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A mindfulness walk in peace

John Dear | Oct. 23, 2012 On the Road to Peace

A few weeks ago, I spent a lovely Saturday morning speaking on "Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Peace and Nonviolence" at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in southern Illinois. We had a good conservation on the connection between Merton's writings on contemplation, prayer and meditation; his thoughts on nonviolence, disarmament and peace; and what it all means for us today. Then we did something unusual. We went for a walk together in silence. We were trying to practice the resurrection life of peace.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist peacemaker and friend of Merton, has been teaching "mindfulness walking" for years, but we rarely hear of Christians who practice this simple exercise. More than 100 of us walked out of the conference center in pairs very slowly, trying to be conscious of our breath, our steps, our thoughts, our feelings and our surroundings. We walked for 30 minutes to a small garden with a large statue of Jesus in prayer at Gethsemane and then slowly back to the conference center.

The goal was simply to experience the ordinary holiness of prayerful peace. By walking slowly in silence with others, we inadvertently encourage one another to be fully aware of our breathing, our walking, our prayer, our peaceableness. Try it, and you'll find how rewarding it is.

Mindfulness walking is a good exercise in the day-to-day practice of nonviolence. It forces us to slow down -- literally -- and to notice the trees, the bushes, the flowers, the sky and the birds, as well as to notice the resistance within us and how far short of "everyday peace" we fall.

Daily exercises in mindfulness help develop our patience, peaceableness, prayer and nonviolence. They not only reduce stress, but can open us to the simple joys of living. This is the flip side to our resistance to the culture of war. While we resist the culture of war and violence, we try to live every minute of every day in peace, hope and joy. One could argue that's too high a goal, but isn't that precisely the journey of the spiritual life? Why not try to reach for the heights and depths and horizons of peace?

"We walk slowly, in a relaxed way, keeping a light smile on our lips," Thich Nhat Hanh teaches in his writings about mindfulness walking. "When we practice this way, we feel deeply at ease, and our steps are those of the most secure person on earth. All our sorrows and anxieties drop away, and peace and joy fill our hearts. Anyone can do it. It takes only a little time, a little mindfulness, and the wish to be happy."

He continues:

> People say that walking on water is a miracle, but to me, walking peacefully on the earth is the real miracle ... Each step is a miracle. Taking steps on our beautiful planet can bring real happiness. As you walk, be fully aware of your foot, the ground, and the connection between them, which is your conscious breathing.
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> When we practice walking meditation, we arrive in each moment. Our true home is in the present moment. When we enter the present moment deeply, our regrets and sorrows disappear, and we discover

> life with all its wonders. Breathing in, we say to ourselves, "I have arrived." Breathing our, we say, "I am home." When we do this, we overcome dispersion and dwell peacefully n the present moment, which is the only moment for us to be alive.
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> When the baby Buddha was born, he took seven steps, and a lotus flower appeared under each step. When you practice walking meditation, you can do the same. Visualize a lotus, a tulip or a gardenia blooming under each step the moment your foot touches the ground. If you practice beautifully like this, your friends will see fields of flowers everywhere you walk.
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> If your steps are peaceful, the world will have peace. If you can make one peaceful step, then peace is possible ... Peace is every step.

After our walk, one participant said to me, "Everything I do has a purpose, even when I go for a walk. I walk my dog. I walk to get exercise. I walk to get the mail. This was a walk with no purpose, and I found it very hard." I told him that was a blessing, that it's a grace to learn to walk in peace for the sake of peace. This is the beginning of peace -- to let go of the outcome, to drop our American addiction for accomplishment, achievement and results, and to dwell simply in the peace of the Holy Spirit.

That's another way to understand walking meditation -- to see it as practice for living and breathing in the Holy Spirit of peace. We can do this any time day during our day: while running errands, doing work or at home. It will help inspire us to be more mindful throughout our day. The goal is to be mindfully centered in the Holy Spirit of peace when we make breakfast, drive the car, engage in work, talk on the phone, do the dishes, wash the laundry, feed the cat, meet with friends or do our chores.

More, this simple exercise in the rhythm of peace trains us to respond more peacefully in the face of pain, anger, rejection, despair, resentment, depression, grief or sickness. We can use this simple exercise to breathe in the Holy Spirit of peace, return to the Holy Spirit of peace and go through any crisis in the Holy Spirit of peace. As we train ourselves to be more peaceful and calm, we prepare ourselves, too, to be more peaceful for the inevitable experience of suffering and death that awaits us all, so that we might go to our deaths in a spirit of peace and mindfulness.

Walking in mindful peace is like prayer, like communion. As far as the world is concerned, it is a waste of time. As far as heaven is concerned, it's a foretaste of the heavenly life to come.

We all experience this mindful walking when we process up the aisle in church to receive Holy Communion. In that moment, we are centered on Jesus. That holy experience summons us to live every moment in peace, mindfulness and communion with Jesus.

I think Jesus did everything nonviolently, mindfully and peacefully. He was perfectly centered, conscious and awake. He taught us to be peaceful and mindful ("Consider the lilies of the field ..." "Study the fig tree ..." "Notice the birds of the air ..."). He certainly taught, healed and walked with great grace and presence of mind. He was peaceful and mindful throughout his actions, conversations, civil disobedience and death, and certainly in his resurrection, when he breathed on the disciples. In light of Buddhist teachings, walking meditation helps us breathe in the breath of the risen Christ, that we might live in the Holy Spirit of peace.

Anyone who cares about humanity and the earth, who works for justice and peace, who resists injustice and war needs to take special care to practice the art of peace so we don't get swallowed whole by this violent culture of mindlessness. Daily peaceful living is essential if we are to offer the gift of peace to others. But what we're rarely told is how blessed the life of peace can be.

"The God of peace is never glorified by human violence," Thomas Merton once wrote. What Merton forgot to

add is that the God of peace is always glorified by human nonviolence. Like Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh, let's continue to walk the path of peace in the fullness of peace that our lives might offer a gift of peace to others.

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On Oct. 28, John Dear will give a talk about *Lazarus, Come Forth!* at Maryknoll in Ossining, N.Y. He will also speak Oct. 30 at Springfield College in Springfield, Mass., and lead a day of reflection, "Peace and Justice Rising!: On the Resurrection Accounts of Jesus" on Nov. 9 at the Call to Action conference in Louisville, Ky. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [1]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [2], 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. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [3]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [4] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[5]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[6]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[7]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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