

Jailed for Dissent “In These Times”

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by Chris Gaunt

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my experiences as someone who works in a library who has taken a stance against the war and occupation in Iraq.

Stirred by my country’s vengeful responses to the events of September 11, 2001, I have become a determined peace activist. There are many dimensions to story, and I’ve chosen to tell you about three recent experiences:

I was sentenced to jail for ninety days in early 2003 for peacefully protesting at the School of the Americas in Georgia.

I was wrongfully convicted of assaulting a police officer for going limp at a protest in Iowa against the occupation in Iraq in November 2003.

That same Iowa protest got national attention when subpoenas were issued to fellow peace activists in February 2004.

In spite of being treated as a criminal by the legal system, an overwhelming abundance of blessings has come my way.

With pain, I watched my beloved country’s response to the September 11th attacks – revenge. I believe that violence is a vicious circle that only creates more violence, and that there must be another path we can choose to follow. As I witnessed a wave of fear, threat, and loss of civil liberties spread across our land, I decided to refuse to live my life in fear.

One link between libraries and my activism is the PATRIOT Act. This 131-page document passed through Congress in the middle of the night on October 26, 2001, without most of our elected officials having time to

read it, let alone try to understand it. It gives broad and frightening power to our government to crack down on dissenters in time of war. Many in libraries are concerned about the provision that gives the federal government access to our patron records, previously protected by law. According to the PATRIOT Act, "in these times" we are required to make patron records available on demand to law enforcement agencies, and to keep such demands a secret.

In the year following September 11th, I resolved to nonviolently disagree with my government on two issues. I wanted to change U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, and I wanted to stop our insane rush to war in Iraq.

A number of circumstances in my life started lining up that would enable me to take the risks and accept the consequences that go with nonviolent acts of civil disobedience. My faith plays a huge role in my decisions to take those risks. I have also felt my husband's support of me grow stronger in recent years, and I have lived long enough to see our two daughters grow into independent young women. I decided it was now time for me to put my beliefs into action.

On October 26, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the PATRIOT Act, I was arrested for the first time in my life. A group of Iowa peace activists made a pitiful attempt to try to stop the Iowa Air Guard from flying another mission over the no-fly zones in northern Iraq. I *knew* how severely the eleven years of sanctions had already punished the Iraqi people. I believed that for U.S. planes to fly in those no-fly zones was illegal under international law. I knew that our bombs were killing innocent Iraqis on the ground. Even though the Iraqi air defense was so weak that it had never shot down one of our planes, I felt that such an event could happen. That, I feared, could be a precipitator to WW III. I felt a responsibility to try to do something to stop that.

So after a *legal* rally, about a dozen of us were arrested for trespass. The judge we came before to make our pleas told us that "in these times" we should not be protesting in this way by walking across lines in the grass! That is the same thing I would hear when I came before a Georgia judge two months later on a federal charge of trespassing. Both judges warned us not to exercise our first amendment rights "in these times."

Only three weeks after my arrest in Iowa, I traveled to Ft. Benning, Georgia, to participate in the annual protest to close the School of the Americas (SOA). If you haven't heard of the SOA, it is a small part of the army base at Ft. Benning where our taxpayer dollars are used to train Latin American soldiers to be international terrorists. The graduates of the School of the Americas have consistently used their skills to torture, "disappear", and massacre their own people.

I first attended this protest in 1998 with the pastor of my church and our then 17-year-old daughter Jodi. The protest happens each November on

the anniversary of the time in El Salvador when six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter were brutally murdered by SOA graduates. About 10,000 people from all walks of life and from all across the United States gather for this annual weekend protest. On Sunday, those who are willing to risk arrest typically walk in a solemn funeral procession onto the base. In the years prior to 2001, those who crossed the line were placed on buses, driven two miles away, and released. I was deeply affected that first year when I crossed the line. I felt the pain of the victims. My presence was an attempt to be the voice for those who had been silenced.

Over two thousand of us crossed the line that year. We so overpowered them with numbers that only a few were arrested. We went back home and Congress failed by only ten votes to pass legislation demanding the closure of the school. When the next November rolled around I remember how *pissed* I was that we had to go back again to the annual protest. I had gone that first time with every intention of closing that damn school.

It was after my fourth annual trip in 2001 that I realized I was now part of a *movement*. This movement is committed to nonviolence, and it will not stop until the school is shut down.

By now over 170 people have collectively served over 78 years in federal prisons and jails for nonviolent protest calling for the closure of the School. My turn would come after the 2002 protest.

Police and military tactics at the SOA protest changed after 9/11. Spirit moved me and 85 others to cross the line in 2002. We were all taken to jail for two nights. No more short bus rides out of town. A tough new crack-down in time of build-up for war!

