

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Narrator: Father Bill Bichsel
Date: May 9, 2014
Interviewed by: Lucas Dambergs
Place: Tacoma, WA

Lucas Dambergs: Can I begin by just having you introduce yourself, say your name -

Father Bill Bichsel: Okay, okay. Well, my name is Bill Bichsel. I live here at Jean's House of Prayer, which is part of the Tacoma Catholic Worker. The Tacoma Catholic Worker, as you're probably familiar with, basically our mission is to take in homeless people and live in community with them, and serve other needs. We're open six days a week for people on the streets to get showers, underwear, a change of underwear, and to use the phone and mail drop, things of that nature. And then also, as part of the Catholic worker movement, we also take stands against nonviolence - or, pardon, take a stance against violence. And in a nonviolent way we try to live a life of nonviolence among ourselves. Our founder, Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 in the Bronx in New York during the depression, was just deeply, deeply strong in the nonviolent movement. As a matter of fact she was - at that time they would refer to it as the - what do you call it - I just blanked out there. [laughs] But, anyway, there was no give in it at all. She opposed the First World War - the Second World War and our entry, or our being part of the second world war, as well. Pacifism. She was known and still is referred to at times as pacifism. Total nonviolence. So we try and we live that out or try as much as we can in our community.

LD: What I'm interested in talking to you about during this interview is your involvement with the Plowshares action in 2009. What led up to it, the action itself, and then the consequences. Thinking about what led up to it, I wanted to ask you about pacifism, and your idea of pacifism. How do you understand pacifism?

BB: Okay, so I can answer that as we go along.

LD: Great. So, how did you first learn of the Plowshares movement?

BB: Well, I've been quite aware of the Plowshares movement for some years. It started, actually, in 1980, in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, when the Berrigan brothers and Sister Anne Montgomery and five others entered into the munitions factory there and hammered on the nose cone of what were to be nuclear weapons. And, of course, they were all arrested and that was the beginning of Plowshares. And, so its takes its name, Plowshares, from the injunction of Isaiah that, "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and the nations shall not teach war anymore." That's in Isaiah 2, verses 1 to 4. So that's the [unintelligible] whole movement. And since that time there's been over 100 Plowshares actions in the United States. Also, there's been 25 in Europe, that are modeled on the on the Plowshares actions here. And

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

there are also Catholic Worker houses now in - there are three in Germany, two in the Netherlands, three in London, one in Ireland, one in Glasgow; in Guatemala, in Mexico, so it's quite international now.

But, anyway, I first became aware of the Plowshares through their actions. Then all the people involved in the Plowshares were in some way or another very familiar with the Catholic Worker movement, and had been deeply influenced by Dorothy Day, and also the writings of Thomas Merton, the great theologian, the Trappist theologian. So, they were great inspirations in their lives. It was through that time, or over the years I've been familiar with the Plowshares actions. I think it may be - I don't know if this would be helpful or not - but my first actions at the Trident submarine base, where there were actions took place in, uh, well I had been going up there in the early '70s protesting. At that particular time the base had not been built, the Trident submarine base, and we were up there protesting the building of the base at that time. So, finally the base began to be built, and my first arrest that there was in nineteen, uh, at times, I get it confused whether it was 1975 or 1976, but I I think it was 1976.

LD: I have it written down - August 9, 1976 were the first Trident protests

BB: Right. That was for me. There had been other - yeah, yeah. And what brought that about is, well, there were a group of us that were assembled outside the gates of the kind Trident submarine base, and one of the organizers of the group said that they wanted to carry a replica of the Trident submarine into the base itself and they need volunteers to do that. I wasn't necessarily thinking about doing that, but there was an interval of silence, about a half an hour interval, and there was a Buddhist monk there who was chanting. And as he was chanting and drumming he had a huge picture of Nagasaki there, right beside him, of Nagasaki destroyed after the bombing of Nagasaki in August 9, 1945. And I just got kind of caught up in that - his drumming and the picture itself. And then when the organizer at the end of the half hour period asked for volunteers who would go in, I said, "well I'll go in." And basically the action that time is - during the night we had, there were people in the group that had cut through the fence. They had to do it at various times because they were watching the perimeter fence very closely. And so they would just, at times, you could cut through. And so, in the morning light, when it came time to carry it in, there was a rally and then the fence was easy to knock over - it was already cut through. And so then we carried in the replica. The replica of the Trident was made out of bamboo sticks, rubber hose, cloth. It was about six hundred feet long - that's about the size of the Trident submarine. So that was my first introduction to being arrested at Trident.

LD: Tell me about what led to the organization of this Plowshares movement, how the idea started and how it began.

BB: I had been very involved in the resistance to the Trident base for those years of the early 70's, 80s, and then and then I got involved in working with the School of the Americas down at Fort Benning, Georgia. And, so, often arrested down there, spent a

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

year and four months in prison for violations there. But finally I decided, I think it was the 2000s, that that was quite far to go down to Georgia, every year. This is in our backyard, and it - just that whole sense of its our responsibility, the proximity of the these agents of death. And the more and more I lived the more and more I just saw them as just tremendous signs of hopelessness, and tremendous signs of fear. And it was almost like in steel, and in destructive material they were saying human beings can go no farther than this, this is the end of it. There is no possibility of dialogue, no possibility working things out, other than the use of weapons. And then just the horrific, the horrific pain and suffering and destruction that a nuclear weapon carries drew me back here, into our own backyard, where we have them. I felt more of a responsibility for the weapons that are surrounding us. So, that got me involved in it. There's been a number of actions over the years that I got - but, I got involved in the Plowshares through the influence of Steve Kelly. Steve is a Jesuit priest and had been arrested in a number of times on Plowshares actions and at that time had spent easily five years in prison for his actions. He came here and thought about the possibility of us forming a Plowshares group here. The irony of this was that I said, "yeah, I think it's a good idea," and we had two young ladies living with that kind that were interested in being part of the Plowshares, so, I joined as sort of a support person for them. But then it turned out neither of them were able to do it, so I stuck with that.

