

## 263: Conversation with John Dear, SJ, on Envisioning a Peaceful World

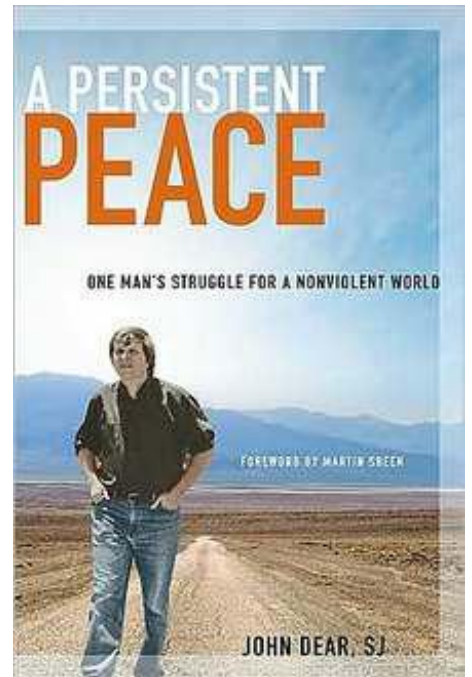
“Courage,” Martin Sheen writes in the introduction to John Dear’s memoir, “is often described as the first virtue from which so many other virtues flow. It is certainly the most admired virtue and the one most devoutly wished for, and while its source remains a mystery, courage is universally acknowledged as the very best part of the human character. Courage is breathtakingly abundant in John Dear.”

In more than a dozen previous books, Dear has written extensively about the nature of peace. He also has written inspirational books about spiritual heroes like Gandhi and the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero. Now, after a quarter of a century in the peace-making trenches himself, including multiple arrests at protests and time spent behind bars for his activism, Dear has written his memoirs.

By his own description, he wrote, rewrote, cut and revised the manuscript until it became the kind of lean and muscular story we have in “*A Persistent Peace: One Man’s Struggle for a Nonviolent World*.” In Dear’s 4-page introduction to his autobiography, he takes us through his first 20 years from his birth in 1959 in North Carolina to 1979 and “the din of the never-ending fraternity party” that dominated his life as he started at Duke University.

It was during his time in that Duke frat house, however, that his life was transformed while reading about the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born American canonized as a Catholic saint. Suddenly, as Dear read about her heroic life in the basement of his frat house one day, he suddenly realized: “Mother Seton had helped hundreds, had influenced thousands, and through her life with Jesus and her service to suffering humanity had found purpose and meaning. That must mean that I could, too.”

And that’s only page 19 of this 430-page tale. This is a big, bold spiritual adventure story. It’s written to rouse people to action in this overwhelming era of global change early in this new millennium. Over the next 400 pages, Dear takes us around the world with him from one daring protest to another, from one global conflict to another, from one center of activism to another.



### Here are highlights of our Conversation With John Dear, SJ:

DAVID: John, there are so many spiritual adventures in this book, let’s start with this question: Can you give us an example of one of your own favorite adventures in the book? Can you give readers an example of something that stands out for you?

JOHN: Well, it was a spiritual adventure to write the book and not just to live the life. I’ve been through so much that it was a real challenge to turn it into a book. I’ve just turned 49 and I realized that, as I started to put this all down on paper, I had to sort through all I’ve been through.

For me, the spiritual life is a journey to peace and that eventually involves all of the human race and all of creation. So, there’s a lot to say.

I grappled with this problem as I worked on the book. When I went through all my notes from my life, I wound up writing about 800 pages, then a lot was cut. The published book is half of what I wrote.



I write in the introduction of the book: What is the story of my life? Is it when I was at Duke and I had this conversion experience? Or, was it when I was in Israel? Or when I was in El Salvador? Or when I went into a military base and hammered on nuclear weapons in a protest and was facing 20 years in prison? Or was it in New Mexico, when soldiers surrounded the rectory where I was living?

