

A HEALING MOMENT

Told by Brother David Stendl-Rast

New York City had never seen anything like it: close to a million people demonstrating against the insanity of nuclear arms. It was 1982. The Cold War was quietly raging.

The people marched from the United Nations headquarters to Central Park, taking half a day to walk those few miles slowly, deliberately, claiming the streets with their banners, charts, signs, and songs. Among them was a quiet band of Buddhist and Christian monks, including Brother David and his companion, the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh.*

*A leader in the nonviolent movement for peace in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh believed that mindfulness, insight, and altruistic love should be the foundation for any political action. His vision was so powerful that after meeting him in 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. strengthened his commitment to nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement, and, in solidarity with his new friend, King took the controversial step of supporting the anti-Vietnam War movement. King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize with characteristic eloquence: "His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."

They were enjoying the crowd: the colorful array of streamers and signs, masks and costumes, clowns surrounded by children, musicians and singers. There were Veterans of Foreign Wars, Grandmothers for Peace, parents wheeling babies, and dogs displaying peaceful slogans on their backs—a day of pure joy in solidarity. On the evening news, New York City's chief of police praised the demonstrators for cleaning up every scrap of trash along their route, right down to the gum wrappers.

Why not leave it at that? A group of students from Columbia University with whom Brother David set out the next morning had grappled all night with this question. They decided there are times when we can—and should—forget what

divides us; but other times we must take an active stand for our beliefs. We must make a clean cut, when necessary, so healing can take place. In this spirit, that morning, Brother David and the students would obstruct access to the office of the French delegation to the UN, as other groups were doing the same at offices of the other countries that kept the arms race going. There was to be no violence, even if they were attacked.

As a symbol of their message, they brought bread to share, baskets of fresh, fragrant, home-baked bread. The banner above them read BREAD NOT BOMBS. They sang and prayed and broke the bread, offering it to people rushing by on their way to work. Occasionally someone stopped long enough to read their banner and eat some bread. Homeless people, drawn to the food and company, pulled up with their shopping carts full of belongings.

Soon a police squad moved in and surrounded the entrance to the building. The police asked the protestors to clear out. They stayed. "Do you want to get arrested?" an officer asked. "We want to stay here," a protestor answered, "even if that means getting arrested." The police lowered the visors on their helmets and grabbed their clubs. The protestors knelt down and refused to move.

It was a strange scene, those two lines of people confronting each other, face to face, less than two feet apart. In Brother David's mind, it became a figure in a dance, one position suspended in time. An hour went by, then another. They stood. They sang. They prayed the Lord's Prayer aloud, over and over: "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us . . . as we forgive." Another hour passed.

They came to know the buttons on the police uniforms in greater detail than they'd ever known the buttons on their own coats. They were close enough to hear one another's breathing, had it not been for the city noises. Behind the bars of the visor opposite him, Brother David looked into the eyes of a young man. In a different context, he might have called those eyes gentle. He imagined the man's mother proudly showing her neighbors a photo of her son in uniform. By now, he felt like a brother to him. He wondered if the feeling could be mutual.

He didn't understand why they hadn't been arrested and taken off in a paddy wagon hours ago. Why this deadlock? Later they learned that more arrests had been made that day than ever before in the history of New York City. Every police van, and even schoolbuses, had been pressed into service to cart off the demonstrators. Perhaps, when it was their turn, no vehicles were available to take them to jail.

Employees of the French offices came and went. Then one small, silver-haired gentleman in a gray three-piece suit and tie stopped. Looking down the gauntlet—a long row of helmets facing a long row of unprotected heads—Brother David could see the man's face, timid and anxious, exactly where the lines converged. Then something happened, as if a high voltage had built up between the two poles, and suddenly a spark jumped. The man's face lit up. He read the banner, BREAD NOT BOMBS, took off his hat, and—bravely, proudly—held out his hand. He took a piece of bread and put it in his mouth, solemnly almost, as if it were Holy Communion. And in a way, it was.

Shortly after that, the police took off their helmets, shook hands with the demonstrators, and let them go. One of the officers raised his hand in the victory sign. But what Brother David will never forget is the moment when that clerk's face lit up—the victory of his own private conviction—and his own healing.

Touching the present moment is the door to everything.

THICH NHAT HANH

Your gift to the hungry may be small. Find out how you can give it the greatest leverage by contacting **Bread for the World** at 800-82-BREAD, or by visiting their Web site, www.bread.org.

If you want to learn mindfulness with Thich Nhat Hanh by attending a retreat, or to receive a list of his books and tapes, contact the **Community of Mindful Living** at Parallax Press, P.O. Box 7355, Berkeley, CA 94707; or visit www.plumvillage.org.