I made a trip to Japan, in the meantime. 18 of us from Tacoma had gone to Japan during the time of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki remembrance of the bombing on August the 6th and August the 9th. And just the powerful, powerful feelings I had of people being destroyed there especially in Hiroshima. But even when I got back from that, I still was not ready, I don't think, for the Plowshares. But there was, a thought that was running through my head, especially, was the area in which we are going in, it would be an area where lethal force is authorized. And that thought started ringing through my head - of lethal force authorized. And then the more I thought of that, the more I thought of - this is true of about three fifths of our world's population. Lethal force is already being exercised against them with a lack of opportunity for education, lack of opportunity for employment or housing, for food, for things that are necessary to lead a full human life. To me, this is lethal force on human beings, and its authorized. Governments know that this is going on. It's not as if it's a well-kept secret. You've got people dying tremendously. In our own country, too, it happens. As we're seeing especially in this area of mental illness, of how rampant that is, especially with the forces that are coming back from the slaughtering wars Afghanistan and Iraq. And also in Pakistan where we do skirmishes and drone warfare. The devastation that is happening on service personnel who go through that and come back completely psychologically deeply damaged. As well just in our whole culture. So, just bringing a little bit more on nuclear weapons, too, there was a Jesuit priest, Dick McSorley, who once stated, he said, "the taproot of violence in our culture and our society, the United States, is our acceptance of nuclear weapons." And, so, the taproot violence, spreading throughout, like an epidemic.

Long story short, I joined in with that action, that Plowshares action, we called ourselves Disarm Now Plowshares action. It was Sister Anne Montgomery and Susan Crane who

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

had been a longtime peace activist, as well Anne Montgomery, had been in something like eight Plowshares actions and Susan something like six, and Steve, five. Then, also, Lynn Greenwald, who works here with us and is director of the Irma Gary house. It's a house of transition for women coming out of prison. She was one. So, there were five of us. Anne was 84 at the time. I was 82, and the rest were in their 60s. We thought about it, prayed about it, for about a year, and discerned, where we want to be. You have to go through your own motivations: why am doing this? Am I doing this for any kind of notoriety? We have one another to be able to check on us, or to be able to question us. So, it's a real process you go through. We decided we do this - we'd go to the Bangor submarine base. We had already - on Google - we had already seen the area where the nuclear weapons are stored. It's called SWFPAC. That's Strategic Weapons [Facility] Pacific, where the weapons are stored. And I might mention that we have the largest stockpile of deployable nuclear weapons in the United States, in the Western Hemisphere, and possibly in the world. Because it's servicing eight Trident submarines that are stationed up at Bangor submarine base.

So, anyway, we prayed about it, we discerned about it, before our actions. Part of the Plowshares actions - we all carry hammers in with you to - not necessarily that you're gonna wreak havoc, as much as it's a symbolic - [he quotes:] that they shall hammer their swords into plowshares. We also carry vials of our own blood, if you get close enough to weapons. There've been any number of Plowshares actions through the years where people have to drop their blood on nuclear weapons or on planes that have carried nuclear weapons, or places where they manufacture nuclear weapons. So we brought our vials of blood with us. So, we cut through the fence, the first fence, after we decided to go in on All Souls' Day, that's November 2nd, 2009. Now it's five years ago. It's amazing.

We had to cut through the first perimeter fence about two o'clock in the morning we got on the base. We thought we'd have to go through brush and the forest areas, but we found out we could use the roads. There wasn't that much traffic on the roads. Whenever a car would come we'd duck into the bushes. Finally we came to this road that was leading up to where nuclear weapons were stored. As we were walking up in this road they had four trucks came by at a pretty good pace. I didn't think much of it at the time, but we all ducked in. But then we saw the side road that led directly down to where the weapons were stored. And you look down - it was a huge lighted area that looks like a big prison yard. It had the guard towers, and it had double fences around it. So, we made our way down there. We were surprised to get that far. We had already been on the base three and half hours. We were surprised to get that far, and we got to the fences and we cut through the first one. And then there's a little rabbit run in between the two fences, a road that is just a gravel road that's about ten feet wide or fifteen feet, maybe. And then the next fence. We cut through the next fence, which had many sensors. When we cut through that the Marines were there immediately. But we got through, all five of us got through.

And they all came with their assault rifles and everything trained on us. And then they had us all face down. They cuffed us and had us face down on the ground for about three hours. They put hoods over our heads, sort of like Guantanamo. But we were within

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

probably about ten, fifteen yards from the weapons themselves. They're stored in sort of little - they look like real small little cottage shed-like things, each weapon. But we were that close to them. And then we were held there for about three and a half hours on the ground, and then taken down to the Navy headquarters and questioned by the FBI and the Navy criminal investigation team.

Then what we didn't expect at all - we expected to be taken, as follows Plowshares actions, you're taken into jail immediately. They didn't, they released us. They cited us, of course. At the time they cited us with trespass, but then later on the charges were destruction of government property, depredation of government property, conspiracy, and trespass. So, they, in all, carried about thirty years' sentence. But, as it was, our trial did not happen until almost ten months later.

There was one thing about when we all got inside, were facedown on the ground. We all felt a real sense of joy. With all of us it was very present, that sense of joy. For me, myself, it was a sense of - and this is just coming for my own personal beliefs - believing in the resurrection, it's the power of life. And I felt that that's where the resurrection has to be manifested - where the greatest threat to life is. And I thought that's what, in my own beliefs, that's where Jesus would be.

