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My Night in the Las Vegas Jail

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

On Holy Thursday, at 3 p.m., fourteen of us walked on to the Creech Air Force Base near Indian Springs, Nevada (about an hour northwest of Las Vegas) to pray and speak out against the U.S. unmanned drones which take off every two minutes in practice runs for bombing raids in Central Asia. After three hours, we were arrested, put in handcuffs and chains; then jailed for the night in Las Vegas.

When we were released on Good Friday morning, we did what any normal Christian would do: we went back to the scene of the crime and continued to pray and speak out for an end to U.S. war making.

The Nevada desert is stunning in its stark beauty. The drive out to Indian Springs is a meditation in itself, into the world of yucca plants, Joshua trees, and barren sandy landscapes, with towering snow-capped mountains in the distance.

Our nonviolent action was beautiful, but dangerous. Praying and singing, our little group carried white roses in honor of the White Rose movement of Germany, the small band of students who were executed for leafleting and speaking out against the Nazis. We also carried signs calling for an end to the drones and U.S. bombings, an appeal to the base commander and bread and water as gifts to the soldiers. Behind the little brown buildings ahead, a drone took off on the runway and circled out over the distant mountains, practicing for the kill.

It's possible our action was the first protest ever at Creech, certainly its first civil disobedience action. They might have been expecting us to cross the line on Good Friday, so our surprise Holy Thursday presence may have caught them off guard. In any case, they were absolutely unprepared for the blessing of our peaceful presence.

At the first notice of our presence, a young airman approached, fear in his eyes, and he began yelling, ordering us to turn around. He had an M-16 slung over his shoulder and he swung it toward us. His order notwithstanding, we continued to walk and started to sing.

The poor airman was undone and started shoving, first a friend, then me. He was growing furious, so we knelt down. Soon three other soldiers approached, all of them toting machine guns. Together they shouted, as if that would make any difference. We assured them we were unarmed, and we offered them our roses. The poor airmen, they stood befuddled. Should they shout louder? Should they open fire? Whatever their script, it failed them in the face of nonviolence. Meantime another drone flew overhead.

And so we arrived at something of an impasse. Our group knelt and sat for several hours, the befuddled airmen keeping watch, grimacing, pacing. Finally the Nevada State highway patrol and the Las Vegas Metro Police Department arrived at the scene and placed us under arrest. First came the plastic handcuffs; then actual metal chains were tied around our wastes with metal handcuffs attached to our sides.

The police sergeant casually informed us: had we gone a few feet further, the airmen would have opened fire. "Do you think that would have been a crime?" our friend, Kathy Kelly, of Voices for Creative Nonviolence asked, offering him a rose. "No, they would have been authorized to do so," he said with a smile. "Would it have been a shame?" she continued. "Yes, it would have been a shame," he admitted, rather glumly.

Most were placed in police cars and driven the hour to Las Vegas. The last to go, my friends Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada, Brian Terrell, and I had to wait an additional hour for a police van. We waited on the ground in our chains, police officers flanking us on all sides, as the sky turned pink and orange and the desert sun slowly set in the distance.

The van arrived finally, a filthy white vehicle with metal benches and down the middle of the aisle a metal wall. The three of us were squeezed along one side, chained, buckled in, and off to Vegas we went.

Jerry, Brian and I prayed out loud for a good while - for our friends and supporters; for an end to the drones and U.S. wars; for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; for the church's conversion to Holy Thursday nonviolence. We noted that words of the risen Jesus to the disciple Peter, "When you were younger you went about and did what you wanted to, but as you grow older, someone will place a belt around you and take you where you'd rather not go. Follow me." We looked at each other knowingly.

Night by now had fallen and we drove toward the towering lights of the casinos, the shows, the strip clubs, and the restaurants. The streets were mobbed, the scene was dazzling. But mesh on the windows kept us from getting a clear view, an appropriate perspective for the Christian in such a culture. We arrived eventually at the Clark County Detention Facility - the Las Vegas Jail - in the belly of Sin City.

For the next five hours, we sat in a large room with everyone else arrested in Las Vegas that night. We were moved to think that most were likely heading to prison. One by one we were fingerprinted, photographed, and booked. Our property was taken and documented. A nurse examined us and took our blood pressure. (Mine was very high, but "You're under a lot of stress," she said. She had no idea.) Around midnight, we were split up. The men got shuttled off to a concrete cell and the women to a cell down the hall. There we remained until 7:30 a.m. on Good Friday, when we were escorted to the streets, now barren and empty.

I found the time difficult, but bearable because of the prayer, our intent and the sustaining friendships. I

felt blessed to be with many close friends and heroes, like Jerry and Brian, but also Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly, Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale, and the great Kathy Kelly of Voices of Creative Nonviolence. We took the time to catch up with our lives and lament the suffering of the world. We kept an eye on each other, and tried to lift each other's spirit. The others arrested were: Dennis DuVall, Renee Espeland, Judy Homanich, Mariah Klusmire, Brad Lyttle, Elizabeth Pappalardo, Megan Rice, and Eve Tetaz.

Fr. Louie, 77, was featured that morning on the front page of the 'L.A. Times' in a glowing profile. We celebrated his life witness.

The ordeal, while grim, also carried a spirit of playfulness, included summer camp antics. The women had wisely fallen right to sleep on the concrete floor of their cell - after, of course, Kathy Kelly, entertained them with a rousing song and dance routine that cheered them up. But they accused us, the men, of carrying on a party all night long. They could hear us talking and laughing the entire night, they said.

Alas, it was true. Steve, Louie, and most of our group never slept. Around 3 a.m., when our nerves were shot and exhaustion had set in, Steve told a silly joke that left us in stitches. We all cried we laughed so hard. We shared many stories about our life's work for peace, and found our spirits buoyed by the good company. The women and the guards did not know what came over us.

More solemnly, though, I regard our modest gesture as an act of prayer. As I marched into the teeth of the beast, I was mindful of the millions of people across the country attending Holy Thursday Mass, and the contrast of sitting in metal chains in the county jail. Some of us spoke of trying to be with the nonviolent Jesus who was arrested on this holy night. We reflected on his last words: 'Put down the sword! Stop, no more of this!' - a message we had brought to Creech AFB.

We felt the loneliness of Jesus' arrest, jailing and trial, yet we felt grateful that we could taste his experience. Our nonviolent action, in the end, was a poor, but noble effort to follow Jesus and carry on his campaign of nonviolent resistance to empire.

Upon our release, we were ordered to appear in court on June 9th. Then, we went right back to Creech AF Base in time for the Nevada Desert Experience's annual Stations of the Cross. With sixty folks, we read and prayed through each modern-day station, learning how Jesus is condemned and crucified all over again in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan because of our weapons and wars. We prayed, sang and reflected along the towering chain fence of the military base - and were interrupted repeatedly by the drones flying overhead.

We saw with our own eyes that these drones are real, that our country is dead set on killing, mechanically, soullessly. We tried to take action, to say as Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Put down the sword, no more of this!' We felt blessed in the effort.

On Easter Sunday morning, we gathered for Mass at the Nevada Test site, walked on to that military base to offer the risen Jesus' gift of resurrection peace and were arrested all over again. I'll tell about that next week.

St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, A Persistent Peace (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and Put Down Your Sword, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from www.amazon.com. For more information on the Good Friday protest in Nevada, see:

www.nevadadesertexperience.org. On April 24-26, John will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center, see: www.kirkridge.org. For info on his books and speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org.

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