

DESERT VOICES

The Newsletter of the Nevada Desert Experience, Summer, 1990



IF THE PEOPLE ARE SILENT, THE STONES WILL CRY OUT

by Phyllis Kovacich

I feel held hostage by the desert that is in some ways bleak, in other ways beautiful, but God's creation in both ways. The only visible scars are chain link fences and signs admonishing one not to trespass. I come to this place with no preconceptions save one: I am uncomfortable with what goes on here. But my discomfort is minimal, like a flea inside my sleeve. I am removed from it; I have never seen it. I have never heard a Shoshone talk about the land that was abducted from his people. I have never, before that Saturday, when a nuclear bomb was "tested," stood at the entrance to this fenced, violated, kidnapped land during an early morning rape. But now I have. I can never be the same unconcerned, removed, apolitical, albeit Christian, woman again, for this is the Nevada Test Site where atomic bombs are exploded. I have come to protest, to say to those who do this, "stop wounding my home, my mother."

As Saturday morning unfolds, we listen to people speak to us of this violation of our Earth. We learn the deplorable facts about development of newer, more intricate weapons. My heart asks "why more" when we already have enough to destroy this planet several times over.

By Saturday evening, it is apparent that some of us are struggling with the question of civil disobedience. The action will call for some of us to remain in prayer outside the fence and others to cross over the line and be arrested. Part of me screams to cross that arbitrary line and another part screams as loudly for me to stay outside. I wonder which voice is God's. I cannot tell.

Sunday morning comes and the war still rages within me. We arrive at the test site and congregate as close as the signs

and fences will allow. We celebrate Eucharist. It seems as if the land is screaming out its pain from the previous days' wounding. The wind is howling and it is torturously cold.

Our scenario calls for us to follow a cross to the cattle guard. I had asked if I might carry the cross; now I feel blessed, chosen like Simon the Cyrenean. As we approach the "line" we stop and kneel to pray silently. Some begin to sing softly. I weep. The presence of God is very powerful.

Those who have chosen to do so cross the line. I clutch the cross. The wind pulls it from me but I do not let go. For two hours I clutch it, battling the wind. The wind and I contend for the possession of this symbol. Others offer to lift my burden. I thank them but cannot relinquish this penance. I pray, I weep, I hang on to that wood for dear life. I stand outside the gate. "I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want but what I hate." (Romans 7:15)

As personally devastated as I feel, I am not in despair for I have never experienced such prayer. I have never seen such hope spring from our faith, hope which in turn calls forth our prayer.

I stare at Mother Earth. I cannot see her scars but I know they are there. They are etched in my spirit. How can I forget? Why would I want to? I am held hostage by this desert experience.

I can never be free until we stop this rape, this crucifixion of our island earth.

Phyllis Kovacich participated in the Catholic Peace Coalition Weekend (March 10-11) during LDE IX. Our thanks to Phyllis for granting us permission to share this reflection.

WESTERN SHOSHONES FIGHT FOR THEIR LAND

When Western Shoshone chiefs agreed to the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley, they thought they were agreeing to a legally binding treaty which assured them title to their ancestral lands. But for the next 117 years, the US government slowly whittled away at the Shoshone's land rights. The treaty was never amended or abrogated. It remained in force while the federal government systematically violated both the letter and spirit of the treaty, and the spirit of the Shoshone's land, which includes the area presently occupied by the Nevada Test Site.

Probably the most shameless attempt to defraud the Western Shoshone people occurred in 1979 when the government tried to pay the Western Shoshone \$25 million -- just fifteen cents per acre -- for LAND THAT HAS NEVER BEEN FOR SALE. The Western Shoshone refused the offer. But the government put the money into a trust fund and called the transaction complete. In 1985 negotiations began to address Western Shoshones' land grievances. The negotiations broke down in 1986 when the US government was unwilling to assume a realistic position concerning the Ruby Valley Treaty.

All violations of the Treaty of Ruby Valley concern the Western Shoshone National Council, but the acts of greatest concern are the nuclear weapons tests at the Test Site. In 1986 the council began to issue permits to anti-nuclear activists at the Nevada Test Site. Thus, the Shoshones informed the US government that it cannot accuse someone of trespass on land it does not own. The government of the Western Shoshone has shown that it is the US who is trespassing.

For more information, contact The Western Shoshone National Council, Box 68, Duckwater, NV 89314; (702) 863-0227.

LENTEN DESERT EXPERIENCE CONCLUDES INCOURTROOM & TEST SITE

Two hundred people sang "Peace is flowing like a river..." as they filed into the Federal Court in Las Vegas, Nevada, on Good Friday morning, April 13, for the sentencing of Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale and Br. Gary Sponholtz. After standing in solidarity with Vitale and Sponholtz while Judge Lloyd George sentenced them to two months in a half-way house, the witnesses went to the Nevada Test Site to continue their Holy Week pilgrimage.

Joining a group of persons who had walked 65 miles carrying a cross from Las Vegas to the Test Site, the Holy Week witnesses planted the cross at the gate, sang and prayed as 53 persons crossed the fence into the bomb-testing desert. They were arrested, cited and released on site. Charges are expected to be dropped.

Fr. Louie and Br. Gary, together with presidential candidate Erik Thompson of Milan, Minnesota, had been found guilty of trespass for their action of reconsecrating a building formerly used as a chapel in the village of Mercury on the test site. Thompson has been sentenced to 90 days in jail, a \$5,000 fine, plus \$1,200 monthly incarceration costs. Thompson began serving his sentence April 30, Sponholtz and Vitale April 27.

The Good Friday events were part of an intense week of prayer, dance, scripture study and pilgrimage sponsored by the Nevada Desert Experience. Kathryn Scarano of Riverside, California, Director of Kairos Dancers; and Chad Myers of Pasadena, California, author of *Binding the Strong Man*, a commentary on Mark's Gospel, led some 50 retreatants in meditation, movement and study through the week, with afternoons given to the walking pilgrimage from Las Vegas to the Test site.

An Easter celebration marked the conclusion of the Lenten Desert Experience series of events with the theme, "When Stones Cry Out". During the 40-day Lenten period, more than 1,300 people from many religious communities including the Catholic Peace Coalition, Friends, Brethren, Mennonites, Franciscans, Methodists, and others participated in the witness, with 469 arrested. Also included in the programs were presentations by Pauline Esteves and Corban Harney of the Western Shoshone nation, and Kairat Umarov of Kazakhstan, representing the "Nevada-Semipalatinsk" movement resisting nuclear testing in the USSR.

NDE Staff members Mary Lehman and Peter Ediger are planning to participate in the International Citizens Congress for a Nuclear Test Ban to be held in Kazakhstan, USSR, May 24-27, 1990. The Congress will seek to strengthen international movement toward a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.



TAKE ACTION TO PROPEL TEST BAN TREATY CONFERENCE

A "Meeting of the Parties" to the Partial Test Ban Treaty will be held May 29-June 8, 1990 in New York at UN headquarters to prepare for the comprehensive test ban conference.

The first full session will be January 7-18, 1991, also at the UN. The US has agreed to attend only this session, so additional sessions can only happen if the US changes its position.

ACTION: Between May 29-June 4, send telegrams to the US Ambassador to the UN with the message: "The American people want an end to nuclear weapons testing. Support a CTB at the Test Ban Treaty Conference." Send to Ambassador Thomas Pickering, United Nations, New York, NY 10017. Ask local groups to join you. Every telegram makes a difference.

MORE ACTION: Senators Claiborne Pell and Mark Hatfield are introducing Senate Joint Resolution 287, "requesting the President of the US to negotiate agreements to achieve early prohibition of nuclear explosions." Co-sponsors are Mitchell, Jeffords, John Kerry, Kennedy, Simon and Cranston. Write your Senators and Representatives urging them to support the resolution, or letting them know you applaud their support of it. The House Members have yet to choose sponsors.

For more information, contact the US Comprehensive Test Ban Coalition, 1000 16th St NW, Ste 810, Washington DC 20036. 202-862-4956. Fax 202-785-3942.



A Great Big Thank You

THANK YOU! to all who responded to our appeal for funds in the last issue of "Desert Voices". We received \$1,600 for the NDE budget and \$2,200 for staff travel to the USSR for the International Congress for a Nuclear Test Ban. Your support is much appreciated. Mary and Peter will report on the Congress in the next Newsletter.

Desert Voices

Desert Voices is the newsletter of the non-profit Nevada Desert Experience.

Your letters, articles, announcements of coming events, poetry or humorous pieces are welcome. Send them (and a stamped, self-addressed envelope) to Desert Voices, Box 4487, Las Vegas, NV 89127-0487, phone (702) 646-4814.

Newsletter Staff: Mary Lehman, Peter Ediger, Leslie and Jon Klumiré

FOR WHOM TOLL THE BELLS?

By Ed Fallon

Throughout history, the tolling of church bells has signaled an occasion of either great joy or great sorrow.

As drastic changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union herald a new age of peace and freedom, a network of twenty Iowa congregations are expressing their opinion that global tensions can be further reduced by a comprehensive, global nuclear test ban. To call attention to this issue, the participant churches have begun the solemn tolling of bells each time any nation conducts a nuclear test.

The network is called "People of Faith for a Nuclear Test Ban." It is endorsed by eight denominations and coordinated by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Congregations ring their bells or make an announcement after each nuclear test. Thus far, the bells have tolled twice this year.

