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Living Beyond the \"End of the World\"

John Dear | Oct. 28, 2008 On the Road to Peace

As the election approaches, economies worsen, wars go on relentlessly, nukes are poised on alert, and hundreds of millions starve and die in poverty, it's clear what's at stake -- the material world is tottering. But there's far more at stake than that, I submit. Peril is rippling through the waters of our spiritual depths. We have long been beset by our own greed and violence. And now our world, our beautiful creation, our very souls are at stake.

And with just enough light to peer around the next corner, I can utter confidently: no matter who prevails on Election Day, all of us have to change our focus and the way we live. We have to work for justice and disarmament, for the preservation of the earth, for God's reign of peace, and do so for the rest of our lives. It's work we have to approach as if our very souls depend on it. Because they do.

Last week in Milwaukee, several of us gave workshops at the science and spirituality conference, "And God Said It Was Good," attended by some 400 people. There we discussed the different aspects of the environmental catastrophe and what could be done to stave it off. The keynote speaker Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God for Evolution*, gave three stirring presentations on the history of the universe and on God's indwelling presence.

A great highlight for me was to the opportunity to visit with my friend Margaret Swedish, a longtime Central America solidarity activist who has just published a devastating book (which I highly recommend) called *Living Beyond the "End of the World:" A Spirituality of Hope*, (Orbis Books).

It was good to be with so many Catholic Christians who care for the earth, humanity, the church and the God of life. But as Margaret laments in her book, problems far exceed the current headlines. We are doing nothing less than killing the planet and, in the process, ourselves. And the time for delusion is over. We need to face bitter realities and begin a new way of living if we're to have any real hope.

We already know the stark facts: global warming and climate catastrophe; the depletion of petroleum sources; overpopulation and the exhaustion of natural resources; the collapse of a debtor economy; the escalation of war, terrorism and global violence; and the extreme poverty that will afflict and kill billions this century. Few of us can stomach such realities.

One of Michael Dowd's themes was that Christians need to stop wrangling with scientists -- to set aside the medieval attitude over empiricism -- and to listen to scientists who are teaching us about God's work: the universe. The evidence shows what our good God is doing. It also shows us how the evil we do undoes God's

creation. "Sin," in the words of the theologian William Stringfellow, "is 'uncreation.'"

In the past few months, predictions have grown direr yet -- warming at a *faster* rate, far *more* extinctions than thought before, *more* poverty and wars over resources, indeed, a seeming "End of the World" scenario.

> "It is now apparent," Margaret writes, "that we are indeed facing times unprecedented in the evolution of our species, if only because we face the prospect of our own extinction. Everywhere we turn there are fundamental challenges to our way of life and to how we think of ourselves -- as human beings on this earth, as U.S. Americans.
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> "At the very least, we cannot go on as we have been. The changes we face are huge -- and they are scary. Our way of life is dying -- or perhaps to put it another way, it is killing us, killing life on our planet -- and it can no longer be supported. Whatever denial mechanisms we choose to distance ourselves from this reality, we cannot make it go away.
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> "We are steadily accelerating toward the limits of this U.S. way of life -- in other words, toward a destructive, possibly fatal, future, unless we make some drastic changes now? We are accelerating climate changes that increasing numbers of scientists believe can no longer be reversed. Melting permafrost in Siberia, summer melting of the Arctic Ocean, collapsing Antarctic ice sheets, receding glaciers, and warming ocean temperatures may indicate that we have already arrived at the tipping point where irreversible global warming will alter life as we know it across every part of our planet.
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> "It is apparent that our political, religious, moral, cultural, and certainly our economic leaders are either unable to grasp the magnitude of the challenges, or, if they can, to tell us the truth about them. As a result, they are unable or unwilling to issue a call to our nation to begin urgently implementing the fundamental changes in our personal, social, economic, and political lives that these times demand.
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> "I believe human beings can deal with harsh realities and be changed?. People change; people willingly undergo conversion. And we must change. It will be hardest in those societies that have the most to surrender in terms of consumer lifestyles, of power and control, and of identities based in these things. But I have watched people throw all of that away when they discovered a reason to be alive and a purpose and meaning to the human journey and their own lives that made doing so far easier than one might think. In the end, the longing for meaning seems a stronger motivation than selfish fear.
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> "I am sobered by the challenges we face, but I have not lost heart," she writes. "We may not be able to avoid some of the harsher consequences of our human hubris and fear, but we have within us everything we need to create something new in the midst of the chaos, something redeeming, something that salvages our earth's human experiment toward greater, richer, more sacred life.

> "The clarion call that needs to go out, to this society in particular, is to turn away from the age of the economic being to the age of the ecological being. What is required now, and this must be the content of the call, is that this nation and other rich countries--and our religious and pastoral leaders as well--be summoned to turn toward a new way of life, to being creating that new way of life, one that puts our consumption and waste back into balance with nature, into a relationship with the earth that allows the earth to heal, restore, regenerate what is needed to continue the story of life, while at the same time making it possible for poor people to no longer be poor.
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> "God acts in the midst of all this, not apart from it, but in it, the whole thing, the whole story. And to me it is unmistakable that we are being called in this time to a much larger experience of faith, one large enough to embrace the ecological crises that threaten life on this one planet, large enough to embrace our new sense of who we are within the cosmos. It is time to live into this urgent, vital, vibrant, all-encompassing sense of God, intimately present within the crisis, calling us to an utterly new way of life, coming into our consciousness in a wholly new way now in our time."

I agree with Margaret. Everything now is up for grabs. And we are called in turn to repent, to turn around, to welcome God's reign, and so to stop our violence, our injustice, our consumerism, our greed, our warmaking, and to get off the path toward global destruction.

As I told the conference, for me all this means that we must make the connections between all the issues we struggle with and unite them in the Gospel web of nonviolence. And this entails expanding our faith and trust in the God of life and peace. As Jesus said, if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, we could move mountains, or as he showed, halt the storms and calm furious seas. "Do not be afraid, just have faith," Jesus repeated over and over again.

It boils down to this. Let's each of us believe that we can make a difference. Part of the problem now is that we don't believe in ourselves. But this is part of what faith means to me: believing with Jesus that nothing is impossible for the God of life and peace, and so, taking Jesus at his word and doing what he commands. Which means, we start acting and speaking and doing what we can for disarmament, justice and peacemaking, acting as if each one of us can make a difference for the future of the world. We are doing God's work, and acting like true believers. In the process, our faith grows ever stronger.

Perhaps we are finally learning what it means to believe in God, to be human, to be Christian, to be part of the Creation story.

John Dear will speak this Friday night at Harvard University with Dr. Paul Farmer, then lead a retreat on Saturday for Pax Christi Massachusetts in Boston. John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press), and a new collection of these NCR Cafe columns, *Put Down Your Sword* (Eerdmans), are available from www.amazon.com [1]. For further information, see: **www.johndear.org** [2] and www.persistentpeace.com [3].

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