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The desert is a school of peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

It's been a hot summer across the country, but withering heat comes with the territory for those of us who live in the Southwest. I've lived in the high desert of northern New Mexico for eight years now, and despite the heat, the desert has proven itself a source of inspiration, healing and hope.

I came here directly after seven years on Broadway in Manhattan. And a jarring transition it was. I abandoned crowds, lights, tight spaces and constant clamor and embraced vastness, wildness and penetrating silence. After few years in a little parish town I moved to a remote mesa south of Santa Fe, where I now live in an abode house with a tin roof overlooking 50 miles of canyons, hills, juniper and sage. In the far distance looms a gray-brown ridge of stony mountains.

I'm off the grid; I get power when I can from fickle solar panels. And I have no drinking water except what can be brought up from stores in nearby towns. I spend most of the year on the road speaking. But summers afford me time to explore desert life and to enter the moods of the elements and join with the spirits of the creatures. I live in immediate contact with the earth. I wake with the sun. I spend hours watching spectacular sunsets. Coyotes prowl outside my window under the moonlight and now and then send up their eerie howls. There are other creatures lurking about as well.

"Blessed are the meek," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. "They shall inherit the earth." For years, I've tried to live and teach biblical meekness as creative nonviolence. But I haven't known much about "inheriting the earth." Once on the mesa, however, in near utter solitude, the meaning has come clear. I look out sometimes and feel that creation is mine. Silence and solitude, howling winds and sudden rains, sequined night skies and a moon you can almost put your hands on -- these feel like gifts of creation to me.

Over the years the desert has tried to teach me a thing or two. We often think of the desert as a metaphor for the spiritual life. But to think that is to miss the point. No place of withdrawal or escape, the desert bears the truth of ineluctable reality. And in that respect it heightens the struggle of faith. Magical and breathtaking is the desert. But because of our bomb-building, it's irradiated and scarred. The desert is a land of angels and demons that mirrors our truest selves and nudges us to see the unvarnished truth -- our own torn souls.

Once, during a of prayer vigil and civil disobedience actions at the nuclear Nevada Nuclear Test Site in the early 1990s, Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara preached, "The desert of the U.S. Southwest has suffered the most violence of any place on earth. It must become the place of the greatest nonviolence."

I think of that often as I take my meditative walks around my home. The sun bears down and my walking kicks up dust, and I see the distant mountains, including those on which the town of Los Alamos sits. Los Alamos -- the birthplace of the atomic bomb, where after 65 years, business is still booming, thanks to the Obama Administration's substantial increase in nuclear weapons spending.

Laying claim to the desert are peace and violence. Just as they do in my own heart. As I meander among the sage, cactus and juniper bushes, I feel vastly alone, and I peer more deeply into my soul. And there I see the lurking restlessness and addictions, violence and illusions.

In the city, you can find diversions and run from yourself. Here, not so easily. But if you keep at it, the desert becomes a training camp in creative nonviolence. It will reveal to you your "shadow side," where much of our violence is born. It will offer you glimpses of those things that shame and hurt you, and it will nudge you to accept them or let them go and make peace with yourself. Contemplative peace. Or inner disarmament, as I call it.

I confess I avail myself too rarely of such moments. But some weeks ago in a field of sagebrush in Box Canyon near Abiquiu, with cliffs of red, orange and yellow towering around me on three sides, I sat myself down and put myself in the hands of the Creator and let myself feel one with creation. Something about the desert that reorders the soul. Meekness, compassion, nonviolence and love -- the desert silence restores them to proper proportion. Deeper springs of compassion seemed to be unleashed within me, and I felt so at one with creation and the Creator. I hope so moments give me a spiritual framework within which to live my life.

Jesus, himself, submitted to the transforming powers of the desert. He had heard God's call: "You are my Beloved," a call that required substantiation. So off he went into the desert to fast and pray. This was no lark, like taking in the scenes at the Grand Canyon. Jesus walked into the desert, among the dry wadis and the desolate hills. And the narrative features, not the harsh surroundings, but Jesus' inner landscape. We accompany him as he struggles. Was he to cooperate with empire as so many of his contemporaries did? Was he to take the road of revolt? Was he to size up his people's helpless situation and doubt God and give in to despair? What did it mean to be God's Beloved?

