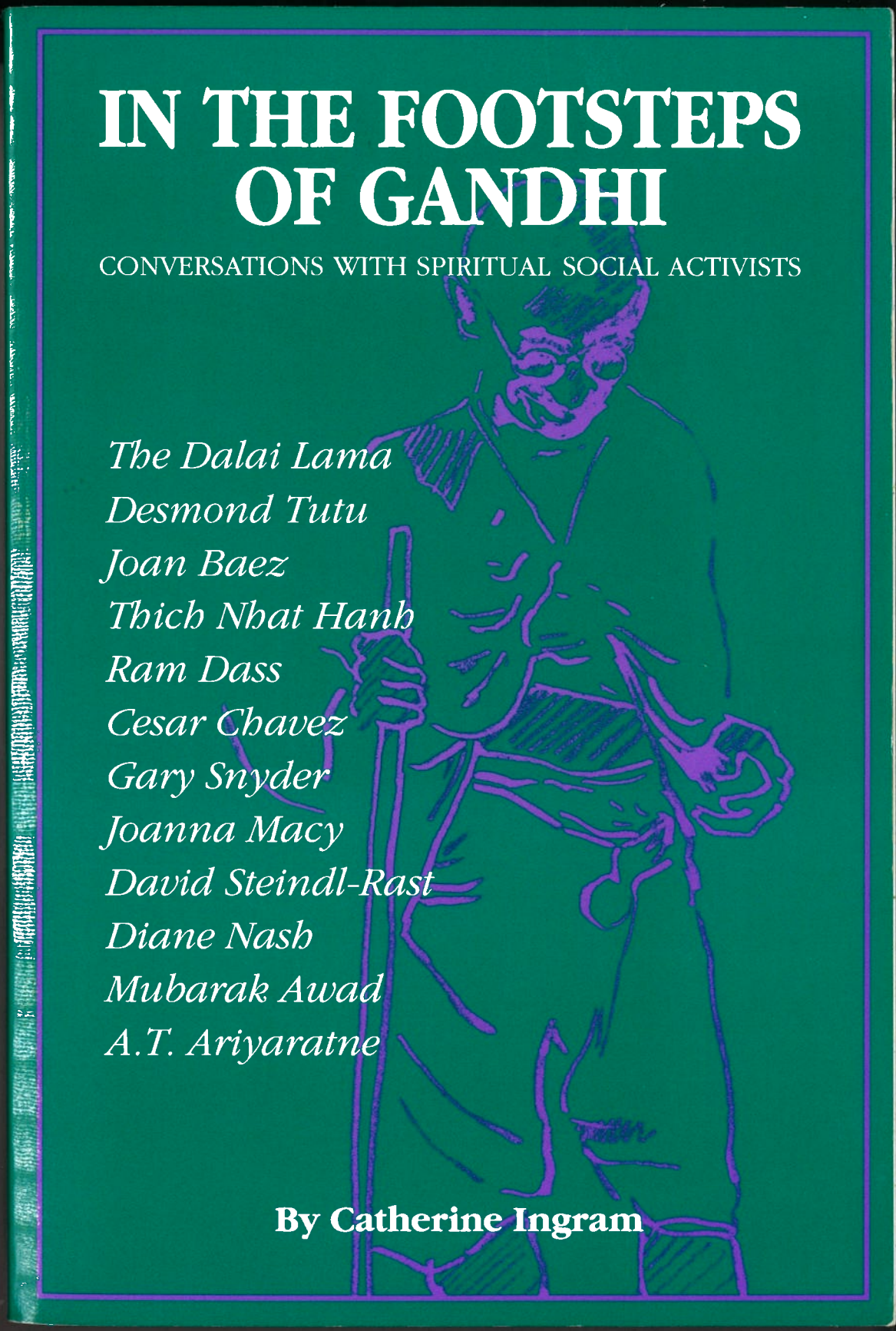
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GANDHI

CONVERSATIONS WITH SPIRITUAL SOCIAL ACTIVISTS



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Cesar Chavez
Gary Snyder
Joanna Macy
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Diane Nash
Mubarak Awad
A.T. Ariyaratne

By Catherine Ingram

Catherine Ingram's journalism focuses on meditation and psychology, and their links with social activism, particularly in the areas of human rights and refugees. She is a co-founder of Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Massachusetts, a Buddhist retreat center established in 1976, and co-founder of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples, an organization dedicated to serving indigenous peoples and dispossessed nations not represented in the U.N.

In the Footsteps of Gandhi presents twelve informative and inspiring conversations with renowned spiritual social activists. Ingram's interviews give the reader a full sense of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the strength to love."

"To live for the benefit of others heals us. These are interviews with men and women who tread the path of compassionate action and leave markers to point the way. A wonderful book!"—Stephen and Ondrea Levine

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In the Footsteps of Gandhi

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FOR BROTHER DAVID -

IN THANKS FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY GIFT OF A WEEKEND TOGETHER -

MARC DUMMIT, M.D.

