

## 2

## You Can't Kill the Spirit: Women and Nonviolent Action<sup>1</sup>

*Pam McAllister*

What has drawn me most strongly to nonviolence is its capacity for encompassing a complexity necessarily denied by violent strategies. By complexity I mean the sort faced by feminists who rage against the system of male supremacy but, at the same time, love their fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and male friends. I mean the complexity which requires us to name an underpaid working man who beats his wife both as someone who is oppressed and as an oppressor. Violent tactics and strategies rely on polarization and dualistic thinking and require us to divide ourselves into the good and the bad, assume neat, rigid little categories easily answered from the barrel of a gun. Nonviolence allows for the complexity inherent in our struggles and requires a reasonable acceptance of diversity and an appreciation for our common ground.

Barbara Deming wrote convincingly of the "complicated truth" in her 1977 essay, "Remembering Who We Are."

how can one any longer make neat distinctions between oppressors and oppressed? Won't it often happen that we would have to name the very same person both an oppressed person and an oppressor? Yes, it will very often happen. Life is precisely that complicated. And to pretend that it isn't that complicated doesn't help. We need rescue from neat distinctions that are illusions...

if the complicated truth is that many of the oppressed are also oppressors, and many of the oppressors are also oppressed – nonviolent confrontation is the only form of confrontation that allows us to respond realistically to such complexity. In this kind of struggle we address ourselves always both to that which we refuse to accept from others and to that which we can respect in them, have in common with them – however much or little that may be.<sup>2</sup>

Barbara wrote about the two hands of nonviolence. She wrote that nonviolence gives us two hands upon the oppressor – "one hand taking from him what is not his due, the other slowly calming him as we do this."

In another essay she wrote, "We can put more pressure on the antagonist for whom we show human concern. We put upon him two pressures – the pressure of our defiance of him and the pressure of our respect for his life – and it happens that in combination these two pressures are uniquely effective."<sup>3</sup>

This visual metaphor is particularly helpful in describing the basic attitude underlying the nonviolent sensibility. With one hand we say to an oppressor, "Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life." But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised outstretched – maybe with love and sympathy, but maybe not – but always outstretched with the message that "No, you are not the other; and no, I am not the other. No one is the other." With this hand we say, "I won't let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I'll be here when you're ready. Like it or not, we are a part of one another." The peculiar strength of nonviolence comes precisely from the dual nature of its approach – the two hands.

The women at the Seneca Peace Encampment in New York State used the two hands of nonviolence in the summer of 1983. Barbara was with the peace camp women the day they went on a women's history walk past the homes of Harriet Tubman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and past the site of the first Women's Rights Convention. But during their walk, the women were met by a fierce and frenzied mob in Waterloo. People jabbed the pointed tips of their little American flags like tiny spears at the peace camp women and screamed, "Commie dykes, go back to Russia!" and "All you girls need is a little rape." Barbara saw then the two hands of nonviolence used at the most crucial moment when the women were blocked from proceeding and danger was imminent:

I saw that a number of women had sat down, then formed a circle together... I can remember the reassurance I felt at once, at the sight of those quietly seated figures. Without words they made the statement it was essential that we make. The statement that we posed no threat – had no intention of trying to thrust our way through the mob. But the statement that we had no intention of retreating, either. We knew our Constitutional rights. We had a right to walk here. The two-fold message that gives nonviolent struggle its leverage: We won't be bullied; but you needn't fear us. You needn't fear us; but we won't be bullied.<sup>4</sup>

My response to my world requires such complexity as is embraced by nonviolent strategies. As I have learned and continue to learn more about nonviolence, I have realized that, despite first impressions, nonviolence not only allows but requires me to act from the full range of my feelings and

reactions. It is about speaking the whole complicated truth, responding to the fullness of the struggle, and it requires my most bitter words, my most hearty laughter, my deepest compassion, my sharpest wit.

### Tactical Nonviolence

The above discussion of the spirit and sensibility of a nonviolent philosophy of resistance may seem lofty, especially in contrast to its practical applications. In fact, most of the people who participate in nonviolent action are not in the least concerned with the underlying philosophy, nor would they know to call their actions nonviolent. Most would be surprised to learn that they are quite adept at using tactical nonviolence or that they have done so every time they have gone on strike, signed a petition, participated in a boycott, stood silently in a candlelight vigil, or joined a demonstration. While bombs bursting in air are given prominence in anthems, headlines, and national budgets, and the impulse for revenge is celebrated in folktale and box office hits, nonviolent tactics have been used more often and more successfully than violent tactics ever have. The majority of people who've successfully relied on tactical nonviolence have simply understood it to be a direct, commonsense way to protest, intervene, in or refuse to cooperate with circumstances they deem unjust.

