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

Writing and peacemaking

John Dear S.J. | Nov. 22, 2011 On the Road to Peace

I never intended to become a writer -- and I certainly don't claim any special talent in that department. Thirty years ago, I looked around and saw that Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, the Berrigans, Merton and nearly all the saints from Paul of Tarsus to Therese of Lisieux wrote regularly. I naively thought that writing was a requirement of Gospel peacemaking. Remembering the old adage "The pen is mightier than the sword," I started writing -- and never stopped.

Reading through Gandhi's collected works years ago, I came upon his confession to a friend that he wrote articles and 20 letters a day and edited two national weekly newspapers because he wanted to lead others to truth and nonviolence, but sometimes, he wrote just to vent his frustration over the world's violence.

I found that helpful. He was talking about writing as a way of life. It's a tool, he said, to help us do good, spread the good word, influence others to do the good and point the way toward a better world of peace with justice. It can help us sort through our struggles, come to new clarities, express reactions to current events and encourage others to take action.

Thirty years ago, when I was 22, I started my first book, *Disarming the Heart*, because I was passionate about the vow of nonviolence that my friends and I were preparing to profess. I thought others might want to undertake a similar commitment; but more, I wanted to figure out what that commitment might mean for me. The experience of writing that book set me on a journey I could never have predicted. The writing helped clarify my understanding of nonviolence, which led to further insights and action, and more writing, and so forth.

Writing has become for me a way of life, part of my daily practice, part of the "action-reflection" model. For starters, I've been keeping a journal for almost every day for more than 30 years. It's a way to process and reflect on my day-to-day life, my inner struggles, my adventures and my spiritual calling.

Through the years, I've published biographies, journals, a systematic theology, scripture studies, collections of essays and my autobiography. *The God of Peace* grew out of my master's thesis in theology. *The Sacrament of Civil Disobedience* was an effort to understand the dynamic and practice of resistance, arrest and jail. *Peace Behind Bars* helped me record -- and survive -- my experience in jail after our plowshares action. *Jesus the Rebel* , my take on the life of the nonviolent Jesus, came in response to my friend Jackson Browne's challenging song, "The Rebel Jesus." Orbis Books asked me to edit collections on Gandhi and Dan Berrigan. Doubleday asked me to write *Living Peace* and *Transfiguration*. I wrote my autobiography because I had the time and energy and a strong desire to reflect on my life before I forgot the details of my adventures.

Perhaps I write too much, but I remain passionate about Christian peacemaking. Writing helps me delve deeper into nonviolence and offers a way to share my enthusiasm with others.

I'm less certain about these *NCR* columns. Five years ago, *NCR* invited me to become one of its bloggers, and I've written a column almost every week since then. I'm not sure who reads them, or if they help, but the practice does keep me focused on the life of peace and nonviolence. I appreciate the feedback, and thank

everyone for supporting this column and urge you to share it with friends. (Read the full set. [1])

How does one write, and why? Twenty years ago, I asked my friend Sr. Mary Lou Kownacki, a gifted writer and peacemaker, for suggestions on writing.

"You need to read *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg [2]," she said.

The next day I went down to Telegraph Road in Berkeley, where I was living, and bought all of Natalie's books. I've been using them ever since. I recommend them to aspiring writers.

Goldberg's million-selling classic, published in 1986, let loose a tremendous wave of writing. She argues that anyone can write, that everyone should write and that all you have to do is start writing. She proposes a few easy tips to get going: "Keep your hand moving. Lose control. Be specific. Don't be logical. Go for the jugular."

In the process of urging us to write for short periods each day, she tells us to be kind. That, I suggest, was one of her original insights. It seems obvious now. She suggested that we don't need any more talented Hemingways who are so violent in their personal lives.

Be compassionate to yourself and others, Natalie advises, so that as you write, you live in the present moment of peace and your writing comes from a deep place of peace. She speaks of writing as a spiritual practice. Be kind to yourself, breathe, be at peace, love everyone and keep on writing.

"The deepest secret in our heart of hearts is that we are writing because we love the world," Natalie writes. "Let the whole thing flower: the poem and the person writing the poem. And let us always be kind in this world."

For years, Natalie has led writing practice groups and workshops in northern New Mexico. Through her other books, such as *Wild Mind*, *Long Quiet Highway*, *Thunder and Lightning* and *Old Friend from Far Away*, Natalie shares her journey from her youth in a Jewish family on Long Island to studying as a Zen student in Minneapolis to settling down as a writing teacher in northern New Mexico. She continues to travel and lecture about the writing life.

Shortly after I moved to New Mexico, I met Natalie and we became friends. She heard me speak in Taos on a panel of activists who were against the impending U.S. war on Iraq. Through her, I've been invited over the years to give Dharma lectures at Upaya Zen Center [3], a gorgeous Buddhist peace and meditation center in Santa Fe.

Recently, Upaya invited Natalie and me to offer a weekend retreat together on writing and peacemaking. The date is set for April 27-April 29, 2012, and we're calling it *The End of War, the Beginning of Peace: The Life and Practice of Creative Nonviolence*.

Along with the Upaya director and Buddhist leader Beate Stolte, we will explore the journey from violence to nonviolence, examining its different aspects in our interior lives, our interpersonal relationships (family, friends, work) and our efforts with grassroots justice and disarmament movements. I will offer reflections on these areas of nonviolence while Natalie will lead timed writing exercises for us to journal about our experiences and thoughts on violence and nonviolence. Throughout the weekend, Beate Stolte will lead us in sitting meditation in the magnificent meditation hall. We will have time for silence, small and large group discussion, and shared peace.

I think it will be a memorable weekend and invite those interested in writing and peacemaking to join us. We suggest you register soon and bring your friends. Natalie, Beate and I are excited about the weekend because we benefit from meditation, enjoy the beauty of Upaya and Santa Fe and long to move deeper into loving

nonviolence. We hope others will share our enthusiasm.

The pen is mightier than the sword? Yes, I'm convinced. Anyone can be violent. Anyone can take up the sword and contribute to the downward spiral of violence and death. Just look around at the streets of Egypt and Syria; the police who pepper-spray protesters at U.C. Davis and Wall Street; the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Look at the way we relate to one another, how we drive and what goes on in our own hearts. Violence is everywhere. Creative nonviolence, on the other hand, is much more challenging. Gandhi says it's more difficult, more interesting and ultimately, the only way to live in peace.

In April, we will take time to meditate in peace, reflect together on the life and practice of nonviolence, and journal about our experience of nonviolence. In the process, we will turn away from war and start anew on the path to peace.

Come join us! But if you can't, take time to write -- about life, peacemaking, nonviolence and your own spiritual journey to the God of peace. Writing can deepen our understanding of peace, and the God of peace, and that deeper understanding will help us all take another step forward on the road to peace.

***

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].

Source URL (retrieved on 12/10/2013 - 19:04): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/writing-and-peacemaking

We can send you an e-mail alert every time On the Road to Peace column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [9]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add On the Road to Peace to your list.

Links:

[1] http://www.johndear.org/articles
[2] http://www.nataliegoldberg.com
[3] http://www.upaya.org
[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-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI
[5] 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-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-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