

Martin Sheen Actor

From *the Right Words at the Right Time*, compiled by Marlo Thomas and friends

Many powerful words from heroes and saints whose lives spoke volumes have inspired me throughout my life: Gandhi on the absolute necessity for nonviolence; Mother Teresa's assurance that we are never asked to be successful, only faithful; and Dorothy Day's belief that the only solution is love, to name a few. But no one spoke more clearly or more personally to me than Daniel Berrigan.

I returned to Catholicism in 1981, but becoming a practicing Catholic again meant far more than Sunday mass and the Sacraments. Indeed, my decision began a long and difficultly journey toward involvement with social justice through nonviolent action by way of moral obligation.

Daniel Berrigan is Jesuit priest in New Your City. During the 1960s he and his brother, Philip, who was also a priest, began organizing nonviolent protests against the war in Vietnam. They were the first to burn draft cards, and in what would become a famous case, they and seven other raided a draft-board center in Catonsville, Maryland, in 1968, hauling many files into the parking lot and burning them with homemade napalm.

They became known as the "The Catonsville Nine," and their action was arguable the single most powerful antiwar act in American history. It was simple and direct. It was nonviolent and it spoke a powerful truth to power.

The Berrigans reasoned that it made far more sense to burn the draft cards of young American than permit the American government to burn Vietnamese children with real napalm while remaining legally unaccountable and morally unchallenged. But they paid dearly for their action. Found guilty and sentenced to several years in prison, Dan held a farewell gathering, and it was at that event that he made a simple but powerful statement that changed my life forever. While he was explaining the man different ways in which nonviolent actions can work to help end the war, he advocated that everyone involved should seriously consider the risk of going to prison. Suddenly, a reporter who challenged him interrupted him. "It's fine for you to go to prison, Father Berrigan. After all, you have no children. What's

going to happen to our children if we go to prison?" To which Daniel Berrigan calmly responded, "What's going to happen to them if you don't it?"

When I read that statement in the newspaper it hit me like a thunderbolt. I was in Los Angeles at the time pursuing an acting career and had not been active at all except for some work I had done for the civil rights movement. But reading Dan's statement—he was already in prison by then—he became an ideal and an inspiration as his one comment forced me to reevaluate everything about myself and the world in which I lived. Eventually it forced me to look at social justice in an entirely different light, and that light illuminated every political and social stand I would take for the rest of my life.

What is the person cost of activism for social justice? After all, if our deals are of any true value they have to cost us something, and the more lofty the ideal, the higher the price.

I didn't meet Daniel Berrigan until 1981 while filming a docudrama on the "The Plowshares Eight." Dan and Phil were on trail again, this time for symbolically trying to disarm a nuclear weapon. These two extraordinary brothers were still working nonviolently for peace and social justice and still risking prison long after the war in Vietnam had ended and the nation was lulled into a false sense of Cold-War peace and well being. After befriending Dan and returning to Catholicism I began involving myself in many different types of activism, demonstrating on behalf of issues from nuclear disarmament, farm workers and the homeless, to the environment and the death penalty. Along they way I have been arrested sixty-four times, and although I am currently on probation for three years following a nonviolent protest against SDI (Star Wars) at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, I've never gone to prison....yet.

Activism for social justice is not always a popular option, of course, especially for actors whose success or failure often depends on public approval, and I am very well aware of the toll it can take on those special people who choose to take the road less traveled. Ed Asner, Mike Farrell and Edward James Olmos come to mind, and recently the name of Richard Gere should be added. Shortly after the September 11 attacks I saw a TV news account of a fund-raiser at Madison Square Garden to benefit the families of the NYPD personnel who lost their lives at the World Trade Center. Richard Gere was to introduce a documentary film at the event and used the opportunity to speak about the war in Afghanistan and how

Americans need to concentrate less on military might and more on its capacity for compassion and forgiveness.

Unfortunately, he was nearly booed off the stage, but he calmly held forth in the face of overwhelming disapproval and finished his statement with elegance and grace. Then he introduced the film. I was so deeply impressed with his courage and commitment that I tracked him down on the phone several days later where he was filming Canada. "You are the only one among us with the courage to speak the truth in public. Thank you," I said, "and would to God I had such courage."

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Name Martin Sheen's three qualities you admire.
- 2) Who does Martin Sheen admire? Why?