

BY GARY MCFARLANE AND DARRYL ECHT

Sometime in our murky past, the self-elected "leaders" of Earth First! issued some decisions: The movement was too violent, too morally impure, too fascistic, too stupid, the wrong media grist and in need of education (or something like that). Anyhow, it was decided that we should clean up our act and become ethically-principled resisters (warriors being a bit too frightening a term). But now, instead of simply being nonviolent (which most of us were already) we are in danger of becoming a cult of nonviolence.

Cults have a strange propensity to subliminally obfuscate their goals. Like all good cultists, we step glassy-eyed forward to our daily ritual of nonviolence, rarely questioning why our value is measured by our ritual performance, let alone questioning the ritual itself. And since noted authorities on the matter recognize questioning and analysis as essential to deprogramming, it is time for Earth First!ers to take a critical look at our own sacred mass: nonviolent civil disobedience. (Religious parallels are not entirely facetious. The historical preacher of nonviolence, the great Gandhi himself, said that it is a way of life, a literal religion.)

The first step in deprogramming a cult mentality is recognizing the cult. Cults are built on a single dogma. Perhaps our closest example is the US Forest Service, whose dogma is logging—the prescription for every situation. Introspection is avoided and individual solutions foregone for the sake of perpetuating dogma issued by the "priesthood."

Likewise, we have established our own nonviolent priesthood. As "actions" to defend the Earth have become dogmatic (civil disobedience applied without situational analysis) and technical, we have determined that we need experts, priests. Now, this may be well and good for actions that are not innate, like dangling on high-tech ropes with all sorts of fancy hardware. But, we also have decided that we need experts to teach us the tactics of nonviolence in the tradition of Thoreau, Gandhi and Parks (she did it long before King did). The learned and/or experienced among us have become nonviolence trainers—they've been ordained. And they've been empowered to feed us a single dogma.

What's so wrong with experts, you say? Well, overreliance on them creates an imbalance, an unhealthy hierarchy that haunts campaigns. Too frequently we defer decision making to our experts or priests. Experience is important, but it isn't every-

thing. Ceding moral or ethical decisions to sanctified, "qualified" individuals is disempowering. Do we really want or need experts to tell us how to behave? Step two, friends, is gently ushering our priests and priestesses off the altar and seating them with the rest of us, around the fire.

Once we are all there as equals, we can begin step three (light that cigarette or whiff that sage,



Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X

'cause this one ain't easy). We must define "nonviolence" itself. Our collective notions of nonviolence are as diverse as North American flora and fauna once were. To some, it is simply the absence of deliberate harm to life. To others, a much narrower construct of nonviolence forbids any kind of destruction, even sabotage, as violent. There are even those who claim that the use of harsh words directed at the forces of terracide is violent. When the definition of nonviolence becomes so narrow as to exclude just about everything (especially anything effective or fun), it should be questioned. We must be careful not to apply the term "violent" too loosely. We can call actions what they may be—silly, irreverent, unpleasant—but we should not label them violent simply because we don't like them. As a diverse

movement, rather than a cult, we must accept that the spectrum of nonviolent action is far wider than our priesthood has dictated.

Step four is questioning our ritual. Is civil disobedience effective? We need to constructively analyze this tactic, rather than swallowing it as our holy wafer. Are we open to new ideas or just the same old ones replayed? In what circumstances has civil disobedience been successful?

Sometimes nonviolent civil disobedience diverts us from the message, especially at the point of arrest. Often it is the tactic that becomes the message, not the Earth. The issue for which we choose to be arrested becomes obscured by the act itself. We seize our media opportunity and bump wildlands protection to make room to publicize less-than-pleasant police treatment and jailhouse conditions. Our sound bites reveal more about bipods and pain holds than agency malfeasance and habitat devastation.

