

## CHAPTER 10

# Assault on the Tracks: Facing Violence with Love and Courage

September 1, 1987, was a bright, sunny day, with a strong breeze blowing off the Suisan Bay. Having earlier faced the bay's rough water and high waves in small boats, we had decided to shift the focus of our campaign to block shipments of weapons from the Concord Naval Weapons Station to land rather than water. About fifty of us gathered at ten o'clock that morning for an interfaith worship service on the train tracks that led to Port Chicago, where weapons from trains were loaded onto ships.

For eighty-three days, we had held peace vigils on these tracks. I had no idea that morning how different this day would be. How could I have known that two hours later I would be cradling one of my dearest friends as he clung tenuously to life, mangled by a 125-ton train carrying bombs and munitions, whose operators had been ordered to deliberately run him over?

Like many visitors to Central America, I had returned from my trips with renewed determination to try to end U.S. military intervention and the wars there. So had Brian Willson, a Vietnam War veteran whose job with the Air Force had included going into villages after U.S. bombing and strafing missions to assess the damage. One particularly unforgettable mission put him on the path from patriotic warrior to peace activist.

An hour after U.S. bombs fell on a small Vietnamese village, Brian was in a sea of crying and moaning humanity. Almost all of the victims, who had been attending to their farming and domestic chores that day, were women and children. Sobbing and gagging from the horror he was witnessing, Brian stumbled upon the body of a young woman,

still clutching her three small, shrapnel-riddled children. Napalm had blackened their bodies and partially melted the woman's face, but her vacant eyes stared right at Brian.

Almost two decades later, Brian witnessed a small caravan of horse-drawn wagons on its way to a cemetery in Nicaragua, carrying the bodies of five women and a child who had been killed by U.S.-supported Contras the day before in an attack on a coffee cooperative. The simple caskets were open, and Brian could see the faces of the dead. He had a flashback to his time in Vietnam, and he knew that he needed to do all that he could to stop the U.S.-sponsored terror in Nicaragua.

In the fall of 1986, four Vietnam veterans fasted for forty-seven days on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, DC, in an appeal to Congress and the people of the United States to stop supporting the killing in Central America. Brian Willson was one of those veterans, and Charlie Liteky, who lived in San Francisco, was another. I was impressed with their witness and began doing nonviolence training with war veterans in the Bay Area.

I was profoundly moved that these veterans—who admitted to collectively killing hundreds of people in combat and on bombing runs—were willing to risk their lives for peace. After a weeklong training, some of them went to Nicaragua and walked more than seventy miles throughout that country's war zones—through ambushes, past bombed vehicles, and over mined roads—in a witness to peace and reconciliation. Brian was part of that team, and when he returned, we spent a long night talking about the agony he felt over what he had seen.

In Nicaragua, Brian had met with Eugene Hasenfus, a U.S. arms transporter who had parachuted to safety when his plane was shot down over southern Nicaragua. Hasenfus and his crew had been secretly dropping weapons to the Contras. The CIA and the Reagan administration denied any connection to him. But the downed plane and Hasenfus's confession blew the lid on the secret activity and exposed what would come to be known as the Iran-Contra Scandal: a doubly illegal covert U.S. operation that involved selling arms to Iran in exchange for their help in securing the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon, and using the cash from Iran to buy weapons for the Contras—all in violation of congressional prohibitions.

I was pretty sure I knew the point from which those weapons had been deployed. In early 1987, I took Brian out to the Concord Naval Weapons Station (CNWS). We found a hillside honeycombed with literally hundreds of bunkers, each one filled with munitions. Bullets,

mines, and bombs were being transported from the storage bunkers in trains and trucks across a public highway, then out to the Port Chicago pier, where the deadly cargo was loaded onto ships that carried it into the San Francisco Bay, beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, and then to other parts of the globe.

Months of research uncovered the horrific reality that millions had died as a result of weapons that had been shipped along the tracks at Concord and then been dropped on, or shot at, people in Vietnam, Korea, Chile, the Philippines, the Middle East, and Central America. We were able to document that arms were going from CNWS to El Salvador for use there, and for trans-shipment to Nicaragua and Guatemala.

A Freedom of Information request from the San Francisco Pledge of Resistance revealed that weapons shipped from Concord to El Salvador's port of Acajutla included more than six thousand high-explosive rockets and almost three thousand demolition and fragmentation bombs for the quick destruction of homes; thousands of white phosphorous rockets with the incendiary capacity to burn flesh to bone; several million cartridges for General Electric machine guns mounted on helicopter gunships that could fire a hundred bullets per second; and almost 1,800 fuse extenders used to increase a bomb's impact and the intensity of damage from shrapnel. The U.S. government was literally sending bombs from our backyard to the front yards of brothers and sisters we had met in Central America.

