

Time to grow up and get with the program

John Dear | Oct. 7, 2008 On the Road to Peace

This week, I've been speaking in Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Montana and Oregon about the life of peace and my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*. Everywhere I go, someone asks, "Are you saying we cannot use violence any more?" Yes, I answer. "How then do we defend ourselves from someone who intends to do us harm? How do we defend ourselves from terrorists who want to hurt us? How do we defend ourselves from other nations?" "Nonviolently!" I answer.

It sounds foolish, of course, but I point folks back to the nonviolent Jesus and suggest that he teaches a whole new way of life.

Of course, everyone's talking about the collapsing economy, the probability that the recession will deepen and that next year will be even harder. People fear that McCain and Palin will continue the wars, worsen the economy, and bring further suffering to the world's poor. Many hope Obama will be elected, end the wars, restore the economy and begin healing the world's poor. But I keep pointing to those deeper Gospel lessons, the long-term journey of personal and global disarmament that Christ commands of us.

We're so used to violence. We easily believe the myth of redemptive violence, the lie of war, the false spirituality of violence, the misguided notion that might makes right, that war is justified, that our weapons protect us, that violence works. I suspect we don't trust God, don't think God can protect us, don't take Jesus seriously. In the end, such questions reveal our lack of faith. Do we believe in the God of peace or not?

I'm not arrogantly saying I know all the answers, or claiming that any of this is easy. Far from it. But I do suggest that Jesus has answers, that he's at least as smart as us (to say the least), that our saints and heroes have verified his way, and that we might as well grow up and get with the program.

As my friend Walter Wink explains in his ground-breaking works, Jesus teaches active nonviolence as an entirely new way of life, as a new way to deal with conflict, a new way to defend ourselves, a new way to relate to other people, other nations, and creation itself.

The world says that in the face of violence, there are only two options: fight back with the vengeful, retaliatory violence, or run away and do nothing. Wink shows how Jesus offers a third way: active nonviolent resistance to one who does violence. We do not run away, nor do we use the means of our opponents. We tap into the power of active love, insist on the truth of our common humanity, urge others not to use violence, and as Dr. King said, wear down our opponents with our suffering love and truth until the scales from their eyes, they repent of their

violence, and we live in peace together.

This methodology of nonviolent resistance has worked in countless individual cases (as many books attest), as well as countless national and international movements, from Gandhi's nonviolent revolution, Dr. King's civil rights movement, the People Power movement in the Philippines, and South Africa's anti-apartheid movement.

Last Thursday, some Catholic Worker friends took me to the Dayton International Peace Museum in Ohio, one of the best museums in the nation, where these peacemaking lessons are displayed for all to see. It's an amazing place, one everyone should visit. Every city in the nation, in the world, should have such a museum, to demonstrate the power and possibilities of peacemaking.

So I tell the crowds: We do not defend ourselves with violence. We defend ourselves with the power of creative nonviolence. "What? Are you crazy? How do you do that?" they ask. Nonviolence is infinitely creative, I explain. But we have to train ourselves in the dynamics and methodologies of Gospel nonviolence. The churches should have taught us this wisdom and way long ago, but they have by and large failed, so we have to teach each other, seek out these lessons from our peace and justice groups, study the new books on nonviolent response to violence and train each other to practice nonviolence in every aspect of our lives.

Inevitably someone presents the hypothetical scenario: "What would you do if some armed man threatened to kill your grandmother? Would you sit back and let him kill her?" No, I say, I would intervene -- we are not talking about passivity. Nonviolence is the hardest thing in the world, because it demands dramatic action, peaceful intervention, real daring-do, but without a trace of violence. Gandhi says it's harder than violence. Anyone can be violent, but try practicing active nonviolence, he said. That's the real challenge.

I would talk to the threatening person, find out what he wants, give him what he needs, inquire why he's so desperate, offer a compassionate presence, listen and convert him. Since this is a hypothetical situation, I would lead him to the truth of nonviolence, help him become more peaceful, make him dinner, and the three of us would all become good friends. Why not? We're not supposed to live in fear. We have to try these gospel teachings, risk practicing them, risk befriending even those who would hurt us, risk bringing more people into the new life of peace. Besides, don't we believe that we are headed for resurrection, that our survival is already guaranteed?

