Literary Courage as a Roadmap to Activism: A Conversation with Kathy Kelly

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Abstract

American pacifist and peace activist Kathy Kelly talks about some of the key experiences, decisions, and books that shaped her views and activism. Her experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, of breaking sanctions, bringing medicine and bearing witness to the effects U.S. military policy has on the lives of those targeted, is central to her work. On the basis of war literature between World War I and the present, she discusses the way these narratives (ranging from poetry to film, to non-fiction) can help shape our conceptions of fear and courage, and how we might question and overcome certain fears in favour of action.

Kathy Kelly (born 1952) is an American peace activist, pacifist, author and three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Most of her activism and writing is focused on Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza, as well as domestic protests against United States drone policy. Her actions and civil disobedience have led to her arrest in the U.S. over sixty times (for planting corn on nuclear missile silo sites, for example) and she has written about her encounters with people who were targets of U.S. military bombardments and inmates of U.S. prisons. She helped organize seventy delegations to bring medicines and medical relief supplies to Iraq, all in violation of U.S. and UN economic sanctions. Kathy travelled there 27 times and remained in Iraq throughout the opening weeks of the U.S. bombing and invasion in 1991 and 2003. She has visited Afghanistan thirty times over the past ten years. Kathy believes it is crucial for people who visited Iraq and Afghanistan to give witness, in the U.S. and the U.K., about the devastation and death caused by the brutal economic and military warfare.

During the fieldwork stage of my doctoral research, I found my way to Kathy and *Voices for Creative Nonviolence,* the organisation she co-coordinated (until it closed down in late 2020). In my project, I research war literature and its influence on peace activism. While doing fieldwork in the U.S. I lived in Uptown Chicago, in the house from which *Voices for Creative Nonviolence* organised. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic my planned return to Chicago was put on hold, and I spoke to Kathy in a video call during the Christmas holidays of 2020.

In some of our earliest conversations in Chicago, Kathy mentioned the influence literature has had on her life and activism, as well as the central role activism plays in her life. This holiday, while we are locked in our homes, I am reminded of a phrase I have heard her say often during my time in Chicago: "The best place to spend Christmas is in prison or in a war zone." At the start of our conversation, I remind her of this maxim.

Kathy:

> Yes, well, here I am, sheltering in place during the pandemic, and feeling a bit troubled by so much security. For many years, I annually found myself in war zones or prisons because of deeply held beliefs.
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> I still believe we should always make the most impoverished people in our world our number one priority. And I believe nonviolence can change the world. It's wrong to kill and wars are always wrong. I don't want to let inconveniences interfere with living in accord with such deeply held beliefs. Those beliefs guided much of my adult life and I don't want to regard that part of my life as a closed chapter.
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> The pandemic has restricted travel, and I'm also feeling acutely conscious of the impact international travels have on the environment. Yet, it's crucial to be in touch with and learn from people bearing consequences of wars. How interesting, for example, to read Vera Brittain's reflections in her book *Testament of Youth*, about visiting German people in the years following World War I. Through her travel, she began to understand how the ravages of war and disease afflicted German civilians.

Testament of Youth (1933) is the first instalment of Vera Brittain's (1893–1970) memoir, detailing her experiences as a young woman who became a nurse during World War I and had to, in addition to her own front experiences, deal with the loss of her fiancé Roland Leighton, her beloved brother Edward, and her three other close male friends, who all died in action or of wounds during the war. In relation to my PhD research, I had invited Kathy to reread *Testament of Youth* so we could discuss it together.

Kathy cont.:

> She had lived the great drama of her life in her love for Roland and her love for her brother and her excruciating experiences as a nurse at the front. I came to *Testament of*

Youth late in life. I have a friend named Brad Lyttle,[1] and he is the most rationalist person I know. He was raised by a mother and two aunts who were total rationalists and Brad cannot easily understand anything impetuous or strongly led by emotions. But he said that he felt the greatest anti-war literature that was ever written was Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* and I thought, "Oh, well that's interesting." I had never heard of it, so I acquired it.

Thalia:

It is hard not to be moved by Testament of Youth, *I think. Especially because you know it is a true story. You can feel how the loss affected her deeply, how it wasn't just a men's war, and how it inspired her later activism.*

K:

Yes, and the letters between her and Roland show them changing their views about the war. Vera and her immediate circle were caught up in imagined glory and honour summoned by war. She was worried that she wouldn't be able to match the noble commitment that her lover and her brother were going to experience. And then we read Roland's rough and raw recognition of how gruesome trench warfare was. He went out to reconstruct an area of the trench and saw the skeletal remains of a soldier covered with grey ragged clothing; that scene moved him to challenge anybody who talked about the glories of war.

