

## Denise Levertov's peacemaking poetry

John Dear | Jan. 30, 2007 On the Road to Peace

In 1991, as the U.S. bombed Baghdad, the phone rang at the Jesuit community house in Oakland where I was living. It was an English professor at Stanford. Would I speak about peacemaking to her classes? she asked. Of course, I answered. In particular, she asked that I might speak against the war on Iraq, and help them launch a chapter of Pax Christi. Fine, I said. We spoke for several minutes more before I asked her name. "Denise Levertov," she answered.

I could scarcely believe it. One of the leading poets of the century, friend of Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan, Catholic convert and outspoken anti-war activist. What a thrill.

I had read her poems for years. And they never failed to entrance me and settle me into meditation and healing. So a few weeks later, when I entered her class I was duly nervous. I needn't have been. Denise, gentle and soft spoken, immediately put me at ease. And I launched into my talk amid a receptive crowd. Denise was my entrée to speak at Stanford on several other occasions. And I stayed in touch with her until her untimely death in 1997.

Now New Directions has brought out a small collection of Denise's finest poems about war and peace, *Making Peace*. Each resonates with her typical passion, nuance and love. Part one evokes the horrors of war -- Vietnam, El Salvador, the first Gulf War, the threat of nuclear annihilation. Part two spotlights the need to protest war and injustice through nonviolent witness and action. Part three ponders the role of poetry in such dark times as these. Part four envisions a new world of peace. Clean, simple, close to the bone, the collection makes for excellent spiritual reading.

Denise would say it offers "a small grain of hope." I think it offers a bountiful feast. Her poem, "Dom Helder Camara at the Nuclear Test Site," especially brings back memories. I was there, standing with Denise and Dan Berrigan in a circle with hundreds of Christian activists in the Nevada desert marking our annual protest against nuclear weapons. Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camara preached to us about peace, then in conclusion, he suddenly gazed upward, begged the heavens for the gift of peace, and started to wave up at the sky, as if to God. The whole crowd caught its breath. That gesture filled us with hope.

Some months later, Denise sent me the original draft of this poem as I languished in a North Carolina jail for my plowshares disarmament action. Hers was a gesture that deeply consoled.

*Dom Helder, octagenarian wisp  
of human substance arrived from Brazil  
raises his arms and gazes toward  
a sky pallid with heat, to implore  
'Peace!'  
-- - then waves a 'goodbye for now'  
to God, as to a compadre.  
"The Mass is over, go in peace  
to love and serve the Lord': he walks  
down with the rest of us to cross  
the cattle-grid, entering forbidden ground  
where marshals wait with their handcuffs.*

These days, as the U.S. bombs Iraq and Afghanistan, funds Israel's occupation of Palestinians, ignores the starving masses from Darfur to Haiti, and maintains thousands of nuclear weapons, we need the wisdom and consolation of Denise Levertov to inspire us.

It all boils down, she says, to "the imagination of peace":

*A voice from the dark called out,  
"The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war."*

An axiom applicable to every warmaking culture -- one of its first losses, the imagination. No one can conceive of a world without war, poverty or nuclear weapons. But poets like Denise Levertov restore our vision. They open our minds to imagine an imponderable world, and push us to announce that vision, and make it come true:

*The choice: to speak*

*or not to speak.*

*We spoke.*

*Those of whom we spoke*

*had not that choice.*

Drawing on Denise's inspiration, we too can speak out against war, poverty and nuclear weapons and hope stubbornly for a day in which all might live in peace.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, (with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu), will be published next month by Doubleday and is available now from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) [1]. For further information, see:

[www.johndear.org](http://www.johndear.org) [2]

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