One of the things I've learned about doing an act of civil disobedience is that before I cross the line I must be prepared to accept all the consequences *and* potential consequences of my actions. I knew darn well I would go to jail for three to six months if I crossed that year. I made the decision in spite of the potential to risk my marriage, my family, and my job.

Once I had accepted the consequences of my actions, I was naïve enough to think that my family members would also. I was wrong! By the time I made it back home to Iowa, I was ready for a hug from my husband. Instead, he was so angry with me that he couldn't look at me or speak to me for twenty-four hours. I decided to give him some space. My being incarcerated was much harder on family members than it was on me.

What I had done was just too far out of the box for an Iowa farm wife! Husband Jay and I are both third generation farmers. We raise hogs for a living. Why would an Iowa farmer be willing to go to jail for her beliefs "in these times"? Friends and relatives could not understand what possibly motivated me to do such a thing. I heard things like this:

“How can you expect your son to obey the law when you are breaking it?”
“Your mother will surely die if you go to prison.”
“Why can’t you just stay home and be a good wife and mother?”
“What are you doing to the Gaunt name?”

It was two months from the time of the protest before I went back to Georgia for my trial. I spent some time one-on-one with each of my seven siblings, asking and listening to how they felt about my actions in Georgia. It helped for them to hear that I had checked with my job about health insurance for my family, and that I had put some thought into this. Even though none of my sisters could ever imagine themselves leaving a husband and 16-year-old son home while they went to jail, they realized that perhaps *I* could. I felt a *deep* sense of being loved by my siblings, even if they did not understand my actions.

At the time of my trial I was sentenced to 90 days in prison and given a \$750 fine. I forgave the judge on the spot, and it was my choice to do the time in a Georgia County Jail.

Let me tell you that jail is not fun. Our system is designed to dehumanize and diminish all who enter. And everyone on the inside was depressed.

Faith, love, and humor. These three things got me through.

I was determined to come out of jail physically and spiritually stronger than when I went in. My experiences as a Prisoner of Conscience can be summed up as profoundly positive, very educational, and transformational. I discovered that I lacked for nothing. I was provided plenty of opportunities to practice nonviolence with the jail staff. In return, I earned the nicknames “Smart-ass” and “Troublemaker” from them! I used humor, including playing an April Fool’s joke on the guards by pushing the intercom on the morning of April 1st and telling them that there was a dead mouse in my grits!

Once I was on the inside, I found that many of my cellmates also were not criminals. While I was wearing an orange and white striped suit designating me as a federal prisoner, my cellmates wore green and white stripes. INS, or Immigration Services was holding them. Most were seeking asylum. Their “welcome to America,” after arriving at the Atlanta airport with false documents, was to be shackled and chained and taken to jail. They were from Haiti, China, Ethiopia, Cameron, Egypt, Nigeria, and Brazil. They all had stories to tell, and they eventually trusted me with those heart-breaking stories. INS did not care to hear their stories. I kept telling them how sorry I was and how ashamed I was of my own country for locking them up in jail.

Let me share with you some of the outcomes from my incarceration:

One of those asylum seekers, Eleni, from Ethiopia, has become like a soul sister to me. Both she and her story are incredible. After 402 days in jail, a loss of thirty percent of her body weight due to stress, and countless dollars (which she did not have) spent on attorneys, she was finally deported to London. We are keeping in touch via telephone.

My employer, Grinnell College, granted me a 90-day personal leave. Probably never before in the history of the college has anyone asked for a leave to go to jail as a prisoner of conscience, but they did it for me! After I got home from jail I read the letter. The fine print at the end said, "Leaves of this nature may not be granted in the future."

My mother did not die! In fact she celebrated her 80th birthday after I got out of jail by flying to Holland to visit my brother! What I suspected was true: my mother is spiritually stronger than most gave her credit for.

And my husband Jay and I are better friends today than ever before. I cannot explain that. But I will accept it!

I also learned an important lesson about taking really good care of myself. I worked out and meditated a couple of hours each day. I think that helped me find peace within myself. After I changed, things around me, including things I had been trying hard to force to change, just happened. I suppose that, in the everyday hubbub of life, women especially find it difficult to place our own health and well being as a top priority. Yet the results for me when I did that were fascinating.

I realized that I am a very fortunate and privileged person. My cellmates always had the threat of deportation in the middle of the night hanging over their heads. I would do my time, then go right back home to all of my advantages. I can name at least eleven of them:

I am an American citizen / I am white / I am middle class / I am married / I have children / I am educated / I am heterosexual / I am employed / I have health insurance, for my family and myself / We own our home / We own vehicles.