Brian and I and several others agreed that we needed to escalate our efforts for peace. We decided to launch a sustained, nonviolent vigil at the road and the tracks, supporting people who were led by conscience to block the trucks and trains carrying weapons. We were prepared to put our bodies between the bombs and the people of Central America.

Our goal was to try to stop the arms shipments, but also to speak to the hearts and consciences of the American people about the insanity of our nation's policies of fighting and killing the people of Central America. Many of us wondered why more German people had not protested and acted to stop the shipment of millions of Jews to their deaths in concentration camps during the Third Reich. Were they afraid that if they acted to stop the genocide they too might end up in concentration camps? How did German Christians reconcile their faith with allowing this horrible mass slaughter to go on?

At Concord our government was not sending people on trains off to death camps, but instead was sending death itself along the tracks.

Every train that passed through the base's main gate meant that more people would die in another corner of the globe. As people of faith committed to creating a peaceful world, we were confronted with a question that echoed what we had asked about Hitler-era Germans: What is our responsibility to speak out and act to stop this crime against humanity?

I wrote these words at the time:

For those of us who call ourselves Christians and people of faith, there is a clear moral choice. We can pretend we don't know these bombs are being shipped from our neighborhood and, as a result, people are dying. We can argue that we have written our Congress people and encouraged them to act to stop this war. We can say the issue is so complex, we are not well enough informed about the issue to act.

We can also argue that literally putting our bodies in the way of these trains could mean death for us if the trains run over us, or, more likely, the possibility of long jail terms for interfering with the war effort. We can ask ourselves: "What good would it do? Who is going to care if a few people get out on the tracks to pray and try to stop a death train?"

Or, we can say: "We have a moral responsibility to act in the strongest nonviolent way we can to stop the killing of innocent men, women, and children in Central America and other parts of the world." If we see ourselves as a human family, we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters whom our government has decided to declare our "enemies" and kill.

I wrote that, as Christians and Jews, we felt a moral obligation to uphold God's laws "Thou shalt not kill" and "Love one another." And we also felt a legal responsibility to uphold international law, particularly the Nuremberg Principles.

After the Second World War, Nazi leaders were put on trial at Nuremberg. A frequent response to questions about their participation in the atrocities of the Third Reich was "I was just following orders." The Nuremberg Principles that arose from that tribunal declared that soldiers are morally obligated to refuse orders that violate conscience; and, furthermore, that it is the responsibility of citizens to try to stop the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against peace being committed by their governments.

These crimes include the wanton killing of civilian populations—which we had witnessed throughout Central America being carried out



With Dorothy Granada, blocking the first truck with munitions headed for El Salvador as part of Nuremberg Actions at Concord Naval Weapons Station, CA (June 1987).

by military personnel and death squads armed, funded and trained by our government. The United States, which had called Nazi leaders to account for their crimes in the Hitler era, was acting without any accountability in direct violation of the principles it had instituted four decades before.

Complicity in crimes against humanity, through silence or passive approval by inaction, was itself defined as a crime at the Nuremberg tribunal. So we decided to call our nonviolent witness at the Concord Naval Weapons Station “Nuremberg Actions.” We did not see ourselves as breaking the law, but rather as participating in “civil obedience,” or “holy obedience,” attempting to uphold both international law and God’s law. We did not view our actions as “disturbing the peace,” as others would charge, but “disturbing the war.”

We launched our witness on June 10, 1987. I was among the initial four who blocked trucks that day. Every truck and train that carried munitions was marked with a large red or orange placard reading “EXPLOSIVES,” so it was easy to identify what to block.

We were kneeling on the cement roadway—a public space about 150 feet wide that was bordered on both sides with a heavy yellow line demarcating Navy property. We claimed that public strip as “people’s

land.” On that sweltering afternoon, we were reading the Nuremberg Principles aloud as a munitions truck approached and stopped.

For about forty-five minutes, we were on our knees in front of the truck. The authorities didn’t know quite what to do. I finally handed an extra copy of the Nuremberg Principles to a friend to carry to the truck driver, so he would know why we were there.

A Marine, who was among the 350 assigned to CNWS to keep the base secure, stopped my friend and said, “You can’t cross this yellow line.” When my friend explained what he was trying to do, the Marine said, “I’ll give it to him.” So I watched as a Marine handed a copy of the Nuremberg Principles to the driver of a truck loaded with bombs headed for Central America!