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In the Footsteps of Gandhi

Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists

Catherine Ingram

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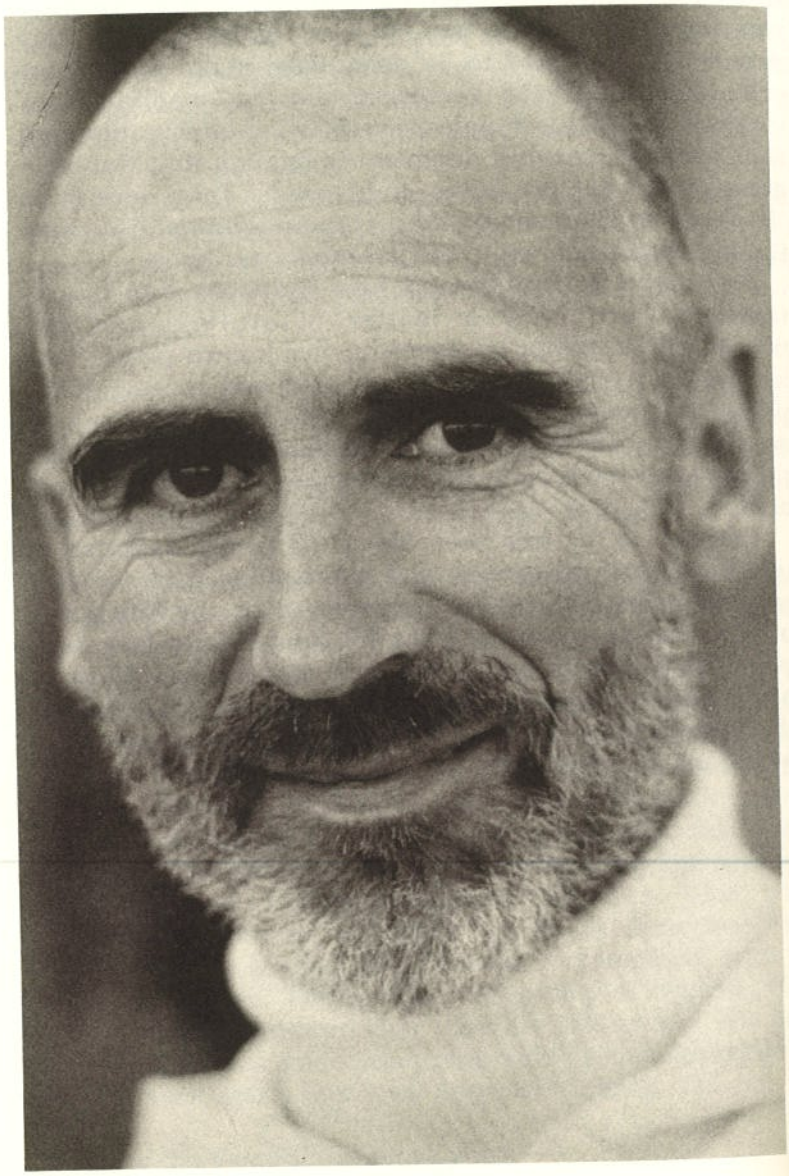

Brother David Steindl-Rast

As a lad growing up in Nazi-occupied Austria, David Steindl-Rast lived with daily air raids. Ordinarily, warning sirens alerted the populace to find an air raid shelter before the bombs fell. One day, however, the sirens' blare occurred at the same time as the bombs began raining down on the beautiful city of Vienna. Young David rushed into the closest building, a church, and hid under a pew with his face in his hands. The sky outside flashed terror and the ground shook, shattering glass and scattering debris all around him. He peeked at the vaulted ceiling of the church above him and hoped that it would hold through the bombing. Nearly an hour later, a long siren tone signalled that the bombing was over.

David emerged from the church into a beautiful May morning, feeling overwhelming wonder and joy to be alive. Although many of the buildings which had stood a short time ago were now in smoking ruins, David's eyes fell on a few square feet of green lawn in the midst of the rubble. "It was as if a friend had offered me an emerald in the hollow of his hand," Steindl-Rast has written. "Never before or after have I seen grass so surprisingly green."

* * *

David Steindl-Rast was born on July 12, 1926 in Vienna, Austria and grew up nearby in a small village in the Alps. His parents were divorced when he was very young, and David lived with his mother and two younger brothers while receiving his primary education in the two-classroom village school. Winters were for skiing in the Alps.

David's memories of growing up in the Austrian countryside include splendid visions of religious customs. Because the local population were mostly devout

Catholics, they seemed to live "from one religious feast to the next." Religion was so woven into the fabric of the community that, according to Steindl-Rast, "the sacred, the cultural, and nature were all of one piece."

For his secondary education, David moved to a progressive Catholic boarding school in Vienna for two years. When the Nazis came in 1938, Steindl-Rast's mother, concerned with the Nazis' interference with and disapproval of the school, moved to Vienna to be with her son, bringing her other two boys with her. The school became a teenage hotbed of opposition to the Nazi occupation, even if the only acts of defiance were those dreamed up by boys, such as congregating in groups of more than two and going off on forbidden camping trips together. The young men also rebelled against the Nazi establishment by becoming deeply religious at an age when they might have normally rebelled against their religion. David's mother encouraged her son's underground activities and, in doing so, incurred the suspicions of the Gestapo, who questioned her on more than one occasion. Despite the war, despite the Nazi occupation and undercurrent of fear, David had a "wonderful time" in his early teens, explaining that at that age "kids don't think about being frightened." As the war years went on, however, David began to realize that the older boys, many of them friends who had taken him under their wings, were being sent off to war and killed on the front lines. "After only half a year, half of them were dead," Steindl-Rast explained. David and his friends began to accept the idea of an early death as inevitable: "We had no expectation of living beyond the age of twenty."