With this awareness of my own privileges comes responsibility. I became determined to do something to help create a more peaceful and loving world. I figured out that I should start by making peace with myself. Then I have a responsibility to try to make peace with those family members I am most intimate with. I believe that every human being has an important, unique and beautiful piece to bring to the mosaic that will make a more peaceful and just world. "In these times," if I want my life to be about peace, and if I believe that peace happens one person at a time, then joining the 2.2 million people inside our U.S. prisons was, in fact, a good place for me to be.

People ask if I think my efforts have done any good. Well, I guess the School of the Americas isn't closed yet, is it? I can only say that I am being faithful to what I believe. Maybe that is enough. I am convinced that LOVE will one day win, *not* hate. That peace can be accomplished through nonviolence. Reconciliation and forgiveness and reparations *are* possible, and that moving toward those goals – the journey – is what counts. Working for peace is amongst the hardest work I have ever done. And I was raised on a farm with a very strong work ethic.

I want to tell you about what happened in Iowa in November 2003.

Exactly one year after the Georgia protest, there was a protest at Iowa's National Guard headquarters near Des Moines called "Stop the Occupation: Bring Our Troops Home." Following a legal rally, ten of us agreed to "cross the line" and risk arrest. In Iowa we have a history of cooperation between the peace protestors and the local police. But something was different this time. When our group showed up for the legal rally, sixteen armed officers in riot gear greeted us! Our attempts to talk with the police were rejected. Someone had called for this change in police tactics, because, they believed, we are a country at war. Ashcroft has ordered a crackdown on dissenters. In fact, we have learned that there were two undercover police officers at our planning meeting the night before the protest. They came as husband and wife, gave us false names, addresses, and someone else's phone number! Oh well, I thought, when I found out, surely they learned something about nonviolence by attending our meeting. Ha! Was I wrong. They described our preparations for nonviolent action to the police as potentially *violent*.

My personal response to the arrests that day was to increase my nonviolent resistance a bit. After we all walked across the line hand in hand, I chose to go limp at the time of my arrest. I trusted the officers with my body. Their plan was to have zero tolerance for line crossers that day, and to take everyone who crossed the line to jail for the night. So they took all ten intentional line crossers to jail, plus two women who accidentally crossed over the line. One was taking a photo and another was trying to help an elderly woman out of a car.

The authorities intended to intimidate. It was clearly an attempt to put a chill on the peace movement "in these times," and to deter anyone else from considering attending a peace rally in the future.

Everyone was charged with trespass, except me. For going limp, I was also charged with interference with arrest and assault on a police officer! Immediately after the arrests, the captain of the police force told the awaiting television and newspaper reporters that this Grinnell woman, Christine Gaunt, had kicked an officer in the knee, and he had gone to the hospital with a possible dislocated kneecap.

At the jail they posted my bond at \$2600. I chose not to bond out. That was fine because one of Georgia's gifts to me is that I no longer fear being in jail.

What do I think happened? Maybe they were afraid they had hurt me by dragging me to the police van (they had!), and they overreacted partly because of that. The officers on duty that day had apparently been told by their undercover agents that we might become violent. Did the agents outright lie? Exaggerate? They had been present when we talked about *and practiced* going limp. Why the hell didn't the police spend some of their time practicing carrying limp bodies? Instead they put on their riot gear. I believe that the officers on duty were told to be specifically on the lookout for something additional they could charge us with – like assault.

That one tiny act of nonviolent resistance, going limp (which I had no idea would be considered a criminal offense), was a spark to more events. I see it as a microcosm of what is happening to dissenters and “suspicious-looking people” all around this country “in these times” of war.

Because the PATRIOT Act is in effect, and because of John Ashcroft's behind-closed-doors visit to the Des Moines police department to drum up support for – and even try to strengthen – the PATRIOT Act, because of the overkill and the attempts to intimidate, because human beings get crazy in time of war, and because nonviolence does indeed create chaos when those in power and control are confronted by something other than violence, ... here I was, a peace activist facing a bogus charge of assault with a penalty of one year in jail if convicted.

Before trial, they offered to drop the assault charge if I would plead guilty to trespass and interfering with arrest. I rejected their plea bargain. I was determined to have a chance to speak the truth in court to a jury of my peers. I was taking full responsibility for all my actions that day. I wanted others to do the same.

To make a long, detailed courtroom story short, the jury believed the five uniformed officers who took the stand and lied, as opposed to the lone peace activist who spoke the truth. I still do not understand how my attorney and I walked into court with depositions in our hands in which all eight potential witnesses for the state (except the alleged victim) said they had not seen the alleged assault. There were no witnesses! How could anyone prove beyond doubt that I intentionally kicked an officer without a single witness? Neither my attorney nor I had ever been involved in a political trial, including selecting a jury for a political trial. Perhaps some of the jurors were biased against me as soon as they knew I had taken a stance against the war.

