

Interview with Tom Keating, Author of 'Yesterday's Soldier'

Andria Williams for The Wrath-Bearing Tree:

I was honored to read Tom Keating's memoir, '[Yesterday's Soldier](#),' an excellently written and sensitive account of his time as a non-combatant servicemember during the Vietnam War. Tom had been a novice in the Roman Catholic priesthood, but when the priests at his seminary deemed him a not-ideal candidate for that calling, he enlisted in the army, which caused him a massive change in his state of mind. His responses to some of my questions are below, and the link to the full interview is embedded. Please come watch – Tom is a great speaker, and his thoughts on how various cultures of religion and obedience play into military service are interesting.

Good news: Tom is now happily married and lives in Massachusetts.

*

WBT: Can you explain your path from seminary school into the military?

Tom Keating: I am the first son of my family of Irish Roman Catholics. Back then, to be a priest was admirable. I attended an all boys' catholic high school taught by priests, the Congregation of Holy Cross. They were young priests, and they were great role models. The idea of being like them grew as I went through the four years. In my senior year, I sought their advice and declared my intention to be one of them. The next

five and one half of my life I was one of them.



My admission of my CO struggle at Bridgewater State college during the class on educational philosophy. The assignment was, we all had to share a moment of radical action we performed. The class was full of veterans. It was tough to share my story with them. Their positive reaction to my story gave me the idea to write a book, but it took years to complete.

WBT: You mention that there were 27 novitiates in your first-year group, but only 5 remaining when you left. What do you think made them leave?

Tom Keating: I was a young seminarian full of the aggiornamento of the church, full of the idea to be Christ's apostle for the flock, so to speak. That flock included the young men who wanted to avoid the draft. I saw my role as ministering to them. Hell, I even co-signed a loan for my friend, a coed who needed money. Of course I had none myself. That action and my activities did in fact affect my future as a priest. The men who were in charge of the seminary were afraid of the liberal trend in the church that I embraced. I originally wrote in the EPILOGUE of the book "And Father's world? The world he lived in, one of order, Latin masses, strict obedience to a hierarchy, Gregorian Chants, celibacy, black cassocks and clerical collars, a world he treasured and tried to protect? He was right to be afraid. That world had been turned into-dogshit." A reference to the dog poop on the previously spotless corridors of the seminary ([Cat, my editor,](#) thought I should change that, so I did make it milder.)

My Dad and I watched the demonstrations in Chicago during the convention. I was home then from the seminary. We shared our

shock and disgust at the police in the riot. He was from the World War 2 generation, respect for authority, etc. It cemented our relationship.

There were violent incidents where I *didn't* have that aversion, mostly in-country. A monument to Army training/brainwashing. In the book, I described a vehicle accident that happened when I was on my way to the elephant factory. That violence was accepted by me and the jeep driver. The dead bodies on the wire after a sapper attack elicited no aversion, just acknowledgement of our firepower. I was bothered by that but could not show it.

Seminary life in 1963-64 was harsh. Monastic rule meant sparse meals, rule of silence except when in class, early morning prayers before breakfast, work on the property after class. No social life, parental visits once a month, poverty chastity and obedience. The social dynamic of 27 mostly teenage boys in that pressure cooker of conformity and strict rules was tough. The novitiate year, where we spent working and praying on a farm in Vermont was very strenuous. It was a pressure cooker, like military basic training, only it lasted one whole year. Our farm was located outside the town of Bennington VT, and we could hear the music playing on car radios that drove by. The world was driving by us, and we were anchored in a centuries-old system. Desertion from the novitiate was swift. We finished the year there with 10 newly sworn in religious.

War and peace today? Of course right now the Ukrainians are being assaulted by Russia. Peace is harder to find. I don't have any great thoughts on war and peace except to say countries are fighting for lithium and rare earths now, and resources like water and iron and salt and sugar. It is insane. I try to have peace around me, so I work with my church and the local veterans' community to help them. I can't do much for nations and their wars, but I can give peace to my friends and social circle.

*

Watch the full interview with Tom Keating here: