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Civil rights figure talks nonviolence and faith in today's society

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

It was hot and muggy this past weekend at the campsite outside of Chapel Hill, N.C., where about 2,000 progressive Christians gathered for the second annual ecumenical Wild Goose Festival, but people didn't seem to mind. Everyone enjoyed the music, the speakers, the prayer groups, the art booths, the kids' games, and the conversations with old and new friends. I, too, was happy to catch up with many friends, among them civil rights leader and theologian Vincent Harding. He has taught for the last few decades at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, but he is best known for his work with Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the 1960s and for drafting speeches for Dr. King, including his famous April 4, 1967, speech against the Vietnam War.

Dr. Vincent Harding is author of several books, including *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* and *Martin Luther King: An Inconvenient Hero*. At Iliff, he continues to chair the "Veterans of Hope Project: A Center for the Study of Religion and Democratic Renewal." I sat down with Vincent on Saturday morning for a conversation about the country, racism, nonviolence, Dr. King, hope and God.

What are your thoughts these days about the state of the nation and the impending election?

In times like this, I remember my beloved elder sister, Grace Boggs, who from her Chinese ancestry reminds me about the Chinese pictograph for the word "crisis." On the top level of that pictograph is "time of great danger," and on the bottom level, for the same word, in that pictograph is "time of great opportunity." That is precisely where we are at this moment in our country -- a time of great danger and a

time of great opportunity.

If we run from the danger, we run from the opportunity. If we fail to see the danger, we might fail to understand the opportunity.

I think that part of the danger is allowing ourselves to become acclimated to war as a natural expression of the American way of life. Part of the danger is to grow accustomed to our president -- beautiful, wonderful man that he is -- allowing himself to become acclimated to choosing who will be killed today or tomorrow or the next day with their children, who might or might not be around when killing time comes. To have such a beautiful man with his own beautiful family and beautiful daughters acclimating himself to the process of destroying other people based on great fear is part of the danger. And having us increasingly accepting that role of our leader, accepting that role for our country, accepting all of the terrible sacrifices that must be made in our country if we are going to be an imperial power throughout the world, accepting all the people who must be neglected and lose out, all the children who will not have the education, care and healing that they need, all the old people who will continue to live in fear with no structures to be of help and protection -- it is easy for us to forget that you cannot be an empire and a compassionate community at the same moment. You have to make a choice. We are now in a time when we must choose. It takes courage and wisdom and insight to ask ourselves: "Who do we want to be?"

We have the opportunity to break out of the trap that vengeance and fear set for us. We have the opportunity to set our minds and hearts on the questions, "What does it mean to create a more perfect union in this country? What does it mean to build a multiracial democracy that is good for all of the people, starting not with the middle class or the 1 percent or .1 percent, but starting with the most needy, the most broken, the most threatened? What would it mean to build a society whose major focus is on the needs of the least of these, not the best and the brightest? To start with the most broken, the prisoners, the poor, the poor, the poor. To build a community in which we learn what it means to be a community and to love each other and feel with each other and recognize each other as fellow human beings, members of the family God?"

Could you share your thoughts on racism in our country today?

On occasion, I am a historian, and I am very conscious of the fact that our beloved country started its life announcing that it sought to build a democracy, and at the same moment and in the same document, that it would protect the institution of slavery. That is a deep contradiction. We have to become mature enough as citizens of this country to recognize that contradiction without it throwing us out of kilter, to recognize that we have built into our life a major contradiction for hundreds of years. It has only been at best the last 50 years or so that there has been anything close to a sense of common commitment to the creation of a new, multiracial, democratic society. So there is no way in which sane human beings could think that an election four years ago would solve the fundamental contradictions of hundreds of years.

For me, what we did four years ago was deeply symbolic and very important because a majority of us seemed to say, "We want to find a way to begin again." Martin King used to talk in loving compelling words, calling the country to be born again. Martin used to say, "America, you must be born again." I saw the whole post-WWII period as a time when we were trying to figure out. "What does it mean to begin again, to be reborn, where racism, white supremacy, white terrorism, white domination, are concerned? What does it mean to build a community that joins us together and finds beauty because of our differences, not in spite of our differences?" I see a very crucial baby step beginning in 2008. But that is all that I see. It's wonderful and necessary, but not sufficient. It's just the beginning.

What we have to keep working on is: What do we have to do to resolve the contradictions, to heal the wounds that we have inflicted on each other? What do we have to do to lift up those we have pushed

down because of their race? What do we have to do to gather the strengths and beauties of those we have pushed aside, to recreate institutions built on white privilege, white supremacy, white domination, white arrogance, white fear? What do we have to do to open ourselves to the fact that on one level, demographically speaking, we are becoming a new country, just in terms of the racial makeup? How do we put Spirit along with demographics, and not be afraid of the demographical change, but welcome it and say, "Lord, is this what we've been waiting for, what we need now?" In a world of magnificent diverse human beings, is our country now being given the chance to learn what that means, and to teach what that means, after we learn it?

The election of 2008 was a chance to say, "We want to learn. We don't know anything about building a multiracial, democratic society, but we want to learn. Help us, Spirit, learn." If we can keep calling on the Spirit in a mode of deep-seeking for help or guidance, we can go forward to the country that does not yet exist and understand what it means to be loving midwives of the newborn America.

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I think we are in that very powerful moment of danger where race is concerned, where people are afraid of losing their prerogatives and mythical history, and therefore tempted to strike out, to hold on to that which they are afraid may slip out of their hands. It's also a time of great opportunity. I keep asking myself, "How do we prepare a new generation not to be ignorant of the past or foolish about what the past has been, not to be frightened about the past, but to recognize that we have been called by our loving Creator, as Dr. King would say, to be a family? How do we build that into a structure of a democratic nation?"

