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Speaking Peace: Finding Words that Breach Walls

In 1918 California Senator Hiram Johnson declared, "The first casualty when war comes is truth," echoing Samuel Johnson's similar declaration, "Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages" (The Idler, 1758). War produces propaganda, and propaganda makes words less usable as instruments of authentic discernment, less capable of complex definitions, less available as a currency of "common sense" as they become the property of spin doctors who turn them into marketable buzz words. Christians who inhabit an environment pervaded with propaganda surely need to help one another develop strategies, often subversive, for navigating the minefields of increasingly Orwellian public discourse. One of the ways to do this is to apprentice ourselves to those who are doing it with skill, integrity, and courage, sometimes at great risk, where possible with wit and winsomeness, each finding his or her own delicate balance between raised fist and open arms as they walk the streets or post their blogs or speak from hearts trained by hard witnessing to those who are listening and to those who are not.

Since the U.S. is now perpetually at war (a term that has lost much of its constitutional precision), and media coverage of wars is largely shaped by
corporate sponsors with vested interests in the profits of war and "imbedded reporting," truth telling has once again become an endangered and dangerous enterprise. To speak peace in time of war is always construed by some supporters of those wars as disloyal, unpatriotic, even treasonous, and as unsupportive of those who put their lives on the line. Consider the fate of conscientious objectors in World War II, or of the Viet Nam “winter soldiers” who testified to atrocities from which they struggled to dissociate themselves, or of troops in Iraq who wrote home begging family and colleagues not to take their place among the supporters of a conflict riddled with hidden agendas (Goodman).

No matter how justifiable the violence and human and environmental costs of war may seem, both Christian teaching and care for the common good mandate every possible effort first to seek peaceable solutions to conflict and never to make war for the sake of profit.

In this paper I’d like to look at the strategies of four people who, in their writing and speaking, model what seem to me effective approaches to "speaking peace” in the midst of highly charged public conversations about war, power, inequality, and common threats that lace those conversations with fear. In many sites of conflict—military, intellectual, and spiritual—“speaking peace” entails not only giving voice and comfort to the suffering, but also speaking truth to those who wield political and economic power, and in doing so, navigating heavily mined fields of discourse and media management.

In reflecting on their strategies of speaking peace, how they have challenged the rhetoric of war and the narratives and myths that support war-making, often by reverting to notions of war that bear little relation to the high-
tech conflicts we now wage, I hope to find encouragement for all of us to be more active peacemakers in word and deed, and instruction about how to do that. Peace strategies vary as widely as military strategies, of course, and significant distinctions may be made between those whose focus is activism aimed at promoting peace by opposing war; those whose objective is reconciliation between warring groups who have to live in proximity; those whose work lies in sustaining life-giving work and fostering compassionate community within regions of violence; those whose efforts are aimed at dismantling and reconceiving the economic infrastructures that depend on war for profit; and those who seek to pursue and promote peace at a spiritual level through prayer, meditation, fasting, and loving-kindness, creating islands of peace by modeling it. Thus some peacemaking is forceful, confrontational, and, at times, offensive. Some peacemaking is so quiet, local, and even hidden, it may risk the appearance of being ineffectual. I would like to proceed here on the assumption that, given the scale of destruction we are now witnessing after decades of depleted uranium, land mines, white phosphorus, daisy cutters, drones, and failed diplomacy, we need peacemakers of all kinds, silent or shrill, those with raised fists and those with bowed heads, those who stay at home and pray and those who risk dysentery and deluge to go to sites of violence. They all face the common challenge of finding ways to “speak peace” to those who long for peace and need encouragement, as well as to those who have become habituated to war and numb to its horrors. The latter may need to hear a persuasive word to help them rediscover that longing.
Wendell Berry

One of Wendell Berry’s more challenging collections of essays, *Standing by Words*, offers a long look at language as a litmus test of cultural health. In the title essay he links “two epidemic illnesses of our time . . . the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons” to the disintegration of language. “My concern,” he explains, “is for the accountability of language—hence for the accountability of the users of language” (Berry, “Standing,” 24). In his own considerable corpus of essays, poetry and novels, he has held himself to a high standard of accountability, committed to plain accessible language, free of jargon, grounded in and respectful of historical and etymological layers of meaning, often, but without pretension, borrowing cadences or images from the King James Bible, Milton, or Shakespeare. Known to many as a farmer-poet who writes about land and community, Berry has in the past decade focused more frequently than before on the matter of war and peace. Shortly after the devastation of 9/11, in the midst of the administration’s hasty preparations for invasion of Iraq, Berry wrote an essay called “The Failure of War” in which he challenges not only the enterprise of modern warfare, but, more explicitly, the terms in which Americans have justified war in a “century of war, militarism, and political terror” (Berry, “Failure”) Berry’s own rhetorical strategies in that essay offer an education in “speaking peace.”