LD: How did it feel to be on that base? To walk through those fences and just wander for hours in that space?

BB: Well, it felt really kind of free. We did run into a few other workmen, when we got down near the Trident - what they called the Delta pier. And beyond that I guess a Trident submarine had been docked there. But we felt pretty good. We were amazed that we were able to use the roads the way we were. At that point Steve was kind of thinking "well, maybe some of us should go down to the Delta pier." So, at that point we had to make a decision about what are we going to do. Are we going to stay together? Are we going to break into two parts of this? I very much wanted to go to the nuclear weapon area. But, anyway, we all decided we'd go to the nuclear weapon area. So happy that we did that. There was certainly something beyond us helping us to do that. Especially in a place where legal force is authorized and so forth.

LD: What did you do during those hours that you walked through the base?

BB: Well, we just took time walking and talking. I have a heart condition, so I'd have to stop every now and then and take nitroglycerin, so we'd joke about that.

LD: What kind of things did you talk about during that time?

BB: Oh, during that time?

LD: Was it just logistics or were you discussing what you were doing?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

BB: Well I think we were discussing a lot of what we're doing, and what's coming up next, and where the next road may be, and the possibly of dog attack, things of that - I think it's more things more immediate, concerning our entry in there.

LD: Did you feel afraid?

BB: Well, when we were getting down in towards the lethal force area, I was, yeah, I felt some fear. And then I didn't expect to get that far, number one, so I felt kind of surprise. And the, of course, when we got to the second one [fence] by that time was feeling pretty good by then. I think we got through the first fence there and, so. And what I expected - neither of the fences were, as far as I can tell, neither of them were electrified. I thought both of them would be electrified, but they weren't. But they did have a sensor wires. So, yeah, especially when we got down into that area, not knowing what to expect or what was gonna happen. But more than anything else I think I was just overtaken by surprise [laughs], I just didn't think we'd be there that far.

LD: I've been reading some other accounts of Plowshares actions, and what you speak of, feeling joy at the moment of arrest - this moment of violence in a non-violent action - that comes up again and again. It's a really interesting reaction and such a different reaction than most people have at being arrested. Of course, everything behind it is different - what you're doing and the reasons - that it could lead to such a different emotion. I find that really interesting.

BB: Yeah, that is amazing. And that's still my belief. I put it down, as I say, it's my own particular, just in the power of the resurrection, if you take steps in faith, in dangerous situations, God'll be with you.

LD: I'm getting into a theological question, but you say that you felt the presence of the resurrection, and you also said "that's where Jesus would be," the place of the most danger. Do you think that feeling is there all the time or is it invoked by your action?

BB: I think it's more invoked by the action itself. I think the reality of it is there all the time, but how often you step into that is different. Like what Megan Rice and Mike Wally and Greg Boertje-Obed who are serving time for their Plowshares action at Oak Ridge. She's doing three years and both men are doing five years. They had the same experience of tremendous joy, too. And accepting the consequences of what that action would bring.

Do accept the consequences? That's part of your preparation. Are you willing to do this, you willing to spend a couple years in jail or something like that? I got great support from my religious superior, Pat Lee, who was Provincial at the time. He wrote a letter of support and a letter of commissioning. He says "I commission these five to do this action." And, of course, he could of been hauled into court as a collaborator with our action, and he was willing to do that. He made a very strong support for us. That hasn't always been true. I think [the] religious are coming around slowly to that reality. That's one of place where religious people ought to be spending their time - in prison.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LD: Pat Lee's commissioning - did that happen before the action?

BB: Yeah, it happened before the action, and he didn't know what the action was going to be exactly. We didn't know. But there was no way at all he would retract that. He stood very strong and made very supportive statements after that.

LD: So, you were released after that, unexpectedly. What did it feel like to be released from that, and then to await trial?

BB: Well, it was odd, because our whole mindset was that we were going into jail right away. And this is especially pivotal for Lynn Greewald who was with us, because she was a healthcare nurse, working up in the Paulsbo area, and I think she was living in Paulsbo at that time. And so what she did, what she fully expected - she quit her job, and she left her house, the house she was renting. Then when she was released she had no place to go, or no [laughs]. So that's when, just fortunately, it opened up for her here to work with women being released from prison here, at the Irma Gary house. The overall umbrella name is New Connections. And then in the meantime, during the ten months, I went back to Oak Ridge, where there was another action, and I got arrested there, in between the time when we - our Plowshares action and our trial.

LD: Did you also make preparations before that action, like Lynn did?

BB: Well, it was just psychologically. I live here, and with the Catholic Worker community had to work some things out about being gone and stuff like that. But it wasn't as traumatic or anything like that, as with Lynn.

LD: Did it feel like your life was on hold at all during those ten months when you were waiting for the trial, or did you just carry on?

BB: I just carried on. I didn't really feel too much on hold. And then, of course, there was a lot of preparation for the trial itself.

LD: So, I want to talk about the trial, then. I want to know your experience of the trial. How did it feel to be on trial for your actions?

BB: To me, we were the wrong ones being put on trial. [laughs] And I sincerely believe, as we have all the very sincerely,, from the Nuremberg principles is that we are not doing civil disobedience, we are doing civil resistance, or civil obedience. if you want. Because we're empowered by the new Nuremberg principles, where it says there if your government is doing wrong you have a responsibility to do something about it. And it's right in the articles there. Naturally, the defense there, the people who belong to the national socialistic party, the Nazi party there, those brought to trial, they said, "well, we were to do it by our government." And the Nuremberg tribunal, which is composed of a lot of American jurists and mostly American-inspired to form that jury trial. They said,

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

their whole thing is, you should have had enough sense to follow your own moral judgment and not obey that, and do so you are delinquent in doing that. And so they were found guilty. And so, right now it addresses to us too. If our government is doing something as - you know, nuclear weapons are internationally against the law. They violate the law. They violate humanitarian law, every kind of law there is. By the Hague convention, the Geneva conventions. At the end of the Hague conventions there was, at the World War I, there was an international agreement that - no more use of poison gas and mustard gas, because it was non-discriminating killer. Even more so our nuclear weapons are non-discriminating killers. And, so the production and deployment of nuclear weapons, and especially, as they say in the Nuremberg trials, anything that would pose a threat to other nations is against international law. And they're the most threatening things that could exist. So, we see ourselves as being obedient to the law.

