

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 11, 2013 at 12:00pm

Utah's majestic landscape presents God in God's creation

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"The earth does not belong to us," Chief Seattle once wrote. "We belong to the earth." That wisdom hit me again this week as I looked out over the spectacular, wild desert landscape of southern Utah.

After visiting friends at the Tuesday afternoon peace prayer group in Salt Lake City, I drove down to Moab to spend a few days in Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park. Those majestic desert vistas and massive orange rock formations reveal Mother Earth at her most astonishing. The endless vistas, orange cliffs, red boulders and canyons -- the fruit of 300 million years of erosion -- seem to bear the fingerprints of the Creator. They provide an up-close encounter with the Great Mystery. If we listen closely, they offer an ancient wisdom: the way of peace.

Some 2,300 natural rock arches are spread throughout the massive orange rock formations, cliffs, boulders and mountains of Arches National Park. Nothing can prepare you for these strange, inspiring orange and red rocks and arches set against the blue sky. At the entrance, you drive high up into the mountains along the sheer orange cliffs and arrive first at "Park Avenue," a narrow valley of sagebush, low pine trees, cactus and dead wood lying between 10-story brown and orange cliffs and rocks. It feels like you're walking between New York's skyscrapers, except that they're infinitely more beautiful. Then you drive on to Windows, Delicate Arch, and eventually Devil's Garden, with its bizarre red and orange cliffs sticking up like fins out of the earth. In the distance, a hundred miles of desert spreads out around you, and massive mountains rise on the horizon -- the distant Rockies.

Before such beauty I found myself reduced to silence. It was like standing before the Grand Canyon or the ocean or looking up at the night sky and seeing a million stars and the Milky Way. Suddenly, you find that you are very small and quite insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Mother Earth can be

humbling.

One can't help but think of the Creator before this stunning scene. There, in that vista, you enter the spirit of peace and quiet, and learn to breath and be present all over again. The harsh but beautiful landscape recenters you, helps you reclaim your soul and makes you feel more human.

Arches National Park is certainly one of the most spectacular places on earth, but it is just a prelude to Canyonlands, where I also spent many hours driving around, looking at the vistas and meditating on creation. Canyonlands National Park is Utah's version of the Grand Canyon. It's more accessible than Arizona's Grand Canyon, since the Colorado and Green Rivers form three sections of Canyonlands, with "Island in the Sky" in the middle, a kind of high plateau in the center of it with views in every direction.

There before you, as far as the eye can see, are red, orange, brown and purple cliffs and canyons and rocks and pillars and white salt edges with green pines and sagebrush sprinkled over the landscape. You feel like you've landed on Mars. Nothing moves. It's like a living painting.

It's so overwhelming that part of you wants to look away and get back to your ordinary day-to-day business. It's too powerful, too real, too much for the eyes and mind and heart. You can't take it all in.

I wonder if that's why so few spend time with God. Like the universe, God is simply too big, too true, too good, too mysterious, too old, too loving, too truthful, too overwhelming. Only a few saints and mystics can stand before the reality of God. Only a few dare not run away from the truth of God. Only a few seem to open their hearts to the mystery of God. I certainly don't claim to be one of those few, but I would like to become one, and I know that eventually, like every other human being, I will stand before God. Canyonlands, like the best of Mother Earth, is a good place to practice being humbled before God. We stand still, open ourselves to the universe, awaken to reality and patiently wait in peace.

There were hardly any tourists that afternoon when I arrived at the Grand View Lookout, so I was able to open my eyes to the vista before me, listen with my ears, drink in the silence, practice mindfulness, enter contemplative peace and be fully present before the revelation.

As I tried to take it in, I noticed everything was broken: the rocks, cliffs, pillars, boulders and pinnacles. It was the brokenness, caused by time's erosion, that brought about the beauty. There's a lesson there somewhere, I thought.

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I've been trying in recent years to spend more quality time with nature -- in the parks, at the ocean, in the desert, by rivers and mountains and woods and fields -- and with her creatures, to become one with the earth and find God in God's creation and creatures. This is part of the peacemaking life, too, I know. I want to feel grounded, connected to the earth, especially now as climate change hits us. I want to grieve for what we have done to creation and her creatures, and try to side with Mother Earth, that my fledgling nonviolence should somehow extend even to creation and her creatures.

Isn't that what Jesus urged? "Consider the lilies of the field." "Learn a lesson from the fig tree." "Look at the birds in the sky." He wanted us to learn the way of God, as he did, from creation and her creatures.

"Blessed are the meek," Jesus teaches in the beatitudes. "They shall inherit the earth." Right there, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, he connects the life of nonviolence with our oneness with

creation. If we can practice biblical meekness -- creative nonviolence -- we will become one with creation. We will be grounded on earth, respect creation and her creations, and find ourselves at home.

It's precisely our disconnect from creation that has led to the destructive policies that now bring catastrophic climate change. Now on the brink, we need to wake up to the truth of reality -- that we are all one, that we are physically united to creation and her creatures, that we need to be nonviolent toward the earth itself and the air and water and all creatures -- if we want to survive and live in peace.

Many scientific reports claim that if we do not radically change our global policies and practices, a frightening apocalypse of violence will bear down upon us. As the population rises to 10 billion by the end of the century, there will be more than a hundred wars over water, with rampant starvation, disease and extreme poverty, killing millions, perhaps billions of sisters and brothers. Within a few hundred years, only half the planet will be inhabitable, and the global population may fall to as low as 250 million people.

"Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth," Chief Seattle wrote long ago. He was right. We need to heed his wisdom and change our lives.

I thought of this as I stood before the majestic Canyonlands of Utah, and tried take in the beauty of the gorgeous desert landscapes and the violence we do to it all: fracking, drilling for oil, poisoning the water and the land, building and using nuclear weapons, ignoring the starving millions, dropping bombs and maintaining a permanent culture of war. Can we choose to protect creation, reverse our destructive policies and save ourselves? The God of peace hopes we will.

At the end of my day, at the visitors' center, I asked one of the rangers, an elderly Minnesotan woman with white hair and a big smile, what it all means. I'm speechless before these canyons, I confessed. "You're on the right track," she said with a smile, pointing to my heart. "These canyons, rocks, cliffs and rivers touch us at a very deep level. They connect to our soul. The challenge is to stay with them and listen to them."

For centuries, these sacred lands have maintained a silent peace witness before us. When I put my ear to the ground, I hear a prayer that we might reclaim our true nonviolent nature, our "meekness," and do what we can to protect creation and her creatures, that we might save the earth and future generations from our senseless violence. It's a worthy struggle, one that offers the blessing of Jesus himself -- and the earth as our personal inheritance.

John Dear will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. John is now working with the Franciscan-based peace group *Pace e Bene*. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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