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Across the country, from despair and anger to hope and peace

John Dear | Sep. 30, 2008 On the Road to Peace

This week I embarked on a ten-week national book tour to discuss my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, and to promote Gospel nonviolence. In the months ahead, I'll report here what I'm learning and hearing. So far, I've spoken in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, and Boise. Along the way, I hear discouragement and despair mingled with fragile hope and a hazy sense of possibility.

People are talking, of course, about the proposed Bush bailout of Wall Street's billionaires -- the sardonic phrase for it, "socialism for the rich." We have not bailed out New Orleans, Haiti or Darfur, but they're doing everything they can to save corrupt Wall Street.

At the United Nations last week, Bono lamented that for ten years he has begged the G8 for $25 billion to relieve hunger and disease for the starving masses, including the 30,000 children who die every single day, and he's been told that the G8 has no money. Suddenly, the United States has $700 billion to spend on Wall Street, and he questions our priorities.

Those who invaded Iraq for its oil, who lied about the war, who massacred hundreds of thousands of civilians -- they'll do anything for the Super Rich. They'll deplete national coffers for greedy corporations. They'll fleece their own citizens to build hegemony. I vote instead for a Global Marshall plan, to feed first every starving child and refugee on the planet, and give healthcare, housing and education to everyone on the planet.

In all of these developments, we see the war coming home. In Albuquerque, a lawyer with the G.I. Rights hotline told me of the terrible crises they face. Since March 2003, over 4,000 U.S. soldiers (and some 1.2 million Iraqis) have been killed, but on top of this, some 15,000 U.S. soldiers who returned from Iraq have committed suicide. 60,000 are now AWOL. We have to end this war, she said. It symbolizes everything.

In Boise, Idaho, after a peace vigil outside the Federal Building and a talk at St. Mark's Catholic church, Liz Paul, coordinator of the Idaho Peace Coalition, shared her concerns that people are tired, burnt out, struggling to get by, and giving up their work for global peace and justice.

Many folks I met feel weighed down by frustration. At one talk, a woman raised a hand and asked: how do I cope with anger? An important question, especially for those of us who struggle for peace and justice.

I've encountered many activists over the years, and a good many seething with anger. And who would blame them? But I've learned that in the end, anger consumes our heart's energies and can lead us to abandon our work for justice and peace. We saw this in the 1960s when many young people railed against the Vietnam War and their anger erupted in violent protests. Because they did not go beyond their anger into the spiritual roots of peacemaking, I think many gave up the journey to peace.

My own experience seems to bear that out. The more you learn about injustice, war and poverty, the more overwhelmed you can get. Things are far worse, you discover, than you first realized. Anger is often the first emotion on the scene. But anger doesn't sustain you for the long haul work of lifelong peacemaking and nonviolent resistance.

Psychologists tell us anger is a secondary emotion. Something always precedes it -- being hurt or suffering shame, a childhood wound, an unexamined fear. These dark energies channel themselves into anger.

And so everyone, particularly people of peace, must work diligently on their anger. They must face childhood wounds and family violence. They must peer into it intrepidly, think about it, examine its roots, and pray over it. Only then can they move toward forgiveness, letting go, healing and inner peace. Many of us, I suspect, do not attend to this inner work of healing. As victims of the culture of war, we can all too easily become frantic and furious because the violence we see in the world touches the violence within which we have suffered. We can easily become strident and loud, or worse. Hardly the right tone of heart for agents of peace.

Jesus, I insist, was not a raging fanatic, but "gentle and humble of heart." He uttered a scandalous teaching, I pointed out, one by and large ignored. It's the first antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount. He says: "You have heard it said, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say, 'Don't even get angry! Be reconciled!'"

"Don't even get angry." It's an admonition that violates the tenets of pop psychology and one I've been pondering for years. I suggest that Jesus is calling us to something deeper than anger, something more sublime, something that will sustain our peacemaking for the long haul, for a lifelong journey of nonviolence. We can't be peacemakers unless we learn, as Jesus urges, to forgive and reconcile. You'll get only so far on anger, and you'll likely cause hurt and bedlam along the way. You need to pursue purity of heart.

But there's more to the story. In the same chapter Jesus recommends two other emotions -- sorrow and joy, the former being especially foreign to middle class ears. "Blessed are those who mourn?" In his context, Jesus called for the grieving of the victims of the Roman Empire. And so for us, to grieve for the death of innocents around the world. But then Jesus commands us to rejoice -- to rejoice when we find ourselves renounced or ridiculed or worse for interfering with injustice. "Rejoice and be glad, for the prophets were treated likewise. Your reward will be great." If we can go deep into love like him, he adds later, "our joy will be complete."

"I have learned through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger," Gandhi said toward the end of his life, "and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power which can move the world."

Long ago, I noticed that the most persistent peacemakers, like Gandhi, are not angry people. I think of my cousin Marry Anne Muller and her son Danny, Pax Christi friends like Thomas Gumbleton and Janice Vanderhaar, and heroes like Helen Prejean, Mother Teresa, Daniel Berrigan, Dom Helder Camara, Thich Nhat Hanh, Joan Baez, and Archbishop Tutu. They've all moved beyond anger. They're quick to feel sorrow and just as quick to enter raucous joy. They know how to laugh even in the midst of their solemn work to end injustice, poverty and war.

This is what Jesus calls us to do, I said to the woman concerned about anger. Grieve for the suffering and dying in the world, speak out against war and poverty, and celebrate life with joy, even the trouble you get into for your peacework. Pray over your anger, feel it, forgive those who hurt you, let it go, reconcile as best you can, and get back to work ending war, poverty and injustice, staying faithful to the journey of Gospel nonviolence.

After my talk in LA, a student approached me and said, "You helped me fill in the missing piece." What was that? I asked. "The radical call of Jesus." Yes, I said, that's the piece we must all seize if we hope to discover ourselves, to fulfill our vocation as peacemakers. Dissolving anger, embracing sorrow, rejoicing in spite of persecution -- these go against the tide of wayward human nature. But if we focus on Jesus and practice his nonviolence, not only will we move from despair and anger to hope and peace, but we'll be privileged to take part in spreading God's reign of peace.

John Dear's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press, 440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen), is now available from www.amazon.com [1]. See www.persistentpeace.com [2]. This week, he'll be speaking in Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Montana, and Oregon. For schedule details, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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