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Discrete events aren't important, it's the journey

John Dear S.J. | Aug. 12, 2008 On the Road to Peace

(A note from John Dear: For your end of summer reading, I offer here excerpts from my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, published last week from Loyola Press. We'll begin with part of the introduction. Have a peaceful August!)

Over the years I've committed my story to paper in fits and starts -- journals now stowed away in file cabinets, scattered notes in folders, half-developed reflections lying about. Lately it seemed good to stitch the pieces together, to make of them a coherent memoir. It's an exercise that leads to introspection like nothing else. The mystery of life unfolds. The meaning of events draws near. I've enjoyed the process, returning to events and smelling the bloom of significance.

Along the way I pondered the question: Which event ranks highest? Perhaps the day I renounced all my plans, including my dream of becoming a rock star, to serve God as a Jesuit. Perhaps that day in Israel, camped by the Sea of Galilee, pondering the Beatitudes, pledging to make them mine if only I were given a sign -- and then ducking as Israeli jets appeared out of nowhere, thundered overhead, and unleashed their bombs in Lebanon. That was surely a sign of something.

Maybe the key moment was when I entered the Jesuits and professed a vow of nonviolence. Or when I journeyed to the Pentagon to protest war, ended up in handcuffs, and received word from my superior that he had dismissed me from the Jesuits -- a dismissal later overturned.

My most significant season could be one turbulent summer in El Salvador. There I made my home in a makeshift camp with long-suffering Salvadoran refugees and witnessed daily U.S. bombing raids. In El Salvador, I met the visionary Jesuits at the University of Central America, who were assassinated a few years after.

Or perhaps my most important days were still to come -- days in Iraq, India, Haiti, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, Northern Ireland and Palestine. Or my years of banishment to a Jesuit high school in Scranton for challenging Jesuit authority. Or my stretch at a homeless shelter blocks from the U.S. Capitol. Or later at Berkeley, ostensibly studying theology, but spending more time organizing demonstrations against U.S. military actions.

Certainly, one would think my ordination to the priesthood ranks high -- ordained at last despite Jesuit annoyance with me. But so did my 1993 Plowshares action, during which I entered an Air Force base in North

Carolina and hammered on an F15 -- in biblical terms, to "beat swords into plowshares," the most notorious of some seventy-five arrests for peace. Or my years as director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest interfaith peace group in the U.S. Or perhaps when I paddled a canoe down Connecticut's Thames River to block a Trident submarine. Or my work for the New York Red Cross consoling grieving family members and rescue workers at Ground Zero after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Or the morning National Guard Battalion 515 arrayed themselves outside my rectory door in the high desert of New Mexico and chanted, "One bullet, one kill!"

I've asked myself, How do these events line up in terms of importance? And it dawned on me: discrete events aren't important. The journey itself is the real story. Meaning in life is found on the long road to peace. Though I'm nobody, I've tried to undertake a lifelong journey into Gospel nonviolence, and I have discovered a taste of life's meaning: love, compassion, service, resistance and peace.

Mahatma Gandhi titled his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments in Truth*. I find that helpful. I've conducted experiments in the truth of nonviolence. Early on, I decided I wanted to do what the rich young man of the Gospel couldn't do -- give away my wealth to the poor and follow Jesus -- with disregard for the consequences. To "lose my life in order to save it." To "seek first God's reign and God's justice" and let everything be provided for me. I've discovered the Gospel works. The promises come true. Jesus' promise to his disciples has been fulfilled in my life: "Amen I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions as well." (Mark 10:29-30)

Living this way thrust me among the world's suffering -- refugees, prisoners, the homeless, the poorest, and death row inmates. And it has allowed me to be among the privileged and influential -- presidents, a pope, a queen, Nobel peace prize winners, and more, the saints of our time: Mother Teresa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dom Helder Camara, Coretta Scott King, Desmond Tutu, Mairead Maguire, Cesar Chavez, and Daniel and Philip Berrigan.

This journey toward peace creates a life of deep contrasts. I've observed protocol in palaces and moldered in prisons. I've stalked the halls of power and lived months at a time in a refugee camp. I want to follow the nonviolent Jesus, and so I try in a modest way to enter the Gospel story and proclaim the gospel of peace, even to a world of war.

Over the years I've crisscrossed the continent and spoken to hundreds of thousands of people. I urge them to oppose war. I invite them to embrace Jesus' way of peace and nonviolent love. My authority, I believe, springs from my story.

I share this story in the hope that others will undertake their own experiments in Gospel nonviolence, in pursuit of a new world without war, poverty or nuclear weapons. I can promise difficulties beyond number, but blessings beyond your wildest dreams. In the end, the blessings are all that matter.

John Dear's autobiography *A Persistent Peace* (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press) is available at www.amazon.com [1]. For information about the book and his national fall book

tour, see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.johndear.org. [3]

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