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The Bells of Hiroshima -- in Los Alamos

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

A hundred and fifty of us gathered on Sunday night, Aug. 5, at Ashley Pond in Los Alamos, New Mexico, at the exact spot where long ago the Hiroshima Bomb was built. Right at 5:15 p.m -- 8:15 a.m. Monday morning, Aug. 6 in Japan -- we heard live, thanks to the wonders of the Internet, the ringing of the Peace Bell in Hiroshima.

It was deeply moving. Each year, thousands gather in Hiroshima in Peace Park to commemorate the 1945 U.S. atomic bombing with a ceremony and the ringing of the giant Peace Bell. But here we were, standing in Los Alamos where the bomb was made, listening live over our sound system to the deep sound of the bell in Hiroshima. For once, people in Hiroshima and Los Alamos were connected in commemorating the U.S. bombing. It was a holy moment.

After we heard the solemn bell several times, all hundred and fifty of us processed in silence two by two up Trinity Boulevard toward Oppenheimer Way and the main entrance of LANL, the Nuclear Weapons Laboratories.

At 5:45 p.m. precisely, we each donned sackcloth and poured ashes on the sidewalk and sat down in strict silence, using this ancient biblical symbol of 'sackcloth and ashes' to 'repent of the mortal sin of nuclear weapons and beg the God of peace for the gift of disarmament.'

We sat in contemplative prayer for thirty minutes. Cars passed by. Clouds hung overhead. And you could hear a pin drop.

But for me, that deep Hiroshima bell continued to resonate. It was like a giant mindfulness bell, calling the world back to the center of peace.

For years now we've used the ancient biblical symbol of sackcloth and ashes. In the Book of Jonah, we recalled, Jonah marches through the town of Ninevah, and calls the people to repent of their violence. Lo and behold, the entire town repents in sackcloth and ashes, and changes their violent ways.

That's what we're trying to do: to call upon the people of Los Alamos and United States to repent of the evil work of building and maintaining nuclear weapons; to take responsibility for our own complicity in this culture of death; to demand that we dismantle our nuclear weapons; and to welcome a new nuclear-free world. That's our hope and our prayer.

The evening action came after a remarkable weekend conference in Santa Fe called "Vision Without Fission." Several dozen speakers looked at nuclear weapons from a variety of angles. Indigenous women from the Santa Clara Pueblo, for example, which is located at the foot of the mountains below the labs, told their stories and expressed their sadness and outrage at the ongoing development of nuclear weapons at Los Alamos.

At the heart of the weekend was the witness of our friend, Alaric Balibrera. Alaric is a Santa Fe screenwriter who grew up in Los Alamos, where his father was the documentarian for LANL. As a child, he saw films of the atomic explosions projected practically every evening on his living room wall. Later, he visited Hiroshima and finally realized the horrors which his hometown had unleashed upon the world.

On July 16, the anniversary of the first nuclear bomb test, Alaric began a "hunger strike" to protest nuclear weapons development. He's still fasting today, three weeks later, and still calling for the end of nukes. Dozens of people have joined Alaric for a day or more of fasting. He is perhaps the first Los Alamos resident to make such a public stand against nuclear weapons.

"I'm on hunger strike because I love Los Alamos and I love science and I want to see both of them used for the enrichment of humanity," Alaric told me as we sat on the lawn by Ashley Pond, listening to musicians singing about peace. "There's so many wonderful things we can do with science -- cure cancer, cleanup our messes, and create freedom want."

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"I'm striking for transformation from a world of competition to a world of cooperation. I don't believe we need to raise our children for the future; we need to raise the future for our children. The minds of Los Alamos could be turned to creating solutions to our most pressing problems. I want to see this brain power used for life-sustaining work."

Other speakers included Arjun Makhijani of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research; Joni Arends of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety; Pancho Ramos Stierle, from the Oakland Occupy movement; Cynthia Jurs, of the Open Way Buddhist Sangha; and Beata Tsosie-Pena of the Santa Clara Pueblo who works with HOPE, ("Honor Our Pueblo Existence?").

"I'm here because if you're going to fight nuclear weapons, you have to come to the source," William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, told me. "This is ground zero for weapons of mass destruction, so we have to speak here." I asked Bill about hope. "I think the fact that our president said we have to get rid of these weapons is good. People are realizing we can't afford them. These moments come in waves, and I think more people are coming along who will help make disarmament a reality."

