

Dangerous fools: my story about being a conscientious objector

Larry - Nebraska, U.S.A.

On a spring day, I sat with my classmates at a table in the training room with the ROTC test on the table in front of me. The instructor for the final test admonished us to do well so we could enlist as an Army Officer. The pitch to become an officer was made enticing, a slam dunk. The perks were emphasized but there was little or no mention of the dangers. Certainly, there was no sober, deep thinking about the damage wars perpetrate. I always wanted to do well in classes even in the required ROTC. The idea of being in the Army as an officer or not, respected or not, courageous or not, haunted me, as I was not sure where I stood.

Weeks earlier at firing practice, I had aimed and held steady. The target was a blur, and the telescope baffled me. I froze, desperately trying to figure out what was the center of the target. The officer behind me lashed out at me for not shooting. I felt shame that I was so baffled, even fearful. I was familiar with handling a rifle, a 22, single shot, the farm boy's 12th birthday gift for hunting rabbits, possibly a varmint, and, of course, target practice. Once at the taunt of a classmate, I shot at a bird expecting it to fly before I fired. I regretted killing it. What did the bird do to me? What use could the poor little bird be if dead?

Was my not being able to see the target in shooting practice, a premonition that in the military I would have to shoot not being able to see the target and regret what I hit? I think we had been given an M16. I don't remember. The damage it could do certainly outweighed that of a 22. Would the bullet ricochet in this unfamiliar target practice place? Apparently, it did not. I think the first shot hit the clip on which the target was hanging. Realizing suddenly what I could not see. My second shot hit the center circle on the target! Bullseye.

Now looking around the table with drafting instruments to plot a strategy of a military operation, I felt uncomfortable. I did not want to pass the test. As enticing as being an Army Officer sounded, I recalled the foolishness of one ROTC instructor, an Army Officer, touting that at the end of the Second World War, the U.S. could and should have taken Russia. I was an

engineering student not a student of Russian history or even World war II. Yet, the Officer's statement did not add up, seemed utterly crazy! Russia had been an ally.

I did poorly on the final ROTC exam. I was embarrassed but knew it was not in me to plot war. I had evaded becoming an officer.

Two weeks later, John Swomley, a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Professor at St. Paul's Theological Seminary, as I recall, was leading a seminar on war and peace. Being an officer in the State Methodist Student Movement (MSM), I had been made aware of the one-day event. At that seminar, we thought deeply about war and peace, military service, and the tragic history of war. At that seminar, I found an alternative to going along with or evading military service. I was a Conscientious Objector!

Vietnam was on the minds of most students. Some may have been in classes to get the student deferment from the draft. My opposition to the war was based on personal study about Vietnam; why we were there. Also, I had an increasing sense that the US military effort was just another chapter in that country's history of colonialism. Convinced of the folly, tragedy, and inhumanity of this war and all wars, I sought out contact information and the requirements for changing my draft status to that of a Conscientious Objector. In the required essay, I remember writing about war doing more damage than good and that there was no "just" war. The use of military force was an indiscriminating force that failed both in dealing with the problem and in creating an environment for peace. The use of force created an equal and opposite force. It wasn't a very good essay. I don't remember keeping a copy of it.

In response, my draft board simply wrote, "You have a Student deferment. We will not address your request."

I struggled. I was scared. The easy option was to drop it. I had said my piece. I became convinced that being a Conscientious Objector meant I would lose my student deferment and imagined being assigned to a Red Cross Project in Vietnam. The message felt like a threat that I would face the draft interrupting my studies. Finally, I wrote reiterating that I was a Conscientious Objector, a Pacifist. They would have to do what they had to do, and I would do what I had to do. I waited for the response. There was none!

For 58 years I have carried feelings of being dismissed, shame in allowing myself to be dismissed, and a sense of powerlessness. I have watched resistance to war dissipating and war become more and more glorified. I remain a Pacifist and a Conscientious Objector, dismissed or not. The retired, 4 Star General who was the Warden of the County Prison in which I was the Correctional Chaplain responded to my sharing briefly my story over lunch one day as they were engaged in a military discussion. He responded, "Oh, I have great respect for you guys."

Mostly, I have been met with silence if I didn't remain silent. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote somewhere that being a pacifist was naïve in the real world. I understand. But when will we stop being dangerous fools thinking that wars can solve the world's problems? One person's war

is terrorism, and another's terrorism is war. Seems like war is the problem. All we have done in using war to make peace is to learn how to demonize and kill and destroy more efficiently with righteous indignation often, usually, tainted by a hidden agenda.