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September 11: Gandhi's Hundredth Anniversary

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

For the last five days, some 50 of us walked more than 50 miles; we went from Thomas Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani to downtown Louisville, Ky. There on Sept. 11 we held a rally at the corner of Fourth Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard, where nearly 50 years ago, Merton realized he loved everyone and decided to spend the rest of his life engaging the woes and tumult of the world.

While many commemorated the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of Gandhi's Satyagraha campaign in South Africa. That campaign began with Gandhi's speech to a crowd, a speech that inspired some 3,000 oppressed Indians to profess a vow of nonviolence to resist racist laws. That day, Gandhi told the gathered people:

The government has taken leave of all sense of decency. Those who take the pledge [of nonviolent resistance] must be prepared for the worst. Imagine that all of us present here numbering 3,000 take the pledge. We might have to go to jail. We might be insulted. We might have to go hungry and suffer extreme heat or cold. Hard labor might be imposed on us. We might be flogged. We might be fined and our property might be help up to auction. We might be reduced to abject poverty. We might be deported. Suffering from starvation and similar hardships in jail, some of us might fall ill and even die.

But if the entire community humanly stands the tests," he famously concluded, "the end will be near. I can boldly declare, and with certainty, that so long as there is even a handful

of people true to their pledge, there can only be one end to the struggle, and that is victory.

This was a turning point in history. To mark it, yesterday, more than a hundred gathered in Louisville and professed our own vows of nonviolence.

I had professed such a vow when I entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1982. I was preparing for the typical vows of Catholic religious life, when I read that Gandhi had professed 16 vows, including vows of fearlessness, truth-telling and respect for all religions. A few friends and I decided to prepare a vow of nonviolence, too, and we spent two years experimenting with it in our personal lives.

I still study the life of Mahatma Gandhi, as did Merton, for clues about peacemaking. Last year I traveled to India with Gandhi's grandson Arun to see where Gandhi lived and died and to witness how his work continues. I spent years reading all 98 volumes of Gandhi's collected works, as well as 25 biographies, for my book, *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writing*. In all his words one theme persisted. Whatever crisis or catastrophe presented itself, Gandhi offered the same answer: steadfast, persistent, dedicated, committed, relentless, truthful, prayerful, loving, active, creative nonviolence.

For Gandhi, nonviolence surpasses the refusal to hurt or kill: nonviolence is active love, a force for social uplift. Indeed, he insisted, nonviolence is the most active and powerful force in the world. Since he saw it as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good, he concluded that nonviolence is more powerful than all nuclear weapons. If millions of Americans would practice it, would peacefully and actively resist war, disarmament would be assured.

Nonviolence always works, he said, because it uses the method of suffering love to melt the human heart. He taught that if we can harness its power, nonviolence becomes contagious and wars end, injustices cease and nations disarm.

He observed that all religions are rooted in nonviolence and he asserted that God is a God of peace. He taught we should pursue truth passionately; that non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good, and that if we want peace, we must resist war. He taught, as well, that we should have nothing to do with power, that we should renounce the fruit of our action and do good because it's good and leave the outcome to God. And more, that the struggle for peace requires measure for measure the same risk and sacrifice of war.

But like Jesus, Gandhi went further. He came to the conclusion of the cross, which is to say, social change derives from our willingness to suffer for the sake of justice and peace. Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the evildoer, but means the pitting of one's whole would against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save honor, religion, soul and lay the foundation for the fall of empire and the regeneration of society.

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In his commitment to faith-based nonviolence, Gandhi spent one hour in prayer every morning, usually around three, and another in the afternoon around five. Over the course of 20 years, so he could maintain his peaceful center, he remained silent every Monday.

We all have to adopt nonviolence, Gandhi said after the United States dropped the atom bomb on

Hiroshima, shortly before his death, or we are doomed. Yet he remained hopeful. He also said, "We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence, but I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence."

As the crowds gathered with Gandhi a hundred years ago, our group gathered where Thomas Merton once stood and professed a vow of nonviolence. We were exhausted from the walk, but exhilarated by the spirit of peace. We pledged to be nonviolent in every aspect of our lives, and like Gandhi, pursue new discoveries in the field of nonviolence, including the abolition of war itself.

John Dear's book, *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writings*, is available from Orbis Books. For information, see: www.fatherjohndear.org

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