

Walking in Prison Shoes  
By Lil Mattingly, MM

**Lil is serving 6 months in prison in Danbury, Connecticut, for illegal entering Fort Benning, while protesting the School of the Americas (see January/February 2005 *Connection*). Below is the full text of her reflections on peacemaking behind bars. An edited version appears in the July/August issue of *Connection*.**

I feel very honored to be asked to write something for NETWORK, especially something related to Peacemaking.

As I sit here in the prison camp in Danbury, Connecticut, I think about all the beautiful articles, reflections and poems on Peace that have been sent by thoughtful persons to share with me. What more could I possibly add? Now, after 2 months of living, learning and surviving with 190 other women this hotbed of stress called a “Correctional Institution,” I venture to write about how my current experiences and relationships with the women have added to my understanding of what peacemaking can be.

Here, almost every day, there can be a crisis. An argument between two of the women over using the laundry machines; a teasing remark is taken personally and tempers flare; something disappears and someone is suspected of taking it; someone cuts in line ahead of others (and there are many lines where we wait for something or other); someone is punished and sent to segregated “cage” confinement while everyone knows it is because another resident has “snitched” on her (told the Officer of some infringement of a rule)... etc., etc. Potential disaster living...based on fear, humiliation, control, punishment.

However, for every unkind word spoken between women residents, I believe there have been two or more kind ones; and even though there is no formal process for resolving conflicts among the residents, still the women find amazing ways to do their own peacemaking. Just today, Mary 20, I was inspired by one young woman who I’m getting to know as we are in a group going to our work areas each day. She and another had been exchanging insults, the other making comments about her size, calling her “half-pint.” The young woman flared back calling the other “dummy” and more. Then she turned to me and said, “Oh, Sister, you didn’t hear that,” so I said, “You are venting your anger, but you know, I think that kind of negativity not only hurts you, but it goes out into the universe as a form of violence.” Later, I watched as the young woman went to sit by the other and was making an effort at friendly conversation. When another was taunting her, she actually said, “I don’t like the negativity...” I have since learned how this young woman came from a very deprived childhood, and age 19 “rescued” her younger sister and brother from their negligent parents.

One day at breakfast I noticed one of the women as she was dashing from her table back to the food line. My thought was, “Gee, she looks wild with her blonde hair flying out all over her head,” and I recalled when I had recently overheard her cursing at the bathroom sink saying how she hated one of the women... All of a sudden, my attention was caught

up short as I saw the reason for her rushing: she was helping to carry the tray of an older white-headed resident who uses a walker...

Next day was Mother's Day. I was talking in Spanish with one of the women from the Dominican Republic who is very sad and bitter about being here (I had an earlier conversation with her about her sentencing and her saying tearfully that she was innocent and shouldn't be here, how she can't trust anyone anymore except her family.) Now as she shared her joy with me about the visit of her son and grandson, one of the young women residents came up to us and asked me if the other woman spoke English. The woman said yes, she did, and the young one (who I had also hear cursing before and avoiding work) smiled beautifully and said, "I just wanted to tell her she has a beautiful family. Her son is so polite!" I just stood there in admiration as the two very different women embraced warmly...

When we consider all the reasons for a prison being a high-stress arena, it seems too many to name here. What I have seen, walking in prison shoes, are what seem to be tension-releasing happenings such as: the women doing each others' hair and nails; cooking for one another and eating together; crocheting, making things for one another; greeting others with endearing names; random acts of kindness! I have found that by asking as many women as I could what peacemaking means to them, not only did some very profound conversations ensue, but a few kept reflecting and put in writing their thoughts which I can share:

From one of the women: "Before I begin to embrace the challenges of a new day, I take a moment to open my heart and mind to God, praying for peace. The challenge is, not watering down my principles to fit in, but to take a stand by the way I live; which enables me to diffuse situations with a kind word or just listening, not repeating negative stories or being judgmental. I appreciate the diversity in others and make myself available to be a friend, especially at emotional and stressful times, when it is so easy to blow things out of proportion. I call on God's peace, and guidance to support me in roles of mother, grandmother, sister or friend to bring calm and peace into any confrontational situation, as humbly as I know how."

From another: By finding peace within myself, I'm finding that I'm better able to be compassionate and more apt to hold out a helping hand to my sister inmates to offer them the better part of me, and not the angry self-centered woman I once was... A friend helped me to see that about myself. When you use drugs, drink, you stop growing... what I need to figure out is why I needed drugs. I didn't realize how much damage I was doing."

One woman spent days thinking about the different aspects of peace, how it has to be experienced; that communication plays an important part, needing to be truthful, and how coming to a knowledge of God who is Peace is essential. She wrote a poem in prose:

Peace by prayer

By quiet meditative prayer

Softly gently touching hearts and minds  
Prayer in solitude and secret  
Prayer in groups peacefully and serenely  
Peace by example  
Softly gently inviting  
Joyful serenity  
Healthy heartfelt living caring tenderness  
Laughter too!

What is tremendously helpful in our situation here in Danbury – to think, pray and work toward peacemaking is the presence of Dominican Sister Ardeth Platte. She has been an advocate with others for PEACE WITH JUSTICE for years and has spent many of those years in prison for Plowshares and other peace activities. She lives peacemaking by prayer and example, loving the women and looking out for their needs while inviting groups to reflect on Scripture and our daily lives. In these ways, we help one another to be more aware of personal and local peacemaking as well as global peacemaking.

Since Alice Gerard and I arrived to serve our 6 months' sentence for "illegal re-entry onto Ft. Benning" to protest the SOA/WHINSEC and Militarism, we continue to be inspired by Ardeth, and with her to experience a mutual ministering to and from the other women inmates.

I close with a quote from Peace Pilgrim, who walked miles and years for peace: "In order to help usher in the golden age we must see the good n people. We must know it is there, no matter how deeply it may be buried. Yes, apathy is there and selfishness it there – but good is there also. It is not through judgment that the good can be reached, but through love and faith." (Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words, An Ocean Tree Book, Santa Fe, NM; 1994, p. 87)