

DISARMING OUR HEARTS & THE WORLD

Confronting nuclear weapons requires a new way of being

Chelsea Collonge

On June 21, 1999, Dr. Steven Younger gave a talk that included information about the W-76 warhead, a thermonuclear weapon seven times as powerful as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima:

“The W-76 warhead is the backbone of America’s strategic nuclear deterrent. There are lots of these things out there. They are out there right now on submarines, submarines moving very quietly. We don’t know where they are. The bad guys don’t know where they are. Thirty minutes, however, and they can deliver this type of weapon to just about any target on earth.... Now they’re intended to prevent other countries, other states, other national entities from doing something that really isn’t in our national interest. You get people’s attention when you threaten the existence of their nation.”

Younger, a top nuclear weapons scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, was speaking to his colleagues, all University of California employees at the UC-managed lab. The United States currently has 1500 W-76 warheads on active duty, while the firepower of its total arsenal of 10,000 nuclear weapons is 400 times that of all explosive power used during WWII. Not even counting the nuclear arsenals of the seven other countries that possess nuclear weapons, the US has enough firepower to destroy the entire world.

How can we counter this specter of ultimate violence prowling through our waters? How can we counter the dehumanized attitudes of intelligent people who talk of making other countries “go away”? As Einstein said, “The splitting of the atom has changed everything, except our way of thinking.” By offering destruction on such an overwhelming scale, the nuclear bomb numbs our ability to comprehend it; this psychic numbing leads to nuclear entrapment, in which the very horror of the bomb removes our ability to struggle against it. But are we truly entrapped?

Gandhi answered this question in 1946 with a resounding no. “Do I still adhere to my faith in truth and nonviolence? Has not the atomic bomb exploded that faith? Not only has it not done so but it has clearly demonstrated to me that the twins (nonviolence and truth) constitute the mightiest force in the world. Before it the atom bomb is of no effect. The two opposing forces are wholly different in kind, the one moral and spiritual, the other physical and material. The one is infinitely superior to the other which by its very nature has an end. The force of the spirit is ever progressive and endless. Its full expression makes it unconquerable in the world.”¹ Adam Michnik, leader of the

Polish nonviolent movement that helped end the Cold War, made a similar point: they had “discovered the political equivalent of the Atom bomb”—for People Power had done what an A-bomb couldn’t do, namely to bring about freedom and justice for Poland.

Ultimate Violence

The violence of nuclear weapons goes beyond their destructive megatonnage; these weapons are also a window into our society’s most violent ideas and patterns. Nuclear weapons are the epitome of technocratic modernity, which Gandhi condemned in favor of decentralized economic forms that limit technology to serving basic human needs. They also represent our society’s powerful commitment to untruth, both in the undemocratic secrecy of national security and in the lie of militarism: that safety can come from the ultimate threat. C. Wright Mills noted that because proponents of nuclear security believe in a radical separation of means from ends, “the major cause of WWII will be our preparation for it.” Violence begets violence, a dynamic we see today when the threatening postures of the nuclear weapons states encourage other countries to seek nuclear weapons as a deterrent, bringing proliferation of weapons and escalating conflict to the international scene.

Nuclear weapons are also the epitome of idolatry; as Jonathan Granoff writes, “The most offensive expression of the violence that grows from the heart bereft of peace is the threat to use nuclear weapons and ultimately destroy all life on the planet earth in order to exalt a human creation, a nation state.” Throughout the Nuclear Age, the U.S. government has sacrificed the health and safety of its own citizens—the Navajo uranium miners, families living downwind of the Nevada Test Site, and the “atomic veterans,” servicemen exposed to nuclear tests—suppressing human security in the name of national security. During the Cold War the US engaged in the height of dehumanizing enmity with the Soviet Union. By refusing to see ourselves in our opponent, Americans neglected to see our own goodness and own evil reflected in the Soviet Union; so we aligned ourselves with our own enemy in an arms race that held the whole world hostage.