We refused to move when ordered to do so. Eventually the county sheriff and his deputies arrested us. We and the groups that followed us successfully blocked three trucks that day, all of which turned back with their cargo. The driver of a security truck stopped and rolled down his window as we were being taken off to jail and said, “Real good job there, you fellows.” I was always moved to find people on the “inside” who supported us.

We spent three days in jail and returned to the tracks. Despite temperatures that sometimes rose to 120 degrees, we maintained an ongoing vigil throughout that summer. After that first encounter, the deputies arrested us quickly whenever we blocked trains or trucks.

In August, Brian Willson declared at the tracks, “One truth seems clear: if the munitions train moves past our blockade, other human beings will be killed and maimed. *We are not worth more. They are not worth less.* Let us commit to ourselves and the world that we will claim our dignity, self-respect, and honor by resisting with our lives and dollars, no matter what it takes.”

In an August 21 open letter to Captain Lonnie Cagle, the commander of CNWS, Brian wrote that the authorities had the choice of “suspending movements of munitions, removing our bodies, or running over us.” He requested a meeting with Cagle. The base commander neither answered the letter nor responded to two follow-up phone calls from Brian.

Brian echoed the words of the letter when he addressed the base authorities at a press conference at the tracks on the morning of September 1, as he prepared to block a train and begin a forty-day fast. Referring to those who were being killed by our weapons in Central America, he asked, “Am I more valuable than those people? If I say no,

then I have to say, you can't move these munitions without moving my body, or destroying my body."

About an hour later, at 11:40 a.m., Brian, along with veterans Duncan Murphy and David Duncombe, took their positions in front of our blue "Nuremberg Actions" banner on the tracks. Brian and I had been strategizing, and we had planned to block the first train together. But at the press conference after the worship service, I had asked if anyone who had not yet received nonviolence training wanted to join the ongoing blockade. Many people came forward, and I was the only one there at the time that could do the training, so I agreed to do that instead of blocking the first train. I planned to block the next train with others later that day.

I remember that the mood at the base felt more uneasy and sinister that day than it had before. About ten minutes before Brian, Duncan, and David moved onto the tracks, two truckloads of Marines wearing flak jackets drove close to our vigil, got out, pointed their M-16 rifles at us, and then sped off. A few minutes later, a carload of Marines drove by us, and one of them shouted, "We hear there's going to be violence today." But still I didn't imagine what was about to happen.

I was standing in front of Brian, Duncan, and David, at the edge of the tracks. The munitions train had been sitting for about half an hour with its headlights blazing about five hundred feet away. We sent a couple of people over to deliver a copy of Brian's letter and tell the person in charge of security that we were beginning the blockade of the train. A guard in the security office picked up a handheld radio and told someone—presumably the engineer of the train—that people were on the tracks. The two members of our vigil heard the voice on the radio respond, "I think you're crazy. We have our job to do."

As they were walking back toward us, the train began moving. As it got closer and closer to us, it kept picking up speed. On the cowcatcher platform at the front of the locomotive stood two spotters, whose job it was to make sure the tracks were clear.

I was waving my arms frantically over the tracks and looking those guys in the eyes, shouting, "There are people on the tracks! Stop the train!" They just looked straight ahead and kept coming. We learned later that the train was going about seventeen mph when it reached us—more than three times the five mph speed limit.

The train hit my arm and knocked me to the ground. From that vantage point, I could see underneath the wheels, and I was appalled by what I saw. David had leapt off the tracks, and Duncan had managed to jump up ten feet to grab the railing of the cowcatcher. But Brian





We come to the aid of Brian Willson, who was run over by a train with two boxcars of munitions at Concord, CA (September 1, 1987). [Photo: John Skerce]

had been run over and was being dragged by the locomotive, getting smashed from side to side as the train continued another four hundred feet before stopping. As I got up and ran toward Brian, I first came to one of his legs, which had been severed by the impact.

Witnessing Brian's mutilation was the most horrible experience of my life. He had a gaping hole the size of a lemon in his skull. I knelt over him, trying to protect his exposed and bleeding brain. He reached up and felt the wound and said, "Oh my God, I'm gonna die." Friends surrounded him, telling him they loved him, encouraging him to hold on. I think everybody there believed he was going to die, and several people made a point of assuring him that the witness at the tracks would go on.

Blessedly, Holley Rauwen, a midwife whom Brian had married just ten days before, had studied emergency medical care in preparation for peace walks on mined roads in Nicaragua's war zones. She and others used pressure to control the blood gushing from the stump of Brian's leg and other injuries. Duncan's training and experience as an ambulance driver during World War II was also invaluable at that moment. Though in excruciating pain, Brian's chief concern was for his thirteen-year-old stepson, Gabriel, who had witnessed the whole grisly spectacle.

