

**Los Alamos NM is a lovely town.** If you have been there you would speak of its charm and scenic beauty.

But it also is a town of contradictions as best I can tell from experiencing it for a few days recently. As a person of faith I sense some contradictions that concern me. Especially some moral conflicts I feel about what is being manufactured there and how deep are the pockets that maintain that unique community.

I'd like to share my thoughts with you.

**First thing I learned is that indeed it's a beautiful place.** It's clean and neat and well maintained. Lots of new buildings attest to its thriving commerce. Ducks and fish love the local pond and call it their home. Los Alamos is a quiet and serene place if ever I saw one.

Its Chamber of Commerce reports a population of 12,019 and proudly boasts a median household income of over \$105,000. That's remarkable. The rest of New Mexico reports less than \$44,000. Los Alamos has stated it is the best educated community in the country. Over 70% of adults have degrees in higher education. People of wealth live in Los Alamos. It has the highest rate of millionaires in the country.

But Los Alamos also holds contradictions. It's a loveliness that is seemingly based on a not-so-lovely economic and philosophical model. The research and the skills needed to manufacture nuclear weapons. It's a not-so-healthy mix designed to produce things that go boom in dark and hold the keys to the destruction of all of human life.

Without the will of its nation's citizenry and the funding of the federal government, I doubt its livelihood would continue. Uncle Sam gives Los Alamos 2 billion dollars a year to play with all things nuclear. Statistically speaking the county of Los Alamos is the richest in the nation while at the same time it rests in the poorest state in the country.

I don't know how to think in those terms. Perhaps that's why they have created a public relations firm to help folks like me comprehend why 2 billion a year needs to go for things that blow people up.

Contradictions abound. The beauty of Los Alamos is deceptive. Last year a billion dollar nuclear waste storage facility caught fire from negligence at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory. That facility is no longer usable.

Pueblo Indians who call that land their ancestral home will tell you that radioactive waste was tossed into their canyons and left buried there. The cancer rate in these parts of New Mexico is six times higher than the national average. Deer and elk hunted by

these indigenous peoples are reported to carry tumors and growths still visible years later.

As a person who believes the words ethics and aesthetics are closely related, I am trying to come to terms with the deceptive beauty of this place

**I learned a second thing these past few days.** Folks who question the underlying philosophical foundation of Los Alamos are asked to leave and never return. They are bad for business.

Bad for business is a term I first heard when I was ten years old. I didn't know what it meant. I do know.

During the Christmas season at my family flower shop I found a spring loaded weight scale used for measuring florist supplies. I thought it would be fun to see how many poinsettia plants I could connect to that mechanism. I found out. Zero. The mechanism broke and the scales collapsed I came tumbling down on top of 22 beautiful red poinsettia plants. I broke all 22. I was bad for business in that moment. It was a term I would not forget.

James Doyle, a political scientist at Los Alamos National Labs for 17 years learned that he was bad for business. His actions were a bit more grave than mine. James Doyle was fired in 2014 over a report he wrote calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

His article was an impassioned critique of the political theories undergirding the nuclear arms race. He questioned the heart of the central mission of his nation's lab. Designing and building atomic bombs.

What Doyle pointed out is that we are long past the Cold War era and the capacity to mutually assure the destruction on any country initiating use of atomic weapons. Now we are assured of the destruction of the planet. Pointing that out to the federal government, even if it is entirely true and factually correct, is bad for business. James Doyle learned that truth recently. His views are no longer desired in Los Alamos.

**I learned a third thing.** I learned that wrapped up in the conversation about nuclear weapons there are words that are used and language that is employed that is essentially Christian in its vocabulary.

Christian words are used to talk about the power and death-dealing presence of thermonuclear explosions. What a strange way to have a conversation.

Christian concepts and theological terminology have found their way into the Los Alamos lexicon. Two of the most destructive features of the Manhattan Project – the code name for the building of the first atomic bomb – have taken on euphemistic meanings.

**One** is the word Trinity.

In the summer of '45 the scientists tasked with designing and implementing the first atomic bomb needed a place to test their prototype. They chose a desert location in New Mexico. They named that site “Trinity”. When the test bomb fell from a 100 foot tower it detonated on impact and did what it was designed to do. Create such a powerful explosion that all life nearby was destroyed.

Trinity in Christian parlance has nothing to do with blowing things up.

It was first used in the second century as a way to speak of the three Biblical components of the Triune God – God the Father, God the Son, and God then Holy Spirit. It was the early church’s way to try to bring together different words describing the God of the scriptures. I think of the Evangelist John who said the God of Love is experienced in three different ways. Trinity was a power to hold things together.

That’s the opposite of the power of the Trinity test site. Its job was to blow things apart.

I think the folks at the Trinity test site were fundamentally at odds with and contradictory to the concept of Trinity found in the New Testament. I hear one term being spoken of in two diametrically opposed ways.