Living under the threat of nuclear annihilation for 60 years has also had a violent effect on our psyches, as the process of psychic numbing desensitizes us to reality. Gandhi wrote in 1946, “The atom bomb brought an empty victory to the allied arms but it resulted for the time being in destroying the soul of Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see.... A slave holder cannot hold a slave without putting himself or

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his deputy in the cage holding the slave.... The moral to be legitimately drawn from the supreme tragedy of the bomb is that it will not be destroyed by counter-bombs even as violence cannot be by counter-violence.”²

Disarmament and Nonviolence

The combination of physical and psychic violence embodied in nuclear weapons makes it critical for the nuclear abolition movement to use nonviolence not only as a tactic of resistance, but also to show another way of being in the world.

The nuclear disarmament movement of the past 60 years has a strong record of using nonviolent resistance. In 1955, a handful of people joined Dorothy Day in open flouting of mandatory national “civil defense” drills, meant to prepare the populace for nuclear war. In 1961, 2,000 people demonstrated and brought an end to compulsory participation. Numerous Ploughshares activists have hammered and poured blood on missile silos and warheads. In the early 1980s, several thousand people participated in direct actions to shut down Livermore Lab. These acts have been critical—for when destruction has been civilized, civil disobedience is more important than ever.

The disarmament movement has also included constructive programs, such as the creation of Nuclear Weapons Free cities and Nuclear Weapons Free Zones throughout the world (almost the entire Southern hemisphere is a NWFZ, with countries prohibiting nuclear weapons passing through their waters). It has also reached out to people once considered enemies, building what Johan Galtung would call the Great Chain of Nonviolence, in which people influence those who are in a position to influence the opponent. Examples are former Cold War planner George Kennan, former Strategic

Command head General Lee Butler, and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara—people who can act as a bridge because they are involved in both the national security community and the nuclear abolition movement.

Conscientious objection has played a huge part in the disarmament movement, which has relied on numerous whistleblowers in the nuclear industry risking their jobs



Nevada Desert Experience participants make a pilgrimage from Las Vegas to the Nevada Test Site during Easter Week of 2004. (Josh Kearns)

and freedom, such as Mordechai Vanunu, who revealed Israel’s secret nuclear arsenal to the world and spent more than 18 years in prison. Many university students working for nuclear abolition engage in counter-recruitment of science and engineering students who are thinking of working for the nuclear weapons labs, collecting signatures for a Scientists’ and Engineers’ Pledge to Renounce Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The Peace Boat

This summer I had two beautiful opportunities to experience anti-nuclear peacemaking. The first time was in the desert outside the Nevada Test Site on August 6th, the 60th anniversary of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Hundreds of people gathered alongside the Western Shoshone people, on whose sacred land the test site lies, to reclaim the desert as holy ground and trespass into the Test Site in protest.

My other beautiful experience this summer was on the Peace Boat, a Japanese cruise ship that organizes global voyages for peace education. I was one of seven Anti-Nuclear Youth Ambassadors from seven nuclear weapons states on the Peace Boat’s 50th anniversary voyage in Northeast Asia. The voyage came right on the 60th anniversary

of the end of WWII and was a joint effort by Korean and Japanese people to examine the legacies of that war and do truth and reconciliation work.

The voyage also came in the context of the North Korean nuclear crisis and the 60th year of the hibakusha, the atomic survivors, which is why we antinuclear youth were invited. It was so moving to be involved in the kind of citizen diplomacy we saw a lot during the Cold War, aimed at building trust and cooperation among nations by building trust and cooperation among people. We also worked together to create a 2, 5, and 10 year plan for disarming our countries and creating a new system of collective security, in which trust and cooperation combine with international law to create a world in which countries recognize that none are safe until all are safe.

Despite the power of the nuclear establishment and the entrenched ideologies of those working within it, it is important not to give up hope that people can and will exercise transformative agency. To keep this hope and to reach out effectively, it is essential to recognize the basic human needs that nuclear weapons work fulfills for the scientists, and to recognize that they are trying to serve their country.

