

A Visit to Los Alamos High School

John Dear | Apr. 22, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Last week, I drove up the mountain to the town of Los Alamos, birthplace of the bomb, along Trinity Drive past Oppenheimer Road near the National Nuclear Weapons Labs. I was there for a very unusual speaking invitation -- to talk about peace and disarmament to a group of students at Los Alamos High School. I approached the doors with a vague sense of dread, but left exhilarated. These bright young students gave me hope.

Los Alamos is one eerie place. Situated atop gorgeous red and orange mesas, it's by all appearance a basic American town. It has all the usual amenities -- a bank, a library, a grocery store, a Starbucks, a large Endoscopy center. And then again a few things most towns lack -- tons of radioactive waste and laboratories from which spring the latest nuclear weapons capable of vaporizing millions.

And another deep contradiction. At the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church -- a beautiful pond out front, a statue of St. Francis and a stone bench dedicated to Mother Teresa -- the priest blesses the Bomb and tells lab employees they are doing God's will.

Los Alamos has the feel of the 1950s film, "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers," where the people have vanished and in their place are their exact replicas, but without soul or spirit. Los Alamos is like that. Most people shuffle through town like zombies, going mindlessly to work, heartlessly doing their jobs, preparing for the destruction of the planet. Los Alamos is a soulless place.

Massive denial prevails. Most will not acknowledge that their work portends the end of the world. And thus they confirm Gandhi's wisdom. He said the Bomb destroyed Japanese bodies; it will come to destroy American souls.

Down the street from the labs stands Los Alamos High School. Located in one of the poorest states in the nation, yet centered in the nation's wealthiest counties -- this according to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. Most students' parents work at the Labs, and they make a fortune.

And thus my trepidation. What reception was I to expect? But my worries were put at rest. Megan, a bright young senior, greeted me warmly and said she was happy to be my host. She walked me through the school and explained that she could not tell the faculty or the principal that I was coming because my talk would have been banned. I understood and nodded. The people of Los Alamos haven't taken kindly to me, particularly the

Catholics there.

Megan and her friends recently formed the Peace and Global Concerns Club. Last month, to mark the fifth anniversary of the U.S. war on Iraq, 20 of them announced they would stage a walkout. The principal threatened to suspend them all, but the students went ahead with their plan. When the moment arrived, 150 students walked out of classes and sat for two hours on the lawn in front of the school holding anti-war signs.

Their action made the front page of the *Los Alamos Monitor*, and caused a debate throughout the community. The principal backed down; no one was suspended.

Megan escorted me to the room and there I found 25 eager students ready to engage me in a discussion of peace, disarmament, nonviolence and justice. I shared my stories, explained the urgent need to dismantle our nuclear arsenal and practice nonviolent conflict resolution, and I pointed to the spiritual roots of peacemaking and the invitation of the God of peace.

And how impressed I was with these students. Their attention was earnest and serious. These are kids growing up in the shadow of the Bomb, whose parents earn their living preparing the destruction of the planet, in a town where the churches bless nuclear weapons and cancer has become the norm. Yet in all this they formed a conscience and then a peace group. No small accomplishment.

They listened attentively then asked questions: What should we do? How do you begin to work for peace? What would real security look like anyway? How do we reach that tipping point? And then their spectacular insights: You're talking about a world of nonviolence, but aren't you really pointing us to a world without fear? Is the quest for peace impossible without an inner search for God?

They astonished me. Their faces were so searching, their questions deep and serious. One of them told me, she grew up hearing that the lab employees were the greatest peacemakers in the nation. Case closed. Still, she asked the hard questions; she pondered the critical link. Obscene armaments steal food from the tables of the poor. These students understood more than most the realities of nuclear weapons.

I invited them to join us this summer for our annual Pax Christi New Mexico events, which commemorate the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This year, we'll host Sr. Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and *The Death of Innocents*.

On Aug. 1, she'll speak in Santa Fe about the connection between death row and nuclear weapons, and explain how Los Alamos puts us all on a kind of global death row.

On Saturday, Aug. 2, she'll join us in Los Alamos, where hundreds of us will put on sackcloth and sit in ashes in a prayerful and symbolic action to repent of the mortal sin of war and nuclear weapons. Sitting in the ashes, we'll beg the God of peace for the gift of nuclear disarmament. I hope the students will join us. And hundreds of others as well!

I headed to Los Alamos in despair. I came down the mountain in hope. These bright young people gave me

hope with their stand against the Iraq war, their ability to question the nuclear weapons labs, and their serious commitment to a new world without war. Perhaps we all can learn from them to perceive the elephant in the middle of the room, raise the unpopular hard questions, seek new answers, and commit ourselves with the same seriousness We might all find new hope.

For information about the Aug. 1-2 events, see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org [1]. John's book *Seeds of Nonviolence* has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com [2]. He also recommends Daniel Berrigan's new book, *The Kings and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power*, published this week by [Eerdmans](http://www.eerdmans.com) [3]. For information regarding John's forthcoming autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, see www.persistentpeace.com [4], and also www.johndear.org [5].

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