Nonviolent action is often used by those who would be equally willing to use violent tactics in some circumstances. People who have no qualms about taking up the gun to defend flag or family are the same people who vote to go on strike at their workplace (the classic nonviolent tactic), and who can be found on picket lines every day (another nonviolent tactic). Furthermore, tactical nonviolence is the backbone of most national liberation struggles, struggles popularly called "violent revolutions." These revolutions do rely on fighters who are able and willing to use violent tactics and lethal weapons. But they also rely on countless acts of nonviolent resistance by workers, students, women, elders, and children who use a full range of tactics including strikes, physical obstruction, sanctuary, hunger strikes, petitions, slowdowns in factories, mass protest demonstrations, acts of economic noncooperation such as boycotts and tax resistance, civil disobedience, and the development of underground presses and/or secret organizations. In these struggles, even teaching people to read is sometimes a revolutionary act of civil disobedience taken at great risk. Nonviolent actions have especially made sense to unarmed or insufficiently armed people whose adversaries are not only equipped with a range of weapons and military apparatus but are rigorously trained, ready, and willing to use violence.

Nonviolent actions were used long before the word nonviolence was first used in print in 1923 by Clarence Marsh Case in *Nonviolent Coercion: A Study in Methods of Social Pressure*. For centuries people sought ways to

live without causing injury to others and experimented with ways to fight injustice without employing violence, but they had no name with which they could identify or give shape to this commitment as an intentional philosophy. Historians studying nonviolence will find it possible only to identify the occasions when a specific nonviolent action was used, but must leave to conjecture any attempt to identify a nonviolent philosophy or strategy.

Theorist Gene Sharp identifies three basic tactical categories of nonviolent action. The first is nonviolent protest and persuasion. With these actions we name what we think is wrong, point our fingers at it and try to help others understand. This category would include such tactics as petitioning, picketing, demonstrating, and lobbying. The second category is nonviolent non-cooperation. With these actions we deliberately fold our hands and turn our backs, refusing to participate in the wrong we have named. This category would include such tactics as boycotts, strikes, and tax resistance. The third category is nonviolent intervention. With these actions we face the wrong we have named, the wrong we have refused to aid, and we step into the way, interfere, block. This category would include such tactics as physical obstruction, blockades, civil disobedience, and sit-ins.

### Subversive Activity: Women Resisting Disappearance

A few years ago I received a call from a university professor who said he was teaching a class on the history of nonviolence – you know, all about the contributions of Thoreau, Tolstoy, A. J. Muste, Gandhi, Martin Luther King – but he felt he should include something about women. Trouble was, he just didn't have any substantial information about women and nonviolence, and he wondered if I could help. "Had women ever contributed anything toward the history of nonviolence?" he asked.

Men like Thoreau, Tolstoy, Muste, Gandhi and King usually get the credit for the development of active nonviolence, but women – around the world and from the beginning of history have consistently experimented with ways to resist oppression and challenge injustice without endorsing violence. In fact, most of what we commonly call "women's history" is actually the history of women's role in the development of nonviolent action.

Feminist historian Dale Spender has written that the most subversive and powerful activities women can engage in are those activities which celebrate our lives and help us resist disappearance. Mary "Mother" Jones, the great labor organizer, knew this. It is said that every speech she gave was a history lesson: she wanted working women and men to know that their courageous acts were not isolated, that they were part of a tradition of struggle. I too want to tell stories which will empower us, lift us out of our isolation, sustain us in times of personal despair, heal our brokenness. I want to tell stories that will stimulate our imaginations, incite us to action.

At his request, I taught the professor's class. I told stories for over two hours to students whose only knowledge of Susan B. Anthony was that she appeared on an odd-sized coin. That day I limited myself to stories of how women in North America (primarily in the United States) have used nonviolent action in their struggles for social justice. The students were spellbound, abandoning their frantic note-taking after the first half hour to simply listen.

I told about the Lysistrata action taken in 1600 by the women of the Iroquois nation. They threatened to boycott love-making and childbearing until the men conceded some of their power in decisions about war and peace.

I told about Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer and the nonviolent tactics they used in the fight for religious freedom in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. I told about the women fighting against slavery: Lucretia Mott, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Prudence Crandall, Harriet Tubman, Mary Shadd Cary, the women who worked on the Underground Railroad.

I told about the fight for women's suffrage and the nonviolent actions of Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Alice Paul, and the suffragists.

I told stories from the civil rights movement, stories about Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks.

I told about women's anti-lynching campaigns, about Ida B. Wells, and women's labor movements. I told of women's long history of fighting for peace: stories about Jane Addams, Jeanette Rankin, Dorothy Day, Barbara Deming, the women at the peace camps.