DAVID: I'll tell you: Readers may disagree with some of your political and religious stands, but they won't be bored with your book.

JOHN: I like that phrase you used: "a spiritual adventure story." Life is an adventure. If you're going to stand up for peace in a world of total war, then everyday is a day to practice nonviolence. Every day is an adventure.

If I had to pick one experience that sticks out for me, I would have to say it was entering Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in 1993.

DAVID: [The base's Web site](#) says it serves as "home to the multi-role, all-weather F-15E Strike Eagle and provides worldwide deployable aircraft and personnel capable of executing combat missions in support of the Aerospace Expeditionary Force." Your book dramatically describes your sneaking onto the base with other protesters, fully expecting to be arrested, and approaching a giant F-15E aircraft that can carry nuclear weapons into war. In your hand, you held a little hammer inscribed with the words "Swords into Plowshares" and "Love Your Enemies."

JOHN: We were trying to fulfill the commandment of Isaiah to beat swords into plowshares by hammering just once or twice on a fighter-bomber with that little hammer. With that act, my whole life was changed. I'm now an ex-con, a convicted felon. Did time in jail.

I was stepping into the Acts of the Apostles. It's a great adventure, learning how to live out these great texts from the Bible — of actually showing what it means to try to beat swords into plowshares, to love your enemies.

On December 7, 1993, four of us, including the late Philip Berrigan walked onto this Air Force base in North Carolina and we wound up walking right into the middle of thousands of soldiers in the middle of war games. We walked right up to a nuclear-capable fighter-bomber and hammered on it. After hitting the F-15E a couple of times, we put down our hammer and we were surrounded by thousands of soldiers.

We were arrested, tried and found guilty in two felony convictions. Our message throughout this whole experience was that the future of the world depends upon nuclear disarmament and using those funds for the eradication of poverty and hunger around the world.

DAVID: How many times have you been arrested?

JOHN: I've been arrested about 75 times.

DAVID: How many people have you spoken to in the course of your travels and demonstrations, sermons and other talks?

JOHN: I've spoken to millions of people. But it takes more than speaking to people. Sooner or later, you have to engage the law itself that legalizes nuclear weapons. How do you do that? That's the question we've explored. We're going beyond Dr. King and Gandhi in their understanding. We're actually touching the weapons and then entering into the courts to see if some court can find us not guilty and can find nuclear weapons themselves illegal.

DAVID: We're publishing a book this fall, "Ian Fleming's Seven Deadlier Sins," in which scholar and pastoral counselor Benjamin Pratt writes about Fleming's own prophetic writings about the deadly sins of our modern era.

I'm greatly impressed by Fleming's conclusion that the greatest sin may be "accidie," sometimes translated as "sloth." But what Fleming really was talking about was a sense of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming forces of evil — the temptation to slip into inactivity in such a situation.

In reading your book, people may think of these experiences you've had as overly dramatic perhaps. But I



understand what you're describing here as your deliberate spiritual choice of taking action — of not giving in to a feeling of being overwhelmed. Am I right?

JOHN: My point is that not only are people dying around the planet, but we have died in so many ways with them. Gandhi would say we've lost our souls. That was the effect on the people who first built the tools of atomic war. This was the loss of their souls.

We're facing the death of our imagination. One of the effects of a culture of war is the loss of imagination among the people. We can no longer even imagine a world without nuclear weapons or a world without war. And yet that is precisely what we are called to do — to imagine the end of war.

I love reading from the abolitionists — these fantastic people, many of them Christians, who went out in public and declared: "We are announcing the abolition of slavery!" It's incredible what they did.

And, at the time, others said: "What? Are you crazy? Some people aren't even people. They were born to be slaves. We will have slavery forever. You're crazy!"

And to this, the abolitionists said: "No, a new world is coming." And they gave up their lives, some of them, to proclaim this message.

