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The peace of Chaco Canyon

John Dear | Jul. 28, 2009 On the Road to Peace

This week Pax Christi New Mexico friends and I will mark the anniversary of the United States? obscene bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And to commemorate the victims, as we?ve done for years now, hundreds of us, plus two Nobel Peace prize winners, will converge on Los Alamos, where the atomic bomb was made. There we?ll sit in sackcloth and ashes and pray to see nuclear weapons banished from the earth.

I?ve been busy organizing, making phone calls and distributing fliers, but the task requires more than planning details. One must stop and listen so as to prime the imagination of peace, to prepare the spirit and the mind. So the other day I made a solo journey to Chaco Canyon, the monumental ruins of a long-lost peaceable culture in the badlands of the high desert, about three hours northwest of Albuquerque.

In that barren canyon, hemmed in by mammoth sandstone cliffs, ancient people a thousand years ago built quite the sophisticated cultural center with roads, kivas, storage rooms, ceremonial centers, and buildings of surprising height. Some two thousand lived there and thousands more converged each year for trading and religious ceremonies. They lived simply, peacefully, humanly, nonviolently. They learned here how to pray and share. It brings us up short. In this they fulfilled Christian scriptures -- and without benefit of having ever heard the Gospel of Jesus.

I pestered the park ranger. ?Did they keep armies?? ?Were they warlike?? ?Did they kill others?? ?No. No. No,? he answered. ?They were a peaceful people.?

Surely, the bitter winters and blazing summers tested their spirits. It was over 100 degrees the afternoon I visited. Still, from the 800s to the late 1200s, a just and happy society thrived. Their culture was light years ahead of ours. Some refer to the place as a cultural oasis in a harsh desert; others call it a kind of Mecca, a religious destination.

Religious destination -- the comparison is fitting. Ponderous silence lays claim to the place; the pungency of sagebrush fills the air. I hiked along the bases of the soaring cliffs, and then tromped through the ruins and ambled along the trails. The silence bore the weight of their spirit of peace and I breathed it in. I imagined the ruggedness and their lives of hardship. But I smiled inwardly at the thought of their simplicity and freedom. Here, under blazing noons, must have blossomed deep peace and joy.

A fine reverie, these thoughts of mine, but it wasn?t destined to last. The all too familiar contrast flooded my mind -- the morally wretched land, not so far off, of Los Alamos. Los Alamos bears nothing of ancient grandeur; it reflects the opposite of a culture of peace. It?s the land of omnicide. And it?s our own creation.

In Los Alamos our ?best and brightest? are forever busy developing new ways to ?defend? ourselves. (More PhDs per capita live there than anywhere else on earth.) Who are these people, the ?best and brightest?? There is something about the phrase -- something of elitism and haughtiness. It?s a jingle of little content, yet it manages to bear sinister purposes. It?s calibrated to hurl back the lay person -- the meek, the hungry, the peacenik -- who dares raise questions.

After the recent death of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, historian Howard Zinn commented how presidents Kennedy and Johnson and much of the country, regarded McNamara as among the ?best and the brightest,? if not the very apex.

Yet this prominent Democrat, in conducting World War II and the Vietnam War, came to characterize himself ?a war criminal.? He unleashed the horrors of Vietnam, he said, then realized the disaster he had made -- and did nothing to end it. Zinn agrees: McNamara possessed a formidable mind. Yet he had little concept of humanity, spirituality, morality, or the things that make for peace. His was a case of retardation -- morally and spiritually.

The question stabs at the heart. How can one be so smart, sophisticated, intelligent? And on the other hand be completely disconnected from peace, love, humanity and God? The question eludes an easy answer. But in our culture there?s ample evidence of the disjunction between mind and soul. Just look around. We?re all like McNamara.

And nowhere is this disjunction more conspicuous than at Los Alamos. There the smartest hatch plans for the destruction of the planet. Thousands of scientists design ever more sinister ways to kill, as if that were a decent way to spend one?s life. No doubt, many are adept at sociability and at exhibiting charm, like, say, Adolf Eichmann, but their work betrays a void of morality, spirituality, humanity.

As for the Chaco people -- including the Hopi, the Anasazi, the Navajo, and all the ancient pueblo peoples who created this humble culture of peace -- most of us dismiss them as primitive and unsophisticated. They showed no ambition to conquer the world. Thus our books reference their cultures as quaint artifacts, as footnotes.

And yet, and yet. In the ways that count they surpass us: in their economic equity, their egalitarianism, their rich cultural life, the spiritual dedication, their intense relationship with creation. They were much more human than we are. And in fact, if we?ll humble ourselves, they?ll show us what true intelligence is. More, they?ll show us -- dare I say it -- how to be Christian. I can easily imagine Jesus rejoicing over them, celebrating God for revealing such peace "not to the wise and learned, but to the childlike.?

The sun by now had passed its zenith and my energy began to flag. As I turned back, I recited under my breath Psalm 37. ?The meek shall possess the earth. They shall delight in abounding peace ... There is a future for the peaceful.? But then the psalmist adds a contrary word: ?The wicked draw a sword. They bend their bow to bring down the afflicted and the poor, to slaughter those whose path is right. But their swords shall pierce their own hearts and their bows shall be broken.?

People of war are a futureless people, our predicament precisely. By continuing to build weapons of mass destruction, by waging war, squandering the earth?s resources, slaughtering the world?s poor, we not only lose any sense of peace, morality, or spirituality. The stakes are much higher -- we lose our future.

Chaco Canyon and Los Alamos -- these are the extremes of our world. One, a culture of peace rooted in the earth, in sharing, in reverencing life and creation and God. The other, a culture of war, of greed, of contempt for the earth, a culture that itself claims to be God.

This week, when we converge on Los Alamos, we will name this Robert McNamara-culture of war as bankrupt. We?ll expose it as immoral, inhuman, idolatrous, atheistic, and doomed to fail. We?ll take responsibility for our part in this doomed culture of death. More, we will pray for a miracle, using the spiritual practice of another ancient culture, the people of Nineveh?s method of sackcloth and ashes. We?ll pray that all might renounce violence, learn from our ancestors, and create a new culture of peace based on simplicity, sharing, nonviolence and prayer.

The silent voices of Chaco Canyon bolstered my hope. Our holy ancestors have shown us that a peaceful culture is possible. If we learn from them, perhaps we might secure a future worthy of the name. Here's the link to the **Chaco Culture National Historical Park** [1].

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To learn about this weekend?s Hiroshima Day commemoration at Los Alamos, NM, visit www.paxchristinewmexico.org. ?John Dear On Peace? (edited by Patricia Normile, St. Anthony Messenger Press), and John?s new books, ?A Persistent Peace? (Loyola Press) and ?Put Down Your Sword? (Eerdmans Pub.) are all available from www.amazon.com. To see John?s other books, articles and speaking schedule, visit www.johndear.org.

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A message from John Dear about his*NCR* columns

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading and supporting my weekly column. Each week about 2,500 people read these columns. We would like to double that by the end of the year. Would you please send this column to 10 friends and ask them to sign up to receive the e-mail alerts?

Any other outreach you can give to promote this column would be greatly appreciated. Here's a **direct link to the e-mail sign up** [2].

Thanks, too, for all you do for justice, disarmament and peace, for teaching and practicing Gospel nonviolence.

God bless you,
Fr. John Dear, SJ

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