NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The War Resisters League celebrates 90 years of opposing war

John Dear | Oct. 22, 2013 On the Road to Peace

In her diary on Oct. 19, 1923, 48-year-old New York City educator Jessie Wallace Hughan wrote, "Took Tracy to dinner -- had hair done -- organized the War Resisters League." That day, she launched a new independent, secular network of peace activists that has continued to resist every war since.

On Friday night, hundreds of us gathered in New York City to celebrate the 90th birthday of the War Resisters League. To mark the occasion, WRL presented awards to three living legends of peace and justice -- folk singer Joan Baez, whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg and recording star and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte. It was a magical, memorable evening that encouraged all of us to continue in the struggle to resist war.

A beautiful program told the WRL story. One photo showed an early flier from the 1920s that read: "Do not enlist! Think for yourselves! True courage is to stand for the right and refuse to kill! Peace is our duty -- not war! Might is not right. Use your light. Do not fight!" Other photos showed the WRL motto: "Wars will cease when men refuse to fight!"

In 1930, Albert Einstein agreed to serve as honorary chair of WRL and told one gathering, "If only 2 percent of those assigned to perform military service should announce their refusal to fight, governments would be powerless."

For 90 years, WRL has done its best to fulfill its mission [1]: "The War Resisters League affirms that all war is a crime against humanity. We therefore are determined not to support any kind of war, international or civil, and to strive nonviolently for the removal of the causes of war, including racism, sexism and all forms of human exploitation."

Today, WRL promotes what it calls "revolutionary nonviolence." That challenge was at the heart of our celebration Friday night.

Baez reflected on Gandhi's insight that we have both violence and nonviolence within us and among us.

"But it's a question of which one we will organize," she said. "Violence is easier to organize and more attractive, but we have to organize nonviolence. My motto is, 'Little victories and big defeats.' We have to do whatever we can for nonviolence."

She told us about her own personal 10-year campaign of tax resistance to oppose the Vietnam War and how the IRS put a lien on her house and car and used to visit her regularly. Then she sang folk anthem "Joe Hill" and the festive Chilean song "Gracias a la Vida."

"I should have spoken out more for nonviolence over the past few decades," Ellsberg said. "Dictators depend on the obedience and support of the public. We should withdraw that support. We have power in our withdrawal of our support for war."

"I withdrew my willingness to be silent [by releasing the Pentagon Papers]," he continued. "Cooperation with silence is the widest scale of evil. If we noncooperate, we withdraw the veil and expose the evil. Every U.S. president has threatened nuclear weapons. These are terrorist weapons, which means every U.S. president is a terrorist. People keep secret what they know is criminal in order to save their jobs, and so innumerable people have died over the years. But we have the power to withdraw our silence, to awaken people and to warn them. That's what [Chelsea] Manning and [Edward] Snowden have done."

Belafonte reflected on his time in the U.S. Army during World War II and the hope of black people for real change after the war. Instead, society returned to the same old segregation, racism and violence. He spoke of the people who influenced him and radicalized him -- Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph and, ultimately, Martin Luther King Jr.

"King showed me why nonviolence was the morally and philosophically right place to be but that it was also tactically the right place to be," he said. "Later, I got to know Nelson Mandela and spent serious time with him in heart-to-heart sharing. Mandela told me that how we applied nonviolence here in the United States became an important plan of his plan for a new South Africa. Most of all, Jesus was my first instructor of nonviolence. Everything Christ did was nonviolent. There I learned that nonviolence was in my DNA."

It was great to celebrate the War Resisters League's beautiful history, to meet like-minded committed peacemakers, and to renew our commitment to oppose all war. I urge folks to learn more about WRL [1] and join the movement to end war.

"You could say that on a night like tonight, we're just preaching to the choir," Belafonte said at one point. "But I was with Dr. King once after a talk and a reporter said to him, 'Aren't you just preaching to the choir?' And Dr. King answered: 'If I don't preach to the choir, they might stop singing.' "

"So dear friends," Harry Belafonte told us, "keep on singing for peace!"

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org [2] and Amazon.com [3]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule, to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, or to join his work with Campaign Nonviolence [4], go to his website [5] or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene [6]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] 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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[2] http://paceebene.org/store/item/nonviolent-life
[3] http://www.amazon.com/The-Nonviolent-Life-John-Dear/dp/0966978323
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