And, so that sense was with us, but we were not allowed in court - you're not allowed to use those as defenses. You're not allowed to use international law or necessity as defenses, so you have to skirt around it. I'm not that light on my feet, put it that way, legalese-wise. I didn't think I was a particularly good testifier. And then we had some great witnesses that came to speak at our behalf like Ramsey Clark, former Attorney General. And Stephen Leeper from Hiroshima, Japan, who was the Director/Coordinator of mayors for peace. That's an organization that has something like 6000 members now, but he came all the way from Japan to testify for us. And then had Angie Zelter from the United Kingdom, who had been arrested a number of different times and was really an expert on international law, who also testified, but to no avail. Any presentations that bordered on using international law or necessity or humanitarian law was overridden.

LD: Would they stop it right there, and not allow them to speak anymore?

BB: Yeah, right. I'll tell you, a real funny thing happened is - I had a copy of the United States Constitution in my back pocket, and at one point I just want to make the point of - we were following the law. And there, its article six in the Constitution, article six section two, where it says any treaty that the United States enters into with other nations, or any agreements they enter, become the automatic supreme law of the land. Taking precedent over domestic law even. And so I pulled that out and I started reading, and the prosecution stood up and objected to the Constitution [laughs]. So, that was one time when the judge did not sustain the objection.

LD: What was your expectation of that trial? Did it go how you thought it would?

BB: Yeah, somewhat. He was very gentle, the judge that we had was very subtle. He tried to be as accommodating - but you knew already that he was not going to step over those lines. He was not gonna allow any international law, because this precedent has been set for years and years and years. That would have been political suicide for him. And he was caught in those.

So, the sentencing was pretty - Steve and Susan both got 15 months. Anne and I both

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

given three months, and then six months house arrest, and then one year probation. And then Lynn was given six months. We couldn't quite figure out - I think this because of our ages with Anne and I. Of course, Anne had done a tremendous amount of Plowshares actions. Most courageous woman. She just died a year and a half ago, down in California. So then I had to live with ankle bracelets for about six months. But then, during that time, too, I had to serve time -. While I was in SeaTac the prison out here for our Plowshares actions, I was also sent back to Tennessee to stand trial for the for the arrest there at Oak Ridge. Where there were thirty-three of us. There were thirteen of us that were arrested for trespassing onto the federal sign. And I was given three months for that.

LD: How did it feel to be found guilty?

BB: It felt right [laughs]. I mean, it was something that you expected. It felt different - I remember, years before that, when I was in - after trial I was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months for actions at the School of the Americas. I was pronounced guilty, and for some reason or another, I felt guilty. I had never had that feeling exactly like that before. But it was it was a sense of feeling guilty - I had done something wrong. Whereas I had done something right, really. But then, in prayer, I got a better sense of that. That "I will be with you, you did okay."

LD: Do you think that feeling changed through your experience? Through the time in between those two actions?

BB: I think so, I think so, yeah. To more of a real, deep awareness that we are doing the actions that we're called to do, and were not in violation of the law. Therefore, actually, upholding international law, we're upholding our Constitution.

LD: How did it feel to be sentenced to those three months? Were you worried about going to prison?

BB: No, I wasn't. I expected much more than that. You mean the three months for the Plowshares action? Some of the irony of that is, I spent a great deal of my three months for the Plowshares action, I spent doing time in Tennessee because they shipped me back. We went into jail at the end of April, and they sent me back in early May for the trial. And they just kept me there in Tennessee. So, I served out my federal time, I was a federal prisoner there in the county jail in Knoxville. And then when I came back to here, the state of Washington, I was in prison there fore my action at Knoxville. It really got confusing to people. Make up your mind! [laughs]

LD: So, you were taken directly from the court into the prison system. Is that correct?

BB: Yeah, we went directly into jail, and then I wasn't there too long. Steve and I were cellmates at SeaTac. It wasn't too long after that then I was on the chain gang to leave. And then I went by Conair to - it took about two weeks to get back to Tennessee. I ran into some tough times there, being shipped by air.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LD: Tell me about that.

BB: Well, you're all bound up like this [holds wrists together in front of him], you're bound here, you have ankle chains on, you have belly chains on, and you're cuffed like this. To get to get up the stairs of the plane - I have a knee replacement here, my right knee, and it's not as strong as the other one. So, I couldn't handle it, so they either had to pull me or push me up. And then because of my heart condition, I'm much slower on my pace, and so that was kind of tough moving. And then before you're sent out, when you get ready to go, to move from one prison to another, you're assembled in this cage for about eight hours. It's freezing, for me it was always freezing. I was very cold most of the time. Waiting to be cuffed, and then put back onto the plane. And then for any food - it would be the same food, year in year out, it'd be a baloney sandwich, a little thing of milk and little thing of cookies. And then sometimes there would be an apple, not all the time. But what was so hard on that is trying to drink the milk when you're cuffed, or trying to be anything when you're cuffed. And then if you had to use the restroom you had to use it at the Bureau of Prison time. You might have 150 guys on the plane, and women, too. They would just kinda go down the rows, regardless if you had to go right now or later. So, that was tough with me. I've got weak kidneys. That was tough.

LD: Did your health suffer during those moves?