A Navy ambulance arrived. I looked at the sea of Brian's spilled blood and begged the crew, "Please, take this man to the hospital! He's



dying!” One of them said to me, “We are not allowed to.” They left, having provided no medical assistance or transportation, explaining that Brian’s body was lying in public space and not on Navy property. Seventeen more precious minutes elapsed before the county ambulance arrived.

Holley remained amazingly composed, tending to Brian and also trying to calm Gabriel, who screamed out his rage and grief. Incredibly, Brian stayed conscious and kept talking. I invited Holley to switch places with me. I thought she should be the one to hold him and try to communicate with him in his final minutes and hear what I assumed would be his last words.

Three or four times, Brian said, “Take the stuff out of my pockets.” So I went through his pockets and pulled out his keys and some change, thinking that this was a crazy use of my time at that moment. But Brian explained later that he thought he was going to jail, and he didn’t want the jailers to lose his ID or keys.

The wars came home in a powerful way that day. What our government had long been willing to do to poor people and people of color in other parts of the world, it was also willing to do to peaceful protesters in the United States who tried to impede the war effort.

That Brian survived was nothing short of a miracle. He suffered a total of nineteen injuries, including a skull fracture, a damaged kidney, and broken ribs, wrist, and shoulder. He spent eight hours in surgery that day. One leg had been severed in the collision, and the other was so badly twisted and mangled that it needed to be surgically amputated below the knee. One ear had to be reattached. Brain surgery was necessary to clean Brian’s brain of grease, dirt, and debris, and to extract a piece of skull that had lodged in his frontal lobe.

I felt a heavy responsibility, because I had helped to organize the blockade. I feared first of all that this beautiful man and dear friend was going to lose his life—and, secondly, that if he survived, he would be horribly physically maimed and mentally debilitated. So three days later, when a few of us were allowed into his hospital room, seeing Brian alert and talking was one of the most joyful moments of my life. Although his body was badly battered, and literally every part of it was bandaged, his spirit was still very much alive and free.

Brian asked about Gabriel and wanted to know what was going on at the tracks. I shared with him that we were going to hold a huge rally there the next day, and I asked if there was anything he wanted to communicate to those who would gather. From beneath that massive

bandage covering his whole body came a voice with an unwavering commitment to nonviolence, love for the people who would be killed if the trains got their weapons to their destination, and determination to continue the struggle. It was obvious that, rather than being destroyed by the train assault, Brian's conviction about nonviolence had deepened.

Brian had a tube in his throat, which made it difficult for him to talk, and he was in overwhelming pain. But he dictated this message, which I wrote down and typed up, then read over the loudspeaker at the rally the next day:

I want to thank all of you for coming to Concord today out of concern for the violence which the death train inflicted on me last Tuesday. But please remember that the same horror—and much worse—is happening every day to the people in Central America.

I am grateful you are here today to demonstrate your concern for peace in Central America. I hope you will come back day after day after day after day to nonviolently block the trains and trucks carrying bombs and munitions to ships bound for Central America and other parts of the world. Tomorrow, the next day, and the next day and the next—come a day, a week, a month—for as long as you can.

As soon as I am able, I will be back on the tracks. Hopefully, we can get enough people to stop the arms shipments from Concord, and then the blockades will spread throughout the rest of the country.

Despite your anger and outrage at what has happened, I ask you to express your opposition to this violence here on the tracks, and in Central America, *nonviolently*. We must confront violence with nonviolence.

We all have to put our lives on the line for peace and justice. It does not have to be in front of a train. If we want peace, we can have it, but we are going to have to pay for it.

Is there anything of higher value than peace and justice? A boat? A VCR? What is standing in the way of your journey to liberation with the people of the earth? We of the First World need to learn the lessons of the Third World—that justice is the foundation for peace.

This is the time to call for the creation of a peace force, where people will work full-time to stop the arms race, consistent with President Eisenhower's statement: "I think that people want

peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it.”

Every time those munitions trains go past us, some people are going to be killed or maimed. When we come to sincerely feel that the lives of those people are worth no less than our own lives, we become fully liberated.

We’re talking about nonviolent revolution—of our lifestyle and attitudes and values—so we can join the Third World revolution for justice and stop the madness, greed, and war which come out of the First World. Our government can only continue its wars with the cooperation of our people, and that cooperation is with our taxes and with our bodies.

