

Gaie Houston

CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN AT GREENHAM PEACE CAMP ABOUT NON-VIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

Wind and drizzle. I hover on the asphalt path at the main gate of Greenham RAF base, on the official side of the hedge, ornamental dwarf evergreen, military personnel for the delectation of.

In the trodden mud on the far side of it flap the night-shelters of polythene slung over ropes between trees, the white cupboard with no wall to lean on, and the bales and beds and kitchen chairs encircling the Greenham Women's Peace Camp fire. Last time I was here, there was a small notice: This Is Our Living Room.

Sit down, sit down. Want some tea? Somebody brought this (she peers at the label) instant disposable multi-pack lemon teas, just add hot water.

She does, and we drink. Two TV crews pace about, getting shots of the barbed wire, the police vans and the guards. I state my interest in the philosophy and practice of non-violent direct action. Whichever end of the plastic-covered bed I sit on, smoke still blows quite painfully into my eyes. I do not speak of this.

What follows is part of a three-hour conversation with women who came and went about their day's business. A middle-aged man, brought to the circle by one of the women, and looking as if he had nowhere else to go, listened attentively throughout, held the handle of the kettle if it looked in danger of tipping over on the fire, but never spoke.

Where I remember who said what, I put the speaker's name.

This Peace Camp is a non-violent direct action in itself, right through two winters so far.

Me: What do you say to the criticism that it is not an effective form of protest, because it's not productive?



Photographs by Anne McArthur



What are you calling productive? Those Paris riots which end up with indiscriminate police baton charges? They produce publicity. So do we. We're the Greenham Factor, with a whole Heseltine set up in opposition to us.

Debi: They just don't know what to do with us. The authorities don't understand our form of protest. If only we'd be violent, then that'd be fine. They've got all the training for that.

Teresa: At Easter some of us had this Teddy Bears' Picnic inside the Base. About twenty-seven women in teddy bear costumes, with a jester and an Easter bunny, went over the fence.

Spiney: There was a soldier just standing there as we came over the top. He said things into his walkie-talkie while we spread out our cloth and food and started eating.

Debi: Then there was a ring of twenty soldiers standing round us, trying not to grin. But this police sergeant said "Confiscate the food". So they did.

Spiney: I'd gone round to this one little place where I knew there was a break in the fence, and got inside to spread decorated hard-boiled eggs around the base. They arrested me when I went out on the runway to get past a muddy place. When I asked how many others they'd got, they said two or three, and I was really pleased all the others were still free. Then we went round a corner and they'd got coaches full of women, hundreds of women all leaning out of the windows and waving and cheering. There were too many of us for them to arrest us. They just don't know how to deal with us.

Spiney: We don't all have the same reactions. We're all different people. So we all accept that you do what you want to do, what's right for you at that time. Like when the police come for you, some women walk, and some lie down and have to be carried.

When people come out here, new to it, you see their eyes go round, looking to see what the party line is, what they ought to be doing. But there isn't a party line here. Except that you know that you have support in whatever you decide to do.

In court in February the charge was against twenty-six named women and 'persons unknown'. So the rest of us paid four pounds each for an affidavit, and asked that our names be read out. It was a non-violent way of obstructing the court proceedings. . . as well as supporting the others.

Teresa: I think we must give more thought to what we do in court. We must recognise the humanity in the police and in the officers of the court. It's not the core of humanity in those people that we're against, it's the system.

Polly: But they're individuals. They've chosen to work in that system. They're pigs.

Teresa: When I was in court, I had a make-up like a sheep. As a statement about all the compliance, the nature of what was going on.

Marie: Did you see Sarah's bit in that broadsheet, the Greenham Factor? About how one African tribe deals with anyone who has done anything anti-social? All the others surround the person, and recall all the good about them, all the good they've done, right back to their birth. They keep on until the person in the middle feels affirmed enough not to need to do damage.

Teresa: I'd like to be like that with the police.

Marie: I feel like it towards the Greenham Base, especially when we ringed it on December 12th. I'm not afraid of that place anymore. Before the first time I went in, I was scared, lying awake thinking of watercannon, of being got under the Official Secrets Act or something. Now I know it's just a piece of land with barbed wire round it. And those silos. And that strange place in the middle that looks as if a nuclear bomb's dropped there already.

