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On the death of my friend Ted Gordon

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

You probably never met him, but if you read these weekly columns, you already know him. Ted Gordon, 52, was a close friend of mine who helped me by editing these columns every week for the last four years, as well as all my recent manuscripts. Several times a week over the last six or seven years, we communicated about my reflections on Jesus and peacemaking. So it was a complete shock when his wife Christy called me on Thursday morning to say that Ted had died suddenly of a massive heart attack.

What a great loss for us, and yet I dare say, what a great blessing for Ted. At 5 a.m., Christy heard a thud, went to the other side of the bed, and found him on the floor. He was pronounced dead in the ambulance.

It's hard to imagine that Ted is gone. He was such a loving, vital presence in his family, his church, and to his friends. For all those who knew him, he was a rock, a tower of faith, hope and love. Ten years ago, Ted invited me to lead a retreat at his Dayspring church in Gaithersburg, Md., and we've been friends ever since. Ted was a leader of the Dayspring retreat ministry, started its peace group, and was affiliated with the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. He was also active with Pax Christi. Several times over the years, he and Christy came to New Mexico to join our annual sackcloth and ashes peace vigil at Los Alamos.

Ted was a big, humble, gentle person, and a roaring intellectual. He worked for the Consumer Protection Agency as an electrical engineer, but I never understood what he did. Whenever I called and asked what he was doing, he would explain how he was dismantling a microwave, finding out what was wrong with it, and putting it back together. The next week it would be a refrigerator, or some other appliance. In the evenings, he attended theology school, and on weekends, he preached periodically at Dayspring. He and Christy had two sons, Christopher and Devon. Throughout all of this, he pored over my writings every week, and helped me get out the good news of peace.

I remember so well when he joined me in 2006 on the 50-mile Merton-Gandhi peace pilgrimage from the Abbey of Gethsemani to Louisville, Ky., where we arrived on Sept. 11, the 100th anniversary of Gandhi's professing a vow of nonviolence. Those days of prayer, peacemaking and walking, we agreed, were some of the greatest days of our lives.

Throughout this past year, I have been writing a book on the raising of Lazarus as a metaphor for God's work to lead humanity out of the culture of war and death. Lazarus, to my mind, represents humanity stuck in the tomb of the culture of violence. Jesus is the God of life who comes to liberate us and set us free that we might "live life to the full."

Ted had been wrestling with my ideas in this project every week for nearly a year. He told me recently that he felt like he had been on a year-long retreat, pondering the meaning of life, death and resurrection. My theme is that "death does not get the last word," that God wants us to practice resurrection now, which means, we can have nothing more to do with the big business of death. I have been trying to apply the poetic wisdom of Edna St. Vincent Millay who wrote, "I shall die, but that is all I shall do for death."

Every few days, Ted sent a comment on my reflections on life, death, war, peace and the politics of resurrection. A few weeks ago, I received his final editings, finished the manuscript and sent it off to a publisher. Being the absent-minded professor that I am, I ended the book with the word "death." Ted wrote with typical wit and wisdom, chastising me for giving death the last word. He rewrote my last sentence to end with the word "life." This childlike word play delighted us both to no end.

To thank him, I mailed him copies of the newly released, remastered Beatles "Greatest Hits" CDs. Being a Beatles fan, I wrote to him that their uplifting music represented for me an example of the fullness of life and love which Jesus invites us to celebrate. Ted and Christy spent last Sunday enjoying that music. He was, as he told me just before his sudden death, very happy.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said to Martha of Bethany as they stood near the tomb of her brother Lazarus. "Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:26)

Ted and I discussed this question nearly every week over the course of this past year. He answered a resounding yes to the peacemaking, life-giving Jesus. I realize now that Ted knew what resurrection meant. He lived it every day, so he made the life of loving nonviolence his spiritual practice. I told Christy that Ted was a great saint, and had gone immediately into the new life of peace with Jesus. She agreed.

"Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the One who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation," Jesus announced, "but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24) I believe this statement is true of my friend Ted -- and all who seek peace, practice nonviolence, love unconditionally, and work for justice. Ted listened attentively to the Word of the God of peace; he struggled with it, and fashioned his life around it. Along with his family and friends, I know that he lived life to the full, and had already entered the "eternal life" of resurrection long before last Thursday.

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Ted leaves us with his shining example, loving encouragement and gentle wisdom. Please join me in praying for Christy and their sons, and trying to live that resurrection life which Ted did so well.

This week, John will be on the U.S-Mexico border for the annual Mass for all the immigrants who have died, as well as in Miami to lead a retreat for "Food for the Poor." John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John's new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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