My husband insists that I was framed.

I was found guilty of assault, interference with arrest, and trespass. I was

given a 60-day suspended sentence, one year of probation, sixty hours of community service, a court order to take a class on assaultive behavior, plus fines and court costs.

What have I learned from this?

I learned that an anti-war stance is *still* not a very popular one. I cannot blame the jurors for believing the officers who lied, because I, too, still want to believe that our police officers would not lie!

I learned something about the power of the news media. My friends and family who know me well know that never in a million years would I ever assault anyone, especially not a police officer. Yet they tended to believe that I might have kicked him, though they thought he must have done something really bad to me first! All because they heard it on the news!

I learned that *wrongful convictions happen*. Period. I wonder how many are sitting in our prisons today because of that? My 21-yr-old daughter's response at the shock of hearing my guilty verdict was to say, "Mom, now I know *why* you have always been against the death penalty."

I do not think the officers who lied will go to hell for their lies. I would like to find a way to help them with their shame. That didn't happen through the courts. I am still trying to figure out a way to do that.

Something else happened in Iowa last February that was directly related to this case of assault. An agent representing the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force delivered subpoenas to four peace activists who had attended a training session the night before that November protest. Drake University, the place where that meeting was held, was also given a subpoena and a gag order! The feds wanted all records and documents in Drake's possession relating to the meetings that were hosted by Drake's chapter of the National Lawyer's Guild. That included names of all the people who attended any of those events. Whoa! Suddenly "these times" resemble the times from the McCarthy Era in the 1950's. When a person is ordered to come before a federal grand jury for questioning, they must come without an attorney. The experience can be very intimidating. If people refuse to talk, they can be locked up for a long time. A couple of our people were prepared to do that.

There was a huge outcry against the subpoenas and gag order by the Iowa Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, and the National Lawyer's Guild. Iowa Senators Harkin and Grassley demanded of Ashcroft why peace activists were being spied on and why Drake University was being gagged. From all appearances this was nothing but an attempt to stretch the PATRIOT Act into a force against peaceful protestors and potentially label them domestic terrorists. The word got out nationally and internationally. We had reporters in from the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, the *Progressive*, the *Nation*, *Salon*, the *Chronicle of Higher*

Education, and the PBS program NOW with Bill Moyers. Most recently, a French investigative television news program came to Des Moines to do interviews about the case.

I think that somewhere in those subpoenas the feds were looking for a conspiracy charge. Perhaps they wanted to find a conspiracy to hurt an officer? There was gross miscommunication between the local police force and the U.S. attorneys. U.S. Attorney Stephen P. O'Meara, from whose office the subpoenas were ordered, stated in a public meeting "a deputy sheriff was severely kicked and had suffered serious injury to a knee."

Note: Many documents concerning this case can be found on the ICLU website, www.iowaclu.org, under news / documents / Drake protesters.

It was a victory for the peace movement when the outcry of injustice was heard round the world and the subpoenas were all quashed as a result. A real moment of truth came at the time of the next Iowa protest on March 21, 2004. Because of the media attention, a much larger group gathered this time to say "Stop the Occupation: Bring Our Troops Home." We were surprised when we arrived at the site to find no police presence. None! No officers in riot gear. For a second time someone made a tactical decision to do things differently. This in itself is a major victory, won through nonviolent means. This change in police tactics toward protests certainly implies that intimidation was the intent just four months earlier.

Even though I was awaiting sentencing for my assault conviction, I crossed the line again. Actually, this time, we had to roll under a fence. I felt no need to go limp when they arrested me. We were not taken to jail, but were processed, and released on a promise to appear in court. In the end, most got a \$50 fine or community service, plus court costs. I took a different path and did not sign my promise to appear papers. That means they took me to jail for the night. I wanted the opportunity to carry on positive conversations with the arresting officers, the jail staff, and anyone who might be in the holding cell. I think I was seeking redemption about the fact that I am not a violent person. I wanted to state boldly with my body that I *still* do not intimidate easily, *and I want the occupation in Iraq to stop*.

I believe that some day we will look back on "these times" and recall with absurdity the decisions to send peace activists to jail for crimes such as nonviolent dissent!

When I was locked up in Georgia, I found that my time in jail was not so much about closing the School of the Americas, but became a sharing of stories with my fellow inmates, of making human connections, and strengthening commitment to nonviolence. So too with my talk here at ALA. My presence here isn't so much about libraries, but about sharing stories with others committed to social change and engaged in social activism. In the end, all I have is a story to tell. Please know that this opportunity to talk to you means a lot to me. Thanks for listening.