

THE BODHISATTVA & THE PROPHET

Part Two: Father Daniel Berrigan

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Recap

The Bodhisattva and The Prophet. Two archetypes of how to live one's life. Thich Nhat Hanh embodying the Way of the Bodhisattva and Father Daniel Berrigan embodying the Way of the Prophet — two different spiritual paths, two different temperaments.

In Part I I talked mostly about Thich Nhat Hanh, and shared some stories from his early life in Vietnam — experiences which forged his character: his desire to reform the Buddhism of his day, make it more engaged with the real world suffering; his founding a School of Youth for Social Service, bringing youth into the countryside (during the war) to help the peasants with harvests, build schools and health clinics, and rebuild bombed out villages (dangerous work in which some of his closest students and friends were murdered; how he accepted an invitation from Princeton to come to the States to study and teach — when it became too dangerous for him to stay in Vietnam; how he became a voice in the anti-war movement in the States as well as Vietnam — meeting allies like Daniel Berrigan, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King; how his friendship with Berrigan grew over the years.

I also shared some personal experiences of meeting Thich Nhat Hanh, of spending time at his home in exile, Plum Village, in the Bordeaux region of France, and the “high” you can get from living in a monastic community for a while, and its similarities and differences from our kind of congregational life. Concluding that Nhat Hanh's greatest moral lesson is his own life.

Berrigan Bio

Today we will focus on Daniel Berrigan.

Born in Virginia, Minnesota, north of Duluth, on May 9th of 1921. This May he will turn 95.¹ The Berrigan's had 6 children (all boys!), Daniel being the 5th, and his brother Philip, the 6th. His mother a first generation immigrant from Germany. His father a 2nd generation immigrant, Irish Catholic, from Tipperary. His father's parents had fled Ireland during the Potato Famine of 1846. The Berrigans were always poor, but they always lent a helping hand to those poorer than they were.

Daniel was the most studious of the six children, and the one who inherited his father's love for writing poetry. Over the years Daniel has published fourteen books of poetry.

Daniel went to Catholic school and entered the Jesuit Order right after graduating high school in 1939, at the age of 18, and immediately began thirteen long years of arduous training necessary for membership in the Society of Jesus. The Jesuit Order traces its history back to the 16th century. It's founder was the Spaniard, Ignatius of Loyola. The Jesuits have always been an influential order of priests — well educated, intrepid explorers and missionaries — international in outlook — and at times extreme in their interpretation and defense of the Catholic faith.

In 1952 Daniel completed his training for the Society of Jesus and was ordained by Cardinal Cushing at the Jesuit Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts. (His brother Philip was a 1950 graduate of Holy Cross in Worcester.)

Daniel's mother was a devout Catholic. His father was a nominal Catholic. They used to get Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker newspaper at their home. The paper and Dorothy Day were a big influence on Berrigan. Are you familiar with the Catholic Worker Movement? Started in 1933 by Roman Catholic social activists, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. They are known for establishing "Houses of Hospitality" in inner-city neighborhoods to help feed and clothe the homeless, and they publish a newspaper, The Catholic Worker. Catholic Worker communities are also known for their support of labor unions, human rights, and the promotion of a non-violent culture. The wood engraver, Fritz Eichenberg, used to contribute beautiful wood engravings to the newspaper. The newspaper was a focal point for Catholic pacifism.

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh will turn 90 on October 11.

Berrigan says it took him a long time to come around to Dorothy Day's views on non-violence. Berrigan had five brothers, four of them served in the military, including his younger brother, Philip. Daniel says, besides Dorothy Day, it was the writings of Thomas Merton, which appeared in the Catholic Worker newspaper, that changed his views on killing, on Catholic Just War Theory and nuclear war.

He began agitating against the war as early as the late 1950's. He organized ecumenical retreats on "The Spiritual Roots of Resistance."

