

## Marching for peace in New York City

John Dear | May. 11, 2010 On the Road to Peace

They say the peace movement is dead. It's hard to argue against that when so few speak out against our two wars, and when so many peace organizations are cutting back, laying off staff, and struggling to make ends meet. But if you were in New York City this past weekend, you would have seen the movement is alive and well. Some 15,000 converged at the opening of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review conference at the United Nations.

We gathered in a spirit of nonviolence in Times Square (only 12 hours after a car bomb nearly blew up the block). Police by the hundreds formed a menacing presence around us. We sang songs, chanted slogans, reconnected with friends, held banners, and set off for a long walk across mid-town to the U.N.'s Dag Hammerskold Plaza.

Holding the march together was the Japanese contingent -- some 1,800 peacemakers freshly arrived from Japan. They humbled the rest of us. They were of all ages, dressed in their best, bearing signs and banners. And to a person, every one of them, smiling, gracious and focused, fully aware of the urgent need for nuclear disarmament. I enjoyed greeting as many as I could.

It was also striking to see the large number of religious women. In these days of male clerical abuse and cover up -- and the Vatican's harassments of women's orders -- it amazed me to see so many smiling sisters walking along, their chins up, and their focus where it should be: on the urgent need for nuclear disarmament. These great women stop at nothing.

At the plaza, we heard the stories of several Hibakusha -- aged atomic bomb survivors from Nagasaki and Hiroshima, many bearing their wounds to this day. Seeing them always cuts me to the heart.

Monday morning, as the U.N. conference began -- with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton stepping up to the lectern not to speak for nuclear disarmament but to stir the embers of war with Iran -- a hundred of us gathered in nearby Grand Central Station, just as morning rush hour got underway. And there we participated in a series of nonviolent public actions for nuclear disarmament.

During rush hour, thousands pass through the station every few minutes, and in the midst of the great bustle, several dozen gathered in the center of the main hall, and marched around the tall clock, carrying placards. "Nuclear Disarmament Begins with U.S.!"

After a while, dozens of others appeared and handed out leaflets to passers-by. Some took the leaflets, others refused. Others mumbled a few choice words under their breath. Friends expected to be arrested, but police just stood back and let it happen. More than 2,000 leaflets were distributed.

Then, around 9 a.m., several other friends appeared on the second floor balcony overlooking the main hall and unfurled a banner that reached to the floor. "Talk Less, Disarm More." "Nuclear Weapons = Terrorism" The police scrambled up the stairs and hauled the miscreants away. We below applauded their daring witness.

And so it went. A proliferation of witnesses. A police officer yelled into the phone strapped to his shoulder: "They seem to be all over the place." Indeed, we were everywhere. War Resisters League, Peace Action, the Catholic Worker, Think Outside the Bomb, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Pax Christi.

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Non-Proliferation Treaty Review conferences have taken place every five years since the treaty to curtail and nuclear weapons was signed in 1970 by 189 nations. The last meeting, in 2005, ended with a whimper. No agreement, no mutual commitment. When nations give agreement serious consideration, the U.S. always seems to scuttle the process. Which is why more and more of us need to take to the streets and raise our voices.

Members of the War Resisters League raised theirs:

The official "nuclear posture" of the U.S. government under the Obama administration is one that maintains the option of "first strike" against any country that is deemed threatening to the U.S. (e.g. those harboring alleged terrorists) while insisting that other nations such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan are to blame for the necessity of nuclear weapons.

Our action today made clear that the United States is a central global perpetrator of nuclear terrorism as, along with Russia, it maintains 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, about half of which are deployed throughout the world. Nuclear terrorism is one central way in which the U.S. maintains its ongoing imperialist wars and occupations and spends our taxpayer dollars to do so. The U.S. must be held accountable both internationally and by its own people.

I'm often confronted with the question, what good do these actions do? Why bother marching? What's the use of singing? Does anyone really pay any attention to your leaflets, your unfurling of banners, your staged die-ins?

Such questions are misplaced, arising as they do from our culture's obsession with command and control and effectiveness. I operate from another ethic, the one that calls us to speak out against the odds, to puncture pretenses, to break the unanimity.

Such was much of the busyness among the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, often read during our Easter and Pentecost seasons. Each day the apostles and the early community gathered near the Temple, in the heart of Jerusalem. And there they spoke out -- and faced arrest. Even though they seemed to make little difference. Even though the system barreled on.

But they had resolved themselves. They would "witness to the resurrection," in their words. They would speak of the defeat of death. As for the chips, let them fall where they may.

Here's Peter and one typical day in the Life: "God raised up his servant and sent him to bless you by turning each of you from your evil ways." While they were still speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the guard and the Sadducees confronted them, disturbed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They laid hands on them and put them in custody ..." (Act 3:26, 4:1-3).

This is the story of the early church. In our own clumsy way, we tried to do the same. In Grand Central Station, in Times Square. We witnessed to the resurrection. Which today translates to mean: "No more nuclear weapons, no more wars, no more killing, no more violence. Stop planning the global crucifixion of Christ. The days of engineering society by Death are over."

We who participated in these events were inspired to carry on, and in these cynical, despairing times, that in

itself is a great accomplishment.

The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will, and we never know the outcome of our witness. What we do know is our vocation -- to stand up, speak out boldly, and announce Resurrection to a troubled people mired in a culture of death.

And so we carry on, however modest, however simple. *Adelante!*

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to:  
<http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. From Aug. 2-6, he will teach a course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see [www.ghost ranch.org](http://www.ghost ranch.org). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to [www.johndear.org](http://www.johndear.org).

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