NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Making peace in inner-city Oakland, one block at a time

John Dear | Feb. 21, 2012 On the Road to Peace

I'm traveling in California for two weeks, giving talks on my new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, and had the chance to spend an afternoon recently with my friend Anne Symens-Bucher to see for myself the new community she and her family have created in Oakland. The mother of five, a lifelong peace activist and secular Franciscan, Anne and her husband, Terry, recently founded "Canticle Farm," a peace and nonviolence community right smack-dab in inner-city Oakland. I was impressed and inspired by this bold, hopeful move.

Anne is no stranger to peace and justice work. In the 1970s, she lived at the New York Catholic Worker with Dorothy Day and later founded the Oakland Catholic Worker. Then, she co-founded the Nevada Desert Experience and organized protests at the Nevada Test Site for many years. She worked for more than 20 years as co-director of the West Coast Franciscan Office for Justice, Peace, & Integrity of Creation. Her children are now fifth-generation Oakland residents.

Through the years, Anne and Terry bought several houses next to each other in the Fruitvale section of east Oakland. They have always lived simply and trusted that the funds for their work would be provided. They always dreamed of one day creating a peace community in the city, and in the last two years, it began to happen.

Through her work as an assistant to writer and teacher Joanna Macy, Anne met scores of young environmental activists. Some of them stayed at her houses of hospitality, sometimes for months at a time, and slowly, Canticle Farm began to develop. Their new intentional community is located right on the fault line between two "gangs" in one of Oakland's most violent neighborhoods. Fifteen community members live in four houses that connect around a large backyard. They are in the process of creating a large organic garden for themselves and their neighbors as a way to make peace, restore the neighborhood and teach nonviolent living.

The name "Canticle" comes from St. Francis' hymn to creation and reminds them to give thanks and praise for the wonders of creation. Over lunch, they told me how they want to be a presence of peace and nonviolence in the neighborhood, and how that means going deep into contemplation and connection with the earth, especially if you live in the inner city.

They hold two one-hour "receptive silence" (meditation) sessions each day, and some of them practice silence on Mondays, as Gandhi did. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they hold open meditation and yoga sessions in the nearby Cesar Chavez Park. On Friday nights, they offer an open house hour of silence, followed by group sharing and a meal, which 40 people usually attend.

They have just begun their Canticle Farm Saturdays, which begin with meditation followed by public service, such as picking up trash in the neighborhood and local creeks, and connecting with the neighbors. They welcome neighbors for lunch and invite them to work in the garden with the hope that someday, neighbors would take seeds to start their own gardens. In the next few weeks, they will start offering afternoon programs on practical items such as cooking or repairing clothes. These neighborhood Saturdays end with their "Loaves and Fishes" Eucharistic sharing, a meal and a social.

Recently, they purchased another house where they intend to hold intensive training sessions for neighborhood youth. They plan on teaching nonviolence, urban permaculture, eco-literacy, creek restoration and other forms of selfless service. Throughout all of this, the community practices active hospitality and peacemaking with the neighbors by greeting and welcoming everyone.

It was fascinating to see a community in the process of emerging and to hear how nonviolent they want that process to be.

"While we have a vision of what can happen," Anne said, "we know it has to emerge from our connection with our neighbors. We show up with open hearts and a desire to be of service, and know that miracles will happen."

The community started organically, she said, so they want to let it grow organically.

"We want to take down the physical fences in the neighborhood and the fences in our hearts, because we know our real security is not in our fences or the bars on our windows, but in our relationships," she said. "This is the way to peace. We have misguided 'warrior' energy in our neighborhood. Our young people are fighting and dying to protect their 'turf.' We want to suggest that the turf is the earth. These young people are our future and we need to invest in them. That means redirecting their 'warrior' energy toward fighting for and protecting both open space in our neighborhood, so we can grow our food locally, as well as our creek system, which is currently trashed.

"We know about peak oil and global climate change, how the system is coming apart, so we're part of the Transition Town movement [1] and try to help each other to get ready for the future by growing our own food and taking care of one another, so that when things do fall apart, we won't turn on one another," she continued. "We could go to the neighbors and say, 'The end is coming, so start growing your food and get ready,' or, we could say, 'Let's grow our own food now because it's fun, we can share it with one another, get to know one another and build a safer and beautiful community.'"

When I ask about her motivation for doing this, Anne speaks of St. Francis. "I'm trying to embody that phrase attributed to St. Francis: 'Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.'"

Their mission statement explains their hope:

> Inspired by the life of Francis of Assisi, Canticle Farm is a community providing a platform for the Great Turning, one heart, one home, and one block at a time. The Great Turning -- the planetary shift from an industrial-growth society to a life-sustaining society -- is served by Canticle Farm through local work that fosters forgiveness in the human community and compassion for all beings. Canticle Farm primarily focuses on the poor and marginalized as those who most bear the burden of social and planetary degradation, as well as being those who are first able to perceive the need for the Great Turning. Rooted in spiritual practice, Canticle Farm manifests this commitment by engaging in the "Work That Reconnects," integral nonviolence, gift economy, restorative justice practices, urban permaculture, and other disciplines necessary for regenerating community in the 21st Century.

