

CARRY MY HEART

February 8, 2004

Rebecca Johnson

I come to this pulpit with some trepidation, knowing that there is an assumption of wisdom when someone presents a sermon to you. I am afraid that I have very little wisdom to share. Instead, I have questions. I have questions that took me six months to ask, and may take me many years to answer. I'd like to share those questions with you today, in the hopes that our many minds working together are better than mine alone.

I was asked to speak today because I just spent six months in prison. I spent six months in prison because I locked myself to a gate at Fort Benning, an army base in Georgia, and I wouldn't leave. Why I locked myself to that gate is my story for you today. As I share this story with you I hope you will find that it is not my story at all, but the story of a community of activists and supporters and friends I met along the journey, all of whom transformed me as much as my action transformed them.

With that aside, I should start at the beginning. Behind the gate that I locked is a school, called by some La Escuela de Assassinos, the School of Assassins. This school, the real name is the School of the Americas (SOA), and many others like it support our country's ongoing policy of protecting business interests at the expense of human rights. Because of the great violence inflicted by many of the school's graduates, a large movement has grown in the US to shut it down. By the time I decided to throw my hat in the ring, the movement had been around for 13 years, about half my life. The movement began in response to the murder in 1989 of 6 priests and 2 women in El Salvador; 19 of the 26 soldiers responsible were SOA graduates. As more massacres, displacements, and other violations were discovered and declassified, the movement grew. It grew because of the courage of people like Rufina Amaya, people who were willing to share their stories with the world. Rufina Amaya was one of only a few survivors of the 1981 El Mozote Massacre in which 750 of her neighbors and her 4 children were killed by the Salvadoran army. The movement to close the SOA grew because all 8 of the officers in the battalion commanding this mission, ironically named "Operacion Rescate" or "Operation Rescue," were SOA graduates. The movement grew because other SOA graduates covered up evidence of the massacre, other SOA graduates refused to order investigations, and others threatened investigators who set up independent inquiries.

The work to close the SOA is supported by the organization SOA Watch. SOA Watch has been around ever since the movement became too big for one person to organize all of the details. I have worked with SOA Watch since I was a junior in college. When I just started going to protests and lobby days and regional actions, I was impressed by the level of support given to activists. When I decided I wanted to spend a month fasting at the gate to Fort Benning, the army base housing the SOA, the organization provided a mentor, media support, and advertised my action on their website, inviting others to join me. When I joined the staff of SOA Watch after I graduated from college, I realized that the all activists who choose to participate in the work of the movement, whether through civil disobedience or lobbying or attending demonstrations, are provided with resources, guidance, and education. By the time I locked myself to that gate, I knew that I would have access to a lawyer to make sure I got the fairest trial

possible, that I had witnesses to the event to make sure I was safe, that I had peers who had been through prison before who could answer my questions and fears, and that I would have hundreds of people, including my family and my close friends, writing to me and making sure I had everything I needed while I was incarcerated. I tell you all this because there is a tendency to believe that our heroes have acted alone, unsupported, and without guidance. The SOA Watch community showed me that justice work requires this level of support, and it was my confidence in that support more than anything that gave me the courage to take my stand.

In fact, when discerning whether I wanted to do this action of civil disobedience, I came across many questions and doubts that I could not answer. What is effective? What does it mean to be an ally? Where do I begin when the problem is so big, certainly bigger than any one school, that I cannot even name it? Is the SOA the right issue to be working for now? What if my actions make no difference at all? I knew that I had an obligation to work for justice; I wanted to follow the examples of those I trust and admire in the movement; but honestly, I did not know if civil disobedience was the right thing to do.

Finally, in my confusion, I decided to write a letter to my family and friends, thinking that if I could explain myself to them, I might understand it better and find some courage in the process. I described the frustrating hours of evaluating my activism for its effectiveness, and feeling hopeless and overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem. With each sentence I wrote, I came back to the fear that my action would amount to nothing, and the determination that I had to do it anyway. The fear, I realized, came from the sense that I wanted to do it all myself, that I should have the power to single-handedly transform the world. Once I named that fear, I began to realize that it wasn't so scary after all to be just one part of the solution. Naming that fear allowed me the strength to act even through my ambivalence. The determination, however, was based on my experience of similar ambivalence in all of my justice work. I have often become trapped by my uncertainty, unable to do anything for the fear that I could be doing something better. I wanted to be able to act on my conscience, and on the powerful examples of those I admire and trust, even though I knew that the uncertainty would always be with me.

I was not, and am not, sure that I did the right thing, but I am confident that I acted on my conscience in the most effective way that I knew at the time. I acted in ambivalence, but it took a lot of reflection and acceptance of that ambivalence. I am content with that and hope that I can feel at least that confidence in all of my work for justice. The questions are still with me, and I can't say that I have the answers, or that I ever will. They became my prison meditations and the discernment continues. My family and friends who answered my letter with their offers of support and insight have continued that discernment with me. Honoring and working on those questions only made me a better activist, and one that may be able to fight in this community for the long haul. When I can reflect honestly on my actions without blaming myself for mistakes, learning what works and what works for me is powerful and rejuvenating.

When it came down to my sentencing day, though, I felt a little less content. I remembered a saying, though not who said it, "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes." Well, I remember my voice shaking as I gave my sentencing statement, but I sure don't remember if I spoke my mind! I do remember, however, being led away from the court by big, burly US Marshals

wondering, “What in the world have I got myself into this time?!” I was terrified, unsure, and now an incarcerated convict.