Steindl-Rast was drafted to serve in the Nazi army but "had such a guardian angel that [he] was never sent to the front." After a year he took off his uniform and went underground. His mother hid him at home until the war was over and the Russians had marched into Vienna. By this time, there was almost no food in the city. Steindl-Rast remembers living on the ragweed which grew in springtime on the dirt ruins of the bombed houses and

on the peas full of worms which the Russians provided. For a time, Steindl-Rast worked in setting up refugee camps and, later on, clearing rubble from the university. "You had to shovel debris for so many hours before you could register for school," he laughingly recalls.

It was in this period that a friend gave David the Rule of St. Benedict. Italy's Saint Benedict of the sixth century is considered the father of Western monasticism. In 520 A.D. he proposed a rule of life for monks and nuns which made monasticism a more gentle proposition than it had been previously. Saint Benedict emphasized humility, a constant striving to seek God and to abandon self-seeking, prayer, study, manual labor, and "stability in community," or what we would now call a dedication to a sense of place. David was fascinated with the ideas presented in the Rule. He imagined himself at the point of his death and thought that the monastic life as described by Saint Benedict is how he would have liked to have lived. But he dismissed this vision because he knew of no monasteries which lived purely according to the Rule any longer.

Instead, Steindl-Rast concentrated on his studies of painting and art restoration at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. He celebrated the end of the war years by attending Vienna's wondrous balls, operas, and festivals, bribing his way into such venues with cigarettes he procured from friendly American soldiers. But in his heart a longing for monastic life still flickered, and he secretly decided that he would take whichever came first, "the right girl or the right monastery."

As the war had destroyed many art pieces in Europe, David found fascinating work in art restoration over the next few years. He also became interested in children's art and its likeness to primitive art. This led him into child psychology, and he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Vienna, majoring in psychology and minoring in anthropology.

After finishing his studies, Steindl-Rast came to the United States. His maternal grandmother had lived in the U.S. for many years, and his mother had moved to

New York as well. Six months after his arrival in the U.S., Steindl-Rast heard from a friend about a group of Benedictine monks who had recently begun a monastery dedicated to living according to the original Rule of St. Benedict. Steindl-Rast set out to find the group based on the scant information provided by his friend. Within a couple days, he was in Elmira, New York at a little farm in the country with a group of monks still living in a barn and tents on the property and practicing the Rule in its pure form. Although it was a few months before he was able to live at Mt. Saviour, David Steindl-Rast knew he had found his home.

Steindl-Rast joined the Benedictine monks at Mt. Saviour Monastery in 1953 and there began his life as Brother David. For the next decade, he received training in philosophy and theology, and he rarely left the monastery's grounds. However, the dozen or so monks at Mt. Saviour enjoyed a rich intellectual life as many of the great thinkers of the time visited the monastery and would stay up late into the night in dialogue with them. The Prior at Mt. Saviour, Father Damasus Winzen, was well-known for his scholarship in liturgy and religious art, and this brought additional prestige to the small, avant-garde, country monastery.

During these years Brother David began to develop a planetary social consciousness through outside contacts with the monastery. Great social activists, such as Dorothy Day and the staff at the *Catholic Worker*, were in regular touch with the monks.[1] Daniel Berrigan, who was the first Roman Catholic priest in the history of the United States to receive and serve a federal sentence for peace agitation, was a regular visitor and would hold retreats for Protestant clergymen at Mt. Saviour.

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[1] Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was a Roman Catholic social activist and author. She co-founded the Catholic Worker movement, a pacifist organization in New York City, which established "houses of hospitality" for the poor. She is most well-known as the co-founder of the *Catholic Worker*, a publication based on Christian ideals of voluntary poverty and charity and dedicated to social justice and nonviolent resistance to the "warfare state," first published in 1933.

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Brother David also began to take a great interest in other monastic traditions, especially those of the East. He was amazed to read the work of D.T. Suzuki, the Japanese Zen scholar who was one of the early Buddhist influences on the intellectual community in England and the United States. "I began to see that this monastic calling was something that united us," Brother David explained.

Because Father Damasus was not able to oblige all the requests for lectures that he received, he often sent one of the monks in his place. Consequently, Brother David began to lecture on the subject of prayer, as well as social consciousness and an ecumenical understanding of religious traditions, sometimes to the surprise of his audience. "It was a favorable position," Brother David noted, "because rather than speaking to the converted, I would be speaking to people who had come to hear about prayer. So when I would talk about social issues, there was some impact."

His interest in Zen led Brother David to a meeting with Eido Roshi, then known as Tai-Shimano, a Zen monk who had recently come to New York from Japan. The two monks immediately felt a deep rapport. Soon after they met, Brother David received an invitation to participate in a teach-in at the University of Michigan against the war in Vietnam. Brother David invited Tai-Shimano to participate also. On risk of being deported from the U.S., Tai-Shimano attended the teach-in with Brother David, and the two monks shared a room for several days. "It was as though we had lived together a hundred years," Brother David said. "It convinced me in this understanding that monasticism builds a bridge across traditions."

