‘Something Deeper Than Reason’: Violence and Nonviolence in the Plowshares Nuclear Disarmament Movement

Introduction

On November 2, 2009, five Catholic activists – one nun, two priests, and two laypeople – cut through a series of chain link and barbed wire fences surrounding Naval Base Kitsap in Bangor, Washington, where roughly one-quarter of the United States’ nuclear warheads are reportedly stored and a fleet of eleven submarines equipped to deploy Trident nuclear weapons is stationed. The five – all over the age of sixty – unfurled a banner reading “Trident: Illegal + Immoral,” poured their own blood over the site, and beat on the ground and the fences with household hammers before being apprehended and arrested.1 Calling their action Disarm Now Plowshares, the five acted as part of the Plowshares movement, started by Daniel and Philip Berrigan and others in 1980, in response to nuclear proliferation and as a way to galvanize the Catholic Left following the Vietnam War era, during which the Berrigans had risen to national prominence for their anti-war activities. The Disarm Now Plowshares’ civil disobedience followed a template that has remained fairly constant since the first Plowshares action: Participants enter facilities where nuclear equipment is manufactured or stored, pour their blood over the site and the equipment, and beat on it with household hammers in response to the Biblical injunction to beat swords into plowshares, from Isaiah.2 If not immediately detained, they wait.

2 The Tanakh reads, “Thus He will judge among the nations / And arbitrate for the many peoples, / And they shall beat their swords into Plowshares / And their spears into pruning hooks: / Nation shall not take up /Sword against nation; / They shall never again know war.” (Is. 2:4).
The importance of being arrested and going to trial and then to jail, which will be discussed below, is clearly illustrated in the circumstances of the first action in 1980, known as the Plowshares Eight: Charged with burglary, criminal trespass, criminal conspiracy, simple and aggravated assault, terroristic threat and seven other charges for their action at the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, the Plowshares Eight were given an offer – all charges would be dropped if they would simply go away. Refusing to have their action swept under the rug, the eight turned down the offer. Since the Plowshares Eight, there have been about fifty subsequent Plowshares actions in the United States.³ Plowshares activists in the U.S. have never been acquitted and face prison sentences usually in the one- to two-year range. An anomalous case in which eighteen-year sentences were handed down will be discussed below.

Though it followed a template, the Disarm Now Plowshares did not lack imagination: Each group of Plowshares activists chooses themes on which to focus (the effects of nuclear proliferation on children or the environment, for example) and images and symbols to employ; the Disarm Now Plowshares chose to scatter sunflower seeds along with the blood they poured over the base, “to plant the hope of new life in this violated earth,” as they wrote in their action statement.⁴ Though blood has not been poured in every Plowshares action, Plowshares activists commonly characterize it as the

³ There is some discrepancy between sources as to the number of actions, depending on whether or not “solidarity actions” from prison are included in the count, for example.

There have also been Plowshares actions in a handful of other countries, though this paper, as well as the larger project of which it is a part, focuses on the Plowshares movement in the U.S. For a comparative analysis of the movement in the other countries where it has appeared, see Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008)

⁴ From the action statement of the Disarm Now Plowshares, http://www.jonahhouse.org/Disarm_Now_Plowsshares/statement.htm. Action statements are written prior to each action to elucidate the action and specifically the Biblical motivation behind it; they are distributed at the protest site and among supporters.
most theologically laden and thus most significant element of the actions, echoing the thinking of the movement’s founders: Philip Berrigan wrote in his autobiography, “[W]e agreed on blood because of its Biblical symbolism.” He let this statement stand alone, not feeling the need to explicate a symbol that was, for him, straightforward in its Biblical significance. But blood is also a multivalent symbol: We see Plowshares activists acknowledging the variety of meanings that may be assigned to it in the Disarm Now Plowshares action, for example, as seeds are used in combination with blood in order to convey a specific idea of blood as life-giving and renewing, a symbol of redemptive sacrifice. The violent resonances of blood, however, are also invoked in Plowshares actions. Within the movement blood functions both certainly and ambiguously, making visible a tension between an avowedly nonviolent ethos, and the use of elements that the activists recognize may be understood as violent or threatening.

