

Panel: “The Impacts Colrain might have had on the national WTR movement & thoughts on the current state of the WTR & peace movement”

New England Gathering of War Tax Resisters

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Some of what I’ll say will be melancholy and critical, so I’ll start with unguarded tribute. The Colrain action was an inspiration for me, an almost unprecedented one, one of the few times when political action has been as engaging as music. All of you who were at the center of that action inspired me then and inspire me now, and I’ll be grateful till I die for what you gave me.

And I’ll go further. The Colrain action was in some ways the closest thing to a comprehensively Gandhian action I’ve ever experienced. It had a clear political objective, a clear political and geographical focus for its civil disobedience (that being Gandhi’s preferred translation for *satyagraha*). It had a formidable discipline for its participants, a set of constraints on behavior, as Gandhian actions must. No other action I’ve been part of has asked more from me in spiritual preparation or organization. It had staying power. It had a serious constructive program: taking care of the house, working in the garden, housebuilding. And it had a cultural richness to it; the meetings I attended at which strategies were discussed and chosen were joyous, animated by music, full of celebration in both the sacred and secular senses of the word.

It had some of the weaknesses of some Gandhian actions as well. It nurtured an unconscious coerciveness, and relied on social capital that the participants had and the opponents didn’t have. But you explored these matters eloquently in the session with Terry yesterday, so no need to discuss them further here – though I’d note that coerciveness is for me a fine thing for a movement to have, as long as people are conscious of it.

In other circumstances, on an alternative timeline, wtr campaigns could have learned from the Colrain action, assessed its successes and failures, devised new inventions, built a movement.

On this timeline, here on earth, things are different and worse. I can’t recall a moment in my more than thirty years of war tax resistance when such resistance has seemed so far from having political power. Given the Trump administration, one would have expected a significant rise in wtr, in numbers and intensity and demographic range. That hasn’t happened, and the non-happening is an earthquake. The CMTC escrow account is closing down (the deposits have been assigned to other funds). A Quaker escrow fund for wtrs closed in 2015 and has not reopened. New England War Tax Resistance, which I’ve been associated with since 1987, is heroically continuing but not growing, and depressingly few of the organizations to which we give grants do anything in the tax resistance line. And so on, and you’ll all have other events of this sort in mind.

In my judgment, the weak state of war tax resistance, in general and as a means of doing politics, is not temporary but permanent. I can’t see a future in which the war tax resistance at the center of the Colrain action, which has been my war tax resistance as well, exercises political power: that mode of war tax resistance is likely to survive only

as what Randy Kehler tellingly called a spiritual exercise. It won't stop feeling right for me and others to refuse to pay; but we won't thereby be building a movement.

I don't attribute the gloomy state of things to fear of the IRS – especially the currently underfunded IRS! I don't attribute it to insufficient outreach to the young.

I do to some extent attribute it to our choice as a community not to have a shared discipline. We are not ready to do what we did at Colrain: agree on a goal, on demands, on tactics, on strategy, then change our behaviors to conform what we have agreed on. We are a *laissez-faire* community: do what you are led to do. Much can be said for that philosophy, but it doesn't lead to political power.

Even that problem, though, seems to me peripheral. The central problems with what I would call classical war tax resistance, “classical” suggesting both dignity and outmodedness (I use the term as a lover and performer of classical music), are two. First: as its name suggests, war tax resistance is focused on war. It identifies war as the great evil, the great “crime against humanity,” as the WRL puts it. Not the only evil, of course, no one ever thought that, but the evil so great that it and not other evils has to be resisted even at the cost of breaking the law. Hence the many wtrs who have paid local and state taxes, or the non-military percentages of federal tax; hence the fact that those campaigning for peace tax funds, here and abroad, demand a special status for pacifist taxpayers, but not for taxpayers opposed to solitary confinement or the war on drugs.

My sense is that this singling out of war is less and less persuasive, less and less tenable. Why single out the trauma of war rather than the traumas of police brutality? Why resist war's destructive power so much more than the destructive power increasingly unleashed against the planet we live on?

The thing is, though, that this more comprehensive and probably truer view is a much harder thing to found a movement on. (Hence the political scientist Joshua Goldstein's remark: if you want peace, work for peace.) We are pacifists, we oppose war, we oppose paying for war: that's narrow but coherent. We seek justice, we oppose injustice, we oppose paying for injustice: that's comprehensive but less blurred and messy. And of course it's less clearly and powerfully connected to taxes. There is a military budget, we can gather information about it, we can write letters to the IRS about it, we can refuse to pay for it. Identifying and refusing to pay the injustice budget is way harder.

The second problem is about conscience. Robbie Leppzer's film about Colrain is called *An Act of Conscience*. That gets something right about the action, and about classical war tax resistance generally. It's common to hear wtrs say, “I can't in good conscience pay these taxes.” Heaven knows I've used variations of that phrase in everything I've written about wtr, in every letter I've sent to the IRS. And I passionately admire people who live by conscience.

But conscience too seems problematic these days. It's got a feeling of privilege to it. Its force is chiefly negative: it forbids us from doing certain things, as it forbade Socrates and John Woolman, but does not command us to action. It isolates. It is an individual's term, an individualist's term, a transaction between me and me. (It's partly because we place so high a value on conscience that we're so reluctant to impose a discipline on members of our community.) It doesn't aim to build movements, as Thoreau initially didn't aim to build movements; he wanted to be clear of guilt, to be more right than his neighbor. (So did I when I began all this.) It is significantly not part

of the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter or MeToo, which are animated by shared rage and engaged righteousness, as the biblical prophets were.

To summarize, then. We don't as a community have the discipline we achieved at Colrain, and because we cherish individuality we're unlikely to get it. The notion of war tax resistance as something distinct from resistance to other evils is less compelling than it used to be. The notion of acting on conscience is less sufficient, less relevant to powerful collective movements.

Still, I'll end where I began. "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive," wrote Wordsworth about the French Revolution. That's what I feel about having been at Colrain.