

War Tax Resistance as a Life Transforming Way (Relationships)

Eleanor and I began our married life on August 30, 1958 with a commitment to God, each other, and our human community. It was an experience of serendipity because it provided an answer to my questions about the direction of my future. It is no secret that our decisions had been impacted by our readiness to practice the discipleship of peace as demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus. Like Jane Fonda we were “utterly fascinated by this man.”

I write these reflections as both of us enter the 8th decade of our lives. During this period we have responded in a variety of ways to the taxes required of citizens, especially those funds which the IRS was obligated by Congress to confiscate for war related purposes. A critical question for us was: “Why should the C.O. to war refuse service in the military if he or she does not refuse to pay those taxes?”

Yes, I was a war tax resister before I entered into the marriage relationship even though it was not clear how we could implement this goal in the years to come. Considering her strengths and my biases I felt that the two of us had the potential of being compatible partners for a life-long marriage. We knew that we were living in a prosperous society which did not always value persons who challenged the way in which most citizens expressed their loyalties and patriotism. Yet we were confident that our calling included service to others. And so we accepted an assignment overseas among the people of Indonesia together with the Mennonite Central Committee. It turned out to be an adventure which shaped us profoundly.

After partnering nearly seven years with people of other cultures we were even more firmly committed to making a difference in North America. In the preface to my first book, *What Belongs to Caesar?* I suggested that it was William Warren Sweet’s book, *The Story of Religion in America*, that first alerted me “to the idea that paying taxes designated for war might be inconsistent with the demands of Christian discipleship.” It happened rather unexpectedly while we were students in Chicago attending Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Upon further reflection my memory suggests that the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, was a pivotal event for me. Even as an 8-year-old I sensed that this was not an ordinary event. That afternoon I walked out on the farm trying to imagine what this ‘happening’ would mean for people on our planet and how it could possibly impact my own life. Guidance came from my parental home and church community along with the ever challenging newsletter, *The Peacemaker*, from Ohio (begun in 1948). A young man from Kansas, Austin Regier, confronted me with a clear witness. He saw no significant difference between being a conscientious objector to war and refusing to pay military taxes. The logic of that argument has continued to be convincing to this day. I also acknowledge that during my college years, Bennie Barga (business professor) planted more seeds of concern about the propriety of paying for war. With these significant

influences I readily agree with Nels Ferre who claimed that truth in his book, *The Third Conversion Never Fails*.

During our first year of marriage we drafted a letter to the "Commissioner of Internal Revenue, and Secretary for Tax Legislation" expressing our limited cooperation with the government's taxation of citizens. Dated March 30, 1960, it was printed in our denominational magazine (*The Mennonite*, June 9, 1959) along with a cartoon by Robert Regier. It was also circulated among immediate relatives who were basically sympathetic but not very encouraging. Lacking support or conviction (or both), we reluctantly paid the income tax for the year 1958.

It felt good to serve the people of Indonesia for seven years (1960 to 1967). There were no tax obligations for us because we were on a maintenance support arrangement. Still I felt a need to return to N. America so that we could make a witness for nonviolent love in a society that was heavily involved in military exploitation of the Vietnamese people. During October of 1965 we experienced the attempted coup in Indonesia which resulted in an estimated half million deaths or more. That event could have been a big risk for our family of five persons, but it wasn't. So why does every government justify and promote this "unqualified obedience to governmental demands"?

After a year of additional seminary training in Elkhart, Eleanor and I accepted a pastoral assignment in Mountain Lake, MN. for three years. This proved to be a much greater risk because of my limited pastoral skills. Also, not enough members of the congregation were willing to extend the contract to a staff person who was radical enough to challenge prevailing assumptions in our society. I devoted time to an exploration of biblical texts which have been misused to justify obedience to one's government irrespective of what such a government might require militarily. Even though both pastors refused to voluntarily pay the federal excise tax on telephone service, one family in the congregation chose to pay the tax for us despite our objections! (The 'excise tax' was often diverted to the UNICEF Children's Fund or other alternative funds).

Even though we were offered another assignment by a congregation in Minneapolis, MN. who knew about our predicament, this lack of support did negatively impact our relationship to each other. Eleanor was a loyal partner to me but there was a measure of withdrawal due to the disappointment and my failure to perform adequately. She was sympathetic to my goals but challenged the assumption that I should always have the last word. Because of our three children as dependents and the benefit of a housing allowance we were free of tax penalties in Mt. Lake. This changed with our relocation to the Twin Cities where the church office and parsonage were on the same telephone number. Yet the Church Council was willing to support our telephone tax protest for those three years. We filed taxes and protested annually.

