NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Transforming the Jericho Road

John Dear | Sep. 20, 2011 On the Road to Peace

Shortly before he was killed, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. turned to Andrew Young and said, ?I no longer believe the Good Samaritan story. I?m tired of trying to pick up those who are beaten down. I want to change the Jericho Road. I want it to be a safe place where no one gets beat up, robbed, and left for dead.?

King had an extraordinary vision. He saw enormous potential for the whole world. He prayed for God?s nonviolent reign of love and peace to be realized for everyone here and now on earth. He wanted to heal the poor and feed the hungry, and change the structures and systems that left people poor and hungry so that everyone would have food, housing, healthcare, jobs and education. That search led him to speak out against war and nuclear weapons and to uphold Christian nonviolence as the world?s best chance.

Though many reject that way of active nonviolence, violence sure isn?t making us safer, more peaceful or happier. It continues to spread like the virus in the new movie ?Contagion.? Everyone is at risk. King is right: the goal should be to transform our global Jericho Road into a new Garden of Eden.

These were my thoughts as I drove off in late August from New Mexico, leaving my home there after nine years, after church authorities forced me out because of my unpopular anti-nuclear witness. It?s quite an experience to be kicked out of a state because of one?s public stand for peace and nonviolence. Though it?s happened to me before, it only gets harder as I get older. But there are consolations: it?s a blessing these days to be in trouble for speaking out against war, injustice and nuclear weapons.

The Jesuit provincial ordered me to move to a Jesuit community in a row house in Baltimore, so in August I drove across the country with my friend Father Bill, stopping to visit friends Jim and Shelley Douglass in Birmingham, Alabama; to pray in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel where King was killed; and to spend time at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

We arrived on a Tuesday in Washington, D.C., at lunch time and decided to pay a quick visit to the National Gallery of Art. Standing before El Greco?s paintings, we felt the entire building shake as the 5.9 earthquake hit. It was very powerful, and everyone ran from the building onto Pennsylvania Avenue. I remember well the awful 1989 Bay Area earthquake, but this was scary too.

That evening, we had dinner with friends at Jonah House in Baltimore, then arrived at the Jesuit community, a typical Baltimore row house. Every house for blocks has the same front porch, one right next to the other, which makes you feel like you?re in a house of mirrors.

It was late by now, 11:30 p.m., and we decided to sit on the porch and talk about our trip, since Bill had an 8 a.m. flight the next morning. It was a typical hot, muggy, humid August night in Baltimore, and for a moment, it seemed quiet and peaceful.

Just then, blood-curdling screams exploded into the air. A young man came tearing out of his row house about seven houses down the block, and started running down the center of the street, screaming at the top of his

lungs, toward us, followed by a young woman running after him, also screaming at the top of her lungs.

We did not know if someone with a gun or a knife was chasing after them, but they ran toward us, right up our front steps, where he collapsed near our front door. He was covered in blood, bleeding everywhere, and pools of blood quickly formed. The woman was screaming for the police. Bill sat next to the young man and held him while I ran inside and called 911. When I returned, a crowd had begun to gather. The young man was dying before our eyes.

Several people began to press towels against his wounds. He was about to pass out, when the ambulance, fire trucks and police arrived. By now, more than 50 people had gathered on the street. People heard the screams throughout the neighborhood.

The paramedics quickly put the young man on a stretcher and started to work on him. Police cordoned off the area and started questioning everyone. Within moments, they were at the young man?s house.

Only later did we learn that an intruder had broken through the back window intent on robbery. Instead, he met the young couple and started stabbing the young man with a large kitchen knife. The young man tried to fight back until he realized he was about to be killed, so he took off, out the front door. The intruder escaped through the back door down our alley.

Within a few minutes, the ambulance was gone. We stood there shaking, in shock. We prayed hard for him all night long.

And God answered our prayers. The next morning, I tracked the young man down at Johns Hopkins hospital and found him in the ICU, conscious, alert, cleaned up, sewed up, and feeling much better. He was released two days later with no internal injuries and hopes for a full recovery, despite his many serious lacerations.

So there was a happy ending. The episode was a profound spiritual experience of faith, hope and trust in the face of terror.

That was my first official night in Baltimore.

This close encounter with the daily violence of our inner cities reminded me once again of the need for all of us to teach and promote nonviolence as a new way of life for the coming of a new culture -- to do our Good Samaritan duty, but to carry on with the impossible dream of transforming the entire global Jericho Road.

While the media debate partisan politics, the Pentagon wages war around the planet, and our economic, healthcare and housing systems collapse, violent crime continues to run rampant in our cities and around the world. The statistics indicate that it is decreasing, but it is still prevalent.

Last week, the Associated Press reported that ?the number of violent crimes fell by 12 percent in the United States last year, a far bigger drop than the nation has been averaging since 2001, the Justice Department said.?

> The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported there were 3.8 million violent crimes last year, down from 4.3 million in 2009. Experts aren't sure why. The expectation had been that crime would increase in a weak economy with high unemployment like that seen in 2010. The big drop dwarfs the 3 percent yearly decline in violent crimes the nation averaged from 2001 through 2009.
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> The numbers come from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which gathers information on non-fatal crimes against people aged 12 or older by questioning a nationally representative sample of U.S. households.

> From 1993 through 2010, the rate of violent crime has declined by a whopping 70 percent: from 49.9 violent crimes per 1,000 persons age 12 or older to only 14.9 per 1,000 in 2010. Half of this decline came between 1993 and 2001. Between 2001 and 2009, violent crime declined at a more modest annual average of 4 percent, but that rate decline jumped to 13 percent in 2010. (AP news, Sept. 17, 2011)

The decrease in U.S. violent crime is encouraging, but it is still far too frequent. Meanwhile, it continues to be a major concern around the world. A close Jesuit friend from Guatemala told me during a visit last week that violent crime is now so high in Guatemala and El Salvador that it?s more terrifying and unsafe than during the wars of the 1980s. South Africa suffers the same.

The long haul solution requires turning from spending billions on war, corporate greed and weapons toward the elimination of extreme poverty and disease and the creation of a more just world, including a universal education system that teaches the practicalities and methodologies of nonviolence as a way of life.

This is what the spiritual life is about as well. We find the God of peace in one another, trust in that loving God, and spread God?s reign of peace far and wide. We plumb the depths of peace, love, nonviolence and compassion within us, among us, and around us.

If we can live that creative nonviolence in our own lives, and do our part in the global movement of nonviolent transformation, we are doing God?s will for us at this moment in history.

As I move from the desert with its poverty and violence to the city with its poverty and violence, from the nearby specter of Los Alamos to the nearby specter the Pentagon, I still meet good people everywhere. They live on the margins of the culture, and there do their part in the work of peace and compassion to stem the tide of poverty and violence with the force of goodness.

?Everyone must decide whether he or she will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness,? King once said. ?An individual has not started living until he or she can rise above the narrow confines of his or her individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

?All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America,? King continued. ?In doing so, the affluent Americans will eventually have to face themselves with the question that Eichmann chose to ignore: how responsible am I for the well-being of my fellows? To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it.?

So we do what we can to alleviate suffering, to turn our local neighborhoods into ?peace zones,? and to support the global grassroots disarmament and justice movements.

May the God of peace bless us along the way with a new spirit of nonviolence, so the bloodshed will stop and everyone will know true peace.

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From February-April 2012, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John for an evening talk and book-signing at your church, send an e-mail through www.johndear.org [1]. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books 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, visit: www.johndear.org.

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