

Desert Voices

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Love In The Face Of Violence Reflections from August Desert Witness 2004

by

Patrick Finn

Throughout the week leading up to the NDE August Desert Witness, I spent all my time between my home and the hospital. My Grandmother, who is rapidly withdrawing into dementia, had unexpectedly and almost entirely lost her eyesight. I watched her struggle in confusion, fear and aggravation, trying to grasp all that was happening. I spent the week with my parents, watching my mom crumble as she was already stretched to breaking from taking care of my Grandmother. I watched my father break down and cry the sob of an empty man when we brought my Grandmother home, as he was forced to bear witness to the utter disorientation of his mother. I was concerned about everyone and tried to understand the ways in which I could help. I didn't feel a thing.

In Nevada, I listened intently to the wisdom of Richard Rohr and the living testimonies of many others. Fr. Richard described Christ on the Cross, absorbing all violence and unjust human suffering into Himself, thus transforming injustice and suffering through compassion and forgiveness. Richard spoke of the mysterious challenge of a Christian - called to live a life, which does not deny grief nor impotency nor power, a life that refuses to be defined by the violence that confronts us and poses unjust questions. During the weekend, I also shared meals with my elders who spoke of how the violence of nuclear war had affected their lives and how they chose to respond. I sat in the presence of powerful lives, dedicated to peace, the dignity of all creation, and to our one loving Creator. I experienced all this with excitement, but I remained sadly disconnected and frustrated with how little I cared about the brilliance, the struggle, and the injustice around me. I called my folks to make sure they were all right, and to see if there was anything I could do.

At the end of our weekend we gathered at the gates of the test site to celebrate mass in the desert. We seemed so small before the mountains that rose before our feet. These mountains hide a secret violence more terrible than the human mind can comprehend. While sharing the Eucharistic meal, I felt vulnerable - the first genuine feeling I had experienced on the retreat. I felt naked and violated by unseen nuclear particles screaming through my body from their source in the secret of the mountain. I felt helpless and empty against the brokenness of humanity that creates such violence. I needed to hide and protect myself from the relentless, merciless onslaught against my person. There was nowhere to hide in the desert.

As a group of over 100 people, we followed in NDE tradition of ending liturgy at the test site border. There, we danced in solemn celebration as many of us joyfully broke the law and continued dancing into a government confinement unit. Through the fences we were confronted again with the mountains, now without ceremony or celebration. The magnitude of the silent presence of cruelty invaded me again, leaving me feeling vulnerable and helpless. However, now my mind was flooded only with the image of my father empty and sobbing before his mother, feeling powerless. He was helpless before the deterioration of what he loves, as I am now helpless before my father, unable to stop the mysterious suffering of life. I stood helpless before the reality of nuclear destruction. I cried the sob of an empty man.

Here, I experienced the embrace of a reality that was not consolation, but hope. The faces I returned to after being released expressed neither helplessness nor safety, but true grief and compassion.

See ADW - continued on page 4

Reflections from NDE's first Immersion Experience

by Karin Holsinger

Our leaders from the NDE Immersion program promised a wonderful educational experience. Long interested in learning more about the American nuclear situation, I went eager to meet the outspoken few who regularly resist the creation and testing of nuclear weapons in Nevada; Corbin Harney of the Shoshone Nation, Peter Ediger of Pace e Bene, the dedicated volunteers at the Catholic Worker House in Las Vegas. I was hoping to find through these encounters and seminars, the intellectual and emotional momentum to join in the political resistance to nuclear weapons in the United States. But deserts are fierce and unaccommodating places. Nevada allowed me no mere education: it forced me to meet myself and to meet God.

As hoped, in the first few days of the trip, the others in the group and I were inspired and angered by what we were hearing. The discussions and prayer services helped us to digest our experiences and expand our awareness of the pain inflicted on the desert and its people. We eagerly anticipated what a number of us considered to be the climax of the immersion experience: the government-sponsored (DOE) tour of the test site itself, a stark first-hand look at the effects of nuclear testing on the Nevada landscape. The night before, we gathered in prayer and shared our fears and anxieties over the next morning's tour. I told the group that I was afraid of losing myself in anger at the manufacturing of these weapons, being swallowed by rage at its ugly inhumanity.

I was afraid this anger might become hate. I could foresee projecting it all onto the tour guide and other tourists, bloated by my own sense of self-righteousness. I knew anger at the situation was proper, healthy, perhaps even holy, but that my anger so easily corrodes into hatred.