Indeed, the Plowshares rely on blood as multivocal, at the same time a symbol of Christian nonviolence and a mark of violence, for the efficacy of the actions. This paper will explore how the Plowshares negotiate the boundary between nonviolence and the representation of violence, and how they think about what constitutes a “threat” as they construct and convey their identity and their understanding of success both within and outside the movement. I will begin by analyzing the functions that the Plowshares understand blood to serve in the context of an action, on three interconnected levels: The blood conveys a political message, representing the blood spilled by the foreign policy decisions they oppose; it serves a theological purpose, turning the actions into a

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righteous countersacrifice; and it also functions socially, simultaneously linking the
Plowshares to certain communities while distinguishing them from others.

The Plowshares place great emphasis on community – as Sharon Erickston Nepstad concludes from her surveys and interviews with Plowshares activists, commitment is sustained in the movement in large part because of the support provided by the activist’s intentional communities, as well as larger communities of like-minded allies. The importance of community raises the issue of how deviations from the group’s norms – with regard to the performance of the actions, and specifically the negotiation of the gray area between nonviolence and the representation of violence – are understood and managed. The concluding section of this paper will address three cases where the unorthodox use of violent elements or the unexpected appearance of threat raised questions about group identity, and about the permeable line between violence and nonviolence, between risk and redemption.

The Meanings and Functions of Blood in the Plowshares Movement

The November 2nd Disarm Now Plowshares action followed quickly on the heels of an August action performed by Oblate priest Carl Kabat at a missile silo in Greeley, Colorado. These two actions, in unusually swift succession, came after a three year

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6 See Nepstad, 91-115.
period during which none were committed, the longest hiatus in the movement’s history.\(^7\) Since 2000 there have been seven Plowshares actions, as compared to twenty-eight in the movement’s first decade and fifteen in its second. Other trends accompany the decline in frequency: While in earlier years a significant number of activists were in their twenties and thirties at the time of the first action, in the last decade only two of eighteen Plowshares activists have been younger than forty, and many have been a good bit older – of the six activists who performed the two recent actions, three are in their sixties, one in his seventies, and two in their eighties. Many of the last decade’s activists are recidivists, taking part in a second or third or eighth action.\(^8\) The presence of priests and especially nuns has come to characterize the movement progressively more in the last decade. Finally, Plowshares actions in the last decade have been performed in smaller groups than in the past: In the first two decades of the movement, though there were actions undertaken by one or two people, there were also several groups of seven, eight, and nine.

While these shifting trends as well as the decline in number and frequency of actions indicate a diminishing movement, small numbers are not out of keeping with the original intent of the movement, which is drama-based rather than numbers-based. In fact the Plowshares movement constructs and conveys its identity both within and outside the movement through a rhetoric of marginality, according to which the activists comprise a necessarily small, necessarily criminalized and stigmatized group on the

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\(^7\) For a chronology of U.S. Plowshares actions through 2006, see Nepstad, 233-36. With the exceptions of 1981 and 2001, at least one action has taken place every year since 1980. Peak years were 1985 and 1987, with six actions each.

\(^8\) While it is surely not the only factor, there is clearly a link between the fact that most actions are performed by recidivists, and the slowing rate of actions: The next actions can only be performed when a prior sentence has been completed.
outskirts of society and the mainstream Church, performing authentic Christian witness as outlined in scriptural passages that speak of a “righteous remnant” or a persecuted minority (the Beatitudes, for example), the attendant dangers of which few others will dare to risk. Thus small numbers are coded as signifying moral authority and authenticity; it is this social aspect of the resistance that confirms and legitimates the political and theological messages that are presented during the actions. Thus, while I will discuss the political, the theological, and the social separately below, it will be clear how inextricably linked they are to one another. They blood the activists pour serves as the nexus in which the political, the theological, and the social coalesce.

Blood at a Plowshares action site. Photo courtesy the Maas Collection, DePaul University Richardson Library Special Collections.
Blood as Political

In *The Time’s Discipline: The Beatitudes and Nuclear Resistance*, Philip Berrigan and his wife and fellow Plowshares activist Elizabeth McAlister write, “Much discernment has gone into our efforts to offer symbols and symbolic actions that are, if not adequate to the horror humanity faces, at least evocative of such horror…. If only the horror with which people respond to the blood as symbol can be transferred to the reality of shedding blood!”