The most obvious of these is his refusal to speak in accepted euphemisms. He acknowledges that language that promotes peace is difficult in an environment where war talk has become the dominant discourse, and where the costs of war have ceased to be reckoned except in terms of corporate profits on
the one hand and a vaguely defined notion of “national security” on the other. Enabling people who have normalized war to reconceive peace, perhaps on terms and on a scale we haven’t had to consider before, requires exposure of euphemisms for what they are: cover-ups. The problem with euphemistic language, of course, is that the more routinely it is used, the less apparent it is to speaker and listener that it is covering something up. We get dangerously used to the identification of heavily armed squads of soldiers as “peacekeeping teams,” and to accepting the term “peace talks” to refer to hardball negotiations aimed at protecting special interests where veiled threats are exchanged, and forms of blackmail countenanced. Exposing euphemisms, even by a gesture as simple as enclosing them in quotes when using them, resists the normalization of language that deliberately underplays the suffering or costs of war.

Challenging the propaganda that was laying the ground for invasion of Iraq without any plausible evidence of Iraqi connection to those atrocities or possession of the much-discussed “weapons of mass destruction,” Berry pointedly identifies common terms that have been bent to fit private agendas—sometimes turned altogether inside-out. So, for instance, he writes, “…it is hard not to doubt the efficacy of modern war as a solution to any problem except that of retribution—the ‘justice’ of exchanging one damage for another.” Later and more explicitly in the same piece he offers another such term for critical scrutiny: “By diplomacy we mean invariably ultimatums for peace backed by the threat of war. It is always understood that we stand ready to kill those with whom we are ‘peacefully negotiating.’” And again: “‘Casualties’ are so widely distributed among our population as hardly to be noticed.” And finally, “We pay war taxes also in time of ‘peace.’” All the terms in quotes—“justice,” “diplomacy,”
“casualties,” “peaceful negotiation,” and even “peace” itself—have been systematically and deliberately misused, he points out, for the purpose of justifying a questionable and costly war and making it palatable to a gullible public. “Acts of violence committed in ‘justice’ or in affirmation of ‘rights’ or in defense of ‘peace,’” he writes, “do not end violence. They prepare and justify its continuation.”

In a sense, much of the essay is a reclamation project, retrieving words from common and deceptive misapplication. “Cost” is one of those—a term he insistently broadens beyond simple reference to money. Skeptical about the legitimacy of the current “defense” program, he asks, “to what extent the cost even of a successful war of national defense—in life, money, material, foods, health, and (inevitably) freedom—may amount to a national defeat.” An honest dialogue about the costs of war has to include all those dimensions, including the so-called “collateral damage”—a term that has conveniently obscured or diminished the deaths of thousands of civilians, including many children. He similarly insists on some accounting behind the term “acceptable losses,” a way, he says, of “externalizing” the costs of war so as not to have to include them in the reckoning.

One passage in the essay offers a particularly useful example of Berry’s unapologetic criticism of contemporary war-making while also illustrating a strong commitment to a vision of peace that goes beyond simple protest—or, perhaps we should say that reclaims the idea of protest as speaking for—not simply against. “[M]ost apologists for war,” he writes,
imply in their public speeches a mathematics or an accounting of war. Thus by its suffering in the Civil War, the North is said to have ‘paid for’ the emancipation of the slaves and the preservation of the Union. Thus we may speak of our liberty as having been ‘bought’ by the bloodshed of patriots. I am fully aware of the truth in such statements. I know that I am one of many who have benefited from painful sacrifices made by other people, and I would not like to be ungrateful. Moreover, I am a patriot myself and I know that the time may come for any of us when we must make extreme sacrifices for the sake of liberty—a fact confirmed by the fates of Gandhi and King.