Our actions and expressions are what are needed, not our whispers and our quiet dinner conversation. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” When someone is hurting in El Salvador or Nicaragua, we are hurting, too.

I never thought I would lose my legs here in the U.S.—maybe while walking for peace in Nicaragua, but not here. I hope everyone will search their hearts about what they can do to stop this madness. We each need to take responsibility. I want to call on everyone to speak out and act as strongly and powerfully and honestly and nonviolently as possible. Together we can stop these death trains and the horrible wars in Central America.

Four days after the train assault on Brian, ten thousand people heard these words at the tracks. They had come in response to the tragedy, to express their commitment to stopping the continued export of violence to Central America. Among them were Daniel Ellsberg, singer Joan Baez, and presidential candidate Rev. Jesse Jackson, who declared from the stage, “If more people had sat on the tracks in front of trains taking people to death camps forty-five years ago, six million people might not have died.”

Jackson named other activists who, like Brian, had made great sacrifices for peace and justice during the civil rights era and at other critical times in our nation’s history. And he compared “the first Concord,” where the Boston Tea Party took place, to “California’s Concord, where people are again trying to bring this country to its senses.” After the rally, I took him to the place where Brian had been hit, where his blood was still visible, and Jackson knelt and offered a prayer.

We were particularly moved that Rosario Murillo, wife of President Daniel Ortega, came from Nicaragua with their four children. President Ortega sent a letter addressed to Brian, which said in part, “Your body, mutilated by those who make war, is part of our sadness, but it is also part of our hope for a better future.” Murillo, too, wanted to see the place where Brian had been hit, and I took her there early Saturday morning before the rally. When she saw his blood, she said, “I think that this was a very Christian act, what he did, in terms of expressing his love and being willing to risk his life out of love for other people.”

Brian had declared just minutes before he was run over that he hoped that our action was the beginning of a new era of sustained resistance—equivalent in moral power and in nonviolent spirit to the Salt March that liberated India from British control, or the Montgomery bus boycott and Birmingham campaign during the civil rights movement in our own country. He saw our witness as a declaration that “We the people are the ones who are going to make peace.” His prophetic vision began to take shape at the tracks.

After September 1, we had people at or on the tracks twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, maintaining a permanent encampment so that trains and trucks could not sneak by in the middle of the night and building a growing community of commitment. Almost fifty churches, synagogues, Buddhist communities, Friends meetings, and peace groups committed to being present one day each month. Thousands of people kept vigil, prayed, fasted, leafleted the base’s workers, and sat on the tracks. Over the next couple years, more than two thousand arrests were made as we blocked the trains and trucks loaded with munitions.

Detractors passing by in their cars showered us with “gifts”—often insults and obscenities and blaring horns. A few threw trash our way, and one person hurled a dead skunk at us. There was an incident with a shot fired toward the tracks, but fortunately no one was hurt.

In a very different spirit, supporters showed up regularly with food. Occasionally someone would hand us a twenty-dollar bill and say, “I’m glad you’re here.” And a passing busload of school kids flashing us the peace sign would make it all feel worthwhile.

Instead of barreling through our demonstrations, after September 1 the trains crept at about one-half mile per hour. Still, the base authorities tried all kinds of intimidation to get us to give up our nonviolent protest. Drivers of the munitions trucks threatened to run us over. A phalanx of Marines and sheriff’s deputies appeared every day, intent on

forcibly removing us from the tracks. They threatened us with police dogs and stun guns.

On November 10, I was kneeling in prayer with a few others on the tracks, facing the munitions train as it approached. A deputy ordered us to leave, and I responded, “We will get off the tracks when you stop shipping bombs to kill our brothers and sisters in Central America.”

The deputy grabbed my arm and twisted it until I could no longer stand the pain. I got up and walked off the tracks, with him still restraining me. We walked another fifteen feet, and then the deputy—warning, “This is to make sure you leave the tracks next time”—twisted my arm with such force that it broke in two places. I blacked out from the pain. Two other demonstrators also had their arms broken that day.

Such experiences were indeed painful, but we kept reminding ourselves that our suffering was miniscule compared to the immense violence being inflicted on the people of Central America every day by American guns and munitions. After the train passed that day, I went back to the tracks, sat down, and wept.

The tears were partly a result of the pain of my broken arm; partly my awareness of the pain of the people of Nicaragua and El Salvador who would die as a result of the trainload of munitions that had just passed by; and partly a response to the beauty and power of our sustained nonviolent action there on the tracks, our saying “No” to the death trains. I thought to myself as I spilled my tears on the tracks, “They can injure and break our bones, but they cannot kill our spirit and our determination to live as one human family.”