After relocating to Newton, KS. in 1974 we purchased a house where we have lived for the past 40 years. Despite my heavy focus on social concerns and tax issues we have generally found options which relieved the tension of not paying income taxes. The

most effective of these was to consolidate our benevolent giving and medical expenses within one of two years. This provided the advantage of getting more mileage out of tax benefits. Following our move to Kansas, Eleanor and I had a dual position as personnel coordinators for our Commission on Home Ministries. Clerical work together with interviewing volunteers was gratifying for both of us. During the 70's and 80's Eleanor taught piano and organ lessons while I insulated homes and worked for a printing company. For seven years I did pastoral visitation on a part-time basis. This eventually developed into a satisfying vocation with the local HUD housing project (62 units & 17 years at "Wheatland Homes.") The Board invited me to be the executive director knowing full well that we objected to paying military taxes. For 1981 and subsequent years we chose the strategy of paying only that portion of the Federal tax which was not designated for the Pentagon or military purposes. When the IRS placed a lien on our house the Board of Directors kindly wrote a letter of support to the IRS. (Robert Hull advised us to direct letters to our congressional representatives rather than to the IRS). During the Reagan years James Klassen and I requested refunds from the IRS and actually received them! It was a pleasant surprise to receive those checks and channel them to support social agencies!

Despite our shared values and mutual peace concerns it became evident that our marriage relationship was 'growing apart' and becoming less intimate. She recently told me that I was a fanatic and could no longer reciprocate my affirmations of her loyal partnership. So there is a kind of stability which remains but it is not what it once was. Some of it is a reflection of differing attitudes about what the government does or does not do for its citizens. Ever since World War II I have tended to be more skeptical of the nation's daily operations while she continues to be more optimistic about the good functions like roads, schools, and health programs. Her father, Norman Wismer, was energetic about his involvement with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in PA, often traveling to Philadelphia and having contacts with persons like Bayard Rustin. Eleanor had two brothers, one of whom was drafted into the U.S. army in Europe. Eleanor and her youngest sister, Nancy Hilty, both live in this Bluestem community for the past four years. They have a mutually fond appreciation for each other.

To come to the decision to embark on a journey through life with another person, requires an enormous amount of courage. "An American writer, Joseph Sittler, has said, "The heart of marriage is a promise. On the face of it it's a crazy promise. Two people, who have only a partial understanding of one another, stand up and make this bizarre statement that they're going to cherish and care for one another for a lifetimeMarriage is a mutual acceptance of a crazy challenge to fulfill the seemingly impossible. A commitment like that takes guts.'" (John H. Neufeld, *The Story That Shapes Us*, pp 110-111).

Being in the peacemaking business has been most rewarding. It has provided us with terrific literature and the opportunity to increase our sensitivity to the needs of people around the globe. We have been given the gift of compassion. We meet and work

with the most beautiful people on the planet, like Cornelia Lehn. The Bromleys of Ohio are proof that the 'small people' can successfully confront the IRS. We should not fear it. A.J. Muste, our winsome peace advocate, noted that "The Kingdoms of the world seem able to dominate and destroy everything; but they are themselves dominated and destroyed by their own lust for power." We backed into a simple lifestyle. At times the

fellowship and camaraderie of WTR meetings surpassed that of the congregation to which we belong (and we certainly considered our congregation to be peace minded). New understandings come to us to refresh our commitment to love and justice.. Bill Keeney and Bob Hull observed that "Only as people refuse the war tax will Congress take seriously the concerns of conscientious citizens." As Wally Nelson asked, "What could be more positive than refusing to kill people?" The other day I read from Wendell Berry's *The Hidden Wound* in which he makes the astute observation that we in America have "moral discomfort" because we are confused about religious freedom and political power. "And so beneath the public advocacy of the separation of church and state, . . .we see working a mute anxiety to suppress . . . For separation of church and state, then, read separation of morality and state." (p. 15) How profound is that? It makes me want to increase my efforts to encourage more accountability for our citizen's actions.

There are remarkable pioneers for peace. Recently I became aware of the *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, A Man to Match His Mountains*. His living presence on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Pushtunistan) led to the formation of an amazing movement away from blood revenge to the "Servants of God." Who would have guessed such a possibility in Asia during and following World War I? Yet, Badshah Khan, countered military recruitment with gospel nonviolence, bringing "the collective conscience to life" among his people. Like Jeremiah, we need to unmask the illusions of power by being servants of hope among the vulnerable and wounded.