Tai-Shimano invited Brother David to study at his zendo in New York City. Although it was considered highly irregular at the time, Brother David approached the monks at his monastery with a request for permission to study Zen. In considering the request, the Prior invited Tai-Shimano to visit Mt. Saviour, and the Zen monk came for a two day visit. In what Brother David

remembers as an agonizing interchange, the Benedictine monks questioned Tai-Shimano about his understanding. "They asked him all kinds of theological questions and, as he was not familiar with Christian theology, he fell into all the traps," Brother David recalls. "I was mortified by the experience and thought that when he left, that would be the end of the story." The monks took Brother David aside and said that the Zen monk had made no sense to them whatsoever; however, they had watched him carefully. "The way he walks, the way he sits, the way he eats, convinced us that he is a true monk," they told a surprised Brother David. "You can go."

Thus began a Christian/Buddhist bond which pioneered a dialogue between these two great religions. Brother David became one of the first Christian monks to formally study Zen in America, although he had to enroll at Columbia University in Japanese studies "as a cover." At that time, the late sixties, "it wasn't quite acceptable for a Catholic monk to study Zen." Brother David practiced meditation at Tai-Shimano's zendo in New York City for the next three years. It was the beginning of his training in Zen, and he eventually studied with many of the great Zen masters who taught in the U.S., such as Suzuki Roshi, Yasutani Roshi, and Soen Roshi.

Meanwhile, Trappist monk Thomas Merton had also been examining the link between Christianity and Asian religious traditions, so when Father Damasus suggested that he and Brother David visit Merton, Steindl-Rast was delighted. "Merton had done so much reading that he was way ahead of me in understanding the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity," Brother David said. "So the practical aspects—the personal experiences—were very interesting to him, and I had experience there." The mutual exchange between the two Christian monks, theoretically-informed Merton and practice-oriented Steindl-Rast, formed an affinity which continued until Merton's accidental death in Bangkok in

1968. Merton once told Steindl-Rast, "We will need the courage to do the opposite of everybody else."

As the years passed, Brother David became a world-renowned lecturer and philosophical bridge-builder between East and West, between monks and householders, and even between peace workers and the military. In 1985, for example, I attended a talk Brother David gave to a group of U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) in Massachusetts, who were being trained in a six-month program of Aikido, meditation, biofeedback, and psychology. Brother David began by remembering his own army service and eventually led the discussion around to peace. The Special Forces group found Brother David to be one of their favorite guest lecturers.

For two decades, Brother David has been a social activist. He has marched for peace. He has spoken about hunger and the need for the First World to address the needs of the Third and Fourth Worlds. And he has reminded us of the challenges and opportunities of our time as we face ecological crises. His lectures have taken him all over the world—speaking to starving students in Zaire, intellectuals in Germany, Papago Indians in Arizona. Yet he is a hermit at heart. Although he remains a member of Mt. Saviour Monastery in New York, he spends much of his time in solitary retreat in California.

It is Brother David's spiritual essence that is most memorable. His message is that of gratefulness. In his book *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, he writes: "If the fullness of gratitude which the word grate-ful-ness implies can ever be reached, it must be fullness of love and fullness of life." It is that fullness which Brother David suggests will provide us with a sense of belonging, because it is gratefulness which can facilitate our realization of interdependence. As Brother David once told me, "Gratefulness is the only appropriate response to that which is given—and this life is a given."

I have met Brother David on numerous occasions and first interviewed him in 1983 at the Weston Priory in Vermont. He is a man of profound depth, and, at the

same time, delightful playfulness, laughing intermittently and phrasing his words with pun and wit. The following interview took place at the San Francisco Zen Center where Brother David was staying after an evening lecture the previous night to a crowd of 800, a dialogue with Buddhist meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, on "The Sure Heart's Release."

Interview with David Steindl-Rast

July 1, 1988 • San Francisco, California

Catherine Ingram: Years ago you wrote that "wastefulness, fearfulness, and indifference are undoing us fast. Time is running out." What do you feel now?

Brother David Steindl-Rast: I have not seen much improvement, although it is amazing how slow "fast" is. It is helpful for us to live always on this brink and, at the same time, to realize that it may go on and on. We have to do our thing regardless how long it all lasts. Paradoxically, we have to act as if we had all the time in the world, and as if we had no time at all. If we hold these two together, we have a chance of doing the right thing. Then the rest is not up to us.

CI: What are you doing in your own life with regard to "the right thing"?

DS: Well, I have discovered that only if we spend much of our time in one place will we take responsibility for that place. So I've made a concerted effort to travel less and to devote myself more to being in one place.

CI: Yet in our last interview you said that as a result of your travels you had developed concern for the Third and Fourth Worlds.

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DS: Yes, and that remains a great concern to me. I still travel more than I like, and I also get feedback on what is happening in other parts of the world from people who have been in those places for a long time and are deeply rooted there. I think the situation in many places is getting worse and worse.

So one of my questions is "What is it that we need?" Before we can do something we have to know what is concretely needed. One answer that I have discovered since I last talked with you is that we need what I call for lack of a better term, "global heroes." We need to have the values for which we stand embodied in actual persons.

Now while it is true that the world has, in some respects, gotten smaller, for most people the world has gotten bigger. Little communities have been broken open so now they are able to see the whole world. Formerly they knew only their own village or a few nearby villages. For us in the developed countries, the world has become smaller. You can no longer do something in any part of the world that will not influence people in other parts of the world. However, we are not really a world community yet. Community comes about when a group of people have the same hero. If we can find our global heroes, they will turn the mass of humanity into a global community.