Polly: I've learned a lot about going inwards, being with myself and what I believe in. I only weigh about eight stone, but it took four policemen to move me when I lay down in the blockade of the main gates. And Becky's lighter than me, but it took five policemen to move her. She's done T'ai Chi, and she knows this thing of imagining you body floating, with all the weight dragging in your feet.

Teresa: When the police are coming and I'm lying there, I just think of folding, of falling into the earth. The time they handled me the roughest, I was the least hurt, because all my concentration was in myself, in being limp. They got me into a truck in the end, and I started joking with them. When they had to transfer us to another vehicle, two of them could do it easily. I'd moved into thinking about them, instead of withdrawing completely into myself.

Polly: They know it. They say you've got lovely eyes, distract you with stuff like that.

Marie: Before all this I'd never been inside a court of law, and I was frightened of them too. It was a lot to do with not knowing anything about them. But I've got so used to them, seen them a bit frightened of us at times. I feel on equal terms with the judge now, ready to state my case. There've been some beautiful statements from the women in court.

We get a lot of publicity, but we do a lot more than ever gets fully reported. The day that Heseltine came down here, three parties of us staged a counter attraction by dressing up as snakes, and going into the base. The kids in the school in there loved us. We danced around. Then someone in a military vehicle seemed to panic, and drove straight at us. When we side-stepped, he reversed on us, really much too fast. I spoke to the driver, told him we were only snaking around. We weren't going to blow anything up. He calmed down after that. We were all arrested for half an hour, then let out in time to go into Newbury and see Heseltine. But all that got into the papers was him stumbling on a step, which some papers said was us tripping him. It wasn't. The authorities just don't seem to be able to believe we really are non-violent.

Marie: You ought to put down something about the ring of fire round the base at midsummer, with women and children's picnics round little fires, all the way round the outside of Greenham. And the children's party. And the moving Peace Camp coming down all the way from Faslane in Scotland, to Greenham. We're looking into having a Peace Camp on the Berlin Wall, as Mrs. Thatcher suggested. She'll get the first invitation, of course.

Nicky: We aren't a vanguard, you know: the shock troops in the front line of peace or whatever. We don't want to be set apart for being here. There are Plenty of other non-violent direct activities that are important too.

QUOTATION FROM GWYNNETH KIRK, AS REPORTED IN THE GREENHAM FACTOR.

Non-Violent Direct Action Is:

*Withholding tax
singing
talking to people
leaving messages in library books, in the doctor's, in bus
shelters, in the tube, on walls)
refacing not defacing*

wearing badges
putting up stickers
flyposting
thinking
writing
getting information and passing it on blockades, sit-ins
occupations, strikes, boycotts
pickets
vigils
mass demonstrations
street speaking
street theatre
poems, songs, plays
removing signs and changing their meaning
banners
newspapers
holding on to a vision
saying NO
believing
sharing feelings, ideas . . .
more and more . . .

Some people find things easy, others find difficult to do.
I found it useful to work out for myself what actions I find difficult
and try to come to terms with why.

Not everyone can go over the fence at Greenham.
Not everyone needs to.
There are so many other things to do.
Support roles are vital to the success of any action, in no way
secondary.

Support Roles:

food and hot drinks for the blockaders
talking to bystanders
peacekeepers
watching out for cold, tiredness
telling people what's happening
giving out leaflets
buffering hostility
contacting the press
medical help
legal advice
keeping track of what's happening
taking police numbers

following anyone who's arrested
contacting solicitors
listing people's names
giving moral support and encouragement
helping to create a dignified atmosphere.

Blocks To Non-Cooperation

Thoughtless support, going along with things, afraid of what might happen, what people might say, feeling unconfident, not wanting to stand out, feeling a moral obligation to obey and not make a fuss. (People in authority know better than I do, I might lose my job, it won't make any difference because they won't take any notice).

Non-Violence Is:

believing that people can change
channelling anger into action
dignity and power from inner conviction
a complete way of life
a reasoned response to aggression
people co-operating within a group
communicating with opponents
a commitment to openness
trusting
celebrating life . . .

(The broadsheet quoted here and elsewhere in this article is called The Greenham Factor, and is available from Greenham Print Prop, 51 Randolph Avenue, London W9. £ 1 a copy. All proceeds to the Greenham Peace Camp Funds).