Before you and I began this call, I was just rereading the section in which Vera says how it took her weeks to actually absorb that Roland was gone. After reading Roland's repudiation of glorifying war, I reread Wilfred Owen's lines assuring people that if they saw and heard the horrors of war they "would not speak, with such high zest, to children, ardent for some desperate glory, the old lie: 'Dulce et deco-

[1] Bradford Lyttle is a pacifist and peace activist from Chicago, Illinois.

rum est, pro patria mori'" (*It is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland*).

Owen (1893 – 1918) is considered one of the leading poets of World War I. *Dulce et Decorum Est* (in *Poems,* 1920) is his most famous poem, which was published posthumously as he was killed in action in 1918—exactly a week before the Armistice. His poetry is seen as exemplary of trench warfare and has become synonymous with the disillusionment of his generation.

T:

You mentioned earlier that you gravitate more towards World War I literature than before. Is that because of Vera Brittain's book? Or does it have a different reason?

K:

Well, it has seemed to me, historically, that the United States did come close to having a country-wide-rooted anti-war movement that almost stood a chance at preventing the United States from going into World War I. And then the fact that the war was so futile, that it made so little sense by any stretch of the imagination to sacrifice all of those lives in World War I. It just seems important to stay with that time in history and try to understand what might have been done differently to actually prevent World War I. How was it that those promoting the war prevailed?

T:

You have mentioned to me that reading World War II novels had a big influence on you. Could you elaborate on that? What was it about these works that moved you?

K:

I felt compelled by the utter wrongheadedness of Nazism, and the unwillingness of people to take steps that might have

been risky but would have been courageous. Reading about the Nazi 'final solution' made me wonder why people living in safe locales beyond Germany didn't find ways to resist. It made me wonder about my own responsibilities to resist wars being prosecuted by my country, such as U.S. intervention in Central America, and U.S. Cold War preparation for nuclear warfare. I wondered about my responsibilities as an educator, and as I learned more about civil disobedience, I began longing to be a part of nonviolent resistance to war. I felt relief when I finally became a war tax refuser by lowering my salary beneath the taxable income.[2] I was grateful for community gatherings planning nonviolent civil disobedience actions to protest U.S. support for death squads and massacres taking place in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. I grew increasingly committed to disarmament actions such as our "Missouri Peace Planting" campaign which involved planting corn on top of nuclear missile silo sites. Being sentenced to a year in prison for that action seemed like a small price to pay for the opportunity to join a community that peacefully resisted the threat of nuclear war.

Throughout my years of growing as a practitioner of nonviolence, I was especially drawn to the expressions of courage found in various novels about people whose will to live overcame the wretched hardships inflicted in death camps like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Those accounts mediated the question: would you act or not act? Would you go along, or would you resist? And if you would resist, how far would you carry that resistance?

It seemed like an almost personal ethical question that kept on coming back. In high school, the film *Night and Fog* (1955) had a big influence on me. I felt that I never wanted to be a spectator, more or less on the bleachers and just observing and watching and not getting in there to try and

[2] War tax resistance is the refusal to pay some or all taxes that pay for the war efforts of a country; in Kathy's case this is refusing payment of all U.S. federal income tax.

stop something so awful as the concentration camp build-up. Because like all things, it didn't start at its worst incarnation.

Alain Resnais' 1955 Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et Brouillard*) is a short, 32-minutes work, which has received much critical acclaim. It merges footage of concentration camps with descriptions of the rise of Nazi ideology, the torture that the prisoners were subjected to, and the liberation and discovery of the camps at the end of the war, thereby posing questions of responsibility.

K cont.:

André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of The Just* (*Le Dernier des justes*, 1959), described Ernie, a brave young boy in a concentration camp. I felt deeply moved by his story. I was emotionally geared-up to resist atrocities, but truthfully, I didn't do anything to try and stop the Vietnam war. I didn't have a thought in my head about how my emotional antipathy toward war could guide me toward activism.

When I finally became involved in actions defying war and upholding human rights, various novels stirred me to continued action. I feel indebted to Primo Levi's novels and short stories. I remember reading Marge Piercy's *Gone to Soldiers* (1987) while in prison and feeling increasingly drawn to resisting wars.

Literature about wars certainly helps build curiosity about non-fictional analysis of war. For example, Adam Hochschild's book, *To End All Wars* (2011), provides important history about efforts to resist World War I.

T:

So in a way this literature shows readers different points of view and options at the same time: either helping, or not helping or having to be helped or not, or…

K:

Yes, and then to identify what those temptations are in our own societies now, that can draw us more and more into practicing oblivion like "we don't know" or "we're not responsible." I think this is particularly evident with regard to the building of nuclear weapons and the support for forever wars and far-away wars—and the readiness to say, "Well, we're not really responsible for that." I think those ethical questions have to be pressed, but they are often very obscure, which is, I think, exemplified now in this time of the pandemic.

