

the catholic peace fellowship

An educational service conducted by Catholic members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation

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Dear Tom:

Thanks for the letter, addressed to Jim, that arrived in today's mail. I have been trying to get a letter off to you for days, but so much has happened, I'm tied up with newsmen so much of the time, that I haven't. One of the real difficulties in this work is that we find it so hard to keep everybody aware of what's going on and what's on peoples' minds.

On Draft Card Burning:

The CPF did not sponsor draft card burnings, neither David Miller's nor my own. It is difficult for me to separate myself from organizations I represent. It looks to those who know us that the CPF backed the burnings. It's not true, but it might as well be.

When the President signed the draft card burning law, I knew that we had to have a burning. I made a political judgement, an informed one, and as it turned out (so far) a correct one. The results have been better than we had dared hope. Dave burned his card in the context of a demonstration against the Vietnam war, a "coalition" demo, a speak-out. No civil disobedience. The commies are too chicken for c.d.

Somebody, inevitably, was going to burn a card. Thank God it was Davey! I spent much of the preceding day and that morning in trying to talk Dave out of it. My reasons were that he should not expose himself to such severe penalty alone. Dorothy and A.J. should stand with him. Others of us would burn our cards with him. This would be better for him and better for the Movement. Davey agreed, but he said he was still going to burn his card. It just seemed right. He had no idea of the reaction that ~~w~~ he would cause.

I had ordered duplicates of my draft cards from my local board, having burned all my six cards years before. So I declared my intention to burn them publicly at a CNVA meeting concerned with the draft. No one else was ~~xx~~ prepared to burn ~~xx~~ their cards at that time, but I figured that as long as there was a definite plan for a burning, others would be moved to join. We had an excellent core, Dave McReynolds is a fine guy, with whom I have many political (small p) disagreements. Socialists smoke filtered cigarettes! Marc Edeleman of the Student Peace Union is a younger man, very bright fellow. Jim

Wilson is a good Catholic Worker. Lisker is a drink of water, but harmless. The demonstration was the most minutely well planned and skillfully executed I have ever seen. The impact was terrific. A.J. thought it was the best single demo since 1940.

Dan B. had tried to talk me out of burning, so had Fr. Dan Kilfoyle, Tom Haessler and many others. But I knew that it was right for me to do. I had come to this basic position five years ago. I went through the c.o. procedures successfully. I wanted to, to make it easier for the others who would follow. I have reason to believe that my case did make it easier for those who followed. But what then could I do to challenge the draft? Obviously, disaffiliate. So I did, privately. But why, if I cannot carry the card, should I burn it in an ash tray at home? Why not openly? It would polarize public opinion, says Dan B. Yes, it will, but that has to happen sometimes. Polarization is good if it serves to focus the issues. It does no good to have dialogue about the wrong questions, or on questions which are inadequately or falsely framed. Polarization is necessary if the conditions of reconciliation are to follow. But polarization can be too intense. True enough. That's why you have to have political sense, to be able to make an educated guess. I had to trust myself to make that judgement. After all, I had been around quietly digging the scene for over ten years.

When I saw the responses of O'Gara, John Leo, Commonweal (Steinfelds wrote the editorial), I knew that things had turned out right. The whole liberal crowd seems to have moved en bloc a few degrees. That's extremely important. This is the dynamic of nonviolence.

Roger's burning himself shocked me deeply. I was completely incapable of seeing anything calmly or straight for hours, and Dorothy asked me to speak to the press and tv for her. Murray Kempton kept me going. He happened to be visiting. I can't write any more about it, but to tell you that at least three people I know were shocked back to the sacraments after long absence by Roger's sacrifice. It brought the reality and the horror we hide from right before our eyes in the most ghastly and compelling way.

You are not responsible for what CPF or CW people do, and yet you are bound to be thought responsible by some. That's their hang-up. Think of Dorothy and all the pain individual CW's have brought to her. I get it too.

The great thing about all this turmoil, tragedy and glorious victory is that God has indeed taken good out of the worst of it. Our friends came to our aid and shared the burdens. We felt reunited. Fr. Dan's homily at the private mass we had for Roger was healing. We are going to miss him. (He's temporarily exiled). I would keep writing, but I'll have mercy on you and direct your attention to the current CW.

Pax XH
Tom C.