I think of these heroes as "daring people"—people who dared to live the values that we need to cultivate nowadays. They are daring also in the sense of daring *us*. They dare us to become the people that we *can* be, to become in some respects like them, not by imitating them, but by trying to put into practice deep human values. Some of us who are interested in this idea are attempting to publish the lives of such global heroes.

CI: Are these contemporary people?

DS: No, in this particular series we are not focusing on people who are still living, but rather on people who have died, usually, for their cause. I am also asking

these days, "What common basis can we find for solving the many problems that confront us?" What is it that might express in our time what in former times was expressed by, say, "the Tao" or "the Logos"? Maybe the phrase "Common Sense," with a capital "C," capital "S." This is the closest English phrase I can find for that reality which Lao Tzu called "the Tao." In his time, "Tao" meant "path." He gave it a deeper meaning.

Heraclitus called it "the Logos." That meant "Word," or "Thought," and he also gave it a much deeper meaning, which we might call our "deepest consciousness." We can make sense of the world because we have within ourselves what makes the world sensible—the Logos—the principle that animates the world and gives order to it. So Heraclitus and all the Greek philosophers were very much geared toward intellectual understanding.

What Lao Tzu and the Taoists were interested in was the Path. They asked, "How do we live, and walk through life in harmony with the Force, with the Flow?" The Taoists, too, were concerned with how to make sense of this world but by more than a knowing sense; they asked not only, "How can we intellectually understand?" but "How can we make sense of life and of the world?" We can make sense only to the extent to which that sense is common. That is why the phrase, Common Sense, suggests itself. The wider we stretch the sense of "common," the more sense we will be able to make of the world.

We are talking here about Common Sense or a Community Spirit not only with people, but with animals, plants, the whole cosmos—as the Logos was and as the Tao was. What makes it so difficult to use this term is that it has been usurped by people who mean anything but Common Sense. They mean rather "conventionality" and "public opinion" which they call common sense.

CI: Voltaire, I think it was, said that common sense is not so common.

DS: Exactly. People say, "Isn't it common sense to be out for Number One in a world in which dog eats dog?" But

this is the very opposite from genuine Common Sense. It springs not from community, but from alienation.

CI: People often fear going against the grain in society. When there is a widely held belief, such as looking out for Number One, anyone who differs with that will often be seen as an oddball, out of step and out of time.

DS: Yes, and coming back to the idea of "daring people"—what daring people dare to do is to break through this crust of conventionality in the strength of that deep Community Spirit that unites us with all. They get in trouble with the powers of the time because the ones in power are those who are polled conventionally through public opinion. Yet, with the authority of Common Sense, one can take a stand against public opinion. Anyone who has done that becomes a guiding star for our own time because that is exactly what we must do today—take our stand on the authority that unites us against the authorities that divide us. This is what I try to empower people to do when I teach, to live by the authority of Common Sense. In Biblical terms, that is the idea of the Kingdom of God.

CI: Will you say more about the Kingdom of God?

DS: In Biblical terms, it is by the Holy Spirit that we as humans are alive, by the very life-breath of God. That Spirit breaks through the crust of the law and the letter and the flesh and of all that stands for conventionality, separation, and division. The Kingdom means living by the power of the Spirit.

We can envisage today, it seems to me, a world in which the child in each of us comes alive. This child-spirit would unite the world. To liberate that child-spirit within us is an extremely important task. Some twenty years ago we began to see that liberating the woman in us was a primary task. And that was not restricted to women; many men saw clearly that the anima within us had to be liberated. And on the strength of that psycho-

logical insight, one could have forecast a major sociological event that would take place: women's liberation. While women's liberation has sociological overtones, it goes far beyond sociology. Its aim is to liberate all human beings by liberating the anima in us.

In a similar way many people today are beginning to see how urgent it is to liberate the child in all of us. Our survival depends on the child in us being liberated. We, too, can make a forecast: one of the important sociological issues of our time will be the liberation of the child.

CI: Well, I think this could be seen from two vantage points. Of course, most spiritual traditions talk about that childlike wonder and freshness and curiosity, or what is called in Zen, "Beginner's mind,"—a way of spontaneously greeting the world without preconceptions. But then again, there is sometimes a brattiness about children, along with a greediness and immaturity about what it is to suffer and to subsequently feel compassion or empathy. America is often likened to being a kind of adolescent bully on the world stage, for instance. So partly I love that notion of developing childlike qualities, and partly I feel that we need to be a lot older in our ways, more sagelike.

DS: Well, before children become bratty, if we catch them before that, we sometimes get the impression that they are very old, wise beings. And it is that which needs to be cultivated. My intuition is that some of the brattiness is created by society; it is not the natural attitude of the child. There is a misunderstanding of the child built into our culture, a blindspot. We presuppose that the child is rebellious to start with and that we must keep the child in check. We assume that the child is born into the family as a little "savage" and has to be "domesticated," has to be "civilized," and kept under control. In preschool this is already presupposed: children are rebels until proven otherwise. And even later on in society we are again and again assumed to be by nature "rebels" that have to be bent to bow to authority.

