

I still believe in conscientious objection and nonviolent action, heart and soul

Chris Harmer

My name is Chris. I was born in 1950. I grew up a white, middle-class male in a suburban, traditional family in the upper South of the United States. I am aware that my life was and remains an easy life of privilege, for which I am incredibly grateful. What was given from the circumstances of my birth is what all people deserve.

My life's direction was forever changed in the 1960's by the intersection of the Christian ecumenical movement in the US and by our country's deepening involvement in the Viet Nam War. National news on television hit us daily with the brutality of war, the loss of military and civilian life, and the folly of expecting lasting peace from intentional devastation. At the same time, my growing faith and my faith community focused in on Jesus' example of love and nonviolent engagement as the right source of change. Believing in the worth of every human life, I knew could not participate in war. I cannot know, but have also tried to train myself in a consciousness that would never intentionally kill another person.

I completed an application for conscientious objector status when I had to register for the military draft at age 18. Many countries around the world did not and still do not recognize the legitimacy of conscientious objection. While at that time the US did recognize CO status, draft counsellors told me that my specific draft board and the Federal judge in my district had not and would not recognize it. I expected and accepted that I would spend two years in Federal prison after I finished college.

In college, I participated in the first of what would be a lifetime of anti-war demonstrations. I sought training as a draft counsellor. Soon, though, I realized while I could deny the US government my body for its wars, the "poverty draft" was taking low-income young people—disproportionately men of color—without education or job prospects and using them as cannon fodder for US wars. As Muhammed Ali, a hometown icon, said when he refused induction:

"Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?"

I became a military counsellor to help out those military people—men and women-- who were COs or were being mistreated and abused by the military system before and after discharge from active duty. During every US war since, I have re-engaged in military counselling work, helping military people fight for discharges, for promised government health benefits, and, in some cases, for safe passage out of the country.

My college years ended before the Viet Nam war did. I was spared an induction notice and prison time by a high draft lottery number. I began an environmental engineering career, but my avocation of anti-militarism and justice work continued as a volunteer counsellor working with the local ACLU affiliate.

While involved in this work, I discovered and joined with fellow activists in the local Quaker meeting and in the local Fellowship of Reconciliation chapter (FOR). Both have broadened and deepened the framework of my work. I came to see that the only time to fight a war is before it has started. I relearned the interconnectedness between peace and justice from Martin Luther King, Jr's 1968 speech "Beyond Vietnam -- A Time to Break Silence":

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Now more than 50 years later, I see my CO application and commitment as what Fr Daniel Berrigan meant when he said: "Don't just do something, stand there!" It was and is a clear response to my own participation in the war machine, in solidarity with others across the nation and world. I still believe in conscientious objection and nonviolent action, heart and soul. I still oppose conscription, for men and, as is now proposed in the US, for women. At the same time, my work with those in the military made me more aware of different kinds of violence—systemic racial and class injustice, homophobia, sexism, white silence in the face those kinds of injustice, and genocide.

As Audre Lorde said:

"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

In the last 40 years, my vision and work expanded into collective efforts through FOR and other community groups. There have been untold numbers of demonstrations, state and Federal lobbying against militarism and for justice, and educational work around the interconnected struggles around the world and in our own oppressed communities. In all of this, I am clear that I am one among so many. That is a wonder and joy in itself. We are stronger together.

Locally, over the years our local FOR chapter has:

- Provided CO education/trainings;
- Created a monthly newspaper and ongoing speaker series on local and international issues featuring local activists;
- Lead coalitions to pass a Peace Education resolution by the local school board and, decades later, to stop a proposed middle school cadet academy;

- Held weekly educational vigils for Palestinian rights and supported immigrant rights;
- Leafletted to educate about war taxes and better uses of pentagon dollars;
- Leafletted high school students and families about the realities of military life, and won restrictions on the release of student test scores and contact information to military recruiters;
- More recently, established a low-power community-run FM radio station and help sustain an art therapy program for children with a parent in the criminal justice system; and
- Through leadership in the local Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) coalition, continue to organize, educate and advocate for equity in education funding and rooting out racism and classism built into the systems of our public school district.

Now retired for well over a decade from my paid environmental work, my work—which included two Peace Corps tours—one early in the 1980s and one post-career—generally is trying to be an ally for people living in poverty and people of color who are demanding justice and better lives. I lead AROS' advocacy for equitable public education in order to give marginalized people tools and a chance to escape generational poverty. Their lives matter. Each year, I think especially of all 7,000+ students who graduate from our local public high schools. They deserve better.

I want to live in a country that gives them what they need. No justice, no peace. Know justice, know peace.