

Donna Mulhearn is a former journalist and political adviser. After becoming a human shield in 2003, she returned to Iraq as a humanitarian aid worker to set up a shelter for street kids and support refugee families. She now works with young people as part of the Edmund Rice Foundation in Sydney and is an independent writer and speaker on non-violence, spirituality and politics.

I



## The call

Saddam Hussein must understand that if he does not disarm, for the sake of peace, we, along with others, will go disarm Saddam Hussein.

GEORGE W. BUSH, US PRESIDENT, 31 JANUARY 2003



We think that military intervention would be the worst possible solution ...

DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN, FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER, 20 JANUARY 2003



TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY 2003

*Make your way to Baghdad. Join a mass migration of foreigners to stop the war in Iraq.*

My heart stops for a second. What did he say?

This lazy, sunny morning at a friend's house in Sydney's suburbs I abandon the ironing and run to turn up the radio. It's an interview on Triple J's morning show with Ken O'Keefe, a former US marine who'd served in the 1991 Gulf War, but later became a peace activist. I concentrate hard as he speaks:

So I think the only way to stop this war in my opinion is to get down to Iraq in a mass migration. To get thousands of white, Western lives down there, because if there's white, Western lives at stake it will make it politically impossible for our governments to carry out these war policies.

He goes on to say that if the war goes ahead, these people would station themselves at important humanitarian sites to protect them from bombing.

'We'll be human shields,' he says.

I raise my eyebrows, draw a long, deep breath and whistle it out slowly, astounded by the plan. I can't believe what I'm hearing. It's so bold. So damn gutsy. I feel tears start to form in my eyes.

'This is it,' I whisper. 'I have to go.'

I grab a pen and paper. My hands are shaking as I scribble down the website address that's mentioned.

I smile and cheer and cry out to the empty room: 'Yes! This is it! This is *it!*'

People have assumed that I suffered many sleepless nights before deciding to go to Iraq as a human shield, but really, all it took was one moment. That one sacred and defining moment. It's what I had been waiting for.

The context of that moment was summertime in Sydney, early 2003. A hot wind was blowing; Australia was beating England in the cricket; and talk of a possible war in Iraq upped a few notches in intensity. Sydney's usual self-indulgent sunny spirit was troubled by daily news reports about the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the progress of UN weapons inspections and the US president getting tough with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Talkback radio was buzzing with opinions for and against going to war; peace groups organised vigils at the Town Hall; families argued over dinner; politicians polished their lines. Saddam Hussein's removal was well worth the use of force, the pro-war camp maintained. He must be disarmed lest his weapons fall into the hands of terrorists. Scepticism about Saddam's weapons cache and his links with 'terrorists', questions about motives, concern that alternatives had not been exhausted and the potential human catastrophe of a war in Iraq put me and many others in the anti-war camp.

I was busy preparing for the next leg of a year-long journey that was taking me to wonderful places around the world. The two months I had back in Sydney were supposed to be no more than a pause in my travels. I'd left my job, as media adviser to a minister in the New South Wales government, about six months before, tired of the high pressure and long hours. But worse than having to take my phone into the shower every morning, in case the minister called, was all the

nonsense—the games, power-plays, the pettiness. I felt as if all I did was argue. I'd become disillusioned with the adversarial world of politics and alarmed at the person it was making me: exhausted, cranky, always on guard, ready to strike on cue.

Ten years before I would have loved it all. A former journalist, naturally aggressive and politically ambitious, I'd have been in my element. But there had been a change: a gradual yet dramatic change that had begun a few years before in a small town in Ireland, far from the Macquarie Street bear pit. It started within me and found its way out, challenging my priorities and transforming my life. I'd discovered an ancient form of contemplative spirituality—the practice of Christian meditation.

Over time this practice led me along the path of self-knowledge and exploration of what it means to be fully human. I found myself connecting more deeply with the humanity of others, no matter who they were or where they were from. This connection made it impossible to consider, say, bombing their countries, let alone hurting them in any way. Needless to say, after this inner transformation, I found my priorities changing. I was ready for a different life: a life that focused more on being—being human, rather than just rushing around *doing* things without time to 'consider the lilies of the field'.

