

NDE Backgrounder For The Sacred Peace Walk and other events

In this packet you will find background materials to help you prepare for the walk. It contains spiritual reflections about walking and the desert as well as information on nuclear issues and the remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs, or “drones”) at Creech Air Force Base.

We will be walking through a highly militarized zone: Nellis Air Force Base holds hundreds of nuclear bombs, both stored and ready to deploy; the Nellis Bombing Range and the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS) have been places for radioactive testing and disposal; remotely piloted Predator and Reaper aircraft which regularly fire missiles and drop bombs on folks in the Middle East are controlled from Creech Air Force Base at Indian Springs; and the NNSS (a.k.a. “Test Site”) itself has seen over 1,000 nuclear bombings. Yet we will also be walking through the desert, a place of great holiness in many religious traditions. Thank you for bringing your healing power and your longing for healing to the Nevada desert, a place truly located between heaven and hell.

In this packet you will find:

- Article “Walk in Peace for Peace” by Brian Kimmel (p. 2)
- Overview of NDE and Desert Spirituality from Ken Butigan’s book Pilgrimage Through a Burning World (p. 3-5)
- Article on Desert Spirituality: “Desert Attentiveness, Desert Indifference: Countercultural Spirituality in the Desert Fathers and Mothers” by Belden Lane (p. 6-17)
- Health concerns at the Nevada Test Site (pp. 17-20)
- Briefing on the Nevada Test Site from Western States Legal Foundation (pp. 20-22)
- Factsheets on Complex Transformation and the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program from Friends Committee on National Legislation, FCNL (pp. 22-25)
- Article by Brian Terrell comparing modern death/torture to Roman Crucifixions (p.25)
- Article by Fr. Louis Vitale about the drones /RPAs/UAVs at Creech AFB (p. 27)

Please check our website for recent news and updates to the schedule:

NevadaDesertExperience.org/programs/peacewalk.htm

That site has the Peacewalk map and schedule (subject to change), a reminder that at the end of the walk, everyone will be given a ride back into Las Vegas, a reminder to please bring your own tent and sleeping bag, and links to your registration form, outreach materials about the walk, a sample letter for recruiting sponsors for the walk (this helps raise money for our movement and is much appreciated!), a pledge sheet (very effective at raising \$25 at 50 cents per mile for example), and links to more educational materials and background information about nuclear issues, the drones, the desert and native land issues.

If you have not yet formally registered, please download a registration form from the website, or email us with your name, phone, address, arrival date, transportation and other needs. We hope each walker can donate \$200, and we encourage people to do so via **walk-a-thon** pledges. This money covers food and other expenses, and helps fund our ongoing projects.. We can help you fundraise, but if cost is stopping you, please contact us about other possibilities. We will provide snacks and healthy, simple meals. Please let us know if you have any dietary restrictions. If you would like us to mail you a hard copy of this welcome packet, we’d be happy to mail it to you! Also, we hope you’ll consider downloading outreach materials to share with others.

Please join us for the walk orientation scheduled for Saturday at 3 pm. Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you need help with transportation or if you need special sleeping accommodations. Our phone is 702.646.4814 and our eml is info@NevadaDesertExperience.org

Three Phases in an NDE Event:

APPRECIATE, EDUCATE, LIBERATE

WALK IN PEACE FOR PEACE *by Brian Kimmel*

War had been my distant cousin, until one day I saw the war was in me. All wars are in me. When I was twenty-four I finally read my grandmother's autobiography about her life in Japanese occupied Indonesia during WWII. I read of the toil of a young girl, running for her life when the soldiers threatened to kill her uncle before her. Just as I turned the page, the blood of his slaughter ran through me.

War is never an impersonal thing. We think, even, we can suffer ourselves in silence, without anyone or anything to witness, but when we suffer we commit that suffering to the collective consciousness. As chief Seattle once said, "We are all connected." Surely, when one of us experiences war, that war is infused like tea into a cup of hot water...surely our cup is filled with enough suffering to last for generations, enough wars to keep our hearts submersed over generations in the killing fields.

When we walk for peace, it isn't peace we walk 'for'. When we walk for peace, it must be our peace that is walking with us. Each step we can arrive into the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God. Each step we arrive home. When we step with the left foot we can say 'Arrive'. When we step with the right foot we can say 'Home'.

Arrive, Home.

Our embodiment of peace is our message. Our body, as the body of peace, is our social action. My teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, "All the elements for your happiness are already here. There is no need to run, strive, search, or struggle. Just be. Just being in the moment in this place is the deepest meditation." (TNH 153 parallax press, 1998).

Surely we can take this wisdom into our actions toward world-peace. Even if we are voicing our concerns about nuclear weapons, if we are speaking out against fighting in Iraq, even if we are defending ourselves in court for a traffic ticket, or arguing with a friend about what we want to eat for dinner, act as if you have already arrived....see that which you desire most is already a part of you. See that this moment contains all.

If we are to walk for peace, walk in peace. Let our loving smile show the world that peace is possible, and that no wars, no amount of weapons can take away our freedom, our happiness, our love.

Freedom is available anywhere, at anytime. It is often the most difficult situations that offer the greatest opportunity for enlightenment. It is the freedom from suffering that I talk about. Because as long as we continue to hate, continue to build walls between each other, to have prejudices, blame, guilt, shame and even loneliness, even if our hands are no longer bound, and the bombs are no longer falling from overhead, freedom will not be found. Freedom is something that must be developed internally as well.

I wrote [in] an article once... "...the war is and has always been within. We cannot end this war without going inside and recognizing our own thoughts contributing to the suffering, fear, and anger in the world." ... when I am angry, and I blame another person for my anger, that person suffers a lot, I suffer a lot with that anger inside of me. Most of us get hurt from something on the outside and continue to blame that thing, to point our finger, to raise our voices, to close our hearts in anger for that thing.

Non-violent social action demands us to speak out against injustice without engaging in partisan conflict. It means that we see that both sides are suffering, both sides come from a common origin of ignorance, confusion, fear and violence. Four of the Fourteen Trainings of the Order of Interbeing are: Openness, Non-attachment to Views, Freedom of Thought, and Awareness of Suffering.

About the Author

Brian Kimmel is an ordained lay member of the Order of Interbeing, a community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen under the guidance and tradition of Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. He lives in Las Vegas and leads the Tuesday Night Mindfulness Group. He is also a gifted pianist, singer and songwriter and has written many beautiful songs for peace.

NDE & Desert Spirituality

an excerpt from *Pilgrimage through a Burning World*

Many Catholic Workers journeyed to the Nevada desert to join in NDE activities over the years... celebrated with workshops, liturgy, and nonviolent civil disobedience at the gates of the test site. The experiments in nonviolence that Dorothy Day had pioneered—including the rituals of civil defense resistance—were part of the lore and tradition that shaped the identity and praxis of succeeding generations of Catholic Workers. This transmission of a culture and spirituality of a particular construction of nonviolent action directly influenced those who organized faith-based resistance at the U.S. nuclear proving ground in Nevada.

If we are to be pilgrims for
justice and peace, we must
expect the desert.
-Dom Helder Camara

From the beginning, the desert played an unavoidably central role in the conceptualization and dramatization of NDE's contemporary pilgrimage to the test site. In the growing NDE vision, the desert was not regarded as "backdrop" or even primarily as "victim" of a relentless and merciless bombing campaign. It became a spiritually vibrant terrain that nurtured, taught, and transformed. The themes of the desert as place of spiritual temptation and personal testing, of apophatic kenosis or emptying but also inexplicable richness and satiation, of being a "devastatingly holy place," recur in people's accounts of their experience of NDE.

While it is true that the desert can evoke intimations of dread and fascination in many human beings simply because of its extremity—and a nuclearized desert can magnify this awareness of awesome power, horror, and in its broadest sense the sublime—it is nonetheless true that such extremity is ultimately not a "given" but an interpretation informed by one's store of metaphors or interpretive lenses. As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, our conceptual system and its range of metaphors define our reality. This view of the Nevada terrain was not a "given." It was

seen through certain lenses constructed through a long meditation on "desert" beginning in the Hebrew scriptures, highlighted in the Second Testament with Jesus' forays into the wilderness, embodied in the lived experience of the first Christian hermits in the Egyptian and Palestinian deserts of the fourth century C.E., enunciated recursively throughout the history of Eastern and Western Christian monasticism, and even reframed by European settlers in North America...

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton views nuclear testing as a symptom of spiritual danger. "Look at the deserts today," he says, "What are they? The birthplace of a new and terrible creation, the testing-ground of the power by which the human being seeks to un-create what God has blessed. This analysis flows from Christian monasticisms spirituality and theology of the desert. As Merton shows here and elsewhere, Western monasticism traditionally views the desert archetypally as the great school, where the human being passes from death and unreality to a life involving "a total commitment to reality," but it is there that one must rely entirely on God alone." The desert topography that, by Christian monastic definition, does not typically support life; therefore, whatever life endures there is necessarily maintained by God. It is in this physical, spiritual, and existential terrain that humans come face to face with the Creator, because such a life is true with God only. Merton writes that, for the Desert Fathers and Mothers the great spiritual significance of the desert derived from its inversion of the hierarchy of the values of the dominant culture. ...