The fact is, when you check it out psychologically, human beings have an inordinate inclination to sell out to external authorities, to bow to authorities, because that is easier for us, far less costly than to live by the authority of our own deepest convictions. Therefore, all the authorities in our society conspire to make us more subservient to external authority. Yet, the rightful use of authority, the *only* rightful use of authority that I can see, is to strengthen those under authority so that they will stand on their own two feet and take responsibility. The books and study of Alice Miller support this understanding of authority.

CI: Such as her book *For Your Own Good?*

DS: Yes, also *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child.* And there are also such studies as Stanley Milgram did at Yale.[2] He set himself the task to find out how the Holocaust was possible, how people who went home at night to play chamber music and read poetry with their families could put to death the Jews, the Gypsies, and the Poles during their work hours. Milgram wanted to see to what extent average people, not only in Germany, but in the world, would go to inflict excruciating pain on an innocent victim for no other reason than that an authority figure told them to do so. So he devised that highly controversial and very ingenious test...

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[2]In the early sixties research psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933-1984) conducted a series of "obedience to authority" experiments at Yale University, the results of which were first published in 1963. The actual subject was recruited from newspaper ads and thought he (forty men participated) was part of a test to determine the effectiveness of punishment in learning tasks. Each man was required to administer what he thought were electric shocks to a "learner" in the next room whenever the learner made a mistake in a word test. Although the shocks were not real, the learner often simulated pain by banging on the wall and refusing to answer any more questions. Using a range of from 15 to 450 volts, sixty-five percent of the subjects, often prodded by the "authority figure" experimenter present in the room, pressed the 450 volt switch. That amount of voltage, marked only with "XXX" was two notches beyond what was marked "Danger: Severe Shock."

CI: Using actors who pretended to be getting electrically shocked.

DS: Right. It didn't receive the reception in the psychological and psychiatric world that it deserved because we don't like to believe to what extent we—the average people—are willing to sell out to external authorities.

CI: But it does seem perennial. I was just reading an article about the people who were driving the train which ran over Brian Willson.[3] Basically they said they were just following orders.

People are often willing to give away their own power in exchange for being told what to do next, because following one's own path can be hard—terrifying and lonely. They'd rather have a leader tell them what to do and what to think. You see, I think this is a danger with your idea of a global hero.

DS: Yes, and in Germany where we are right now working on this project, you cannot use this word "hero" at all. It is totally out. We haven't come up with another word. We are talking about using something like "guiding stars."

CI: Or perhaps to simply refer to the kind of inspiration that Jesus provided, a reminder to love and forgive.

DS: Yes, my understanding of the Jesus event is precisely that it is a Common Sense breakthrough in the deepest meaning of that word. For instance, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul understood what Jesus stood for and he put it into one verse—"In Christ there is neither

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[3]On September 1, 1987, Vietnam veteran Brian Willson began a nonviolent vigil at the Concord Naval Weapons Station in California to protest the transportation of bombs and munitions to Central America. He had sent a letter informing the Weapons Station authorities that he and others would be fasting and sitting on the tracks. On the first day of the protest, a train with orders not to stop ran over Brian Willson, severing both of his legs.

Jew nor Gentile, in Christ there is neither male nor female, in Christ there is neither slave nor free person."

But it took decades until at least a small group of people understood what it meant that "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile." Then it took 1700 or 1800 years to recognize that "In Christ there is neither free nor slave." And we are still grappling with male and female! That's just where the crack in this social conventionality is allowing a little bit of Common Sense to break through. And when this is exhausted there will be other issues.

CI: This sounds like a view of consciousness as being progressive.

DS: Yes, I suppose it does sound as if I were saying things are getting better and better. Well, there are, within the general unfolding of things, some aspects where things are getting better. But I'm not one of those who uphold the idea that on the whole everything's getting better—that we started out in the dumps and are working ourselves up. In some respects things are getting worse and worse. If you look at some of the primitive societies and communities, there was a great deal of Common Sense in them. In early myth and ritual and symbol, a great deal of this communality is expressed. On another level there is a great deal of fear in primitive societies, a great deal of narrowness and exclusiveness: "Anybody who is not one of us is not human"—ideas like that. So in that respect, there is room for improvement. But it's not an ascending line and it's not a clearly descending line. We are making some breakthroughs, and on the other hand it is getting more difficult.

CI: One thing that seems to be at issue is whether or not we will actually survive. We are living in a time which has become dangerous enough and bad enough to possibly awaken us, if only out of self-interest, to live more gently on this Earth, to co-exist with the life forms on this planet. Do you think we're going to make it?

DS: It's a good question, but I'm not sure it's a question that should be answered. I'm not sure that the answer one way or the other is going to help anybody. If we say, "Yes, we are surely going to make it,"—first of all it would be difficult to substantiate that claim—and, if the idea is really accepted, it could have damaging effects. We may just go on like before and not do anything to stop the destruction.

Now the opposite answer, "We're not going to make it," can also have enormously damaging effects because people would say, "If we're not going to make it anyway, why bother?" So neither of these two answers is going to help very much. We must put as much effort into everything we're doing as if whether or not we're going to make it depended upon it. And we must find a way of living in which even if we are not going to make it, in the last second you can say to yourself, "Well, what I did was worthwhile." But the worthwhileness must never depend on the success.

