

Pax Christi Massachusetts Retreat: April 12, 2025

“Hope for the Long Haul: Finding Our Place in Poetic Time.”

The title of our talk today is “Hope for the Long Haul: Finding our place in Poetic Time.” And so, I want to spend time today with the idea of story, of poetic time, of living in a poetic reality, because I think that can offer us a means by which we learn how to engage in hope *and* resistance for the long haul.

And of course, there is no better person than Philip Berrigan to give us hope for the long haul. Many of you knew Phil, worked with him, perhaps were arrested with him. I never met Phil Berrigan and so know him only from his writings and from stories his family and friends have shared. But from what I gather from my research and from those stories, he embodied hope and resistance for the long haul.

And so, let’s start at the beginning of the story, with Phil Berrigan’s story and the story of this book, and even the title of the book: A Ministry of Risk.

Why a book on Phil Berrigan’s writings, what was the research like, the process, the dictating, the structure?

The book was written chronologically because I wanted to tell Phil’s story and the story of post-World War II America. The element of story is so important.

And so, a little backstory about Phil Berrigan for those who do not know:

Phil was born on October 5, 1923, in Two Harbors, Minnesota. The youngest of six boys in a Depression era family, a hardscrabble life of hard work on what was then a frozen frontier.

His father Tom was a working-class man, a socialist poet father, and his mother was loving and kind and generous, reading the Catholic worker newspaper regularly. They shared meals with those who knocked on their door even though their meals were already sparse to begin with. This was the setting for the formative years of Phil.

When WW II began Phil placed himself in a story of his own creation: he was Philip the Bold, the toughest kid on the block, and he was going to go off and kill as many Nazis as he could. He went to war and served in action in Europe. He was a good soldier, a sharpshooter, moved through the ranks. He saw the devastation of total warfare, the rubble of the great cities of Europe, the endless piles of the dead.

When he came home, he went through a period of discernment – what had he done there? What had the U.S. done? What had they become?

Inspired by Dan who had joined the Jesuits before the war, Phil decided to join the Josephite order and become a priest. During the war Phil had seen American discrimination firsthand in the armed forces as the treatment of his African American comrades down South in basic training and in the fighting fields of Europe appalled him. The Josephites were a Catholic order dedicated to serving African Americans.

For Phil, there was justice and injustice, right and wrong, and not much in between. Racism was wrong and it infuriated him. So shortly after becoming a Josephite priest and upon his first assignment, he began working with the African American community to push for better housing, better schools, desegregation. This of course infuriated the white Catholics who quickly protested to their Bishop.

Phil would be transferred again and again from Washington to New Orleans to New York but no matter where they sent him, he did the same work with the vulnerable populations in the community: organize, stand up and demand better living conditions.

About this time an insight that can be found in one of the earliest writings of Phil's I was able to discover in the archives comes in a 1958 lecture he gave to teenagers at a retreat. (Page 6 of the book)

Phil soon began to see the connection between racism, militarism and materialisms.

“Segregation and the arms race are connected, the vicious seeds of one helps to promote the other.”

“The tyranny we impose upon our own citizens, the African American community, that tyranny has now threatened to take an international form in the larger neighborhood of the world. Human injustice exists as a hydra, contriving a new face for every area of the world.”

Essentially, when we impose tyranny on our own people at home it becomes easier to impose tyranny on vulnerable populations abroad.

Now that's an interesting insight, and this was something Phil was so good at: connecting the dots, seeing how power works, looking behind the curtain and seeing the inner workings of an empire and then giving it back to us. I think Phil was brilliant in his ability to quickly analyze a situation, see its moving parts of who wins and who loses, who is grabbing the power, and then give that back to us in his writings to do with what we will.

“Americans are brutalized by affluence ...” - diverted, desensitized, dehumanized.

Around this time the war in Vietnam was intensifying. Phil saw it for it was: a war of imperialism, another example of the powerful victimizing the vulnerable.