On January 27, a group of 20 braved the cold to gather on the steps of St. Ambrose Cathedral in Des Moines, announcing the commencement of the effort. Those present listened to remarks by three CND members. The speakers shared their views on the need for a complete ban on nuclear testing, and on the faith community's responsibility in this process.

After a closing prayer, the bells of St. Ambrose tolled for several minutes to recognize the moral and spiritual crisis created by continued nuclear testing.

HALF-WAY QUESTIONS FROM A HALF-WAY SENTENCE

(The sentence for Louie Vitale and Gary Sponholtz for going to the Nevada Test Site to reconsecrate a chapel building converted for use as a laboratory for nuclear weapons testing: two months in a half-way house.)

Why are our brothers given a half-way sentence
for going all the way to worship the One who is the Way?

Are we half-way Christian
in a society half-way human
living a half-way life
seeing a half-way truth
walking a half-way way?

Is this half-way justice from a half-way court
where half-way truth becomes half-way lies?
Is this half-way freedom in a half-way land
where half-way laws serve half-way people?

When will we go all the way?

Peter J. Ediger

On March 14, at 4 pm, the first nuclear test of the year was observed by the tolling of bells in various parts of Des Moines. Congregations without bells made their observance at services later that week.

"People of Faith for a Nuclear Test Ban" is a growing network. CND hopes to increase participation to 100 congregations by the end of the year. Educational efforts within the congregation will include announcements, presentations and bulletin inserts. Anyone interested in learning more about this effort is encouraged to contact Neva Jorgensen, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 1548 8th St, Des Moines, IA 50314; 515-282-5851

Ed Fallon is Director of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a grassroots organization with 650 members in Des Moines, Iowa.

(Editor's Note: The Testing Alert Hotline, of the American Peace Test, keeps you informed on nuclear weapons tests after they have occurred. For an informative recording: 702-731-9646. To be part of the network informed at the time of a nuclear weapons test in Nevada, call 702-731-9644. Please leave a message until Stephane can return your call.)



1991: THREE MAJOR EVENTS

LENTEN DESERT EXPERIENCE X: CELEBRATING A DECADE IN THE DESERT

We are inviting all the groups and people who have been to Lenten Desert Experiences the past nine years to join together for a united witness the weekend of March 8-10, 1991. There will be opportunities for constituent groups to meet separately on Thursday or Friday, with joint meetings Saturday and Sunday. Plans are in process; send us your suggestions; reserve the date.

CORPUS CHRISTI DESERT EXPERIENCE

A call is going out to Women and Men Religious to come to the desert for a Faith and Resistance Retreat, June 17-21, 1991. For more information contact Groundwork for a Just World, Detroit MI 48124. (313) 822-2055.

AUGUST DESERT WITNESS

Annual Commemoration of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, early August, program to be announced.

LENTEN DESERT EXPERIENCE AUDIO TAPES, AND MORE:

Audio tapes are available for some Lenten 1990 events, for \$4.50 each, which includes postage. (Quality of tapes may vary; refunds given for returns due to dissatisfaction.)

Louis Vitale, OFM: 'Peacemaking, Community and God'--Keynote of Episcopallans and Friends Weekend

Mary Luke Tobin, SL: 'Integration of Prayer and Action'--Keynote of Ash Wednesday Eve

Retired Lt. Col Thomas Carew: 'The Arms Race as It Is, Was, and Does Not Need to Be'--Keynote of Catholic Peace Coalition Weekend

Joanne Schatzlein, OSF: 'Clare, Mirror of the Desert'--A Keynote of Franciscan Weekend

Murray Bodo, OFM: 'Francis, Embracing the Creatures of the Desert'--A Keynote of Franciscan Weekend

Concert, Franciscan Weekend: Rufino Zaragoza, OFM, Conv. Jesse Manibusan, Karen Miller, Tim Hilgeman

'A Fertile Desert,' a 12-minute video based on the script of NDE's 'Notes on Nonviolence' is also available. This depicts our prayerful nonviolent campaign to end nuclear weapon testing. \$22.50 for purchase, or contact us about rental use.

T-shirts are available from past Lenten Desert Experiences in limited sizes.

1989: 'A Time to be Silent, A Time to Speak' in yellow (no small yellow) or pink; 50-50 blend of polyester and cotton only, \$5.00 (Includes mailing).

1990: 'When Stones Cry Out' in apricot (if ordering large, indicate whether extra large or medium is second choice) or blue (no large available in any fabric, and no extra large in 50-50 blend), available generally in 100% cotton, or 50-50 blend of polyester and cotton, \$8.00 (Includes mailing).

Make checks payable to Nevada Desert Experience, P.O. Box 4487, Las Vegas, NV 89127, or call 702-646-4814. Thank you!

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