Prison transformed me, beginning in that moment. I am a sheltered, white, middle-class girl who has spent my life learning by reading books. For goodness’ sake, I even chose to become a UU because I read about it in the library! I was and am a good liberal, always on the serving side of the soup kitchen line. Prison took away that mental line I drew between us and them. The privileges I have in everyday life transferred to prison – my skin color, my education, my money, my support – but even those could not protect me at the level to which I was accustomed. I concentrated so much on how demeaning and dehumanizing the prison was for me and for everyone, that I overlooked my privileges. As a protester, however, I had an extra privilege that gave me the opportunity to finally come to terms with my position both in the prison and out; I could move among the set social groups at the prison camp. Sitting at the lunch table with white inmates one day and with black inmates the next was OK, because I was different. For the first time in my life, I learned directly from the people who are most affected by the policies I fight. I am very grateful for that experience.

I went to prison as part of a movement to close the SOA, but in listening to the stories of the women around me I found what I wasn’t prepared for – a second transformation. I’d like to offer a few of the stories women shared with me during my time in prison. I want to tell these stories because the women who told them taught me something profound about human beings. Very few women I met denied their crimes, whether it was drugs or robbery or embezzlement, and very few were kind in the traditional sense of the word, but there was something beautiful in the unwritten moral code that everyone knows in prison, in the frequent gestures of compassion, in the power of the human spirit to survive even in the most humiliating places.

- Like any good organizer I tried to share my story and the story of the SOA with the women I met. My first mistake was assuming that women in prison universally would care to hear my story. I was, of course, wrong. My second mistake was assuming that women in prison would automatically support my cause and my action. Early in my stay, I spoke with Rhonda. She is serving a mandatory minimum sentence of 8 years for a drug conspiracy crime. She reminded me that for the women who did not choose to go to prison, the idea of me voluntarily separating myself from my family is almost insulting. She told me that the government is too big and too powerful for me to change and that the best I can do is make things a little more comfortable for those already caught in its web. She advised me to become a lawyer and do what I can for prisoners, but most of all, to leave and never come back. The conversation I had with her stuck with me for the rest of my prison term. Her anger at my willingness to leave my family for so long for my beliefs was powerful and humbling for me.
- Another powerful experience for me was the death of Brenda Thompson, an inmate I knew only by name. She reported to prison with a heart condition and epilepsy. She died from a heart attack two weeks later after receiving none of her medications. The guard on duty that night refused to give her CPR because, as she said, the rules did not require it. Brenda was dead before she left her sleeping quarters. In the months following her death, many inmates stepped forward, offering to tell the truth about the prison hospital’s willful negligence in Brenda’s health care. Even though it is a great risk for women in prison to come forward with

complaints about the prison – the consequences can include extra time in prison, denial of access to the telephone or family visits, time in solitary confinement, or any number of less official but still egregious punishments for making the prison look bad – many women were even willing to write affidavits and testify in court about what they saw of Brenda’s attempts to see the prison doctor.

- Finally, I’d like to share a story from my time in a Jail in Georgia. About three weeks into my sentence, I had my 24th birthday. While I took a nap that afternoon, my cellmates melted a candy bar in the warm water of the shower to frost my cake – a doughnut bought in the commissary. They then wrapped presents of oranges and candy bars in magazine pages and made me a balloon bouquet out of a toilet paper roll and potato chip bags. We sang and ate all afternoon, and I experienced a feeling of community that I never would have expected in jail.

Because of what I learned from other inmates in my journey through the justice system, I was energized by my prison experience. I came out with an optimism about humans that I had never felt before. That energy and optimism is so important because we live and work in an environment where we never seem to come any closer to our goals. Burnout is common in the movement, especially when we go to protest after protest and see the same faces, the same counter-demonstrators, and are left with the same sense of inconsequentiality. A couple of years ago, SOA Watch had a great victory in Congress. The president signed a bill to close the SOA and we were awed at our sense of power. Soon, however, we realized that the bill, while it closed the SOA, it also reopened it a few months later under a new name. It felt like we were starting all over. The news had spread that the SOA was closed, and we couldn’t even get a new bill written in Congress; Representatives kept telling us that we had to give the “new” school a chance. The ground was pulled out from under our feet, and we lost our momentum. Up until then we worked with the hope that, any day now, the school would close for good. Now all of us realized that it took 15 years to close the first school, and we had to consciously decide whether this is the work we feel called to do for the next 15 years too. Ultimately, as we all went through this crisis and as many of us came to the conclusion that we wanted to continue with SOA Watch, we found out that the very process of reconsidering our goals had made us stronger. Once we chose the work, responding to our own considerations instead of some vague sense of duty, we could work through the hard times, and still find energy for the struggle, however long it may take.

So you see that I have few answers, but I have found the comfort to sit with my questions and to act for justice even with my questions unanswered or partially answered. I learned to continue to ask the questions, even when my action is over, and to learn from the aftermath as much as from the action. I have even learned, as Alice Walker demands, to offer my small, imperfect stone to the edifice of hope without shame. These are lessons I could never have learned alone, but too many of us do justice work without allies. What could you do if you had the support I had in going to prison? How much stronger would you feel in your own work for justice if you could take the time to stop, doubt, and reconsider? What can you accomplish together? I leave you with the hope that all our minds working together are wiser than any one of us alone.