



DAN WESTFALL

# WHAT JESUS WOULD DO

## JOHN DEAR ON NONVIOLENCE, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, AND DOING TIME

JOHN MALKIN

**C**hristian conservatives' support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is well publicized, but there is also a long tradition in the U.S. of Christians using nonviolent direct action to oppose militarism. One of the current leaders of that nonviolent resistance is John Dear, a Jesuit priest who has been arrested more than seventy-five times for civil disobedience. For him, to be a Christian is to question the government and reject violence in all its forms. In his recently released autobiography, *A Persistent Peace: One Man's Struggle for a Nonviolent World* (Loyola Press), Dear writes, "The arrival of dawn comes at a high price. It requires good people to break bad laws."

*Born in North Carolina in 1959, Dear has committed civil*

*disobedience at the U.S. military's School of the Americas (since renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) and has broken the law to protest nuclear-weapons development at sites such as the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and the Nevada Test Site. On December 7, 1993, he was arrested at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina, for hammering on an F-15 nuclear bomber. It was one of a series of protests, called "Plowshares Disarmament Actions," inspired by the biblical prophet Isaiah's prediction that the nations of the earth will "beat their swords into plowshares." For that action Dear spent more than eight months in a North Carolina jail with fellow Catholic activist Philip Berrigan.*

*Dear has spread his message by giving hundreds of lectures on nonviolence in the U.S. He's also traveled internationally to witness the violence perpetuated by U.S. policies and military actions in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Middle East, Colombia, and the Philippines. In the early 1980s he lived and worked in a refugee camp in El Salvador, and in 1999 he led a delegation of Nobel Peace Prize winners to Iraq to witness the deadly effects of UN economic sanctions on children there.*

*In the late nineties Dear served as the executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the largest interfaith peace organization in the U.S. After the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center, he helped coordinate the chaplain program at the Red Cross's Family Assistance Center, working with hundreds of firefighters and police officers, as well as with family members who'd lost loved ones.*

*Dear was vocal in his opposition to U.S. military retaliation for the 9/11 attacks, and his antiwar position got him kicked out of his New York parish by his Jesuit superiors. He moved to northeastern New Mexico to serve as pastor for several parishes there and later cofounded Pax Christi New Mexico ([www.paxchristinewmexico.org](http://www.paxchristinewmexico.org)). In 2008 Dear was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.*

*In addition to his autobiography ([www.persistentpeace.com](http://www.persistentpeace.com)), Dear is the author or editor of twenty-four books, including Put Down Your Sword: Answering the Gospel Call to Creative Nonviolence (Wm. B. Eerdmans), Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action (Image), and The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence (Wipf & Stock). He writes a weekly column for the National Catholic Reporter at [www.ncronline.org](http://www.ncronline.org) and is the subject of the film The Narrow Path. Dear advocates vegetarianism as a form of Christian nonviolence and has worked to end the death penalty. Currently he is coordinating a nonviolent campaign to close the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.*

*While interviewing Dear, I heard in his voice an inspired perseverance and deep commitment to working for peace and justice. When I talked with him again recently, he explained that he was rather busy: he'd been arrested the previous day during protests at Nevada's Creech Air Force Base, the center for U.S. drone warplanes, and he'd just gotten out of jail. He added, "And tomorrow I plan on going back and getting arrested again." He is currently awaiting trial for his Nevada protests against U.S. military activities.*

**Malkin:** You've said, "Nonviolence is not passive." Can you elaborate?

**Dear:** Everyone presumes *pacifism* means passivity, that the only response to violence is to either retaliate or do nothing. Nonviolence is a third choice, and an active one. For me, nonviolence is not just a tactic or a strategy; it's a way of life that requires us to love our enemies. It demands creativity, initiative, and engagement with the culture. There's nothing passive about it.

Labor leader César Chávez said to me long ago that we can't be nonviolent by sitting alone in our rooms and praying

the rosary. Nonviolence happens in the world, usually on the streets. Yes, nonviolence requires private prayer, but it always leads to public activity and risk. Gandhi defined nonviolence as "conscious suffering." He said it is practiced only in courtrooms and jail cells — and on the gallows, because true nonviolence means being willing to give our lives for lasting justice and peace.

**Malkin:** Tell me about your experience with breaking the law to protest injustice.

**Dear:** I'm still learning from and reflecting on all of the experiences I've had. I think that living responsibly in the United States requires resistance to the culture of war and injustice.

When I was a college kid at Duke University, I decided to give my whole life to God and become a Jesuit. My parents were appalled and begged me not to, so I agreed to wait for a while. I decided to hitchhike through Israel first, make a pilgrimage to see where Jesus lived. I was there when Israel invaded Lebanon in the summer of 1982. I saw the jets swoop down over the Sea of Galilee and bomb the place where Jesus had said, "Love your enemies." That was a great revelation. After that I entered the Jesuits.

As a young Jesuit I wrote to Daniel Berrigan and his brother Philip, who were icons of the peace movement. Dan is the one who told me that change happens when good people break bad laws and accept the consequences. It's been true throughout history, whether you look at the abolitionists, the suffragists, the labor movement, the civil-rights movement, or the antiwar movement. Dan also said to me, "If you're going to follow Jesus, making trouble for peace is just part of the job description. Look at Jesus: he got killed."

I immediately went and got arrested at the Pentagon. I tried to get a few friends to join me, but they wouldn't. I was twenty-two years old and almost got kicked out of the Jesuits, but a higher-up let me stay. That was the first in a series of arrests for me all over the country.