I illustrated how, in all of these campaigns, women found creative ways to struggle collectively and nonviolently. The stories opened the door for us to talk, not only about women's history, but about nonviolent action – what it is, how it works, why it's used. In the discussion that followed my storytelling, the students, professor, and I seemed to feel ourselves empowered by the rich history of women activists who had created an ongoing global laboratory in which nonviolence theory is continually tested and transformed.

That experience also opened my eyes to the difficulty we have in finding these stories, this history. I was startled that such a learned professor had been at a loss in his search for examples of women's participation in the development and use of nonviolence – especially since his area of expertise was the history of nonviolence.

As I began hunting for more stories I soon discovered why he had had such a hard time. Women's stories have been buried. In 1705, English feminist Mary Astell observed, "Since the Men being the Historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good Actions of Women." Oh Mary, how true.

Texts on nonviolence make little if any mention of women's use of nonviolent action. The classic text on nonviolent action is Gene Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Part Two: The Methods of Nonviolent*

*Action*.<sup>5</sup> Sharp lists 198 specific nonviolent tactics with several documented examples to illustrate each one. But in this fascinating volume, so popular with students of nonviolence, women are underrepresented to a shocking degree. For example, of the nine instances he cites of the use of mass petitions, Sharp includes none by women, though petitioning is a tactic critical to women's history. Of the ten stories he tells of revenue refusal, he cites no examples of women's use of tax resistance. Of the ten examples of protest meetings, he cites none by women. This is not to say that he leaves out women entirely. He has included a number of examples of women's use of nonviolent action, but they are unnecessarily scarce, made conspicuous by their rarity.

Nor is Sharp the only researcher and theorist of nonviolence to largely disregard women's contributions. *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: The Voices of Peace – From Isaiah to Bob Dylan* edited by Allen and Linda Kirschner and published in 1971, includes passages by such diverse thinkers and doers as Buddha, Pope John XXIII, Thoreau, Linus Pauling, Pete Seeger, and Daniel Berrigan, but Joan Baez is the only woman deemed fit to be included in what would appear to be the otherwise all-male club. Of the 535 pages which constitute the important volume *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*, edited by Staughton Lynd in 1966, only 46 pages are given to words by women. *The Quiet Battle: Writings on the Theory and Practice of Non-Violent Resistance* edited by Mulford Q. Sibley, features case studies in nonviolent resistance from modern-day United States as well as from India, colonial Pennsylvania, ancient Rome, South Africa, Hungary and Norway. However, out of twenty-seven essays only one is by a woman.

In the preface to his 1970 political science text *Twentieth Century Pacifism*, Dr. Peter Brock thanks his wife (who remains nameless) "for typing the greater part of the manuscript of this book" but lists only six references to women in the index of his 274-page book. Of these six women, only three were accorded a full sentence each in the text itself. No wonder the professor who called me for help wondered if women had ever contributed to the history of nonviolence. They have, but you wouldn't know it from many of the books we use.

I found the same problem in other areas of published research and soon learned that if I wanted to know about women's actions, I had to look for resources specifically about women. If I wanted to know about a strike by women workers in Japan, or South Africa, or Peru, books about the labor struggles in these countries rarely helped. Instead, I had to seek books specifically about women in Japan, South Africa and Peru. I repeatedly found that books which claimed to offer general information were often actually accounts specifically of men's thoughts and actions. I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, throughout most of my formal education, the "history" I studied had been filtered through the voices and point of view of North American white males. Their history was labeled "world" history though it left out most of what had happened to the non-kings, not to

mention whole continents like Africa, Australia, and most of Asia and South America. These places, when they were mentioned, served as props for European explorers, men like Columbus who "discovered" a new world, albeit a world inhabited by people who had settled on the land centuries before, people with long traditions, laws, religions, cultural inheritances, history. But it was new to the European white males and so it became "the new world," a world theirs for the finding, its history theirs for the telling. The stories I heard were told in the conqueror's tongue with the conqueror's emphasis.

All history books are biased, they tell a story from a point of view. While white, male European history is often passed off as world history, what little "history of nonviolence" seeps into the lessons is similarly distorted and still reflects the white male European bias. The danger is that the bias is so often unacknowledged, the point of view mislabeled "universal" or "objective."

I am not particularly more interested in women's nonviolent actions than men's, but I am dismayed that so many wonderful stories have systematically been denied us and deemed less vital, less important than other stories simply because they are about actions taken by people who are not male. The denial and suppression of these stories is no accident given that we live on a planet which is overwhelmingly patriarchal. And if mere oversight accounts for their exclusion from history, it is an oversight which both reflects and reinforces patriarchal ideology. I believe this is why Dale Spender suggested that telling our stories as women and thus resisting disappearance is a subversive activity.

### **The Gestures of Courage are Repeated**

Stories of resistance have been taken from us, the books burned, the songs stifled or forbidden, the troubadours sent wandering in the wilderness where no one will hear the stories they have to tell. Some stories have been told but the storyteller failed to hold our interest: we didn't pay attention. And now, the one who would destroy freedom of speech grins amiably on our television sets.