Blood is meant to convey this political message, representing the bloodshed of foreign policy decisions. And the spectacle of blood is useful for attracting attention to that message. But blood is not meant to be simply evocative – it is also meant to be functional, as McAlister suggests with the following:

We need to get beyond the assumed rationality of it all. We need to appeal to something deeper than reason, something that has to do with powerful earth symbols and actions. Our indication of the whole break up about us is that people still think rationality works. In reasonable times, symbols belong to everyone. In times likes ours, driven and captivated as we are by our idols (bombs and all) people fear symbols, don’t understand them. Restoring symbols and purifying them through suffering and public exposure is part of the renewal of a community of sanity—which ought to be the definition of the Church…We do our symbolic action to witness to the truth about our lives today.

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10 McAlister, notes for testimony at Griffiss Air Force Base Plowshares trial, DePaul University Richardson Library Special Collections, Berrigan-McAlister Collection, Box 1.
The linking of symbol and action, of representation and renewal, of evocation and effect, suggests an interplay between tactical and symbolic goals, between do-ing and mean-ing, which Mark Juergensmeyer explicates in his work on “performance violence,” through which acts of religious terrorism take on, in addition to their tactical elements, symbolic value: “They are intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate target: a grander conquest, for instance, or a struggle more awesome than meets the eye.... Such explosive scenarios are not tactics directed toward an immediate, earthly, or strategic goal, but dramatic events intended to impress for their symbolic significance.”

Symbolic intent does not negate but rather layers on top of tactical intent, so that any terrorist act can be placed on a spectrum, with tactical goals at one end and symbolic intent at the other, and with immediate political goals and “larger, less tangible” or ideological goals at the corresponding poles.

Juergensmeyer suggests that symbolic intent adds dimension to purely tactical or result-oriented action, and makes it more understandable to outsiders. Adding a level of meaning to an act of do-ing moves the act into the realm of comprehension, so that it becomes less senseless. Though symbolism may be thought of as operating at a level of apprehension rather than reason, an action’s symbolic meaning, suggests Juergensmeyer, may be what renders the act intelligible to reason – thus the performative can be transformative because it can change modes of thinking in various audiences. While Juergensmeyer explores the means by which tactical actions gain dimension through symbolic elements, the Plowshares provide a different, almost antithetical example, not only because their actions are nonviolent, but because theirs are meaning-oriented actions.

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12 Ibid., 124.
that locate their tactical elements squarely within a symbolic framework – the symbolic is tactical, in part because there are strategic reasons for their uses of particular symbols such as blood (blood is, if nothing else, attention-grabbing), but also because it in large part on the symbolic level that the action is perceived as “working.” The Plowshares do not expect either that they will effectively disable military aircraft, or that they will bring about sweeping change in foreign policy. This is not to suggest that Plowshares activists never feel that their actions might effect political change; but their labeling of the actions as “symbolic disarmaments” indicates where they understand the importance to reside. The symbolic, however, is not understood as being opposed to instrumental goals they could but do not achieve; rather, the symbolic elements of the actions are efficacious because of their theological functionality.

_Blood as Theological_

The Plowshares characterize themselves as countering the state’s bloodshed with a bloodshed of their own that is liturgical, sacramental, and redemptive, an invocation and repetition of the sacrifices of Jesus Christ in the crucifixion, and other martyrs throughout history. Plowshares documents refer to the “government Beast” and the “BOMB” as idols, and to the blood spilled to them as idolatrous offerings, perversions of true religion; for example, the Disarm Now Plowshares opened their action statement with a verse from Ezekiel, “I will purify you from the taint of all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and make you
conform to my statutes” (Ez. 36:25-27); they continued, “Nuclear weapons can never be guardians, defenders, or upholders of peace. They are sheathed in stainless steel and metal coverings that conceal the evil incarnate lying within.” The deaths that nuclear weapons perpetrated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the deaths that contemporary foreign policy decisions bring about in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, are likened to Cain’s slaying of Abel, in which the blood from an unsanctioned killing cries out to God from the earth.

The spilling of their own blood, then, is understood as a countersacrifice, an “enfleshing” of their resistance to idols via worthy offering to the legitimate God of the Judeo-Christian scriptures; the countersacrifice is meant to metaphysically tip the scales or right the wrongs committed by policy-makers as well as complacent Americans who do not actively resist the government. The blood spilled in the actions is thus also meant to represent the Plowshares’ separateness or distinctiveness from mainstream America, which they characterize as chosen marginality. Without fail, defendants speak in their trials about the sacrifices involved in choosing to perform the action, and that they chose those sacrifices, which involve separation from loved ones and from society at large, as a way to mirror Christ’s sacrifice.

