

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 20, 2007 at 9:38am

The road isn't easy

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last month brought a kind of a travel nightmare. I lectured in St. Cloud, Minn., and the next morning at 3:30 a.m. (New Mexico time) out the door I went, off to the airport. I boarded at five and soon after heard the pilot utter those dreaded words, "Our apologies for the delay, but owing to mechanical problems ..."
And there we sat for three hours.

Airborne finally, we headed to Denver, but I missed my connecting flight. Time slowed. Lines, clerks, waiting, paper work, airport food, more lines ... and towards afternoon Albuquerque-bound at last. Long after dark, I began the long ride home up Route 14, New Mexico's storied "Turquoise Trail," a serpentine ribbon through the high mountainous desert. Another hour and I'd be home.

Buoyant spirits had long ago gone under; they had given way hours before to exhaustion and irritation. And a fair amount of confusion -- what possible meaning could such a frustrating day have? None that I could see. I glanced up at the tapestry of stars and managed a faint prayer for guidance and light.

My mind turned to Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco -- a neighbor of mine in Berkeley in 1989. He had come to lodge right next door after being blown about like a tumbleweed by the gales of history. He had suffered as one of the U.S. hostages in Beirut and had settled in Berkeley to recover. I came to love him and over time learned of his prayers and nonviolence and of his kidnapping and suffering.

While held hostage, his darkest moments came when his captors moved him clandestinely. They would

wrap him in tape from head to toe and strap him beneath a truck. For 10 hours they drove, from Beirut to Damascus, the air choked with dust and the road pitted and rutted. Every jounce, every lurch, smashed his nose against the truck's undercarriage, breaking his nose over and over again.

He cried out for hours a kind of whimsical prayer: "Oh, come on, Lord! Is this really necessary? I've done my part already. A Christian, priest, now a hostage. But tied to a truck? Is this really necessary?" (He tells this story in his memoir, *Bound to Forgive*.)

My own ordeal couldn't compare. Still, as I wended along the Turquoise Trail, my lips issued a similar prayer. "Oh c'mon, Lord, 14 hours in jumble and limbo. What could be the meaning of such a day?"

The Turquoise Trail is storied for its breath-taking vistas, and its gorgeous brown rocks, junipers, sagebrush, peculiar mountains and spectacular sunsets. It bore me up to 7,000 feet into frigid rarefied air, on my right precipices and chasms, long plunges downward to boulders and cactus. Traffic at that time of night was sparse and cautious. But nearing home I came upon a driver who, apparently, had no fear of God. He swerved madly, slowed to a crawl, then raced ahead -- much of the time in the wrong lane.

Another drunk driver, I thought, one of the claims to fame of our fair state -- land of enchantment, land of extremes. Last in education and first in poverty. First as well in suicide, domestic violence, drug addiction and drunk driving. That's why I'm here, to serve and stand as best I might with the poorest of our deranged nation. The disenfranchised and marginalized, addicts included, most directly bear the penalty of a culture of war. Their poverty and brokenness and despair -- it derives, to my mind, from Los Alamos and our nuclear doomsday industry, where the rich genuflect before the powers of death and turn away from those in need.

For 10 miles I kept my distance behind the swerving car. Now and then the car's tires skirted the edge of the world and raised clouds of gravel and dust. And he did little to calibrate the car's speed for the hair-pin turns. Watching him, I found myself gripping my own wheel more tightly than usual. I relaxed a bit as we passed through Madrid, an artist's village near where I live, snug in a valley. But not far beyond, the road bore us high up again, twisting upon itself like our ubiquitous rattlers. Then it happened; the road turned but he didn't. The car forsook the road and sailed into the dark. At 60 miles per hour.

I was dumbstruck. Pitch black all around and me, without a cell phone. My mind raced. Surely everyone had died. But what if they hadn't? What to do?

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Amid the inner clamor arose a familiar tale. " ... a wounded man, left half dead in a ditch ... " ... a priest happened to be going by the same road and passed him by ... " The words of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Well, here's one priest that won't pass by, I thought to myself.

I backed up, found the skid tracks in the snow, and peered over. The car was settled far below, resting miraculously in a grove of juniper trees, not among the massive boulders typical of that terrain. Presently

a car passed by and I hailed it and asked them to call 911. Then I buttoned up and donned my gloves and plunged into the three-foot snow drifts. Down I slipped toward the wreck.

At length I arrived and hauled open the door and was met by a cloud of alcohol. Inside sat a dazed young couple, drunk and stoned, but with scarcely a scratch. The police arrived 30 minutes later and hauled the couple to their feet and placed them under arrest. In the meantime, we found a stunned three-year-old boy, strapped in tight in the backseat, uninjured. Quite a miracle.

A happy ending of sorts, but the memory of it all still has me shaken. And I stop now and then to search for meaning. The whole maddening trip from St. Cloud to Albuquerque -- delay upon delay. Perhaps the divine hand maneuvered events. Perhaps it put me in a position to help. For had I not been on the road, no one would have observed the car careen over. And there they would have sat, disoriented, out of sight, until freezing temperatures overtook them, mother and father and young son. Seems the turn of events had a role for me to play; seems I was supposed to be there.

Perhaps, maybe not, but quite a story in either event, a story worth committing to paper. I write it not only to settle myself down and work through the trauma. I set it down because it strikes me as a metaphor for New Mexico. In a desperately poor state like ours, disaster plays out every day before my eyes. Broad poverty and the poor dying young. And in rich corners of the state, relentless preparations for nuclear war.

Yet among us are noble people who keep the faith, who walk the road to peace. Here Good Samaritans go beyond binding wounds. I think of Sr. Hildegard Smith, my colleague at my former parish in Cimarron, who visits the sick and homebound, and runs the food pantry. Marc Page, founder of Trinity Catholic Worker house, in Albuquerque who protests regularly at Los Alamos. Fr. Bill McNichols and Fr. John Brasher, visiting the sick at all hours, presiding at an endless number of funerals for the poor. And Pax Christi friends, preparing to stand trial with me for opposing the Iraq war. They follow closely the nonviolent, troublemaking Jesus. A journey that cuts across the grain of injustice. A journey that sets one proclaiming a new world. A world that funds not nuclear research but housing and healthcare, education and environmental cleanup, and free, full-time programs to treat addiction.

The road to peace may pose risks. Many don't make it. Some fall into ditches, some sail over edges. But it's a beautiful journey, nonetheless. And my prayer is that we all follow it faithfully, come what may.

Come what may. Late that night, I approached the hidden, dirt road that leads four miles up the mesa on which I live. Up ahead, the long path, never smooth and broad on a sunny day in June, had become impassable under fresh three foot snow drifts from the high winds. I pulled over, turned off the car, slung my bag over my shoulder, and trudged three and a half miles home up the mountain in ten degree weather. Overhead, a full moon lit my way, and for the first time, I felt immensely consoled.

John Dear is currently on a national speaking tour of Australia. His latest book, *Transfiguration*, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu, just published by Doubleday, is available from amazon.com or your local bookstore. For further info, see: www.johndear.org.

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