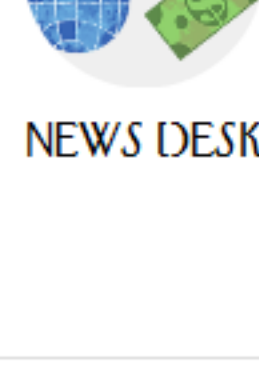


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DANIEL BERRIGAN, MY DANGEROUS FRIEND

BY JAMES CARROLL



The Jesuit poet and antiwar protester Daniel Berrigan in 1972, a week after being released from prison.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN / GETTY

I was a twenty-two-year-old seminarian in 1965, struggling to imagine myself in what already seemed the impossible life of the Catholic priest, when I came upon the writing of Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit poet.

Berrigan, who died on Saturday at the age of ninety-four, quickly came to embody for me a new ideal. He testified, in his expansive life, to language itself as an opening to transcendence. What was Creation if not the Word of God, and what were human words if not sacraments of God's real presence? Writing could be an act of worship. The idea defines me still.

My literary fancy, in truth, had nothing to do with the hard-edged, down-to-earth actualities of Berrigan's poems. But that same style—that rejection of clerical timidity—recruited me to his way of thinking. I met him briefly at a poetry reading that year, and was struck by his rare combination of earnestness and kindness. Yes, I would be like Daniel Berrigan. From then on, I carried his poems with me everywhere. I, too, began to wear the black turtleneck sweaters that he favored.

In my case, emulating Berrigan was dangerous. The abyss of the Vietnam War had already opened, and I had more reason than most to avert my gaze, lest the abyss stare back. My father, an Air Force general, had been my commissioning ideal of the manly virtue I had associated with the priesthood. Now, as the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, he was instrumental in prosecuting the war. At my family home, on Generals' Row at Bolling Air Force Base (our next-door neighbor was Curtis LeMay), I was regularly tutored in the tragic necessities of the killing from its onset. My father was a connoisseur of the Catholic doctrine of just war. His office was at the Pentagon.

In November of 1965, a Quaker pacifist named Norman Morrison immolated himself outside the Pentagon as a protest against the war. The flames on his gasoline-doused body were visible from my father's nearby office. I would later learn that my father was staggered by Morrison's act, even though he regarded it as profoundly misguided. A week later, what for me was an equally shattering protest occurred. Perhaps inspired by Morrison (who, no doubt, had been inspired by self-immolating Buddhist monks in Vietnam), a young Catholic named Roger LaPorte set himself aflame across from the United Nations in New York, where, only a month before, Pope Paul VI had cried, "War no more!"

"I am a Catholic Worker," LaPorte said before dying. "I am antiwar—all wars. I did this as a religious action." Before I had resolved my complicated reaction to LaPorte's death, Daniel Berrigan emerged in the press as associated with it. He had in no way encouraged LaPorte's action, had never approved his self-killing, but he also refused to denounce it. He prayed at LaPorte's funeral liturgy, which was enough to bring down the wrath of New York's Cardinal, Francis Spellman, a good friend of my father's. Berrigan's condemnation by Spellman marked the transformation of the Jesuit's reputation. From then on, he would be known more for dissidence than for poetry.

I clung to his poetry, while the moral acid of the war, and my father's part in it, ate at me inside. Finally, nearly two years later, I dared to trespass on the grass below my father's office at the Pentagon, but only because I knew he would never pick me out of the throng of more than fifty thousand other protesters. Compared to those who defiantly confronted soldiers and police, I was timid and afraid, yet the deed was defining for me. Looking back, I see my participation in the antiwar demonstration as a mundane, somewhat overdue coming of age, the culmination of an Oedipal melodrama. At the time, though, it felt like an act of self-orphaning. Who would be my ethical North Star now?

Unknown to me, Berrigan was at the protest, too. He was one of those with the guts to get arrested. I was consoled and relieved to learn, later on, that the two of us had stood together, if on separate margins of the same crowd. Still Oedipally challenged, perhaps, I needed more than ever the affirmation of a father, and in Father Berrigan I had it. Knowing nothing of my struggle, he was nevertheless authorizing my personal reinvention. I continued in ambivalence and dread even as I more firmly rejected not only my father's position but the world view—as much religious as political—on which it stood. But Berrigan kept demanding more.

About three months after that Pentagon demonstration came the hinge on which the war turned: the Tet offensive, in January, 1968. Eighty thousand North Vietnamese soldiers stormed out of the jungles, wreaking havoc on cities throughout South Vietnam, endangering even the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Claimed as an American victory, Tet showed irrefutably that the United States had vastly undercounted the enemy it faced (a failure that General William Westmoreland later explained away as like "trying to estimate the roaches in your kitchen"). Tet showed the war as the American intelligence failure that it was, although by then my father had, in the secret councils of the Pentagon, long been arguing that further escalations were pointless—arguments he was losing. I did not know that. He and I rarely spoke.