Blood as Social

In undertaking such radical actions, which they expect will result in prison time and which they do not expect many others to emulate, they understand themselves to be

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13 Action statement, Disarm Now Plowshares.
living on the outskirts of society\textsuperscript{14}; this social location is understood as itself a kind of martyrdom, so the blood is a symbol of this, too, the visual accompaniment to their social enactment of theological claims about separation and sacrifice. McAlister writes,

When Jesus said: ‘You will be my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8) he wasn’t giving advice to his disciples or recommending a course of action. He was telling them what had happened to them and what would continue to happen to them. Witnessing isn’t so much something you do—it is something that happens to you…To witness is to risk yourself. How I’d like to know an easier way. But I sense that any other way would involve turning my back on all the clues I’ve had about a decent, meaningful life.\textsuperscript{15}

The spilling of their own blood represents their sacrifices as linked with Christ’s death and conflated with the perils faced by the Beatitude’s persecuted peacemakers.

The pouring of blood connects the activists not only to Biblical figures, but to the various resistance lineages and communities in which they place themselves. When Philip and Daniel Berrigan first started to incorporate blood into their protests against the

\textsuperscript{14} It might be argued that prison is not truly marginalizing for individuals whose theological justification and status as religious virtuosi, both of which are crucial to movement building, are predicated upon prison sentences. And it is certainly the case that their time in prison has increased the celebrity and status of the Berrigans, and that neither they nor most other Plowshares activists are likely to disappear within the prison system or be subjected to many of its worst horrors. Moreover, they emerge from prison into communities and wider circles that valorize their prison experiences. But I do not believe that simply because these individuals do not often experience the worst prison has to offer, they are not also subject to the marginalization and stigmatization that being a prisoner most often implies. Prison becomes routine for some Plowshares activists, but many still face the certainty of prison time with trepidation, and realize that it will alienate at least some of their loved ones; most do not attain any celebrity from their actions or their sentences, but emerge from prison as anonymous and largely ignored as when they entered.

\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth McAlister, trial notes.
Vietnam War, they knew the tactic would alienate them, as it did, from allies and mentors such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, who worried that the use of blood would call into question the supposed nonviolence of the Catholic Left. But it was precisely this traditional notion of nonviolence with which the Berrigans intended to break during these years. Accompanying this strategic move to incorporate blood into the actions was their decision to go “underground” rather than willingly submit to the authorities, also a significant break from traditional nonviolence in which punishment is willingly accepted. Both these deviations were meant not only to serve as a more trenchant critique of the authorities and thus a more solid resistance to the War, but to mark them as genuine, limiting their numbers to those who were truly willing to face serious consequences for their more dangerous actions. ¹⁶ The Plowshares movement was born out of this sense that authentic Christian witness happens from within a limited group on the margins of society. I suggest that blood was incorporated as the primary symbol, then, not only because of its theological and political resonance, but because of its social functionality: The symbol simultaneously links them to a specific lineage, and distinguishes them from the wider – and, to them, less committed – resistance community, as well as mainstream Church and society.

Also included in their virtuosic resistance community, which is both forged and represented by blood, are the victims whose blood is spilled not voluntarily, but because they are the victims of foreign policy decisions: The Disarm Now Plowshares write in their statement, “On this day of remembrance, All Souls Day, we bring our own blood in

solidarity with the victims of war, who are invisible to those who target them.” The Plowshares explain their action specifically in terms of solidarity with these victims, especially child victims, as a way to memorialize and connect with them. This link is made explicit in the writing of activist Paul Kabat, for example, who identifies his actions, which largely go unnoticed and which many people call silly and ineffectual, with child victims who also go unnoticed on the world stage:

Although in my wildest fantasy I may have hoped our effort of disarmament would have already turned the dynamics of world and national politics around, in my more rational moments I am aware we may have had little impact on anybody or anything…In spite of my fantasies I do not expect my act or my resulting years in prison will have any cosmic effect on history, just as I am aware that the quiet deaths of many children in fourth world situations around the world make any real difference to us Americans and especially to the political and economic leaders of our nation. Millions of children phase out silently and are buried in obscurity. So also we will not be much noted as time and events go by.

