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The politics of universal love

John Dear | Jan. 20, 2009 On the Road to Peace

While hiking the other day in the high desert of northern New Mexico, I met my neighbor, a Native American elder who gives workshops around the country on Native-American spirituality. When I asked him for his thoughts on President-elect Obama, he said that Obama had already given us a great gift. ?He has liberated white Americans from their role as oppressors. Not all have understood this or accepted it,? he said, ?but it is a great gift.?

Maybe, I replied, but we still have our work cut out for us.

We still need to demand justice, disarmament and peace, not just for ourselves but for the whole human race. We need to build a stronger, public movement that will give Obama the backing and support to make the right change. My neighbor agreed.

We need to relentlessly pursue a world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming, each of us doing our part to make such a world come true. This, too, was the spectacular vision of nonviolence upheld by Martin Luther King, Jr.

An episode from 1967 illustrates his vision, so often misunderstood. His childhood friend, Howard Baugh, at the time Atlanta?s top-ranking African-American policeman and a former marine, heard Dr. King address a convention of broadcasters in Atlanta on a Friday night early that August. He was shocked at King?s stand for peace and universal love. That Saturday afternoon, he stopped by Ebenezer church where he found King alone in his office preparing to be on ?Meet the Press? the next day.

Howard Baugh told King that he was appalled at King?s opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam. How could he betray his country like that? Why get mixed up in politics? What did that have to do with being a Christian anyway?

King invited Baugh to sit down, and then launched into an explanation, according to David Garrow?s biography, *Bearing the Cross*. ?You?ve never really given this organization full credit for what it really stands for,? King said. ?It?s a nonviolent organization, and when I say ?nonviolent? I mean ?nonviolent? all the way. Never could I advocate nonviolence in this country and not advocate nonviolence for the whole world. That?s my philosophy. I don?t believe in death and killing on any side, no matter who?s heading it up -- whether it be America or any other country, or whether it be for white folks or black folks. Nonviolence is my stand, and I?ll die for that stand.?

?For the first time in my life,? Baugh later said, ?I understood what was meant by nonviolence.?

Nonviolence is my stand, and I?ll die for that stand. That to me sounds like a modern translation of an ancient

Gospel announcement: ?The reign of God is at hand.? ?Love your enemies.? ?Blessed are the peacemakers.? ?Put down your sword.? ?Take up your cross and lay down your life for others.? Few people speak or think that way. Nonetheless, I submit that King shows us a new kind of Christianity, a new kind of spirituality, a new kind of politics that takes account of every human being on the planet, that goes beyond national boundaries to embrace all people, all creatures and all creation.

?An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity,? King wrote. That?s the kind of politics advocated by the Gospel?politics that take into account every human being, all creatures and all of creation. In today?s world of violence and war, it?s still a difficult stand to take, but one well worth giving our lives for.

Recently, Deepak Chopra, an Indian-American physician who writes on mind-body medicine, launched a campaign to get 100 million people to profess a vow of nonviolence, to pursue that lifelong stand of nonviolence like Jesus and Dr. King. His project (at www.itakeavow.com) espouses nonviolence as a way of life, with an all-encompassing vision for a new world of nonviolence. I?m grateful for his campaign to promote personal and creative nonviolence, and I hope many will join it.

?The vow of nonviolence is a vow of peace,? he writes.

> It amounts to the same thing. Whatever language one chooses there are bound to be certain pitfalls associated with it. As we know, people have tried to justify war and violence in the name of peace as well. I see the vow of nonviolence in terms of the Sanskrit word ?ahimsa,? which is an active interaction with others and nature on the basis of the spiritual unity which connects us all. So nonviolence is not passive, but active in a nurturing way. Ahimsa describes behavior that respects and supports all who are involved. It assumes a universality the way that the greeting namaste recognizes that divinity in others is the same as the divinity within us. When we see, feel and know that consciousness that we are all a part of, then becoming a peacemaker comes naturally, and compassion joyfulness, and friendliness towards others is just an expression of which we are.

We need millions to take this stand of committed, visionary nonviolence if the world is to turn from war to peace, from poverty and starvation to justice and equality, from nuclear weapons and global warming to global disarmament and global peace.

There is, of course, a change on the air. I?m grateful that the Bush-Cheney administration and their politics of war and empire have come to an end. But I know that the American system, with its nuclear weapons and seven hundred military bases around the world, is bigger than any one person.

Barack Obama has spoken of closing Guantanamo, rebuilding the economy, cleaning up the environment and providing healthcare to the millions. But many of his appointments, his support for Israel?s warmaking, and his talk of increased U.S. warfare in Afghanistan, sound to me like politics as usual. The politics of war and empire.

Israel still occupies Gaza and Palestine. Los Alamos still churns out nuclear weapons. Billions still lack adequate food, housing, medicine, education and jobs. Global warming continues. Sisters and brothers are dying in Sudan, Uganda, Haiti, Colombia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Blind violence lies in the nature of things.

Our predicament is symbolized by news out of Oakland, Calif. On New Year?s Eve, a police officer killed Oscar Grant III, an unarmed, 22 year old African American man at an Oakland subway stop. Apparently, there was some kind of fight on the train, the police were called, everyone was ordered off the train, the police started making arrests, and in the process, grabbed Grant, threw him against the wall and then to the ground, and then knelt down on his neck. Grant was probably not even involved in the fight.

As crowds watched, he begged the police not to hurt him, saying he had a four year old daughter. One of the officers then stood over him and shot him in the back. He died, in handcuffs, shortly afterwards. This should never happen anywhere. We need to create a new culture of nonviolence, where nonviolence is practiced at every level of society.

Reflecting on Dr. King?s vision presents us with vertiginous questions: Is it possible to create a culture of nonviolence? Can we have a nonviolent government? A nonviolent police force? A nonviolent, non-military peace force? Nonviolent religions? Nonviolent churches, synagogues and mosques? A nonviolent media? Nonviolent schools? Nonviolent cities? Nonviolent politics?

With Dr. King I say: that?s the only vision, the only future, worth striving for, the only stand worth taking during the course of one?s life.

?Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows,? King said. ?One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars??

This week, notwithstanding the hoopla of the inauguration, I hope for politics out of the ordinary -- politics of nonviolent love as espoused by Jesus and his apostle Martin Luther King, Jr. I look to them, not any administration, for hope and guidance. And I commit myself to doing my part in helping the world turn a corner toward a nonviolent world.

This ultimately is the dream, the vision, the stand of Jesus who spoke of the coming of God?s reign here and now. And so, as we watch the times? events unfold, I urge each of us to do what we can to practice the politics of universal, nonviolent love.

John Dear has two new books, *A Persistent Peace* (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence and peacemakers such as Cesar Chavez, Joan Baez, Dr. King, Sophie Scholl, Thomas Merton, and Franziska and Franz Jagerstatter. Both books are available from www.amazon.com On April 24-26, he will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center in Stroudsburg, PA; see: www.kirkridge.org. For info, see: www.johndear.org

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