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A visit to the Peace Abbey

John Dear | Oct. 20, 2009 On the Road to Peace

With many others, the news last week that President Obama had received the Nobel Peace Prize left me dismayed. Out he stepped from the Oval Office to accept the prize, then back in he went to continue his preparations to send tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan. There, under his orders, they?ll drop bombs, follow their drones, make sweeps through villages and terrorize children. Not my idea of a peacemaker.

In fact, he?s conducting two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, and rumors continue of an attack on Iran. Obama?s war budget exceeds that of even George W. Bush. No peace can come from this, only decades more of brutal war, poverty, terrorism, and fear.

A new president, a shiny peace prize dangling off his neck -- but little has changed. I understand why Europeans support him so earnestly, but his administration maintains our imperial war machine. It wreaks havoc, wastes billions, breeds terrorists, rewards corrupt bankers, and plants the seeds of our own economic collapse. Over 4,000 American lives have been lost, and who knows how many Iraqi and Afghani. A day of war in Iraq costs us $720 million. On the Afghani conflict, since 2001, we?ve spent $223 billion.

It baffles many of us that the head of such a warlike juggernaut should win a prize ordained for those who make peace. But then I remember: Gandhi never received one; neither did Thich Nhat Hanh, Dorothy Day, nor Dan and Phil Berrigan. On the other hand, they handed one to Henry Kissinger and, in 1938, they thought seriously about awarding one to Hitler.

Dorothy Stang, Jean Donovan, Steve Biko, Franz Jagerstatter?those who expend their lives, some of whom suffer martyrdom for making peace, are usually unheralded and unsung. Such is the way for most nonviolent peacemakers.

I learned more about such great peacemakers last month when I visited the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. Here is a true oasis of peace and nonviolence. And here over the decades they?ve given the ?Courage of Conscience? award to an astonishing list of peacemakers: Mother Teresa and Thich Nhat Hanh, Pete Seeger and Maya Angelou, Dr. Paul Farmer and Kathy Kelly -- people who work in a variety of ways to end the culture of war and poverty.

Part school, part peace center, and part museum, the Peace Abbey is dedicated to the world?s greatest peacemakers, and features books, pictures and artifacts (such as Archbishop Romero?s glasses and blood-stained alb). Outside on the lawn is a memorial garden with two giant statues -- one of Gandhi and one of Mother Teresa -- and with plaques bearing the quotes of some of our greatest peacemakers.

It was Mother Teresa herself who inspired the launching of the Peace Abbey. She had come in 1988 to visit the Life Experience School, its peace school and community for disabled students. After her visit, organizer Lewis Randa and his friends added a museum, library, multi-faith chapel and memorial to inspire the students and other visitors. Now it has become a landmark, a sign of what we could be if we all dared.

These days, the Peace Abbey takes in guests and offers weekly interfaith peace prayer services. It hosts lectures and periodically presents its ?Courage of Conscience? award. It administers the National Registry for Conscientious Objectors and provides a cemetery to honor those who had refused to fight. It operates the Veganpeace Animal Sanctuary (for rescued animals from a nearby slaughterhouse) as well as an Animal Rights Memorial.

The Life Experience School has evolved into the Special Peace Corps, with twelve members engaged in service work in the local community. The Peace Abbey also sponsors Stonewalk, the sober procession of a carved stone dedicated to ?All Unknown Civilians Killed in War.? I know of no other memorial to the millions of non-military sisters and brothers who have died from the privations and ordnance of war.

Their mission statement reads:

> The Peace Abbey is dedicated to creating innovative models for society that empower individuals on the paths of nonviolence, peacemaking, and cruelty-free living. We offer a variety of programs and resources that teach, inspire and encourage one to speak out and act on issues of peace and social justice. Faith in action is the cornerstone of our fellowship and activist pacifism is our creed.

My heart lifted and I breathed easier as I walked through the buildings filled with sacred peace memorabilia -- a wall of books about Gandhi, pews in the chapel dedicated to the peace tradition within every religion, photos of peacemakers from around the world on the wall. In one room is the Peacemakers Table, where a silent interfaith prayer is held before the presentation of the award. Here has prayed a wide array of extraordinary people: Mother Teresa, Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, Muhammad Ali, and Maya Angelou.

Maya Angelou said after her visit: "God put the rainbow in the clouds so even in the dreariest of times we would know there is hope. And that is why The Peace Abbey is here."

Mother Teresa said: "My prayer is that this school continues to prepare its children to become peacemakers in our troubled world -- the true peace that comes from loving and caring and respecting the rights of everyone -- my brother, my sister."

I was moved most especially as I prayed over the graves of the Conscientious Objectors, which included my late friends Tom Lewis and Dave Dellinger. I was humbled that evening to receive the award, along with Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley from the nearby Agape Community.

Lewis Randa, founder and leader of the Peace Abbey, himself one of the truly great peacemakers, has kept the ship afloat despite little advertising or fundraising. A few years ago, as the Abbey foundered, on the verge of closing, Yoko Ono sent a large donation. A vote of confidence; she, too, wants to keep the Peace Abbey going.

The place achieved national attention in 1995, when they rescued a cow on the lam from death row. Not far from the Abbey is a slaughter-house and ?Emily,? as she was later named, leaped the five foot tall fence and made her way toward freedom. For weeks she lay low in the woods, and for weeks the media stoked the story. Where is Emily?

Emily was found finally, and the Peace Abbey offered her sanctuary, to which the slaughterhouse reluctantly agreed. For eight years Emily lived the retired life in a fine barn and attracted crowds of visitors and well-wishers.

When she died finally, a few years ago, the Abbey erected a statue of her to remind us of the dignity of all of God?s creatures, and to lift up the vision of Isaiah and St. Francis?we are to live at peace with all creation. Emily was truly a ?sacred cow.?

With such warmth and basic humanity, the Peace Abbey radiates peace. It makes nonviolence feel ?normal.? It inspires visitors to join the movement and become peacemakers.

I wish every church, university and monastery could become like the Peace Abbey, a center of nonviolence that upholds peacemakers and inspires students and visitors to live the life of peace, nonviolence, compassion and love. I urge everyone to visit it someday, and to learn its lessons of peace. Together, all of us can aspire to the heights of peace and nonviolence -- and be re-energized to work for the immediate end of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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For further information, see: www.peaceabbey.org. This 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, and to schedule a speaking event, see: www.johndear.org.

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