In 1953 the Jesuits sent Daniel to France, and there he gained first hand experience of the Worker Priest movement, which Daniel admired and the Vatican disapproved of. This was also the time Vietnam was trying to liberate itself from French colonial rule.

In 1964 Berrigan and other Catholics staged a anti-war peace vigil in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in NYC. This was the last straw for his superior, Cardinal Frances Spellman (a supporter of the Vietnam War). He ordered Berrigan to leave the country immediately, sent him to Mexico, and on to Lima, Peru. The poverty Berrigan witnessed in exile only served to radicalize him more. His exile in Latin American lasted only a few weeks, because his friends back in NYC took out a full page ad in the NY Times asking, "Why Has Father Berrigan Been Sent Into Exile?"

In 1965, with the increased US bombing of North Vietnam, Daniel and his brother began to speak out more forcefully against the war. At a service held in our Community Church in NYC, they got publicity for being the first priests in the US to publicly criticize the War. Daniel's name also now appeared on the letterhead of Clergy Concerned About Vietnam (a new group founded in 1965), mainly by heads of Protestant denominations (including UU President Dana Greeley.) Daniel's involvement with this group got him in more trouble with the Catholic hierarchy in NYC (Cardinal Francis Spellman².)

From 1966-70 Berrigan was the head of Religious Affairs on the Cornell campus - organizing Teach-Ins, doing Draft Counseling, and civil-rights

² Spellman died December 2, 1967. Born 1889.

work. Soon the president of Cornell University was getting “flack” from university alumni. Berrigan was pointing out the close connections between the University and the military-industrial complex.

About this time Berrigan received a call from Tom Hayden, asking him and Howard Zinn to travel to Hanoi to pick up three captured US pilots. They spent much of their time in North Vietnam in bomb shelters.

By 1968, after frustrating conversations with Senators and the Secretary of State³ — where they heard comments such as, “*I leave all matters of morality to you clergymen*” — Daniel and Philip decided on a protest involving the symbolic destruction of government property — the Catonsville action — pouring home made napalm on Draft records.

In May of 1968 Daniel, his younger brother Philip (now a Josephite priest) and seven others - soon dubbed “the Catonsville 9,” destroyed Selective Service records with home made napalm.⁴ The action, which lasted only minutes, was biblical and symbolic. They were quickly arrested. At the time of their trial Daniel accepted the presumption that “*one owes the state restitution for breaking the law.*”⁵ But later, after the US Supreme Court refused to hear their appeal, he decided to evade arrest and became a fugitive, was eventually caught by the FBI (five months later) at the home of his theologian friend, William Stringfellow⁶, and jailed.

Actions rooted in Biblical faith

Father Berrigan’s actions are rooted in his Biblical faith.

³ Dean Rusk : SS from January 21, 1961 – January 20, 1969

⁴ The Media called them “criminals for peace,” or “holy outlaws.”

⁵ Fr. Daniel Berrigan was convicted and sentenced to prison to begin on April 9, 1970. According to Anke Wessels, director of Cornell's Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy, "On the very day he was scheduled to begin his prison term, he left his office keys on a secretary's desk in Anabel Taylor Hall and disappeared." On August 11, 1970, the FBI found and arrested Berrigan. He was released from prison in 1972.

⁶ Frank William Stringfellow (April 26, 1928 – March 2, 1985) was an American lay theologian, lawyer and social activist.

At the time Berrigan wrote: *“We implore our countrymen to judge our actions against this nation’s Judeo-Christian tradition.”*⁷ Berrigan said: *“I claim for myself the dignity of a Christian and a human being, present to this tradition (as Catholic, Jesuit, as chief strength), often faithless to that tradition (as a large weakness). But in any case, within it; for good, for ill, but unrecognizable to myself apart from it.”*

The Catonsville Action upped the anti on anti-war protests.

What are the public responsibilities of the Christian? Berrigan’s actions have always been subject to conflicting interpretations. His actions built up uneasiness in Christian communities.

Perhaps the only way the Christian and the non-Christian has to judge the actions of someone like Daniel Berrigan is to take out the Bible and read.⁸

Listen to the voice of this contemporary prophet:

I know that the prophetic vision is not popular today in some spiritual circles. But our task is not to be popular or to be seen as having an impact, but to speak the deepest truths that we know. We need to live our lives in accord with the deepest truths we know, even if doing so does not produce immediate results in the world.

The only message I have to the world is: We are not allowed to kill innocent people. We are not allowed to be complicit in murder. We are not allowed to be silent while preparations for mass murder proceed in our name, with our money, secretly.

We say killing is disorder. Life and gentleness and community and unselfishness is the only order we recognize. For the sake of that order, we risk our liberty, our good name.”

⁷ From Baltimore Press statement.

⁸ Here is a passage from Acts that Berrigan’s friend William Stringfellow used to quote to justify resistance:

Acts 4:18-20 So they called them (Peter and John) and charged them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

Back to Berrigan's Days as a Fugitive

While a fugitive from the Law, a “holy outlaw,” - for five months - Berrigan did not seek to totally disappear. He would suddenly appear in some church (usually not Catholic) to deliver the sermon - he would make surprise appearances at anti-war rallies - wrote a series of articles for various Christian journals - appeared on TV occasionally — co-authored a book of conversations with Psychiatrist, Robert Coles called The Geography of Faith — authored a play based on trial transcripts called, The Trial of the Catonsville 9, which premiered in LA - Wisely he decided not to go to the premier! (You can imagine how irritating this must have been for Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover. With all the NSA snooping going on today, this would be much harder to do.)

Father Berrigan served two years in prison for the Catonsville protest, was released in 1972, and spent the next three years teaching at Union Seminary in NYC. Following that he went to France, to Thich Nhat Hanh Buddhist Home in Sceaux for some healing time, as described in our Second Reading this morning.

Then in September of 1980,⁹ his will power restored, came the Plowshares 8 Action — a two minute symbolic protest action — of slipping by security guards at a G.E. Plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, and hammering a warhead (equal to 90 times the power of the Hiroshima bomb) and pouring their own blood over blueprints and tools. Symbolic of “beating swords into plowshares.”

The Plowshares 8 naively hoped to put nuclear war on trial, just as the Catonsville 9 protest had hoped to put the Vietnam War on trial. The Plowshares 8 had Robert Jay Lifton, George Wald, Helen Caldecott, and Richard Falk lined up to testify on their behalf - but the judge interpreted the parameters of the trial very narrowly, and they were all fined and sent to jail.

⁹ September 8, 1980

Dan's brother Philip, in explaining their protest, asked the important question: *"Who expects politicians, generals and bomb makers to disarm? People (and public concern) must disarm the bombs."*

Some personal experiences of Father Berrigan

Daniel Berrigan has always been critical of organized religion, its big congregations, its magnificent church buildings. I went to hear him at Duke University once in the 1980's, and I'll never forget one thing he said. Just before his talk on the Duke campus, he stood outside, on the front steps of the Chapel before entering - dressed in his Catholic Worker House hand-me-downs - an out of style parsley shirt, dark pants and sneakers - one could guess what he was thinking - and he said it, inside, a few minutes later: *"Look's like Mr. Duke got a hold of God and planted him upright!"*

A short time earlier that day I was with him at Guilford College, the Quaker college in Greensboro, as he addressed about fifty students and a few faculty. Both at Duke and Guilford College there were lively discussions following his remarks. At Duke he tied together all his various current activities — creating resistance to nuclear weapons; his weekly volunteering at the Catholic Worker hospice in NYC; his thoughts on overcoming the "psychic numbness" to the nuclear issue; and the connection between civility and madness — why we still don't perceive a need for change.

