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A friend's Advent journey to the God of peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

For the last six months, I've been living with the possibility that I have cancer. My doctor and a specialist both told me quite emphatically that this was the case. But a few weeks ago, I finally underwent a biopsy that determined, thankfully, that I do not have cancer. This whole roller-coaster health experience has been an enormous education, at best, an opportunity to learn how open I am to meeting the God of peace and to surrendering my life all over again in love to God.

But a wonderful Jesuit friend in Canada has had a different experience. He's been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma and been through chemotherapy and radiation treatments for the last two years. Last week, his doctors told him there was nothing more they could do for him. So the other day, under great duress and with much help, he flew from Toronto back home to his family on Prince Edward Island to die.

His Advent is utterly focused, real and holy, and what's more, he's shared his journey over the last two years on a blog for everyone to read and join with him.

His name is James Profit, and he's one of the most passionate people I know who cares about the earth and the horrors of global warming. I don't know any other Jesuit or priest who shares even a quarter of his passion.

James has been in love with creation since he was a child, growing up with his marvelous family on glorious Prince Edward Island, on the far eastern end of Canada, a place I know and love well. Early on, James decided the best way to serve creation was to study it, so he earned a degree in agriculture.

After joining the Jesuits and being ordained, he was named director of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Canada. There, he worked on their organic farm, preached environmental theology, launched a forest project and inspired friends near and far to work for the protection of creation. He attracted

widespread publicity for publicly challenging Wal-mart, which planned to build a new superstore at the cost of the local environment. Previously, James had served in Jamaica and in the First Nations at Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island.

James calls his blog "All Creation Is Groaning" (see: www.jamesprofit.wordpress.com). He started it years ago when he was first diagnosed with cancer. As I have followed it, I've been moved by his theme of hope and the honest struggle for hope in such a world. The text that runs throughout his journal entries is from Paul's letter to the Romans: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now ... In hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:22-25).

Years ago, James invited me to stay a while with him in Guelph and arranged for me to give talks around the area. I was so moved by his passion for the environment. He really educated me and, even more, inspired me to change my way of thinking. I know too that anyone who cares about the earth and talks about hope is grappling with real despair -- despair for creation, despair over our indifference toward creation, despair over the church and church officials who do nothing to inspire change.

"I am trying to gain the grace of patience as I wait -- a good grace for Advent!" That's what he wrote during Advent a few years ago. He went on: "A friend reminded me of a question that Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst and author, would ask 'what is the Christ that will be birthed in you this year?' This will be a different Christmas, but I have no doubt that Christ will be birthed in me. I yearn for this. I wait."

Then he went on to write about our friend Jim Loney:

Six years ago this time I attended the Climate Change Conference in Montreal. While I was there, the minority Liberal government fell and I learned that Jim Loney, a member of the Catholic Worker community in Toronto and Christian Peacemaker Team, was taken hostage in Iraq. I remember being called to have hope for Jim, as well as for some meaningful action addressing climate change. Jim was released, after 118 days of captivity. The length of time at least tested my ability to have hope. He has written a book on his experience, *Captivity*. Happily President Obama welcomed home the last remaining U.S. troops in Iraq this week. The end of a senseless, unneeded and expensive war based on a lie. Yes, Christ has been birthed in our midst. This week, after a similar Climate Change Conference in Durban, South Africa, the Canadian government withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol. My ability to live with hope is being tested once again. I am embarrassed and saddened by our government. I continue to yearn for the Christ birthing in yet another way. And I wait.

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Let me share another journal entry, from November 2011, so you can catch a flavor of James' spirit:

This morning in prayer, I was filled with gratitude for the journey that I am on. It really is a time for me to step back. People (you) have been so kind and supportive. I have had many visitors. This past week two of my sisters were here from PEI. They were joined by my Cape Breton brother-in-law for one of the days ... The previous three weekends, I had visits from friends with whom I lived at the farm community (1984-86) and from Wikwemikong. I continue to receive various e-mails and notes.

A friend from the U.S., also living with cancer, referred to this support as the "Compassionate

Curve of the Universe," that "Field of Compassion" where we are so loved and cared for. Yes, it feels like that -- again, I feel I am being held by the Universe. It is so easy to experience the interconnection of all beings across the continents.

I have been reading a book which has reminded me that this interconnectivity can have negative consequences as well. *Anti-cancer* by David Servan-Schreiber was given to me by a friend who is a cancer survivor. Servan-Schreiber is a MD and brain researcher and had a brain tumor at 31, while he was a researcher. He admits that the causes of cancer are complex, but points to influences not often seen by the medical scientific field, such as the health of our planet and the mind-body connection.

Arguing that you cannot be healthy on a sick planet, he reminded me that the polar bear, farthest removed from Western civilization but on top of the food chain, is the most contaminated by toxic chemicals to the point that their immune system and reproductive capacities are threatened. Humans, located not in the immediate environment of the bears but thousands of miles even continents away, pollute waters that eventually end up in the sea. Servan-Schreiber also states that cancer is a rich person's disease, and traces our stressful Western lifestyle to the cause of cancer ? eating food from an industrial food system, our exposure to a large amounts chemical products, and eating large quantities of highly refined sugar. He lists foods that would provide for a healthier lifestyle and encourages spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer.

If we alter our lifestyle reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, we would not need the tar sands oil and at the same time we would contribute to easing the problem of climate change which is robbing the polar bears of their habitat. We would also be eating better and there would be less cancer. Changing our lifestyle is the hard part, but the positive results are interconnected as well!

Last month, James wrote about his impending death in a direct and honest way, with classic Prince Edward Island understatement:

I plan to spend my last days in PEI. My mother and siblings will look after me with the assistance of home care. It is important that I leave [Guelph] quickly as I am finding it harder to travel. My hope and expectation is that my body will be returned to Guelph for burial in our Jesuit cemetery. Death could be quite far down the road; it could also be quite soon.

I am living in the midst of mystery now. There is so much I want to do; so much to be done. There have been so many prayers! Why this result? I know that my thoughts beyond reaching PEI in the next couple of weeks will focus on the journey beyond. While I am approaching this part of the journey with peace, I recognize that there is still much need for prayer to sort out a few things, including some of the mixed feelings I have. I am grateful for this time. Life is a real mystery.

Last week before his flight back to Prince Edward Island, James and I spoke on the phone. It was a moment to say thank you and congratulations for a life well lived, but for me, almost too painful to bear.

So this Advent, I invite you to join me in praying for James as he enters the last days of his life journey and to walk with him in hope toward hope, giving birth to the Christ and welcoming Christ's reign of peace here on earth for everyone, including the polar bears. You can follow James' journey on his blog and send him good wishes and Christmas blessings there. We certainly need more priests and leaders like James, but James would say we all need to rise to the occasion and do what we can to protect creation.

Thank you, God of peace, for the gift of life, hope and peace. Thank you for James, for his journey, for the groaning of creation, for the hope of a new spirit of nonviolence among us. May we all walk the Advent journey in hope like James, live life to the full, welcome Christ and do our part to make visible Christ's reign of peace on earth. Amen.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is available at paceebene.org and Amazon.com. To join his work with Campaign Nonviolence, contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. Next year, John will undertake a four-month-long national speaking tour about *The Nonviolent Life* and Campaign Nonviolence. *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and John's other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John's website.]

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