But still I am suspicious of this kind of accounting. . . . though our leaders in war always assume that there is an acceptable price, there is never a previously stated level of acceptability. The acceptable price, finally, is whatever is paid.

It is easy to see the similarity between this accounting of the price of war and our usual accounting of ‘the price of progress.’ . . . If that price includes the diminishment of privacy and the increase of government secrecy, so be it. If it means a radical reduction in the number of small businesses and the virtual destruction of the farm population, so be it. If it means the devastation of whole regions by extractive industries, so be it. If it means that a handful of people should own more billions of wealth than is owned by all of the world’s poor, so be it.
But let us have the candor to acknowledge that what we call ‘the economy’ or ‘the free market’ is less and less distinguishable from warfare.

Berry makes several deft moves in this passage that do the double work of challenging warfare and simultaneously offering a vision of peace. Focusing on the mathematical language of accounting that has long belonged to conventional war rhetoric, he both exposes the way that metaphor obscures devious question-begging and utter lack of accountability and affirms by implication the pricelessness of those things we glibly speak of in terms of price. Naming the forfeitures we have recently suffered—loss of privacy, loss of transparency, loss of farms and small businesses and living soil—also affirms the value of those forms of freedom and wealth. The mention of Gandhi and King as two who paid the price of liberty challenges the idea of the “war hero” with images of two “peace heroes” whose track records in empowering the poor and serving justice can hardly be doubted.

Berry’s stance is prophetic: he speaks truths many do not want to hear, names the collective sins and failures that have implicated us all in evil, and offers a clear vision of what must be repented and reclaimed before it is too late. He does not, he assures us, think there is an easy answer to the moral and political dilemmas we have created. But he does suggest some simple steps toward amelioration: “We would be less absurd if we took better care of things. We would be less absurd if we founded our public policies upon an honest description of our needs and our predicament . . . . We would be less absurd if our leaders would consider in good faith the proven alternatives to violence.”
The words with which he ends his essay are not his own. They are taken from scripture—a device that can, of course, be used to good purpose or ill—by way of summary: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” In a public conversation where scripture has been invoked far too often to justify killing, this, too, is an act of reclamation in its reaffirmation that the faith tradition so many of us claim is rooted and grounded in an ethic of love, forgiveness, and peace that is fundamentally incompatible with the kinds of wars we now wage.

**Arundhati Roy**

Arundhati Roy, a novelist, essayist, and international speaker whose concerns focus on India’s poor and on colonized people around the world, writes of state- and corporate-sponsored violence with similar intention to identify strategic misuse of common language; one can take the measure of her deep compassion for the plight of the poor who live under the shadow of tankers and drones in her indignation at the greed, swathed in finely spun language, that keeps those poor invisible and powerless. “Donald Rumsfeld said that his mission in the War Against Terror,” she observes “was to persuade the world that Americans must be allowed to continue their way of life. . . . The American Way of Life is simply not sustainable. Because it doesn’t acknowledge that there is a world beyond America” (Roy, *War Talk*). And yet the term seems so innocuous; “protecting our way of life” seems a natural and human thing to do,
as long as we don’t inquire too closely into a way of life that consumes more resources than any other on earth, fills the air with carbon, the oceans with plastics, and sweatshops with child labor.

In another piece written about the same time, “War is Peace,” she takes on two other key terms that played a key role in post-9/11 war propaganda:

The 'evidence' against the terrorists was shared amongst friends in the 'Coalition'. After conferring, they announced that it didn’t matter whether or not the 'evidence' would stand up in a court of law. Thus, in an instant, were centuries of jurisprudence carelessly trashed. (Roy, “War is Peace”)

The cavalier dismissal of standards of evidence, which begins in misapplication of the term to sketchy information hastily cobbled together from unreliable sources, has had long-term and costly consequences in Iraq, where no “weapons of mass destruction” were ever found. Similarly, the pretense that a “coalition” of nations came about by duly considered agreement on information, policies, and by democratic process has made less credible the very notion of what alliance entails and means. Careless use of these two nouns has had lasting consequences in their legitimation of costly and dubious battle.

