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Rejecting war, living the nonviolent life

John Dear | Sep. 3, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Like many others, I'm horrified and saddened by the war and killings in Syria and adamantly oppose U.S. bombings and entry into the war. Further war-making is not the way to end war. Instead, the United States should organize massive global, nonviolent pressure on Syria to cut all weapons sales and deliveries and work nonviolently to end the war. Of course, that means we should end all our military aid and weapons sales to Israel, Egypt and elsewhere, and dismantle our own weapons of mass destruction.

An active, engaged, nonviolent response is the Christian way, as Pope Francis said Sunday. Jesus commanded us in the Sermon on the Mount: "Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil," and "love your enemies." These teachings demand that we pursue nonviolent solutions to international conflict as well as nonviolent living.

My new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, reflects on the three dimensions of a nonviolent life: practicing nonviolence toward oneself; practicing nonviolence toward all others, all creatures, and creation; and practicing nonviolence by joining the global grass-roots movement of nonviolence. This week, I offer a few excerpts for your reflection.

The Nonviolent Life can be ordered at paceebene.org [1].

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We are all called to become who we were created to be -- the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace. That means each one of us is sent like the nonviolent Jesus into the world of war to make peace. We claim our true identities in God's love, and try to love ourselves, every one we meet, and to increase love and end violence throughout the world. This is a beautiful, exciting mission which gives our lives ultimate meaning in the universal scheme of things.

Rooted in this identity and mission, we seek to live in the conscious awareness of God's loving, nonviolent presence, and to share that disarming love with everyone. That means, we continue to nurture God's peace and nonviolence within us, every day, for the rest of our lives. We strive to become people of peace, who act like the sons and daughters of the God of peace. We seek to let that holy peace dwell within us and radiate from us so that the world will become more peaceful, more nonviolent.

Of course, this is much harder than it sounds. That's why I suggest that we begin our reflections on the life of nonviolence with the inner work of nonviolence -- letting go of our interior violence, cultivating interior nonviolence, not being violent to ourselves, and working to treat ourselves nonviolently from now on. We need to practice nonviolence first of all toward ourselves, and never again be violent to ourselves. The life of nonviolence begins as we befriend ourselves, make peace with ourselves, and make room for God's Spirit of peace to live and dwell within us. It means taking to heart God's affirming word of love and seeing ourselves through that lens of nonviolent love as God does.

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All of this inner peace work is especially important for those involved in the public work for peace and justice. If we are not loving and affirming ourselves, we will be clueless as to the practice of nonviolent love toward others. I think the work of nonviolent resistance to the world's injustices and wars is extremely difficult because, among other reasons, the global issues of violence we are addressing can easily trigger the lingering violence within us and reopen our own past wounds. Peacemakers, social justice advocates and activists need to be acutely aware of their own inner wounds and inner violence as they seek to address the world's wounds and violence. If we are not conscious about that connection, then we will often respond to the world's violence and need for peace from our inner violence, not our inner peace.

As we journey toward deeper inner peace and work publicly for peace, we do not want to do more harm than good! With all our good intentions, we do not want to end up hurting ourselves or others, much less turning everyone else off from the nonviolent struggle for disarmament and justice.

Conscious, self-aware nonviolence is the key.

Nonviolence begins with the conscious awareness that we are all victims of violence, that we are all wounded, and that we have all been indoctrinated in the culture of violence, so we need to tend to our own inner healing and try to learn how to become more nonviolent to ourselves and others. That personal, inner journey is the work of a lifetime; that's what the spiritual life is all about. We need to look deeply within and try to look at the causes of our violence and be gentle with ourselves and not beat ourselves up but cultivate interior peace and nonviolence. Then when we reach out to others and engage in the public struggle for disarmament and justice, with a real awareness of our own woundedness and our need for healing, we might actually help others heal and support the healing of humanity and the planet. We will know from our own inner experience what others are going through, and be able to teach them -- because of our own good inner work -- how to become true people of peace and nonviolence.