I went to the hospital instead of jail that day, to get my arm set. It was a Tuesday, and I was usually at the tracks on Tuesdays and Thursdays. When Thursday came, Rev. David Wylie, who had also had his arm broken, and I showed up with our casts. We were asking ourselves and each other whether we were going to block another train. We acknowledged that there was still a lot we could do with one broken arm. But with two . . . well, that was another story.

We joked uneasily about the things we wouldn’t be able to do with two broken arms—bathroom activities being high on the list. But after we consulted our consciences, we both decided to block the train that day.

The beautiful thing was that the more violent the authorities became, the deeper became our understanding of, and commitment to, nonviolence. We did not express anger or violence to the deputies who injured us, or to the Marines who hurled epithets at us. We felt concern for them and saw them as part of our human family as well.



With my parents, Ray and Ruth Hartsough, before being arrested blocking a weapons train at Concord, CA (1988).

Apparently the Navy thought that running over protesters would end our witness. Instead, for more than two years—875 days, to be exact—we blocked every train and truck that carried arms at Concord Naval Weapons Station. Sometimes two buses were needed to carry off all the arrested demonstrators. Some people ended up spending as much as three months in the county jail.

One of the high points of my life was having my parents join the vigil. Mom and Dad came with a group of Quakers and war-tax resisters from Sonoma County each month to vigil at the tracks. Though my mom had been arrested with me at Livermore, my dad had never been arrested.

Dad was seventy-eight and severely crippled from Parkinson's disease. It was a cold day, and he was wearing several layers of warm clothing and a brightly colored knit hat that I had brought him from the highlands of Guatemala, an area where many civilians had been killed with U.S. weapons. Though he could barely walk or talk, he wanted to come out to Concord to join his voice with others in saying "No" to the killing in Central America.

He and I were sitting and holding crosses on the tracks that day—his emblazoned with the radical idea "Love one another," and mine bearing the name of Valentina Castellon, who had been killed by Contras with U.S. weapons in Nicaragua in February 1986. As a munitions train with

several boxcars loaded with bombs came into sight, I asked dad if he would like to block the train with me. Struggling, he managed to say, “Y-e-s . . . l-e-t’s . . . **b-l-o-c-k**.”

I helped him up. Lieutenant Doug Sizemore from the Sheriff’s Department approached us. I gave him a handshake and said, “I’d like you to meet my dad, Ray Hartsough.” A pained look overtook the sheriff’s face, and he blurted out, “He’s not going to get arrested, is he?”

I beamed him a smile and said, “Lieutenant Sizemore, that is up to you. I’m not going to arrest him.”

Dad and I were placed under arrest, handcuffed, and taken to the side of the tracks as the train laden with its deadly cargo rumbled through. When I looked at Dad, whose Parkinson’s had robbed him of most of his capacity for facial expression, his face lit up with a brilliant smile, and he crowed triumphantly, “They arrested me!”

For a second time, I didn’t go to jail. I think the authorities thought my dad was too old or infirm to go, so they released us both.

My mom got arrested about a month later trying to block a truck. A tiny woman, she was still able to fit into her wedding dress on her fiftieth anniversary. As the police officer put her into the police van, I pleaded with him, “Be gentle, you have some precious cargo.”

Mom was taken, as we all usually were, to the county jailhouse. The women were in one room and the men in another. The men had to go past where the women were being held to use the water fountain. My friend Russ Jorgensen, who also got arrested that day, told me that one of the male inmates saw this “little old lady with silver hair in a blue coat” sitting among the mostly young women who had been picked up for prostitution. He asked Russ, “What was she arrested for?”

Russ answered, “She was arrested for blocking an eighteen-wheeler!” Suddenly all the men felt a need for a drink of water—just so they could get a glimpse of this tiny old woman who had stopped a semi trailer loaded with bombs!

We had themes for many of our days of vigil: Women’s Day, Human Rights Day, World Hunger Day. On February 14, we decided to make valentines, acknowledging that what we were really about in this movement was love. My mom was there, and she and others made valentines for the new commander of the base, Richard Owens, who was much more open in his approach than Captain Cagle had been. We invited him to come out and receive them, which he did.

My mother read her valentine message aloud: “We’re here because we love the whole human family, and we don’t appreciate the Navy



sending all these bombs to kill the people we love. We invite you to join us in loving these people, and stop the shipment of bombs.” The commander very graciously accepted the valentines, and I believe he was moved by the gesture. I think we touched his humanity that day and throughout the entire time we kept vigil at the tracks. I believe he appreciated that we didn’t treat him as an enemy, even though we were totally opposed to what the Navy was doing at Concord.