BB: A little bit. When I was in the Atlanta prison, on my way to Knoxville, I was about a week there. They put me in a cell all by myself because I had a lot of medication I was taking. And so I was kind of isolated. I didn't have my towel and I just had one blanket, and I need at least two blankets, if not three. My circulation is bum. And I had an infection in the toe that was just throbbing a lot. I couldn't get any help for that. And you knew it. There's a certain hopelessness, frustration, you know you're not getting any help on this.

LD: Were you able to continue your religious practice while in prison?

BB: Well, you're not allowed to say mass or anything like that. You're allowed to attend when they have services on - usually it would be Saturday or Sunday you'd have services. And then at different places along the way there were different guys that had different prayer groups. I got in a couple of those for a while. But I was just one of the prisoners. I wasn't really treated any differently from any of the other prisoners.

LD: Was there time to be with other prisoners, or were you mostly kept isolated?

BB: No, I was in general population, the first [three months]. And then the next three months when I was out at SeaTac here, when I got close to my serving my three months, I was eligible for a halfway house. So they sent me into the halfway house here in Tacoma. And that evening, the Buddhist monks who were on a peace walk, they knew I was there at the halfway house, so they came by and drummed. I could hear them outside

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

and I could just barely make them out through the window. And I saw them, and I blew kisses. I was delighted to see them. So, the next morning, the marshals were in my room, drag me out, cuff me, took me out, dragged me out into the sedan. Took me downtown to the federal building, held me there six hours, and took me back prison. And, so I have to spend the rest of my time - I wouldn't be having any halfway house. You'd be spending the rest of your time in prison.

So, I decided I would not go along with this anymore. Steve Kelly, that's a regular practice of his. He refuses to cooperate with what figures is pretty immoral system. He never cooperates with it. Anyway, I decided I would not go along with it. So, right at the time when they're doing the intake you're supposed to fill out forms about the size of your jumper suit, and stuff like that. I refused to do any of that. And then you're supposed to get another TB shot. I refused to do anything. And then you're supposed to change from your clothes into the jumper suit. I refused to do that, so they had to do it. So they have to take my clothes off and put the jumper suit on. And, of course, that irritates them quite a bit. I wasn't doing it to irritate them, I was doing it because I didn't want to cooperate anymore. So, finally, the lieutenant came down. She asked, "why are you doing this?" And I said, "it's a matter of conscience." She said, "this is not a matter of conscience. This is a matter of policy." And I said "and that's why I'm doing it."

Then, at that point, I decided to enter into a fast. And, so, I entered into a 19-day fast, and it was relatively easy. Every morning they would deliver either one or two of those little quarter pints of milk, so I would drink that. That would be it. But I found the fast - I was amazed myself that it so fit in what I was doing. I felt it was a very prayerful time, and I felt a great sense of freedom. I refused to go along with anything. One of the lieutenants got very, very angry with me.

They had a little trial, a little hearing for me within the prison on why was I sent out of the halfway house. And they had the head of the Board of Directors of the halfway houses and then the cook that worked at the halfway house. They were more or less the personnel that - there were three of them. They asked me to make a good statement in my defense, so I just told them what happened. They came, I blew kisses. And so when they got done they said "we find you guilty." Well, I started laughing and I couldn't stop. [laughs] Anyway, they said unsolicited visitation, or unauthorized visit or something like that. I think it was unauthorized visit. But, as soon as they said "we find you guilty," I cracked up. I couldn't stop [laughs].

LD: During that second time in prison, that was when you were in isolation. You said it was a prayerful time. How did you spend your days in isolation?

BB: Well, I would read, a lot. I had scripture, and then I also had - a book cart would come around once a month. You have to look down to the window and try to figure out what looked like a good book. [laughs] It was an insane system. But, anyway, just kind of meditating. And writing. I did a lot of writing.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LD: What did you write about?

BB: I wrote about being there. I wrote about the consequences of being there, and then I think I wrote a good deal, too, about the about what nuclear weapons really mean. And, incidentally, this summer I hope to meet with a group of people, convene with the people of varying ages, to reflect on nuclear weapons. To reflect, first of all, on what it means to have nuclear weapons. What are the dangers, what would be the advantage of nuclear weapons.

[recording pauses to allow Fr. Bichsel to take medication]

LD: I want to get back to that first three months in prison. You were mostly in Tennessee. What happened when you finally got out of prison?

BB: When I got out of prison? Well, it was such a thing. I was released, and I was able - to Joe Power-Drutis, a member of our community here, was there all the time that I was in prison. And he was a great aid to other people who had been arrested at Oak Ridge. Especially to Jackie Hudson and Ardeth Platt, and Carol Gilbert, and other people who had been arrested.

But, I was able to drive back to Tacoma with him. It was amazing. And then after that. I forget exactly the time, but I had a surrender again to SeaTac, to go back to SeaTac. I forget the interval right now.

LD: I have all that through the Plowshares website. It's very well documented. Joe and Leonard, I think, they kept almost daily updates. It's a great source of information.

How did it feel to come back into your life after being in prison for three months?

BB: Well, it felt good. I felt closer, in a sense, to our broader neighborhood, community and to the St. Leo's community.

LD: Why did you feel closer?

BB: I guess I felt maybe more accepted. Because the lead-up to our going before our trial for the Plowshares action was just a great time. For six days we met every evening with a big potluck, and there would be a main speaker and there'd be music and there was a great sense of community and we had great, great speakers. It was a magical time for the community in a lot of ways. I felt that very much.

LD: And that was before your trial?

BB: Yeah, that was before the trial. Right.

LD: Do you feel this action has helped build or strengthen community?

