

I am going this week to a place I have never been before. Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. I will participate in an event unlike anything I have done.

I already feel conflicted.

Part of me wants to go. And part of me wants to stay home. Part of me wants to go support the Peace Vigils in Los Alamos. Part of me does not.

The part that wants to go says this is important work. So important that I cannot think of anything more important that I should be doing. The future of the human species is at stake. Sorta puts things in perspective.

The part that says stay home is borne in part out of the advertised program from the Peace e Bene organization that says the following:

We will gather at the stage area at Ashley Pond in the center of Los Alamos, NM at 2:00 p.m. on Hiroshima Day. This is the exact spot where the Hiroshima atomic bomb was built. A Roman Catholic priest will give instructions and a blessing, and then everyone will pick up sackcloth and ashes, and walk mindfully in groups of twos up Trinity Drive to the entrance of the National Labs. We will carry peace signs. Those wishing to be arrested will cross the bridge. At about 2:30, those not arrested will pour the ashes on the ground, put on sackcloth, and sit down in silence right there on the sidewalk along Trinity Drive for thirty minutes "to repent of the mortal sin of nuclear weapons and beg the God of peace for nuclear disarmament" (as we have been doing since 2005). At 4pm we shall leave in silence. We will repeat this vigil on Nagasaki Day August 9.

Those are not things I feel entirely comfortable doing. Maybe I will by the time I get there.

A second reason I am not sure I want to do this is the last time I participated in a Peace Vigil, I attracted attention I did not particularly want. The year was 2003. My wife and son, Cameron, I attended a vigil following the invasion of Iraq. We assembled silently at the State Capitol in Austin Texas, lit candles and sat on the steps leading up to the building. My picture appeared on the front of the next morning's newspaper. Members of my congregation saw it. They asked me why I was not more supportive of the troops in Bagdad. My members said they took their patriotism very seriously and wondered why I would not do the same. Their views of war and definitions of patriotism were different than mine. And still are.

I have a few conflicts as you can see that I am working through. I want peace. But I am part of a nation that has been and still is promoting war.

I should probably tell you that much of my childhood was spent following examples of people who spoke favorably about the American war effort.

When I was eight years old, my best friend in the third grade, John Martin, was a bona fide warmonger. I did not know what those words Bona Fide War Monger meant in the third grade but I do now.

John was a lover of all things military and I decided I wanted to be like him. His toys were war toys: plastic guns, model tanks, authentic miniature replicas of warplanes with guns and colorful decals. The planes hung from the ceiling on strings. I only had a few Mickey Mantle baseball cards hanging from mine.

John had one of the first GI Joe action figures. John wore army boots to school. He threw hand grenades at me made out of pine cones that looked just like the hand grenades John Wayne use in the movie Iwo Jima.

Most Saturday afternoons John and I would go to the movie theater to see whatever battle story was being shown. The Sands of Tarawa Beachhead and Pork Chop Hill in Korea were some of our favorites.

We learned to wait until the romance scenes about halfway thought the movie before we'd go for popcorn so we'd not miss any of the action scenes.

We memorized words from songs we heard on the radio. Songs like Jimmy Dean's *PT 109* and Johnny Horton's *Sink the Bismarck*. On Sunday mornings we would go to each other's church – whichever one was singing, "Onward Christian Soldiers Marching as to War".

Our second favorite hymn was Stand Stand Up for Jesus. Here's a verse:

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus! ye soldiers of the cross;
Lift high His royal banner, it must not suffer loss:
From vict'ry unto vict'ry, His army shall He lead,
Till every foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.*

John really liked the part about vanquishing the foe. He volunteered to be the first in line.

I still remember vividly that day when I was eight when John and I went to fight an imaginary battalion of Germans in WWII, which in our eight-year-old minds often became conflated, with fighting a band of ruthless Cherokee Indians who were attacking our fort. We had our hands full so we climbed to the top of Mrs. Peck's garage where we could better aim our pine cones.

Mrs. Peck was the sweetest lady I had ever met. She baked me warm cookies and fresh bread and always had a gentle smile on her face.

But one day her smile disappeared. It was the day John and I proceeded to smash out the windows in her garage with our popguns and shoot the approaching Germans and Indians. We then hid in the tall grass when she came out to see what was happening to her windows. Lots of things changed that day for me. I learned respect for other people's property. I learned the costs for paying off damages I incurred. Paying off costs for the purchase, installation and delivery of new windows. I learned about always telling the truth to my parents. And I learned about apologies to neighbors.

I never went back to Mrs. Peck's garage. And the warm cookies and fresh breads were items I saw less frequently.

I feel conflicted knowing war stories, the kinds that inspired me and the ones that got me in trouble, were always held in high regard by people around me. We had no shortage of WWII heroes.

Harry Morgan, another childhood friend told of his father's exploits flying 25 missions over Europe in 1944-45. His father was the legendary Robert Morgan, pilot of the famed Memphis Belle B-17 bomber. The story of the Memphis Belle was made into a movie a few years ago.

Proudly these stories were told and retold. Especially the days when Capt. Morgan flew the plane home after the war. Given permission to fly the plane over our hometown in Asheville, Capt. Morgan then buzzed the downtown area at a low level by flying between the county courthouse and the city hall where my grand father was working in his office. He looked out the window and saw a B-17 heading right at him. Captain Morgan missed City Hall by just a few feet according to the local paper the next day. Stories like that are hard to forget.

All this is part of the reason I am going to Santa Fe for the week of conferences and Los Alamos for the peace vigils. It's a journey I have needed to make for a long time. My worldview has changed considerably since my childhood days. Apostle Paul's words speak to me. "When I was a child, I thought like a child, reasoned like a child, and acted like a child. When I became a grown-up, I put away childlike things." Paul speaks to me through those words. And yet those long shadows of childhood still linger.