Phil tried to dialogue with America's leaders, met with high level government officials during the early years of the Vietnam War, but he got nowhere. they wouldn't listen. Something else was needed. Something to galvanize public attention. Stir debate and discussion at the American dinner table.

Eventually Baltimore and Catonsville - the creativity of Phil's nonviolent resistance. Recreating nonviolent resistance for the present day.

Catonsville and the copycat actions. 1966-1973 hundreds of thousands of draft files destroyed. No copies of them. The rippling effect of nonviolence can become a giant wave, a tsunami that overwhelms and wins. We've seen this time and again.

Two middle aged white Catholic priests burning draft files and going to prison. They could not be written off as hippies and the Berrigan brothers knew this. They were using their status in America to send a message, stir debate, get people talking.

Phil became a fugitive from justice with Dan, had the FBI hunting him, the Department of Justice trying to put him in prison for life, but he continued with hundreds of actions and arrests throughout the 1970s, 80s, 90s, up until his death in 2002. Phil spent a total of 11 years in prison.

When Phil was released from prison in 1973, he and Elizabeth McAllister started Jonah house, an intentional living community in Baltimore. He and Liz raise a family: Frida, Jerry, and Kate. And their life becomes one family, resistance, prison, house painting. From changing diapers to arrests at the DOD, all part of the life of resistance.

You cannot talk about Phil without talking about Liz. Their relationship together was unique, profound, and powerful. One of the interesting things I found in the research was that though Phil was of course hard driving, even domineering by his own admission, he was also capable of great tenderness, such as this writing about Liz: . . . Read the section on Liz page 170

How did Phil have hope and energy and passion for so long? What kept him afloat, gave him the energy year after year? Phil would say to others, “Just don’t get tired.” But it may not be that simple. Either consciously or subconsciously, I believe Phil had placed himself in a story.

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Poetic time, poetic reality, and finding ourselves in a story. In poetic reality we see with depth, with the fullness of being, transcending time and place. We are not alone as individuals, discreet and floundering. We walk in a larger reality, a sacred one. We need to cultivate a heightened awareness of our being, to see with imagination. The goal is to open the universe, the whole of it, and step in.

Then read the section of Phil in World War 2 and the boy soldier. A good example of how Phil placed himself in an eternal story.

People say that Phil was not a poet, that Dan was the poet. Fair enough. Dan wrote beautiful, profound award-winning poetry. But Phil lived each day with a poet’s perception of reality, saw the world and all of humanity existing within the epic poem of God and therefore sacred.

Phil was awestruck by what he saw each day, the same way William Blake was awestruck by what he saw each day. It was said that Blake lived in Paradise, routinely saw God in the window. And the prophet Ezekiel under a tree. He conversed daily with angels. His wife said of him, “I have very little of Mr. Blake's company; he is always in Paradise.” Blake believed everyone was capable of such sight, but it was not cultivated. “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all.” And so Blake lived in paradise, his poetic reality.

I would say that Phil lived somewhere east of Paradise, east of Eden, in a fallen world, saw God each day in every person, saw Christ each day looking at him, waiting, questioning.

Phil placed himself within the story, the great story, the one where God entered time, where God became human, God became us. It is the greatest story, and Phil found his place there.

As an example, read quote from prison 1971:

- “So, if you find the following negative, caustic, angry – remember that they come from one who has questioned domestic racism and modern war, for 10 years; who has resisted militarism, and war-making repeatedly; who has experienced not only prison, but solitary confinement and long fasts; who has endured the charade of three political trials and who faces a fourth, and who probably will be in and out of prison for the remainder of his life. In sum, my experience has been out of the ordinary, and it comes purely from attempts to answer the question, ‘What does Christ ask of me?’”

This is Phil seeing himself in *the* story, the Christian story, the one of salvation and redemption, touched by grace and beauty and infused by hope. A story of rebirth by carrying out the works of Christ. Phil walked with Christ, heard him talking, asking questions of Phil.