Trinity to most Christians is the positive, life-giving affirmation of how divine mercy and compassion become experienced and shared. Using that term to speak of the cruelest single instrument of death ever created by the human species seems awkward to me at best.

**There is also a second euphemism** I find a bit problematic. It has to do with the description of the uranium bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Crew members of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb, spoke of things like a flash of light, scorching heat, a concussive shock wave, a firestorm, cyclonic winds and a twisting cloud that dropped radioactive black rain.

Crew members would go on to say that at the moment of detonation the temperature at the center of the bomb exceeded 1 million degrees. The words most frequently used were the “brilliance of the sun”. It was as if the light from the explosion was more brilliant than 10,000 suns.

Interestingly, Christianity has used that same language to describe a particular moment in the Jesus story when he went up into the clouds one day to the top of a high mountain. His apostles thought they saw an aura of holiness surround Jesus' face and head.

That brief story described in our reading today speaks of a kind of first-time-ever transformation. His friends said it looked as if Jesus' whole appearance was brighter than the sun. He glowed with a radiance of heavenly proportion.

I read these two stories - one an ancient tale 2000 years ago, and the other in 1945. I think of the dichotomy between the two events. One created a glow and brought life. One created a glow and brought death. Inside the B-29 cockpit the words of the copilot, Robert Lewis, summed it up simply. "My God" he observed. "What have we done?"

The glow in the Jesus story is a glow symbolizing the holy presence of the divine. The Hiroshima glow is of an entirely different nature. I prefer the Jesus glow. The one that represents life. Not the one of death. Using Christian euphemisms or words that speak of weapons designed to annihilate other human beings seems hard to grasp. Those uses of language seem contradictory.

**I learned one other thing.** I learned that there are a lot of people here in this country, over in Japan, and around the world trying to do something good. Trying to bring something positive and life-giving out of the horrors of atomic destruction.

I see folks trying to change the way we think about the modern world, the cultural presuppositions which we wake up with day. I see a kind of thinking that says violence is the way the world works. And another kind that says: Let's meet violence with an equal amount of or even larger amount of reactive nonviolence.

We have a kind of thinking in our culture where the default response by some people is to employ violence whenever disagreements or misunderstandings arise.

And it's in those moments that I can see and hear a different agenda beginning to take shape. A different kind of relating. A different kind of being.

The kind Gandhi advocated. The kind Jesus advocated. The kind that Gandhi says looks like and feels like and promotes a different alternative - Nonviolence. "Nonviolence" he famously said, "is a weapon of the strong".

I bet you will never hear those words from the Pentagon. Nor from Los Alamos. But they are just as valid. Not everyone subscribes to the philosophy of violence. Alternatives do exist. Nonviolence can be just as valid as a kind of human response.

Ask those who lived in the South in the '50s and '60s. Especially those who longed for an alternative to Jim Crow. That system of thinking and doing and being which spoke of racial superiority .

Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. Jim Crow was a culture. A kind of racial caste system designed by white people in power, including, I am sorry to admit, clergy.

Christian ministers taught that whites were the Chosen People. Sunday School classes taught that blacks were cursed to be servants. Congregations maintained that God supported racial segregation. Institutions, sacred and secular, created and supported this kind of thinking.

That's hard to overcome. As Edwin Black has pointed out Social Darwinists, eugenicists, craniologists (scientists who studied the shape and size of the human skull), people at every educational level held on to the notion that blacks were innately both intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. And worst of all, violence was permitted to maintain that point of view.

But something changed. Those who held different beliefs began to speak up. White as well as black Americans said "Enough".

When Rosa Parks remained in her bus seat in Montgomery AL she was arrested. Black women all across the city decided to support her and quite riding the Montgomery city buses.

Peaceful, nonviolent, non-cooperation slowly took hold and attracted national attention. White people joined in this bus boycott and before long the local bus company was losing lots of money. It was then the city fathers' turn to say "Enough. You may sit where ever you like."

That nonviolent initiative spread to other cities. Sit-ins in Greensboro. Voter registrations in Mississippi. Peaceful protests in Selma. Until the State police with billy clubs showed up.

We saw in this nation a slow but steady nonviolent grassroots movement take hold and Jim Crow segregation began to go the way of the 7 ounce Coca Cola bottle. It was no longer what most people wanted anymore.

We saw the nonviolence of Gandhi begin to dismantle the British Empire. We saw the nonviolence of the Civil Rights movement begin to alter a way of life in America that few thought would ever go away.

I wonder what would happen if the nonviolent peace vigils I saw in Los Alamos became a model for dismantling instruments of human annihilation. If folks across this country said “Enough. We no longer want our billions of dollars to go toward thermonuclear weapons. We no longer want our additional trillions to go to the Pentagon.

We’d like to send our money to our schools. To our crumbling roads and dilapidated bridges. We’d like that money to go towards solutions to poverty, mass incarcerations, and health-care coverage for all Americans.

I heard those calls these past few days. I saw men and women carry such signs.

I wonder what it would look like and feel like if large numbers of folks began to say and do similar things.