This belief is very much linked to the emphasis on Person Power within nonviolence. Granoff writes, “I believe that the mystery that placed the power of destruction in the binding forces of the atom has placed the healing power of love in our hearts and further gifted us with the courage and wisdom to use that power effectively.” In the words of Henry Wieman, we must “split the atom of human egoism.” This is why it is so important for disarmament activists to embody nonviolence as a living alternative to militarism. Instead of nationalism, we need a “species mentality”; instead of nuclear competition, a recognition of interdependence; instead of arrogance, humility and a recognition of human fallibility. In other words, we must work on disarming our own hearts as we work to disarm the world.

Nevada Desert Experience

One organization that brings this element of principled nonviolence to the anti-nuclear movement is Nevada Desert Experience (NDE). Since 1981 NDE has organized people to go to the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, site of almost 1,000 nuclear bomb explosions, to learn about nuclear weapons testing and engage in faith-based resistance using active nonviolence. The message they send is less about facts and opinions than it is expressing something deeply personal and trying to embody a nonviolent way of being as they work for a less violent world. NDE has cultivated respectful relationships with the sheriffs at the Test Site (who are in charge of making arrests) as well as with test site workers and nuclear weapons scientists.

NDE combats Untruth through witnessing – bringing out into the open what the government would prefer to remain hidden—the cancers caused to downwinders by the testing, the environmental damage, the security failures. Through their presence and their concern, NDE participants dissolve the great Untruth that nuclear weapons are nothing to worry about; by focusing on the survivors they break through the psychic numbing brought about by alienating numbers and overwhelming threat.

By inviting people into an antinuclearist spirituality, NDE helps to create a new culture that enables creative imaging of a nuclear-free world and resistance to the current nuclear system. It helps to create a new faith, a faith in the



The peace walkers talk to the sheriff's officers while preparing to “cross the line” into the Test Site, replacing the secrecy of nuclear weapons testing with intimate witness. (Josh Kearns)

preciousness of the earth and the possibility of change, which at the same time leads people to new social practices with each other. These social practices, in turn, show the possibility for new social relations in the form of collective security, therefore replacing faith in nuclear weapons, as well as technocracy in general.

In their pamphlet *Notes on Nonviolence*, NDE defines the desert as a place for intimate contact, and for inner work. “We stand on the same ground, physically and morally, as do our friends in the immediate circle and the circle it represents, the world. We share the circle with friends and opponents alike. We cannot separate ourselves from those with whom we disagree. The violence to which we object is found within us.”

The desert is a place of growth: “We will try to practice that which we advocate: truth, gentleness, love of God, love of one another, love of the earth.” But it is also a place of suffering. As Dom Helder Camara, Brazilian priest and champion of the poor, said: “We must have no illusions. We must not be naive. If we listen to the voice of God, we make our choice, get out of ourselves and fight nonviolently for a better world. We must not expect to find it easy; we shall not walk on roses, people will not throng to hear us and applaud, and we shall not always be aware of divine protection. If we are to be pilgrims for justice and peace, we must expect the desert.”

Implications for the Movement

As in the Cold War, today we continue to face “a choice between nonviolence and nonexistence,” as Martin Luther King Jr. put it. But since the fall of the Soviet Union, the

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nuclear threat has fallen out of people's consciences, and we no longer see the kind of mass civil disobedience that were common during the 80s, when people feared for their lives. The nuclear abolition movement today will only grow and be sustainable if it is motivated not by fear but by love for the world, and by the desire to embody something better. As King said, "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear annihilation.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

Spend your winter break on holy ground at the Nevada Test Site during NDE's immersion trip January 8-13, 2006. To join this experiment in nonviolence, please contact nde_august@peacenet.org.

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violence in Peace and War* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1949), Vol II, p. 94.

² M.K. Gandhi, "Atom Bomb and Ahimsa." *The Harijan*. July 7 1946.