In her 2003 book, War Talk, Roy energetically further considers the half-truths and dubious claims of world governments and corporations she recognizes as deeply complicit in war profiteering. Part of what she finds offensive about discussions of war in the mass media is the routine trivialization of it: “While we wait for rain, for football, for justice, the old generals and eager boy-anchors on TV talk of first-strike and second-strike capabilities as though
they’re discussing a family board game” (Roy, War Talk, 2). This is a point Paul Fussell emphasized in his now-classic book on World War I, The Great War and Modern Memory, in which he points out how persistent were the analogies between the fields of battle and the playing fields of English public schools, and how effective the war-as-game metaphor proved to be in domesticating violence and marshaling public acceptance of what was in fact an atrocity and a thinly disguised absurdity of unprecedented proportions.

Roy takes on the word “war” itself, considering the consequences of its application to undeclared, secretly orchestrated, non-negotiated, unbounded programs aimed at world domination, like the “War on Terror” that effectively provides a carte blanche to initiate aggression wherever “suspected terrorists”—another conveniently undefined term—are “harbored.” “The underlying principle of the War Against Terror, the very notion that war is an acceptable reaction to terrorism, has ensured that terrorists in the subcontinent now have the power to trigger a nuclear war” (Roy, War Talk, 4). If you call it war, in other words, you make it into a war. “Any government’s condemnation of terrorism,” she goes on, “is only credible if it shows itself to be responsive to persistent, reasonable, closely argued, nonviolent dissent” (Roy, War Talk, 13). If we are really against terror, she suggests, we must distinguish our own strategies from those of terrorists and dictators.

Like Berry, Roy often makes her point by widening the frame and connecting the dots, refusing to allow “war” to be discussed independently of the many ways in which what we may like to think of as peacetime enterprises are perpetuating warfare because they have become dependent on it: “In the twenty-first century,” she writes, “the connection between religious
fundamentalism, nuclear nationalism, and the pauperization of whole populations because of corporate globalization is becoming impossible to ignore” (Roy, *War Talk*, 14). One must stop over such sentences, of which there are many, and consider what, exactly, that connection consists of. Similarly, she connects the fate of humankind to the earth’s other creatures, widening the terms of the conversation to include far more than immediate measures of human welfare, and reminding us that our welfare is not separable from that of other orders: “Never counted in the ‘costs’ of war are the dead birds, the charred animals, the murdered fish, incinerated insects, poisoned water sources, destroyed vegetation. Rarely mentioned is the arrogance of the human race toward other living things with which it shares this planet” (Roy, *War Talk*, 95). The breadth of her vision, both of destruction and of what healing would require, is daunting, to be sure, but also exhilarating. She calls her readers to a holistic understanding of the common hope of surviving, thriving, and living peaceably in a world where political boundaries obscure our deeper commitments of stewardship.

Always a global thinker, Roy speaks of India and of the U.S. as prime examples of a political dynamic that is irreversibly transnational, and by doing so insists upon a vision of peace that also transcends nationalism. Like Berry, she calls for allegiance to place, people, and a local beloved community over against ideological patriotism. “Can we not find it in ourselves,” she asks, “to love a land instead of just patrolling a territory?” (Roy, *War Talk*, 36)

As a novelist and storyteller, Roy recognizes that stories are what we live by; every culture has master narratives in which myth and history entwine like strands of DNA. The public narrative “colonizes us.” If we seek peace, therefore, we need to revisit and revise those stories that have become our place
of habitation, consider how closely our actual experience aligns with them, and, reflecting on that experience, tell our own. “There can never be a single story,” she insists. “There are only ways of seeing”—an observation that suggests the importance always of challenging, modifying, or at least complementing official, sponsored narratives with those that are more local, personal, concrete, and untied to power and privilege (Roy, War Talk, 46).

Part of Roy’s effectiveness as an advocate for authentic democracy—a term she claims has been “twisted into something unrecognizable”—is that she cites a wide repertoire of facts and statistics that make it impossible simply to descend to abstract ideological disputes. “Of the top hundred biggest economies, fifty-one are corporations, not countries,” she reminds us. “The top one percent of the world has the same combined income as the bottom fifty-seven percent and the disparity is growing” (Roy, War Talk, 70). More facts follow, adding up to a composite picture of deliberate devastation: “When Israel attacks Palestine, it is American missiles that smash through Palestinian homes. And every year Israel receives several billion dollars from the United States” (Roy, War Talk, 61) “Iraq’s fields and farmlands have been shelled with three hundred tons of depleted uranium” (Roy, War Talk, 65) “In southern Iraq, there has been a fourfold increase in cancer among children. In the decade of economic sanctions that followed the war, Iraqi civilians have been denied food, medicine, hospital equipment, ambulances, clean water—the basic essentials” (Roy, War Talk, 65) Each of these facts drops into her narrative like a seed crystal, its implications unfolding into the protected space of our denials, and impinging on conscience.