We need to see like this, like poets, speak like sentries (warning of war and speaking the truth), and live like servants. This is how we work for the long haul. Only by finding ourselves in time, in the greater span of time, in poetic and prophetic time, do we find the strength and spirit to keep going. No matter the odds. No matter the setbacks.

We work with family and friends and community, but we also work with reverie. And by reverie I mean to dream during our waking hours. To daydream with intention. To imagine. To see with poetic vision. We seek and we find reverie in the work we do. Reverie is a colleague, a companion. Reverie helps us find our way home.

To see ourselves in a story, in poetic time, is to be in a state of active creation. Each of us has our own unique life history, our childhood and life as an adult, its traumas and triumphs, and we need to use that to create a story for ourselves that feeds us, sustains us. When we do that with intention and prayer, we will undoubtedly be linking our story to other stories created by intention and prayer, created by reverie.

To engage in reverie is to dream. And Martin Luther King of course had a dream. It's important that we all have the ability to dream in order to do this work. We have to imagine the future and then go to work implementing it. Dreaming is not a waste of time, and it is not pie in the sky. It is an essential element of this work. Deep dreaming, reverie, is understanding humanity's connection to the life of this world and to the next.

We blend our own life story into the present-day story of the world, and we find our place in that story of the world as one of Christ's workers, one of Christ's witnesses, a witness for the victims and for peace. We go into the breach.

I have been working on a new book about this idea of story and how we use it to survive. It is a book about violence and survival. Violence in families and violence in war. I come from a history of childhood violence and so became a prosecutor to work with victims of violence and from there to eventually being a peacemaker. From violence in the family to the community to the world. That is a story in which I place myself.

We all have such stories, unique to us, our own lives of triumphs and tragedies, and we mold those stories to become who we are. There is a reason each of you is sitting here today in this room at a Pax Christi retreat. You have, consciously or subconsciously, created a story from the threads of your life and placed yourself in that story such that you feel compelled to be here today, to do this work of peace and justice and love.

We need to tell ourselves such stories to survive, to make life bearable, to give us strength to overcome our struggles and those we see in the world. This is not make believe story telling. Like it or not, we are part of a story and so we may as well recognize that, join in the active creation of that story.

But we must be sure we create the right story for ourselves. How do we do this? How did Phil do it?

In December of 2016, Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old father of two from North Carolina read that a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. had become a sex prison for young children facilitated by Hillary Clinton and other Democrats. Other online articles told of how Democrats routinely drank the blood of children. This pizza shop was where it all happened. A den of devils. Welch sped to the scene from North Carolina, well-armed with his AR-15 rifle. On the way, he recorded a video for his young daughters telling them how he was saving the children, standing up

for them, that this was how he wanted them to remember him. When he arrived at the pizzeria, he began shooting. Edgar Welch had found himself a story. But it was the wrong story.

Any story that exiles us from community, that has violence as a tool, is the wrong story. Our stories should always be moving us in the direction of community, of nonviolence, of compassion and justice. This is our check as to whether we are creating the right story.

And so we must find the right story, the story that is uniquely ours, and then we must never surrender it. Because by holding on to that story that is uniquely ours alone, we are holding on to our soul. Each of us is a unique expression of God's creation, and the story of ourselves is part of that unique creation. It holds within it our soul.

One of the great dangers of an authoritarian government is that it seeks to replace the individual with the collective, to have the individual surrender their identity to the nation. The personal story becomes the collective story. Which in reality is no story. That is incredibly damaging to human dignity and is an offense against God's creation. And so hold on to your story with all of your might.

We must liberate ourselves from any story, any reality that constricts God's creation, and that creation as lived out in our own story. We engage in creative visualization, where the dream of intention gives new form to our experience. Transformation can take place in this area. To have peace, we must first visualize it. See it in every detail and make that our reality.