For the Christian monks of the fourth century, the desert

functions as the symbolic province of nothingness not because it is utterly devoid of sensible realities but because it exists outside the framework of established social arrangements, including the economic valuation prescribed by prevailing society. The social construction of this view of "nothingness" has perdured throughout the history of Christian spirituality as a dynamic and potent element of the disciple's spiritual journey. Just as Jesus' mission is framed in terms of kenosis and emptying-dramatized most starkly and vividly in the crucifixion-Christian practitioners, including many considered saints, mystics, and contemplatives have experienced Christianity as the *via negativa*, the absence of God, or the apprehension of nothingness.

... The first hermits who withdrew to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine searched for God but knew that the way, to this "great unknown" was by way of an ongoing battle with The Adversary. In this symbology of Christian spirituality, the desert is thus a rich symbolic site where one is freed of all that blocks intimacy with the mysterious and hidden—but sustaining and nurturing—Source. At the same time, it is a setting where one contests the forces within and without that seek to interfere with this intimacy and relationship with that Source. It is not by accident that commentators refer to the desert as an arena where this contest is fought: just as the "sandy arena" in Rome was a place of grisly, imperial spectacle, where early Christians were tested, so too the early monks self-consciously were engaged in another struggle in another, sandy setting. The desert has become the new stage or theater of a dramatic, if more hidden and subtle, *agon* where Christianity is performed in a new way.

In March 1988 Patricia McCarthy wrote about her NDE participation in this way:

On the surface a call to the desert could be a comforting embrace of solitude among the raw beauty of untrod sand and pebble. In every creature, color and texture carefully blend, designed for survival. But this is a new day, we go to a new desert, a

desert being destroyed by radiation and shock, a desert being bound from producing and sold for greed. Jesus went into the desert, he was the first to cross the line, to dare to look evil in its faceless reality... He went ahead of us to show us how to worship, how to be the people of God we were created to be. He knew we could never be human with each other as long as we had gods of metal and iron. And he knew that we could not disarm our hearts from them without the truth of God.

The desert is the place in us where we affirm the truth of God and admit that it doesn't fit with the reality of destruction and violence. Going into this place doesn't require heroism, it demands surrender to the awesome person of God and abandonment to his heart. From there his will and desire consume us, transforming hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. Jesus returned from the desert to minister to his people, confident that he was of God and with God; and because of him, we do the same."

In the same year, Nevada Desert Experience published a booklet entitled "Notes on Nonviolence." This short work, deploying a contemplatively sparse and lyrical prose, summarizes NDE's vision of the desert:

An hour drive: from Las Vegas,
Cold mornings then hot sun.

Flowers. Cactus. Snakes,
mice, songbirds. Silence.

Wind. Mountains.

Expanse. Silence.

Another Test Site vigil.
People from near and far
gather in the early hours
of the morning ...

In every direction is desert,
the Great Basin.

Vigilcrs retreat into the desert

for the inner work of nonviolence.
Those who know the desert
and those who do not
Are quieted to their core.

In the desert there is a natural order,
An instinctive putting of first things first.
With ease, simplicity and grace.
This is sacred ground. The Paiutes named it,
"Ground Afire."

In the desert,
inner peacemaking
is easier
because
luxury,
position
and
status
account for nothing.
Solitude strips away
the need to maintain face.
Here we can face ourselves
without illusion or pretense.
A desert experience
is seeing ourselves
for who we are
within the solitude of God.

Silence.
Hours of silence.

We have not come to the desert
to hide from ourselves or the world.

We intend to look long and hard, and act.

Our experience of soul searching is by design
and location an experience in soul force.

The desert prayer deepens.
The vigil becomes embodied prayer."

Vast political, cultural, sociological,
economic, and environmental factors were
incalculably important in catalyzing the
historical matrix from which the Nevada
Desert Experience and other antinuclear

organizations emerged. At the same
time, NDE's vision, character, and
practice were shaped as well by
particular persons who, rooted in
specific religious and political
traditions, gradually synthesized a
vision and a set of practices as a
response to the challenges of that
historical and existential moment.
The people who created Nevada
Desert Experience discovered that
they were engendering a different
kind of pilgrimage to which they
would invite thousands of people,
even as they arrived like uniting
pilgrims, at the edge of a terrain of
poignant beauty in the boundless
physicality of the American West
and in the unbounded fear and
possibility in the postwar
imagination. Drawing on traditions
of active nonviolence, Franciscan
spirituality, the Catholic Worker
Movement and a perduring lineage
of desert religiosity, the founders
of, and participants in, Nevada
Desert Experience created a
contemporary spiritual discipline
that sought, consciously or
unconsciously, to decenter and
recenter the self consenting to and
reinforcing nuclearism and its
spiritual, psychological, political,
military, cultural, and economic
burden.

Over the following two
decades, this spiritual discipline
would work itself out in many
different ways. In the following
chapters examine in more detail what
I call three spiritual practices of
Nevada Desert Experience's
antinuclear asceticism: nonviolent
civil disobedience; the Stations of the
Nuclear Cross; and antinuclear
pilgrimage .

DESERT ATTENTIVENESS, DESERT INDIFFERENCE: COUNTERCULTURAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS

By Belden C. Lane

published in Cross Currents, 0011-1953, , Vol. 44, Issue 2

On the far side of emptiness, where brokenness and disorientation overtake us, where death awaits us, we learn to care—and not to care.

In December of 1935, Antoine de Saint Exupery, on a mail flight between Paris and Saigon, crashed in the Libyan Desert west of the Nile. It was in the same vicinity to which the desert fathers and mothers of the fourth century had withdrawn to seek the face of God in a landscape of emptiness. Saint Exupery's story of survival, in his now classic *Wind, Sand and Stars*, evokes the same desert discipline practiced by those who had preceded him there centuries earlier. No one lives for long in the desert without acquiring its crusty virtues of attentiveness and indifference. It was only because of these that Saint Exupery survived.

Over a period of three days he walked 124 miles without water through desert sands, stumbling at last, half-dead, into a remote Bedouin camp. He had been told that no one could survive more than nineteen hours in the desert without water; the eyes then filled with a ghostly light, and death soon followed. What saved him were two things. First, he was meticulously observant of his surroundings, noticing an unusual northeast wind, full of moisture, retarding the dehydration of his body and bringing a light dew he could collect on parachute silk. Secondly, he remained stubbornly indifferent to the panic, pain, and despair which preyed on his mind.

Learning to be fiercely attentive, he learned also not to care -- to ignore everything that was unnecessary, everything unrelated to the primary task of staying alive.

When he finally crawled into the Bedouin camp, he looked like some desert rat, crazed and blistered. Unable to raise any saliva, his lips had sealed together with a kind of glue. His tongue was like plaster-of-Paris. There was a rasping in his throat, a horrible taste in his mouth. In the last hours, he had been waiting for the tell-tale cough to begin, the throat to close up, the shining spots to appear before his eyes, spots that would soon change to flames, and then the end. This, he had learned in talking to others, was the pattern of desert death he could expect as his own. (n1)

Having once known the desert in a way as intimate as this, Saint Exupery could never again succumb to the naivete of desert romanticism. Those of us whom the desert has never touched find it much easier to imagine only the beauty and glory of desert spirituality -- thumbing our way through old copies of *Arizona Highways* and dreaming of desert retreats. We suppose arid and empty terrain to be naturally solicitous of our human need for contemplation. But the stark, unsettling truth is that the desert doesn't give a damn. Its capacity for indifference seems almost infinite. Precisely this sense of danger and disregard fed the spiritual vigor of early desert monasticism.

There is an unsolicitous and ungentle quality about the desert Christians that makes them especially attractive in our current climate of sentimentalized, feel-good spirituality. Much of popular contemporary piety is so individualistic and ego-centered, so prone to the cultivation of niceness, so disconnected from questions of justice, that it risks anything to avoid giving offense or making demands. The spiritual life of mainstream American churches and synagogues is eminently unexceptionable, generically inoffensive, culturally correct. We substitute amiability for friendship, agreeableness for dialogue, pleasantries for compassion. The acrid smell of the desert is lost.

By contrast, one almost has to speak of the surly, discourteous piety of the desert fathers and mothers. They were resident aliens in a world that fostered gentility and comfort. They simply did not fit. As Bruce Berger observes, "the desert notoriously harbors the loner, the misfit, the only child." (n2) It attracts a people who are downwardly mobile, often cantankerous, ill at ease in polite society. Shun the city and all of its niceties, growled Jerome from his desert lair. His Christianity required the harsh solace of open spaces.

The desert has always been the abode of dingbats, visionaries, and half-crazed fools. It invites departure from every form of civility. "Never forget," warns one contemporary desert writer, "that it was in the Mojave that the first claimed UFO sightings took place, and the pioneer conversations with little green men from Venus. In a landscape where nothing officially exists (otherwise it would not be 'desert'), absolutely anything becomes thinkable, and may consequently happen." (n3) The desert, as a place where one expects nothing, becomes the source of the hauntingly unexpected: this unpredictability formed the robust spirituality of the desert monks. (n4)

Not surprisingly, their God was no different. Theirs was not, in John Crowe Ransom's phrase, a "God without thunder," having been thoroughly housebroken and made presentable to the cultural elite of their day. Their God remained mystery -- feared certainly and much loved, but never understood. They would have agreed entirely with John Muir's assessment that in God's wildness lies the hope of the world. (n5) They were quick to recognize "the wildness of God" as a theological category too often ignored by the rest of the church.