**Malkin:** In 1993 you participated in a Plowshares action in North Carolina with Philip Berrigan.

**Dear:** Phil and two friends and I went onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and hammered on an F-15 nuclear-capable fighter-bomber, which was on alert to bomb Bosnia. It wasn't the first time anyone had done something like this. Ours was about the fiftieth of the Plowshares Disarmament Actions. We were convicted of two felony charges: destruction of government property and conspiracy to commit a felony crime. I faced more than twenty years in prison and fully expected to get five. In the end Phil and I did about eight and a half months together in a tiny North Carolina jail cell. Then the judge at my sentencing put me under house arrest for nearly a year. And after that I was on probation. Even now, I'm still monitored.

**Malkin:** There are differing views in the social-justice movement on how useful it is to break laws and go to jail. Some think we can do more by remaining out of jail and agitating for political change.

**Dear:** I'm beyond the question of what difference it makes or whether a protest is successful. I've tried letter writing

and prayer services. I've written twenty-five books, spoken to millions of people, held press conferences, and met with every politician I could. Gandhi said that after you've tried everything you can, you have to cross the line and break the laws that legalize mass murder in your name — and accept the consequences.

I'll never forget being in that tiny jail cell with Philip Berrigan, feeling as if the walls were closing in on me. It was horrible. There was nothing romantic about it.

**Malkin:** You've also said that you had profound spiritual experiences in jail. What kind of spiritual growth or clarity did you find there?

**Dear:** I'm still trying to figure it all out. I actually never made it to a prison where you could go outside and walk around a yard. Phil and I were in a cell about eight feet by eight feet, with a bunk bed and a cold concrete floor. There was an open toilet, and our food came through a slot in the door. It was like being locked in a bathroom. We didn't know how long we were going to be in that cell. The warden was afraid to put us in the general prison population, so he kept us isolated. The only time we got to leave our cell was when we were brought into a little hallway. It was even hard to pray in jail, because Phil and I were always together. As a Jesuit priest I'm used to having solitude, privacy, and silence. Not knowing what was going to happen — and not even being able to walk around — quickly had its effect on us. It was a kind of low-grade torture.

**Malkin:** What was a day in jail like?

**Dear:** We'd get up at 6 A.M. and read about five or ten verses from the Gospel of Mark and then talk about them for two or three hours. I learned more in that eight months than I had in four years of graduate theological studies at Berkeley. The Scriptures took on a whole different meaning. Then we'd take a little Wonder Bread from breakfast and break bread. Every Monday we were given a plastic cup of grape juice, and we'd hide it in the toilet and let it ferment. We'd break the bread and pass the cup and have Eucharist. It felt as if God was right there in the cell with us, in our suffering, loneliness, and claustrophobia.

Despite all of that, there were moments of profound peace and deep joy, which makes sense to me now: if you do the will of God — and working nonviolently for an end to war and nuclear weapons is God's work — then God will touch you. That's what the lives of saints and mystics tell us. Being in jail was painful, *and* it was a profound mystical experience. We were getting a small taste of the suffering of all people in prison and of the poor. There's a lot of talk among Jesuits about how to be in solidarity with the poor. I'm a white male priest, and I'm rich compared to most people around the world. Going to jail is one way for me to know their suffering. It's probably the closest I can get in this society. Jail was a spiritual journey of downward mobility.



JOHN DEAR

**Malkin:** You're just now coming off six months of probation, right?

**Dear:** Yes, in September 2006 some friends and I helped organize the Declaration of Peace, which was a direct action at 350 Congressional Representatives' local offices. I was part of a group of nine who went into the federal building in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and headed for the third-floor office of Senator Pete Domenici, one of the biggest Congressional hawks, who brings funding to Los Alamos for nuclear weapons. We wanted to give him a copy of the Declaration of Peace and ask him to work to end this evil war on the people of Iraq. As soon as we stepped into the elevator, the police charged us and wouldn't let us go up or get out of the elevator. We said we were there to see our senator, and we weren't leaving. I had

brought with me the names of ten thousand Iraqi civilians killed and of every U.S. soldier killed. We started to read them out loud there in the lobby of the federal building, through the open doors of the elevator. We did this for seven hours. Meanwhile they brought in the SWAT team, the FBI, and the head of Homeland Security for the state. Finally they arrested us all on federal charges. I think they deliberately went after me because of my work to close Los Alamos. We were in and out of court for a year and were found guilty of a federal misdemeanor. I expected to get six months in prison but was given a very strict federal probation instead.

**Malkin:** That brings to mind a story in your book about the Plowshares trial in North Carolina, when the judge asked who had driven you to the air-force base.

**Dear:** The moment you're referring to was actually at Philip Berrigan's trial in April 1994 — they gave us separate trials. There was enormous publicity, and the place was packed. Phil had called me as a witness, and I was brought into the courtroom in chains and an orange jumpsuit. All the jury members worked at the air-force base, and the prosecutor worked with the air force, too. They were trying to uncover the identity of our key support person — who, unbeknownst to them, was sitting in the front row — so they could arrest him, too.

After I testified about Phil, the prosecutor asked, "Who drove you that day to the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base?" I refused to name anybody, saying, "I take responsibility for my own actions." The judge grew angry and ordered the jury out and said if I didn't answer, I'd get two years in prison for contempt of court. I said, "OK, I'll answer." They were all shocked that I'd agreed so quickly. They brought the jury back, and the prosecutor asked me the question again, and I said, "Thank you for pushing me to tell the truth. The truth is that we were driven to the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base by the Holy Spirit."

*(end of excerpt)*