Imagination is born in children but seems to die in so many adults. There is a resigned fatigue to the world as it is, a sense that there's nothing they can do about so much suffering in war. They've lost the ability to imagine, to create a story.

We have to repair ourselves while we are trying to repair the world. Our injuries and traumas. To do this we have to see painful or traumatic events of our own within a greater story. If we look at them in an isolated context, they remain as open wounds. But when we see them in poetic time, they can be healed. This is what Phil was doing with this story of the boy soldier through eternity. Repairing himself while repairing the world.

There were certain words Phil used in his story again and again, three words in particular: Resistance, Revolution, and Liberation.

I began to realize that these three words were a journey, one of enlightenment and action, that once one embraces true resistance, the need for nonviolent revolution inevitably follows, and once revolution is fully accepted, liberation arrives and shines its light. It is this belief in light that also marks much of Phil's writings, the light that shines on us through God's grace, and the light that we create ourselves through our own radical love and non-violent actions. Yet like Phil's journey from soldier to peacemaker, this journey to liberation, to light, does not come easy, or without fear.

It's a process, a journey that happens in stages, a bumpy one to be sure, but also beautiful and redemptive. All good stories involve a journey.

Unfortunately, Phil had to go on his journey without support from the church. This pained Phil greatly because he thought the church and its priests and bishops should be siding with the victims and not the victimizers.

Criticisms of the church: "we constitute the church in chains, advocates of resistance to naked power, disproportionate wealth, racism, war-making." The Church in Chains. A powerful and insightful phrase, a damning indictment of the church.

And then this... "Christianity today places its emphasis upon worship at the expense of the works of mercy. Christians seek in religion a divine sanction for personal pride, a philosophy that will pad and cushion them from the demands of life or allow them to deal with only its most palatable forms."

It is clear from Phil's writings that he was deeply wounded at the impotence of the Catholic Church to confront war and racism and materialism. This was a spiritual wound to Phil, one that provoked anger on his surface but created a deep probing beneath that anger, a search for the reason why this was so and how it could be changed. American Catholicism and its false piety pushed Phil along on his spiritual journey, along on his story.

After reading much of Phil's work, I have to say that he does not seem an enigma to me. He's not confusing or unclear, though it might be easier if he were. His challenge might be easier to avoid or dilute, the audacity of his actions easier to

ignore. But Phil's words are unambiguous, his actions and meaning clear, and his source unmistakable.

Phil believed that nonviolent resistance was not only our best hope but our only hope. After all, it is what Christ taught and enacted. As Phil wrote, "Christ never said anything that He didn't do; He never believed anything that He didn't live."

Phil was a man who pondered the works of Christ deeply, took Christ literally, and lived him personally. He saw what Christ did and sought to enact that as best he could.

Again, Phil wrote, "I would suggest in all groping and hesitancy, that the nature of Christian witness is the same operation that Christ endured in becoming us—one cannot become human until one becomes all people. . ."

Time and again Phil writes about becoming more fully human as the journey. To be fully human means to take in all the suffering and all the pain and all the beauty and redemption this world offers. It means to live with depth and with daring. It means to not close ourselves off to the unpleasant or the inconvenient. This is being fully human.

Phil's expression of the this came in the form of asking himself the most daunting—and for Phil the most haunting— of questions: "What does Christ ask of me?"

Later, he wrote, "The Sinless one continues to haunt me."

And so, Phil followed Christ into the breach with the victims, with all people, into prison, into derision and persecution. It was there he found liberation. Phil seemed to be one of the freest men I have ever read about. A nonviolent journey ending in freedom, in liberation of the person, the soul, the spirit.

He explains the difficulty of this journey: "Everything that can be said of Christ can be said of us, even the parallel risks between us in running the course. No one can honestly say that Christ did not possess our fears, our reluctance, our horror in dirtying himself with the soil of apathetic or frightened or vicious human beings. Yet conviction in love forced Christ into the darkness of risk where nothing is predictable, nothing safe or sure, nothing to hold onto but one's faith."