What can we do? There is talk that soon some people among us will be rounded up, given numbers, sent away. What can we do? This has happened before. Often. What have others done in times like these? We try to remember but it is difficult. We need our stories, our legacy of resistance. The storyteller has returned with good news: the gestures of courage are repeated from age to age, a legacy passed on in the dream, the blood, the collective memory. Even if we forget, even if the stories are taken away again, something in us will remember when the time comes. It is a mystery but it's true. The gestures of courage are repeated from age to age. Consider for example, the nonviolent tactic of providing sanctuary:

- In 1300 BC, male babies were condemned to death by law. An Egyptian princess and a Hebrew slave mother crossed ethnic and class lines to conspire to break the law. Women's hands reached through the bull-rushes, pulled a baby to safety, sheltered him from the pharaoh's wrath, from the soldiers' blades. This is the ancient art of providing sanctuary, the gesture of creating a safe place in a violent world. The women were brave, clever, and creative in their resistance to the insanity of their day.
- In 1844, a Quaker farmer put a candle in her window as a sign that her farm was a stop on the secret Underground Railroad. Late that night she hid a black mother and her baby in a barn until the slave-hunters had passed.
- in 1944 Germany, a Protestant woman watched as Nazis goose-stepped past her house. Every time she heard a siren she held her breath. An entire Jewish family was hiding in her attic.
- in 1984, a young volunteer opened the door of a battered-women's shelter to a dispirited woman and her fussing baby. She found milk for the baby and tea for the mother and led them to a room where they would be safe for the night.
- In 1987, an Iowan church woman pulled over into the parking lot and opened her car door to the frightened, young "illegal alien" from Guatemala she had agreed to carry to the next safe house. She was playing her part in the sanctuary movement, the "underground railroad" of the 1980s.

The gesture is sanctuary, an ancient art of protection and resistance to unjust authority. It is easy to imagine certain familiar gestures being repeated by generations of women lifting spoonfuls of food to babies' mouths, placing cool hands on damp, feverish foreheads. The gestures are familiar and ancient. Less familiar but just as ancient are the gestures of resistance to oppression and yet they are part of our legacy. There is power in these stories. There is power in remembering them.

### **The Women are Watching**

On a cold, misty November day in 1984, over 1000 women marched through the streets of New York City in the "Not In Our Name" demonstration in preparation for a civil disobedience action the next day on Wall Street. They sang to the accompaniment of drums and bells, carried huge puppets and banners, chanted, and danced. They passed out leaflets to the onlookers and pointed accusing fingers at the headquarters of corporations that manufactured nuclear weapons and at banks that did business with the white South African government. "We don't want war! Don't call a war in our name!" the women shouted. "Get out of South Africa! Divest now! Don't do business with apartheid in our name! Not in our name! Not in our name!"

Toward the front of the march that day was a small group of women, each of whom carried a tall pole, and on the top of each pole was attached a decorative eye made of cardboard and construction paper. "The women are watching!" the marchers called out. The cardboard eyes looked over the heads of the other marchers, over the heads in the onlooking crowds. The eyes led the way, turning their hard stare toward the headquarters of institutions which had financed oppressive governments, manufactured nuclear weapons, been unfair to their workers, displaced low-income communities, or endorsed racist or sexist policies. The eyes were turned toward these institutions while the marchers chanted, "The women are watching! The women are watching!"<sup>6</sup>

Seeing what we are not supposed to see, recognizing what we are not supposed to name, making the invisible visible – these are acts of defiance, courage, resistance. The women who watch do not cast down their eyes or try to spare embarrassment by politely looking away as women have been trained to do. They see what no one is supposed to see. By watching, they say to the greedy and warmongering, "We know who you are. We know what you're doing."

In her poem "A Song for Gorgons," feminist, pacifist, activist author Barbara Deming pondered the myth of the Gorgons, the snake-haired sisters of Greek mythology who personified women's rage. According to the myth, anyone who met their furious stare would be turned to stone. But in Barbara's retelling of the myth, a woman who dares to meet the Gorgons' stare will turn, not to stone, but to her natural self, with her own fury writhing awake. And it is, for Barbara, women's insightful fury that can save us all. Her poem celebrates "The truth-hissing wide-open-eyed rude/ Glare of our faces" with which we can see truth and unmask lies. Women can help men to see the truth too, so that together we can bring an end to the patriarchal world order which distorts all our lives.