The following morning as we climbed aboard the bus, I took my place in the back, alone, and sank down low in the seat. I tried to center for a few minutes. In repetition, I prayed for God to be present to me, to all of us, so that we could bring Her into the barbed-wired, lethally guarded expanse of desert. I wanted it to be a somber litany—to somehow let the gravity of these murderous machines descend on the Disneyworldish excitement that filled the bus. But the Nevada Test Site cannot be met with solemnity. God is already there in

the slowly healing land and the sincere faces of the military and civilian personnel. As I learned in quiet prayer in that back seat, I needed to meet this place with understanding and forgiveness.

The process of understanding began very quickly as several members of my group and I found ourselves awestruck alongside the other tourists on the bus. The mangled steel beams of a railroad trestle, the caved-in bomb shelters, the giant pockmarks in the earth were great signs of human aptitude and power. No wonder the walls at the badge office were lined with framed photos of fireballs and mushroom clouds, recalling the days when atmospheric testing was still legal. No wonder these men and women, looking daily at such images, lamented the test-ban treaties that limit the progress of our power and creativity. No wonder our guide bragged about the millions of dollars spent for every test—the scale of our power, after all, can also be measured by what we spend. I felt the excitement as much as every person on the bus and every worker at the site.

But hunkered down in prayer, I also knew that this creativity and power had shut out two of the most important considerations: humanity and God. There was no place in our awe for the recognition of decimated flesh and spirit. There were no torn bodies in the concave bomb shelters, no framed pictures of malignant tumors, no anguished weeping over lost children and husbands. There was also no place in our awe for the God whose great love reveals our own frailty, ignorance, and stubborn hubris. The creativity and power that we found so remarkable became suddenly and ridiculously disdainful when stunted by the true Creativity and Power that is divine wisdom.

In that spirit of contemplation, I came to God with my own guilt and sorrow as one of the billions that are easily mesmerized by our own hubris. And in solidarity with each of them, I felt the joy of forgiveness from the Christ who also knew intimately humanity's Promethean temptations and joined me lovingly in the back of the bus. I could not hate anyone on that tour. I could not even be angry. I could only know with them our human failing and forgive them and myself with all of my being.

See Immersion - continued on page 3

Yet the power of the immersion experience did not end there, for it was this contemplative realization that set the stage for our evening event—an ‘alternative’ tour of Las Vegas. Prior to leaving, we watched a video on the ecological impact of this fastest-growing city situated in the middle of a desert. Perhaps most impressive was the footage of the gutting and exploding (bombing) of hardly-worn hotels, simply because they needed to be newer, more dazzling, different. This footage ran through my mind as we drove down the Strip, faces pressed against the windows. From the back of the van I watched our group, wide-eyed and giddy at the lights and titillation of the Las Vegas night. Suddenly I was back on the test site tour bus, feeling the hubris of the world again. This time, though, I felt it as it tore at the fragile desert in the name of growth, and devoured its water in the innocuous name of “the good life.” Spinning under the orange sky and flashing lights, I joined with Christ in one beautiful, reverberating, silent cry for the world whose hubris will not recognize the blatant horror of nuclear weapons and cannot recognize the subtle horror of unrelenting extravagance. In a vital circle of sorrow and forgiveness, I was immersed in both the pain of humanity and the love of God, and I wept.

Karin Holsinger is a graduate student, earning her MA in Theology at the Franciscan School of Theology. Karin first visited the desert in Lent 2004 for the first NDE Immersion Program and soon returned to witness at the August Desert Witness.



Karin (on right) and others from the immersion experience prepare for a vigil at the entrance to the test site. Photo by Greg Tarczynski

NDE introduces its new Program and Development Director

Zachary Moon was born in Oakland California and raised in Berkeley. His undergraduate studies were completed this spring at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie New York. While working toward his major of study in History, he spent five months in Durban South Africa studying the reconciliation process in the post-apartheid era.

Zachary was brought up the Berkeley Quaker community, attending Meeting with both his parents. His commitment to the broader network of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has deepened in the last few years as he has involved himself in service at national, regional, and local levels of committee work. In the last year he has become a member of Strawberry Creek Meeting in Berkeley.