While Phil's nonviolent actions were for the victims, his writings are for us. And so Phil's writings are a critical part of his legacy. They're his way of speaking to us in the 21st century. His writings are both poetic and prophetic, and by prophetic, I mean Phil is clear-eyed in seeing the world as it is and in calling out the conditions of that world to the rest of us. Phil sees the truth, speaks it, and acts on it. He is both sentry and shepherd.

There is a call and response between God and His creation throughout time, a question or a dilemma or a demand issued, and then a hoped-for response. This call and response continues through the prophets and great writers and theologians of the Church. The call from them, and then our awaited response. It continues with Phil: his call to us and our response. And so, the question becomes, what is our response?

Phil wrote:

“The Word of God tells us that life is too precious to live any other way but awake. The truth or light keeps us awake. We need the light to shine on ourselves certainly—on our fears, illusions, and denials. But, just as urgently, we need light to shine on our government and its darkness of lies, secrecy, and mass murders. Confronting evil is the ultimate test of God's life. Such action becomes light for us. Life is there, and the light depends on us.”

The light depends on us. That is Phil speaking to us today, calling to us, compelling us to go forward, to undertake our own ministry of risk. This is part of his legacy. The call comes to us: What is our response?

A question I had as I was working on this book was how did Phil take the measure of his work, of his life? Well, he tells us clearly and plainly: “The yardstick against which I must measure myself is not, supposedly, weaker people but the innocent who die needlessly everywhere, and the Innocent One [Christ] Himself.”

He continues: “What I'm trying to say is this: Our lives, to be agencies of peace, must stand the scrutiny of both God and man, and by man, I mean not our peers, but the billions of people suffering from war, tyranny, starvation, disease, and racism. In our better moments we may pity them, but sentiment has yet to stop bombing or feed starving children. They will hold us to our acts, and if these acts

will not bear human analysis, we will be judged and condemned and withstood in the same coin.”

I don't think Phil would be surprised as to where we are now. Four decades ago, he was writing of environmental destruction, nuclear war, the scourge of racism, and the terrible tentacles of the military industrial complex that had become the domination system. Four decades ago, he was writing that we cannot be silent if we want peace. The gospel, he said, means peacemaking. Again, comes this call and response. What is our response to Phil's call?

Today we are confronted with Genocide in Gaza. With war crimes. With immense suffering, victims and victimizers. A breach.

What would Phil do? We must recreate nonviolent resistance for the present moment the same way Phil and his colleagues did at Baltimore and Catonsville. They distilled the issue of Vietnam to its essence, to a tangible symbol, the draft records, and then used other symbols, blood and napalm, to highlight it.

What is an essential symbol of the genocide in Gaza? What allows it to happen? How do we recreate nonviolent resistance for the present moment?

The same is true for the threat of nuclear weapons today. I work with first and second generation atomic bomb survivors who are Korean and were forcibly removed from their homeland by the Japanese and taken to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as laborers. They were subjected to the atomic blasts there. We are conducting a people's tribunal to try to get them justice. I spent a week in New York City with them in March at the United Nations, and we made the rounds, letting them tell their first-hand stories of what it was like to be a victim of a nuclear attack. Nothing will sober you more than hearing that.

Phil wrote extensively about nuclear weapons, in fact his last writing from his deathbed was about nuclear weapons. He wrote, “I die with the conviction, held since 1968 and Catonsville, that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth; To mine for them, manufacture them, deploy them, use them, is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself”

What do we do today to symbolize the issue of the nuclear threat? How do we distill it to its essence? How do we recreate nonviolent resistance for that issue?

Perhaps these can be part of our small group discussions today, in addition to other thoughts we might have.

I'd like to close with something I wrote about Phil two years ago and have revised for today since I believe it is still pertinent. Perhaps more so. It speaks to this season of spring, of rebirth, of resurrection, of Easter.