It's nice to know the 1,000 origami peace cranes we have been folding these past weeks are already there in New Mexico. We shipped them last Monday. The presence

of Koinonia is already being felt. Healing and transformation are taking place in interesting ways.

Tunes I use to listen to in my car during college like Merle Haggard's "Your Walkin' on the Fightin' Side of Me" – those tunes are now replaced by John Prine's "Your Flag Decals Won't Get You into Heaven Anymore."

Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Mahatma Gandhi, and Thích Nhất Hạnh. They can change a person's point of view. William Sloane Coffin, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, have helped frame that transition in language a Christian pastor can understand.

Chris Hedges, a fellow Presbyterian minister whose writings both challenge me and aggravate me, has helped me see my culture as one that thrives on military defense and boasts its capacity to export American Exceptionalism to all parts of the globe. War, he writes, is a force that tragically gives us meaning.

James Carroll, a Roman Catholic former priest, reminds me that Christianity was once a pacifist movement until Constantine's Sword changed the way Jesus and his followers thought about violence and Empire.

Neil Sheehan's 1988 [A Bright Shining Lie](#) told the story of John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam which helped me understand how erroneously our national history has been told. How mistaken we have been about imposing our worldview on others. Barbara Tuchman's "The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam" confirmed that for me.

Our reading today from Walter Wink has perhaps been the most helpful. He has brought me to a place I never imagined being. He taught me that we Christians have unfortunately embraced a faulty myth. It's called the Myth of Redemptive Violence.

It's a fairly new interpretation that refutes all things Christian when it comes to the use of violence. Any association of God or Jesus with the concept of violence is incorrect. And, as you may have already discovered, the whole of Christianity is constructed on such a "belief." And it is completely wrong. It's a myth created by people we trusted and it's a myth taught to us by people we valued. And it one that needs to be called out for what it is.

Especially troubling for Walter Wink is the teaching that maintains Jesus died on a cross as payment for each of us. His suffering and death were necessary for our salvation and redemption. Not so, say Wink and a growing number of New Testament theologians and pastors.

Rita Nakashima Brock warns that if the God of the Bible required Jesus' death as a sacrifice for us that then would make God the ultimate child abuser. It would suggest that violence is divinely ordained. Neither could be further from the truth. Violence is not and can never be a tool promoting Christian belief.

I find those views instructive. Violence was not redemptive for Jesus and cannot be redemptive for people today. Jesus dies not because God willed a human sacrifice but because the Roman Empire wanted him out of the way. They executed him. Those are two distinctly different starting points for articulating a faith system.

Wink has taught me that my Christian heritage is founded upon a misreading of ancient texts. That heritage can no longer sustain such blind obedience to either the holy books which are its foundational components or blind obedience to the State which uses those writings to promote a violent world ethic.

Jesus' quote when he prepares to enter Jerusalem from high above the city is telling. "If you only knew the things that made for peace", he says to the old war-torn city down below him. "If you only knew".

Jesus meant two things by those words if I read him correctly. First he meant the immediate next few hours and days. His violent arrest, trial by beating, torture, and death await him in the coming hours.

Second, he also meant the bigger picture. All of humankind's predilection for violence – individual, tribal, state, nation – all of it. The bigger picture of atomic explosion. The threat of nuclear winter we have seemingly, conveniently forgotten in 21st century America.

I think Jesus meant both timeframes – his present and our future. "If you only knew the things that make for peace."

Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, wrote later in his life of his remorse for dropping bombs on a defeated enemy (Japan). His growing guilt and moral confusion reached its peak when he met President Truman and told him, "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands." Truman, resentful of this self-doubt, was furious. He told an aide. "I don't want to see that son-of-a-bitch in this office ever again."

Oppenheimer struggled with his scientific gifts. He was a genius who owned a very high IQ. It was built into him. "Ask me a question in Latin" he would brag to his classmates in grade school. "and I will answer you in Greek."

Attending a course on quantum mechanics at Cambridge in England, he would regularly interrupt the lecturer by walking up to the blackboard saying: 'No, that is wrong'. And taking the chalk from his hand he would write the correct equation on the board. Eventually, Oppenheimer's fellow students threatened to boycott future lectures if he did not stop his embarrassing disruptions.

A colleague once noted, "I felt as if he were an inhabitant of Mount Olympus with the pantheon of gods. He was doing his best to appear human.'

Oppenheimer struggled to use his love of physics and channel all that knowledge into a meaningful life's work. When he began to question the implications for bigger and more destructive weapons like the hydrogen bomb - he balked.

That resistance to the hydrogen bomb ultimately had devastating consequences for his career. In 1953 at the height of the McCarthy hearings in Congress, the Atomic Energy Commission suspended his security clearance. Despite testimonials from scores of witnesses during the hearings, his clearance was never reinstated. He retreated to a lonely island, as one colleague would say, broken in spirit.

Lots of patriotic Americans have questioned the validity of war. Lots of solid followers of Jesus have challenged the use of violence as a way of expressing and living out their faith.

I'm talking about that part of you, Fred Rogers once wrote, that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive.
Love that conquers hate,
peace that rises triumphant over war,
and justice that proves more powerful than greed.

That is a journey I find myself presently undertaking.

Some of us take longer than others to get there.

Amen.

Readings:

"When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed." - Fred Rogers

"The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today." - Walter Wink

"When Jesus approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had only known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace.'" - Luke 19:42

*"Dad, how do soldiers killing each other solve the world's problems?"
- Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995*