I sing this song for those with eyes that start,  
With curls that hiss.  
Our slandered wrath is our truth, and –  
If we honor this –  
Can deal not death but healing.<sup>7</sup>

### Mothers of the Disappeared

In Argentina, the mothers were watching with a wide open-eyed rude glare that helped bring down a death-dealing kingdom. Ever since the military coup in 1976, their children and their children's children had been disappearing. They disappeared if they raised their fists, raised their voices, raised their eyebrows. They disappeared if they joined a union, sang freedom songs, were seen with the wrong people in the wrong place at the

wrong time. And occasionally they disappeared even if they had done nothing at all. Heavy footsteps came at night, muffled screams, and then nothing – no bodies, no proof of torture, no world outrage.

For the bewildered families of the "disappeared" there was neither word of assurance nor word of bad news. With no word there could be no funerals, no closure, no coming to terms, no time to grieve or heal. There was only time to wonder, hope, pray, and wait and wait and wait. The mothers' children were silently disappearing and no one was supposed to see a thing. They should look the other way if they knew what was good for them.

Every day many of the mothers of the disappeared went to the Ministry of the Interior in Buenos Aires seeking information from the officials. The mothers waited in long, barren corridors. When a woman finally met with an official, she was told that her case would be "processed" but that, in all likelihood, her missing child had run off, had abandoned the family, was having a secret affair someplace, or was a terrorist who'd been executed by other terrorists. The officials smirked and told the mother to go home. Still, the mothers went day after day and waited in the long corridors. One day an official smirked when he dismissed Azucena De Vicenti. She was a sad and aging woman, well into her sixties. Her suffering was not his concern. But that day Azucena De Vicenti was angry. As she passed the other waiting, anxious mothers on her way out, she muttered, "It's not here that we ought to be – it's the Plaza de Mayo. And when there's enough of us, we'll go to the Casa Rosada and see the president about our children who are missing."<sup>8</sup>

And that is how it all began.

The next Saturday, April 13, 1977, 14 women left their homes to do the bravest thing they had ever done. At a time when all public demonstrations were forbidden, they had decided to stand together as witnesses to the disappearance of their children. They came separately to the Plaza de Mayo carrying only their identity cards and coins for the bus, and wearing flat shoes in case they had to run. Only after several years were they able to look back at that day with a sense of humor, joking about the first lesson they had learned – that even in the heart of the most vicious dictatorship, no one cares if you demonstrate on a Saturday afternoon in a deserted square where no one is around to see you.

After that, the women decided to gather on Thursday afternoons when the Plaza was crowded. From that time on, they walked every week in a slow-moving circle around the square carrying pictures of their lost loved ones. Their numbers grew as daughters, sisters, and grandmothers of the disappeared joined the circle. People began calling them "the Mothers of the Plaza" or sometimes *las locos de la Plaza* – "the mad women." The women were watching and making their witness a public act of defiance against the military regime. When they realized that the newspapers were afraid to write about their action, they got together enough money to buy

an advertisement. It appeared, against great odds and despite efforts by the military to stop it, in *La Prensa* on October 5, 1977. Above pictures of 237 "disappeared" and the names of their mothers was the headline, "We Do Not Ask for Anything More than the Truth."

Ten days after the advertisement appeared, several hundred women carried a petition with 24,000 signatures to the congress building demanding that the government investigate the disappearances.

The police repression which followed was severe. Hundreds of people were harassed, arrested, and detained during the month, including American and British journalists who tried to interview some of the Mothers. Still, the women refused to hide their actions. Every Thursday, two or three hundred women would gather to walk around the Plaza.

On other afternoons the Mothers held open meetings. Many desperate people came seeking information about loved ones who had disappeared. The Mothers were no longer looking for their individual sons or daughters: they were seeking each others' children and the truth about what had happened to the children of Argentina.

At some point during the fall of 1977, a young man named "Gustavo" began coming regularly to the meetings, seeking information about his disappeared brother and helping the women in whatever way he could. A sweet-faced, blue-eyed blond in his mid-twenties, sincere, friendly, generous, and compassionate, Gustavo seemed to be every mother's dream child.

Then in December, two days before another advertisement was to be published, this time in *La Nación*, nine of the women left a planning meeting by a side door and walked directly into a trap. Five or six men, one of them armed with a machine gun, had been lying in wait for the women. The men had been well informed. They demanded the money the Mothers of the Plaza had collected for the advertisement and forced the women into a car. The women disappeared forever. Two days later three more women disappeared; one of them was Azucena De Vicenti.

There was no doubt that young Gustavo had orchestrated the whole maneuver. His real name turned out to be Alfredo Astiz, later recognized as one of the most notorious kidnapers and torturers in ESMA, the Navy Mechanics School in Buenos Aires where an estimated 5,000 people were imprisoned and tortured, and of whom only an estimated 200 survived. Astiz's nickname was "the blond angel."

The Thursday following the kidnapping, only 40 women came to the Plaza; even some of these stayed hidden in the shadows. When the Mothers of the Plaza called a press conference, only four journalists dared attend, all of them foreigners.