Finally, however, it is not her compendium of facts or provocative connections that make Roy a voice for peace. It is her imagination for the lives of
ordinary people, so clearly articulated in her novel, *The God of Small Things*, that invites the empathy and sense of connectedness that make it harder to classify and dismiss them as the enemy. When we hear their stories, we recognize other human beings as family. But, as one of her characters points out, “It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it, as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do” (Roy, *God*, 181) That is the challenge she poses to her readers—to carry each other’s dreams like porcelain, recognizing how common desires—for love, for safety, for peace—can only be approached when we lay down our swords and shields and renounce the stories that glorify the instruments of war.

Wangari Maathai

In 2004 for the first time an African woman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Wangari Maathai, founder of the “Green Belt Movement,” and a woman like Arundhati Roy of wide, compassionate, international vision, was and is recognized as one of the innovative and significant voices for peace in her generation. Her acceptance speech to the Nobel committee and the international audience in Stockholm offers a very different kind of example from either Berry’s or Roy’s vigorous critiques of what it may mean to “speak peace.”

“I accept it,” she says at the outset, “on behalf of the people of Kenya and Africa, and indeed the world. I am especially mindful of women and the girl child. I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership. I know the honour also gives a deep sense of pride to our men, both
old and young. As a mother, I appreciate the inspiration this brings to the youth and urge them to use it to pursue their dreams” (Maathai). This wide, inclusive solidarity with the people whose safety and welfare she holds most dear, while it might be dismissed as pro forma, a courteous bow in all directions on a highly orchestrated international stage, might also be recognized as a reflection of Maathai’s sharp awareness of her responsibilities as a representative of a whole people. The voice and power it confers are gifts for the public good, and personal glory is immediately deflected into whole populations who become beneficiaries of her public success. She receives it, she goes on to say, on behalf of all those who helped “shape the vision and sustain our work, which was often accomplished under hostile conditions.” Like Berry and Roy, Maathai sees clearly the necessary connection between the condition of human communities and the condition of the land they depend on: “Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.”

Maathai’s longer writings include her autobiography, *Unbowed*, which stands alongside her more discursive treatments of earth care, political health, and spirituality as a witness to the interdependence of these concerns. In the Nobel speech, as in her published life narrative, she tells an unembellished story of growing up seeing “forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed biodiversity and the capacity of the forests to conserve water.” The element of personal witness gives the plea an impact that is in some ways more effective than argument, preventing the realities of these losses from becoming safely encased in abstractions like “deforestation,” “development,” and “free enterprise,” neutralizing their connections with
violence and oppression.

She goes on to name specific needs of rural women caring for families—“firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter, and income.” It’s a simple list—one whose simplicity must have seemed painfully ironic in the presence of great wealth, celebrity, and learning as she spoke it. With equal simplicity she speaks of her personal epiphany that led to the planting of 30 million trees to provide employment, improve soil and watersheds, and empower the poor. The tree planting was an educational venture as well, that engaged communities in new kinds of decision-making and in making “connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and society.” As Maathai delineates those problems, she also models a process of connecting the local with the global that must have convicted some of her hearers in a wealthy industrialized country. As she tells her story of Kenya and of the Green Belt Movement as it spread to other parts of Africa, she holds up those “developing” countries as a ray of hope to the privileged, turning on its head whatever condescension might shadow the conferring of the Peace Prize.