Everyone laughs at such comments. But I remind them that Gandhi insists that nonviolence always works. More, that we are people of faith. We believe in the living God. We recognize that God has set a few basic parameters. God promises to be with us and protect us, but has put up the boundary of nonviolence: we're not allowed to resort to violence, no matter what the reason. Like the recovering alcoholic, we know we're addicted to violence, so we no longer resort to violence. We turn to our higher power and try to become sober people of nonviolence.

So in that hypothetical scenario, for the person of faith, there are not just three persons present -- but four. The God of love and peace is present, if we dare believe, if we dare trust. God will guide us in our daring nonviolent resistance toward a peaceful outcome.

My experience -- from soup kitchens, homeless shelters, prisons, and war zones -- is that Gandhi and Jesus were

right. Nonviolence works. I have seen people disarmed. I have tried this creative nonviolence in the face of violence, and found that most people are just as afraid and relieved not to resort to violence. More often than not, violent people are so distraught, they need someone to talk with them, listen to them, help them.

There are wonderful resources about nonviolent response to violence, such as the Pace e Bene programs, videos like "Nonviolent Response to Personal Assault" and "A Force More Powerful," and Joan Baez's brilliant essay, "What Would You Do If?"

But I continue with the scenario. Unlike that hypothetical situation, both of my grandmothers lived peacefully in their apartments in the Washington, D.C. area well into 80s and 90s. Our family visited them regularly; they each had friendly neighbors, and they were never in danger. But just a few miles away, tens of thousands of people were planning to attack millions of people in Central America, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. These violent people worked full-time on their criminal plans to take the resources of others and kill them if necessary -- and there was nothing hypothetical about this scenario. They worked in the most violent institution in the history of the world, a building called: The Pentagon. We need to stop them, I insist. We need to intervene nonviolently, stop them from killing others, and convert them to the way of nonviolence.

Gandhi and King call us to institutionalize nonviolent, non-military responses to international conflict. They want us to teach peaceful methods of conflict resolution in every school and college in the nation and in the world. They urge us to create nonviolent peace teams that can be sent into conflict areas around the world (like the groups, "Nonviolent Peace Force" and "Christian Peacemaker Teams.")

And they tell us to cut the roots of terrorism and war, which are extreme poverty, disease, and lack of education, employment and dignity. If we do not want to suffer further terrorist attacks, they argue that we need to stop giving people around the world good reason to hate us. We should no longer oppress others with our corporate greed, steal their natural resources, or threaten them with our nuclear weapons. We need to overcome evil with goodness, and win the world over by feeding the hungry, healing those with relievable diseases, and being a peaceful presence in the world.

Someday Gandhi and King dreamed, we will institutionalize nonviolence so that everyone on the planet knows how to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Often I'm met with stunned disbelief as I say these things. If I'm speaking in a church, I point to the large crucifix on the wall behind the altar and say, "If you don't like my answers, take your questions to the crucified Jesus. Look at him. See if he defends himself with violence. Learn how he responds to violent threats with creative nonviolence. Ask him to show you how to become more nonviolent. Let him teach you his way to creative nonviolence resistance, his vision of a new world without violence."

Jesus understands violence better than any of us. He intervened many times to save lives (such as the woman caught in the act of adultery). He commanded Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane to "Put down the sword." When he was struck on the cheek, he turned the other cheek and questioned the Roman soldier, but did not retaliate with violence. He forgave his murderers and was executed alongside violent terrorists. He understands our fears and questions, and has thought through his answers. "If you only knew the things that make for peace," he cries out.

Jesus did not come to teach us how to be violent, how to retaliate or how to kill. He wants to break the global cycle of violence. He came to lead us out of our violence into the new life of nonviolence. He invites us to pursue his vision and put his lessons into practice so that the killings stop, we no longer live in fear, and we discover the new life of God's peace. Sounds good to me!

John Dear is currently on a national book tour for his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press, 440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, available from www.amazon.com [1]). For details see: www.persistentpeace.com [2] and www.johndear.org [3]. This week he will be in Portland, Berkeley, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles, Sedona and Phoenix. Eerdmans has just published a new volume of John's *NCR* columns in a new book called "Put Down Your Sword: Answering the Gospel Call to Creative Nonviolence," also available from www.amazon.com [4].

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1223396098&sr=1-1

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