Jesus rejected the insidious temptations. And he emerged from the desert as the light of peace. It was an experience that sustained him all his life. He would be faithful to his calling to be the Beloved of God. He would share that belovedness with one and all, so he took his message of nonviolence to Galilee. Then, audaciously, he took it into downtown Jerusalem. There he challenged the local seat of imperial injustice and went all the way to his death trusting in his beloved God. And when he rose he opened the door for all of us to live free from violence, empire and death. But his learning who he was began in the desert.

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Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries took up his example. In large numbers they retired to the Egyptian desert. Constantine had risen to power, had proclaimed Christianity the imperial religion, and had "Christianized" Roman institutions -- from tribute collections to the judiciary to the Roman army. More than that, he co-opted the church -- he "Romanized" it. For the first time, bishops and priests -- the laity too -- were beholden to an emperor. They could now kill; no more need to follow that prickly Sermon on the Mount. In protest, a remnant of the faithful drifted off into the desert, trying there to keep alive the founding vision, the church's independence and the flame of Jesus' nonviolence.

As for me, I suffer some of the same temptations as Jesus when all by myself. Where are the results? Has God withdrawn? Perhaps I should just give in. Perhaps being a son or daughter of God is merely an abstraction. Jesus' three temptations -- to despair, doubt and dominate -- lurk within each of us, I find.

But the sun sets and the walls of the cliffs fade from red to orange to yellow. And the air grows balmy with the fragrances of the desert flora. And this gentle wheeling of the earth brings an ineffable force to my heart. And I believe. We are, all of us, beloved children of God. All of us are invited to walk the path of nonviolence into resurrection peace -- here and now, on this side of history. We can let go of our resentments and bitterness. We can let God dig out the roots of war within us, and send us forth as peacemakers, as God's beloved sons and daughters.

The heft of the desert sky on our shoulders renews our desire to know God. Which makes the desert a kind of school of prayer. But oddly enough it's also a school of prophecy. John the Baptist lived there, discerned God's voice, and returned with blazing spirit. Return, he urged his people, to the God of peace. He warned them against complying with imperial ways. Two millennia later, the desert has lost nothing of its potency. It continues to plant prophetic seeds. As we touch the land, beautiful and battered at the same time, we emerge enlivened to demand an end to its destruction.

Actually, there is a kind of versatility in the desert's Spartan landscape. If we can hear, it speaks a multitude of messages. The Arizona desert beckons us to welcome our brothers and sisters who cross the border. The deserts of New Mexico, emitting its lethal radiation from Los Alamos, Sandia labs and Kirkland Air Force Base, cry out for the abolition of nuclear weapons. The Nevada desert longs for an end to the greed and paranoia that kindled the culture of casinos and nuclear blasts in the first place. The desert shows who we are -- people of unimaginable violence. On the other hand, it beckons us toward who we can become -- people of holy nonviolence. Before a vexed and hapless crowd, Jesus testified about John. "What did you go out to the desert to see?" A reed shaken by wind? Someone dressed like a king? Or a prophet? "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet" (Mt. 11:7-9). Prophets are bred on the barren landscape. Prophecy hangs in the desert's torrid air. And if the prophets don't speak out, one thinks the very stones themselves will cry out for creation.

The desert, in the words of Dom Helder Camara, can be "a good friend." It has much to teach us. I for one am grateful to have befriended its mystical vistas. They instill in me a yearning to learn more deeply the desert's life-affirming lessons -- lessons of peace, prayer and prophecy. Our warlike culture grants us little on which to stand. Find a desolate, haunting stretch of land, and for a time stand there. Then return, like Jesus, and proclaim its secrets.

John Dear will introduce Bishop Gabino Zavala, president of Pax Christi, at next week's annual

Hiroshima day events in Santa Fe and Los Alamos, N.M. See: www.paxchristinewmexico.org. John will teach a weeklong course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, (see www.ghostranch.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. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat on Gospel Nonviolence, go to www.johndear.org.

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