

Finding My Way

Peter J. De Mott

Peter De Mott was born in Washington, DC on January 6, 1947, of parents he describes as “poor but honest.”

He joined the Marines in November 1967 and left after two years and nine months, having attained the rank of Sergeant (E-5). He then enlisted in the U.S. Army in August of 1971, and left after four and a half years (as an E-6) .

He married Ellen Grady in July 1984, and they have three daughters: Marie, Kate, and Nora. They are all awaiting the arrival of a fourth child in June 2002. Peter works as a general contractor and handyman, doing carpentry, masonry, roofing, and gutters. He hauls trash, trims and fells problematic trees, landscapes, moves pianos, paints houses, and cleans chimneys and windows. He also works mightily at cleaning up and overhauling social structures.

Wanting to realize my culturally conditioned fantasies of adventure and heroism, I began my rather illuminating military experience in November 1967 when I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. A little over a year later, after completing boot camp (where I learned instantaneous, unquestioning obedience to orders) and receiving training in the field of communications, I arrived in Vietnam.

There I worked both as a telephone switchboard operator and as an air traffic controller. I spent almost all my time in Vietnam in relatively “secure” areas, sprawling military bases isolated from the local people. I participated in no fire fights, saw no “action,” and returned to the United States following a twelve-month tour of duty. I was seemingly unpoliticized and untraumatized by my time in Southeast Asia (which cannot be said of many of my comrades-in-arms).

While in Vietnam I attended Roman Catholic Mass regularly and on occasion would go to confession, as I had been brought up to do. As a dutiful young Marine who followed orders well, I had no idea that my work in Vietnam was helping to bring about the deaths of some two million people there, maim and displace countless others, and severely damage and degrade the local environment. That sad realization came to me only much later. While in Vietnam I operated

under the influence of a training film my fellow recruits and I viewed in boot camp, which justified U.S. involvement in the war as a defense against communist aggression. (We were told the communists were struggling to extend their “evil empire.”) Like millions of other soldiers down through the course of history, we were taught by the power elite to look at ourselves as heroic patriots willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our native land and its cherished ideals.

After a tour of duty in Vietnam, I found myself serving as a military policeman at the Marine Corps base at Twentynine Palms, California. There I became more and more disillusioned with life as a Marine, with its stultifying duties and inflexible discipline. I left the Marines in the summer of 1970 and about a year later joined the United States Army, after signing an enlistment contract which promised me a course of study at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. For a year I applied myself to acquiring Turkish there, and then received orders for a NATO assignment in Ankara, where I worked in a three-man office in the Turkish General Staff Building.

My duties could be described as primarily clerical in nature and did not prove particularly demanding. What I liked most about Turkey were the frequent trips all over the Anatolian Peninsula as well as Thrace, visiting areas of historical or archeological significance. From Turkey I also traveled to the Soviet Union, Germany, Syria, Ireland, Italy, and Greece. In those years I viewed the Army as an interesting job, which provided me with training and travel experience and an opportunity to meet and know other cultures. My role as a pawn in a geopolitical struggle for global resources did not intrude upon my consciousness.

Finally I had an eye-opening experience during my trip to the Soviet Union, when I realized that the people there had the same hopes and dreams as the folks back home. Having grown up on a diet of propaganda that the Russians made up a godless country bent on world domination, I saw and experienced instead their common humanity, which helped to change my perspective profoundly.

Once again feeling rather disaffected with the sterility and bureaucracy of military life, I turned my back on the Army in February 1976, and returned to my hometown to complete my college education. Following graduation, I explored the possibility of becoming a diocesan priest by going to a seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota—but dropped out after a year and got involved in the Catholic Worker movement.

The Catholic Worker taught me many things I'd never heard before: pacifism, nonviolence, voluntary poverty, personal responsibility for contemporary injustice, and service to Christ in the person of the victims of military and corporate violence and greed. The Catholic Worker also introduced me to nonviolent civil disobedience and its history and practice in our country. A process of conversion had begun in me, as I began to question authority and realize the need to make myself as marginal to evil as possible.



Peter De Mott with daughter Kate, May 1996

My arrest at an “arms bazaar” was the initial outward, visible act of my conversion process, an ever-evolving journey leading me (please, God) on the *Via Crucis* (the Way of the Cross). Christ tells us that if we wish to be His disciples, then we must deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Him in faith and obedience. The cross represents both the lot and the glory of those who nonviolently resist systemic, institutional injustice, and then experience the retribution of the high and mighty as a consequence. Jesus commands us to love one another, and He tells us that no one has greater love than a person who lays down his or her life for a friend. Every act of civil disobedience (which is equally aptly termed “divine obedience”), performed in a spirit of love, helps to restore humanity to a communion of solidarity, unity, and mutual aid.

So, with this consciousness, I took part with Father Roy Bourgeois and others in a protest at an arms bazaar in Rosemont, Illinois (by Chicago O'Hare International Airport) in February 1979. An arms bazaar amounts to nothing more than a marketing event put on by weapons manufacturers, who invite members of the "defense departments" of various countries to view and then purchase the weapons systems on display there. The United States sells billions of dollars worth of weapons annually all over the world. Expenditures for these lethal instruments of war deny life to those whose basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and education then go unmet.

As President Dwight Eisenhower put it: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Since my first act of civil disobedience more than two decades ago, I have undergone arrest many times at the Pentagon, the White House, the School of the Americas, and various military bases and weapons manufacturing sites. Participation in two Plowshares disarmament actions (which symbolically yet concretely beat the nuclear sword into a plowshare, in accord with the vision of the prophet Isaiah), are included in that list. These acts have resulted in periods of incarceration in a variety of jails and prisons, cumulatively about two years in all. Separation from family and friends has been difficult, conditions behind bars less than ideal.

I realize, however, that nothing of good and lasting value comes without a price, and I have been privileged to be part of the worldwide struggle for peace and justice, along with so many others who have done so much. To the extent that we sit passively by during these challenging times—when the fate of the earth and all its life forms hangs in the balance, to that very extent we give our tacit approval to the forces amassed to destroy us.

On September 11, 2001, I happened to be working with a friend from Chile when I learned the shocking and terrible news about the planes slamming into the World Trade Center. My friend commented, "You reap what you sow." He was remembering September 11, 1973, when a U.S.-backed coup in Chile killed its democratically elected president;

bombed the presidential residence; tortured, raped, and murdered thousands; and sent many (including my friend) into exile. The Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who then assumed power, dispatched agents to foreign countries (among them the United States), to assassinate those exiled Chilean nationals whom Pinochet saw as threats.

Sadly, what the U.S. aided and abetted in 1973 in Chile represents only a small portion of a much larger picture of domestic as well as international terrorism, stretching back in history to the genocide practiced by the military of our country against its indigenous population (millions of whom have died). Sadly, too, the violence and destruction currently meted out by our military in Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and Vieques (to name a few) could beget more reciprocal violence from desperate people. I believe that Jesus' command—to love your "enemies" and do good to those who hate you—provides the only answer to the horrific cycle of violence now engulfing the entire human family.

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Peter De Mott delivers peace message to crowd, January 1996.