“In time,” she goes on, “the tree also became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the Green Belt Movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities.” That symbolism has deep roots in African traditions where trees have long been symbols of peace. Every step of the story unfolds a new dimension of blessing—material improvement, confidence, education, community involvement, hope, peace with neighbors. She emphasizes the connection between responsible environmental stewardship, especially preservation of biodiversity, and good
government, and recounts how the tree project led eventually to a peaceful
transition to democracy in Kenya. From there, the narrative widens to embrace
the fate of the earth and its need for healing. The success story becomes a
challenge, and then a demand. Her logic and language are simple; there is no
accusation in her words (though she does make the mild but pregnant
observation that “activities that devastate the environment continue unabated”)
though the implications are clear: what Kenyans have done, and in their wake
other poor African countries, the citizens of the wealthy and privileged West
need to do as well. “The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world
to broaden the understanding of peace,” she points out, once again generously
deflecting credit from her own remarkable role on the world stage. Then she
connects the dots again: “There can be no peace without equitable development;
and there can be no development without sustainable management of the
environment in a democratic and peaceful space.” It is an equation the U.S., in
particular, has found notoriously hard to claim. Without any acerbity on her
part, the facts themselves, clearly stated, offer the necessary indictment, even as
they convey hope.

The moving ending to this memorable speech is a story about a stream.
When she was a child, Maathai remembers, she would play at the stream where
she saw tadpoles hatch into frogs. Fifty years later the stream has dried up and
water must be fetched from great distances and is often unclean. Parable-like,
her global challenge is distilled into a little story about the need for life-giving
water.

“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire,” T.S. Eliot wrote, “is the wisdom
of humility.” In this wide-angled, kindly, generous account of environmental
and cultural renewal, uniting personal witness with global awareness and vigorous challenge with generous encouragement, Maathai offers a comprehensive vision of a possible peace that, in restoring creation and caring for human communities, could remind us all of what it means to be good and faithful stewards.

John Dear

While Wangari Maathai has borne new life and hope into impoverished African communities, Father John Dear, S.J. has done something similar for Americans mired in what seems endless preparation for ever more destructive wars. His writing, as well as his many courageous and thoughtful acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, has influenced thousands to work for peace by lobbying for cessation of development of more nuclear weapons. Spiritual heir to the Berrigan brothers, his hope, articulated in the most recent of his 28 books, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* is to summon others to disavow and abandon what has become a culture of death and choose life. For him, that means a commitment to Christian pacifism.

In one of many stories enacting that commitment, Dear tells of a protest in a government building where, stuck in an open elevator and blockaded from further movement by security officers, he and his companions simply read aloud a list of names of the fallen:

... I produced a list with the names of the killed—American and Iraqi—and to pass the hours we recited them out loud for all to hear. In the meantime, various bureaus dispatched officials—the
Federal Police, the FBI, a SWAT team. And as we recited, they murmured and placed calls and scratched their heads. Toward the end of the day the local director of Homeland Security took matters in hand and placed us under arrest. (Dear, Lazarus, 422-23)

Naming is powerful. One of the first of God’s empowering gifts to humankind, it signifies our participation in the organization and stewardship of creation. Once we have called something or someone by name, we enter into an intersubjective relationship that can no longer be negotiated in purely utilitarian terms. What we call by name is, in a whole new sense, ours.

So, for instance, when journalist Chris Hedges, who has spent 20 years of his career in combat zones, calls war “mass murder,” he insists that his readers reconsider what bombs do, or M-16s or submachine guns in streets where civilians walk in fear. Wendell Berry repeatedly uses the terms “damage,” “destroying,” “killing,” “blowing apart,” and “scattering” in his short story about a soldier returning from World War II, insisting that readers remember that these are what war-making does—that no matter what ideological justifications may be offered, there can be no war without damage—not only collateral, but direct and intentional—to human minds, bodies, spirits, communities, and habitats (Berry, Making, 83ff).

Naming human being’s names is also a literal and powerful way of reminding us what we are doing when we make war. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. that features a list of names of those who died in that war invites us to look at names like Robert or James or Alejandro or Christopher or Ruben or Tyrone and come to terms with the actual loss of sons and brothers and
husbands whose names were once uttered in the intimate circles of family and friends and which stand for stories now ended.