Activism and witness have been a part of Zachary’s life since his earliest memories, watching his parents being arrested for civil disobedience at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. During his high school years he was involved with other coming-of-age activists including four years of work with a program sponsored by the San Francisco branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). As a part of this work he helped to organize six student conferences on civil rights, as well as specifically investigating issues of juvenile justice, tribal sovereignty, and youth homelessness. His activist identity has been greatly enriched by the radical vision and empowering engagement of his extended family, some of them, long time participants of the Nevada Desert Experience. His identity as a person of faith, supported by the generosity of a wealth of elders in his journey, has brought him into this staff position with NDE.

He looks forward to engaging the bountiful work ahead in this coming year for NDE. This fall he will be a part of new efforts in outreach and development. These efforts will include working with Amy to bring more young people to the Test Site, organizing a host of programs during the weeks of Lent and organizing functions to build toward a visible and powerful 60th anniversary witness of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In January, Zachary will continue this work while making the move to Las Vegas to better host events there in the spring and deepen our commitment to local organizing in the area.

The physical embrace of those who love me spoke not of protection, but of communion. And, I turned with my ancestors and those who will come after me to Christ crucified, viewing how Emmanuel chose to absorb the grief and the violence of humanity by entering into the sob of our emptied selves. The Holy Spirit, through the same One who was crucified, permeates us with an embrace we were not expecting. It is an embrace that does not enable us to dispel grief and suffering of this life, but offers us a share in hope, compassion, communion, and joy through true grief. The Spirit transforms our individual and communal helplessness into the ability to love in the face of violence. Thus, we become lives not only or even primarily determined on 'fixing' things, but rather, determined on participating in the re-creation of love from within our existential position of vulnerable nakedness.

Patrick Finn is a graduate student at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology at the Graduate Theological Union. He first visited the Nevada Test Site this past August, as a participant with Nevada Desert Experience's August Desert Witness that marked the 59th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.



Richard Rohr, Terry and Anne Symens-Bucher, and Louie Vitale prepare to cross the line at the August Desert Witness. Photo by David Elliot.

A View From Vegas

by

Paul Colbert, Office Manager

It is too easy to get discouraged these days! Nevada is considered a swing state for the national elections, so we are getting the worst of all the campaign advertisements, with no signs of any peace from either the advertisements or the candidates, all of whom seem hell-bent on destroying the world. Add to that the dirty tricks and challenges on voter registration and things seem even more depressing. I am having to "fight" for my own right to vote. I am forced to vote by absentee ballot, since my precinct does not appear to have enough voters to bother with. However, I have yet to receive a ballot!

Signs of hope abound, however. Mordechai Vanunu has been released from prison. Despite his release he still is struggling with authorities in Israel. Yet he continues to speak and witness to the faith that sustained him in the struggles against nuclear weapons and continues to inspire us. The folks at Nukewatch report that the Navy is closing the ELF project. While other means of communication exist for the launching of weapons, faithful witness has paid off in this arena. The courts have declared that automatic searches of folks attending the School of the Americas activities goes beyond the Patriot Act. Many more areas of hope exist in our struggles to make a change in this country.

I just attended a training conference in the Los Angeles area helping folks in the Episcopal Church to gain tools for change in their home communities. The tools included work on multi-cultural understanding and anti-racism. The tools help folks recognize the different ways in which we interact with each other in our communication styles, our ethnic backgrounds, and our personalities. With these tools, it becomes easier for folks to really show that change begins at home, in our own communities. The personal transformations are crucial. They lead to the transformed communities in which we live and ultimately affect the national scene. It highlights the nature of the song - "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me".

Hot from the Press: What mainstream media wants us to know about nukes

by
Zachary Moon

September was a busy month for developments in the nuclear world. Below are a few offerings from the pages of the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

New York Times, Sunday, September 5, ran a half page article about a small community in Idaho struggling to attain compensation after the effects of radiation fallout, believed to be created from the above ground testing at the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s and early 60s. The downwinder community, like so many others, is made up of regular American folk who have had their lives derailed by severe cancer conditions. Their stories echo the downwinder experience laden with feelings of betrayal and deceit by a government they had trusted to protect them.

