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The car and the pine cone

John Dear | Oct. 13, 2009 On the Road to Peace

There are many facets of nonviolence. We?re just beginning to plumb the mystery, the possibility, the hope of becoming a nonviolent people. But there is, I think, one basic straightforward and practical measure of our nonviolence -- how we drive.

Surely, in the closing days of fossil fuels, the ideal is not to drive at all. Meantime, until cars fall into obsolescence, in this day of road rage and texting on the road and talking on the cell phone, the principles of nonviolence would have us drive centered and aware, peaceful and calm, so as not to hurt a soul.

That means, of course, no offensive driving and no handheld devices. Rather we embrace good, old-fashioned courtesies. We go the speed limit; we offer a nod to let cars in ahead of us. Without citing the word ?nonviolent,? *Road and Travel* magazine offers a nice litany of tips for nonviolent driving: don?t tailgate, don?t cut others off, be magnanimous, offer leeway, don?t express anger, don?t get drawn into a confrontation.

Of course, these days, it?s easier said than done. I violated several of these recently while driving through an unfamiliar town. A side street beckoned, a shortcut to the main road. Thirty miles per hour read the sign on the post. I turned in, only to find myself behind a driver crawling along like a farmer flogging a lazy mule over a hill. In fits and starts we moved ahead, sometimes as slowly as five miles per hour.

I was flooded with annoyance. Why won?t she go faster? I thought. My frustration level rose. Is she lost? What possible reason is there for this? Soon we came to an intersection. Inwardly I pleaded with her: ?turn right, turn left, go anywhere but straight.?

At the intersection she stopped, and stayed stopped long beyond a reasonable hiatus. Then finally, off she crawled -- to my disappointment, straight ahead -- at the rapidity of a tortoise. Alas, she would be my pacesetter for another block.

By now, I had had enough. I pressed on the horn and blasted the air, a blast good and long. That ought to get her moving, I thought.

Her car lurched to a stop. Out came the driver, apoplectic, a young woman with fury in her eyes. She stormed over to my car window, eyes popping out of her head, and screamed. ?What are you doing? Why are you in such a hurry? You?re scaring me!? On the instant, my anger eased, and I fell into an instant case of sheepishness. ?I?m so sorry. You're right.? Back to her car she stomped, twice looking back with a fierce glare.

As we again crawled ahead, I wondered: what had happened? It was only later that it dawned on me. My boorish behavior had little to do with her or her driving. Rather it had to do with an old pain. That morning, a Jesuit I had visited casually uttered the name of a certain Jesuit provincial, one who had written me last year, urging me to leave the Society of Jesus because of my anti-war work (a fairly regular occurrence for me; not a day or a week goes by without some severe criticism). I thought I had let go and moved on. But here it was again, the wound reopened and another bout of anger and resentment -- which I unleashed on the poor driver

ahead.

Such is the mechanics of road rage. Some hurt or bitterness stirs anger within us, and along the highway we take it out others. We cut them off, lean on the horn, and fling in their direction a choice and unflattering name. And in the process we put each other in harm?s way.

There is a story by a German member of the Order of InterBeing, Thich Nhat Hanh?s community. His name is Karl, and he spent a lot of time on the road with Nhat Hanh. Once in Austria, on the way to a retreat, while at the wheel, Karl started picking up speed. Along he went with gusto, far above the speed limit, the great Thich Nhat Hanh sitting beside him. Soon Nhat Hanh put his hand gently on his arm and said, ?Please, Karl, it seems you are driving very fast now.? Embarassed, Karl slowed down and maintained the speed limit.

Later, during a rest stop, Nhat Hanh vanished into the woods for a little ?walking meditation,? and then returned. ?I have a gift for you,? he told Karl. It was a pine cone. Put it on your dashboard, he said. ?Every time you drive faster than the speed limit, it should remind you of my wish that you mindfully take your foot off the gas pedal.?

I?ve taken the story to heart myself. While hiking alone in the Rocky Mountains National Park in Colorado recently, I found a beautiful pine cone and placed it in a conspicuous spot in my truck. It reminds me to drive more nonviolently, more slowly, more peacefully. Sitting there, it also makes me smile; it calls to memory Nhat Hanh?s gentle and wise way of teaching us how to be more mindful.

Life is short. I don?t want to spend it hurting others; I don?t want to hurt anyone ever again. Neither do I want to waste it in useless anger, impatience, or frustration. Nowadays I?m adding to my spiritual disciplines the practice of peaceful driving. As I move along, I listen to music, say my prayers, and enjoy life. I try to avoid the rush and impatience.

Nonviolence is ever unfolding, ever new, ever challenging. It requires vigilance, creativity, helpful reminders and constant reflection about each aspect of our lives. It?s a journey, but even so, a nonviolent journey. The deeper we go into the mystery and mysticism of Christian nonviolence, the more we realize, there?s no rush. We?ve already arrived. As Nhat Hanh would say, we?re already home.

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This week, John helped host the Pax Christi New Mexico Assembly with guest speaker Fr. Louie Vitale (see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org). Next week, John will speak in Kona, on the big island of Hawaii, on his way toward a national speaking tour of New Zealand. John?s latest books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace* are available from www.amazon.com. Next month, Orbis Books will publish his new collection, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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