieutenant; Carl Kabat, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate missionary; Dean Hammer, a Yale Divinity graduate; and Elmer Maas, a teacher and musician.

The Brandywine Peace Community in Pennsylvania provided much of their spiritual and financial support, which is why they chose Pennsylvania. Activists in the Covenant Peace Community in New Haven, Connecticut, also supported the action and offered prayerful presence throughout the subsequent trial as well.

Eight peacemakers entered the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, chosen because the plant
manufactured nose cones for Mark 12-A nuclear warheads. They beat on two of the nose cones with hammers and poured human blood on documents, in a manner reminiscent of the Baltimore Four, Catonsville Nine and other related actions such as the Camden 28, Chicago Eight, D.C. Nine, Harrisburg Seven, Milwaukee Fourteen, or Silver Spring Three. Then they waited for arrest, a method that characterized subsequent Plowshares actions. The eight were arrested, tried by a jury, convicted, and sentenced to prison terms ranging from eighteen months to ten years. After a series of appeals over a decade, they were resentenced to time served. The events were depicted in a 1983 movie, *In the King of Prussia*; the eight activists played themselves and the trial judge was played by Martin Sheen.

Phil Berrigan continued to do Plowshares actions for the rest of his life. He and his groups maintained a consistency that differentiated them from grandstanders. As he said in an interview during the period of the trial in 1981,

> What we’re trying to do very, very simply is witness to life and to its sanctity out of our tradition. We are trying to say something about the truth of our times. And the fact that we hang in there over a period of maybe fifteen, sixteen, or twenty years, whatever it amounts to, that’s traceable more to our tradition and to events than any sort of fixation or hysteria on our part—compulsion on our part—that’s not true at all. If the warmakers would stop making the bombs and would go into disarmament, we’d go back to working with the poor, because we come from that tradition. I was serving black people in the deep South for a very, very long time before I got involved in the anti-war movement. And I’d be delighted—if peace were to arrive and disarmament happened internationally—I’d be delighted to go back to that.25
Dan Berrigan never took part in another Plowshares action, notes Magno, though he was a perpetual advocate for them and the people who did them. He was also a character witness for Anne Montgomery at the Pershing Plowshares trial in 1984.

Despite the inherent controversies, many chose to emulate Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister. Daniel Sicken remembers Phil Berrigan’s “walk around the block,” a phrase that became well known among activists for a stroll through the neighborhood near Jonah House where Phil would convince someone to participate. They had learned the hard way not to talk on the phone with anyone, since the FBI had them tapped for years. Sicken recalled actually walking around the Jonah House block with Phil while being invited to join a Plowshares group that was starting to form.26

Many of the voluntary deprivations and practices of the Jonah House community—driving less, not flying in planes unless absolutely necessary, growing or foraging food rather than buying it, staying physically fit to be able to create a ruckus by climbing walls or trees to hang peace banners—prepared hardy souls like Montgomery, McAlister, Rice, Walli, Boertje-Obed, Fr. Steve Kelly, and so many others to put themselves in harm’s way. All of them had developed a deep and daily prayer life, self-possession, and a willingness to be part of a mission greater than their individual needs. Whether they came from the rigors of religious life, lay life in the military, or both, further formation in this unusual and tough context became an all-purpose starting place, giving them a baseline that allowed them to take the next step and participate in more specific processes leading up to either Plowshares actions or missions with international Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Almost all young couples with children learned quickly that it made no sense for both of them to risk arrest together,
for they might be incarcerated at the same time, leaving their children to be raised by others in the community. In her memoir, Frida Berrigan recalled a time in early 1977, when she was three and her brother Jerry was two, that both of her parents, Liz McAlister and Phil Berrigan, were arrested in separate actions and jailed at the same time. They hadn’t anticipated this terrible accident, and it resulted in community members caring for the children full time for three months. In such a tight-knit community this worked out well enough, and the couple who stepped up to help was highly responsible, but Berrigan still recalls tears and nightmares, because it is terrifying for children so small to suddenly lose both parents. This led to a general rule that parents should orchestrate their potential arrests so that children were not left alone. Greg Boertje-Obed and his wife Michele Naar-Obed were careful not to do this to their daughter.27

Rice left Jonah House in 2000, explaining to her spiritual director Fr. Samson that she did not feel she was needed there any longer. Before she did, she was honored to be able to travel with Greg Boertje-Obed and five-year-old Rachel to visit Michele Naar-Obed when she was in prison for a Plowshares action, and Rice felt a growing affinity with that family. She watched Rachel while the parents visited privately, and Rice wondered about how traumatic it must be for a little girl to give up her mother for a prison term at such a young age. She remembers getting down on all fours like a horse and letting Rachel climb on her back for a ride. She and Rachel remain close, and Rice has visited Rachel’s home and family in Duluth.

