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Ill teenager a touching witness for God's peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Like millions around the world, I, too, was touched by the recent YouTube video of 18-year-old Ben Breedlove, filmed one week before he died of a heart attack on Christmas Day in Austin, Texas. In the simple, short, silent film, he holds small, white notecards in front of his face, describing his serious heart ailment, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which makes it difficult for his heart to pump blood normally. He tells of several near-death experiences and the supernatural peace he felt when he almost died last month at school.

This teenager has given the world an inspiring testimony to peace. He reminds us that life is short, that peace is worth pursuing and that we are all headed toward a new realm of peace. In a culture drenched with media glorification of violence and war, that's quite an accomplishment.

His parents only saw the video after his death. Once posted on YouTube, it went viral. Millions watched it. 1,500 people attended his funeral.

The cards catch your attention from the get-go. He looks grim, then smiles, as he holds the cards. He writes about the bright light he saw when he nearly died as a child, and the tremendous peace he felt. After that, he lost all his worries.

Then it happened again in early December. One day in school, he fainted and nearly died. As he lost consciousness, again he felt a profound, other-worldly peace. Sensing his approaching death, he says he felt proud of his life, of everything he had done, and he was grateful to be in such a heavenly place. He didn't want to return. As the video ends, the last card asks: "Do you believe in angels, or God? I do." He died a few days after making the video.

Ben Breedlove's video reminds us of the core essentials -- the brevity of life, the reality of heaven and the peace that is not of this world but which is ours if we seek it.

"I cannot even begin to describe the peace, how peaceful it was," he wrote. "I will never forget that feeling or that day."

Ben's testimony reminds me of Jesus' promise of peace. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you," Jesus said the night before he was killed. "Not as the world gives do I give it to you." (John 14:47)

Ben insisted he experienced a peace not of this world, and he wanted to live in that peace always. He was so overwhelmed by it he wanted to share his story with everyone. He seemed to suggest that this peace was the one goal worth pursuing in life.

All the great saints, mystics and peacemakers of history likewise testify to that holy peace. It is remarkable to see a sick young man testify so boldly, bravely and calmly about such peace.

"He felt the peace of God when he had those glimpses into heaven and heavenly presence," his mother told a local news station. In her eulogy, his sister said he had recently told her, "God let me feel that peace before I came back so that I would know that heaven is worth it."

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I take three lessons about peacemaking from Ben. First, he reminds us of our mortality. Of course, we all know we are going to die, but we deny it and live our lives as if we are immortal. His somber look, his gentle smile, his notecards, say loud and clear: "Wake up! Life is short! Live life to the full! You know not the day, nor the hour. Get ready. Be lavish with love, forgiveness, compassion and encouragement. Get your priorities right."

Second, Ben encourages us to seek the holy peace of God. We are left with his video to ponder how we can seek peace with the same confidence as he did. Can we pursue peace with his steadfastness without having to suffer through the nightmare of hypothyroid cardiomyopathy? The saints urge us to try. Take time each day in silent meditation with the God of peace. Let the God of peace give you the gift of peace. This is what our scriptures urge, what God desires.

Recently, a lifelong friend told me nonchalantly about his morning meditation practice. A longtime peace activist who was close to William Stringfellow and Philip Berrigan, he described the first two hours of his day. He sits in a strict yogic posture, concentrating on his breath, centering himself in the depths of peace. After an hour of perfect centering, he slowly chants a few key Gospel verses. Then during the last half-hour, he focuses on an image of God. These days, he sits before a large image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to enter into the peace of Mary. There is no verbal communication. "It's a relationship of peaceful, loving presence," he told me. From that profound practice, he sets out to face his day serving as a hospice nurse, caring from the dying and their families.

My friend has come to such devotion after a lifetime of steadfast resistance to war. He has organized protests, given talks, been arrested and gone to prison. Once, 20 years ago, his pastor let him profess a vow of nonviolence after the main Sunday Mass at his large parish. After Communion, he knelt before the altar, while the priest stood in the aisle and the congregation rose. After he recited the vow, the congregation applauded. Many wept. The next day, he left for a risky three-week trip to Bosnia, where he

joined hundreds of internationals in a peace march right through the center of the warzone.

A devout Catholic, he had made the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the 30-day silent retreat. But he wanted more. So he flew to Chennai, India, to live for several months in a Hindu ashram, where he and other students meditated for eight hours a day for months on end. He returns every other year. He wants to learn the art of contemplation from Eastern traditions, he says, because they integrate the body, mind, spirit and breath in prayer. He wants to enter that holy peace with every fiber of his being.

That's the kind of attention and devotion I hear Ben Breedlove urge from all of us.

Third, Ben demonstrates the fine art of creative communication for peace. He shows an authentic evangelization. He tells his story, his experience of God and God's peace, with a kind of "take it or leave it" attitude that touches everyone. He does not shout or exhort with great rhetoric; indeed, he doesn't even speak. With his clever, original YouTube video and notecards, he witnesses to his mystical experience and allows himself to be used by God to touch others.

It's hard to speak of peace these days, or to find a mainstream avenue to raise the topic. You rarely hear talk of peace on television, in the movies, in the churches, from the government, in the military, in the university or in our local communities. During a recent visit on Capitol Hill to see my friend Congressman Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, I was stunned to see how he had cleared out half of his office furniture to set up a little film studio. He had just finished videotaping a statement against the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which he posted on his YouTube channel. This is the future of communication, he told me. We have to try every angle we can to speak against the culture of war.

Dennis and Ben are two of a kind -- determined apostles of peace. They urge us to speak out however we can on behalf of a new world of peace.

I recommend Ben's video, and invite us to reflect on our experience of God and God's peace, to seek that peace as best we can, and to share our stories with one another and the world. As we continue to seek God's peace and share our experience, like Ben, we welcome Jesus' gift of mystical peace. This is what God wants -- not just the abolition of war, guns, killing, nuclear weapons and destruction -- but a generous welcoming of God's peace, justice and love for all.

Thank you, Ben Breedlove, and well done.

On Jan. 25, John Dear will speak at Colgate University in New York, and on Feb. 4, at the Seattle Spiritual Books Festival. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores 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. He will offer a weekend workshop on "Writing and Peacemaking" with Natalie Goldberg in Santa Fe on April 27-29. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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