

Celebrating the life of Scott Kennedy

John Dear S.J. | Dec. 6, 2011 | On the Road to Peace

I'll be in Santa Cruz, Calif., this week to join hundreds of friends at a memorial for my friend and colleague Scott Kennedy, who died suddenly a few weeks ago.

Scott, 62, was one of the most steadfast, determined and active peacemakers I have ever known. The former mayor of Santa Cruz, a founder of the Resource Center for Nonviolence and a longtime leader within the Fellowship of Reconciliation, he had just returned from leading his 36th delegation to Palestine, this one a grueling two weeks in Gaza. He and his wife, Kris, went to bed that Friday night, but on Saturday, Nov. 19, Scott never woke up. He died peacefully of natural causes.

Every peacemaker should know about Scott. He had something to teach us all. He believed there was always work to be done for justice and peace, that none of us are helpless, that every one of us can play our part in disarming the world. In the face of war, injustice, poverty and nuclear weapons development, we can meet, organize and take action that will make a difference. Scott certainly made a difference in the world, and in the lives of many of us, including mine.

"Kennedy spent almost his entire life working to promote social change and help those who were less fortunate, with much of that work done through the center which he co-founded in 1976," [*The San Jose Mercury News* said in its obituary.](#) [1]

"He was a man who would go out of his way to help others, and was stubbornly driven. Kennedy was known for being passionate, intelligent and at times intense, and many are calling his death a huge loss for the community. Friends and colleagues remember him as someone who had an amazing energy and would go out of his way to help others and who had a sharp sense of humor. In his political career, as in his advocacy, he was dedicated and tenacious."

I knew Scott for about 25 years through mutual friends, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and my visits to the Resource Center for Nonviolence. I spent a memorable day in the late 1980s with him and Danilo Dolci, one of Europe's greatest peacemakers who used Gandhian nonviolence in Sicily to fight the Mafia. Danilo was a large, jolly figure, and Scott and I talked about him for years afterwards.

In 1990, I began to serve with Scott on the National Council of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Later as FOR's director, I worked even more closely with Scott. We spent four long days together every three months for years on end in interminable organizing meetings. Those FOR meetings were like something out of early Bolshevik history because they seemed to go on forever. We'd start at 7 a.m. and talk until midnight. I was perpetually exhausted. Scott, on the other hand, was infinitely energized. Scott was perhaps the hardest-working activist I have ever known.

And he maintained his radical commitment throughout his life, right through to the end. One of my favorite memories goes back to the 1990s, when we were struggling at FOR over strategy and action to fight the U.S.-U.N. economic sanctions on Iraq, which were killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children. Scott had the

answer: Buy a large generator, bring it to Iraq, give it to a hospital without power, violate the U.S. sanctions and expose the evil intent to kill Iraqi children. His plan called for serious institutional civil disobedience, the likes of which none of us had ever known. In the end, other activist friends undertook the project and broke the law, but Scott's daring vision pushed all of us deeper into Jesus' commandment, "Love your enemies."

Scott Kennedy was born in Nebraska in 1948, grew up in San Jose, Calif., and went to public schools, where he met his wife, Kris. He attended the University of California at Santa Cruz and became a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. He completed his alternative civilian service in Isla Vista, Calif., where he co-founded the Isla Vista Youth Project and several other community programs. He was a war tax resister from the Vietnam War until 2009.

Scott was always organizing. He took action, created new organizations, supported every peace and justice cause, brought people together, raised funds and built movements. In 1976, Scott, Kris and their friends co-founded the [Resource Center for Nonviolence](#) [2], which remains perhaps the best local peace and justice center in the nation. For decades, he ran their Middle East Program. I was excited to hear just a few weeks ago about the purchase of the former Christian Science church in Santa Cruz as their new headquarters. While other peace groups are folding, Scott and his friends were forging ahead. They know that peace work is needed now more than ever, and that the funds for such projects can be raised. It is one of his last achievements.

Scott's life is a record of extraordinary accomplishments for peace and justice, a list too long to mention. He worked diligently in many nonviolent campaigns from creating nuclear-free zones in Santa Cruz and working for a nuclear-free future in Santa Cruz and at Diablo Canyon, to the Farmworkers' fight to unionize, to human rights struggles in El Salvador and Nicaragua, particularly through "Witness for Peace."

In an effort to make a difference locally, Scott ran for local office and was elected to three terms on the Santa Cruz City Council and served as mayor of Santa Cruz twice. He led the city to issue a resolution against the first Iraq war and completed the city's green belt, a community soccer field and several affordable housing developments. In recent years, he organized several speaking trips for me in his area. I remember how he drove me around Santa Cruz one afternoon and proudly showed off these accomplishments.

