

# Gone Viral

By John Heid

TUSCON, Arizona—May 9, 2020, the 99th anniversary of Dan Berrigan's birth

A half century ago this month Daniel Berrigan, S.J., wrote *America Is Hard to Find: Notes from the Underground and Letters from Danbury Prison*, Doubleday & Co. 1972.

At the time he was underground. Dan and eight others—the Catonsville 9—had been convicted of multiple felonies for burning draft card files in resistance to the US War in Vietnam. He chose to continue his resistance by surreptitiously appearing at anti-war events rather than willingly submit to imprisonment. “On the lam” for four months, Dan spoke publicly, albeit clandestinely, and wrote ferociously. The times were as volatile as the fire. Dan, his brother, Phil and seven others burned hundreds of 1-A draft files. His reflections during this period offered an incisive lens into American culture. That lens, looked through 50 years later, is still acute, clarion.

Why is America still so hard to find? What is America anyway? Dan understood the symbiotic relationship between war and the state of our nation, any nation. He also recognized an antidote: resistance. People power.

War is antithetical to Civil Society. It blurs our visibility, let alone our humanity. What has changed in a half century? What hasn't? Today we find ourselves in the grip of a microscopic virus that rivals the size of the split atom. Suddenly our world is turned upside down. It's become a heyday for doomsday prophets, and profiteers, a free-for-all for conspiracy theorists. Rumor, prediction, and fact have become a sordid *ménage à trois*.

Meanwhile America and much of the world is “doing time” above ground, and staying at home—those who have one. Will the flippant quip “gone viral” ever sound the same? How can our war machine state save us from what we cannot even see without a microscope? Guns, let alone nuclear weapons, are rendered powerless.

An insight I gleaned from Dan's youngest brother, Phil, was to pay attention to the larger context of any political moment. Phil said he learned this lesson during the Vietnam War, when most eyes were

understandably focused on Southeast Asia. Behind the scene, the US stealthily built up its nuclear arsenal. Thus follows my query: what's behind the Covid-19 curtain?

For one, the Tucson-based corporation Raytheon Missiles and Defense secured a multi-billion dollar contract to develop the next generation of air-launched and nuclear-armed missiles—at the height of the pandemic.

The coronavirus is unarguably a major health crisis. Still, in terms of casualties, it amounts to a dress rehearsal to nuclear war. There are ways to minimize the impact of the virus. There is no quarantine from nuclear weapons detonations, no safe space, not even deep in the high-tech bunker at Offutt Air Force Base. There will eventually be a vaccine for Covid-19. There is no cure for nuclear war, only prevention through abolition. The virus has become a partisan issue. Nuclear weapons have bipartisan support. In dystopian terms they are the great equalizer. No one is immune. No one gets out alive.

A pandemic allows us, or perhaps forces us, to recognize our vulnerability, our interdependence. Granted, those with more privilege suffer less in a pandemic. Not so with nuclear war. While our eyes are focused on a cure to resolve our current crisis, another is looming backstage. One might ask, Why isn't the US government investing in a multi-billion dollar research for this pandemic rather than in so-called nuclear security?

There are many smoke screens, so much government subterfuge. Small wonder the heart of America is hard to find. There are war contractor coffers to fill. The heart of America is not underground in resistance. No, it's at large, in plain sight. We are a nation of nuclear war deniers.

Following his imprisonment for the Catonsville 9 action, Dan Berrigan continued his strident resistance to the US militarism, particularly nuclearism, in the streets, in the dock, in jail cells. Nevermore underground. He took his life-long search for America to the grave, and by example urges us to carry on the struggle for disarmament—of ourselves, of fear, of nukes. Only then will we find the heart of America.

— John Heid is a humanitarian aid activist living in Tucson, Arizona



Radioactive waste from fracking is being dumped into landfills and used to remove ice from roads. Source: Oil Change International

## Radioactive Fracking Waste Under a Weakened EPA

By Elena Hight

In early 2020, Justin Nobel published an exposé in *Rolling Stone* on what he called “America's Radioactive Secret.” This secret is the trillions of gallons of fracking wastewater that pour from oil and gas wells each year and make their way along national highways to injection wells and landfills throughout the country.

While some of this waste comes from the mixture of water, sand, and chemical that is injected thousands of feet into the Earth's surface to release fossil fuels trapped in hard shale formations, some of it is radioactive brine. Brine is salt water that is trapped, along with oil and gas, in deep aquifers. Depending on the geological formation, this brine often contains heavy metals and Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials, including lead, uranium, and radium among others. While government organizations and industry leaders claim that the radioactivity levels of the brine are insignificant, Nobel says the amount of radium from the Marcellus Shale—a major source of natural gas extracted through fracking which runs beneath Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia—“averages around 9,300 picocuries per liter, but has been recorded as high as 28,500.” These amounts are hundreds to thousands of times above the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's safety standards.

This waste, which contaminates everything and everyone it touches, is either injected back into the ground or dumped in the landfills or waterways of unsuspecting communities. Sometimes, the brine is even sprayed on local roads to prevent icing. Oil and gas workers, already exposed to a number of dangerous chemicals, are often untrained and unprepared to deal with the radioactive waste that they carry, and the scale that builds up on the trucks, pipes, and equipment can expose them to hundreds of thousands of picocuries per liter (pCi/L) of radiation. The Environmental Protection Agency's Maximum Contaminant Level is 5pCi/L.

Because of exemptions from the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act, there are not many federal regulations on either the wastewater or the wastewater injection wells, leaving a patchwork of state-by-state regulations (some stringent, some alarmingly lenient). In Pennsylvania, this wastewater has even been dumped into local creeks and rivers with minimal treatment, exposing thousands to contaminated drinking water.

Even before the coronavirus, President Trump's Environmental Protection Agency tried to lift what few policies were in place to protect local waterways from insufficiently treated wastewater, but the latest move to completely suspend enforcement of all environmental laws tops all that. As thousands of people die from the government's inept response to coronavirus, Trump is putting other lives at risk by allowing big polluters free license to do damage to land, water, and people. —*Rolling Stone*, Jan. 21, 2020; American Chemical Society, July 12, 2017; Connecticut General Assembly Office of Legislative Research Report, 2013