W.S. Merwin has a beautiful poem in which he says, "On the last day of the world, I would like to plant a tree."[4] He develops the idea that you are not only planting the tree for bearing fruit, and not only as a sign of hope, but just for the planting of the tree for the first time in this spot in which it may or may not live for a long time, and may or may not see the sun coming up and feel the cool of the evening or experience its first night. This tree, this little seedling, is something worthwhile in itself, not only in the view of eventually bearing fruit. That is to me a strong, convincing poetic image, much better than trying to answer, "Are we going to make it, or are we not going to make it?"

CI: It always seems to come back to living in the present moment and finding ways to practice doing that without

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[4] From W.S. Merwin's poem, "Space."

attachment to goals, whether they be saving the planet or getting enlightened.

DS: Yes, I think so. For me, prayer or contemplation are a celebration of life, not means to an end. Celebration of life means celebration of aliveness which happens to have the side effect that it makes me *more* alive, just like poetry is an outcome of mindfulness that makes you more mindful. It's not life itself, it's poetry. Life is greater than poetry. Prayer and contemplation are not life; life is greater than that. Prayer is the poetry of your super-aliveness which is spirituality.

The more alive you are, the more you will see the needs of the time, and the more you will have energy and willingness to devote yourself to those things. *Spiritus* means "life-breath." So your spirituality is a special kind of aliveness that includes your social commitment. If it doesn't include that, there's something wrong. You're not quite alive. I cannot take these things apart; they are all of one piece.

Not long ago I had the great luxury of spending a week in a workshop which dealt with body and spirit. One of the tasks that was given to us was to visualize our body and make a picture of it. Then we were to visualize our soul and depict it somehow. And then we were asked to make a picture of our spirit. I was surprised when we shared the results. Most people had actually visualized these three realities far less superimposed than I had. I can only superimpose them; I cannot visualize them being other than dimensions of one and the same reality. In depicting the body, I just drew the outline of a body in brown. Then for the soul, for me that wasn't something that was somewhere inside this body, but it was a particular kind of aliveness, so I just drew little leaves. This brown body now had little leaves growing all over it; it was just like a tree with leaves. And then for the spirit, it was still that same body with leaves, but now I used a yellow pencil, and the spirit was just radiating everywhere. But it was always the same thing, and so when I speak about those different areas, spirituality and social

action, to me, these are aspects of a person's aliveness. The degree of your aliveness will depend on the degree of your commitment, on the degree of your vision, of your inclusiveness. Does that make sense to you?

CI: Yes, it does. Do you think that this quality of aliveness and understanding will *automatically* include social action?

DS: Since we are talking about life, and in life nothing is automatic, the word "automatic" is not a word that I would use.

CI: Well, let's use the word "evolutionarily" instead.

DS: I would say yes. In other words, what is wrong with a faulty spirituality is that it is not yet as alive or as evolved as it should be. And if somebody gets stuck in meditation, not seeing how it relates to social responsibility, I would say it's because they are not spiritual, or alive, enough, not that they are not active enough. Aliveness itself will inevitably make you alert to the needs of others, will make you alert to your opportunities to serve. This, in turn, will make you more alive by giving you the energy that you need to serve.

CI: Of course, the other side would be the renunciate's view, that simply meditating is an action with positive benefits for the world.

DS: I can only see that on the level that one may say, "My lifetime is limited, my energies are limited, my opportunities are limited, so all I can do for the moment is devote myself to meditating and that will fill a lifetime." But there exists the possibility that this dedication to renunciation will lead you to renounce the *notion* of renunciation that you had when you started out, and will therefore lead you and commit you to things you never thought of, activities you thought you had renounced. If you exclude that possibility, there is something drasti-

cally wrong with your renunciation; it is life-denying rather than life-affirming.

CI: Let's talk a bit about the Church in Central America. Last time we were together you spoke about Archbishop Oscar Romero.[5] After he became the Archbishop, he rose in spirit to the position—in much the same way as in the story of Beckett. It reminds me of that Shakespeare quote, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them." Oscar Romero seemed to have greatness thrust upon him.

DS: Right. He did not have great stature before that.

CI: Are there many such examples of this kind of heroic courage in Central America now among the priests and nuns and other Christians who are working there? And what about the practice of nonviolence in the face of what are truly gross injustices that happen there daily? I'm sure that the Christians who are working there must be tempted in many cases to aid those who fight against this oppression.

DS: Yes, having recently been in Maryknoll community, I have fresh information on this.[6] There are thousands and thousands of people, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, who take a brave stance and who suffer and die for it. Most of them are not so conspicuous as Oscar Romero was, although there are a few in exposed positions with great visibility. It's wonderful to know that very simple people also take this Common Sense stance.

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5 Oscar Arnulfo Romero originally began clergy work in El Salvador as a conservative. In time he came to be regarded as the most outspoken archbishop in Latin America, denouncing the brutally repressive, U.S.-backed government of El Salvador and advocating social and land reforms for the poor. He was assassinated March 24, 1980 while conducting services in his chapel on the outskirts of San Salvador.

6 Traditionally involved in human rights issues, Maryknoll missioners are especially active in Central America. In 1980, two Maryknoll sisters were among the four nuns who were shot in El Salvador, an event which drew world attention to the human rights violations and political corruption in that country.