Agrupnia and Apatheia

The threat of desert landscape -- from its grudging stinginess with water to its poisonous lizards and waiting vultures -- has a way of eliciting the sharp, lean qualities of attentiveness and indifference. Both are desert virtues, honed by exposure to the elements. The one is necessary for survival. No one lasts in the desert without constant attentiveness to exterior and interior landscapes alike. One must keep an eye out for landmarks, the position of the sun in the sky, tracks in the sand, threatening clouds. But equally important is staying attuned to one's inner condition -- the progress of fatigue, the irritation of blisters, the forgetfulness to which the mind is prone, the slow rise of panic at the fear of being lost. The desert

fathers and mothers spoke of this attentiveness as *agrupnia*, the spiritual discipline of "wakefulness," the crucial importance of being aware, paying attention.

The other virtue of "indifference" is the more slowly-learned attitude of abandonment that grows from prolonged desert experience.(n6) It means learning to ignore the unimportant, being able -- as one prepares for desert travel -- to know what to leave behind. It, too, is directed toward interior as well as exterior landscapes. One must learn to accept the empty silence, to ignore sun and heat, to be untroubled by the sparsity of food -- by the sparsity of everything other than space. Yet, even more importantly, this indifference must be aimed inwardly at the self. It means not taking the ego too seriously, being able to watch one's compulsive needs wilt under the discipline of inattention. The desert invites an ignoring of the ego, its separation from the inner audience to which it continually plays for sympathy and admiration. The desert fathers and mothers spoke of this indifference as *apatheia*, the spiritual discipline of "detachment" or "dispassion," the practice of apathy with respect to matters of unimportance. "Indifference" is offered here as an intentionally provocative translation of the term, understood after the pattern of Ignatius Loyola's "active indifference." It doesn't suggest diffidence, laziness, or disinterest so much as the rigorous ordering of one's desires, a reducing of everything to the demanding measure of God's will. (n7)

Attentiveness and indifference are, respectively, the constructive and deconstructive poles of the spiritual life. They tell us when to pay attention and when to let go, what to concentrate on and what to ignore, how to survive and how to abandon everything that isn't necessary. T. S. Eliot, in "Ash Wednesday," prayed for both: "Teach us to care and not to care."(n8) John Climacus, the crusty old abbot of the monastery at Mt. Sinai in the seventh century, understood these virtues as two of the most important rungs in his Ladder of Divine Ascent, a guide to the spiritual life without parallel in all of Eastern Christianity.(n9) They stand in paradoxical relation to each other, these two disciplines of the spirit: how to pay attention and how not to pay attention (and when to apply which of the two standards). Nothing else is more important or more difficult in one's faltering practice of a life of prayer.

Learning to Pay Attention

The talmudic sage Rabbah bar bar Hana, traveling in the wilderness of Sinai in the third century, spoke of meeting an old Arab merchant who "by taking up sand and smelling it," could tell how far he was from the nearest water. The rabbi tested him with sand that was eight parasangs away from the nearest oasis, then again with sand that was three parasangs away. In each case, even when the rabbi tried to fool him with sand substituted from another place, the old Arab proved infallible in his sense of smell. (n10)

People who dwell in wilderness, living close to the land, often evince powers of attentiveness that seem magical by comparison to others.' But the difference really is

only one of discipline. Most of us have little experience in paying careful attention to anything. We marvel at a naturalist like Louis Agassiz of Harvard who once said he had spent the summer traveling, only to get half-way across his back yard. We can't imagine spending that much time on that narrow a field of attention.

That's why the life of the monk seems so utterly foreign, even frightening, to us. Our conditioning as members of a consumer society prevents us from abandoning hope that, with sufficient planning, we might yet be able to see and do everything. To move slowly and deliberately through the world, attending to one thing at a time, strikes us as radically subversive, even un-American. We cringe from the idea of relinquishing, in any moment, all but one of the infinite possibilities our culture offers us. Plagued by a highly diffused attention, we give ourselves to everything lightly. That is our poverty. In saying yes to everything, we attend to nothing. One can love only what one stops to observe.

The desert, as a lean and arid landscape of few distractions, is a place that can teach us well this truth. With its uncluttered horizon, its tendency toward simplicity and repetition, it offers little to the eye and provides great clarity in what it offers. (n11) Stars, for example, are far more brilliant in its dry, night air, stripped of humidity, than anywhere else. The desert serves as an optimal place for sharpening one's skills at paying attention. Survival demands it. The five senses are heightened by wilderness experience and apophatic prayer alike. Disciplined familiarity with emptiness is an exercise the desert teaches equally well to body and soul. (n12)

But there are never, of course, any guarantees. The desert occasions no simplistic environmental determinism, as if entering a dry and barren terrain automatically assures one of spiritual insight. People go to Las Vegas and Reno every day, finding in the desert absolutely nothing. The place may invite them to a deeper reflection on the nature of the nothing they have found, but few pause long enough to listen on their way out of town.

The desert fathers and mothers, by contrast, took all the time necessary to attend to the desert's subtle, taciturn wisdom. Abba Abraham praised the barren landscape of the wilderness at Scete because of its having nothing whatever to offer. Its very lack of fruitfulness meant that men and women would not be distracted by thoughts of cultivation, production, yield per acre.(n13) Its yield had to be measured in the increase of emptiness and abandonment, the slow growth of attentiveness. The discipline of the desert was gradually acquired in the methodical weaving of palm fronds into mats and baskets, the practice of long exposure to desert loneliness, the reduction of life to a radical simplicity. Growth in the spiritual life came to be measured in micro-parameters, in how much could be given up, how much one could be emptied.

*Tom Brown, author of *The Tracker* and *The Search*, sees this process of emptying as part of one's learning to pay attention in wilderness settings. He teaches wilderness survival and nature observation skills in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. On entering the desert, he knows one must learn to be quiet enough to distinguish disturbances in the surrounding landscape from those within the soul;(n14) to*

distinguish between exterior and interior deserts. Otherwise, we recklessly charge into the wilderness, imagining ourselves being followed on unfamiliar trails, jumping at startling sounds, projecting an inner turmoil onto the outer world. One's internal baggage makes true attentiveness impossible.

Saint Exupery speaks of waiting one night for a late flight to depart from a remote landing field in the Sahara. Feeling vaguely uneasy as he walked out in the desert air, he heard dragonflies striking their wings against an oil lamp nearby. It was a sound that vaguely disturbed him, though he didn't know why. The unsettling feeling required a sorting of inner and outer landscapes, checking the one against the other.

Back home in France, the flight of moths around a candle flame at night would have been perfectly common, provoking no particular interest. But there in the desert the sudden presence of insects meant something entirely different. Swept hundreds of miles from their inland oases, the dragonflies were clear signs of impending danger. A savage sand-storm was on its way, sweeping every living thing before it.

Saint Exupery was grateful for the warning that had come, but was moved even more by the powerful experience of having been attentive in an unfamiliar environment -- having been able to distinguish the mystery of the land from the mystery of himself. "What filled me with a barbaric joy was that I had understood a murmured monosyllable of this secret language, had sniffed the air and known what was coming, like one of those primitive men to whom the future is revealed in such faint rustlings; it was that I had been able to read the anger of the desert in the beating wings of a dragonfly." (n15)

Desert attentiveness of this sort is not easily acquired, as people from Antony of Egypt to Mary Austin and Edward Abbey have learned. The desert Christians sought it carefully in the pattern of prayer they adopted for themselves, paying meticulous, repetitive attention to the subtle presence of God in a sparse and meagre landscape. They shared the hard-won wisdom of desert naturalists like Joseph Wood Krutch who never tired of attending to the ordinary. "In nature," he said, "one never really sees a thing for the first time until one has seen it for the fiftieth." (n16)

The practice of paying attention is the rarest of gifts because it depends upon the harshest of disciplines. So uncommon is it for us to grasp the beauty and mystery of ordinary things, that -- when we do so -- it often brings us to the verge of tears. (n17) Appalled by our own poverty, we awake in wonder to a splendor of which we'd never dreamed.

Ignoring What Doesn't Matter

But the compelling mystery of the desert is even more pronounced in what it is able to ignore. One easily becomes lost, physically as well as figuratively, in its vast indifference, in the great emptiness to which it bears witness. The desert is a place fraught with the danger of disappearance. Its ability to absorb people into the terrifying nothingness of its boundless space is legendary.

The "Lady Be Good," a bomber attached to the Allied Forces in North Africa during the Second World War, took off on its first combat mission in 1943. Within hours, all radio contact was lost and the plane disappeared, apparently swallowed up by the desert's vast expanse. Seventeen years later the plane was found in the sands of the Libyan desert, perfectly preserved, offering no clue to what might have gone wrong. (n18)

The desert is like that. It cares little. Stories are repeated in desert towns of the American Southwest about people who have vanished into thin air, their tracks fading away in some remote canyon. The desert, apparently, consumed them. Such was the case of Everett Ruess, a desert enthusiast whose love of Zion National Park took him often into the wilds of the Escalante River system in southern Utah. On one of those trips, in 1934, he disappeared. His boots were later found, but nothing else. There were no signs of animal attack or foul play. Only an inscription on the doorway of an Anasazi ruin nearby, in his handwriting, of the words "Nemo 1934." Nemo, in Latin, means "no one."(n19)

What (or who) was it that Everett Ruess encountered in the awesome nothingness of the Escalante wilderness? What terrifying -- and yet joyous -- freedom is discovered in the desert's enormous capacity for indifference? These are questions posed by the desert's grand disinterest in all the affairs that preoccupy our attention. The desert scoffs at much that we hold dear.