Now I wanted to devote my life to sharing this teaching with others—particularly with young people. But I knew that transforming myself from a stressed out twenty-four/seven press secretary to a teacher of Christian meditation would not happen overnight. So I decided to leave my busy job and career ambitions behind and, in preparation for my new vocation, embark on a journey—a pilgrimage that would nourish my soul with silence and solitude. I set a goal: to explore the mystical traditions of the world's major religions to see how they related to my own, newly adopted practice. I would write

about my experiences and insights along the way. I printed up business cards with a Celtic symbol as my logo, reflecting my ancestry and the land of my spiritual rebirth. The card read: *Donna Mulhearn, Pilgrim and Storyteller.*

I travelled to Tibet and lived in a Buddhist nunnery on a remote hilltop. I journeyed through Alaska, and then Canada, where I attended a silent retreat with my spiritual community, the World Community for Christian Meditation, led by its director, Benedictine monk Father Laurence Freeman, a wise spiritual teacher.

The topic of the retreat was the nonviolence of Jesus. This teaching had been preached in churches for ages, yet largely ignored in practice, resulting in the appalling violence unleashed by Christians of various denominations over the centuries. The philosophy of non-violence was presented to me in a way I had never heard before, or perhaps, as a contemplative, now I could actually hear it: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.* I imagined what might happen if we actually did that! The response of Jesus when he was confronted with violence was breathtaking—first, an order to those who would protect him: *Put down the sword;* and later, while being beaten up, just a pointed question: *Why do you strike me?* Suggestions on how to live this philosophy day-to-day were never offered in the Sunday sermons I had heard. When I thought about how this teaching could be applied in the world, whether in family lounge rooms or at the White House, I felt shame at our past failures and hope at future possibilities.

For myself, I pledged I would try to find ways to practice this teaching. As I spent those days at the retreat surrounded by a powerful silence, 'Who would Jesus bomb?' was a question I could not get out of my mind.

So in January 2003, I'm back in Sydney preparing for the next leg of my pilgrimage: first stop, the desert monasteries of Egypt, then on to Turkey. I'd been anticipating the adventures ahead and rushing around arranging visas and gathering supplies.

But all the talk of a possible war in Iraq makes me uneasy. I feel an urgent need to challenge those who advocate violence, to demand they pursue the alternatives—I just don't know how to make them listen. I know that inflicting terror and violence on people already oppressed with terror and violence would only result in more disaster for them. It would usher in a new cycle of violence for the world to deal with. Plans had been put forward by credible people about how Saddam Hussein could be ousted nonviolently—plans that targeted the man himself without hurting the Iraqi people and devastating their country. But with other, darker motives in play, it seemed the war machine would move in, regardless of the peaceful alternatives available. My frustration is brewing inside me. I know that others feel it, too.

I want to do something, anything, but especially something in keeping with the teaching of nonviolence that I'm trying to follow. I recite daily the powerful prayer inspired by that gentle medieval monk, St Francis of Assisi: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred let me bring love.*

The hunger of the White House for a war and the enthusiasm my government is showing towards these plans make the prayer of St Francis take on a much greater urgency. But faced with gun-toting governments determined to use brute force, how can anyone be an instrument of peace?

'It's all right for you St Francis,' I mutter under my breath more than once. 'Back in thirteenth century Italy, you didn't have George W. Bush to deal with! Or Saddam Hussein, nuclear

weapons, suicide bombers and talkback radio.' Still, I wished I had a telephone line through time so I could call and ask St Francis' advice. Some days the frustration caused by my feelings of impotence is exasperating. I'm readying my backpack to resume my pilgrimage, but in a corner of my heart there is something nagging away; something that makes me hesitate.

It's around this time that I hear the call.

TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY 2003

Join a mass migration of foreigners to stop the war in Iraq!

The call is literally an answer to my prayer, or the chance for me to live the prayer. The frustration I'd experienced is replaced by a huge sense of relief. Now I feel empowered, exhilarated. Joining a group of ordinary people coming together to face the might of the US military is the perfect way to express my opposition to the war. As a human shield living amongst Iraqis, I could protect important sites and so much more. I could also bear witness to the impact of the war, write stories, show solidarity with the Iraqi people and bring to them a message of peace from Australia.

It's perfect. I can sense St Francis smiling.