Tet sparked a savage renewal of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. As it happened, a pair of American peace activists arrived in Hanoi just then, on a mission to receive from the North Vietnamese three freed prisoners of war. The activists were the historian Howard Zinn and Daniel Berrigan. Once more, my attention was riveted by the Jesuit, but for Berrigan, too, the experience was transforming. He and Zinn spent their first night in Hanoi in an underground shelter while U.S. bombs fell from the sky—"under the rain of fire," as Berrigan later described it. That night, and on subsequent nights, they huddled in shelters with, especially, children, who for Berrigan obliterated from then on any capacity he might have had to cloak the realities of the war in abstraction. His poem "Children in the Shelter" marks his transformation:

I picked up the littlest
a boy, his face
breaded with rice (His sister calmly feeding him
as we climbed down)

In my arms, fathered
in a moment's grace, the messiah
of all my tears. I bore, reborn

a Hiroshima child from hell.

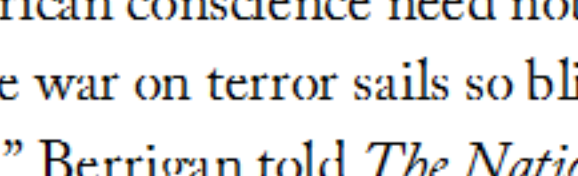
It was children whom Berrigan had uppermost in mind when, four months later, on May 17, 1968, he and his brother, Father Philip Berrigan, and seven other Catholics burned draft files in Catonsville, Maryland. They used homemade napalm, concocted from gasoline and Ivory Flakes. Still carrying the memory of those little ones from Hanoi, Daniel Berrigan said for the group, "Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children . . . We could not, so help us God, do otherwise . . . thinking of the Land of Burning Children." Then came the lines that tore through the consciences of many like me. "How many must die before our voices are heard, how many must be tortured, dislocated, starved, maddened . . . When, at what point, will you say no to this war?"

As Daniel Berrigan, in a simpler time, had embodied my new priestly ideal, braced by the sacredness of expression itself—Man of the Word—now his relentless pacifist expression both in language and in deed pushed further. I was soon to be ordained in the priesthood, and all at once my ambition was redefined once again. The Berrigans demonstrated the acute relevancy of an expressly Catholic sensibility—ritual protest as a kind of sacrament. The brothers' brave willingness to take great risks for peace seemed to justify, in a way that traditional piety no longer could, a lifelong vow of celibacy and the radical renunciations it entailed. The gospel of peace and justice would define my priesthood, even if, as tradition and family ties required, I still said my first Mass at the chapel at Bolling Air Force Base—a perfect symbol of the ever-divided heart that would keep me one of the more timid members of the Berrigan wing of Catholic resistance.

As a chaplain at Boston University, I supported the Berrigans in their trials, met them, and became their friend. I sponsored rallies for them, went hungry in fasts they led, went to court with them, and greeted them when they got out of jail. On behalf of many young men, I lifted them up as examples of Catholic pacifism, at a time when draft boards insisted that there was no such thing. Through the tumult, my feelings of admiration for both men mellowed into affection. Daniel, in particular, surprised me by reciprocating. He understood what I told him about my father. He read my poems. He was patient with my ambivalence about law-breaking, but he was relentless, too, in his expectation that I would do yet more to oppose the war in Vietnam. Still, my priesthood was defined by what opposition I joined in. Enough so that, as the war came to an end, so did my time as a Catholic priest. My lifelong friendship with Daniel Berrigan, however, had just begun.

It may seem hopelessly narcissistic of me to respond to the death of Daniel Berrigan with this account of his early impact on my life. As if, on the scale of his historic significance, my story matters a damn. Yet perhaps the point is not that my experience is unique but rather that, for all its odd particularities, it is typical. For many, many American Catholics, what it meant to be American and what it meant to be Catholic was radically altered by the witness of Daniel Berrigan. He and his brother, long after the war in Vietnam had ended, continued to insist that U.S. militarism, and the nuclear monstrosity underlying it, was a moral catastrophe. Their insistence lives on as a potent countercurrent to the ongoing drift toward war. And their insistence will always remain as hard evidence that the twenty-first-century American conscience need not become the frozen sea across which the war on terror sails so blithely on. "This is the worst time of my long life," Berrigan told The Nation, in 2008. And who did not know exactly what he meant? And, knowing him, who did not see that the United States, at critical turns during the past fifty years, might have gone a different way?

It still could. Daniel Berrigan's rage against war was fuelled by his undying hope, rooted in faith, that peace is possible. I believe that, too. For the rest, I will never forget the man, or what he meant to me. I love him.



James Carroll is the author of eleven novels, most recently "Warburg in Rome," and eight works of nonfiction, most recently "Christ Actually: Reimagining Faith in the Modern Age."

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