San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday, September 19, 'Business' section featured a large article and graphic announcing that, yes, "Star Wars" is back on the radar. As soon as November, with a little election-driven push from the current administration, silos at two national sites will be installed with Bechtel-made interceptor devices. Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Barbara, California, and Fort Greely just north of Anchorage, Alaska, are the two sites that have been named for interceptor capacity. Believed to be our only defense, other than the 'preemptive attack', against weapons-of-mass-destruction-equipped rogue states, these interceptors would meet deployed warheads mid-flight. Not to be outdone, Lockheed Martin is in the process of developing a laser turret that would blast identified warheads until their metal casing overheats and ruptures. As addenda [added by the writer of *this* article] are the comments of Nick Cohen from the *London Observer*: "To describe Star Wars as criminally insane is to slander reputable psychopaths. It is inspired by the delusion that America can achieve absolute dominance, that she can fight without taking casualties, forget about deterrence and detonate nuclear weapons secure in the knowledge that her defensive missiles will shoot down any warheads launched in retaliation."

San Francisco Chronicle, Thursday, September 23, 'Bay Area' section led an article documenting the University of California Regents decision to follow the lead of consultation from Bechtel and seek to secure an 'industrial partner' before bidding to retain management of the Los Alamos site. Initial efforts to form such a partnership with Lockheed Martin have for the time fallen through. Seizing the opportunity created by the first open bidding process, UC faculty and students have been active in calling for public dialogue about right relationship between public university education and the military industrial complex.

San Francisco Chronicle, Saturday, September 25, 'Business' section led an article announcing Lockheed Martin's winning of a multibillion dollar contract to develop a new satellite communication network. The price tag for the design and production of two satellites is marked at 2.1 billion dollars, but the contract could run approximately upwards of 3.27 billion dollars. Lockheed Martin annually receives approximately 15 billion dollars of the taxpayers' money through a series of military contracts. If only we had bought stock in Lockheed Martin; stock shares jumped sixty-four cents.

Nukewatch reports ELF Facility to close

Nukewatch has published a special report with headlines announcing "Navy Calls it Quits, Announces Shutdown of Project ELF".

The Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) transmitters have been one of many communications devices to contact submarines for launching of nuclear missiles. Nukewatch has been a watchdog group opposed to the ELF project, which has been associated with environmental and health concerns. For more information go to www.nukewatch.com.

We offer our thanks and support to those who have engaged in civil resistance and called attention to this aspect of nuclearism in our country. May we all have the fortitude to continue witnessing for peace and achieve other victories.

August Desert Witness 2005 being planned

Next year is the 60th anniversary of the usage of nuclear weapons. Despite the recognized horrors of the bomb's usage on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there are ongoing plans to develop a new generation of weapons.

NDE is planning a major event for 2005 in conjunction with other groups. The Hiroshima Day weekend (August 5-7) will see events at three major locations in the country, Lawrence Livermore Labs in Livermore CA, the Oak Ridge Facility in Oak Ridge TN, and the Nevada Test Site and Las Vegas NV. NDE is planning events for an extended weekend - August 4-8.

NDE is working with Pax Christi, Peace Action, Western States Legal Foundation, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and others to organize a long weekend of activities and protests against nuclear weapons research, development, and testing.

The planners have developed a tentative schedule of events and programs. We hope that people attending will be able to come early and stay late to fully commemorate those who have died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with those who have been affected by testing and development of the weapons, the atomic veterans and the downwinders. We recognize that some will be limited to weekend participation, due to other commitments.

Overview of Program

Thursday - Arrival - Meet with Western Shoshone - Native American Ritual

Friday - Preparation - Nonviolence Training and Retreat elements

Friday night - Pax Christi and other groups - keynote speakers open to all

Saturday - Actions in Las Vegas and at Test Site

Sunday - Reflection on Event - Music Celebration on Sunday Night

Monday - Nagasaki commemoration, departure

Mark your calendars now for a major event!

Upcoming NDE Events

One of the key components for NDE is the experiential aspect of bringing people to the desert for spiritual rejuvenation. We have several events planned to bring folks to Las Vegas and the Test Site. *Events listed in italics are not held in Las Vegas.*

Speaking Event with Richard Rohr, ofm. November 16, 2004 at St. Ignatius Catholic Church, San Francisco CA and at Christ the King Catholic Church, Pleasant Hill CA. Proceeds from this event will go to NDE. See Page 8 or contact 510.849.1540 for more information.

Quaker Weekend - Lenten Desert Experience. February 18-21, 2005. Friday through Monday. Las Vegas and the Test Site.

Episcopal Weekend - Lenten Desert Experience. March 11-13, 2005. Las Vegas and the Test Site.