T:

You mentioned just now, when you were talking about those books, the idea of courage and the courage of the protagonists in those narratives. When you've encountered courage as manifested in a literary character, how has it affected you?

K:

Well, I think that fear drives a great deal of human activity. Fear and greed combined with weapons drives war. Then there is the question: what helps us overcome our fears? Everybody feels fear. How do we learn to overcome our fears? What allows us to control our fears so that we *do* act in accord with what we believe in? I think reading stories actually helps imagine a character, like oneself maybe, who overcomes fear and takes action. So I think it's very good for people to read stories and read biographies or be inspired by characters that certainly feel fear but don't allow that fear to govern their lives. I think that a lot of times we're governed by the fears of other people as well. What our family members fear for us, or you know, fears that are really not even our own. At least it helps to start to identify "well, okay, I really feel *that* fear" and not to be burdened with the fears that other people might feel.

I think we learn courage in all kinds of mundane ways. When you're a kid you get your lunch tray and you're trying to figure out where you're going to sit yourself. That takes a little courage. Or, just figuring out how to negotiate your way into relationships on a first job. There are all kinds of places to deepen our experience of overcoming fears; we learn courage jumping off the high dive. But to take that to a point where we might be in a life-or-death situation like it might be under occupation during a war, or facing imprisonment for instance, that's another kind of learning that I think often requires some pretty solid relationships so that people don't go towards that in a lonely way.

I think once there is a desire, a deep desire, to live in accord with your deepest ideals, your deepest beliefs, a certain level of courage might be required—if your ideals are maybe at odds with the wider society. I want to be in sync with the people who don't want to use guns, weapons, bombs, threats, war, sanctions; that's the crowd I want to be with. And I believe in that. I deeply believe in it. But to really align my life with those beliefs sometimes requires looking at some things that might seem fearful at times. In the past for me that's been, "I'm a little afraid of going to prison," or maybe going off to a place where war is going on is fearful. Becoming a war tax refuser initially had a little bit of fear-related hesitation. In a way, my greatest fears now have to do with not being radical enough. That's what I fear, I don't fear being too radical, I fear not being radical enough.

T:

I imagine that's different from when you started out?

K:

It is. I mean, I look at my friends who are going off to prison and I am sitting in a very comfortable room in a comfort-

able suburb and I think, "What am *I* doing?" It's a bit like Henry Thoreau's encounter with Emerson when Thoreau is in prison, it's part of his *Civil Disobedience* (1849). Emerson goes to visit Thoreau and asks: "What are you doing in there?" and Thoreau responds: "What are you doing out there?"

T:

How did you find your way to your own "civil disobedience" and peace activism?

K:

Well, part of it was being very sure that I did not want to share the mindset and language-usage of some of my immediate family members. One of my sisters married a Chicago policeman, Bill, and he spoke about people in the neighbourhood where my sister was an emergency nurse and he was what we call a "beat cop."[3] His language was often really rough and sometimes almost inhuman.

Bill would say to me, "Well, if you knew the people that we see when we're at work, you'd change your tune." And eventually I thought, alright, let me move into the neighbourhood, and see for myself. I moved to the poorest neighbourhood on the north side of Chicago, and I realised that Bill would tell one set of stories to himself and the police guys and maybe the emergency room nurses, but that my friends and I would tell another set of stories.

We'd be saying, "Oh wasn't that interesting what so-and-so told us over dinner at the soup kitchen" and "Did you get a chance to talk with so-and-so who lives in that single room only occupancy?" or you know, "So-and-so's brother is in

[3] A beat cop refers to a law enforcement officer who walks, rides, cycles, or drives in a specific neighbourhood, which becomes known as their "beat." The idea is that because the officer routinely patrols in the same area, they become known and trusted by the community, although there are well documented cases where the opposite happens because of over-policing.

jail; what are they going to do?" It was a different way of speaking about things. That's when I started to realise that I wanted to be with the people who told the stories that said, "We really don't need guns and violence and war." Essentially, the community I grew to respect and care for decidedly rejected including threat or force, much less weapons, in their 'toolkit' to solve problems. They worked toward peaceable solutions.

