

COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP

1637 BUTLER AVENUE, SUITE 203
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90025
(310) 478-0829

December 2002

Letter to Help the Year End

Dear Friends,

“I die with the conviction, held since 1968 and Catonsville, that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth; to mine for them, manufacture them, deploy them, use them, is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself.” Such was the final statement of Philip Berrigan, a week before his death on December 6.

He first came to public prominence in 1968 when, as a Josephite priest, joined by his brother Dan, a Jesuit, and seven others, he doused home-made napalm on draft records in Catonsville, Maryland, in the midst of the Vietnam war. The Berrigan brothers’ “Catonsville 9” act of civil disobedience sent shivers down the moral spine of the country as it saw the pictures of smiling priests in clerical collars being led off in handcuffs to long prison terms. If men of the cloth felt called by conscience to risk imprisonment to end that horrid war, what were we each called to do in our own lives?

Over the next three and a half decades, Phil Berrigan spent eleven years in prison for various acts of resistance to war and the nuclear arms race. Think of it – one of every three days since 1968 spent in prison. His last stint – 14 months – ended only a year ago, when he was released in December 2001. He was 78 years old when he got out from behind bars for the last time.

“He learned patience through bolts and bars ... through long sacrifice and little reward,” his brother Dan told the funeral procession. Few of us can imagine the sacrifice, or but admire the driving passion for justice and an end to the risk of the horrors of war, particularly nuclear war, that motivated Phil to give up so much for so long.

“We tried to stay in there, speaking some sanity and some nonviolence,” he said in a 1997 interview. **“We didn’t quit. That’s epitaph enough.”** We didn’t quit! My God, that is indeed quite an epitaph, in a world filled with those who soon quit the struggle for justice, or never even entered it. He didn’t quit.

As the world prepares again for war, with some officials expressing a rather unbecoming eagerness; as this country breaks out of nuclear arms treaties and talks rather loosely about pre-emptive nuclear strikes against non-nuclear countries; as some in high places push for ending the moratorium on nuclear weapons testing and to begin developing new nuclear warheads once again, it is well to remember what some of those in the low places of political power but the elevated locations of moral conviction have given and done in order to try to wake us up, to help us alter course.

* * *

Few of us are called to spend years imprisoned for acts of civil disobedience. But we are each called to stand up, speak out, work effectively for justice, and pay some personal price. It is a major part of being a sentient being, a person of conscience.

Less than a week after Phil Berrigan moved on, we lost Rick Best. Only 32 years old, he had spent his entire life as a paraplegic, his spinal cord having been severed at birth. A lifetime in a wheelchair might have led you or me to succumb to self-pity and despair. Instead, Rick spent his life working strenuously, effectively, and committedly on behalf of the environment. I have not seen a harder worker

I met Rick when he convinced his boss, Assembly Speaker pro Tem Fred Keeley, to author legislation CBG supported to put an end, by statute, to the long-running and controversial effort to place a radioactive waste dump at Ward Valley, California. The bill also requires any nuclear waste facility that might be built in California to meet significantly improved safety and design requirements than would have been the case for the unlined trenches proposed for Ward Valley. Rick did everything humanly possible to get the bill through. Time and time again, the bill passed committee or floor votes with no votes to spare. Each time, it would have been defeated had it not been for Rick's unstinting efforts, his own sacrifices. Lives were saved by Rick doing what was necessary, even if personally costly, to make a difference.

He worked incredible hours, staying late night after night, leaving exhausted. I don't know if it was after one such night that the accident occurred, but driving home in August, in the midst of the legislative battles, his car ran out of control and collided with a dumpster. He was hospitalized for months, fighting pneumonia, which finally beat him.

A few weeks before Rick died, his bill was signed into law. At the memorial service a few days ago, (now former) Assemblymember Keeley spoke. He mentioned how I had come to see him a few weeks earlier, and had told him of the best scientific estimates that Ward Valley, had it gone forward, could have resulted in approximately 20,000 cancer deaths spread over many generations. This was true even if 99% of the plutonium estimated for that dump never moved and only 1% ever migrated, over thousands of years, into the nearby Colorado River. Rick's actions, along with those of many others, helped save those lives.

We are all disabled and imprisoned, in one way or another, some more visibly than others. But within us all is the same battle – to bemoan our personal condition or to help uplift the condition of others. Rick Best and Phil Berrigan chose the latter path, at considerable cost each. Our world is blessed that such as these traveled upon it, and we would be doubly blessed were we to permit the message of their lives to sink deeply into our hearts, and from there into our actions.

May it be also said of each of us: "We didn't quit."

With best wishes for a NEW year,



Daniel Hirsch
President

SUMMARY OF BRIDGE THE GAP 2002 WORK

We've had a number of important victories in our work this year, plus some frustrations:

- We won a lawsuit against the state Health Department, overturning regulations that set very lax cleanup standards for contaminated nuclear sites.
- Legislation barring a nuclear waste dump at Ward Valley, near the Colorado River, passed and was signed into law.
- Additional legislation that we sponsored--to prohibit radioactive waste from being disposed of in municipal landfills, metal recyclers and other unlicensed sites--passed the Legislature with overwhelming margins, only to be vetoed by the Governor. He has, however imposed a temporary moratorium on radioactive wastes going to municipal landfills (but not other sites not licensed for such wastes) while the state comes up with new regulations that would presumably permit such deregulation generally.
- We helped a low-income farmworker community near Bakersfield successfully win the first phase in a proceeding to stop a hazardous waste landfill from taking radioactive wastes, for which they were neither licensed nor designed; this pressured the company to commit to never again take such wastes.
- We got significant national coverage for our work trying to improve protections against nuclear terrorism, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is now finally on the verge of some upgrade of requirements--not as much as we have proposed, but progress nonetheless.

These are tough fights, with very powerful (and well-funded) forces allied against us. That we can beat them from time to time despite the odds is a testament not only to a lot of long hours and tough organizing, but also the community of support that makes it all possible.