

***Compassion and Nonviolence
from New York to Afghanistan:
Reflections after September 11th***

by John Dear

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Like thousands of other New Yorkers, I started volunteering immediately after the World Trade Center disaster. Within a few days, the Red Cross asked me to help coordinate the chaplain program at the Family Assistance Center, the site run by the government and the Red Cross for families.

I've been working there ever since. These past few weeks, I have met some 1,500 grieving family members, police officers and firefighters.

All we can do is stand with them in their grief, share their pain, listen, hold them, pray with them, encourage and bless them.

I remember the Long Island Catholic man who came to turn in DNA evidence only to discover his missing brother-in-law's name on the short list of recovered bodies; the retired New Jersey couple looking for their son, sitting with them as they swabbed their mouths for DNA; the young man who flew alone from Italy looking for his missing mother, crying and shaking; a young man looking for his missing father; holding several mothers weeping for their lost sons.

I recall the young wife desperate to find her husband, asking me through her tears and anger, about God; the many firefighters who stopped me and asked for a blessing; the young woman looking for her husband, wanting to pray and become a Christian; the businessman who lost over fifty colleagues on one of the top floors; and the many low-income security guards, window washers and restaurant workers who narrowly escaped with their lives, who now mourn the loss of their friends and seek financial assistance.

There are so many people that I no longer remember them all, but I lift them up in prayer.

After a week, I stood at Ground Zero amidst the twisted steel and debris, and spoke and prayed with hundreds of workers. Then, I began escorting fifty family members at a time by ferry to Ground Zero, only to hold them as they wept before the horrific devastation. I felt like John standing with Mary and the women on Calvary, at the foot of the cross.

The grief has been overwhelming. But though September 11th remains horrific and still impossible to take in, unfortunately, it is understandable. We mourn nearly 5,400 people who died at the Trade towers in New York City, but in Iraq, they mourn over one million children and women dead from the US sanctions imposed since 1990. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, parents mourn the hundreds of young people shot by Israeli soldiers. Tens of thousands die daily from starvation around the world, a result of Western economic and military hegemony.

As we begin to realize the massive grief around the world, we begin to understand why after years of bombs, sanctions and killings, powerless people are enraged with anger, and why several pursued the insanity of suicidal terrorism.

These days, I find myself walking from grieving families to Ground Zero to peace vigils, comforting the sorrowful, and speaking out against retaliation and war.

The U.S. bombing of Afghanistan began as 10,000 of us marched through Times Square with the message that inflicting further grief on the Muslim, Arabic world would only insure further terrorist attacks upon us. At another rally, I told how one crying mother, who lost her thirty year old son on the 105th floor of the First Tower, said that the deaths of innocent

Afghanistan women and children would not bring her son back or make her feel safe, only increase her sorrow.

As we live through these sorrowful times, our task is to proclaim the simple Gospel truth that war is not the answer, that war doesn't work, that war is not the will of God, that war is never justified, and that war is never blessed by God.

We need to pray for peace, forgive and ask for forgiveness, pursue social justice and teach the lessons of peace: that there is no security in war, nuclear weapons, bombing raids, missile shields or greed, only in nonviolence, love, justice, compassion and the God of peace.

As war fever spreads, we can quietly quote Gandhi's insight: "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind." Violence in response to violence only leads to further violence. State-sanctioned terrorism will not stop terrorism, but only lead to further terrorism. Missile shields will not protect us from hijacked airplanes. Peaceful means are the only way to a peaceful future and to the God of peace. These are hard lessons, but they are the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus lived, taught and practiced the third way of active nonviolence. If we dare be his friends and followers, we too must live, teach and practice loving nonviolence.

The Gospel is crystal clear: love your enemies, forgive those who hurt you, bless those who persecute you, seek justice for the poor, and be compassionate like God. In other words, practice active, creative nonviolence. It's the only way out. We are not allowed to kill.

Standing at Ground Zero, I think of Jesus as he approached Jerusalem, weeping, saying, "If only you had understood the way to peace!" When his disciples wanted to call down "fire from heaven" upon their enemies, he rebuked them. When they took out the sword to defend him, he cried out, "Put away the sword."

In his name, we call for an immediate end to the war, the bombing raids, the sanctions on Iraq, the oppression of the Palestinian people and the international debt. We insist that our government throw away the Star Wars proposal, dismantle every nuclear weapon and every weapon of mass destruction, undertake international treaties for nuclear disarmament, and redirect those billions of dollars toward the hard work for a lasting peace through international cooperation for nonviolent alternatives, interfaith dialogue, feeding every child on the planet, joining the world court and international law, protecting the earth and showing compassion toward every human being on the planet.

"The moral to be drawn from the tragedy of destruction is that it cannot be resolved by counter-bombs," Gandhi said after World War II, "even as violence cannot be ended by counter-violence. Humanity has to get out of violence only through nonviolence. Hatred can be overcome only by love. Violence can only be overcome by nonviolence."

We can find hope in these dark days by remaining faithful to the nonviolent Jesus. He is the light in our darkness. By staying close to him and his story, we can find the courage and the love to gather for prayer and scripture study in our communities, to hold candlelight peace vigils in our towns, to organize teach-ins on nonviolence, to befriend our Muslim sisters and brothers and to act publicly for an end to war, nuclear weapons and injustice.

The grieving families of New York City have taught me once again that life is precious, that violence breeds violence, and that our only hope is in the wisdom of God's nonviolence.

But they give me hope. If we can walk with the grieving and suffering at home and abroad; love one another and love our enemies; and offer the truth of disarmament and nonviolence, I believe we will sow seeds of peace that will help bring a harvest of peace.

All we have to do is turn back to the God of peace with all our hearts.