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Walking With Sorrow

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last month, some 80 Catholic Workers, Pax Christi folk and other activists from across the West Coast gathered for a weekend of community-building and nonviolent witness at the Nevada Test Site. Father Daniel Berrigan offered reflections under the theme, "Walking With Our Sorrow." A cogent title. I thought of it as news trickled in of the Virginia Tech massacre. It left me horrified and heartbroken. But given our culture of violence, the news failed to surprise me. I marvel that rampages explode as infrequently as they do.

Columbine and the Amish schoolhouse massacres make headlines -- and now Virginia Tech -- but killings go on every day. I lower my head at the statistics: 30,000 die each year in the U.S. by handguns. Some 300,000 assaults each year are gun-related. Nearly half of all U.S. households have a gun. That's some 200 million privately owned firearms, including 65 million handguns. And if those numbers aren't morose enough, suicide rates are highest in those states where guns are easiest to get.

Young people train with hand guns every day; just visit your local video store. And how easy it is to get a semi-automatic. To make it easier, in 2004, Congress quietly ended a 10-year federal ban on semi-automatic assault weapons, with no national or media outcry.

And now we live in a culture in which people go berserk, husbands turn violent against their wives -- and guns are reached for. Moreover, accidents happen (think of Vice President Cheney shooting his friend).

But we shouldn't despair of a solution -- the solution is to ban all guns. Period.

But it won't come easily. Handguns are promoted by the most energetic and fanatical activists in the nation, the National Rifle Association. A chilling coincidence, the NRA had just finished its annual conference in St. Louis the night before Seung-Hui Cho commenced aiming and firing and slaying his peers. But the night before in St. Louis, some 60,000 gun enthusiasts lustily cheered "the right to bear arms."

To counter them, you and I need to be as committed as they are -- only in pursuit of nonviolence and peace.

Of course, the solution defies glib policy changes; change will come, as Merton said, only through a profound metanoia among us as a people. It will entail making the connection among every type of violence -- road rage, workplace intrigues, bloody cathartic movies, domestic violence, child abuse, murder, contingency war plans, military adventurism, nuclear weapons. Metanoia entails our seeing how they're connected, how one leads to the other. And it entails our taking on the long haul of dismantling of all our weapons and the turning toward a new culture of nonviolence.

And the linkages go on. The terror of Virginia Tech is part and parcel of the daily terror inflicted on innocent human beings everywhere in the world -- Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Colombia, Darfur and so many other tragic places. The terror of Virginia Tech is part and parcel of America's ultimate terror -- our idolatrous nuclear arsenal.

Such connections are officially forbidden, and few dare to make them. The disconnect is evident in the president's offer of condolences. He said, "No one can explain such suffering and violence." At the same time he defends and perpetrates massive suffering and violence in Iraq, and elsewhere. His condolences pale in light of his own massacres abroad -- 655,000 dead in Iraq so far.

Iraqis are, as far as America is concerned, without names, stories, faces. Recently we were told vaguely that 70 women students were killed at an Iraqi university Jan. 16. And the day after the tragedy at Virginia Tech, some 230 people died in Baghdad. "Collateral damage," to use the phrase of one former parishioner of mine.

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The massacre in Iraq goes on. So do preparations for future massacres. Another round of missiles, bombers, lasers, depleted uranium, F16s, Trident Submarines. Another generation of nuclear weapons.

What can they mean but to portend another round of massacres? Do we want a nation where no one is ever massacred? Then we have to work for a world safe from massacres, American-style.

I've read the great spiritual leaders of the last century, people like Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Dr. King, the Dalai Lama, John XXIII, Mother Theresa, Thich Nhat Hanh, John Paul II, Daniel Berrigan, Eileen Egan and Thomas Merton -- and I hear them calling for personal, national and global conversion to nonviolence.

That means, of course, a ban on all weapons, little guns and big guns. What do we do? For starters, we can become students and teachers of nonviolence. We can pass our days studying the methodology and practice of personal, interpersonal and global nonviolence. We can help build new institutions of nonviolence. We can train, we can teach nonviolence to one another. Important people aren't going to do this. We ordinary people have to do it ourselves.

And to begin we must examine our personal shadow sides, as Jung said. We must explore our inner violence, pursue our inner disarmament and healing. And we must lift up the alternative of nonviolence across the country -- a task foremost for the churches. I ascribe this responsibility to all the churches. Our burden, if we can credit our Gospel, is to teach and practice nonviolence. I believe only communities of faith and conscience can offer a clear vision of nonviolence. So we have to educate one another, including our priests, ministers and bishops who remain largely ignorant of this Gospel mandate. And every university must truly outlaw guns and preparations for massacres from their campuses by ending ROTC and cutting all military ties.

How overwhelming it all is -- the Virginia Tech massacre and America's massacres of Iraq and Afghanistan. How overwhelming is the poverty and violence of the world. But ignoring things, numbing ourselves, finding refuge in denial -- this helps no one, including ourselves. It certainly doesn't make us safer.

Sorrow is a good beginning. Grieve. Hold the sorrow. Personal, national and global healing may follow. And amidst the tears take heart. Our tears authorize each of us to play a part in that global transformation. Our broken hearts enable us to sow the seeds of nonviolence.

Notice, "Blessed are those who mourn" comes before "Blessed are the Peacemakers." Peacemaking begins with mourning, but not partisan mourning. Not mourning that bewails our side and taunts the other. Mourn the dead of Virginia Tech. Then mourn the dead of Baghdad, Gaza, Kabul, Bogotá, Port au Prince, Darfur. Mourn the dead of the whole world as you hear of it. Mourn the loss of every single sister and brother on planet earth. Mourn the loss of creatures and creation itself.

Brutal regimes like ours deflect anger and stridency every day. But mourning, walking with sorrow -- no brutal regime can long survive it. We are invited to expand our mourning, to keen and wail, to sit in sackcloth and ashes (as some of us will do once again this August in Los Alamos). Offer love and compassion to everyone. Teach nonviolence. Pursue a culture where handguns are unwelcome, unlawful, unheard of. And unwelcome, as well: bombs, poverty, weapons and war. Embracing sorrow can bring the most implacable empire to heel. It is the human response to an inhuman time.

John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available

from

www.amazon.com or your local bookstore. For more information on banning handguns, see

www.bradycampaign.org. For further info, see:

www.johndear.org.

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