And Common Sense tells us that force creates counterforce; pressure creates counterpressure. So even though at the moment it seems tempting to help this liberation with weapons, or with some other violence, in the long run that is not going to achieve peace and justice. The temptation to resort to violence must be enormous, and so I admire the people who resist that temptation enormously. And even those who do resort to violence, I admire their courage, although I do not think that they are as deeply rooted in Common Sense as those who remain nonviolent are. History will bear this out.

Jesus himself is not a success story; it is a great historical failure that he would be crucified and die in such a way. But the failure was external. A very important aspect of his resurrection is simply that this kind of life cannot be squelched. Someone else will take it up. This kind of life is not subject to death. As long as there are human beings, it will be there. Even the death of the martyrs can become the seed for the faith, as we often say, because it can become the catalyst for others to act out of that same Common Sense.

CI: There's a line from Kierkegaard: "A tyrant dies and his reign ends. A martyr dies and his reign begins." You would say unequivocally that nonviolence makes the most Common Sense.

DS: Yes. But while I think that this is theoretically correct, I say it with great respect and awe for the people who heroically choose other paths. It is my luxury not to be under that pressure, and therefore I can talk about it with detachment. But if I were in the midst of it, I might not be able to see it so clearly.

CI: I'm interested in your personal views on death. I read your essay "Why a Man Becomes a Monk," in which you talked about the relationship that a monk has to death, and that it is a prerequisite—I'm paraphrasing here—to living one's life fully. What is your own relationship to death? Your feelings about death?

At this point in the interview the noon bell at the Zen center rang. Brother David suggested that I join him in one minute of silence for world peace.

CI: Do you do that everyday?

DS: Yes, and I have encouraged many people all over the world to do it. Thank you for doing that with me.

So you ask about death. When you say "feelings," what do you mean by that?

CI: Have you come to terms with your own death? Do you feel ready to die?

DS: Do I feel ready to die? Yes, I do. That isn't difficult to answer. Sometimes I would like to. [laughing]

CI: I know what you mean. [laughing]

DS: I've reached a stage in life where I can say, rather frequently actually, that if I were told now that I have only a very short time to live, I would be mostly sorry for those who have to clean up the mess I leave behind. This is really my main concern. I'm trying to straighten out my books and manuscripts so that there will not be much of a mess for other people. But as far as my feeling that I have unaccomplished, unfinished business, well, there will always be unfinished business. I have had a very, very rich and full life; I'm grateful for that and I can't ask for more.

But then I have other days where I see things that I could do and still be of service, so I'm very grateful to have some opportunity and some energy to do that.

CI: To be primarily concerned with leaving a mess behind is actually quite a refined place. It represents a kind of detachment that perhaps you have in your life as a monk—a greater detachment than a householder who would leave family behind. I wonder about this. You

haven't married, your parents are gone, you haven't had children...

DS: I have lots of children, spiritual children.

CI: But in terms of those special bonds that one says yes to in a life—"Yes, I'll have a spouse. Yes, I'll have a family"—being willing to take on the kind of attachment which is a natural emotion when one has a family. Do you ever feel that was something you missed?

DS: No, I do not feel it as a loss, but I am very much aware and was always aware as long as I can remember that with everything you choose, you also choose not to take another path—the road not chosen.

CI: Yes, making a choice can also be seen as the death of options.

DS: And I was willing to do that—to let go of other options. Yet, my life is rich in so many ways that I cannot complain at all.

I also have this image—it's a real conviction—that our life is maturing toward death in every experience that we have. And we have experience not just because something happens to us—that's not yet an experience—but because we are mindful and we open ourselves. So in every moment in which we really respond to the world, there is a timeless element there. It's something that cannot be destroyed by time. Time comes and goes, but the "now" is not in time to begin with. In time, there is just this seam of "was" and "will be" without any remnant. Within the "now," we experience that which is not subject to time.

There's something in love and faithfulness, beauty and goodness, something that is not subject to time. For me, it is enormously consoling and reassuring that there is only a limited amount of time to work with, that sooner or later my time will be up. For when time is up, then all that has matured during my time remains. Only

the aspect of time falls away. Only vanishing vanishes. And when vanishing vanishes, then "Is" remains.

CI: Suchness remains.

DS: Exactly. When time is up for me, then all that I ever had—all the relationships, all the friendships, all the beauty, all the goodness, is. From my present perspective I would say "will be" but that's not well expressed. And I then have the whole world through the window of my life which at that moment is completed.

Of course, as we look back on our life we also see shortcomings, many things that we wish we had done differently. And since that perpetuates itself in others, there will be a certain pain. When I see clearly how I have done ill to others, or maybe things that I thought were for the best but which had evil or life-denying effects, that is very painful. But I trust that in the overall view, it will all be meaningful or that we can somehow work that out. How one can work beyond time is a little difficult to explain and even a little difficult for me to understand, but we know that in some moments life seems to stand still for us, and in this experience, we do more, we work more, and more happens, than at other periods of even long, long stretches of time.

As T.S. Eliot put it, "What has been and what might have been point to one end which is always present." Somehow I trust that in "the now that doesn't pass away," all possibilities will be able to blossom forth.[7] Through people that I did know or through things that I did touch, I am connected with everything that ever was and everything that ever will be. Everything hangs together with everything. So when the limitations that time and space impose on me are removed because my time is up and my space is no longer there, then I will be in touch with all that ever was and ever will be. That's something to look forward to.

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7 "The now that doesn't pass away" is St. Augustine's definition of "eternity."