But commemoration as a prod to conscience is only one of the many versatile approaches Dear takes to raising awareness in centers of power and decision-making. In a 2004 essay, “A Vision of Peace,” he tells a series of stories that testify to how the God of Peace is visibly at work in the world. The essay opens with quotations by Gandhi and John Lennon, the former a vision rife with confident longing: "I see no poverty in the world of tomorrow--no wars, no revolutions, no bloodshed. And in that world, there will be a faith in God greater and deeper than ever in the past." It is, of course, what Christians can recognize as a vision of the kingdom of heaven. Christians differ on what our role may be in preparing for and helping to bring about the coming of that kingdom, but Dear is not confused about his understanding of kingdom work: peacemakers are named in Jesus’ greatest words of blessing.

As with other writers, part of his work of peacemaking is finding the words that give direction and hope, offer a vision, and deconstruct the discourses of death that have become a first-world idiom. He finds many of those words in story. He tells the back-story of the dismantling of the Berlin wall, and how the impetus came from a small group of East Germans who met in a basement and imagined together. Then he tells a story of abolitionists, led by William Lloyd Garrison, who imagined a world without slavery. He follows that story later with one of gatherings in Los Alamos where people gather to imagine and pray for a world without nuclear weapons. He ends with a story about John Lennon’s affirmation of the value of imagining peace and devoting his energies to what seemed (and still seems) a hopeless cause. Lennon likens the force of
imagination and preparation for change to Leonardo’s imagining the flying machine long before its time. Each of the stories makes a simple point like a parable. Cumulatively, they encourage imagination to those who are tempted to think working for peace is either a waste of time or a lost cause, or just God’s job. That is what stories do: they activate the imagination. They give us images that bring our purposes into focus. His stories say, *This is what peacemaking looks like.* *Watch this.*

Each story is followed by a few paragraphs of reflection or instruction, very like the way Jesus often followed his parables with commentary for his followers. I’d like to conclude by taking a close look at one of these, considering, once again, how Dear has learned to speak peace and follow after it on the “long path” he so often speaks about in sharing his journey as a Christian activist for peace:

*Active nonviolence is much more than a tactic or a strategy; it is a way of life. We renounce violence and vow never to hurt anyone ever again. Nonviolence demands active love and truth that seeks justice and peace for the whole human race, resists systemic evil, and persistently reconciles with everyone. It insists that there is no cause however noble for which we support the killing of a single human being. Instead of killing others, we are willing to be killed in the struggle for justice and peace. Instead of inflicting violence on others, we accept and undergo suffering without even the desire to retaliate with further violence as we pursue justice and peace for all people.*
Just notice three things about this statement:

1) Its wide inclusiveness. “never hurt anyone ever again”; “justice and peace for the whole human race”; “reconcile with everyone”; no killing of “a single human being”; “justice and peace for all people.” It’s a short paragraph with a huge vision, and that vision is unqualified, insistent, and unabashedly, righteously indiscriminate: we are not the final arbiters of justice, but we are its administrators, and what we seek to enact in the world is the justice of an infinitely merciful God.

2) It is not only descriptive or declarative, but contractual. “We renounce.” We are willing.” “We accept…” Linguists call this performative speech. Liturgists might recognize it as sacramental—words that effect what they signify—outward and visible signs of inward spiritual grace. Because in a sense it is always true that to speak is to act. And to join in speaking collectively as a “we” with one voice is to solidify and empower communities as members of one body.

3) It offers a series of clear contrasts, putting a choice before us in a way reminiscent of the words in Deuteronomy: “. . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life . . .” (Deut. 30:19). Not a strategy, but a way of life. No killing, but a willingness to be killed. Inflicting no violence, but being willing to suffer it. These scary choices are the very kind Jesus put to his followers. Yes, there are ambiguities and grey areas, times for speech and times for silence, times for negotiation as well as times for resistance. But to put our feet on solid ground, Dear suggests, is to recognize that ultimately to be a peacemaker is to choose life in the very shadow of death.
Speaking peace is only one dimension of the work of the peacemaker. There are many who go about their quiet work in the world saying little, who spread peace by example, by ministries of presence, by work done “faithfully and well.” But the gift of language is a commission. Utterance is a channel of grace. So the words we speak, how we craft them, how we deliver them, prayerfully discerning what the occasion calls for, in what form—stories, poems, sermons, essays, blogs, academic articles, even diatribes—are an irreducible part of the work of bringing God’s peace into a violent world. What we speak, we impart. May God help us, even in confronting the darkest truths of the wars we make, to tell those truths in a way that imparts blessing.

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