Respect for roles that don't involve voluntary arrest is essential. Indoctrination, be it called education or training, creates a group mind. Thoughtful debate is discouraged when all the answers are found within an ideological framework. Autonomy, individualism, creativity and self-motivation can be stifled, and participation by those with heretical tendencies is dissuaded. For example, it has been our experience that some people involved in the Cove/Mallard campaign have not felt their ideas and skills were welcome or respected. Individuals have been literally ostracized for failing to swallow dogma, thereby not only quashing potentially effective new perspectives, but encouraging blind obedience. The bumper stickers on our vehicles may declare "Resist Much, Obey Little," but we are expected to leave such radical notions aside when we pull into camp.

We should look to other historical movements for insight. There has been no movement, struggle or revolution throughout history (that we know of) that has succeeded via a single strategy or tactic. Where cults flounder or perish, genuine movements have flourished. Sinn Fein would never have found its way to the table had the Irish Republican Army not initiated the resistance to British imperialism. The animal-rights movement would be a mere laughing stock if not for the Animal Liberation Front. The Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers played incredibly instrumental roles in the struggle for civil rights in the US. Even our sacred cow, the fight for India's independence, would surely have stagnated in the salt sea without the nameless

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agitators who fought colonialism—clearly outside of Gandhi's dogma.

We should question our dogma by examining the reasons not to sit on the pew. There are numerous valid reasons not to place ourselves in a voluntary arrest scenario. Having a criminal record makes one suspect in other actions; hence, future strategic action becomes dangerous, if not impossible. Many of us can also testify that fighting the system through the court is disempowering. Just as our arrest deflects our message, court shifts our focus and the focus of the campaign. It keeps the focus on the legal system, social justice and human rights—everything *but* logging. The media also focuses on every issue except the destruction. Voluntarily subjecting oneself to arrest becomes an endless energy sink, wasting countless hours of time and effort.

Successful cults demand homogeneity. Step five of our deprogramming requires us to reject the expectation that we all be the same and do the same. A Native American eco-activist told one of us that although he respects those who choose arrest, he would never ask his friends on the reservation to subject themselves to the very power that has enslaved them for over 500 years. As white, mainly middle-class activists, we have a decidedly different experience with the justice system than indigenous people and people of color. The cult of nonviolence begets a paradigm that doesn't recognize different experiences—it mandates that we judge the worth of activists by their willingness to participate in our ritual.

What we have complicitly created is a romantic backdrop for herd mentality. We build heroes, inflate martyrs and devalue the roles of other activists. People feel compelled to win approval by getting arrested, perhaps rejecting what they feel is right or effective. The sixth step back to sanity demands that we release this demon and recognize that all of our roles must be equally revered. Individualism must be respected. If we all look alike, dress alike, unilaterally adopt pseudonyms and expect each other to share all of the same values, we are in big trouble.

Respecting actions outside our dogma need not mean we embrace any action committed in our, or more importantly, the Earth's name. For example, though we may not choose to set the fire, we should recognize that the burning of Peabody

Coal's headquarters was powerfully symbolic and a very real financial loss. The scuttling of whale vessels would never have passed campaign consensus, but it succeeded in slowing a gruesome war. Even rendering earth-destroying machinery unworkable has been effective. These examples do not mean that we all must abandon our own unique skills and become mid-night eco-raiders, but they do suggest that we should set our prejudices aside and recognize their worth.

There is a wide spectrum of creative actions that fall outside our current dogma which are as innocuous as they are effective. Cat-

and-mouse games in the back country play their part in the struggle. Outreach and entertainment, which have nothing to do with civil disobedience, play crucial roles, as do protests and vigils. Isolating those responsible for the destruction, vigilantly haunting them and making their work hard, expensive and even frightening, can save wild places. We are in no position to limit our options—we simply must diversify our strategy, our tactics and our movement by empowering others to carry on the fight with whatever skills they possess.

Maybe there are five more steps before we are recovered cultists. We don't claim to have all the answers, and we aren't pretending there isn't room for nonviolent civil disobedience. We do question its effectiveness, however, particularly in areas where few people are there to support such a campaign. We need more, not fewer, solutions. If you want to join a cult, don a pair of Nikes and start channeling 4-billion year-old spirits, but if you want to defend the Earth, we suggest you bring all your tools to the fire and not fall prey to pick pockets.



Leon Klippenstein

Can you find the undercover fed?