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The resignation of Darrel Vandeveld

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

A few months ago, I received a surprising and moving e-mail from Lt. Col. Darrel Vandeveld, a military lawyer who has been prosecuting detainees at Guantánamo for over a year. He had, he said, "grave misgivings" about what was happening at Guantánamo, the trials, and U.S. policy. What advice did I have to offer? I dashed off a reply to this effect: "Quit."

He did just that, as reported on page one of last Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*. He could no longer remain a Catholic, a follower of Jesus, he said, and keep himself embroiled in "this mess." His brave decision is not only a sign of hope, it challenges us to withdraw our own cooperation with U.S. militarism and embark on the path of the nonviolent Jesus.

I've been on the road these past few weeks speaking about my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, this week in Phoenix, Sedona, Chicago, Milwaukee, Nashville, St. Louis and Memphis. But you can't keep ahead of the media. They track me down and pose their inquiry. "Why did you give that advice to Darrel Vandeveld?"

[Read the story of Lt. Col. Darrel Vandeveld's resignation from his post at Guantanamo.](#)

It's all quite simple, I explain. Jesus calls us to put down the sword, love our enemies and receive the blessings of being peacemakers. For Jesus -- a victim of torture and execution himself--saves the victims

and sides with the condemned. His followers must do the same. All a matter of simple logic--we can't side with torturers, executioners, bomb-makers, bombers or warmakers, and then dare claim we follow Jesus.

To Darrel, I wrote:

"That you are having grave misgivings is a great blessing. Alas, the whole U.S. operation at Guantánamo is a sham, and the whole world knows it. I certainly believe those being held there are Christ, and what we do to those detained, including torture, we do to Christ. So, having grave misgivings is a good thing!

"I keep thinking that life is short," I continued, "and we're all going to die, and then we're going to be standing before the risen Jesus, and like you, I want to do what Jesus will have wanted us to do. So I urge you to quit. The only way change will happen is when good people like yourself take a stand. Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good.' Follow Jesus and let him lead you to a new beginning in peace.

"God does not want you to participate in any injustice, and Guantánamo is so bad, I hope and pray you will peacefully, prayerfully resign, and start your life over. In time, if you and your family can stay centered in the peace of Jesus and prayer, God will bless you enormously. That I can promise!"

In subsequent testimony, Darrel Vandeveld charged the U.S. government with withholding from defense lawyers the evidence it had against their clients, including exculpatory information -- material considered helpful to the defense, according to the *Times*.

The system at Guantánamo, he wrote, was so dysfunctional that it deprived "the accused of basic due process and subject[ed] the well-intentioned prosecutor to claims of ethical misconduct." As the travesty unfolded, he went from being a "true believer to someone who felt truly deceived."

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After his release from active duty becomes final, he intends to speak out about all that he knows, he told the *Times*.

I am grateful for Darrel Vandeveld's decision. A rare sign of hope in terrible times. But more, we can glean from it a few lessons. First, we need to do what he's done: withdraw our cooperation from U.S.

militarism, torture, injustice and warmaking.

Second, we need to call anyone we know out from the pit of U.S. warmaking and imperial America's culture of injustice. I've been doing this for decades -- urging young people not to join the military; urging soldiers and sailors to quit; counseling those considering going AWOL; calling upon employees at the Pentagon, Los Alamos and Livermore Labs to resign their jobs; asking military chaplains to do the same; even telling a Federal judge in federal court recently, just before he sentenced me for protesting the Iraq war, that he should quit and join the peace movement--in short, urging anyone in the slightest way connected to any system which fosters death to repent their role and quit. Simple advice, really: "Quit!"

Of course, many disagree. And more than a few religious professionals upbraid me for having poor pastoral skills. To them I respectfully offer a contrary word. The duty of every good shepherd is to lead the flock out of harm's way, to protect them from the foxes, the forces of death. I want no one to kill or be killed, to sin or lead others into sin, to suffer or lead others into suffering.

I hope that more of us will invite those caught in the web of U.S. warmaking, injustice and death, to make a bold move, like Darrel Vandeveld. And from the point of all things new, embark on Jesus' nonviolent path.

And a final lesson in Darrel's example. All of us need to put aside our childish ways and become adult Christians. It's time for us to start practicing a mature spirituality, to take Jesus at his word and let his economics and politics play out in our lives. Then will God's reign of peace break out around us.

So many of us are mired in kindergarten assumptions about spirituality, God, and the purposes of life. We need to do our homework, study the Gospels, take up spiritual disciplines, change our lives, serve the poor, join a local peace and justice group, and let our discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus blossom and flourish.

We need to make hard choices like St. Francis did, like Franz Jagerstatter, Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Dorothy Stang, Rosa Parks, and so many other heroes.

"When you were young, you dressed yourself and went about as you pleased," the risen Jesus told Simon Peter at the end of John's Gospel. "But as you grow older, someone will put a belt around you and lead you where you would rather not go. Follow me."

Life is short and precious. The needs of the world are great. It's time, for the sake of existence, to follow Jesus on the way of nonviolent resistance to the imperial culture of war. Which is to say, to take up our cross.

If we dare, we will have troubles for sure, but the promises of blessing are sure.

John Dear will speak this week in Memphis, Houston, Tulsa and Ames, Iowa, about his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, available from www.amazon.com). Eerdmans has just published a collection of these NCR Café columns called *Put Down Your Sword*

, also available from www.amazon.com. For details see: www.johndear.org and www.persistentpeace.com.

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