

Diane Nash's call for nonviolence and agapeic energy

John Dear | Nov. 13, 2012 On the Road to Peace

"We citizens have to take the future of our country into our own hands. There's no one to solve the problems of our country and our world anymore except us."

That was the message Friday night to 1,500 of us at the national Call to Action conference, called "Justice Rising," in Louisville, Ky., from civil rights leader Diane Nash. Use the power of nonviolence and get to work, she said.

For my part in the weekend, I led a daylong workshop on the resurrection accounts of Jesus and their connection with our work for peace and justice. One hundred fifty of us wrestled with the texts and came away with new hope to carry on our work for justice and peace by keeping our eyes on the peacemaking Jesus, welcoming his resurrection gift of peace, becoming people of active nonviolence and resisting the culture of war, violence and death. Nash's evening lecture not only confirmed our reflections, but challenged us further.

A native of Chicago, Nash enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville in 1959 and was shocked by the reality of segregation. She decided to try to do something about it, but was told by friends not to cause trouble. There's nothing that can be done, they said. Then she discovered that the Rev. Jim Lawson was holding weekly classes nearby on the practice of nonviolence.

As shown in the documentary "[A Force More Powerful](#) [1]," Lawson taught Nash and others about the methodology of nonviolence and inspired them to take action, which they did. (Decades later, as chairperson of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Lawson hired me as the group's executive director, and we served together for many years. Like Nash, he remains my friend and teacher. In his 80s, he's still teaching weekly classes on nonviolence, this time in Los Angeles.)

In 1960, Nash became the chairperson of the student sit-in movement in Nashville, led many demonstrations, and helped Nashville become the first Southern city to desegregate its lunch counters. Then she helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and in 1961, coordinated the Freedom Ride from Birmingham, Ala., to Jackson, Miss., which was documented in the recent PBS film "[Freedom Riders](#) [2]." She spent 30 days in jail even though she was pregnant with her first child.

She became a key strategist for the Birmingham campaign and the Selma Voting Rights campaign and was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to the national committee that formed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. as an organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. To my mind, Diane Nash, like Jim Lawson, is one of the nation's most important leaders.

During our workshop, we spent the morning reading from the resurrection accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, focusing on the road to Emmaus story, our own journey from despair to hope, and Jesus' explanation of the history and power of nonviolence. In the afternoon, we read in the Gospel of John how the risen Jesus gives us his gift of peace, sends us on the mission of peace, and in particular, asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" I pointed out that the text uses the Greek word *agape*. Jesus asks Peter if he has *agape* for Jesus, if he's

willing to lay down his life in nonviolent love for him. Peter can only say he has *philia* for Jesus, the ordinary "love" between friends or brothers. Three times, Jesus invites Peter to *agape*, and each time, Peter says he can only go as far as *philia*. So the account ends with Jesus calling Peter to "follow him," to start all over the journey of discipleship and nonviolence on the road to peace.

So it was thrilling to hear Nash speak later that evening on the power of nonviolence as *agapeic* energy. "You probably never heard that before," she said with a smile. "That's because I made it up."

Everything requires energy, she said, especially violence, hatred and war, but if we use the energy of *agape* /love, we can disarm, heal and transform every situation, including our country and our world, for the better. That's what Gandhi taught us. This powerful nonviolence, or *agapeic* energy, is the best way to bring about lasting justice and peace.

One might expect a charismatic, historic leader like Nash to tell inspiring stories of the struggle, and she did relate a few, but instead, she turned that hotel ballroom into a university classroom and used her lecture to teach us the steps of nonviolence. Like a wise professor, she walked us through the methodology of nonviolence/*agapeic* energy, and urged us to use this power to change our country and the world.

"We, the citizens, are the only ones who can change this country," she said. "If we waited for elected officials to desegregate, we would still be waiting." We have to get to work, keep on working and force our elected officials to implement our vision of justice and peace.

Keep in mind a few basic principles, she said: "People are never your enemies. Racism, sexism, war and unjust political systems are your enemies. So love the person, your opponent, and attack the wrongful system."

She said to remember that "oppression always requires the cooperation of the oppressed. If the oppressed withdraw their cooperation with the oppressive system, that oppressive system will fall. The day that blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, decided not to ride segregated buses in Montgomery was the day the buses of Montgomery were no longer segregated," she explained.

We have to non-cooperate with oppression, she taught, which means changing yourself. "We changed ourselves into people who would no longer be segregated," she said. "And they had to deal with us like that. We need to do the same today."

There are six basic steps for every campaign of nonviolence or *agapeic* energy, she continued.

First, investigation. Set the goal, gather information, ask analytical questions and examine how the oppressed are participating in their own oppression.

Second, education. Educate everyone about the reality of the situation and the nonviolent way to transform it.

Third, negotiation. Contact the opponent and express love for them while you explain that you are no longer going to cooperate with oppression and violence.

Fourth, demonstrations. Use public action to focus the community's attention on the need to end oppression and create a more just society.

Fifth, resistance. After these steps, it's time for "hardcore non-cooperation," such as economic boycotts, non-payment of taxes, strikes, work stoppages and other actions.

And sixth, ensure that the problem will not recur.

"Freedom is a constant, never-ending struggle," she said. We have to keep working for it and keep using these steps to change our country and our world.

King did not do everything in the civil rights movement, she observed. Thousands of people were actively involved in the struggle for civil rights, and every one of them was needed. If people really understood what happened in the movement, they would ask themselves, "What can I do now to help build up movements for justice, disarmament and peace?"

Nash teaches us the power of nonviolence to bring about real societal change and encourages us to do what we can for today's movements for justice and peace, knowing that each one of us is needed, each one of us can make a difference, each one of us has the power to change ourselves and to be a force for societal transformation.

Every one of us is needed if we are going to end the U.S. war in Afghanistan, the death penalty, unjust immigration policies, drones, nuclear weapons, corporate greed, the violation of human rights, world hunger and environmental destruction, and every form of violence.

"Learn about *agapeic* energy," Nash concluded. "Trust yourself. Assert an appropriate amount of power in your community. Non-cooperate with injustice. And take action. We have work to do."

That's a great lesson and encouragement for all of us to keep on working for justice, disarmament and peace for our country and our world.

John Dear will give the Maguire Lecture about the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador and their peacemaking lessons at Seattle University on Thursday. CDs of John's workshop at the Call to Action conference are available at cta-usa.org [3]. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to [John Dear's website](http://www.johndear.org) [4]. 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. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [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.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/afmp/index.php>

[2] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>

[3] <http://www.cta-usa.org/>

[4] <http://www.johndear.org>

[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-](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=1GYTD8AM60PI)

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[6] <http://www.fosna.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>