The only other time I had seen and heard him was about a decade earlier, in the early 70's (1973?), when he spoke at our Unitarian Universalist Church in Ashby, Massachusetts. Ashby is a sleepy little town in central Massachusetts, in northern Worcester County, about sixty miles west of Boston. The Ashby church is a cavernous white wood colonial structure. Normally, in our marginal congregations in that part of Massachusetts back then, about 20-30 folks would attend a Sunday service.¹⁰ That evening, to hear Daniel Berrigan, over 400 showed up! Young couples and families, homesteading in New Hampshire and central Massachusetts came in droves to hear what the radical Jesuit priest had to say. Berrigan provided a big energy boost to the few of us who were conducting weekly vigils in front of the Draft Board in downtown Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

¹⁰ Attendance doubled on Easter and Christmas.

After his remarks and a Q&A session, a young Catholic family with a new baby came on stage and Daniel conducted a Christening Service for them — a Catholic rite in a Unitarian church! Berrigan wasn't worried about the mixing of "sacred spaces." How refreshing that was. In the nearby town of Winchendon where I was minister, if a interfaith couple, say a Unitarian and a Catholic, wanted to get married (and the Catholic wished to remain Catholic) the wedding could only take place in the Catholic Church and the only part I could have in the wedding was saying a closing blessing. Mixing sacred spaces was not permitted. (Which in part explains why over the decades the membership of the Catholic Church in that area grew, and the membership of the Protestant Churches in that area declined. This, however, was not the case in other Massachusetts towns.¹¹)

In Q&A sessions Daniel was frequently asked, "*What should I do?*" by people looking for easy answers. He would always caution — "*Civil disobedience ought never be a substitute for unsatisfactory lives. Civil disobedience is the natural flowering of satisfactory lives; those who grow concerned grow quite naturally to deeper concern, and so to steps that dramatize their conscience.*" He frequently mentioned the weeks and months of spiritual preparation (what he calls "contemplation.") — before taking any action — the need for a base community, a circle of friends, meditation and prayer, retreats for thinking and sharing personal fears and worries — that preceded any protest action. The Catonsville 9 or the Plowshares 8 were close communities long before they entered the Catonsville Draft Board or the GE plant in King of Prussia.

If they didn't succeed in making their trials into Show Cases for the Vietnam War or Nuclear War, they did succeed in getting these issues back in the public's mind — for a while.

The Catholic Experience in the United States

This biographical information needs a bit of sociological and historical context — So I want to touch now on some of the Irish Catholic experience in the States.

¹¹ My cousin Martha's wedding in Leicester had 3 ministers — myself, her priest, and her groom's Methodist minister, and we all had equal parts in the ceremony.

Until the election of John F. Kennedy, most American Catholics experienced themselves as a distinctive minority in the United States. They felt alienated from the main stream of the American Way of Life. The Protestants pretty much ran the country, at least they had control of all the important jobs in government and business. (How things have changed!¹² Catholics now comprise 22% of the US population¹³. 31% of Congress is now Catholic. While Scalia was alive, 6 of the 9 Supreme Court Justices were Catholic. Now 5. The remaining 3 on the Supreme Court are of the Jewish faith. No Protestants on the Supreme Court.)¹⁴

I can remember, back in the 50's, when my dad, a fall-away Catholic, used to read books by Paul Blanchard¹⁵, especially American Freedom and Catholic Power (1950). Blanchard, raised by Protestants, was an outspoken critic of Catholicism, and the popularity of his books signified the anxiety among Protestants over the increasing political power of Catholics in the U.S.

Like most first generation immigrants, the Irish Catholics (say Daniel's grandfather's generation) responded to their new home in the States cautiously and with a desire to stick together with their fellow Irish Catholics. They were poor and not yet accepted by the Protestant majority.

The second generation (Berrigan's father's generation) tended to be less cautious and suspicious, and made their way to full assimilation. The second generation, in its desire for full assimilation, sacrificed some of its traditional self-identity. Daniel's father was a nominal Catholic.