Throughout 1978 the Mothers tried to maintain a presence in the Plaza, to let Argentina and the rest of the world know that the women were still watching, still watching despite great odds, still watching. But the police violence against them was great and each week a few women were arrested. By the beginning of 1979, the Mothers of the Plaza were finding it almost

impossible to endure the violence. Each Thursday they met in the shadows, hurried across the square and quickly formed their small circle for a few minutes before the police closed in. Finally, even that became impossible.

No doubt the military men felt smug then as they chuckled over their afternoon cocktails; it seemed that guns, billy clubs, tear gas, and terror could defeat even the Mothers of the Plaza. Little did they know that in churches around the city the Mothers continued to gather.

Every meeting was illegal and dangerous but the women had found a way. They entered the dark sanctuaries as women do in cities all over the world every day. Some lit candles and knelt before little altars murmuring special prayers, and then they found a place in the pews to rest and pray. There was nothing unusual in this.

What the authorities couldn't see was that the women in the churches, sometimes numbering over 100, were passing notes to each other as their heads were bowed. These were "meetings" at which decisions were made without a word spoken aloud.

It must have been a great surprise to the authorities when, seemingly out of nowhere, the Mothers of the Plaza stepped out of the darkened churches in May 1979. Determined to formalize their structure, they held elections, legally registered as an association and opened a bank account with some of the financial support which began to come in from around the world. In 1980, they rented an office on Uruguay Street and opened the House of the Mothers. They even started publishing their own bulletin and within several years counted their membership in the thousands.

The women returned to the Plaza. They wore flat shoes and white scarves embroidered with the names or initials of the relatives they were seeking. They came to the Plaza carrying photos of the "disappeared." Some days after walking the circle, several women would leave the square, take a megaphone down a side street and each tell her personal story. They had learned that it was easier for people to understand the horror of one missing child than it was to grasp the picture of thousands who had "disappeared."

The police met the women in even greater numbers than before and the women continued to face tear gas, nightsticks, and arrest. But something had changed. The Mothers of the Plaza were determined that they'd never again retreat into silence and shadows. Their visible courage was contagious. Onlookers who had been too afraid to stop long enough to acknowledge the women now stood still to applaud the Mothers as they circled the square.

Argentina's bloody military regime could not hide from the eyes of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The women were watching and the world was watching them. With their persistence they inspired women in other countries (such as the mothers of El Salvador and Guatemala) where children were disappearing. And they helped bring the day in December 1993 when the people of Argentina inaugurated President Raul Alfonsín as the head of a democratic government.

### No More Hiroshimas

"No more Hiroshima!"

"No more Nagasaki!"

"Women for peace!"

Over 2,000 chanting women marched through Tokyo's commercial district on December 6, 1981, just as they had marched in December 1980. The women marched again in remembrance of the day Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. They followed a banner which declared, "We will not allow the way to war!"

The women were publicly remembering and calling on others in their country to remember with them. Theirs had been the only nation to suffer the wartime devastation of atomic bombings. Even as they marched, the disfigured atomic holocaust survivors called *hibakusha* women were suffering from radiation-caused cancers and from ostracism by other Japanese citizens.

The women were remembering, and they were watching in shared rage and despair the increasing militarization of their beautiful Japan, a nation which had made so much progress in transforming its national spirit from warlike to peace-seeking. Wasn't Japan the only industrialized nation whose constitution, written and adopted after defeat in the Second World War, renounced war? Hadn't Japan's government boldly affirmed a three-point antinuclear principle in 1968 by vowing never to manufacture, possess, or store nuclear weapons? Hadn't Japan managed to keep its military spending to under 1 percent of its gross national product and concentrated its citizens' brainpower on designing and producing nonmilitary consumer products? Hadn't it set an example for other nations of the world that peace could be a financially healthy investment? Was all this to be lost?

The women who gathered on December 6, 1981 were watching. They knew that all the good intentions of maintaining a peace-loving Japan were being undermined, that men were preparing for war in the very shadow of Mount Fuji. The United States, which had occupied Japan at the end of the Second World War had never really left, some said. It had signed a security act with Japan in the 1960s which permitted installation of US military bases and was now spending \$2 billion per year to maintain its operations there. And suddenly, in 1981, there was no doubt that Japan's peace consciousness had eroded. A "hawkish" prime minister had come to power and the Liberal Democratic Party was leaning far to the right. There was serious talk of revising the constitution and even of reinstating a conscription system. The "Self-Defense Force" had grown into the seventh largest army in the world. Twenty-four nuclear power plants were operating in Japan, with more being constructed, all

of them producing plutonium which could be used to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Now, too, rumors were spreading throughout the population that the United States had brought nuclear weapons to its bases in Okinawa and to its submarines that cruised Japan's waters, and planned to bring Tomahawk cruise missiles tipped with nuclear warheads to its Iwakuni base on Japan's mainland. For its part, the United States would neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons in Japan.