This harsh virtue of desert indifference seems to conflict with its opposite impulse of careful attentiveness, the one taking away what the other gives. Actually the two principles operate very much in tandem. Indifference serves as a corrective lens, indicating what does and doesn't deserve attention. It provides the negation that gives meaning and direction to the broad field of one's concentration. If focusing one's attention is half of the desert art of contemplation, the other half is a matter of knowing when and how to withhold it.

For the early fathers and mothers, the immensity of the desert's indifference -- suggesting for them the even greater immensity of God --offered great clarity about what did and did not matter, about what they would attend to and what they would ignore. In the calm, critical judgment of divine insouciance, bold decisions could be made about how the community of faith would conduct itself in the world.

To use the provocative language of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, the desert Christians understood the church as an alien community no longer caught up in the anxious, self-interested preservation of the world- as-it-is. Their practice of indifference to the dominant social values of their age, exercised from the desert's edge, stood in stark contrast to the accommodating spirit of post-Constantinian, urban Christianity. Indeed, they understood their "oddness" to be an essential part of their faithfulness to Christ and the new community being formed in their midst. (n20)

The indifference practiced by this desert colony of believers took shape in response to the social and political preoccupations of a compulsive world. In their reading of the gospel, they knew that a person's worth could never be measured by reference to any contemporary cult of success. The story is told, in the sayings of the desert fathers, about a brother who came to Macarius the Egyptian, asking the great abbot of the monastery at Scete how he could achieve a reputation in holiness. The older monk told him to go to the cemetery and abuse the dead, yelling at the most prestigious among them for all he was worth, even throwing stones. The young man thought this strange, but did as he was told and then returned to his teacher.

"What did they say to you?" Macarius asked. "Nothing," the brother replied. "Then go back again tomorrow and praise them," answered the abbot, "calling them apostles, saints, and righteous men. Think of every compliment you can." The young man once more did as he was told, then returned to the cloister, where Macarius asked, "What did they say this time? ... They still didn't answer a word," replied the brother. "Ah, they must, indeed, be holy people," said Abba Macarius. "You insulted them and they did not reply. You praised them and they did not speak. Go and do likewise, my friend, taking no account of either the scorn of others or their praises." (n21)

Becoming equally indifferent to the praise and blame of the world was a primary goal of spiritual discipline in the desert. Learning not to care was a matter of utmost importance. Yet the desert masters were always careful to distinguish between "true" and "false" indifference. "True" indifference was a fruit of contemplation, a direct

result of disciplined attentiveness. The "no" of desert apatheia could emerge only out of deep certainty about the "yes" of the gospel. Detachment from the world and its values required informed, deliberate choices about what does and doesn't matter in light of Jesus and the inbreaking of his kingdom. True indifference was rooted in a very conscious caring.

"False" indifference, by contrast, was seen as an easy, casual matter of choosing haphazardly by neglect. It dissolved very readily into the worst of the seven deadly sins -- sloth or accidie, the lazy sullenness and despairing indiscipline of not caring about anything. Maurice Sendak whimsically satirizes this vice in his tiny "cautionary tale" for children entitled *Pierre*. The constant refrain of his young protagonist is "I don't care." All threats are empty, all promises void for children who, like Pierre, live beyond hope. In the desert experience of the early Christians, such was the temptation of despair that often struck at noon- with the sun high overhead, the heat oppressive, mind and body giving in to the weary, monotonous passing of time.

False indifference is the scourge of a domesticated Christianity, tired and worn-out, readily accommodating itself to its culture, bowing to the social pressures of the status quo. It remains so tame as to fear nothing so much as the disdain of sophisticated unbelief. Such indifference is what allows the church to abandon its call to radical obedience to Christ in the world. It becomes the driving force behind

every injustice, allowing dominant cultural forms to remain unchallenged... by people too indifferent to care.

But indifference properly understood can become a source of profoundly liberating power. Adopted as a discipline of ignoring what isn't important -- in light of the truth of the gospel -- it becomes a counter-cultural influence of great significance. People who pay attention to what matters most in their lives, and who learn to ignore everything else, assume a freedom that is highly creative as well as potentially dangerous in contemporary society. Having abandoned everything of insignificance, these are people not easily coopted. They have nothing to lose. Apart from being faithful to their Lord, what happens to them no longer matters.(n22)

Were Christians to practice this stubborn desert discipline today, they would find a freedom that is refreshing and contagious to some, but also threatening and intolerable to others. Unjust societal structures and people addicted to power will not tolerate being ignored. They are profoundly threatened by those not subject to their influence, no longer playing by the accepted rules. To cease to be driven by the fear of what other people think is to become a threat to the world as we know it. Only at great personal risk does one become indifferent to the accepted standards and expectations of the dominant culture.

Yet the people willing to assume this risk- the ones who find the center of their existence outside the cultural milieu -- are those who model for us today the vitality of Christian faith. A marginal character in William Golding's novel *The Paper Men* seems strangely unaffected by everyone else's compulsive craving for attention and success. "The things you could see that woman had no need of," an acquaintance cries out in astonishment and envy. (n23) Such a declaration may be the highest praise possible in a commodity culture like our own. But it was common reality among desert Christians. People in the fourth century were dumbfounded by all the things of which the monks seemed to have no need.

The Moral Equivalent of Desert

Where, then, does one go to learn such freedom? Can the gruff virtues of the desert be cultivated in contemporary urban life? Is physical proximity to an arid landscape necessary for the practice of desert spirituality? The answer is both yes and no. Clearly the desert, as desert, teaches attentiveness and indifference with great finesse. For some of us there is no substitute for wilderness. Nothing is able to take the place of periodic forays into the land of little rain. The desert feeds something that is fragile, but insistent in the modern soul.

Even for those who never enter the land of cholla and creosote bush, the mere existence of wilderness is important. "We simply need that wild country available to us," Wallace Stegner argued, "even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in." The desert answers to deep purposes of the human spirit. Something in us requires its presence. (n24)

But the practice of Christian discipline has never been limited to specific physical environments. The truth of the desert fathers and mothers has to be transferable, able also to be lived out in the canyons of our great cities -- where steel and glass cliffs of mirrored indifference border the street corners of lonely anonymity at Madison and State, Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street.

Where, in the modern landscape of our lives, do we find the moral equivalent of desert? What are the places in our experience where desert abandonment is forced on us with the same threatening insistence provided by fierce geographical terrain? In what hazardous contexts does an alien community of faith struggle even now to survive?

All of us know desert Christians who have never been to Egypt, never wandered the dry arroyos of northern New Mexico. But they have been no strangers to the most terrifying of desert landscapes. They have known intimately the parched and cracked land of an AIDS hospice, the steep cliffs beyond the waiting room of Radiation Oncology. Through their struggle with cancer and AIDS, they have acquired much of the attentiveness, explored many of the deep caves of indifference mapped out by desert Christians centuries before them.

We know others who have trod the high country of abuse, who have --through poverty or prejudice -- dealt with levels of indifference for which we have no language. Still others have dwelt in the harsh desert of addiction and mental illness, knowing the sustained pain of divorce, unemployment, or physical disability. The possibilities of desert experience in contemporary life are more varied than we ever might have thought.

Certainly a distinction has to be drawn here between voluntary and involuntary desert experience, between those who intentionally embrace the vulnerability of self-emptying and those inadvertently thrust into the dark night of body and soul. A crucial question of our time is how to provoke people into practicing the former while identifying in solidarity with those suffering the latter. In early monastic practice, the desert served a double function of comforting the afflicted as well as afflicting the comfortable.(n25)

The desert, as metaphor, is that uncharted terrain beyond the edges of the seemingly secure and structured world in which we take such confidence -- a world of affluence and order that we cannot imagine ending. Yet it does. And at the point where the world begins to crack, where brokenness and disorientation suddenly overtake us, there we step into the wide, silent plains of a desert we had never known to exist.

We cross its sands—unwelcomed, stripped of influence and reputation, the desert caring nothing for the worries and warped sense of self-importance dragged along behind us. There in the desert everything is lost. Absolutely everything. The extent of its unrelenting indifference is devastating. This awareness, at first, is terrifying. But if we stay long enough, resisting the blind panic that gnaws at our minds, we discover -- beyond hope and all caring- that "in the end we are saved by the things that ignore us."(n26) The desert's silent immensity is able to absorb every grief and

anxiety, all the fears and brokenness we are able to pour into it. In being emptied of everything, oddly enough we know ourselves to be loved unconditionally -- for the first time in our lives. The deepest mystery of love is never realized apart from the experience of having nothing to offer in return. Only there does love reveal itself in unaccountable wonder.(n27)

In that place, we discover ourselves to be no longer alone. In the wilderness we meet other wizened souls who have weathered sun and heat, all of them healed of the same wound. There is a wildness in their eyes. They don't give a damn for things they used to find so terribly important. Hardly fit for polite company, they nonetheless love with a fierceness echoing the land through which they have passed. Like Abba Simeon and Amma Syncletica, theirs is "a harsh and dreadful love," pure as it is lean.(n28) The desert has taught them well. They are what the church has been summoned to be -- a community of broken people, painfully honest, undomesticated, rid of the pretense and suffocating niceness to which "religion" is so often prone. They love, inexplicably and unflinchingly, because of having been so loved themselves. The desert, unquestionably, is a hard schoolmaster. Its discipline is fierce and unrelenting. Mark Twain proclaimed in *Roughing It*, his own ornery account of desert survival, that "Providence don't fire no blank ca'tridges, boys." (n29) All the games in the desert are played for keeps. D. H. Lawrence described the arid terrain of New Mexico as a place of "splendid silent terror." (n30) Hundreds of nineteenth-century travelers succumbed to the heat and rattlesnakes along a thirsty stretch of land known as el Camino del Diablo on the southern Arizona border.

