



Desert Voices

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An Act of Freedom

Reflections from the August Desert Witness

by

Jarrett Lovell

On August 6, 2005 I was privileged to join roughly 400 peace activists from across the country who converged at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site for a vigil to commemorate the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to call for a halt to continued nuclear testing. The action at the test site capped a four-day conference where young and old worked together to discuss the transformative power of love and nonviolence. On the day of the action, several hundred activists filled an auditorium for a mass workshop on nonviolent protest. We sat in a huge circle while two facilitators fielded concerns, fears, hopes and visions for the entire group. Everybody listened, and all views were welcome. A six-year old addressed the group, followed by a 60 year old. All language was peaceful and positive, and no disrespect was shown.

Later that night, the group of several hundred filled chartered buses and made the trek approximately 60 miles away to the Nevada Test Site, where songs were sung, performances were staged, speakers spoke - all directly addressing the issue at hand. This was a day to commemorate and mourn Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to grandstand or lobby for other causes.



Speaker Janet Chisholm passes through the Sacred Hoop at the opening ceremonies. Passing through the hoop symbolized making a new beginning in our visioning a nuclear-free world. The hoop was used again at the Test Site and for the closing ceremony. Board members Louie Vitale and Gwen Watson assisted at the passageway. Photo by Dan Webster.

At approximately 10pm, all participants walked quietly down the dark road illuminated with candles and made a procession toward the gate at the site. It was, in both a real and symbolic sense, a pathway guided by light, a light that promised an alternative to violence. At the gate about 180 activists decided to take the last step and 'cross the line' onto the test site in an act of civil disobedience. I am proud to have been one of them, joined by three other members of the Orange County Peace Coalition, while a fourth stayed behind and served as our muse, monitored the legalities, and held onto our personal possessions.

We were immediately overcome with emotion upon crossing the line. Many of us shed tears; I was shivering despite the 90 degree temperature of the desert. It is a feeling that can only be described as freedom. All of us reading this have, for years, been controlled by negative forces trying to counter our opposition to violence. All of us have had limits imposed upon our opposition. Crossing the line was an act of freedom. Until now, I never understood what Erich Fromm meant when he said that true freedom only comes through spontaneity. It was the most liberating thing one could do, and it was done with love and the spirit of non-violence. For the first time, we were acting out of love, not out of fear.

One of the most notable aspects of the event was the presence of females in the action. Indeed, women outnumbered men 3 to 1, which is fitting, for I am convinced that women are those most capable of converting society from one predicated upon violence to one of nurturing and compassion.

After being held for only an hour, we were released with a citation. Bail listed on the citation was \$330, but they released us on our own recognizance. We could go to court, but in all likelihood, the papers will never be filed. (I was told as much by the arresting officer).

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Episcopalians remember nuclear victims

by
Dan Webster

The sweet smell of burning sage began and ended a four-day interfaith event to remember the victims of nuclear bombing and nuclear testing.

The University of Nevada-Las Vegas was the site of a conference, "Many Stories, One Vision for a Nuclear Free World." The Episcopal Peace Fellowship was one of 27 religious and non-profit groups co-sponsoring and endorsing the conference, put on by Pax Christi USA and the Nevada Desert Experience, on August 4-7.

Janet Chisholm from Nyack, New York, chair of EPF's national executive council, was the first speaker. "You might say I fell in love with the bomb," said Chisholm, who grew up in Las Vegas. She recounted school days memories of what local residents were told by the federal government about the safety and necessity of nuclear weapons. There have been 928 announced nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, 100 of them detonated above ground. Many above ground tests were advertised in the Las Vegas newspapers and citizens were invited to bring sunglasses and come and watch. "It was amazing. It was entertaining. It was exciting," she told nearly 400 participants from across the U.S. She was so convinced she went to college planning to design missiles and rockets.

"But darn it, they made me take a religion course and then I became a religion major," said Chisholm. That began a life of activism for her, though telling her story required Chisholm's breaking silence over hometown nuclear testing. She said she believed her childhood

Presbyterian pastor, who said the desert land around the then-small Las Vegas community was like the Holy Land. "I really believed this desert was holy land," she said, declaring, "all land is holy. All people are holy."

Dr. Tony de Brum, another event speaker, grew up in the Marshall Islands and served its government. His story began as a child, fishing before dawn with his grandfather, when a bright flash broke the early morning stillness of the island shore. The colors were so eerie, he said. "It was like sunrise and sunset decided to happen at the same time," de Brum told a rapt audience. "I can still hear the men saying, 'Run! Run!'"

He recounted what he called "numerous broken promises and deceitful actions" against his people, who bore the brunt of the effects of 12 years of U.S. nuclear

testing in the South Pacific. "Some ask us why don't we just move. We tell them, for us, this land does not belong to us. We belong to the land," said de Brum.