The plan also supports my belief in nonviolent direct action. History shows that nonviolent movements have succeeded time and time again in deposing dictators, securing human rights and toppling corrupt governments: for example the actions of Gandhi in India, the people of the Philippines and, more recently, the masses in Serbia who removed dictator Slobodan Milosevic peacefully, after NATO bombs and violence had failed to do so. The human shield concept is consistent with my beliefs. So to act on these beliefs and put my money where my mouth is: I have to go.

I log onto the human shield website that was announced on the radio, my heart beating at twice its normal pace. I register my details and prepare to follow the most immediate piece of advice the website offered—*Make your way to Baghdad*—by cancelling my plans for Egypt and elsewhere. Instead I book a ticket to Jordan, where human shields would converge before travelling to Iraq.

Although on the face of it, going to Iraq to witness a war is a big departure from my pilgrimage, in a certain way, it isn't. I believe that everyone has opportunities throughout life to contribute to peace and justice in the world, regardless of religious disposition. Other people hear other calls to different places, at different times. This is mine. My pilgrimage would continue; it would be a pilgrimage of peace.

I feel the freedom that comes from acting on what I feel to be the truth, of being obedient to the truth, to my conscience. I feel the joy that comes from deciding to be who I really am, with giving voice to my humanity.

In the days after hearing the call, I ensure that this voice is loudest in my ears as I gather documents, copies of passports and other things that the human shield office require. I expect that other voices, from family, friends and acquaintances, will be sceptical and negative, so I don't tell too many people about my plan at that early stage. I will deal with Mum, and others, later.

Those planning to join the mission are asked to submit a statement explaining why we want to go to Iraq as human shields, and to accept full responsibility for all possible outcomes, including injury or death. Despite my decision not to dwell on the negatives, I need to take some quiet moments to prepare this statement. As I put the words together I wonder why I'm not more spooked by the prospect of death. I keep thinking that if I'm going to die at some stage, then dying for

something I believe in is surely the best way to go. And if we are to be serious advocates of nonviolence, surely we have to be prepared to take the same risks for peace as soldiers take for war. If I die for a cause, I know I would have first lived, fully lived. As I write the statement, I feel a lightness in my spirit: it feels as though I am actually choosing life, not possible death. Anyway, I feel I'm exactly the sort of person that *should* be going to Iraq. I'm sure others who oppose the war would like to go but can't because of family commitments and other responsibilities. My circumstances are more conducive: I am single, without children, and have no debt and no dependents.

I send the following words to a person called Uzma Bashir, the contact name given on the website, who seems to be coordinating things in London.

I, Donna Mulhearn, want to travel to Iraq to stand with the Iraqi people as they are targeted by US military action. I believe the aggression of the US towards Iraq is not warranted or justified. I believe people of the world want to see our leaders work towards peace not war. I understand that the Human Shield action in Iraq is a highly dangerous and potentially life-threatening trip. I have thought seriously about the consequences to my person and have decided to volunteer as a human shield. This decision has been made of my own free will and I am going entirely at my own risk.

I have a million questions racing around my head and I send a few by email to Uzma, hoping she can shed some light: how do I actually get to Iraq from Jordan? Where will we stay in Baghdad? What might our costs be? How cold will it be?

How do I get a visa? My questions generally receive the same answer: ‘updated info coming soon ... please watch the website for more’.

This spontaneous birth of a new peace movement is as chaotic as it is exciting. I’d heard of precedents of such nonviolent action: in the 1980s small peace teams in Nicaragua placed their bodies in front of villages to protect them from attack by the US-backed Contras, and in Palestine and other places ‘accompaniment’ work is done, where internationals protect locals from violence by being present and bearing witness. But I soon find out that no-one involved in this mission has done anything like it on this scale before. We will all pay our own way and take everything with us that we need to be self-sufficient. We are about to walk, together, into the unknown.

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## Instrument

We know that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons  
of mass destruction; he’s determined to make more.

COLIN POWELL, US SECRETARY OF STATE, SPEECH TO UN SECURITY COUNCIL,

5 FEBRUARY 2003



We have said many times before and we say it again today, that  
Iraq is free of such weapons.

SADDAM HUSSEIN, IRAQI PRESIDENT 6 FEBRUARY 2003