My friends and I are new abolitionists. We are proclaiming a vision of peace in a world of total blindness. We are announcing the coming of a new world without war. And everybody may say we're crazy, but we are insisting on the vision and we are pointing the way and we are trying to help one another turn toward this new reality. That's our only hope and it is our Christian duty.



DAVID: That's not the message that most people around the world today are getting from media.

JOHN: No, our culture keeps telling us: You are somebody when you can buy this — this car or this product. Or, our culture keeps telling us: Go off and kill somebody and you'll be doing something important.

But for me, the only authority is Jesus who tells us: You are a beloved son or daughter of God and because of that you must go on and become a peacemaker.

Now, most of us immediately say: Heavens, no! We can't do that.

But I'm saying: At least, I'm going to try to do it. OK, I am a beloved son of God, too, so I'm going to go out and love my enemies.

DAVID: You're preaching from a Christian perspective, but you're talking about almost universal religious teachings. Perhaps they're not taken seriously in our world — but they're almost universal in the world's great faiths.

JOHN: The No. 1 Truth of the spiritual life is this: We are all — every human being on the planet — an infinitely loved son or daughter of the God of peace. And that means the No. 2 Truth of the spiritual life is: Every human being on the planet is our sister or brother. This goes way beyond national boundaries or church boundaries. It goes beyond gender or race.

This is the truth of reality: Every human being is our sister or brother and we are already reconciled. The gift of peace was given years ago. So, this leads us to the No. 3 Truth: You can never hurt anyone ever again. Much less remain silent when people are being hurt. There are 35 wars going on around the world today. Millions of children are starving. There are 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world. There's global warming. Violence is leading us toward the brink. There is no question: The spiritual truth is that we have to be involved in this world because our brothers and sisters are suffering.





DAVID: You lay this out as a challenge not just to people who regard themselves as peace activists. You lay this out in very broad terms.

JOHN: I think the duty now of every priest, minister, pastor, clergyperson in the United States who says that they are Christian is to return to preaching the Gospel message of Jesus. And that message is a message of nonviolence, a message of peacemaking. I'm talking about a deep-down hunger of people to hear the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes and the meaning of Jesus on the cross as nonviolent resistance to the power of empire.

My experience of preaching this message around the world is that most people and especially poor people are desperate for hope. They've just never heard this message before. It's a different kind of messages than the Madison Avenue church-marketing experts are telling churches to preach.

DAVID: It's a very provocative message to preach. Next week, we're going to publish an interview with the evangelical author Rob Bell, who in many ways is preaching the same thing you're proclaiming out of your Catholic tradition.

JOHN: This is a call to the whole human race to breathe in peace, speak peace and live everyday for the rest of our lives on a journey to peace.

This is what it means to be human.

I've talked about this with the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. He talks about this as mindfulness and he teaches that peace is very step. Every step actually can be peace.

I'm talking in Christian language, but however we look at it, this is the truth of reality and the way forward in the spiritual life: to be at peace and live at peace and to speak the truth of peace from now on.

And, as we go, this is the way to let peace wash back over us.

## CARE TO READ MORE?

Read [our review of John's book](#) in our ReadTheSpirit bookstore.

Visit [John's own Web site](#) where there's a detailed chronology of his life and lots to read about his various stances on behalf of peace through the years. The site includes many of his speeches and sermons.

## PHOTO CAPTIONS:

Cover of Dear's new book is at top.

From left: Pete Seeger, Martin Sheen, Daniel Berrigan and John Dear gather in 1999 for a protest against the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. Courtesy of Loyola Press from the new book.

Next, an F-15E in flight.

In 1993, Dear is arrested at the gates of Livermore Lab in California. Photo courtesy of Loyola Press.

In 1989, Dear takes part in a protest at the Federal Building in San Francisco. Five Jesuits led 100 church people to kneel in prayer on behalf of six Salvadoran Jesuits and two women who were massacred. Photo courtesy of Loyola Press.

The bottom photo shows Dear meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh in 1998. Photo courtesy of Loyola Press.

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