The women were watching. They had been watching a long time, and in the spring of 1981 they intensified their campaign to let their government know they were watching. Women workers took to the streets, collecting 2 million signatures against the increasing militarization of Japan. Many pledged that, even if the prisons should become "filled with mammas and grandmas," they would stop the draft before it started. All spring long, women, gathered to voice their concerns – at the Rally to Build Peace with Women's Votes, at the Women's Symposium for Thinking of the Constitution, and later, at the Women's Rally Never to Allow an Undesirable Amendment of the Constitution.

That spring, too, 6,000 working women came to Meiji Park, Tokyo in the pouring rain to attend a demonstration with a very long name – the Central Rally of Women for a Ban on Adverse Revision of the Japanese Constitution and for the Establishment of Peace. Women from the Housewives Association, the Socialist Party, the 20,000-member Japan Women's Council, the Japanese Women's Caucus against War, and the Women's Bureau of the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan joined together in a campaign of witnessing to the increased militarization.

The year of intense antiwar activity by women concluded with the December 6 demonstration in Tokyo. They chanted as they marched, "No more Hiroshima! No more Nagasaki! Women for peace! Women for peace!" In an effort to encourage solidarity with women's antiwar movements in other countries, the Japanese Women's Caucus Against War invited London-based peace activist and writer Leonie Caldecott to speak briefly during that day's rally about women's initiatives in the European peace movement. Caldecott spoke on a platform with Japanese peace activists who stood, one after the other, to give sincere, carefully crafted messages.

Suddenly, a group of rough peasant women took the stage. They were dressed in cotton trousers and jackets and wide straw hats. Several of the women held a banner while one of their group spoke. The speech was angry and passionate. The crowd stirred. These were the Shibokusa women who lived at the foot of Mount Fuji, two hours by bus from sophisticated Tokyo.

The Shibokusa women, mostly in their fifties and sixties, had been watching military maneuvers in the shadow of the mountain for many years. They had made it their business to watch and disrupt the military exercises conducted there by Japan's young warriors, warriors not so

different from those of an earlier time, a time which had brought immeasurable suffering to Japan. The women remembered.

They had watched the young soldiers parade and practice killing on land that did not belong to them. For centuries, that land at the foot of Mount Fuji had been cultivated by hard-working farmers. They had worked the poor land, managing to grow radishes and beans. The people had also started a silkworm industry there. But in 1936, the Japanese army took over the land – and began using it for military drills, and after the Second World War the US army moved in. The San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed in 1952 between Japan and the United States, and the farmers hoped that the land would be returned to the people, but the Japanese government continued to use the land for its “self-defense” exercises. The local farmers protested and a few concessions were made, but the state didn’t leave. Eventually the men went off to cities to look for work. The women stayed. The women watched, and they helped create a resistance movement in Japan, helped fight for their land rights and against all preparations for war. When others got discouraged, these women sustained the spirit of resistance. They remembered Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They remembered when the land at the foot of the beautiful Mount Fuji had been used to grow food.

During an interview with Leonie Caldecott, the Shibokusa women explained:

We are not clever. Most of us have hardly been educated at all. But we are strong because we are close to the earth, and we know what matters. Our conviction that the military is wrong is unshakeable. We are the strongest women in Japan! And we want other women to be like us.<sup>9</sup>

It is their intention to be a mischievous, bothersome, embarrassing presence at the military base. They create secret paths leading from their cottages to the center of the military exercise areas. In groups of ten or less, they sometimes crawl along the paths startling the soldiers, plant scarecrows here and there, sit in a circle to sing and clap, or stand to point and laugh at the soldiers. They always ignore direct orders to go away.

Theirs has been a long struggle. Once, in 1970, 1,000 riot police came to evict them from their cottages. The women dressed for death that day. They realized that the struggle was their whole life, the journey was their home. The people in the nearby town sometimes treat the women with contempt. Of less concern to the women are their frequent arrests. When they are arrested, the grinning Shibokusa women refuse to give their names or any information. They laugh and say they are too old to remember who they are. The Shibokusa women, by their own reckoning the “strongest women in Japan,” witness for peace with their lives. They are watching, watching, taking care “that the third atom bomb never comes.”<sup>10</sup>

Deadly rain gathers poison from the sky,  
And the fish carry death  
In the depths of the sea,  
Fishing boats are idle, their owners are blind,  
Deadly harvest of two atom bombs.  
Then land and sea folk  
You must watch and take care  
That the third atom bomb never comes.  
– Ishigi Astu, “Furusato” (English verse by Ewen MacColl)<sup>11</sup>

### Greenham Common

The women at the Greenham Common peace camp were also watching. They saw what they were not supposed to see and made the invisible visible. The women began their presence at Greenham Common in England in 1981, watching each of the nine gates at the US Air Force base where ground-launched cruise missiles were deployed in November 1983 in preparation for the Third World War.