How has your understanding of nonviolence evolved over the years? What do you mean by nonviolence?

I have most often found myself drawn to Gandhi's emphasis on *Satyagraha*, meaning "the determined holding on to truth." In our situation, it means, "holding on to the fundamental truth that we are one and that anything we do, must contribute to the building of our oneness." Everything that we do must stand in opposition to all of the tendencies and institutions and laws and practices that would deny our oneness, and that would teach that we are not one, that would teach that those we call enemy are not part of us.

For me, that insistence means that even those who seek to destroy us are us, are part of us. The prophets, the spiritual guides and the quantum physicists all say the same thing: We are connected by the life force itself, and the life force is a divine source, and everything we do must enter into the stream of that life force, to affirm that reality.

For me, nonviolence is that -- seeking to affirm the reality of our human community. That's why Gandhi was constantly calling us to experiment with truth, to experiment with what it takes to call us all together and to hold us together. We have spent far too many years, dollars and lives experimenting with untruth, the untruth of war and destruction and assassination and terror. Gandhi knew we have the capacity, as Jesus knew we have the capacity, to live a different way. Gandhi spoke with faith, as Jesus spoke with faith, that we have been created with the capacity to live the truth of our connectedness, and have a responsibility for each other.

For me, nonviolence is the way of continuing to experiment with what it means to hold on to that truth, especially in situations where people seek to destroy the truth of our oneness. Segregation was a great blasphemous desecration of our oneness. What can you do if you are a child of God, a follower of Jesus?

You've got to do what Dr. King and the movement said. You have to stand in opposition to that blasphemy. It's not just about the right to eat something at a lunch counter, but being in the right way of life, being on the path of exploring and experimenting with what will bring us all together in the connection that we were meant to have from the creation of the universe.

For me, nonviolence is at its heart is "holding on to the truth of our oneness," and not letting anyone -- presidents, Ku Klux Klan-ers, or white supremacists or fearful black supremacists -- cheat us of our heritage of the children of God.

Could share any memories or your current thoughts about Dr. King?

A couple of times in my book about the last years of Martin's life, I quote a poem that includes the lines, "It is easier to build monuments than to build a better world." I think that we have been tempted to do with Martin exactly what we who call ourselves Christians have been tempted to do with Jesus -- to build monuments, theologies, doctrines and institutions based on his name. We have run away from continuing to build a better world that he was calling us to.

I was thinking of this when I went to visit the new monument to Dr. King in Washington, D.C. I was tempted to let my thoughts hang there. But I know from much experience that if you believe in life, you never end on a negative. What I saw was an opportunity to explain what Dr. King was about, to teach children, to read some of the things he said, to help express to another generation what King was about, why he lived and why he was killed and what that means for us now. What it means for King to be standing near a place where decisions are made to assassinate people again and again and again.

It's important to go beyond romantic memories of King and instead to engage him, his spirit and his meaning. Otherwise, we will simply be romantics. Romance is necessary but not sufficient. For me, the need is to continue to hear Martin's most difficult and challenging words.

I am particularly listening to some of the things that were coming out toward the end of his life. "We got to find a way to organize goodness," he said. He was talking about the way "non-goodness" was so fully organized in our culture and how we who believe in goodness have to organize goodness. We need to give some thought to this. He also kept saying, toward the end of his life, as he was talking to his SCLC staff, "We've got to keep calling upon our country with the words, 'America, you must be born again.'" I think that is a powerful challenge. What does that mean? How does that take place? Who should be the midwives for that new birth?

What gives you hope these days? How do we be hopeful?

Part of what gives me hope is that wherever I go in this country in the midst of all the temptation to despair, wherever I go, I find women and men and young people and communities working to create an alternative to fear and despair, who are saying, "We are able with the help of the Spirit to be better, to do better, to create better than we have before." They are scattered all over the country. They use a different language, dress differently and sing differently, but they're everywhere, and I personally am encouraged to see them, to find them.

I remember your article about the letter to the Hebrews in *Sojourners* magazine in 1985, where you said that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, including Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Oscar Romero, Steve Biko and others. Can you share more about living with the cloud of witnesses?

There's so many times in which nothing else speaks to the situation -- its hardness, its bleakness, its

uncertainty, its danger -- nothing else can provide the kind of strength, encouragement, support, except a sense that the community of saints is present. That community is full of surprises as to who is part of it.

But it's important not to try to put that into rational, academic ways of thinking, but simply, as our Buddhist friends encourage us, to breathe deeply and to realize that the breath of God and the breath of saints of God and the breath of the community of struggle joins our breath and fills our life for the next stages of our work.

Looking back on your lifelong involvement with the struggle, where have you found God in the struggle for justice, peace and civil rights?

I found God in the midst of all of the struggle. That's what we were promised: Wherever you are involved in the struggle for the weak and outcast, I'm there. It's been clear that that's right.

On a certain level, I think that it's important for those of us interested in that question to go and place ourselves there and find what answers come to us. The answers that someone else gives about what it means to stand with the prisoners is not sufficient. We've got to take the risk of going, standing, speaking and sitting with prisoners ourselves, and all those who have been dehumanized with the word "criminal." And then see where the loving Spirit leads us, and where we can hear the Spirit.

My own understanding of the story of Matthew 25 is that we are invited to come among the outcasts, the prisoners -- in America today, that group is a great challenge and very important -- not because we good people have something to offer them, but because we were told that our Lord and Master is present among them. If we want to find God, go there. If we go there in the Spirit, then maybe we'll find something, and even better, we'll be found.

John Dear will speak Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Aug. 26 near London at the annual Greenbelt Festival. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, 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. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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