The desert kills. But it also gives life...robust and insistent life. Nothing is more beautiful than the red splash of desert sky after a late-afternoon storm, no flower more lovely than the cactus bloom that opens but once a year. If, in biblical imagery, the desert is a place of fiery serpents and scorpions on an occasion for brokenness and failure (Deut. 8:15), it is no less a place of beauty and romance. Yahweh remembers walking hand in hand with Israel, as lovers in the lonely desert of Sinai (Jer. 2:2). The landscape of terror becomes also a land of allure and love.(n31) Even in its darkest mysteries, the desert reveals its beauty. The sacred datura, or moonflower, blooms only at night, its white, trumpet-shaped flowers as rich in ghostly dreams as they are in fragrance. "All things excellent," says Edward Abbey, "are as difficult as they are rare."(n32)

Through all its stern lessons in attentiveness and indifference, the desert points to a beauty and wholeness found only on the far side of emptiness. In desert wildness we meet an untamed God who upsets every expectation, destroys all order as we have known it. Our plane crashes in the desert and burns. Everything... is lost. Death, most likely, is nineteen hours away. Never have we been so alone or so empty. But in the clarity of that moment, in the reckless wilderness beyond all hope, we are somehow met. Inexplicably and without reason. We discover something worth paying attention to, something more beautiful than ever we had imagined in all of our lives. We realize how very little everything else matters, by comparison. In our absolute nothingness, we are loved unreservedly by a God on whom we have no claim.

"Teach us to care and not to care," the Ash Wednesday prayer intones. Nothing else seems quite so important for those who have been to the desert and back. Attentiveness and indifference form the foundation of the desert discipline by which their lives continue to make sense in a world increasingly desperate for meaning.

Notes

(n1.) Antoine de Saint Exupery, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 173-236. (n2.) Bruce Berger, *The Telling Distance: Conversations with the American Desert* (Portland, Ore.: Breitenbush Books, 1990), 1. (n3.) Peter Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1982), 44. (n4.) The cultural and geographical matrix of fourth-century desert monasticism is described in Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966); Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Belden C. Lane, "Desert Catechesis: The Landscape and Theology of Early Christian Monasticism," *Anglican Theological Review* (Summer 1993): 292-314. (n5.) Richard Cartwright Austin, *Baptized into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1989), 90. (n6.) Apatheia is defined here as "indifference," echoing the early Christian use of the word as referring to one's struggle with temptation in the spiritual life. Active indifference became a way of focusing one's attention on that which was most worthy of love. (n7.) Cf. Joseph Tetlow, S.J., *Ignatius Loyola: Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 54-55. (n8.) T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1971), 61. (n9.) John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, steps 20, 29. (n10.) Baba Batra 73b, quoted in Joshua Schwartz, "Sinai in Jewish Thought and Tradition," *Immanuel: A Bulletin of Religious Thought and Research in Israel* 13 (Fall 1981): 8. (n11.) Walter Kaufmann argues that, in Islam, religious architectural design suggests to the worshiper what is "left out" in the process of entering a courtyard to pray. *Religions in Four Dimensions* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), 373. (n12.) Carol Ochs urges that "all of the time spent in the desert after the Sinaitic revelation was time spent in education for remaining open to Presence amidst daily life." Cf. "The Presence in the Desert," *Cross Currents* 43, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 305. (n13.) John Cassian, *Conferences*, XXIV, 3, 4, 12. (n14.) Tom Brown, Jr., *The Tracker* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 16. (n15.) Saint Exupery, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, 138. (n16.) Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Desert Year* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), 4. (n17.) Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 89. (n18.) *New York Times*, February 14, 1960, 1:6. (n19.) W. L. Rusho, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983). (n20.) Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 93. (n21.) *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Macarius of Egypt, 23. P.G. LXV, 272C. (n22.) In this vein Thomas Merton spoke of the contemplative as cutting against the grain of a dominant culture. *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 4-5. (n23.) William Golding, *The Paper Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1984), 155. (n24.) Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 153. (n25.) The desert Christians discovered solace as well as harshness in the desert landscape. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* shows him taking joy in its lonely recesses. Cf. Susan P. Bratton, "The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness," *Environmental Ethics* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 31-53. (n26.) Andrew Harvey, *A Journey in Ladakh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 93. (n27.) A similar theme is found in Farid Ud-Din Attar's "The Conference of the Birds." Cf. Belden C. Lane, "In Quest of the King: Image, Narrative, and Unitive Spirituality in a Twelfth-Century Sufi Classic," *Horizons* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 39-48. (n28.) The phrase is that of Fr. Zosima in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. (n29.) Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1872), 388. (n30.) D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers* (London, 1936), 141-47. (n31.) For reflections on desert experience in the Jewish scriptures, cf. Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in Alexander Altmann, *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Graham I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness: A Geographical Study of the Wilderness Itineraries in the Old Testament* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Rabbinic interpretations of the desert are considered in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911), 3:3641. (n32.) Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 192. The phrase is taken from the last line of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

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Health Concerns at the Nevada Test Site

by Fred Galluccio

Many people have asked about possible health effects of visiting the Nevada National Security Site (a.k.a. Test Site), either to the entrance where we gather, or for taking a tour of the test site. The answers are not as simple as people would like them to be. We need to weigh the risks of exposure with our reasons for being there and take sensible precautions. Radiation is part of our everyday world even away from the test site and we need to look at the type of contamination we face and its potential effect on us.

Taking Risks

We all need to recognize that risks are often relative. We all make choices and decisions regarding risky behavior on a regular basis. Skiing, smoking, traveling by car and other choices contain different risks that many of us are willing to take. As we learn more about the risks, we may change our choices over time.

Many people who come to the test site to pray or to protest subscribe to the principles of non-violence as taught by Gandhi. Gandhi observed that there were many causes for which he was prepared to die, but none for which he was willing to kill. Many who come to the test site are willing to take some risks, with the hope and expectation that the risks they are undertaking will have an effect of reducing the nuclear risks for the rest of the world.

The exposure to external radiation at the test site is relative as well. Recent measurements at the entrance to the Nevada Test Site have shown that the radiation is essentially that of background radiation – radiation emitted from the sun, rocks, and other natural sources. In contrast, measurements at the Sedan Crater deep inside the test site (and a site visited on tours of the test site) reveal that a one-hour exposure is essentially the same as receiving a chest x-ray. Those who fly to the test site are exposed to a larger dosage of external radiation during their flight than they are at the entrance to the test site, since exposure to solar radiation increases with altitude.

We are exposed to external sources of radiation in our daily lives. Background radiation from the sun or from radon comprise two major sources for people in the US. Studies have shown that we are all downwinders; we have all been exposed to radioactive fallout over the years as a result of testing. However, the greatest concentration of fallout landed in the immediate area of the tests. Most of the radioactive particles have been bound up in the soil, but the soil can be disturbed, releasing some particles into the air. Ingesting radioactive particles through eating, drinking, or breathing does present a higher risk at the test site than in other parts of the country.

Steps and Precautions to Take

At the entrance to the test site.

The first precaution that people can take in coming out to the test site is to eat meals that are properly balanced with key elements and minerals, such as calcium and iodine.

Some folks wear surgical masks when there is a lot of wind stirring up dust in the area at the entrance to the test site.

Wash clothes thoroughly after returning from the test site.

For those taking a tour.

Teenagers and young women of childbearing years should probably not take the tour of the test site, even though they might come to the entrance. This is the recommendation of Sr. Rosalie Bertell, an epidemiologist. With increased radiation inside the test site, especially near old craters such as the Sedan Crater, there is an increased risk of ingesting radioactive particles.

People should place a handkerchief over their mouths or wear surgical masks when they get out of the bus at the Sedan Crater.

Wash clothes thoroughly after returning from the test site.

In general

In addition to maintaining an appropriate diet for general well being and resisting disease, it is helpful to maintain a prayerful attitude. Centering prayer is good at relieving stress. Stress reduction is helpful for resisting disease. In particular, pray for:

Those who have been subjected to radioactivity at the site – the military, journalists, and workers.

Those who are downwind from the test site – who were most affected during the testing era.

The healing of mother earth

Those who still see nuclear weapons and testing as necessary.

Those around the world who are expressing opposition to nuclear weapons, particularly those in prison.

Health Effects

Radiation has varying effects on people. Exposure to high doses of radiation usually results in radiation sickness that is apparent soon after the exposure. However, lower doses may affect body chemistry and molecular biology in a way that leads to cancer, which may not be detected for many years. It is impossible to state acceptable exposures with any precision. Different people respond to radiation differently, and the same person may respond to a radiation dose one way when they are healthy and have a balanced diet, but another way when exposed while their body is out of balance due to sickness.

Most radiation standards are based on external exposure or the amount of radiation that penetrates the body and organs through the skin. This is completely different than the dosages that might enter the organs due to ingestion. Once radioactive particles have entered the body through eating, drinking, or breathing, they will be absorbed into the blood stream and pass through various organs. The dosage obviously depends on the amount of material ingested. Each organ responds differently to radiation applied within the organ, compared to external radiation.

