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A weekend with Nobel Peace Laureates

John Dear | Sep. 26, 2006 On the Road to Peace

"We will never win a war against terror as long as the conditions for poverty and injustice remain," Archbishop Desmond Tutu said. "Poverty breeds terrorism. So we should stop spending billions of dollars on weapons of destruction and instead feed the hungry people of the world. Then, we'll stop terrorism. If we want to live in peace, we have to realize we are all members of the same family."

Archbishop Tutu was just one of 10 Nobel Peace prize winners speaking to 3,000 youth last weekend in Denver at PeaceJam, an international program that brings youth from around the world together with Nobel Peace Laureates -- 10 of them in this case -- the largest gathering ever in North America. Founded by a dynamic young couple, Dawn Engle and Ivan Suvanjieff, PeaceJam is one of the most exciting, empowering youth programs in the nation.

My friend Mairead Maguire, the Nobel laureate from Belfast, whose writings I edited into the collection, *The Vision of Peace*, asked me to accompany her to the events. I had traveled with her before, along with our friend Adolfo Perez Esquivel, the Nobel laureate from Argentina, to Iraq in 1999. And recently, Archbishop Tutu, laureate from South Africa, wrote a forward for my forthcoming Doubleday book, *Transfiguration*.

Besides reconnecting with these heroes of mine, I got to meet Jose Ramos Horta, Prime Minister of East Timor; President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica; Jody Williams of the Landmines Campaign, Shrini Ebadi of Iran, Rigoberta Menchu Tum of Guatemala, and Betty Williams of Northern Ireland. And at one point during the weekend, I received a blessing from the Dalai Lama. The weekend concluded with a Global Call to Action with the Youth of the World, a plea to fight poverty, racism, environmental destruction, war and nuclear weapons.

Such wondrously inspiring days. The weekend over, I drove Mairead to New Mexico, where she spoke in several churches and gave media interviews and toured Los Alamos.

It was gratifying to meet young people from around the world. At one point, hundreds lined up at the microphone to say briefly what inspires them, before they received Tutu's blessing. One 15 year old said, "I'm inspired by all those who stand up against the current and speak out for peace. After all, only dead fish go with the flow!"

Still, I found myself moved most by the message of the laureates.

"War doesn't work," Mairead said over and over to the thousands who turned out. "Nuclear weapons don't work. I don't believe in a just war. The war on Iraq is totally immoral, totally illegal, and totally unnecessary. So we need to say no to war, and no to nuclear weapons. We need to learn the way of nonviolence."

Said Shrini Ebadi, the brave judge from Iran: "Every nation with nuclear weapons should dismantle them

immediately. I wish, for example, that after 9/11 the U.S. had built thousands of schools in Afghanistan in honor of each victim."

Jose Ramos said, "I'm worried about the consequences of nuclear proliferation. I'm worried that one day we will wake to find Washington, D.C. or London destroyed by biological attacks from non-state terrorists."

And Jody Williams asked, "What has the war and violence done in Iraq? It's only turned Iraq into a training ground for terrorists. You cannot bring change through the barrel of a gun. If we really want to disarm the world of nuclear weapons, we should begin first here at home."

"Work for peace is really hard work," she continued. "Peacemaking means getting up every single day and working hard for global peace. It's not doves or nice paintings or bad poetry; it's hard work. And that's the only way to make the world better. Peace is economic and social justice, and we have to work hard for that."

President Oscar Arias pointed out that the U.S. spends over half a trillion dollars a year on militarism, but only a tiny fracture on food, medicine and education for the worlds poor. "Real security means first of all security against hunger, disease, and poverty," he said.

And Rigoberta Menchu cut us to the core: "If there were no wars in the world, the U.S. economy would not prosper. Therefore, there must not be any more prosperity in the United States, if the world's poor are to prosper."

"World peace begins with our personal inner disarmament," the Dalai Lama taught. "We need to take seriously our religious traditions and inner life, then try to educate young people and future generations about the life of peace. And we have to recognize that all six billion of us are one."

"When I was tortured by the Argentine junta," Adolfo Perez Esquivel told us, "I saw on the ceiling of my cell, written in blood, the words, 'God does not kill.' We need to learn that lesson, and resist the forces of death and destruction, and struggle for life and dignity for all. If we focus on this task, we can build peace."

Betty Williams told us flatly: "If you are not trying to change what's wrong in the world, you are part of the problem. Every one of us has a responsibility to look after humanity."

And again Shrini Ebadi: "When you believe in your cause, you will find strength to take another step forward, and you will make a difference. One day, God will ask us what we did with our lives, how we served humanity, so we better get on with that work."

"How about exporting your generosity instead of your bombs?" Archbishop Tutu concluded, as he addressed thousands of young people. "You are the future of the world. Don't become cynical like us old folks who made a mess of the world. The world is hurting. Go and heal it."

"We need a new nonviolent, non-killing world. Is such a world possible? Of course it is," Mairead Maguire said. "But we have to work for it. Get to work!"

A noble mandate for all of us.

John Dear is a Jesuit priest, peace activist and author of *You Will Be My Witnesses* (Orbis) and *Living Peace* (Doubleday). For information on the Nobel Laureates gathering, see: **www.peacejam.org** [1]. For information on the campaign to stop the war on Iraq, see: **www.declarationofpeace.org** [2]. See also: **www.johndear.org** [3].

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