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A story
about two
strangers.



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As Battlefields Shift, Old Warrior for Peace Pursues the Same Enemy

By DAN FROSCH

GREELEY, Colo. — It had been nearly 30 years since the Rev. Carl Kabat and a group of peace activists, including his fellow Catholic priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan, barged into a General Electric weapons plant outside Philadelphia. Known as the Plowshares Eight, they battered missile nose cones with hammers in an effort to disable some of the world's most fearsome weapons, and sprinkled blood on classified documents to protest the cold war, before they were arrested.

The cold war ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago this November and the splintering of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Three of the Plowshares Eight, including Philip Berrigan, have died, and scores of other activists have turned their attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the terrorism suspects held at Guantánamo.

Not Father Kabat, though. At 75 he continues his crusade against [nuclear weapons](#) at missile silos across the United States, armed with a hammer and a pair of bolt cutters. He usually wears a clown suit, in homage, he says, to St. Paul's words: "We are fools for Christ's sake."

Though his actions are mostly symbolic — the authorities have always seized him before he could damage a live missile — he has spent half of the last three decades in state and federal prisons.

His most recent protest unfolded on a quiet dawn last month, when he drove down a country road outside Greeley, a few hours north of Denver, used the bolt cutters to cut a hole in a chain-link fence, wedged his aging body through and stepped atop the silo of a Minuteman III nuclear missile coming up from the ground. He had enough time — about 45 minutes — to drape antiwar banners from the fence, say a prayer and try without success to open a hatch leading to the silo before he was arrested by Air Force security personnel.

"I thought, 'What a beautiful place this is except for this damnable thing in the ground that could kill two or three million people,'" Father Kabat said later in an interview at the Weld County Jail, where he is being held on misdemeanor criminal mischief and trespassing charges. "It's insane."

If convicted, he faces up to a year behind bars, a possibility that does not seem to faze him.

"You can't just kill babies and children and old people indiscriminately," he said. "It should be unreasonable for every human person to accept nuclear weapons."

Bill Sulzman, a former priest from Colorado Springs and a friend, described Father Kabat's impact this way: "Everything in the peace movement has shrunk, but Carl represents steadfastness. When you see a man of

his age willing to take on those risks, it has a big shaming effect.”

Raised on a farm in southern Illinois, Father Kabat joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate order as a young man and became radicalized after missions in the Philippines and Brazil. But it was not until the late 1970s, after meeting Philip Berrigan — like his brother Daniel a giant of the peace movement — that Father Kabat hurled himself into the antinuclear weapons fight.

He served about a year and a half in prison for taking part in the 1980 Plowshares Eight protest at the G.E. plant in King of Prussia, Pa., which became a touchstone of the antinuclear movement.

Four years later, Father Kabat, his brother Paul and another man and a woman, armed with a jackhammer, broke into a missile silo in Missouri. Father Kabat served nearly 10 years in prison for that attack. “Even if we were left there for 24 hours, we could not cut through the reinforced concrete,” he recalled, “but we wanted to show that this was serious business.”

Subsequent protests led to Father Kabat’s spending more time in prison than out, raising questions about the effectiveness of his approach.

Liz McAlister, who married Philip Berrigan, has an answer. “We live in a culture where we want to measure everything to know how successful things are,” Ms. McAlister said. “It’s beautiful to see people who don’t spend time wondering and worrying about that and are willing to do what they think is right regardless of the consequences.”

Still, the United States no longer teeters on the brink of nuclear war, and the 150 Minuteman III missiles scattered across Wyoming, Nebraska and Colorado go largely unnoticed by a younger generation of activists.

A 30-year-old Catholic peace activist, Chrissy Kirchhoefer, one of Father Kabat’s closest friends, acknowledged that she does not entirely relate to his cause, but said his devoutness still commanded a profound respect. “For young people, that issue doesn’t really speak to us,” she said. “But I don’t question the validity or usefulness of it. Carl once said to me, ‘If I don’t act on this, then what good is my life?’ ”

To Father Kabat, the nuclear issue — and his protests — remain essential. The building of weapons continues to drain money that could be used to fight poverty and hunger, he says, adding, as if caught in a time warp, “There’s still a real threat these things could go to the U.S.S.R.”

Nearing his 76th birthday, Father Kabat muses that he now feels freer behind prison walls, where he spends time reading, reflecting and playing basketball, a passion, than he does outside them. On the outside, he says, he is overwhelmed by the sense of not doing enough. “When I die, I want my tombstone to read, ‘He really lived,’ ” the priest said with a grin.

On a recent Thursday, Father Kabat shuffled into a small county courtroom here, shackled to a line of other inmates. He has refused to post \$5,000 bond or sign anything that could be interpreted as capitulation. Before his case could be presented, Father Kabat’s public defender and a prosecutor agreed to continue the hearing until Sept. 17.

The priest smiled, nodded to a small group of supporters in the courtroom and was taken back to jail.

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