Most radiation studies have been for high doses or for intense dosage over short periods of time. Most government scientists have used these data to estimate the effects of low-dosage exposure or exposure over time. They have been coming up with standards that are much more relaxed than epidemiologists like Dr.

Rosalie Bertell agree with. Her studies, and those of others, have been revealing that low dosages can have a greater impact on health than previously thought, especially when the radioactive materials are ingested.

How Radiation affects tissues in the body

When charged particles, such as radioactive particles, enter tissue, they interact with the atoms and molecules in the surrounding area. This interaction is a way for the charged particles to trade charges with other atoms and create new molecules. These molecules then start changing as well. Many of the original molecules are crucial for stability of cells within the body. As the original molecules change, the rest of the cell begins to change as well. These biological changes may be limited to affecting only a few cells, but there can be wider changes that take years to detect. The cells may mutate and reproduce in a mutated version that leads to genetic changes. The cells may also become cancerous and eventually grow into a larger cancer that affects the body. The cells may also simply die or not be affected by the changing molecules.

How the radioactive particles got there.

Radioactive particles that have been the result of atomic testing have settled to earth over a period of time since testing occurred. Some were widely scattered by the wind throughout the United States and farther. Many of these particles have been absorbed into plants, soils, and animals. Most of the alpha particles have short lives and are no longer a threat. However, in the area around the test site, some of these particles have settled in the soil. With rainwater washing the soils, a lot of these have settled in the dry arroyos in the area. They do not generally present a problem unless people stir up the dust in the washes. Government observers have noted that the soils in Nevada appear to have bound (or captured) atomic particles more than the soils near the testing in Australia or elsewhere.

Most radioactive isotopes mimic other elements that the body uses naturally. If our bodies do not contain enough of the proper elements, then the radioactive elements will be absorbed in their place. For example, strontium-90 and iodine-131 imitate calcium and iodine. If the body does not have a sufficient amount of iodine, then the strontium will enter the body and be absorbed like iodine would. As the strontium releases its radioactive charge, it can damage the cells.

Basics in chemistry and radiation

All materials tend to decay and revert to their original form over time. Normally this is not a problem. Iron products tend to oxidize to form iron oxide, which is the condition in which iron ore is found. This process of rusting is a reversion to a more natural state. When some elements decay, they emit radioactive particles while in the process of decaying and changing to another material.

Some of the decay by-products are themselves radioactive. Each element has a different rate of decay and produces different types of radioactivity during the process. The decay rate is usually measured in a unit known as a half-life. The half-life of an element is the length of time it will take for half of the mass to decay into other products. At the end of the half-life, there is still half of the mass that is giving off radioactivity, so many half-lives are needed to reduce the material to a state that does not emit radioactivity. Additionally, many of the by-products are themselves radioactive. Each one of those materials has its own half-life.

Other possible steps

In examining data about nuclear exposure and its effects on the body, there is a wide range of interpretation of the same data. Much of the information distributed by the government about the safety from radiation at the test site refers to general exposure and background radiation. Yet the workers at the Test Site and Yucca are very aware of the dangers of ingesting radioactive particles. Many who attend events at the Test Site are also proponents of healthy nutrition and diets. Some people have suggested that there are dietary precautions that can protect or avert the dangers of the effects of ingested particles. As mentioned above, some of the radioactive particles imitate other minerals in the body, so that they get absorbed in the system and do damage. Some people believe that by eating miso soup, or ingesting larger amounts of iodized salt before a visit, or by taking supplemental calcium and other minerals, the body will contain enough nutrients so that the radioactive particles do not get absorbed. This is a theory, but it is a theory that has not been established or verified through controlled testing of nutrition on the body. Overall, NDE suggests that everyone attending events consider the risks and evaluate why they are visiting the Test Site and how the risks balance the effect that the public witness will have.

The Nevada Test Site: Desert Annex of the Nuclear Weapons Laboratories

Western States Legal Foundation Information Bulletin circa 2006

The Nevada Test Site (NTS), an immense tract of desert and mountains northwest of Las Vegas, is the test range where the United States government set off over 900 nuclear explosions during the Cold War phase of the arms race. For most Americans, the Test Site is only a symbol of a closed chapter of history, a time of great danger that now is over. Even those who know that the Nevada Test Site still is used for “subcritical” testing of nuclear weapons materials and components underground may think operations largely have been suspended, with unused facilities retained only against the eventuality of a return to full scale underground nuclear testing. But the Test Site remains an important part of the nuclear weapons complex, both a remote site where dangerous activities can be conducted with little public knowledge and a weapons laboratory unto itself. High risk programs involving nuclear material, such as nuclear criticality experiments, are slated for transfer to the Test Site, and it also is being considered as a location for a proposed factory to mass produce plutonium pits, the atomic explosive “triggers” at the core of most nuclear weapons. In addition, a wide range of other weapons testing takes place at NTS, ranging from flight testing of unmanned air vehicles to new types of conventional explosives. And as is true today of many military research laboratories, the NTS has an increasingly entrepreneurial culture, run with an eye to increasing its “market share” of tax dollars for its for-profit corporate managers. Nuclear Testing at the Nevada Test Site: Out of Sight, but Never Ending The first nuclear explosion at the Nevada Test Site, code-named Able, was conducted on January 27, 1951. Since then, 99 more tests were detonated aboveground there, and 804 were done underground. Twenty four underground tests were conducted jointly with the United Kingdom, which used NTS for the development of its own considerable nuclear arsenal. Some underground tests involved more than one nuclear explosion.¹ In a nuclear arms race that saw the development of weapons ranging from bombs that could destroy entire cities to atomic explosives that could be fired from an artillery shell, a mind-boggling array of nuclear tests were conducted. Nuclear explosives were “dropped from planes, shot as rockets, detonated on the surface, shot from a cannon, placed on top of towers, and suspended from balloons.”² Structures like houses and underground parking garages were built and subjected to nuclear detonations to study the effects of nuclear war on cities. Animals were penned up where they would be burnt, blasted, or irradiated to death, and thousands of soldiers were deployed to the site to study their response to a nearby nuclear explosion. Much of the population of the United States, living in the great part of the country east of Nevada, were unknowing participants in these experiments as well, with fallout distributed thousands of miles downwind.³ The last full-scale underground nuclear explosion at NTS took place on September 23, 1992. At that time, the U.S. government initiated a voluntary moratorium on nuclear explosive testing, a moratorium that continues to this day. The United States signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, but the Senate refused to ratify it, and it has since been repudiated by the Bush Administration. Although the United States no longer explodes nuclear weapons underground, it continues to conduct a wide range of nuclear weapons research, and to develop and deploy nuclear weapons with new military capabilities. Budgets for the Department of Energy nuclear weapons laboratories today match those during the frenzied Cold War arms buildup, with the labs constructing an array of new nuclear weapons experimental facilities that will provide the capacity to simulate various aspects of nuclear explosions and study the resulting data in unprecedented detail. (See sidebar, Stockpile Stewardship: Nuclear Weapons Research and Production for the 21st Century) The Bush Administration’s Fiscal Year 2006 budget request includes funds for work at NTS to allow the United States to resume full scale underground testing more quickly should the government choose to do so. And despite the absence of full-scale underground nuclear explosions, the Nevada Test Site continues to play a central role in nuclear weapons research. “Subcritical” tests are conducted underground at the NTS U1A complex, a vast warren of tunnels deep beneath the desert. These tests are called “subcritical” because they use fissile materials but there is no self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction. Most subcritical tests employ weapons grade plutonium (Pu-239), which is imploded with high explosives or shocked in various ways.⁴ The data from these tests is integrated with that from a variety of other physical experiments in a continuing effort to expand nuclear weapons knowledge that both sustains the huge existing U.S. Nuclear arsenal and contributes to efforts to develop nuclear weapons with new capabilities.

The Nevada Test Site: Weapons Lab Today, Weapons Factory Tomorrow?

Western States Legal Foundation Information Bulletin

circa2006

In addition to weapons experiments that take advantage of the infrastructure and skills developed for underground nuclear testing and that help sustain capabilities, the Nevada Test Site supports a growing array of nuclear weapons facilities:¹¹

- ! The Big Explosive Experiment Facility (BEEF) allows non-nuclear high explosive tests too powerful to be conducted at high explosive testing facilities at the nuclear weapons labs in Livermore and Los Alamos. BEEF can be used to tests new types or configurations of conventional explosives, and also for “hydrodynamic” experiments, in which the high explosive components of nuclear weapons can be tested, using substitutes for fissile materials that are similar in their physical characteristics but will not result in a nuclear explosion.
- ! The Joint Actinide Shock Physics Experimental Research Facility (JASPER) is a large gas gun that tests the characteristics of plutonium and other materials by blasting them with high speed projectiles.
- ! The Atlas pulsed power facility, relocated from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, instantaneously releases large amounts of stored electrical energy in a small space to simulate certain aspects of nuclear explosions, will be to NTS. It resumed operation in July 2005.
- ! The Device Assembly Facility (DAF), a complex of thirty buildings reinforced with steel and covered with earth, is one of the two sites, together with the Pantex Plant in Texas, where special nuclear materials– plutonium and uranium– can be combined into either nuclear weapons or configurations for nuclear weapons tests, such as the subcritical experiments conducted at NTS. The DAF originally was built to assemble nuclear weapons for underground tests, and is jointly operated by the Los Alamos and Livermore National Laboratories. Located far from population centers and surrounded by layers of security, the DAF is one of the largest and most modern facilities available to the U.S. government for operations involving both nuclear materials and high explosives, including assembly of nuclear weapons. A 2005 Secretary of Energy Advisory Board Report has recommended that the DAF be used to assemble the proposed next generation of “Reliable Replacement Warheads” until a new nuclear weapons assembly plant is built.¹²

With no full scale underground tests on the immediate horizon, the DAF is being given other roles involving nuclear materials. Test assemblies for subcritical experiments are put together at the DAF. Criticality experiments, which involve significant quantities of such weapons useable materials as highly enriched uranium and which study the behavior of these materials at or near the conditions where they generate a self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction, are being transferred to the DAF from Los Alamos. Some criticality experiments still may be conducted at Los Alamos, but those involving larger quantities of weapons-useable nuclear material will be moved to NTS. The move is expected to involve relocation to NTS of 2.6 tons of special nuclear material (probably plutonium and enriched uranium), as well as 11 tons of depleted uranium and thorium.¹³

The Nevada Test Site also is being considered as one possible location for the Modern Pit Facility, a factory to mass produce plutonium pits, the key component of the atomic explosive trigger at the heart of most modern nuclear weapons. Current plans call for a facility that could produce at least 125 pits per year...