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

BB: I think so. I think it's helped. It has helped. It has definitely introduced an element into community, an element of resistance, I think. It's not completely taken - I mean you'd hope it'd be [laughs] deep -

For example, I experienced a real sense of faithful resistance over on Jeju Island, where I went there, last September/October. I don't know whether this would be an interruption here. Well, I and that Gilberto Perez, a Buddhist monk from Bainbridge Island, we went together. And it was amazing. Just that whole sense of faithful resistance. It's like every day - this for seven years - the people of the village did not want that naval base, which is United States inspired, and United States more or less twisting the arm of South Korea. And then Samsung being the contractor for the thing. It's gigantic forces, gigantic military forces.

But, every day, these villagers, and there were an awful lot of Catholic priests and nuns, that were joining in, doing the resisting of blocking the gates. I never heard of Jeju Island, nor did I know that they were building a naval base there. But the sight of seeing them all resisting and standing against the cement trucks that were coming in. And then every day they had the Eucharist of the side of the road, it was very much a part of it. And in all the priests would be in their mass vestments, the nuns, of course, in their habits. I was just edified by that. So, we went in and joined, and it was even more so than what we had seen on video and so forth. Just the spirit. And then there's a bishop there that is sort of the real inspiration for this. He supports it, and he's the one that instituted the Eucharist on the side of the road, which - right across from one of the gates where resistance happens. And that's ongoing.

And that kind got me off when you do things like this - I feel our actions are somewhat sporadic, our peace actions in this country. Went when I left there I left more with the idea that I was going to do something every day. Some prayerful action or something every day known to be in solidarity with the people on Jeju Island. So that our peace movement, too might have just some sense of ongoing continuity faithfulness. But I didn't follow through on what I hoped to have done. I still have hopes of doing that. I still have hopes of doing the Eucharist at different times during the day. Try to get a schedule of that, being that regular. To be in solidarity with them there. And then as far as our own resistance. But, anyways, that's still to come.

LD: What do you think is different about what's happening in Korea than what's happening in the United States? What makes that community so different?

BB: It's like with the Jesuit order - in Korea, all the Korean Jesuits are all full supported, and three of the Jesuits have been appointed to full-time resistance. That's not so in this country. We don't have the same response to our militarism here, which is the greatest single - the most devastating force. But then the people are very strong there. The people all have one consciousness of that. And then, they suffered greatly. There's a film out called "Ghosts of Jeju Island" and it documents the slaughter that took place during the

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

American occupation, when the American military was in command of South Korea and Jeju Island. On Jeju Island itself thirty thousand people were slaughtered during the watch of the United States from '46 to '49. There's a huge memorial on the island that, dedicate to the slaughter of all the innocents that were killed. They were considered to be Communists. Most of them didn't know what communism was. To them - they're very assertive, they're very passionate about what it takes to be a human being. I think that was what ran into the American occupation strategies.

LD: It sounds like that would have informed the resistance - that experience, or the memory of that experience. Do you think there's also a cultural difference? A more community or collective culture, versus our independent culture?

BB: Yes, yes I think so. I think that - part of this whole resistance thing, they have a communal kitchen, for any people in the resistance can go there anytime. But, anybody needing food or anything can go. It's operated by the people of the village or other people on Jeju Island who completely supply the kitchen. And it has a volunteer group that there every day. It's the same during the days of the resistance. You have organizers who are there every day. Especially I remember three young ladies that were amazing. Every day, this is every day for a couple years, they've been there at it. Setting things up, ready for the resistance work that day. And then, also what you're talking about, the cultural acceptance. This goes on all day, block the gates. There are something like a hundred police that are stationed very close by to where the construction is going on. And Whenever the cement trucks come, the police come out and they remove everyone. Usually people are sitting in chairs, and they remove people. They pick him up in the chairs and then surround them so that they cannot in any way obstruct the trucks coming in. That goes on a number of times during the day when they come out. It's sort of like a dance almost. Sometimes it does turn into civil disobedience or into resistance.

At the end of each day there is just - it is amazing dance and song by the Koreans. Is the most lively, spirited - there's a particular dance, there's a name for it and I don't have been on my tongue. But it is so uplifting. And the song and the singing. And so that whole thing helps the bind them together. They love to sing, of course, very strong into that.

LD: Your description of that community - it makes me think of everything you've been working on here in Tacoma. This community that's been build around these houses here. Guadalupe House and all the projects I hear about - providing food and gardens, and places for people to live and get help. It sounds like that more collectivist idea of community, and you're trying to build a little bubble of it here in Tacoma.

BB: What I see, just projecting a bit about our community here, is we started - before we were the Catholic Worker, and this year is our 25th year as a Catholic Worker community, before that time we were called the G St. community. We welcomed in or took in people with mental illness and lived in community with them. And then in 1987 we had a fire. So, we had to rebuild, and when we reorganized, we reorganized as a Catholic worker. But we were the G St. Community from 1979 to '87, when the fire

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

happened. And then it was a year and a half rebuilding. I see it as our foundation blocks are the people of mental illness. Whom we have, in some way or another, learned from or have lived with us, or have touched us in certain ways.

And what I see in this community now, what they're rebuilding now up here on Yakima Avenue. They are combining Nativity House and the Hospitality Kitchen all into one facility. And, then on top of that they are putting fifty units for very low income people, but especially people who have been touched with mental illness. People with people with mental illness who find it very difficult to get a place anywhere - there might be a place there. Well, I see this as a real generating power, if you want, or something. I see this as being a complete - to be a welcoming community. Especially those who are - most people and want hands off or do something else with them.

One thing, too, I'm jumping a little bit, but, also on Jeju Island - being there I found - to me, I was just deeply impressed by being there and I felt a great well, I think it's a well of spirituality or of wholeness, or a well of healing or whatever is. To me it sound - wow, this is stronger than these forces that these people are fighting against. I almost put it in terms of - I think that there is the strength out of that solidarity to resist the militarism of United States. Especially to resist the militarism in the Pacific. Anyway, I'm very encouraged by that, and I hope in September to be able to back go [laughs] back to Korea if I can.