Scott's true passion lay in the struggle for a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1968, while a freshman in college, he visited Palestine with his sister, Diane Kennedy Pike, and her husband, the late Bishop James Pike. After that first trip, Scott poured his energy and talent into doing what he could to support Israelis and Palestinians who work nonviolently to end the occupation. He brought hundreds of Americans to the region to help them understand U.S. foreign policy and join the effort for a just two-state solution.

"Since the mid-1970s, I have attempted to amplify the voices of those Palestinians and Israelis that are committed to waging nonviolent struggle to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, as well as the Golan Heights," Scott [told "Fellowship" magazine last year in an interview](#) [3].

In 1974, I met Allan Solomonow, who worked with FOR's affiliated Jewish Peace Fellowship and the Committee on New Alternatives in the Middle East. Allan invited me in 1975 to participate in the first inter-religious peace delegation to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, and the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Allan and I have since continued to travel to and organize delegations to the region nearly every year from 1979 to the present. We have worked under different organizational umbrellas, such as FOR, Middle East Witness, and Interfaith Peace-Builders. I have been to the region more than 40 times and have led three-dozen delegations.

In all of my work, I have always enjoyed the challenge and opportunities of problem solving and the nitty-

gritty work that helps make an organization, or a city, work. Despite the mixed results of these forays into elected office, I have been challenged by Gandhi's admonition, "No principle exists without its concrete application" (my paraphrase).

I think I was able to make a difference by working closely with other council members and building or sustaining a majority to construct low-income housing, extend youth services, expand funding for homeless services and the emerging Latino population, rebuild our downtown after the 1989 earthquake, strengthen cooperation with local schools, and permanently preserve through public acquisition several greenbelt properties on the city's perimeter. Also, I authored -- and Santa Cruz was the first local government to adopt -- a resolution opposing the second Gulf war.

I was awestruck when I read that interview with Scott. I'm still stunned. He believed each one of us could make a difference, and he tried to make a difference in the Middle East where few go.

I remember a conversation we had two years ago in the parking lot of a Santa Cruz shopping center. I confessed my frustration with the so-called "peace movement," my lack of patience, my exasperation and frustration and lingering resentments. How do you maintain such equanimity and patience? I asked him.

"I've never held on to anger, resentment, bitterness or hard feelings," Scott told me. "I've always been able to try my best, move on and never let hard feelings hinder my work for peace and justice." That was a great teaching moment for me.

When I heard the news of Scott's death, I recalled the words of Martin Luther King Jr., in a sermon a few months before he was assassinated.

"I just want to leave a committed life behind," Dr. King said as he talked about his inevitable death.

That's what Scott did, I thought. Scott was one of the most committed people I've ever known. His dedication to ending war and injustice was indefatigable. He was relentless. He would also be the first to say that his life's work would not have been possible without his wife, Kris.

That Friday night, Joan Baez called Scott and left a message asking for his advice on how to support the Occupy Wall Street movement. The next morning, Kris called back with the shocking news. Later that day, Joan issued this statement:

Scott Kennedy's death is a loss not only to family and friends, but to the larger family of nonviolent soldiers he has taught, shared with, laughed with, and loved. I'm fortunate to consider myself a member of his compassionate and passionate army. Not many people manage to make a dent in the world of conflicts, but Scott's work in the Middle East defies all cynicism and hopelessness.

At this time in the world of extraordinary current events, we need his nonviolent army to infuse the enthusiastic thousands with the true spirit of Gandhi, and the minions who have steadfastly stood their ground through the waves of violence with strength, love, caring, and the willingness to suffer rather than inflict suffering. May he make the crossing smoothly and joyfully.

I share these reflections about my friend in the hope that, as Joan says, we will carry on with renewed vigor as members of that great nonviolent army doing what we can, like Scott, for justice, nonviolence and peace.

Thank you, Scott, for your patient, persistent, peacemaking life. May you live forever in the land of peace where the revolution of nonviolence has finally come true.

John Dear's new book, [Lazarus, Come Forth!](#) [4], has just been published by Orbis Books. It explores Jesus as the God of life, calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. This book 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. For more information, go to [John Dear's website](#) [8].

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Links:

[1] http://www.mercurynews.com/central-coast/ci_19380334

[2] <http://www.rcnv.org>

[3] <http://forusa.org/blogs/ethan-vesely-flad/life-committed-peace-scott-kennedy/8220>

[4]

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI)

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[5] [http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

[Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

[6] [http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-](http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1)

[Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1)

[7] [http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

[World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

[8] <http://www.johndear.org>

[9] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>