When Rice refers to leaving Jonah House, she sometimes shrugs and says with a wry smile that she was “fired,” but it wasn’t quite that contentious. It was simply time to go. She sometimes speaks of Jonah House as a specific training
ground for her and then says she “graduated.” Her participation in Y-12 never could have happened without it.

She returned one last time in 2002 to attend Phil Berrigan’s funeral. Then she left Jonah House for what was truly the last time, carrying in her heart its deep and abiding formation.

PLOWSHARES SACRAMENTS: HAMMERS

The words of Isaiah are a powerful driving force for the Plowshares movement. Hammers remind activists that the lofty goal of this work is to abolish nuclear weapons, so that nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (2:4).

Greg Boertje-Obed explained that using a hammer to disarm a weapon can seem counterintuitive, because a hammer is so small and a nuclear weapon is so huge. Some activists don’t even use full-sized work hammers, but rather the lighter type that is easier to carry. There’s no way such a petite tool could truly disarm a Trident submarine the length of two football fields and capable of inflicting the damage of a hundred Hiroshima-type bombs. But the act of hammering, he said, is both a symbol and—they emphasize—an act of actual disarmament at the same time. To illustrate, he recalled hammering on an anti-submarine warplane. “Two of us hammered on a combat helicopter and a fighter bomber jet. Elmer Maas was real big on that. You render it unusable at that existential moment.”

Anne Montgomery said hammering was “both real and symbolic. In other words, we wanted, nonviolently and without threatening anybody, to take apart a real warhead, the Mark 12A, which we knew was being manufactured in the King of Prussia plant. And this is particularly significant
because it is a first-strike weapon and because it shows the corporate connection with the Pentagon, that GE is making a lot of money, you know, millions of dollars.” In a radio interview with Disarm Now Plowshares in November of 2009, she said, “We were convicted for hammering on that with hammers which represent taking something apart to turn it into something useful, like a washing machine.”

Art Laffin said, “When I was on the Trident hammering [with the 1982 Trident Nein Plowshares action], I mean, I was praying. I was praying for my own disarming of my heart, and then to say to the sailors that we encountered, and then going to court and to say to the nation and to the world: ‘These weapons are immoral, they’re illegal. They have no right to exist. Their only purpose is to destroy life. We are here to save life. We can disarm. We can.’ ”

Activist Lynn Fredriksson, who hammered in 1993 at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base with Phil Berrigan, John Dear, and Bruce Friedrich, agreed: “We hammered on that bomber to begin the process of disassembly and conversion.”

The Kings Bay Plowshares 7 used special hammers for their action, made from recast guns. In this sense they used plowshares made from swords in order to hammer swords into plowshares.

Many hammers used by the activists have words on them. For the Y-12 action, Transform Now Plowshares member brought his or her own hammer. Michael Walli brought a ball-peen hammer with a cloth tied to it that bore quotations from Fr. Richard McSorley—“It is a sin to build a nuclear weapon”—and President Eisenhower—“Every dollar that is spent on armaments is a theft from the poor.” Megan Rice’s was a standard hammer with “Swords into plowshares, transform now into life for all” emblazoned on the handle along with the names of Western Shoshone tribe leader Corbin Harney and Rice’s uncle Walter Hooke. Greg Boertje-Obed brought a small sledgehammer
with “Repent! God’s kindom is at hand” burned into the handle. Some Plowshares activists prefer the word kindom to kingdom, for its gesture away from a regal, masculine term, and toward the kinship of community. For her actions, Sr. Ardeth Platte’s hammer bore the painted words “LOVE ENEMIES” and “DO GOOD.” A hammer for the Martin Marietta MX Witness in 1985, a Plowshares-type action performed by Al Zook, Mary Sprung-Froese, and Marie Nord, had an elaborate handle painted white with colorful words that said, “The Earth is the Lord’s and the Witness Thereof,” “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” “LOVE your enemies and PRAY for those who persecute you,” “Behold, I make all things NEW,” and finally, “Jesus Wept.”

Sue Frankel-Streit’s hammer at the ANZUS Plowshares in 1991 said “PREPARE the WAY of the LORD.” Moana Cole’s at the same action said, “FAITH in JESUS is Freedom.” At the HMS Vanguard Disarmament Action in Scotland in 2001, activists had a sign that showed a hammer bending a trident arrow, with the words “Tri-denting it.”

Rice sometimes brings her hammer with her to events, showing it to the audience. She brought it with her to a book signing event at a Washington DC bookstore in December of 2019, which she attended as a contributor to the book, Activist: Portraits of Courage, edited by KK Ottesen. As fans gathered afterward to ask her to sign her portrait in the book, she let people who asked to do so hold the hammer. Some marveled that it was so small.32
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