Several workshops and teach-ins were woven between the main speakers. The Fellowship of Reconciliation and Peace e Bene offered introductions to their trainings for nonviolence. The Bay Area NVC offered a workshop on nonviolent communications. Erin Barlow, 13, one of the younger attendees, had been given a scholarship from EPF to attend the event after writing an essay. Barlow went to the nonviolent communication workshop. "I was made more sensitive. I definitely will think differently about conservatives," said the middle school student. "I will try to understand what they're thinking and get past the idea of personal gain." Barlow's interest in the nuclear issue arose from a reading assignment in school. It also may have come from a family connection. Her grandfather was once a site manager at the Nevada Test Site, 60 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Barlow also attended the Saturday evening action at the Test Site with Chisholm, where Martin Sheen was one of the speakers. The actor, who plays President Jed Bartlet on NBC-TV's "The West Wing," said his character would grant a "presidential pardon" to all those arrested "crossing the line" onto the test site. Sheen, a longtime anti-war and anti-nuclear activist, recited a poem from Rabindranath Tagore that concludes, "Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

The closing ceremony, "Beyond Words: An Interfaith Ritual for Peace" was performed by the Omega West Dance Company from Berkeley, California. Some of the music used in the performance was from St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, California, with ceremony and dance involving religious leaders from different faiths and music and gestures from Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions.

This article was reprinted from the Episcopal News Service ©2005 and was edited for length. It was written by The Rev. Dan Webster. Dan is the communications director for the Episcopal Diocese of Utah. His wife, Elizabeth Murphy was one of the Omega West Dancers that performed the closing ceremony for the event.

I share this experience with you to communicate the lessons learned. They are numerous, and they suggest many ways we can refocus our efforts.

1. We need to incorporate the spirit and philosophy of non-violence into our strategizing and organizing. We need to emphasize what we are for, not what we are against. Being “anti” anything communicates a message of hate, not a message of love.

2. We need to incorporate a singular message into our method. The message ought to be clear, forward thinking, and contain visions of hope.

3. We need to forget that such things as political parties exist. During the four-day conference, there was not one single mention of Bush, Kerry, Nader, or even Truman. Parties are artificial social groups that merely divide us and distract us in endless debate. Our message must show solidarity amongst our numbers. Think about the signs we carry. Do they target individuals, or policies? Are they hopeful, or hateful? Do they divide, or do they inspire? Anybody can find room for disagreement in partisan politics. But how can one disagree with messages of love?

4. We need to be positive in our thinking. We have not been defeated. Each day we feel depressed because we haven't been effective, someone in the world is thankful that we are taking a stand.

5. We need to accept risk and discomfort. An 80+ year old blind man was among those arrested for civil disobedience. He was arrested with a young man who had to walk him across the line, then into the holding pen. The holding pen contained nothing but rocks as a floor, and a port-a-potty. The temperature was over 90 degrees, and bugs were literally in our hair and on our bodies. This elderly man was not concerned with his own risk or discomfort. How could he be when it fails to compare to the risk and discomfort caused by our own tax dollars?

It is true that this was a purely “symbolic” act of civil disobedience which isn't going to bring the system to a halt, but we are living in symbolic times. Ours is the era of the image, where billboards and advertisements use symbols to communicate messages that stick with us for a lifetime. This was a symbolic action, but the image, emotion and message has transformed me forever.

Jarret Lovell is assistant professor of criminal justice at California State University, Fullerton where he teaches a course on civil disobedience and social progress. Additionally, Professor Lovell is a founding member of the Orange County Peace Coalition (www.ocpeace.org) and the host of “Justice, or Just Us?” - a weekly radio program discussing social activism and progressive politics.

Taking Heart in Tough Times

a retreat with Joanna Macy

Joanna Macy will conduct a retreat to benefit NDE in May 2006. According to the publicity for the weekend:

“This weekend workshop sets our personal spiritual journeys within the context of our global crisis. It brings into focus the silent revolution now occurring: the shift to a life-sustaining society. This noble and necessary adventure, which we call the Great Turning, invites our full engagement and rewards us with new depths of courage, creativity, and community. Our time together will include talks, interactive exercises, and meditative practices. Come prepared to work hard and fall in love again with life. Full time attendance required.”

The retreat will be held May 5-7, 2006, beginning with registration from 4.30 to 6.30 on Friday evening. It will conclude with lunch on Sunday. The retreat will be held at the San Damiano Retreat Center in Danville CA. For further information Call Lorraine for more information at San Damiano Retreat Center, 925-837-9141, Ext. 306. You can also visit www.sandamiano.org for more info or on-line registration. Costs are on a sliding scale from \$225-\$195 for a private room and from \$195-\$165 for a double room.

Joanna Macy is a scholar of Buddhism, deep ecology, and systems theory, and is known worldwide for her workshops for activists. Her books include *Coming Back to Life*, *World as Lover*, *World as Self*, *Widening Circles*, and translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry. For more information about Joanna and her work, visit her website at www.joannamacy.net.



Martin Sheen visits with the crowd before the event on Saturday night. He said that his character, President Jed Bartlett, would issue a presidential pardon for those who crossed the line (see page 3). Photo by Dan Webster.