After Kennedy's election, Catholics could shed their feelings of being an outsider group. They now felt fully integrated into the American mainstream.

¹² With 69.5 million members, it is the largest religious body in the United States, comprising 22% of the population as of 2015.

¹³ Form 2015 survey.

¹⁴ Catholics: Roberts, Kennedy, Thomas, Alito, Sotomayer. Jews: Kagan, Breyer, Ginsburg.

¹⁵ Paul Blanshard died 27 January 1980. Paul Beecher Blanshard (August 27, 1892 – January 27, 1980) was an American author, assistant editor of *The Nation* magazine, lawyer, socialist, secular humanist, and from 1949 an outspoken critic of Catholicism. Many of his books were published by our own Beacon Press.

The third generation, Daniel's, comes along and it is searching for their identity as nominal Catholics and Christians. In Daniel's generation a significant number of priests, nuns and lay folk have found it impossible to continue in their old roles and have left the church — or — like the Berrigan brothers, sought to build a new identity within the church. (I found it interesting that the congregations I served in NC, Greensboro and Charlotte, contained large numbers of former Catholics, and frankly they made great members.)

In sum: first generation is poor and on the fringe of the American way of life, and is cautious and feels the need to hold on to its traditional self-identity. The second generation feels the urge to complete the process of assimilation and thus is willing to sacrifice some its old self-identity. Finally, the third generation, born assimilated, doesn't have to fight that battle. Rather, its problem is finding its identity as a so-called Christian. This kind of socio-historical analysis can be helpful in understanding the radical actions of Father Berrigan. But don't let it be too reductive.

Berrigan's Philo-Theological Viewpoint

In brief, Daniel Berrigan sees human life always subject to the temptation of self-forgetfulness. He sees most people, most of the time, seeking contentment in life — to the point of forgetting their essential worth, their humane core, as caring, responsible persons. This self-forgetfulness has narrowed our moral sense. The public, for the most part, suffers from amnesia.

The religious response to this amnesia he calls "contemplation," by which he means "pondering," "thinking" — making the effort to remember who we are, re-member who we might be (our higher self), what he believes God calls us to be. For Father Berrigan, the act of "re-membering", of remembering the acts of the saints, the OT prophets, remembering the commands and peace message of Jesus, remembering significant people of the past, who summoned their contemporaries from living a distracted and fragmented life of self-forgetfulness, to live life fully aware of its preciousness, its precariousness, its inevitable insecurity, its continual jeopardy.

He regards what people of faith do each Sunday, in their respective denominations, as a political act: *“I am convinced,”* he writes, *“that contemplation, indulging the common worship of believing women and men, is a political act of the highest value, implying the riskiest of consequences to those taking part.”*¹⁶

The authors of the Bible did not compose general statements, or write essays to communicate their thoughts. Instead, they used poetry, myth, historical and semi-historical narrative. They confronted their readers with human beings involved in concrete actions. The protest actions of Daniel Berrigan, his brother and the others, are a similar way of communicating.

Their acts of witness were symbolic and dramatic — like the religious drama of the OT or the acts of Jesus (for example — overthrowing the table of the money changers). This is what Daniel hoped to accomplish — to create an image, by their actions, which would help us to remember, by virtue of this image being hard to erase.

“Our apologies good friends for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper, instead of children.”

What did Daniel Berrigan accomplish? By putting his own life in jeopardy, he accomplished for many what, in his last public sermon before being caught by the FBI (at a Methodist church in Germantown PA) — he said he hoped to do, and that was, quote:

“to suggest to you that my life may open up questions also for yours, for your families, for your work, for your attitude to human life and death, especially the deaths of children and the innocent.”

¹⁶ If, for Berrigan, worship has political implications, then, what seems to others to be a political act of protest against a war (the burning of Selective Service records) is seen by the Catonsville 9 as a religious act, act of religious witness, a liturgical act.