LD: Thinking back to the Plowshares again, you did the three months in prison in Tennessee, and then you were released back here, and then you went to SeaTac when you had that time in solitary. And then when you were released from that you were under house arrest. How did that affect your life, the house arrest?

BB: Not much. No, it didn't. Actually it was pretty lenient. It was more like a curfew than anything else. I could not leave the house before 6am and I had to be back by 9pm, which gave me a tremendous - ordinarily cuffs when you get house arrest like that, you're restricted to just about a ten foot perimeter around where you are staying. And then you have to get special permission to leave that area at all. And so I was given pretty easy on that.

LD: Were you able to continue doing any activism during that time?

BB: Yeah, yeah. I would still go to rallies and do whatever.

LD: When you were in solitary at SeaTac you said you were fasting. Why were you fasting?

BB: I was fasting for the abolition of nuclear weapons. In some way or other that we become more conscious of what that means to have nuclear weapons in our midst. To me, it's some sort of idolatry, and it's - where do we place our security? On destroying others? It's a paralysis. I feel a real numbing. I feel that more year after year, we're becoming

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

number and number. Less responsive to the needs of people of our own country and our world.

LD: And you're hoping to focus more attention on those needs.

Yeah, hopefully.

LD: After you were released you were awarded the Greater Tacoma Peace Prize. Did it feel like people were listening to you at that point? Like your message was starting to get through?

BB: Yeah. I think I felt that somewhat. Number one, I felt very honored to be - and then I kept thinking, "you got the right person here? Who you talking about?" But, one thing that was very telling about is that the one of the persons that initiated that whole peace prize thing through PLU through the Scandinavian Cultural Center, his name was Tom Heavey. He had been a graduate of PLU, and was very active in the alumni association, and also, he was in the military, or course. At one point he had a position, I forget whether it was with the military or another thing, that ensured the security of Bangor, the submarine base, in some way or another. At first, when he heard my name he just shook his head said how misguided I was. But what said - at least he says, "he [Fr. Bichsel] made me think." So, on his part, I thought it was a very magnanimous statement.

LD: You got to travel to Norway.

BB: Yeah, Norway, and that was amazing. I was with Joe Power-Drutis. Also, we were accompanied by Helen Young and she was doing a documentary on the Plowshares action. She came and she covered part of that. Then we went to England, and there we visited different Catholic Worker houses in London where they're very strong. We interviewed a lot of people there that have been in the nuclear abolition and No War movements. At the Catholic worker that Kieran O'Reilly, who was a very good friend of Julian Assange. He stood vigil three times or four times a day out in front of the Ecuadorian Embassy where Julian Assange had sought asylum. And he's a tremendous character in himself.

LD: How did it feel to meet other people who were doing similar work?

BB: Oh, it felt good. It always feels solidifying. This is deeply a global issue, and we have global sisters and brothers. You get that, especially in Scotland were over 85% of the people want the Trident submarine base that they had there out. The Trident submarine base that's station at Faslane on the west coast of the Scotland. There's just been tremendous, tremendous, over the years, tremendous ecumenical resistance to that. So much so that this year they're supposed to vote on independence or not in Scotland, and one of the main platforms of the party that's in power there is elimination of Trident. So we'll see what happens. We're not quite sure yet. But, I found the hopes of nuclear abolition very strong there. That's another hopeful spring for me, going to Scotland.

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LD: Could you talk a little bit about the philosophy of Plowshares and resistance? I'm wondering, what does resistance mean to you?

BB: I think resistance means to show up. To be there. To be there in what you believe in. To stand by what you consider to be morally right. So, to me, it means, more anything else, it means faithfulness to what you believe.

LD: It seems to me that you put a lot of value on action over words.

BB: Yeah, I think I do. Although I have to say that there are words that catch it. That have a tremendous power in themselves. That has a tremendous moving power, and I think that when that word is struck or said or enunciated it's stronger than an action. But what personally do, maybe it's because of my limitation of words or whatever, I think I do put a lot of emphasis on action. It's what Jackie Hudson, the Dominican nun who died, who resisted nuclear weapons, and spent many years in prison for it, what she said, "we have to step out of our comfort zone." I put a lot of in that. Taking those steps out of those little things keep us mired in a comfort zone. And they can be so different for different people. They can be so - whatever it is people know when feel a sense of liberty or when they feel a sense of freedom.

LD: I'm curious about - going right back to the beginning now - about that half an hour of silence. You said you hadn't chosen to take the step, to go onto the base, and then something there - this is back in 1976, right - something in there changed. And you decided to carry that sub replica onto the base. Was that something new for you at that point, or had you been taking those actions already?

BB: I had been doing some, but I think that was an action where I kinda realized I was in a place where I could not and would not return to where I had been. It was an action I felt I was entering into something broader and wider and more liberating.

LD: So, did that feel like a turning point in your life?

BB: Somewhat, I think so. I think so.

LD: Do you have any sense of what changed in that half hour?

BB: [long pause] Well, you know, I'm not quite sure. I think I felt more - I was not letting a lot of other things get in the way of saying yes. Something changed that way, I think. I think it was kind of a "yes." It was kind of like you're sinking down, and there aren't a lot of other reasons why you shouldn't say yes. But it was just, "yes."

LD: Have you had that feeling since then?

BB: Yeah, I've had that feeling at different times, too. When we were laying down on the

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

ground, there. And then I had that feeding after some actions at SOA. And certainly when I entered into my fast at the thing. I certainly had it then. I felt, "yes."

LD: What do you think allows us to say, "yes?"

