

Rachel, Risk and Nonviolent Action

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Many people have asked whether our Olympia friend Rachel Corrie took an unreasonable risk when she nonviolently stood in front of the Israeli military bulldozer and pleaded with the driver to spare the Palestinian home he was going to demolish. Here is how I understand the answer:

For several decades the United Nations has been passing resolutions saying that the lands that Israel has been occupying since the 1967 war do not belong to Israel. Israel is occupying them illegally in violation of international law and in violation of the United Nations' repeated efforts to restore peace.

Sadly, the United States government has repeatedly opposed and even vetoed the U.N. Security Council's attempts to up to restore peace. Other countries have been pleading at the United Nations to send international peacekeepers to go there and protect the human rights of innocent Palestinians suffering under this illegal occupation, but the United States has used its veto to prevent the U.N. from doing this too.

Every year the United States gives billions of dollars to the government of Israel for these illegal military purposes. The bulldozer that killed Rachel was made in the U.S. and most likely paid for by our tax dollars.

Every human being has a responsibility to do what is right. When our government repeatedly does what is wrong, we citizens of the U.S. (and citizens of the world) have a moral responsibility to work harder (even at some personal risk) to turn things around and set them right. Rachel was taking personal responsibility to perform the peace and human rights work that the U.S. government has shamefully refused to do.

Everyone knows that joining the military can result being killed in combat, but the public often fails to recognize or understand the equal courage and sacrifice of people who volunteer to work NONVIOLENTLY for worthy goals -- even at great personal risk. (It's one thing to go into combat with heavy armor and weapons. It's something very different to enter a conflict armed with nothing but love.) A fundamental principle of nonviolence is that it is better to absorb suffering than to inflict it on others. Rachel's courageous stand was an embodiment of that principle and part of the historical tradition of active nonviolence.

- In the early-to-mid 1800s when the movement to abolish slavery in the United States was growing, many white people put themselves at great personal risk to help slaves escape.
- In the later 1800s and early 1900s working people risked their lives to organize labor unions to protect the rights of working people, and some of them were killed for this.
- During the 1930s and 1940s a great many people throughout risked their own lives to help Jews hide or escape from the Nazis.

- In the early 1960s peace activists sailed boats into areas of the Pacific Ocean where nuclear weapons were scheduled to be tested in the open air, as a nonviolent way to call world attention to those atrocities. Their courageous efforts helped lead to the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty. Your freedom to breathe air without radiation in it and your freedom to drink milk from grass that is not contaminated by Strontium 90 are owed partly to these activists who risked their lives for our health and safety and peace.
- During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s the African-Americans who worked in the Deep South for integration, voting, and other human rights were targeted for violence and many were killed. As long as this was happening only to Southern blacks, most Northern whites did not really know much about it. When some Northern whites went to the South to help work for African-Americans' civil rights, their presence created connections with the larger white America. Their Northern friends and hometowns and news media put more of a spotlight on the atrocities that had been happening anonymously in the South. These white volunteers knew their work would be dangerous. Some of them volunteered to work in rural areas controlled by the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Councils. Some of these Northern whites were killed. Poor anonymous black people's murders were only minimally reported in the press, so these white people's presence there helped the rest of us see what was really going on. They did not seek to be killed, and they took reasonable precautions when holding meetings, traveling the back roads, etc. When white racists chose to kill them, this revealed the violence under which African-Americans were living daily. Suddenly, the atrocities were exposed, the whole world was watching, and history started to change.

Through these and other historical examples, we can now look back and respect the courage these people displayed in risking their lives for freedom, human rights and peace. Many millions of people around the world already see Rachel Corrie in this long tradition. Eventually when peace comes to the Middle East, even more people will see the courageous nonviolent work of Rachel and other nonviolent healers as stepping stones toward that peace.

Rachel was wearing a bright orange-red jacket. She faced each other eye-to-eye, and they did make eye contact. She was shouting through a bullhorn to the bulldozer driver. The driver's decision to murder her is clear for the whole world to see.

The young Chinese man who faced down the tanks in Tiananmen Square stood up for freedom and democracy. So did Rachel Corrie. That young man became a symbol for freedom and democracy everywhere. Rachel tried to appeal to the conscience of the bulldozer driver. She ended up reaching the conscience of the entire world.