

Wildgoose Festival Takes Flight in Hot Springs, N.C.

John Dear S.J. | Aug. 13, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Some 2,200 of us made the trek to Hot Springs, N.C., this past weekend for the third annual Wildgoose Festival. We gathered along the roaring French Broad River and the Appalachian Trail amid the Blue Ridge mountains for four days of "spirituality, justice, music and art," with a hundred speakers and performers, food and hiking, prayer and preaching. It was renewing and uplifting for one and all.

This year's featured lineup included Dr. Martin Luther King's associate Vincent Harding, church historian Phyllis Tickle, authors such as Brian McClaran and Philip Yancey, theologian James Alison, Grammy winning rapper Speech from "Arrested Development," bands such as The Violent Burning, Run River North and, the highlight for us all, the fabulous Indigo Girls. Krista Tippett, host of the NPR talk show "On Being," interviewed people on the main stage throughout the weekend.

Workshops addressed a variety of concerns such as combating racism, the ecology of food, community-building, housing the homeless, forgiveness, sexuality, writing, grief and prayer. Live music was performed almost continuously, while food, coffee and beer were served in tents spread across the campground.

The wild goose, of course, is an ancient Celtic Christian metaphor for "the unpredictable spirit of God." Such Christian music/preaching festivals are common in Europe, most notably the large Greenbelt festival outside London, but this is the first of its kind in the States. People of all ages, including many young families with kids find a safe, welcoming, peaceful setting to enjoy one another, share their faith, pray together, gain new insights, and celebrate life. While it is predominantly evangelical, it is definitely ecumenical.

One of the most exhilarating speakers was the charismatic Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP and convenor of the recent "Moral Mondays" protests in Raleigh, N.C. Over the last four months, nearly 1,000 people have been arrested at the State Capitol protesting the recent evil cutbacks in social spending for health care, education and food services for the needy.

The Moral Mondays movement may be the most exciting movement for justice and peace happening right this moment in the United States. Barber explained how he and his friends are trying to reframe the political agenda by insisting that politics and policies should be rooted in morality, instead of the immoral forces of institutionalized Southern racism and classism, which ultimately hurt everyone.

As the festival was ending, the Republican governor of North Carolina signed a law demanding that all North Carolina voters have a picture ID in order to cast a ballot, perhaps the most racially discriminatory and unconstitutional move in recent history. He claims he's trying to prevent "voter fraud," even though that has not been a problem in North Carolina. Instead, as the Moral Mondays movement insist, right wing politicians are trying to disenfranchise young, poorer, older, African-American and Latino voters. So the movement continues.

For my contribution to the weekend, I offered reflections on Mahatma Gandhi's lessons for us today, on how we can become better nonviolent resisters, based on my book, *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writings*. I reminded the crowd that Dr. King once called Gandhi, a Hindu, the greatest Christian in modern times, and that

he has much to teach us for the work at hand.

One young man asked about "being saved" and "living in the grace of the Spirit with the resurrected Christ," and what that had to do with Gandhi. I encouraged him to take, like Dr. King, a Gandhian hermeneutic approach toward spirituality and theology, to keep our spirituality and theology within the framework of nonviolence, so that we don't go through life feeling "saved" yet still supporting the culture of war, greed, racism and destruction. Life in the spirit of the risen Christ, as Gandhi and King demonstrated, means we are being disarmed of violence, that we have nothing more to do with death, that we are becoming people of active nonviolence.

Everyone had a chance to grapple with such questions this year because my friends and co-workers at Pace e Bene offered a great nonviolence training session every morning titled "The power of Gospel Nonviolence to change our lives and our world." They looked at various Gospel texts including the love your enemies commandment and the resurrection account of Jesus giving us his gift of peace. While reading the Gethsemani commandment to "Put down your sword," we were invited to stand and raise our hand, to imagine the sword we carry, to feel the violence within us, and to hear that commandment anew, so that when we were ready, we would slowly lower our hands and renounce our violence.

Toward the end, they invited everyone to line up—a hundred people on one side, a hundred on the other—for a role play in which we had the chance to practice responding nonviolently to someone who vehemently disagrees with us. They urged everyone to see those who disagree with us through the eyes of compassionate love and to follow five basic steps: to center yourself; learn about the conflict, including one's own piece of the truth in it; to articulate your piece of the truth; to receive the piece of the truth from the other; and to accomplish a more just and nonviolent outcome. Such exercises are extremely important because we are all so well-trained in violence, but woefully ignorant of nonviolent ways to respond.

Throughout the four days of the festival, there was a constant flow of music, lectures, prayers and other activities occurring simultaneously in tents all over the campground well into the night. It was impossible to hear and see it all; there was too much to choose from.

At one point, for example, I walked by the "open mike" tent and stopped to hear a young man read a long poem he had written about the greatest day in his life. He was working the cash register at the local alternative food coop store in Detroit, he said, and faced a long line of seemingly tough male customers. Suddenly, slowly, they began to back away to allow a short, shy, elderly woman to come forward. She was carrying a little bag of herbal tea. It was Rosa Parks! She searched through her purse and finally handed him her coop membership card. He looked down at her name on the card and then up at her smiling face. The young poet described the overwhelming feelings of grace he felt from her presence, and how his life was changed. The poem was so inspiring that we all felt changed in the hearing of it.

On Sunday morning I joined 40 folks down by the river to share reflections on "Nonviolence as a Spiritual Discipline," led by Lucas Johnson of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Lucas asked us to turn to the person next to us and share our "our religious experience of nonviolence." What a provocative exercise!

I was sitting next to a friend, the legendary Civil Rights leader Vincent Harding. He told me about growing up in the army and his training at Fort Dix. He thoroughly enjoyed learning how to shoot a rifle, he said. At the same time, he was beginning to read the Gospels, believe in Jesus, and fall in love with God. One day while firing his gun at shooting practice, he heard an inner voice "the voice of God, the voice of Jesus" ask him, "You like shooting that gun, don't you, Vincent? Don't you realize you are being trained to kill? How is this 'loving your enemies,'" as I taught?" That voice, that spiritual experience, set him on the path of Gospel nonviolence.

Others in the circle shared how God is leading them from violence to nonviolence. Everyone confessed some current challenge whether dealing with their inner violence, anger, fear or the threat of physical violence. It was a sacred conversation, one I wish could take place in every Christian community and household across the land.

As we ended, Vincent led us in a song he wrote, to the tune of "Jacob's Ladder": "We are builders of a better world! Courage brothers, courage sisters, courage people! Be strong, though the way be long."

That's the Wildgoose Festival. It opens a space for Christians of all stripes to gather in the beauty of creation to reflect on our lives, the Word of God, and the terrible challenges of the times, and to feel encouraged to go forth and build a better world.

All weekend long, I heard the roaring river celebrate with us.

[Next month, John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, will be published, and he will embark on a speaking tour of Scotland. Copies of his new book can be ordered now at www.paceebene.org [1]. Next year, John will go on a national speaking tour about his new book. To invite John to speak in your church or peace group, visit www.johndear.org [2] or contact www.paceebene.org [1]. *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and John's other recent books, such as *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com [3].]

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