Spring is a time of planting, of seeding the fields, a time hopeful for growth. The field work is hard, but the horizon is hopeful. Color returns in these days. And warmth. We are fortunate to gain sustenance from the yield of those who worked in the fields so hard before us.

“The seed is the word of God,” according to the Gospel of Luke. Thomas Merton elaborated by writing, “Every expression of the will of God is in some sense a ‘word’ of God and therefore a seed of new life.” To those who tilled the fields and planted the seeds, we give thanks. We harvest their bounty and gain new life. And so we carry on the work.

Phil’s expression of the will of God came in the form of asking himself the most daunting—and for Phil the most haunting— of questions: What does Christ ask of me?

The answer was learned slowly and with sacrifice. Phil expressed it in actions and with these words: To stand in the breach with the victims. To resist the culture of death. To grasp that Christianity and revolution are synonymous. To understand that the true nature of Christian witness means being faithful enough to suffer and daring enough to serve. To accept that through our actions we will constitute the church in chains. To embrace a ministry of risk.

The bounty of these words, the hard truth of them, their gravitational pull, may just be our best hope as we prepare for what feels like an ominous time in the history of this world, as we mold our resistance for the long haul. A friend recently said to me, “Think of it: You plant seeds, and food comes up from the ground. Year after year, relentless growth, new life.” We are thankful for the seeds, for those who planted them. The harvest is rich. Phil’s work yields in abundance.

Philip Berrigan was both physical and intellectual. A field hand who saw behind the curtain. In Luke we read the following: “If they do these things in the green

wood, what will they do in the dry?” (Luke 23:21). Phil quoted this passage from prison in 1999. If they executed Christ in the green, what will they do in the dry? His conclusion: Quote - “If we wake up and live out the nonviolent resistance exemplified by Christ, we can discard the biblical metaphors of green and dry wood. Jesus Christ will live, now and forever. And so will we.” End quote.

Long may we labor. Long may we love. Winter has ended. A new spring awaits.

Philip Berrigan: Quotes for the Long Haul

- “A ministry of risk goes unerringly to the side of the victims, to those threatened or destroyed by greed, prejudice, and war. From the side of those victims, it teaches two simple, indispensable lessons: (1) that we all belong in the ditch, or in the breach, with the victims; and (2) that until we go to the ditch, or into the breach, victimizing will not cease.”
- “Faithful enough to suffer, daring enough to serve.”
- “Christianity and revolution are synonymous.”
- “We constitute the church in chains.”
- “Truth and peace mean resistance.”

- “So, if you find the following negative, caustic, angry – remember that they come from one who has questioned domestic racism and modern war for 10 years; who has resisted militarism, and war-making repeatedly; who has experienced not only prison, but solitary confinement and long fasts; who has endured the charade of three political trials and who faces of fourth, and who probably will be in and out of prison for the remainder of his life. In sum, my experience has been out of the ordinary, and it comes purely from attempts to answer the question, ‘What does Christ ask of me?’”

- “The object of witness is humanity, people, each and every person.”
- “The single task of life is a responsive and loving reaction to Christ taking on our life to himself. A person must now put on Christ.”

- “To be a world force in peace, and not merely an inconsequential remnant, the church must constantly re-learn itself as it is: a poor, evangelical and universalist community, which is constantly striving for the delicate balance between the word of God and its service among humanity.”

- “War fever betrays a monstrous contempt of humanity. It hides behind a bewildering variety of biblical trappings, pretending virtuously to be concerned about human rights and values, while in reality it pays for itself through misery of the poor and the colonialism of people of color, trusting only in the power of dogma and weapons.”

- “Resistance will outrage the high and mighty, who tolerate such convictions, neither from Christ, nor from any of us.”

- “To attack draft files is to attack both militarism and war as an unjust preoccupation with private property. Those draft files to us are Death, or, more precisely, the mechanism of death. Our blood upon them is a tribute to life and a covenant with it. Our way of saying: no more war, war never again.”