

Moral Courage & The Story of Sister Megan Rice by Michael Edwards

To remain in prison for the rest of my life is the greatest honor you could give me: the story of Sister Megan Rice

Where does moral courage come from - the energy and strength to challenge and transform much larger powers? A prison correspondence provides some answers.

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The Y-12 nuclear weapons plant in Oakridge, Tennessee, is supposed to be impregnable. But on July 28th 2012, an 84 year-old nun called Sister Megan Rice broke through a series of high-security fences surrounding the plant and reached a uranium storage bunker at the center of the complex. She was accompanied by Greg Boertje-Obed (57) and Michael Walli (63).

The trio daubed the walls of the bunker with biblical references like “the fruit of justice is peace,” and scattered small vials of human blood across the ground. Then they sat down for a picnic. When the security guards arrived they offered them some bread, along with a candle, a bible and a bunch of white roses.

Two years later, Rice, Walli and Boertje-Obed were sentenced to federal prison terms of between three and five years, plus restitution in the amount of \$53,000 for damage done to the plant - far in excess of the estimates produced at their trial. Rice, who received the shortest sentence of the three, was sent to a detention center in Knoxville, Tennessee, and then transferred to a prison in Ocilla, Georgia. She is now serving the rest of her sentence in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, New York.

When questioned about her actions at her trial by Judge Amul Thapar, Rice told him that her actions were intended to draw attention to the US stockpile of nuclear weapons that she and her co-defendants felt was illegal and immoral. They also wanted to expose the ineffectiveness of the security systems that were supposed to protect these weapons from theft or damage. “We were acutely mindful of the widespread loss to humanity that nuclear weapons have already caused,” wrote Rice afterwards in a letter to her supporters, “and we realize that all life on earth could be exterminated through intentional, accidental or technical error. Our action exposed the storage of weapons-making materials deliberately hidden from the general public. The production, refurbishment, threat or use of these weapons of mass destruction violates the fundamental rules and principles by which we all try to live amicably as human beings.”

All three defendants were found guilty of “sabotage of the national defense.” Just before

they were sentenced, Rice made a statement to the court which ended like this: "We have to speak, and we're happy to die for that. To remain in prison for the rest of my life is the greatest honor that you could give me. Please don't be lenient with me. It would be an honor for that to happen."

What struck me most about the accounts of the trial I read wasn't just the honest fearlessness of these words, but the serenity and lack of malice with which they were delivered - as though they represented a simple, straightforward and legitimate truth instead of a potential death sentence behind bars, given Rice's age.

That set me thinking. Where does such moral courage come from - the energy and strength that are needed to challenge and transform much larger powers? So I decided to write to Sister Rice in prison, not expecting a reply.

But reply she did, in letters handwritten in perfect script, on standard-issue, lined prison notepaper. The letters were full of spontaneous last minute additions and corrections inserted into the margins; key words bolded, capitalized and underlined; text running up and down and sideways as one thought led to another. One common theme emerged from our correspondence and from Rice's letters to her supporters, which are available here : everything is connected for good or for ill, from the way we are brought up as children ("We were never spanked or shouted at growing up"), to our actions towards each other as adults ("Great harm is done by abuse and violence at any stage of life"), to the militaristic policies of nations.

For Rice, the immorality of nuclear weapons is linked to the injustices she has witnessed first-hand in the dehumanizing conditions of the prison system. Both stem from a culture of violence in the USA which is reinforced at every turn by allegiance to the military industrial complex and the interests it serves, and which filters down like a poison through the institutions of prisons and police, schools and even families.

"Detainees arrive, already abused, to experience overcrowded prison systems and botched justice", she says in one of her letters. "I saw needless theft by officials and denial of the use of eye glasses for a significant number of inmates (so they can't read), and the absence of adequate programs for real, creative growth through restorative healing processes. Instead of engagement in any productive activities...officers waste time by devising ways to further incriminate, punish and suppress the most vulnerable citizens. I personally received three charges for refusing to strip-search i.e. 1) possession of a paper clip (among my privileged legal papers) and one metal clasp on a paper envelope called 'dangerous contraband;' 2) failure to obey lawful rule; and 3) interference with a search, for which I was pronounced guilty then given 31 days lock down. I had 7 fellow inmates in my lockdown pod sentenced for things like reserving a single arthritis pill to take at night so the inmate could sleep (which was designated as 'hoarding pills')."

Just as important, this culture of violence can be systematically reversed through interlinked, personal and political action. For Rice, Walli and Boertje-Obed, this process ends with "the transformation of weapons of mass destruction to sustainable life-giving alternatives," but it starts by modeling a radically different set of relationships with other people wherever they are. What shines out from Rice's writings is always life over death, love over fear, and joyful subversion instead of the passive acceptance of our circumstances.

"Dear sisters and brothers," she begins her letters to her supporters, "united as we are in efforts to transform weapons of war into projects fostering LIFE in all its fullness,

restorative of justice, and healing for our planet.” Everything she does is infused with this same spirit. Even a ride in a prison van turns into an opportunity for celebration: Rice and her two co-defendants were separated after their trial, but briefly reunited inside a prison vehicle on their way from Tennessee to Georgia. “You can imagine our joy in finding ourselves seated in front of or behind each other in a comfortable prisoner transport van,” she writes, “where we could have our first chat since last May. The memory of chatting is truly treasured!”

This vignette reminds me of the school children who joined hands and sang as they marched into jail during the “children’s crusade” for civil rights in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. In the face of bureaucratic authority, the expression of joy can be both powerful and subversive, partly because it is so unexpected. It disarms those in power through an absolute refusal to be provoked or humbled, and it provides great inner strength for the struggles that lie ahead.

How does such exuberance survive in the face of injustice? For Rice this is a spiritual and religious matter. “By gift of birth through choices made”, she told me in a letter, “Religion is and has always been understood as those activities which enhance my awareness of being in union with God, understood as the source of my being. God cannot be seen or heard, but there is a way of feeling that God is near to me...and so the experience of spirit became real, as God is spirit, and I have a spirit part which is real in me and all other beings...I learned, from those who surround us also, that spirit manifests itself, or its presence in me, as conscience. We sense what is fair and just, true and genuine, loving and good for all of us...Genuine religious activity calls us to actively work for fairness, peace, and harmony in all our relationships...in all that fosters life on this planet Earth.”

Everything is connected from that spiritual center, she seems to be saying, but this time in reverse - all the way up the system from loving personal relationships to a foreign policy no longer based on fear and domination. Every act of resistance becomes an act of liberation from the need to exercise raw power over others; a contribution to breaking the cycle of violence and re-building relationships around the radically different rationalities of love, joy and justice.

As Rice wrote in her most recent letter to me: “I learned that people in government can and do act unjustly, and that resisters are often unjustly tried and persecuted for their faithfulness to their consciences...So it would be no surprise if acting to end imperialism causes one to end up in prisons of some sort...I am assured that in the long run, truth will be served despite appearances.”

Given that logic, I suppose it makes sense to tell a judge that “to remain in prison for the rest of my life is the greatest honor you could give me” even if you’re already 84 years old.

Here’s to love, life and Sister Megan Rice.

If you would like to receive copies of Sister Rice’s letters to her supporters, please email nukeresister@igc.org. Mailing addresses for Sister Rice and her co-defendants can be found at www.transformnowplowshares.wordpress.com and www.nukeresister.org/inside-out. You can also sign a petition requesting their pardon here. Unless otherwise stated, all the quotes used in this article come from my correspondence with Sister Rice.