At the time, in the 1970s, everybody I hung out with in my neighbourhood was *very* optimistic that we could stop the United States from entering into war in Central America—and there was some success. Noam Chomsky has written that the Central America solidarity movements were far broader in scale than the protests against the Vietnam war, and much more rooted in mainstream society. These movements forged new paths of resistance; popular support for U.S. wars of choice—intervening in other countries—was actually quite thin. So when it looked like the United States was going to go to war in the Middle East I thought, "Well let's just get to it! We can stop this." And I was wrong. It just didn't happen. But by that time, I was ready to say that I'd do things even if there was no apparent success.

T:

I have heard this within peace activism more often. That it is not about the effectiveness of the action but about the intention behind it. Can you elaborate on that?

K:

There's a very strong urge within the peace movement to act in accord with your intentions rather than evaluating on whether or not you'll be successful. What I'd say is that it's really hard to calculate if something is successful because you don't know in time or across the world where the impact

might be felt.

T:

I can imagine that it is also an easy way to deter yourself. To say, "But oh well, what does it do?"

K:

Yes, often people are wondering about an 'escape hatch' when contemplating deeper activist involvement. So then when it appears the action might be futile, that it's never going to make a difference—people might run for that hatch.

T:

With regards to contemporary conflicts that you have experienced up-close; do you also read contemporary war literature? From people that are from, or have been to, Iraq and Afghanistan?

K:

I've been very impressed by a diary that a Yemeni doctor has kept. Doctor Derwish writes about Yemen under COVID-19.[4] I'm also impressed by the writing of a man named Jeffrey Stern who has traced a Paveway Missile from its manufacture in Arizona to a small town in Yemen where it was blasted into a village where they just discovered water.[5] It is just the saddest story: they were so excited because they had hired a rig and managed to go down deep enough to get water. During their celebration a Saudi bomber using a U.S. manufactured bomb struck them. I'm also halfway through a book about a Danish troop of soldiers in Afghanistan and it's so violent, I almost have to just take it in chunks. It is called *The First Stone* (2015) by Carsten Jensen and is about a platoon of NATO soldiers that is sent on a special mission during the war in Afghanistan.

4 See Works Cited.

5 See Works Cited.

T:

Is it odd to read that when you've been there? Because you've been there during some severe U.S. bombings as well, so you have a perspective that is not exactly that of a civilian, nor that of a veteran.

K:

I don't think I've read much that matches my own experience. Although there is one book, which is not a novel but a book by an Iraqi artist, Wafaa Bilal, called *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008). After his brother was killed by a drone, he set up an installation at the Art Institute in Chicago where he is behind a screen, and anybody from anywhere in the world can shoot a paintball at him by just pressing a computer button. He can dodge these paintballs by staying behind the screen, but he's also vulnerable. If he stands up, he might get hit. This room where he stationed himself is splattered with yellow paint all over the back wall. He stayed there for thirty days I think, and then wrote a book about it. I think the randomness, in a sense, the far-away remoteness, the distance at which people could be hateful toward Iraqis somehow spoke to me a great deal. Because when you're in their country, you don't feel hateful, and you can't understand why people are wanting to be so hateful toward other human beings who are hospitable and kind and dignified. I told Wafaa that, if I had known what he was going to do, I think I would have committed civil disobedience on the Art Institute steps and tried to prevent him from going in.

T:

Always returning to activism. Would the reasoning be that you have tried to prevent the shooting of civilians in Iraq, and that the same goal holds up if that situation is moved to the U.S.?

K:

I think my reasoning would relate to having known Wafaa, personally, and feeling responsible to protect him from harm. I guess that's not detached from the reason so many of us felt willing to remain in Iraq during the 2003 Shock and Awe bombing.

During the Shock and Awe bombing of Baghdad, I would accompany a U.S. medical doctor to the Emergency Room of a main hospital in Baghdad. She had skills to offer. Because I had made many previous trips to Iraq, the authorities would allow her to enter the hospital if I was more or less along for the ride. I remember sitting on a bench outside the Emergency Room. Next to me, a woman was convulsed with sobs. I tried to offer a word of comfort. "How will I tell him?" she asked. "What can I say?" Eventually, I learned that she was struggling with how to tell her nephew, Ali Abbas, a young teenager, that not only had he lost both of his arms in surgery after a U. S. bomb attacked his family home, she must also tell him that she was now his only surviving relative. A surgeon emerged to say that he had already explained to Ali that both of his arms had been surgically removed. The surgeon said Ali's response was, "Yes, but will I always be this way?"

I wonder this myself sometimes, and you've heard me say it during speeches at protests. "Will we always be this way?"

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Biography

Thalia Ostendorf is a PhD candidate at the University of St. Andrews, in the departments of Social Anthropology and Modern Languages. Her research focusses on war literature and its influence on contemporary peace activism and remembrance practices in the U.K. and the U.S. She is also a co-founder of *Uitgeverij Chaos* (Chaos Press).