News
EarthBeat



Fr. John Dear (CNS/Octavio Duran)

by Tom Boswell

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April 14, 2018
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Just prior to the December 2015 Climate Change Conference in Paris, Pope Francis warned a group of reporters that the world is on the brink of committing "suicide." Less than a year later, Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election and then,

after he took office, pulled out of the Paris accords. These days, it's hard to believe that the state of our planet could be more dire.

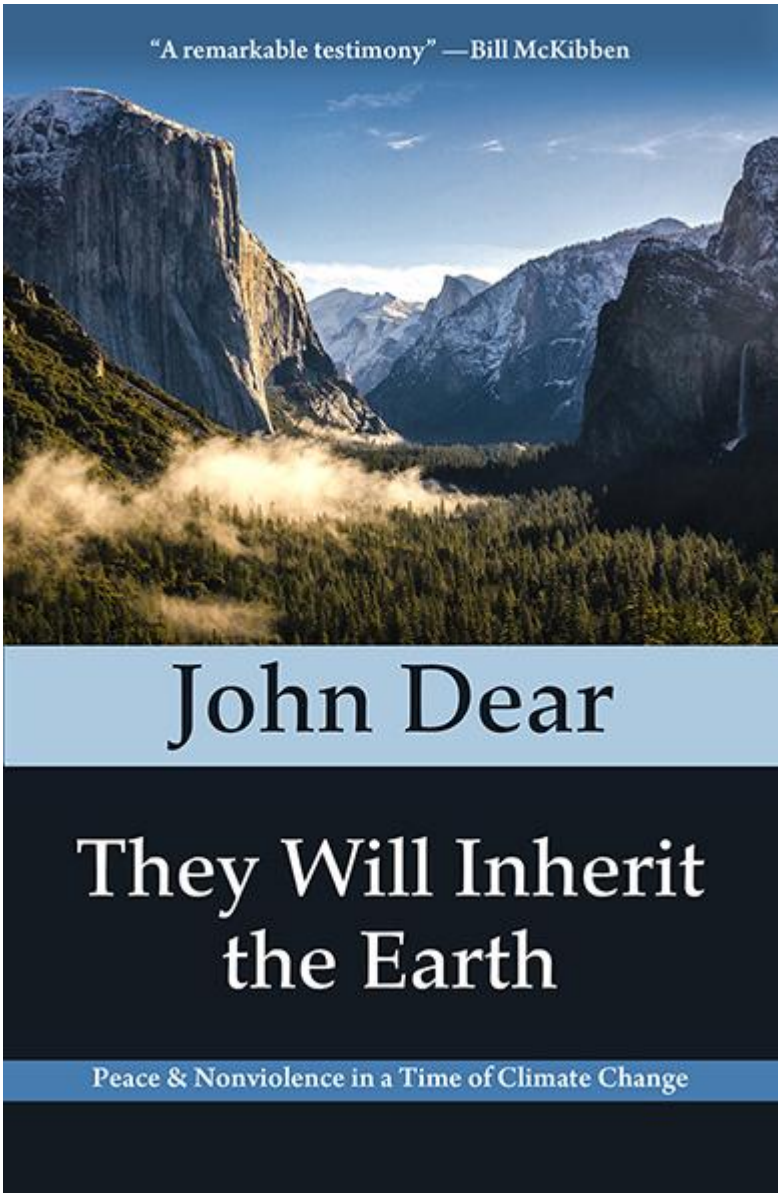
But John Dear, Catholic priest, longtime peace activist and, more recently, a global-warming warrior, still brims with hope, energy and optimism.

"There's more happening in active nonviolent movements around the planet right now than ever before in history," he told NCR in an interview in early April. "There's massive change happening beyond the bad news from the current administration. There's incredible organizing going on, such as the teacher's strikes, such as the anti-gun-violence organizing, such as all the people working on immigration. And some people working against war, but not enough."

Dear visited Madison, Wisconsin, April 4 as part of a 50-city, three-month book tour to promote *They Will Inherit the Earth: Peace & Nonviolence in a Time of Climate Change*, the latest of his 37 books. A former Jesuit who left the order after 32 years, Dear is now a diocesan priest and a staff member of the national peace organization Pace e Bene. He lives on a remote desert mesa south of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and east of Los Alamos, the birthplace of the atomic bomb.