"I'm here to do my part for nuclear abolition," Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico told me, "and we're going to do it, but it will be a step by step process. This weekend has been fabulous for focusing us, and we're going to keep doing this every year until we get the job done!"

Today there is little accountability, transparency or public participation in decisions made at Los Alamos, according to www.nukefrenow.org, the broad coalition that sponsored the weekend. They write:

After the war, a few scientists, fearing that the new A-bomb might initiate a nuclear arms race, worked to stop its further development. As we know, they failed, and the task of controlling and stopping nuclear weapons was left to later generations.... Since 2006 nuclear weapons have been a for-profit business at the Lab. From 1943 to 2006, the University of California (UC) ran the Lab as a non-profit entity. Since 2006, LANL has been operated by Los Alamos National Security (LANS), a for-profit cooperation. The dominant members of LANS are the international construction giant Bechtel and UC. Under LANS, the research and design of nuclear weapons at LANL became a for profit business and costs soared. In 2011, for instance, US taxpayers paid over \$83 million to run LANL, ten times what UC as sole manager received; the same year the Lab Director was paid over \$1 million, triple the pre-Bechtel salary. Bechtel, the world's largest privately owned corporation, conducts all daily operations at the Lab... The Labs continue to be a drain on the state of New Mexico, despite what politicians say... The county of Los Alamos receives \$47 million a year from the state of New Mexico from the gross receipts tax paid by the lab as a for profit business. Los Alamo County has the lowest poverty rate of any county in the United States and the most millionaires per capita in the country. On the other hand, the state of New Mexico is fourth from the bottom in income and more of our children -- twenty-five percent -- live in poverty than in any other state.

For my part in the program, I noted that nuclear weapons not only bankrupt us economically, they bankrupt us spiritually. I read what Mahatma Gandhi said a few days after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima: "I hold that those who invented the atomic bomb have committed the gravest sin. The atomic bomb brought an empty victory to the Allied arms, but it resulted for the time being in destroying Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see... Unless the world adopts nonviolence, this will spell certain suicide for humanity."

Today, we see everywhere the effect that the bomb has had upon us as a nation, I continued:

We have lost our soul. We have no sense of meaning, love, truth, empathy or compassion, no understanding of our basic humanity. So we come here to repent of this the gravest sin and start the journey again to reclaim our soul, to become people of nonviolence, to call for the abolition of nuclear weapons once and for all, and to redirect those billions of dollars for food for the world's hungry, homes for the homeless, free healthcare, jobs and education for everyone, and training every human being on the planet in the methodologies of nonviolent conflict resolution.

I invited everyone at the Labs to quit their jobs and join the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. It's a call we will continue to make as we try to build the nuclear abolition movement.

On the morning of Aug. 6 itself, members of "Occupy Los Alamos" took to the streets of Los Alamos and blocked the street near the main entrance to the Labs. Six were arrested and given court dates.

But I will not soon forget standing on the green lawn where the Hiroshima Bomb was built, and hearing that solemn bell ring live from the service in Hiroshima. It was like a giant alarm clock, a global wake up call. It was part mourning, part warning. I left wondering why we are so deaf to the Peace Bell of

Hiroshima, what keeps us from hearing that global mindfulness bell, and what we can do to help one another hear that universal wake up call.

Maybe more and more of us need to go to Los Alamos for this annual commemoration, to see for ourselves the buildings where we continue to build nuclear weapons, and to come to terms with the reality of Los Alamos. Whatever sense of despair or apathy we might feel, the Peace Bell of Hiroshima has rung once again, calling us to wake up, get moving, keep on marching, and keep on doing what we can to build a global movement to abolish nuclear weapons forever.

John Dear will speak on Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, and on Aug. 26-28 at the annual Greenbelt Festival, in Cheltenham, England, (www.greenbelt.org.uk). To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to: www.johndear.org. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book, *Challenging Empire* (www.fosna.org). He is profiled along with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels*, by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books, 2011). He has an essay in the new book, *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* (a collection about difficult questions on Gospel Nonviolence, at www.wipfandstock.com.) *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, such as *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com.

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