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A new year of nonviolence

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"When a person claims to be nonviolent, he is expected not to be angry with one who has injured him," Gandhi wrote. "He will not wish him harm. He will wish him well. He will not swear at him. He will not cause him any physical hurt. He will put up with all the injury to which he is subjected by the wrongdoer. Thus nonviolence is complete innocence."

That was Gandhi's editorial message on Sept. 3, 1922, in his newspaper, *Young India*. He was trying to inspire his nation to reach the highest ideal of peace, love and nonviolence as they resisted British imperialism.

Who could possibly be that nonviolent? Most of us get angry and vengeful at the slightest put-down. I know I do. If I'm disrespected or attacked for one reason or another -- and that happens frequently to anyone who speaks against war -- I feel hurt, then get angry, then want to retaliate with a verbal attack or worse. If I repress those feelings, I end up with a pool of resentment that eventually needs to be addressed or it will lead to even greater judgmentalism, self-righteousness or explosive violence.

"Complete nonviolence is complete absence of ill will against all that lives," Gandhi continued. "Nonviolence is, in its active form, good will towards all life. It is pure Love. Nonviolence is a perfect state. It is a goal towards which all humanity moves naturally though unconsciously. The goal ever recedes from us. The greater the progress, the greater the recognition of our unworthiness. Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory."

Gandhi reminds me that the full effort to resist evil, respond nonviolently and deal with hard feelings without further retaliation is at the heart of the spiritual life. This journey can break the cycle of violence and take us deep into forgiveness, compassion and unconditional love. And isn't that what Godly living is all about? Isn't that real peacemaking? Isn't that the life Jesus invites us to live?

As we begin another year fraught with uncertainty, injustice and war, Gandhi points us toward our highest ideal and invites us to a new year's resolution of renewed nonviolence for the coming of a new world of nonviolence.

That's what's on my mind as we start this election year, as I survey the global landscape of violence, war, poverty, executions, corporate greed and environmental destruction. There's simply no better beacon in modern history than Gandhi and his ideal of nonviolence. He shows us, I suggest, the Christian way.

Over the past few years, I've reprinted Pax Christi's vow of nonviolence at New Year's as a friendly reminder of our ongoing commitment to embody the peace we seek, to renew our personal nonviolence and to help the global movement for justice and disarmament. Gandhi's vow of nonviolence encouraged him to remain nonviolent until his last breath. It pushed him, he claimed, beyond himself to his ideal, fully realized, true self. Such a vow can help us do the same. It has certainly helped me, first of all, by urging me not to say or do something I would later regret, which will only continue the spiral of violence.

Recently, I read how my friend Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy concludes her workshops on hope by inviting people to profess five vows as a way to solemnize their commitment to hope, peace and right action. They read:

I vow to myself and to each of you:

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- *to commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all being;*
- *to live on earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products and energy I consume;*
- *to draw strength and guidance from the living Earth, the ancestors, the future generations, and my brothers and sisters of all species;*
- *to support each other in our work for the world and to ask for help when I need it;*
- *to pursue a daily practice that clarifies my mind, strengthens my heart and supports me in observing these vows.*

Joanna Macy's vows remind me of the "Metta Sutta," a kind of prayer-vow, used at the end of meditation sessions at various Buddhist centers I have visited. It is recited slowly and together by the community as an act of renewal and re-centering, and can be a very disarming experience. It acts like a compass to point us in the right direction for the journey ahead.

May I be free from enmity and danger.

May I be free from mental suffering.

May I be free from physical suffering.

May I take care of myself happily.

May all beings be free from enmity and danger.

May all beings be free from mental suffering.

May all beings be free from physical suffering.

May all beings take care of themselves happily.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be free from suffering.

May it be so.

"Wage peace with your breath," Judyth Hill writes in one of her poems. "Breathe in fire and rubble, breathe out whole buildings and flocks of redwing blackbirds. Breathe in terrorists and breathe out sleeping children and freshly mown fields. Breathe in confusion and breathe out maple trees. Breathe in the fallen and breathe out lifelong friendships intact. Wage peace with your listening. Hearing sirens, pray loud. Remember your tools: flower seeds, clothes pins, clean rivers. Make soup, play music ... Wage peace! Never has the world seemed so fresh and precious. Act as if armistice has already arrived. Don't wait another minute."

The New Year has arrived. If we dare to dream about the highest ideal, we could wish for the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan; the abolition of the death penalty, hunger and nuclear weapons; and a national change of heart that will bring true universal health care, as well as decent jobs, housing and education for all, and a global rededication to the earth. For ourselves, we long to remain centered in the peace of Christ, to live and breathe that deep peace and to cultivate that peace in our personal lives, our workplace, our families, and in the various movements for social justice and disarmament we support.

As we wage peace, we send a ripple of peace into the world to join the waves of nonviolence that wash over nations and empires and disarm us all.

And so I offer the Pax Christi "Vow of Nonviolence" again and invite you to read it slowly and prayerfully, to profess it by yourself or with friends. May it help us to follow the nonviolent Jesus on our journey to peace, that we might all hasten a new year, a new world, of nonviolence.

Recognizing the violence in my own heart, yet trusting in the goodness and mercy of God, I vow for one year to practice the nonviolence of Jesus who taught us in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called the sons and daughters of God. Love your enemies that you may be sons and daughters of your Creator in heaven ..."

Before God the Creator and the Sanctifying Spirit, I vow to carry out in my life the love and example of Jesus --

- by striving for peace within myself and seeking to be a peacemaker in my daily life;
- by accepting suffering in the struggle for justice and peace rather than inflicting it;
- by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence;
- by persevering in nonviolence of tongue and heart;
- by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live;
- by actively resisting evil and working nonviolently to abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth.

God, I trust in your sustaining love and believe that just as You gave me the grace and desire to offer this, so You will also bestow abundant grace to fulfill it. Amen.

John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, has just been published by Orbis Books. It explores Jesus as the God of life, calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings; Put Down Your Sword*

and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John Dear's website.

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