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From now on, we practice meticulous nonviolence toward all others. We try to be nonviolent toward everyone we meet in our ordinary day to day lives for the rest of our lives. We work to be conscious and mindful of our interpersonal nonviolence, to consciously cultivate an attitude of nonviolence toward everyone on the planet, and all creatures and creation itself.

You might say this sounds easy, but there's a reason we're so violent. Nonviolence is hard; violence is easy. We're used to violence. It's so deeply rooted within us that sooner or later it always rears its ugly head. We go along with it because it's second nature. We're constantly provoked, and rarely encouraged to be nonviolent.

Though nonviolence is hard, it's actually not quite as hard as violence. Violence hurts everyone involved -- its victim and its victimizer. It brings pain of all kinds, including physical injury and death, but also emotional, psychological and spiritual pain. It never leads to the consolation of the Holy Spirit. It always leads to despair, hard feelings, resentment, bitterness and worse.

Nonviolence, on the other hand, does not hurt the other person. It's hard to practice, and may require that we accept suffering in pursuit of the truth with love without resorting to violence, but it heals even as it works. It takes time and requires patience, but it always leads to the consolation of the Holy Spirit. It can lead to new hope, forgiveness, justice, reconciliation and transformation. And those should always be our goals.

How do we respond to those who threaten us with violence? Nonviolently! If we respond with similar anger or

violence, we can be sure that we will receive the full brunt of his promised violence. If we respond with reason, insight, wisdom, humor and creativity, using the methods of Jesus and Gandhi, we might disarm the opponent and make a new friend.

In all things, be nonviolent. In all relationships, be nonviolent. In all protests, in all encounters, in all confrontations, be nonviolent. Train and practice nonviolence in those small, tense, day to day encounters with those around you that you might develop muscles for later on, so that you can practice the "nonviolence of the strong," like Gandhi and Dr. King.

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"What are you going to do today to fight injustice and global evil?" That's the question the mother of legendary singer and activist Harry Belafonte told him to ask himself every morning when he woke up: "What am I going to do today for peace and justice for humanity?"

In his beautiful memoir, *My Song*, Belafonte tells how he has asked himself that question every morning of his life since he was a little boy. It became his mantra. He has tried to begin every day by determining what practical action he will take that day to help end poverty, war, racism, and systemic evil.

By doing this, Belafonte gave his life focus, purpose and meaning. By staying with that question every day of his life, he has remained committed to the struggle and made a huge difference for all of us.

Every one of us can start our day by asking ourselves that question, Harry Belafonte writes. "What can I do today to promote justice, disarmament, nonviolence and peace? What concrete action can I take to help end violence, war, poverty, racism and evil? How can I practice creative nonviolence, relieve unjust suffering, and help disarm the world? How can I serve God's reign of justice and peace today? How can I help more people become nonviolent? How can I help build the global grassroots movement of nonviolence?" These are good questions to take every morning to God in our quiet meditation.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. both insisted that nonviolence requires a profound commitment -- as well as serious movement organizing. They taught that living and advocating the life of nonviolence, given our global addiction to violence, was the highest human ideal. If we are to survive, all our institutions, structures, and nations will have to become nonviolent, and each one of us is needed to help bring about this global transformation.

We can't be just try to be peaceful in our personal lives and do nothing about the world of total violence and permanent war. Nor can we practice attentive nonviolence solely to those around us, and ignore the plight of the suffering masses. We need to make the connections, practice nonviolence at every level, and do our part to help disarm the world. When we join the global grassroots movement of nonviolence, we practice the full, holistic "nonviolence of the strong" taught by Jesus, Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day and many others.

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[John will undertake a speaking tour of Scotland next week and next year will tour the United States speaking about the life of nonviolence. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [2] or contact the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [3]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [4] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [5], *Put Down Your Sword* [6] and *A Persistent Peace* [7], are available from Amazon.com.]

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