I was grateful that we maintained a spirit of nonviolence throughout those many months, and for the instances of genuine mutual respect and caring between us and the authorities. Our nonviolence covenant was very clear that we considered all base workers, security personnel, and police as our brothers and sisters, and that we would treat them as such.

On the day of the big rally after the assault on Brian, about fifty people who had nothing to do with Nuremberg Actions came prepared to tear up the train tracks. Holley and I and several others pleaded with them to maintain the spirit of nonviolence, which for us included a covenant not to destroy property. But they refused to listen. They had large hammers and crowbars and massive bolt cutters, and they succeeded in removing a couple of lengths of track.

But then I gathered a few people to sit on the tracks with me, and soon others who saw what was happening joined us, so that we had about a hundred people. The sparks were flying—literally, off the hammers—within six inches of us. About seventy-five police cars were there for the rally, and I went with a couple of others to tell the police captain what was going on. He thanked us and told us he’d let us deal with it.

I stayed at the tracks that night until about eight thirty, after the sun had set and the crowd had left. The captain of Marine Security came by, and he told me he was impressed that we weren’t just talking about nonviolence, but that we were willing even to sit on the tracks to block their destruction. He also assured me that he had given every truck driver and train engineer instructions to stop until people are removed from the tracks. And he said, “If for whatever reason they don’t, I personally will get out in front of them and make sure they do.”

An amazing, inspiring community grew up around the Concord tracks. There was a gathering every morning to share stories about what had happened during the night. People from many walks of life appeared, from teenagers to retirees, developing a deep appreciation and affection for one another. A few ex-CIA agents and many war veterans joined us. Our sense of community eventually grew to include

members of the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department who, though still continuing to carry out orders, showed increasing respect toward us.

David Duncombe, a former weapons designer, served as a chaplain at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center. He and his wife had been riding along the bike path in Sausalito one day when I happened to see them. I said, "Well, Dave, we are going to start blocking trains and trucks carrying bombs to Central America on June tenth, and I thought you might be interested."

He not only blocked the train with Brian on September 1, he ended up taking off two days each week from his work for three years to be present at the tracks. He was our unofficial chaplain, providing a lot of Spirit and sustenance for the group. David was arrested more than a hundred times, received several long jail terms, and fasted three times, each for more than forty days in prison and on the tracks.

Diane Poole, who had a high-paying computer job in Silicon Valley, quit it to live at the tracks. During one arrest after blocking a train, she was handcuffed and sitting in the jail bus. She saw another train coming down the tracks. A guard blocked the bus's front door. A sign over the back door read "For Emergency Use Only." Declaring, "Well, this is an emergency," Diane walked back the aisle and, with her hands still cuffed behind her, opened the back door.

Diane got back on the tracks to block the next train. The Navy was especially upset with her and tried to charge her with attempting to escape from prison, but she hadn't been booked yet. So instead they settled for charging her with stealing government property: the handcuffs!

Abraham Zwickel, who was in his nineties and lived near the base, came virtually every day to the tracks with his Buddhist drum. Whenever he got arrested, the authorities always tried to expedite his processing and get him out of jail as quickly as possible. I think they were worried he was going to die on their watch.

When I went to El Salvador in 1988, I was in a village where there were no radios, no electricity, and no newspapers. But people there had heard about Brian Willson—and about the many people who were blockading the trains and trucks that were carrying the bombs that were killing their family members.

It was amazing that everywhere I went—even in the most remote villages and refugee camps in El Salvador and Nicaragua—people had heard about our witness. One peasant man in El Salvador said, "It fills us with hope and joy that there are North Americans who are willing

to risk their lives to try to stop the horrible violence and killing being inflicted on our people.” I heard similar sentiments over and over, all across Central America.

I remain grateful for the many outcomes of the Nuremberg Actions. It is no longer a secret that arms are shipped from Concord Naval Weapons Station. Thousands of people felt personally touched by the wars and confronted the question: what am I willing to do to stop the killing? We learned of two munitions truck drivers who quit their jobs because they felt they couldn’t in conscience continue their work, and a few Marines who refused orders to keep us off the tracks. They joined the thousands of others who were declaring with our bodies “The war stops here.”

Our witness gave great encouragement to people in Central America and around the world. We learned that in Palestine and Pakistan, in Iraq and Afghanistan, from Korea to Cuba and Colombia, people at “the other end of the tracks” were moved by what we had done.

