

Journey toward Conversion

John Dear | Aug. 19, 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. Here, I tell about the beginnings of my conversion at Duke University. Have a peaceful August!)

When I realized how hard my classes would be [during my junior year at Duke], I looked to round out my schedule with something easier. Someone had told me that the easiest class on campus was Abnormal Psychology, taught by Professor Harold Schiffman, an absent-minded professor who looked like Albert Einstein. I signed up. He would raise the grade by one letter for any student who performed a few hours of volunteer work for him each week. I knew an easy A when I saw one, so I volunteered.

Schiffman wanted us to help out in psychiatric clinics and homeless shelters around Durham. I was only free on Fridays, and the only Friday opportunity was in nearby Butner at the state hospital, also known as the North Carolina State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

When Friday morning came, a group of us drove out into the countryside. The mammoth facility was a former military barracks that looked more like a prison than a hospital. The institution had only recently stopped performing frontal lobotomies. The officials gave us a brief orientation and assigned each of us to a section where we would spend the day with the patients. They sent me to the Continued Treatment Unit. A guard escorted me through endless hallways that reeked of disinfectant. Along the way we passed a woman running up and down the hallway screaming at the top of her lungs.

After passing through two sets of locked doors, we arrived at a large white room right out of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." On every one of the some 50 cots sat a man dressed in white, his head shaved, staring off into space. Each had been found guilty of some crime and diagnosed insane. Each was drugged and more or less catatonic. They owned nothing. They had no friends. They had no life. No one cared for them. They had been left to rot in this stinking prison. The underpaid, undertrained, uneducated, yet well-armed staff watched them twenty-four hours a day from a glass booth.

It was 10 in the morning. The guard, who must have taken me to be a psychiatrist, looked at his watch and said, "I'll be back for you at four." He left, locking the doors behind him. There I was, alone with 50 Charles Mansons. They all turned as one and looked at me; I expected to be killed at any moment. Then one of them spoke, in a whisper, as they all did -- a side effect of the drugs. His words sounded friendly, so I walked over

and asked his name. He started to talk, and I sat down to listen. For the rest of the day, I listened to dozens of these forsaken men.

I sat in silence on the way back to Duke. My complacency had been shattered. How could people be left to rot? Didn't anyone care for them? What should happen to them, and what does the state owe them given their violence and crimes? Where was God in the midst of their suffering? What did their lives mean? Or was there any meaning to life when this situation could exist?

When I arrived back at the fraternity house, the party was well under way. I stood among the best and the brightest, having just left the least and the worst, and the contrast hit me hard: how could humanity be so divided?

How does one respond to this great divide? What can a person do? I suddenly felt homeless myself, even in my insular world of privilege. Yet I wasn't sure I had the wherewithal to reject the selfishness around me and within me and find a home somewhere else. For the next twelve weeks the contrast weighed on me and plunged me deeper into despair.

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No matter how much I pondered the divide of humanity, new questions kept coming, and lingering. Where was God? Wasn't God aware of this sea of suffering? Why wasn't God helping? The rift in my heart widened, and my turmoil grew.

Then I came upon an answer: maybe there wasn't a God.

It almost felt good to acknowledge this. It made things easier. I could discard the church's catechism -- I had been raised Catholic and had attended a Jesuit high school -- and live from now on by society's anti-catechism: *Life has no moral purpose. I have no obligations. There is no higher justice. There is no ultimate meaning.* I could do whatever the hell I wanted -- live for myself, pursue big money, get ahead, turn my back on the poor, and join the wild crowd. I could put an end, too, to my ruminations about the brevity of life and the mystery of death. When I died, I would vanish into oblivion -- *finis*. It was time to stop worrying and just live for myself.

This was the logic of despair, and I accepted it, hoping it would resolve my crisis. But instead it caused my inner darkness and despair to deepen. It led me to conclude that violence, starvation, execution, and war make perfect sense. Nothing matters, so by all means kill people. Send missiles against civilians. Let populations starve. From the halls of power, plot crimes against humanity. Destroy the planet. Unleash a nuclear winter. It doesn't matter. To hell with everything.

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One cold morning in late January, I ran into Joe [Markwordt] on campus in front of the student center. I started to complain about all the papers I had to write, the tests I had to take, and the craziness of fraternity life. I

expected a sympathetic response from this self-proclaimed Christian. But he looked me in the eye and said, "You know, John, if you really believe in Jesus, then nothing else really matters that much."

His words struck me like a bolt of lightning. He walked on, but I stood right there on the quad, electrified. I knew immediately that he was right. Something in me responded to the essential truth Joe had spoken, but at the time I couldn't come up with a response. Even now I look back at that moment and know that Joe's simple statement was probably the most important thing anyone had ever said to me.

I couldn't pay attention to anything for weeks afterwards. My mind raced with questions. Could I believe as fearlessly as Joe? Could I make the same moral choices? Petty problems, he said, would fall into the background, and meaning and direction would become clear. Might Jesus be the answer to my despair? Could I walk Jesus' way, against the tide of culture? This last question challenged me profoundly. More, it gave me a glimmer of hope for myself -- and the world.

John Dear's autobiography, "A Persistent Peace" (440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, published by Loyola Press) is now available at www.amazon.com [1]. For information about the book and his upcoming national book tour, see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.johndear.org [3]. John will be speaking in Ottawa, Canada this week, and at the Network of Spiritual Progressives, in Denver, at the start of the Democratic convention.

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