

Surviving Nuclear Threats

Rosalie Bertell recalls the end of World War II with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although her family was happy that the war was over, there was no celebration in her house. She remembers her mother saying “they shouldn’t have done it, they shouldn’t have done it.”

But Bertell did not become active in the peace movement until she had a heart attack in 1972. She stopped teaching and devoted more time to researching the environmental and hereditary factors influencing leukemia.

“As I learned more I became more and more involved.” When she was invited to testify on the effects of low-level radiation at a nuclear plant licencing hearing, she started asking “Where did they get permission to give everyone radiation exposure? And who said it was ok?”

Still, she left the peace aspect to others until two events forced it into her consciousness. Eight years ago she was invited to speak in commemoration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. She spoke with survivors, living examples of what she had been researching. Then she went to a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) briefing—a whole day describing the weapons of war. During the question period she asked “How many people die every year in the production of these bombs?” Finally Paul Wainke, a key American SALT II negotiator, said quietly into the microphone, “That’s not our department.”

Said Bertell “that really hit me because I knew the military didn’t count the cost in money but it was so obvious that they didn’t count the cost in lives either.”

For Bertell, there has been no turning back

Kinesis spoke with Bertell in February as she passed through Vancouver on her way home from the Marshall Islands.

Kinesis: Does your perspective have anything to do with being a woman?

Bertell: Oh yes, it certainly does. This is a caricature but I think it’s fairly accurate. Men somehow or other consider that their part of life is economics, how much it costs, what’s the political clout, who’s in charge, who has the most power. They judge activities on maximizing the economics and the political clout. This is behind their planning.

Strategic planners have economists and political scientists, physicists and engineers. They don't hire biologists, or medical doctors, geneticists or pediatricians. They consider the other part of life—human life—not their business.

I think it stems from the fact that somebody has fed them and clothed them and nourished them and they've never worried about that part of life. It's rather astonishing to hear strategic planners talk about the possibility of nuclear war out in the Pacific Ocean without anyone saying "what about our food?" That's the fish supply for the people of the world. That doesn't enter into the equation.

There's very little feeling for the fact that the earth is alive, the earth recycles everything in the water and the food, and the air. We need the trees and the insects and the animals and the birds in order to live ourselves. There's also no feeling for the longterm effects on the human race. If you damage the gene pool (the effect of low-level radiation), you produce children who are damaged.

Those children are physically less able to cope, and then you give them a more hazardous world to cope with. You can't keep doing it. It's a snowballing disaster undermining survivability of the human race. And the strategic planners don't think about that, it's not in the equation.

Kinesis: What do women have to offer?

Bertell: I think women are going to have to do something about this one. The women are the ones who have been cleaning up for years, and this one they can't actually clean up, so they'd better stop the whole thing.

It's going to have to come from someone *outside* this system because this system can't solve its own problems. There's no economic and political solution. It's not going to come from the people in political power because their *basis* of power is war. As the threat of war increases, so does the power of the leaders, so they're not likely to do away with the spiral...

Kinesis: What is the prognosis for life on this planet, even if there is no nuclear war?

Bertell: We're already into a slow death syndrome, but it's going to soon become very obvious. We're probably now seeing the third generation of the nuclear age. I suspect that by the fifth generation everyone will know what's happened, but by then it becomes more difficult to stop it

because you've got genetically damaged people and a genetically damaged earth. We're damaging people.

Quality of life is going to have to be the value we choose. If we don't have life, and strength and health, it's going to become harder and harder to get anything else. Civilization is a sham, it's getting rotten from the inside out.

Kinesis: How do you say stop?

Bertell: Non-cooperation is the basis. We have to find more ways in which we cooperate to stop the escalation. I don't think you can do it alone, you need to belong to a community where you keep questioning "how am I helping, how am I cooperating, how can I withdraw my money and my labour from this insanity and how can I make my non-cooperation visible?"

I would expect the peace movement to eventually say "on Friday between one and three o'clock nobody is going to work. We're giving you a message that we don't approve." If this doesn't work we do it on Wednesday and Friday and so on until the message gets across that we're serious, we're not just out here parading once a year saying we want peace, and meanwhile the rest of the time helping you prepare for war. The message has got to get across loud and clear that business is just not going to be done.

I would expect women will take the lead. Women have always been the change agents in society, while men's traditional role has been maintaining the status quo. Major change movements have been initiated by women.

Kinesis: Is there hope?

Bertell: People give up, but I guess because of my medical background—I don't. If somebody has had polio or a disastrous automobile accident, you don't say "oh well, this person is going to be harmed for life so to heck with it." You don't give up. I feel that way about the earth. We've hurt ourselves as a people, the earth, but you don't just give up and say "what the heck, we might as well just blow the whole thing up." You try to say "ok, yes, we did do that, let's stop doing it in the future and let's maximize what health is left on the earth and have a decent existence."

I can't understand giving up. Every individual has to die at some point, and that doesn't mean

you don't ever live. You don't say "well, I'm doomed to die therefore I never will live." I don't understand that attitude at all. There is hope, there's hope that we can live and there's no reason to roll up in the corner and die just because we've done what we've done to ourselves. Life belongs to the survivors.

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