And Philip Berrigan has written that in actions where blood is poured and the deaths of those from nuclear attacks are imagined, “a mystical kinship [arises] with the dead and dying – especially with the children sacrificed to the Moloch of State.” Both the blood

17 http://jonahhouse.org/Disarm_Now_Plowshares/statement.htm

18 Paul Kabat, “What Did You Accomplish?” Letter from prison, no date. DePaul University Richardson Library Special Collections, Maas Collection, Box 2.

19 Philip Berrigan, letter, Aug. 6-9 1979, Cornell University, Karl A. Croch Library, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Daniel and Philip Berrigan Collection, Box 99.
of victims and the blood of those representing the victims are called “the blood of the Covenant” – there is not only solidarity but a conflation of identity, emphasized also in the rhetoric of martyrdom and marginality.

In order to communicate what the activists intend on each of these three levels – the political, the theological, and the social – most Plowshares actions have used an almost identical template of trespass, blood, household hammers, and the recitation of prayers. Small innovations abound, such as the Disarm Now Plowshares’ scattering of sunflower seeds, but these come from a generally-accepted, Biblically-based repertoire from which deviation is rare. I will now discuss three Plowshares actions that took a sharp turn from the established template; these cases demonstrate how gray is the area of representational violence, raising the question of what happens, in a context of performance as an assertion of community, to those whose performances are undertaken in non-sanctioned ways. How are breaches understood and managed? In the first case, Plowshares activists thought they were acting according to the template but were surprised with the unaccustomed charge of criminal assault; in the second case a dramatic innovation on the part of activists was not understood as a breach by the rest of the movement; in the third case it very much was understood as a breach, though the activist in question did not consider it as such.

The Perception and Representation of “Threat”
Awaiting trial, jailed Plowshares activist Ardeth Platte wrote: “We are fine, coming to our time before the courts once again, another little opportunity to shed a light in the darkness with a hope that continuing to be faithful enhances the world in the future.” Plowshares activists see their trials not only as inevitable, but as welcome opportunities to bring a theological and political message to a wider audience; and as authentications of what they characterize as their chosen marginality, in which they understand their moral authority to reside. Behavior during the trials (which is more often celebratory than anxious or glum) and the rhetoric that surrounds them have become as ritualized as the actions themselves; indeed, the trials are understood to be a part of each action, as much as the civil disobedience. Berrigan biographers Murray Polner and Jim O’Grady write in reference to a particular trial: “Neither the [courtroom] exchange nor any part of this protest will appear in a single news report, but several dozen citizens have just been witness to a discussion on the morality of nuclear weapons. According to the Berrigans’ creed of scattering seeds of ‘truth’ and leaving to God the task of nurturing them, such an occurrence, on this day, is enough.” The chance to explicate their truths is especially important to the activists because of the multivocality of their primary symbol, blood, and because of the ambiguous presence of “threat” in their actions. These three cases illustrate that ambiguity.

Plowshares trials follow a template as much as the actions do, and given that most Plowshares activists are recidivists, they offer few surprises. But irregularities do occur:

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In March of 2000, four Plowshares activists stood trial for their 1999 Plowshares versus Depleted Uranium action, which targeted Maryland’s Warfield Air National Guard Base and its A-10 Thunderbird aircraft, intended to deploy weapons tipped with radioactive depleted uranium, probably to Iraq. Of the four activists, three were recidivists. The trial was familiar territory for them, except for the very surprising charge of criminal assault leveled at one of the defendants, Susan Crane.

Crane previously had stood trial for Plowshares as well as numerous other civil disobedience actions (she also participated in the November 2nd Disarm Now Plowshares). Like other Plowshares activists she has great confidence in her actions, regarding them as divinely mandated. On the stand she is calm and assured. But the charge of assault was unexpected, even for activists who expect and indeed rely upon the charge of “criminal.” The assault charge rattled the four, and especially Crane, who specifically was charged with threatening or actually attacking one of the officers at the facility. Crane broke down when the assault charge was brought up, so appalling to her was the idea of it and so counter to the proclaimed nonviolence of the group. The four were convicted of the other charges but the assault charge was eventually dropped, with even the officer who had claimed to have been assaulted visibly uncomfortable with such a charge being attached to an elderly woman who seemed incapable of anything but gentleness – Crane has consistently characterized her participation in Plowshares actions in terms of care for the children of the world, and of speaks of blood as redemptive and renewing.