Do you have hope for the future?
 Someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
 Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right
 for *what it was*, something we can accept,
 mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
 not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,
 or what looking back half the time it seems
 we could easily have been, or ought . . .
 The future, yes, and even for the past,
 that it will become something we can bear.
 And I too, and my children, so I hope,
 will recall as not too heavy the tug
 of those albatrosses I sadly placed
 upon their tender necks. *Hope for the past*,
 yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage,

and it brings strange peace that itself passes
 into past, easier to bear because
 you said it, rather casually, as snow
 went on falling in Vermont years ago. (poem by David Ray from *Sam's Book*,
 Wesleyan University Press, 1987)

Eleanor and I can confirm that since the year 2012 we were successful in living below the government taxable level. In fact that year we were to receive a refund totaling \$228.

Knowing that the NWTRCC Committee which produces pamphlet # 8 needs our stories of experience, we have made an effort to be somewhat transparent. Are we candid enough? Probably not. If Eleanor's perspective were more explicit in my account of the marital conflict there would be more focus on my inabilities as well as my compulsive habit of collecting too much. I was trained to be frugal before I left the parental home. And I thought I was generous compared to some of my stingy cousins! Eleanor knows that few couples are able to be in full agreement on the details of how to protest one's complicity in war. It is a temptation to be too controlling of the other spouse. On the other hand, I understand that no one person alone can make the change happen. If I didn't feel my family responsibilities so keenly I would be inclined to live more frugally and accept the consequences of prison. This would enable one to disassociate oneself more completely and clearly from the military-industrial complex.

There are many ways to resist the efforts of the Pentagon in the U.S. tax system. We ask that you let us know if any of our experiences may be relevant to your task. We would appreciate seeing how our reflections or that of others might be used if that should happen.

Postscript of March 2, 2013: Eleanor and I often felt that there was a significant bonding of our relationship when we recognized that we had come from parallel roots in Alsace out of Swiss and Anabaptist histories. However, our forebears came to N. America via two distinct migrations – one in 1709 by way of the Carolinas and Pennsylvania, the other in 1874 by way of the Great Plains. Was it providential or coincidental that we should have this common heritage from the past?

Beyond that we come from two congregations states and miles apart that were tied together for us by an act of mutual aid and by the ministry of a person. Russell Mast was the one who served both locations during our growing-up years. Eleanor frequently speaks about how she at eleven years took copious notes while listening to him preach at Deep Run West (located near Bedminster, PA). As a teenager who was eager to make sense out of life's mysteries I listened intently to him at the Salem-Zion (North) Church near Freeman, S.D. He was known to spend an hour for every minute that he spoke to the congregation. His ministry was crucial in correcting my errors in character. So, this is one servant of the church who brought our strands of hope together in a meaningful

way. Perhaps our individual transformations matured us enough to undertake our faith disciplines for our 'life together" these 60 years.

Parenthetically, I might add a comment about my 'Uncle Dan' (known by most citizens as "Bicycle Dan"). He was the second youngest of 11 siblings and remained a bachelor all his life. During WWI he was drafted into the Army. My father spent considerable energy attempting to keep him out by asking for a farm exemption. It was not successfu. My father didn't talk much about that experience but perhaps we as children were too reluctant to ask questions. Uncle Dan spent several months as a non-combatant in the mess hall at Fort Reilly, Kanas, consoling himself that he was "feeding people inseed of killing them." My uncle was clearly different.

Joel Schwader, a correspondent for the *South Dakota Magazine* (Sept.-Oct., 2000, page 53 reported that "He never rose in anger to those who made fun of him. All the years he stood on the corner smiling robbed them of their unconcern. He may have been crazy. But Dan Kaufman . . . taught the town of Freeman, SD, the meaning of commpassion."

Parenthetically, when Russell Mast arrived in the East Freeman community approximately 75% of the young men in the North Church were being drafted into the military. By God's grace through significant mid-week Bible studies and prophetic preaching that trend was reversed within two or three years. The congregation then had 75% entering into Civilian Public Service as an alternative to militarism. In my experience it was a most encouraging "God-send."

– Donald D. Kaufman (Sept. 6, 2018). Eleanor Wismer's & Don's life sketch.

– 30 – (replaces 2013 ms.)

Sent at the U.S. Government's request for alternatives to war and military service. Please examine carefully.
 — Donald D. Kaufman