Nuclear Weapons Testing on Indigenous Lands

The existence of nuclear weapons in the world causes ecological devastation, even if they never are used in warfare. A half century of testing has contaminated vast reaches of the planet, and has resulted in millions of premature deaths by causing birth defects, cancer, and other diseases. Nuclear explosions at the Nevada Test Site have left millions of curies of strontium, cesium, and plutonium underground. In addition, hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of radioactive waste have been buried at NTS. Above ground nuclear testing, along with plutonium dispersal experiments and depleted uranium ammunition testing, caused additional contamination. For an overview of radioactive contamination at NTS, see Arjun Makhijani, Howard Hu, and Katherine Yih, *Nuclear Wastelands: A Global Guide to Nuclear Weapons Production and its Health and Environmental Effects*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press: 1995), pp.224-227

“...[Of] the eight nations in the world that have detonated nuclear weapons during the last 55 years, five have used the lands of indigenous peoples. The United States, Russia, Britain, France and China have tested their nuclear might on lands held sacred by the people of First Nations. The Western Shoshone nation of North America, the Marshall Islanders, and other South Pacific Islanders, Australian Aboriginals, the Kazakhs, and Tibetans are but a few of those whose land has been consistently contaminated with nuclear poison....” Richard Salvador, Pacific Islands Association of NGOs, NGO Presentation, “Indigenous Perspective,” to the NPT Review Conference Preparatory Committee, New York, April 2002

“No Developed nation tests its nuclear weapons on its own lands. All nuclear testing is done on indigenous people’s lands... The Western Shoshone are the rightful custodians of this land, affirmed by the Treaty of Ruby Valley in 1863. With over 900 bombs exploded, they are the most bombed nation in the world.” Raymond D. Yowell, Chief, Western Shoshone National Council, Healing Global Wounds event invitation, The Test Banner, American Peace Test, Summer/Fall 1992.



For more on the impacts of nuclear weapons research, development, testing and production on indigenous peoples world wide, see the the fact sheet and resource links, “Indigenous People and the Nuclear Age: Making the Connections,” prepared by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, at www.reachingcriticalwill.org/technical/factsheets/indigenous.html

What is the Nuclear Weapons Complex?

The Nuclear Weapons Complex is a network of facilities that develop and maintain the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal. The Energy Department (DOE) is the federal agency that administers the Complex.

These facilities are scattered across the country at eight major sites with missions as diverse as laboratory work to explosives testing to weapon component manufacturing. DOE employees

working in the Complex range from factory workers to nuclear physicists. Currently, the Nuclear Weapons Complex costs taxpayers over \$6 billion per year.

What is Complex Transformation?

Complex Transformation is the Bush administration’s plan to restructure and rebuild the Nuclear Weapons Complex. A key element of the plan is the updating and construction of new nuclear weapons production facilities. In addition, Complex Transformation would consolidate weapons-grade

nuclear materials into fewer locations and reduce the Complex footprint.

The major planned new nuclear weapons support facility, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement plant (CMRR), would enable the annual capacity to build 80 plutonium pits, or “triggers,” for new nuclear warheads. This would sharply increase

U.S. capacity to produce new nuclear weapons, a capacity the United States has not had since the closure of the Rocky Flats Plant outside Boulder, Colorado, in 1989. The CMRR facility would be built at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, located northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Energy Department estimates that the CMRR would cost taxpayers over \$2 billion.

Complex Transformation Undermines Security

The international community has worked for decades to construct the nuclear nonproliferation regime that has helped prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The Complex Transformation proposal undermines these agreements that were created to reduce the nuclear danger. At a time when the U.S. government is demanding other countries adhere to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and renounce nuclear weapons, the U.S. government is not meeting its own obligation to pursue disarmament.

In signing the NPT, the United States committed to working toward the goal of nuclear disarmament under Article VI of the treaty. Complex Transformation violates the spirit of this disarmament section because it would enable the United States to build new nuclear weapons.

While the U.S. government is pressing Iran and North Korea to abandon their nuclear programs, it is planning to buttress its own nuclear arsenal. This is an untenable and morally wrong policy of “do as I say, and not as I do.” Indeed, as Rep. Ed Markey (MA) has warned, “America cannot preach nuclear temperance from a barstool.”

Where Are We Now and What Can I Do?

The administration is seeking funds for Complex Transformation in its fiscal year 2009 (FY09) budget request. Specifically, the Energy Department (DOE) requested \$100 million for the new nuclear bomb support facility, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement facility (CMRR). The complete cost of CMRR is estimated to be greater than \$2 billion.

The public has played a central role in curbing the nuclear arms race. In 2007, people across the United States mobilized against the Reliable Replacement Warhead and a proposed mega-scale bomb plant. Arms control advocates celebrated a major victory when Congress denied money for both programs. A similar movement is needed again. Here is what you can do:

- Express your views on new nuclear weapons directly to the federal government. The Energy Department is required to consider your recommendations on Complex Transformation and the proposed CMRR bomb support facility by holding public hearings and accepting public comments through April 30, 2008. You can submit comments directly by email to the DOE at ComplexTransformation@nnsa.doe.gov. For more information, visit www.fcnl.org/nuclear



Reliable Replacement Warhead Another Unneeded Nuclear Weapon

Friends Committee on National Legislation
Information Bulletin circa 2008

Stymied by Congress' refusal to fund the nuclear "bunker buster," the Bush administration remains intent on developing another class of new nuclear weapons, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead, or RRW.

The administration has asked for \$119 million for fiscal year 2008 to enable the Energy Department in conjunction with the Defense Department to design and develop a program to replace current nuclear warheads. Arms control advocates and some members of Congress are concerned that the program is a Trojan horse that could lead to the resumption of nuclear testing.

Researching and developing a new generation of "reliable" nuclear weapons could undermine arms control and nonproliferation objectives by setting off a nuclear arms race. It sends the wrong message to other would-be nuclear powers around the world. It could prompt Russia and China to modernize their nuclear arsenals. The program could also lead to the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing and end the current international testing moratorium.

Despite the "reliable" label of the proposed new program, the current U.S. arsenal is extremely reliable. The secretaries of Energy and Defense have certified to the president for the past 11 years that the present U.S. nuclear stockpile is safe, secure—and reliable.

The keystone of the Energy Department's argument for RRW has been the aging of plutonium pits, an essential element of new nuclear weapons. Department officials had estimated that some pits in existing weapons would become "unreliable" in less than a decade and needed to be replaced. Yet, a congressionally mandated report by a scientific panel found that pits will remain "reliable" for more than twice the time originally estimated, with most pits having lifetimes of over 100 years.

The program would require new nuclear weapons plants that the Energy Department estimates will cost tens of billions of dollars. As a former White House budget official in the first Bush and

Clinton administrations stated, "The weapons labs are more interested in job security than national security."¹

Congressional leaders believe they can keep the RRW program within tight constraints, but the history of previous limits on the nuclear weapons program is not promising.

RRW and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Developing new nuclear weapons is at odds with the U.S. commitment to prevent the spread of nuclear

weapons. It undermines the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), an international agreement signed by 188 countries that has significantly limited the number of states that have nuclear weapons. In 1970 as part of the NPT, the United States agreed "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament" (Article VI). As the Vatican remarked at the United Nations in 2005, "In essence, the NPT promised a world in which nuclear weapons would be eliminated..." However,

"it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament." ²

The administration claims that new nuclear weapons are needed for some future "new threat." However, such U.S. weapons programs make it easier for nuclear "hawks" in Moscow and Beijing to argue for new nuclear weapons for their own nuclear arsenals, undermining the process of disarmament.

Developing new nuclear weapons also undermines U.S. nonproliferation goals. As Rep. Ed Markey (MA), a leading congressional critic of new nuclear weapons, has stated, “America cannot credibly preach nuclear temperance from a barstool.” At a time when the United States is urging restraint in Iran and North Korea’s nuclear programs, the U.S. administration is intent on developing its own new nuclear weapons against an undefined, future threat.