Plowshares activists go to great lengths to show that they mean no harm to personnel on the sites where they trespass, but this does not necessarily mean that they do
not wish to be considered, in some way, a serious threat. A Kitsap Sun story on the Disarm Now Plowshares action reports that according to the Navy’s press release, “At no time was the safety of Navy personnel, property, or the public threatened in any way.”²² The downplaying of any “threat” is in keeping with many official treatments of the actions: Especially in their trials, accusers or detractors insist that they are criminals while simultaneously disparaging them as no threat at all. But whatever might get said in retrospect about how little threat is posed by a few senior citizens taking household hammers to military aircraft, it stands to reason that during the events themselves, not only the fact of their trespass but the image of the spilled blood is disconcerting and perhaps menacing to personnel at the sites (who probably have no prior knowledge of the movement, so can’t assume that they are nonviolent), hence outcomes like the charge of assault against Crane. The insistence on “no threat,” in contrast to what we may imagine as the likeliest immediate responses of those who first apprehend the Plowshares at the sites of the civil disobediences, is clearly a way to trivialize the actions.

Another trivialization of the Disarm Now Plowshares is evident in the report’s absence of any mention of either the blood poured or the seeds scattered. This is similar to reports following other Plowshares actions: In official accounts of the 1984 Silo Pruning Hooks action, which will be discussed below, a military spokesperson offers, “There is a red substance at the site…However, it has not been confirmed as to it being blood.”²³ In such versions of the events, the theological significance of the actions, as well as what the activists believe themselves to be accomplishing, is either overlooked or intentionally expunged. And while it is true, as Susan Crane’s story indicates, that

²² Ed Friedrich, “Antiwar demonstrators cut fence at Bangor sub base,” Kitsap Sun, 3 Nov. 09.
²³ “Four arrested after missile silo is damaged.” Unidentified newspaper clipping. Maas collection, Box 2.
Plowshares activists usually wish to appear non-threatening, the careful excision of their beliefs and message is certainly not their desire. Moreover, wanting to appear non-threatening may be a constant in the movement in theory, but in reality the appearance of “threat” is ambiguous as is that of violence. Anxiety over seeming like a threat is not always the attitude that characterizes the Plowshares, as the next case demonstrates.

*Silo Pruning Hooks*

As mentioned above, one set of Plowshares activists received unheard-of eighteen-year sentences. The shocking sentences were handed down to the participants in the 1984 Silo Pruning Hooks action, which stands out not only for the sentences but for the action itself: Instead of household hammers, the four activists in this action took jackhammers to the missile silo covers at Whitehall Air Force Base near Kansas City. Of course this was seen as a much more serious threat (charges included, for the first time, sabotage), hence the much more serious sentences. What is particularly of note in this case is the way the activists talked about the jackhammers versus household hammers. The thinking was not that the jackhammers would effect more damage or destruction of property: One of the activists observed that even if they had had twenty-four hours, they wouldn’t have made a dent in the silo covers. But even so, he said, he and the others had felt compelled to try what he characterized as a more direct approach to disarmament. The rhetoric hinged on the notion that even though this act did not in fact have any more destructive potential than using household hammers on an aircraft would, it appeared more destructive, and by that appearance of greater destructive capability there was
greater symbolic impact and greater metaphysical import. The approach was more direct because it seemed like more of a threat; the extent to which it actually was more of a threat was glossed over for the most part. The recognition of efficacy as linked to the appearance of a more significant threat, in the context of a movement that often attempts to dispel any appearance of threat, leads to the consideration of a third case.

_Helen Woodson_

Helen Woodson was one of the four activists in the Silo Pruning Hooks action, and she was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. When she was released after ten years, despite her best efforts to serve the whole sentence, she immediately undertook a series of further actions that led to her being distanced from the Plowshares movement, though she considered her latter actions of a piece with the missile silo action. While still in prison Woodson had acted “in solidarity” with a number of Plowshares actions that took place during her term; she would perform various kinds of witness from the prison yard that were taken quite seriously by the rest of the movement; in the movement’s standard chronologies, she is listed as a remote participant in these actions, and one Plowshares action, called Resistance in Captivity, consisted of Woodson alone setting a fire in her prison yard. In willingly accepting such a shockingly lengthy prison term, and in immediately getting herself back into prison after the release that she resisted in every way, \(^{24}\) she was instantiating the movement’s deepest ideals about chosen marginality.