BB: Well, I think we have to be looking to say yes. Knowing that maybe there's something incomplete your life, or there's something that's not finished, or there's something that's halfway, or there's something contradictory, or what whatever the correct words are. I'm not sure. But, I think, that sense of knowing that, and then, all of a sudden there's - to me it's a grace. It's kind of something given. I don't know of anything that I could do that'd conjure that up. Whether it's the circumstances, the time, the circumstances all have some to do with it. But the actual "yes" is, to me - I don't know how else to say it other than say it's a grace, it's a gift, it's something that came, that can come to all of us. That does come to all of us.

LD: It reminds me of what we talked about earlier about the joy you felt. It seems like it was there and it was uncovered. This "yes" is there, and we just need to find a way to uncover it.

BB: Yeah, that's right.

LD: I think that's something that's hard for a lot of people.

BB: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

LD: I was thinking about resistive actions, like the Disarm Now Plowshares action. I'm wondering what are the purposes - I can imagine there are many purposes, but [while] the action seems like an end in itself ... it also seems like there's so much surrounding it, like the preparation, the community, the trial, the prison... How do you see resistance, as an action or a broad series of actions, or a means?

BB: I think it's all of those, in resistance. And you take in the consequences of the action. What will be the ramifications of that? What will that do? So, I think Plowshares has been faithful in doing that. And I use that word - purportedly faithful - not necessarily successful. But it's sticking to it. For our consideration it's much better to be faithful to what we're doing or trying to do, while self criticizing ourselves, or being self-critical. It's important to be faithful, and at the same time open to its causes, what it does, what it doesn't do.

But, I think if we look at "and they shall hammer their swords into plowshares," I think behind that, too, is conversion and not only conversion of thinking and stuff like that, but conversion of our material goods; conversion of things in this world for the use of human needs.

LD: In an action like Plowshares are the immediate outcomes what you're thinking about

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

or are you thinking about a broader impact?

BB: I think they leave the fruits of what it means, of that particular - they leave that into the hands of God, or into the hands of human history. But, there's a building of that, though. There's a constancy. It has struck something that has drawn people.

LD: How did the community support the Disarm Now Plowshares action?

BB: Well, like I say, before trial it was just amazing to see the sense of community coming. Every night there was at least a hundred people that would come to the potlucks and people'd bring food to the potlucks. And then there'd be music and speakers. That was a great, great sign. And all while we were in prison they kept our picture and a candle [laughs] a candle lighted for us at Saint Leo's. And then they would mention us every week in prayers. That was a constant, so that we were not out of sight, out of mind.

LD: How do you feel that anti-nuclear activism has changed over time?

BB: I think there's more, this is just a strict, private observation, I think that there are more personal - before you used to have The Freeze, or things of that nature. It used to be a wide range movement. Now you find the anti-nuclear thing - there's more personal investment. It doesn't come from such a widespread movement as was before, certainly as during the '80s and '90s. So that now nuclear weapons have become sort of a shrug of the shoulder. That's why I think we're kind of in a drugged state. Not only nuclear weapons, not on the back burner, they're barely in the kitchen. They become something that you live with. People, they get used to it. It's like our big cargo planes that float around here and are feeding the far ends of our empire. You get used to them, and you say, "well, isn't that great," or something like that.

LD: Do you feel like there's a complacency about nuclear weapons?

BB: I think there is. I think there is a strain of that complacency. But, I think there's a deep, underlying unexamined layer of - I don't know what kind of words to use, except - I think that there is a complacency, yeah, they're there, they can - yeah I think there is that. But, there's also an underlying deep suspicion of, "what are we doing?" But, it's unexamined and it's untouched.

LD: Why don't you think that we do examine those questions?

BB: In some ways I think it's at the end of the - with the Russian breakup there's a sense, well, it's over. The Cold War is over and the nuclear threat is over. And, then I think there's an overriding sense that the United States would never use these weapons. Which is pretty dangerous. Because the people in charge, they continue to make them stronger and they're infinitely more accurate now, infinitely stronger and infinitely more robust. And, of course, you have to hold financial arrangement where those in power - that is, tremendous amounts of money that's pumped into that. The whole nuclear industry and

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

defense industry. But, I think there is a sort of naïveté that we'd never really use them. But, as a matter of fact, we have used them. And more and more nations are having them. History shows that whenever we develop a weapon, we use it. So, I think that really has to be examined strongly.

LD: What resistance are you doing now, or are you at the moment?

BB: This summer I'd like to have a few, say three or four, meetings of people, to reflect. To spend an evening reflecting on nuclear weapons and I'm lining up some directors for - to have three sessions, maybe. Doctor David Hall, who is a psychiatrist and he's been the national chairman of the Physicians for Social Responsibility is now also national director of the social responsibility. He will be leading one group. And, hopefully, I have an anthropologist from Olympia on the weaponization of America, that'll be leading a group. And then, I was even thinking about Mike Honey, what mass movements do. What the possibility of what brings mass movements - what's at the heart of that. That's one of the things that I'm thinking about, hopefully, for the summer. And then I hope in the Fall, if it turns out, I hope to go back to Jeju. There's gonna be a conference there, held on Jeju Island, about Jeju island. And Steve Kelly, who I mentioned, he'll be one of the speakers, and to it'll be somewhat international, but on a mini scale. It won't be a huge thing. But, I'd like to get some people here who would be interested in going just from the tremendous sense of faithfulness, and tremendous sense of resistance that can be learned there. So I'm thinking about that.

LD: Is there anything you'd like to add?

BB: Well, I appreciate your doing this, and that appreciate what Mike Honey does, too, very much. I just think it's a huge contradiction. We live in this huge contradiction of - we use our resources for destroying ourselves rather than building ourselves up. Nuclear weapons represent that par excellence.