Dear spoke at James Reeb Unitarian Universalist on the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. He sprinkled his talk with direct quotes and anecdotes from King's teachings on nonviolent social change.

"One of the great casualties of violence and warfare is the loss of imagination, the loss of vision," Dear said, and then quoted King as saying, the night before he died, "Hope is the final refusal to give up."



In *They Will Inherit the Earth*, most of it written while on a retreat with Buddhist leader and author Thich Nhat Hanh, Dear traces his personal spiritual journey, what he calls "a long pilgrimage of peace." The journey has included ministering to the family members of the victims of the World Trade Center attacks; visiting Standing Rock with more than 600 other clergy to stand in solidarity with the Dakota, Lakota and Sioux against the Dakota Access Pipeline; and presiding at Masses in Yosemite National Park.

"Because we have practiced violence — global, structured, institutionalized violence — and created systems of total violence, we have hurt and killed one another and destroyed the creatures and the Earth. With the onslaught of climate chaos, we have entered the full consequences of global violence. … We are killing the Earth, but it

will not go down without a fight."

In another chapter, Dear describes the struggle of the indigenous community of the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico, whose home just below the mountain of Los Alamos and the nuclear weapons national laboratories has become a lethal radioactive waste dump. The labs upon the mountain make up “the second richest county in the U.S., with one of the highest per capita rates of Ph.D.'s and millionaires anywhere on earth,” Dear points out. But down below is the second poorest county in the U.S. It's an egregious example of environmental racism.

During his Madison talk, Dear stressed what Christians and everyone else can and must do to resist the Earth's doomsday scenario.

"I think the only way change happens is bottom-up, people-powered, grassroots movements of creative nonviolence in the tradition of Gandhi and King, which, by the way, goes back to Jesus, who was a movement builder and organizer," he told NCR after his speech.

"After studying nonviolence for 40 years, I've decided that nonviolence requires three simultaneous attributes. First, you have to be nonviolent to yourself. We have to stop cooperating with our own inner processes of violence, beating ourselves up, fueling our anger, our rage, hatred and resentment. Second, we have to practice meticulous, interpersonal nonviolence towards everybody in our lives, everybody in the world, and all the creatures and Mother Earth. Third, you have to be involved in the struggle for justice, disarmament and creation.

"We're usually good at one of these," said Dear, "but very few of us reach the level of Dr. King, who did all three."

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In both his book and talk, Dear outlined a list of "rules for living in solidarity with Mother Earth." The first speaks of our need to grieve and to be joyous.

"We need to take quiet time and sit in the beauty of creation in the presence of the Creator and grieve," he writes in his book. "We grieve for our sisters and brothers, for the death and extinction of billions of creatures, and for Mother Earth herself. The more we take formal time to quietly grieve for suffering humanity and suffering

creation, the more nonviolent and compassionate we become."

Other "rules" include practicing meditation, prayer, mindfulness and nonviolent communication, cultivating fearlessness, taking public action for climate justice, and teaching nonviolence, particularly to priests and ministers.

Dear, who is a co-founder of Campaign Nonviolence, a project of Pace e Bene, was offered an opportunity to teach nonviolence to clergy two years ago, when 80 Catholic peacemakers from more than 25 countries were invited to the Vatican for a conference to discuss abandoning the church's just war theory. While there, Ken Butigan of Campaign Nonviolence, Marie Dennis of Pax Christi International, and Dear were asked to help draft a statement for the pope for the 2017 World Day of Peace.

It became the "first statement on nonviolence in the church since the Sermon on the Mount," Dear said, with obvious pride. "It's a huge breakthrough."

Now Dear is hopeful that Francis will craft an encyclical on nonviolence to match "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," his encyclical on the environment. "That's my personal hope and prayer and goal."

[Tom Boswell is a freelance journalist, photographer and poet living near Madison, Wisconsin.]

A version of this story appeared in the **May 4-17, 2018** print issue under the headline: Activist priest John Dear tours with new book on resisting climate change.