Except for the nine miles of barbed wire fence surrounding low-lying bunkers and missile silos, it might have been easy to overlook the missile base in the gray mist and the lush green countryside. This is just what the peace camp women didn’t want to happen, so thousands of women would sometimes show up to encircle the base. They hung photos of their mothers or children on the wire fence, creating little yam webs as a symbol that everything is connected in a fragile and precious web of life. They sang and banged pots and pans. One time, 50,000 women “embraced the base.” They held mirrors up to the fence to reflect its death-dealing energy back on itself. It was as though the women were answering the myth of the Gorgons by saying to the missile base patriarchs, “It is not our glance but your own that will turn you to stone.”

Between these expansive media events, small handfuls of women persisted. They played host to the constant stream of supporters from around the world who visited the camp every day. Sometimes they did nothing but wait and watch, and sometimes they tore open great holes in the fence with wire cutters, or went over the top of the fence, entering the base either to damage whatever equipment they could or to illustrate just how inadequate the security is at the nuclear missile base. Once, at dawn on January 1, 1983, 44 women climbed the fence and danced in a great circle on top of a missile silo.

It is very hard to make the threat of nuclear war tangible. It is too big, terrible, unthinkable. Real estate agents complained that property values around the base had dropped dramatically, not because of the ugly barbed wire that grew where silver birches once did, but because of the presence of the peace camp women.

While the missiles were deployed, the women made it their business to monitor and expose the missile system, which was supposed to be very



secret, if not invisible. Cruise missiles are small and designed to be launched from mobile launch points. If a nuclear alert was given, the missiles were to be taken from the silos and put in a truck caravan which would carry the missiles to a firing point somewhere in the countryside.

In preparation for an actual alert, the trucks were sent out for practice runs that function partly to make nuclear war, or the thought of it, a matter of routine for the young men hired to do the job. But a caravan of 20 trucks is not really invisible even if camouflaged. How, the women wondered, would an enemy know that any movement of trucks from the base is merely a dress rehearsal for the Third World War and not opening night? And was it really safe to have these mammoth 50-foot trucks designed for US highways traveling along the narrow, winding English roads, trucks presumably carrying a massive cargo of death on a nighttime practice run?

The peace camp women observed other eerie late-night practice runs at Greenham. Every so often a siren sounded. Nearby, in the prosperous town of Newbury, the wives and children of the US military men were gotten out of bed, herded onto buses and raced to the "safety" of the nuclear bunkers inside the base. The children were terrified, crying, wondering if this was real, if the end had come. The British police who opened the gates for the Americans have no such bunkers. There were no plans to protect them in case of a nuclear exchange.

The peace camp women watched the cruise missiles. During the deployment, women stood at the gates of the base in nightly vigils, tracking the movements of the missile carriers. They stood in rain and snow, enduring the abusive taunts of the soldiers, watching for the invisible. Whenever the gates would open and a convoy rumbled past, they would blow whistles into the night to awaken the women at the other gates, then find phones to alert nearby towns. Other women would race for their cars and spend the night charting the course of the convoy, tracking every inch of its movements. The women painted slogans on the sides of the trucks and published their findings about the convoys' routes and hiding places.

The women saw what they were not supposed to see, forced the invisible out into the open. The women were watching.

#### Notes

- 1 Excerpts reprinted from McAllister, Pam *You Can't Kill the Spirit*. (Philadelphia, Pa.: New Society Publishers, 1988).
- 2 Barbara Deming, *Remembering Who We Are*: Pagoda Publishers, pp. 187-8.
- 3 Deming, cited in June Meyerding, ed., *We Are All Part of One Another: A Barbara Deming Reader* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1985) pp. 177-8.
- 4 Barbara Deming *Prisons That Could Not Hold: Prison Notes 1964*. (San Francisco: Spinster's Ink, 1985) p. 213.
- 5 Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973.

- 6 "Not In Our Name," *Off Our Backs*, vol. 14, no. 12 (Jan. 1985), p. 8.
- 7 Deming, Barbara. "A Song for Gorgons." In Pam McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1982).
- 8 Simpson, John, and Jana Bennett. *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza: The Story of the 11,000 Argentinians Who Vanished* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).
- 9 Caldecott, Leonie. "At the Foot of the Mountain: The Shibokusa Women of Kita Fuji." In Lynne Jones, ed., *Keeping the Peace: A Women's Peace Handbook*. (London: Women's Press, 1983).
- 10 Astu, Ishigi. "Furusato." In Student Peace Union, ed., *Songs for Peace: 100 Songs of The Peace Movement* (New York: Oak, 1966).
- 11 Ibid.