\(^{24}\) Alone among Plowshares activists, Woodson vigorously resisted early release: She maintained that the only acceptable shortening of her sentence would have to include the acknowledgement that her action had been appropriate, which acknowledgement would be signified by the sentencing judge joining her in another disarmament action. To forestall her release Helen had performed a “resistance in captivity”
and the need for a select few to willingly submit to prison or social death in order for a new society to be born. But in the movement’s fullest account of itself, it is noted that Helen Woodson was later “involved in several controversial protests (which went outside the bounds of traditional nonviolent protest).”²⁵ Three days after her early release from her Silo Pruning Hooks sentence she mailed letters, each with a .38 caliber bullet attached, to several corporate CEOs with the message, “Your actions are like a bullet through life.”

In some ways Woodson had indeed gone outside certain bounds, and though she continues to frame her actions theologially, explaining the letters and the Plowshares actions as all part of one Biblical campaign, she is today claimed most enthusiastically by radical secular groups such as the Earth Liberation Front. But there are ways in which she was well within the bounds of the movement: Her characterization of certain financial establishments as life-destroying idols, and her use of a violent symbol to evoke that characterization, operates on the same plane as the Plowshares’ characterization of the victims of warfare as sacrifices to idols, and their evocative use of blood. Moreover, breaking with the tactics and attitudes of traditional nonviolence was behind the founding of the Plowshares movement, as discussed above. Despite these continuities, while Woodson is not completely ostracized from the movement, she is carefully managed within it: The website maintained by Jonah House – the intentional community in Baltimore that is considered home base for the Plowshares movement – features only two action, in which she used nail polish to set a fire in the prison yard. According to Laffin and Montgomery, the evidence of this action was destroyed by prison officials so that it could not stand in the way of her release. See Swords Into Plowshares, 54-55.

brief mentions of Woodson, and while it does announce her sentencing for the later action, it does not name what that action was. Her other resistance activities are mentioned only in circumspect fashion, though the website provides thorough information on the non-Plowshares activities of other Plowshares participants. Though letters sent to Jonah House over the last decades indicate a continuing friendly relationship with Philip Berrigan until his death in 2002, as well as other members of the Jonah House community, Woodson is positioned on the outskirts of the movement-qua-movement.

**Conclusion**

One could speculate that Woodson’s later actions were perceived as a breach of the movement’s norms because she represented violence in a way that was not explicitly based on Biblical images. But every Plowshares action relies on substitution, assigning a certain creative interpretation to the image of “beating swords into Plowshares.” Woodson did deviate from what had become the orthodox substitution, from the agreed-upon metaphor that anchors the movement. But the case of substituting jackhammers for household hammers shows that there is leeway here as well, and a certain amount of innovation is welcomed from all activists, not just those at the movement’s forefront or who occupy what are generally understood as the leadership roles.

Certainly a breach occurred when a threat to property was replaced with a threat to human life, however symbolic – Plowshares activists emphasize this distinction. But the distinction is an unsteady one, as Woodson’s case illustrates: If the distinction
between a threat to property and a threat to life was a clear one, it stands to reason that the leadership of the movement would have distanced itself from Woodson completely for violating such a core value, rather than still trying to incorporate her, though hesitantly and carefully. Woodson’s case suggests that the movement itself, even as it insists on a distinction between threats to property and threats to human life, experiences that distinction as less than sharp, so that Woodson’s later actions become problematic because they fail to properly maintain a very delicate balance between the threatening and the redemptive capabilities of potentially violent symbols.

Though recognized as an ambiguous symbol capable of suggesting both violence and nonviolence, for the activists, blood renders the action redemptive and neutralizes the threat inherent in the action; it represents, as discussed above, righteous countersacrifice, meant to remind the American people and the world that “the BOMB” and “the Moloch of the State” are idols, false deities created by the warmaking state and worshipped by a people gone astray from the one true God. It is not likely that Woodson’s letters would have seemed less threatening to the recipients if they had been covered with blood along with the bullets that were affixed – probably the opposite is the case. But based on the Plowshares’ use of blood as a way to coalesce and convey their political, theological, and social ideals, I wonder if Woodson’s fellow Plowshares might have had more of a basis for understanding and accepting her radical departure from their template, in which blood is strategically employed to function quite specifically – as redemptive and legitimating rather than threatening, as both evocative and efficacious, as a the sign of an interface between the political, the theological, and the social in which they understand success to reside.