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Rather than building new nuclear weapons, it is time to honor the NPT and work towards, in the words of President Reagan, the elimination of “all nuclear weapons.” As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other senior statesmen recently affirmed, “Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and practical measures toward achieving that goal would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America’s moral heritage.”³

¹ Robert Civiak, “Rumblings over the Bomb: Slippery Slope to New Nukes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 24, 2006.

² Archbishop Celestino Migliore, *Statement to the Review Conference on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, United Nations, May 4, 2005.*

³ George Shultz, William Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn and others, *A World Free of Nuclear Weapons, The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007; Page A15. Article can be found at http://www.fcni.org/issues/item.php?item_id=2252&issue_id=2.

FCNL’s website (www.fcni.org) let’s you view congressional actions, background information, advocate letters and statements, and links to other resources. The web site includes information on topics such as new weapons development, nonproliferation initiatives, nuclear weapons use policy, and weapons testing. Documents on RRW can also be found at StoptheBombPlant.org. If you do not have web access, we can mail written material to you...

The Drone and the Cross

by BRIAN TERRELL, April 05, 2012

Over Holy Week, the days before celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter, Christians are called to meditate on Jesus’ last days. On Good Friday, in churches and often in city streets, it is customary to retrace the “Way of the Cross,” symbolically following Jesus from his trial before the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate to his torture, crucifixion, death and burial. For American Christians in Holy Week, 2012, news headlines of wars in far-away places must not be seen as distractions from our meditations and liturgical observances but rather as a necessary means to realize the implications of Christ’s passion for us here and now.

The Roman Empire employed crucifixion as its preferred method of executing suspects deemed threatening to its imperial power and to the “*Pax Romana*” it imposed on the known world. The history of empires is banal and predicable even in its cruelty and the United States is more clearly than ever the successor of this imperial tradition. Empire will always be on the technological cutting edge, from bronze swords to nuclear missiles, with each advance extending the reach and the catastrophic potential of successive imperial powers, but the history of empires is really one single tragic story told over and over again with incidental variations.

Today those deemed threats to the U.S. Empire and its “*Pax Americana*” are increasingly targeted by Predator and Reaper drones armed with missiles and bombs. Just as Rome considered Jesus a “high value target” for execution, it is unlikely that today’s world empire would view Jesus’ life and teaching with any less suspicion. Were Jesus to preach today as he preached in Jerusalem two millennia ago, instead of a cross of wood the instrument of his passion might be a hellfire missile fired from a predator drone.

While the revolution Jesus preached was nonviolent, this did not matter to Rome and such distinctions are equally lost on the U.S. Empire, whose military, Homeland Security and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force

are at least as zealous in persecuting unarmed advocates for economic and political justice as they are in pursuing terrorists. Jesus called for a jubilee abolition of debt, for redistribution of wealth and for freedom to those in prison. His nonviolent stance did not keep him from meeting in dialogue with the zealots who advocated violent revolution. This would be all the evidence the U.S. Empire needs to detain an “enemy combatant” indefinitely at Guantanamo or indeed, to put him on a CIA hit list.

Mouthpieces for the present empire defend assassination by drone citing the fact that arresting some suspected threats would be difficult to impossible- they travel the desolate reaches of the empire, passing in and out of porous borders. When they do enter populated areas, they are surrounded by crowds of supporters, which translates in U.S. parlance as despicably using civilians as human shields.

The military and law enforcement authorities of Rome and its colonial client states were likewise frustrated in their attempts to track and arrest Jesus. When things got hot in Judea, Jesus and his disciples were known to slip out of the Roman Province of Judea into Herod’s Tetrarchy of Galilee and from there, hop a boat to the jurisdiction of the Decapolis. The mightiest military force on the planet in the year 33 of the current era could not arrest Jesus in Jerusalem “for fear of the crowds,” the Gospels tell us.

In order to bring him to “justice,” Rome needed to recruit and bribe one of Jesus’ inner circle for inside information and then wait to find him alone in a dark garden. That empire required a sham trial before their governor could sentence Jesus to die. Today’s mightiest empire uses unmanned drones to find and kill threats to its power with no trial and from long distances. Victims are named by the military or the CIA on evidence that is kept secret from any court. Rather than being hounded by spies and dragged to a cross by mercenary boots on the ground, threats to the U.S. Empire are now hunted by drones high in the sky, scanning the cities and the wilderness, sending high-resolution video feed to their “pilots” thousands of miles away in Nevada, California or New York and it is from that safe distance that the trigger is pulled to launch the fatal missile.

While drones are touted as weapons of precision, their Hellfire missiles and 500 pound bombs are not surgical instruments. Weddings and funerals, when attended by “high value targets” are fair game and hundreds of celebrants and mourners have been killed by drone strikes on these events in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Villages and urban neighborhoods where such “targets” are suspected to be residing or visiting are devastated along with their inhabitants. War is hell, it is admitted in moments of candor and an empire cannot allow itself to be deterred by fear of “collateral damage” from pursuing its objectives.

With the flexibility that drones offer the present empire, Rome would not have needed to wait for Jesus to surface in Jerusalem at Passover, but could have killed him at its leisure along, incidentally, with anyone in his vicinity. If they had drones, the Romans might have taken out Jesus at Cana along with the other wedding guests. A hellfire missile might have found him welcoming the children or at the funeral of his friend, Lazarus. The hit might have come as a 500 pound bomb dropped on the upper room, interrupting the last supper.

U.S. drones, it is reported, hover over the aftermath of an attack and target rescue workers and those who attempt to give the dead dignified burial. Had Rome the technical capability and lack of compunction of the U.S., Joseph of Arimathaea might have paid with his life for his work of mercy, laying the tortured corpse of Jesus in his own tomb. Mary and the women who later brought ointments to bathe and anoint Jesus’ body might never had made it to the tomb; or they might have been burned beyond recognition themselves before they could deliver the good news that the tomb was empty.

Of course this meditation is the result of wild and perhaps irresponsible speculation. I wonder, though, if it is so far off as it seems even to me. More than this I wonder what it means for me as a privileged citizen of an empire, to venerate the holy cross and to worship the tortured messiah who died on it while my government unleashes hellish droves of machines into the sky to spy and to torture and kill in my name.

Brian Terrell lives in Maloy, Iowa and is a co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence. He spent Good Fridays of 2009 and 2011 in jails in Nevada and New York after protesting at U.S. Air Force drone operation centers.

“DRONE WARRIORS”: ANOTHER THRESHOLD CROSSED

by Fr. Louis Vitale, OFM, co-founder of Nevada Desert Experience (from the December, 2008 *Desert Voices*)

Journalist Keith Rogers, in a recent article in the “Las Vegas Review Journal”, quotes Colonel Christopher Chambliss, commander of the U.S.’s 432nd Wing, in exclaiming the new MQ3 Reaper, big brother to the MQ1 Predator, the latest in the U.S. fleet of “Unmanned Airborne Vehicles.” The colonel reflects on the time nine decades ago when military leaders were beginning to grasp the value of piloted aircraft that led the U.S. to domination of airspace and ultimately the intimidation of the world through the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan.

Jonathan Schell’s latest book *The Seventh Decade* updates us on where we have come with the “atomic bomb” since that time. We have become the “Superpower” who holds the world in check through global domination with the fear of nuclear annihilation through our 12,000+ nuclear weapons available from air, land sites and sea. Noted psychiatrist and author Dr. Robert Jay Lifton has further illustrated the debilitation of the one dropping the bombs. He speaks to a severe “numbing” of the psyche that happens through the size of the weapons and the distance from the victims on the ground.

The new drones that are flown from Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas (in the fashion of a video arcade) 7,000 miles from the target extend the numbing even farther. Here young enlisted men in the Air Force sitting side by side with more experienced pilots guide missiles to their targets as in a video arcade. But these are real missiles and with the “Reaper” even carrying 500 pound bombs. Our daily newspapers and TV broadcasts show us the impact on “family compounds,” schools, and hospitals. These bring the fleeting sense of dropping a bomb from 35,000 feet to an immediate sight of bodies in plain view. Commanders report on the impact on some of the crews, especially the sensors who handle the cameras and guide the missiles to their targets with their laser beams. The commander spoke of the difficulty of some of the younger crew members as they went home to their families after the days bomb runs and the need now to hire more chaplains and psychologists for their aid.

Long time observers of the impact of the Afghanistan/Iraq war, such as humanitarian/activist Kathy Kelly, who have experienced first hand the enormous sufferings of the 2,000,000+ victims are eager to travel to Waziristan and other frontiers between Afghanistan and Pakistan to see up close what the Predator and Reaper crews see on their screens (shown lately to BBC viewers world wide as they dramatized a British Reaper crew--our coalition partners-- to their viewers in the homeland.

Here in Nevada, with the Creech headquarters of the UAV 432nd Wing nearby, part of the same land space shared with the Nevada Test Site, the bombing range operated by Nellis Air Force Base, and other sites of new and lethal weapons, the scandal of Creech’s remote and earth-shattering war, we cannot dare fail to address the damage and destruction both on the Middle East battlefield and on its own crews.

With other Nevada partners we have begun vigils at the gate to the Drone base. We have carried out signs of concern, taken a letter to the base commander Colonel Chambliss and heard their ownership of “causing groans” and making “kills.” We pray and we weep. As with recent developments of torture, this is a frontier we did not want to pass. They intimidate the world and leave us all in fear and trembling.” We are pledged to call attention to the truth of these atrocities and take active measures to put an end to their existence.