United Methodist Gathering - Lenten Desert Experience. March 18 and 19, 2005. Las Vegas and the Test Site. Bishops Minerva Carcaño, Beverly Shannon, and Mary Ann Swenson will be present for this witness.

Holy Week Peace Walk, March 20-25, 2005. Join us for the pilgrimage from Las Vegas to the Test Site, Palm Sunday to Good Friday.

We are building up to the big event of **ADW 2005**, August 4-8, 2005, which will look at 60 years of living with nuclear weapons. Pax Christi, Peace Action, Western States Legal Foundation, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, and other peace fellowship groups are co-sponsoring this event.

Registration Form for NDE Events

Book Order Form

PO Box 46645
Las Vegas NV 89114-6645
702.646.4814 (phone)
nde@peacenet.org
www.NevadaDesertExperience.org

- ^ Quaker Weekend February 18-21, 2005
Cost \$95 - \$70 sliding scale*
- ^ Episcopal Weekend - March 11-13, 2005
Cost \$95 - \$70 sliding scale*
- ^ UMC event. March 18-19, 2005
Cost \$20 or register at Joumc@aol.com
- ^ Holy Week Peace Walk 2005 March 20-25,2005
Walk from Las Vegas to the Nevada Test Site
Cost \$50 (waived if the walker uses this as a walkathon)

* (limited working scholarships available)

- ^ number of people attending _____
- ^ enclosed is \$_____ for these people
- ^ I plan to arrive in Las Vegas on _____ (date)
- ^ Please send information about local hotels
- ^ I will need floor space or housing with locals.
- ^ I will make my own housing arrangements.
- ^ Send me _____ copies (y) of Ken Butigan's book
Cost \$24.00
- ^ Send me _____ copies (y) of Richard Rohr's tapes
Hope against Darkness. Cost \$30.

Please send one form for each event.

Name: _____
Address: _____
Home Phone: _____ Work Phone: _____
email: _____
Best way to reach you: _____

NDE Board of Directors

The following folks have been serving NDE to give direction for our activities. Some have been with us since the beginning, some have recently joined. They have all been involved in activities at the test site. Many thanks for their guidance.

Leslie Brouillette, *Castro Valley CA*
Janet Chisholm, *Nyack NY*
John Dear, sj, *Cirellos NM*
JoAnn Fukumoto, *Pearl City, HI*
Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, *Detroit, MI*
Matt Hogan, *San Francisco CA*
Richard Lai, *Berkeley CA*
Mike Niece, *Half Moon Bay, CA*
Marcus Page, *Gallup NM*
Claudia Peterson, *St. George, UT*
Anne Symens-Bucher, *Oakland, CA*
Erik Thompson, *Milan, MN*
Louis Vitale, ofm, *San Francisco, CA*
Gwen Watson, *Lafayette CA*
Ian Zabarte, *Indian Springs, NV*

Contact Information

Las Vegas Office

Paul Colbert
nde@peacenet.org

NDE
PO Box 46645
Las Vegas NV 89114-6645
702.646.4814

Berkeley Office

Amy Schultz
nde_youth@peacenet.org
Zachary Moon
nde_program@peacenet.org

NDE
PO Box 7849
Oakland CA 94601
510.849.1540

www.NevadaDesertExperience.org

UPCOMING EVENTS
SEE PAGE 6

Nevada Desert Experience is a non-profit group, with 501 c 3 status, so your donations are tax-deductable. If you need a receipt for your tax records, please don't hesitate to ask! We are happy to provide receipts upon request for your donations.

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Richard Rohr, OFM in the San Francisco Bay Area

On Tuesday, November 16, 2004, Richard Rohr will make two separate presentations in the East Bay. All donations will benefit Nevada Desert Experience.

“The Two Halves of Life”

St. Ignatius Catholic Church
9:30 am - 11:30 am
650 Parker Avenue
San Francisco, California
(directions: www.stignatiussf.org)

“The World, the Flesh and Devil: the problem of evil and the promise of hope”

Christ the King Catholic Church
7:30 pm -9:00 pm
199 Brandon Road (at Gregory Lane)
Pleasant Hill, California
(directions: www.ctkph.org)

For more information, contact NDE at nde_youth@peacenet.org and (510) 849-1540. Some of Richard Rohr's Books will be available for sale, along with tapes from his presentation at the August Desert Witness 2004 in Las Vegas.