We built a sustained, nonviolent resistance community and played a part in inspiring others to develop similar nonviolent campaigns and communities at military facilities around the United States. In the spring of 1988, in a coordinated effort organized by the Pledge of Resistance, nonviolent actions took place at forty-five military facilities supporting the war in Central America.

Over time, the broken places in Brian’s body healed, and he gradually recovered his strength. Before long, he was taking his first steps on prosthetic legs. I felt like I was witnessing life after death: resurrection!

Unbelievably, in February 1988 the train crew sued Brian, claiming he had caused them to suffer mental anguish and posttraumatic stress because he had sat on the tracks and got run over by them. Because no criminal charges had ever been brought against the crew or their Navy superiors, Brian’s lawyer convinced him to countersue. Thus began a three-year legal morass.

The engineer, conductor, and supervisor of the train that ran over Brian all admitted to investigators that they had been under orders from their superiors not to stop the train. One of the two spotters standing on the front of the locomotive said in a report that he “felt the protester who had been hit was beyond help, so he did not tell the engineer to stop.” The lawsuit against Brian was eventually dropped, and the U.S. government offered him a substantial cash settlement, which he understood to be an acknowledgment that the Navy’s actions had been intentional and deliberate.

Brian, Holley, and Gabriel lived with our family for four years after Brian was released from the hospital. They owned no property, and their “bank account” was a coffee can in our basement, hidden behind the freezer. Brian had been a war tax refuser for many years, and he knew that a considerable amount of the settlement money was vulnerable to seizure for back taxes.

He directed his lawyer to establish the Brian Willson Trust, over which Brian had no control. When the government check arrived in the mail, he deposited it immediately into the trust account. Within two hours, IRS agents showed up at the house to seize the unpaid taxes, and Brian answered honestly, “I don’t have the money.” It has paid for Brian’s considerable medical expenses and supported many good causes, including his travel to war zones around the world.

In 2011, Brian published his memoir. As part of a speaking tour to promote it, I organized several events for him in the Bay Area. One of them was a book party at the Mount Diablo Peace and Justice Center in Walnut Creek, not far from the Concord Naval Weapons Station. On our way there, we stopped at the base.

We stood at the place where Brian had been run over and snapped a few pictures. Within minutes, sirens blared from all directions. Security vehicles surrounded us, and an officer in a black uniform ordered us to put our hands behind our heads. “It is illegal to take pictures here!” he barked at us. Then he asked what we were doing there.

“I am on a speaking tour, with my book,” answered Brian.

“What’s the book about?”

“It’s called *Blood on the Tracks*—and it is my blood, on those tracks.”

The man in charge became more cordial then. He told Brian, “You know, I was just a kid when that train incident happened.” He had fought in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the meantime. “You were a legend,” he continued, “and everybody in this town knew about you. I am glad to meet you!” We invited him to the book party, and he promised to buy Brian’s book. Before we left, he said, “Oh, by the way, you are not under arrest.”

I continue to be moved by Brian’s spirit and determination. And by his profound insight that our lives are not worth more, and the lives of other people around the world are not worth less. Taking seriously this notion—so radical and unpopular in this age of “American exceptionalism”—has great implications for how we view others and how we live in the world.

I think that for Brian, seeing the agony in Central America was like a parent discovering their child is in a burning house. No parent would question whether to run into a burning house to save their child. That's how Brian felt about the children he had met in Nicaragua and El Salvador—all the ones who were traumatized or orphaned or missing legs because of land mines.

Brian and I had conspired together to do the action that ended up with him losing his legs and almost getting killed. I know that he doesn't regret it, and he doesn't blame me. In fact, our sharing in that tragic event forged a special lifelong friendship and partnership in our work for peace and justice.

But it has not been easy for Brian to do what he has had to do all these years. Like him, I don't regret that we organized the Nuremberg Actions. But when I think about the suffering and hardship of my friend living the rest of his life without his legs, I feel very sad. He paid a very high price for putting into action his love for his sisters and brothers living in war zones.

As part of his book speaking tour, Brian rode more than seven hundred miles from Portland to San Francisco, pedaling his hand-powered tricycle and peddling his book. I rode my bike the last seventy miles with him. As we approached the last big hill rising from Sausalito to the Golden Gate Bridge, Brian was assessing how long and steep it was and pondering if he could make it.

I followed behind him, encouraging him, as he rode more and more slowly, trying to get up that long hill. Eventually I got off my bike, and with one hand on it, and one on his back, I pushed him the last couple hundred yards. He probably would have made it without my help. But that moment seemed symbolic of all the little ways I've tried to be supportive and loving to him over all these years. He is such a gift to the world.