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The peaceable witness of James Loney in 'Captivity'

John Dear | Nov. 6, 2012 On the Road to Peace

It's been hard for me to watch the election campaign when so little attention was paid to our ongoing wars, closing Guantanamo, ending the death penalty, Wall Street corporate corruption, the needs of the poor, and catastrophic climate change -- even as the unthinkable Superstorm Sandy bore down on the East Coast. Throughout these difficult days, I've tried to stay centered in the spirit of peace and to be mindful of the victims of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I've been helped by reading a powerful new memoir by Christian Peacemaker Teams member James Loney of Toronto.

Seven years ago, Loney and three other peace activists -- fellow Canadian Harmeet Singh Sooden, British citizen Norman Kember and American Tom Fox -- were kidnapped at gunpoint on a side street in Baghdad. They were blindfolded, bound and taken to a house where they were held for almost four months by a group calling itself the "Swords of Righteousness Brigade." Fox was killed, but the other three were rescued and brought home. Now Loney, one of the world's exemplars of Christian nonviolence, has written a book about his experience of nonviolence in a land of war.

Captivity: 118 Days in Iraq and the Struggle for a World Without War [1] (Vintage Canada Trade) tells Loney's firsthand account of the most publicized kidnapping of the Iraq war. The four members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams were well-trained in nonviolence and deeply committed to Jesus' way of nonviolent love. Recently in London, I visited with Kember when he came to one of my talks, and I've met Loney several times when he came to my talks in Canada. I am astonished at their steadfast nonviolence, but I'm amazed at *Captivity* . It's a brilliantly written book -- part thriller, part memoir -- and an instant classic of resistance literature.

Christian Peacemaker Teams train people in nonviolent intervention to work with grassroots communities in lethal conflict zones, such as Palestine/Israel, Colombia and elsewhere. The four peacemakers knew what they were getting into, and *Captivity* recounts the daily terror of being hooded and shackled before their rescue by British and U.S. special forces. After 118 days, the three survivors were brought home, but later they were widely condemned for declining to aid the prosecution of their accused captors for fear they would be sentenced to death. Here's an excerpt for the introduction.

> One hundred and eighteen days. To say "we thought it would never end" would be to dilute an understatement with a cliché. Glaciers moved faster than any single minute of any single one of those days. Each day, each minute was a lash, an open grave, a forced march, an agony and a theft for the four of us held hostage together and all of our families and loved ones imprisoned with us in that four month tomb of unknowing.

> My living, breathing, everyday-walking around freedom comes directly from the hand of the soldier who took a bolt cutter in his hands and cut the chain that held me captive for four months. Yet I remain a pacifist, a Christian who believes that Jesus' teaching to love one's enemy is a call to lay down the sword and pick up the cross, to accept rather than inflict suffering.
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> It is a paradox. I went to Baghdad on a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation in opposition to the institution of war. I was kidnapped by Iraqi insurgents who were fighting against the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of their country. CPT used every weapon in its nonviolent arsenal to get us out. There was an international uprising of prayer vigils, solidarity statements, appeals, public witness, moral pressure. Our kidnapping was front page news for weeks. The constant, unrelenting hope was that our captors would have a change of heart and release us. They didn't.

Christian Peacemaker Teams was born from the challenge of Ron Sider in a 1984 speech at the Mennonite World Conference. "Why do we pacifists think that our way -- Jesus' way -- to peace will be less costly? Unless we are ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we really never meant what we said. What would happen if we in the Christian church developed a new nonviolent peacekeeping force of 100,000 persons ready to move into violent conflicts and stand peacefully between warring parties? Frequently we would get killed by the thousands. But everyone assumes that for the sake of peace it is moral and just for soldiers to get killed by the hundreds of thousands, even millions. Do we not have as much courage and faith as soldiers?"

Captivity tells the story of a true Christian peacemaker who was willing to give his life in obedience to Jesus' commandment to love our enemies. It's a riveting account of Loney's journey and the struggle to be nonviolent, loving and forgiving in the face of terror and death. This is a book I will use to remember what Gospel nonviolence looks like in practice.

On day five of their captivity, we read how Loney tells Fox he's sorry he's being singled out because he's American.

"There's nothing we can do about it," Fox tells him through the blindfold. "I'm just trying to live in the present moment. The past is gone and the future doesn't exist. All we have is the present moment. I'm just meditating as much as I can, praying for us, the team, my kids -- letting go of everything and just being in the now."

At one point, Loney starts reviewing his entire life. He writes:

> I begin with my childhood and work my way through high school and university, young adulthood and recent middle age. I consider every school year and job, every place I have lived, every group I've been part of. I try to remember every person I have ever known, those who were an integral part of my life and those whose path I crossed only briefly. I visualize each one, embrace and kiss them, thank them for whatever I have learned or received from them. Each person is a shining sun, a face of God, an indelible part of the man I've become. I begin to see that my life has been astonishingly rich, an ever-flowing fountain of friendship and love, a universe of goodness. The joy! So much joy! So much blessing! I thank God for each person, surround them with light, and let them go.

Recounting the death of Fox, Jim includes a letter Fox wrote the night before their kidnapping. It reads in part:

> Why are we here? If I understand the message of God ... we are to take part in the creation of the Peaceable Realm of God. How we take part in the creation of this realm is to love God with all our heart, our mind and our strength and to love our neighbors and enemies as we love God and ourselves. In its essential form, different aspects of love bring about the creation of the realm ... We are here to root out

> all aspects of dehumanization that exist within us. We are here to stand with those being dehumanized by oppressors and stand firm against that dehumanization. We are here to stop people, including ourselves, from dehumanizing any of God's children, no matter how much they dehumanize their own souls.

The pages about Loney's release and the return to Canada are exhilarating. Such relief and joy.

"If we want to be free," Loney writes at the end of his great book, "if we want to live as sisters and brothers in a beautiful blue world, a world without war, we have to let go of the power of domination and reach for the power of loving and healing and forgiving. We have to lay down the gun, the bomb, the institution of war, our faith in the power of violence. Until then we will live in a charnel house of death, a tomb, a Pharoah's pyramid, the house of captivity."

I'm grateful for this book, for the lives and witness of members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams, and for all those who give their lives for the peaceable realm of God. This book encourages us to go forward through war, elections and superstorms as citizens of the peaceable realm of God and do what we can for peace. Thank you, Jim Loney.

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John Dear will speak Friday at the Call to Action conference in Louisville, Ky. On Nov. 15, he will offer the Maguire Lecture at Seattle University. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], 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* [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[6]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[7]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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