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The San Damiano Foundation's \"Narrow Path\"

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Years ago Gerry Straub, successful TV producer and settled atheist embraced a spectacular modern -- day conversion, and soon entered upon a journey of downward mobility -- from Hollywood big wheel to son of poor St. Francis. A big change, that's bearing good fruit. Soon, a Franciscan -- based non -- profit was born, the San Damiano Foundation. There Gerry makes groundbreaking films documenting the poorest of the world's poor. Next week, his latest film premieres, touching upon a slightly different topic -- of all things, me. My life in the desert and my faith in Gospel nonviolence.

A gratifying project, to be sure, but the one who should be documented is Gerry himself. He grew up in Brooklyn where in 1964, well into his teens, he received a call from a cousin. A tip about a job. Seems the "Ed Sullivan Show" had booked an exciting new act and could use an extra hand. And the act? An outlandish shaggy quartet from Britain -- The Beatles.

The Beatles came and went, but Gerry stayed on. And before long he was working with CBS Records, where he sat in during the early recording sessions of Bob Dylan and other legends. Promotions and emoluments came in succession, and he soon sat on the catbird seat, head of daytime television at NBC and later, producer of *General Hospital* and the other big soaps. A broad road lay before him -- the road to Hollywood, glorious beyond his dreams, except for an intensifying sense of emptiness that ground work and dreams to a halt. The time arrived when he could do nothing else but bid farewell and embark on a pilgrimage of sorts to find his way.

He found himself Rome -- in the mid 1990s -- where he entered a church after a morning spent sight -- seeing. He opened a Bible to a psalm, all the gesture that was needed, apparently, for suddenly there descended an epiphany of sorts -- a flooding sense of purpose and consolation and the embrace of a loving presence.

From Rome, hence to Assisi -- a natural progression after so stirring a moment. At Assisi, Gerry drank in the spirit of St. Francis and began to look upon the saint as his mentor. For the next several months he pursued all things Francis and set about to write. Here was a labor of love and healing and soul-searching. The project culminated in his best-selling book, *The Sun and Moon over Assisi*. Thus transformed, back to Hollywood he went, a new vocation in mind. He would create films about extreme poverty, homelessness, and starvation -- and about those who stand with the poorest.

Church groups and universities everywhere have shown his films, titles such as: "Endless Exodus," "Embracing the Leper," "Rescue Me," "When Did I See You Hungry?" "The Patients of a Saint," and "Where Love Is." His foundation is penurious, nearly as penniless as St. Francis himself. The enterprise stays afloat, one scarcely knows how.

"I fervently believe film can touch hearts and minds," Gerry told the Los Angeles Times. To *The New York Times*, he said: "My message is for Christians who show an utter lack of concern or compassion for people who have nothing."

Learn more about Gerry by reading Hollywood and poverty: Filmmaker puts the power to film at the service of the poor, which appeared in the Nov. 11, 2006 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*.

Gerry's new film about Gospel nonviolence, "The Narrow Path," developed over the course of some years. Gerry and I talk frequently, St. Francis a passion for both of us, Gerry growing animated over the saint's voluntary poverty and his great love for the poor and marginalized. I suggested that Francis embodied radical nonviolence, as well.

From there Gerry spun out his idea. "Let's do a film about you in the New Mexico desert," he said. "We'll film you talking about the nonviolence of Jesus. We'll culminate with the gathering at Los Alamos sitting in sackcloth and ashes."

Thus a movie is born, "The Narrow Path," some 90 minutes long on DVD with cameos from Daniel Berrigan, Martin Sheen, Cindy Sheehan and Ron Kovic, and music by Jackson Browne, "Lives in the Balance," and Joan Baez, "Let it Be." The movie is set in the austere beauty of the desert where I live, atop a mesa 7,000 feet in the air, overlooking miles of spectacular scenery, the land teeming with jackrabbits, ravens, horses, coyotes, scorpions, tarantulas and rattlers. Plus my cat. And in the distance -- the nuclear hellhole of Los Alamos.

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It's awkward undertaking such a project, but the risks notwithstanding, I harbor hopes that the film will

spur people, young people especially, toward a life of peace work and active nonviolence. And I thank Gerry Straub for his ongoing creativity and Gospel risk-taking. We both hope it will encourage others to take another step forward on the narrow path of Gospel nonviolence.

Jesuit priest and peace activist John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu) is available from www.amazon.com or your local bookstore. John expects to stand trial on May 18 for a protest against the Iraq war and faces a month in prison. For more information, see: www.johndear.org.

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