Another community member, Pancho Ramos Stierle, spoke of Gandhi to explain their mission and work.

"How do we find the equivalent of Gandhi's spinning wheel and constructive program for today?" Pancho asked. "Healthy and local food is the answer. This is Gandhi's 21st-century spinning wheel. Anyone on the planet can get involved in healthy and local food -- from planting seeds, watering, mulching, harvesting, composting and supporting local farmers to eating only healthy food. Once we have that constructive program, when we're solid in that, we can confront the pollution-/violence-based system more effectively. But we also

need an inner 'spinning wheel,' so we spend two hours each day in 'receptive silence.' The inner revolution and the outer revolution together can lead to a total revolution of the human spirit."

Pancho knows what he is talking about. He drew a lot of media attention in November when he sat in at an Oakland Occupy protest that verged on violence. In the middle of the night, at the height of the tension, he and friends sat in the half lotus position with their eyes closed. Over time, angry protesters grew more peaceful. When riot police gathered in full force, the protest became remarkably nonviolent. At sunrise, police arrested 32 peaceful people, including Pancho. The media photographed the scene, and a picture of Pancho being arrested while sitting in the half lotus position made headlines around the world. Because he was "undocumented," he was held, and people around the Bay Area began to clamor for his release. Along the way, he made a good impression on the police and the jailers, and indeed, he was unconditionally released, which was a major political breakthrough.

"Nonviolence isn't just a philosophy of resistance, it's is a way of life," Pancho said in a profile about him on dailygood.org [2], which was also reprinted in *Parabola* magazine. "Nonviolence is the thoughts we have, the words that we use, the clothes that we wear, the things that we say. It is not just an absence of violence, not even just the absence of wanting to cause harm. Nonviolence is a state when your heart is so full of love, compassion, kindness, generosity and forgiveness that you simply don't have any room for anger, frustration or violence."

Recently, he met three neighborhood kids -- 14, 15 and 16 years old -- who were probably gang members, and showed them around the community house, Casa de Paz. As he took them to the large meditation room with its white carpet, freshly painted white walls and large green hanging plants, one of the kids said, "I feel so peaceful here."

"That moment -- to facilitate peace and harmony in the heart of one of the local teenagers -- was worth all our effort so far," Pancho said with a smile.

That's because the neighborhood is far from peaceful. Last week, someone walked down their street in the middle of the day shooting off a gun, and then disappeared. Canticle Farm stands right there in the center of violence, offering a nonviolent presence, peaceful hospitality and the beauty of creation. Their intentional community offers a model for others around the country.

"If we can do it here," Pancho says, "it can be replicated in many places."

Ten percent of their energy goes into protest work, such as supporting the local Occupy movement, working against oppressive gang injunctions that unjustly affect all youth, boycotting the corporation Monsanto with its genetically modified seeds, and doing civil disobedience in various nonviolence campaigns, Pancho explained.

But 90 percent of their work will be focused on "the constructive program," which means meditation time, community building, hospitality, growing food, restorative justice, gift economy and nonviolence training. They hope to create a large neighborhood garden and eventually inspire every household to plant their own vegetable garden.

"Why are you part of this?" I asked Pancho.

"Because to live in radical, joyous, shared servanthood is my purpose on this planet," he said.

"If we start wearing the lenses of trust, community, wholeness, abundance and contribution, we see that everywhere we go, we can serve," Pancho says. "Everywhere we go, we can connect at the soul level with another human being. We are moving from 'me' to 'we.' As Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'We only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.'"

I am deeply moved by Anne and Pancho's story and the development of Canticle Farm. It's inspiring to see friends start something new for the poor, for youth, for the earth, for love, for humanity. Their bold example invites all of us to move from "me" to "we," and to take another step forward on the road to peace.

***

*Editor's note: Peter Ediger, an 85-year-old Mennonite peace activist whom John Dear wrote about in his Jan. 24 column [3], died Feb. 16 after a brief illness, according to Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service, which Ediger co-founded in 1989. Read more about Ediger at the Pace e Bene website [4].*

***

John Dear will speak Feb. 24 in Orange, Calif., and Feb. 25 in Flagstaff, Ariz. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [5], 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. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [6]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [7] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[8]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[9]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[10]*, are available from Amazon.com.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 04/30/2016 - 22:15):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/making-peace-inner-city-oakland-one-block-time

We can send you an e-mail alert every time On the Road to Peace column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [11]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add On the Road to Peace to your list.

**Links:**

[1] http://www.transitionnetwork.org
[2] http://www.dailygood.org
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/28593/
[4] http://paceebene.org/peb-update/remembering-peter-ediger-1926-2012
[5] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60P
[6] http://www.johndear.org
[7] http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1
[8] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1
[9] http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1
[10] http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1
[11] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup