

The Narrow Path:

Walking Toward Peace and Nonviolence with John Dear, SJ

Study Guide

Introduction to the Film

The Narrow Path is a bold, challenging, and different film for filmmaker Gerry Straub and his San Damiano Foundation. Their motto is “Putting the Power of Film at the Service of the Poor.” But you will not see any images of extreme poverty in this film, though the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after their destruction are graphic. The message and supporting visuals are focused on a prophetic Christian call to be peacemakers in a nation whose policies are often in direct contrast with this biblical mandate. From his own hermitage in New Mexico as well as in his retreats, lectures, and interview statements in the midst of his peace demonstrations, Father John Dear, SJ, presents and interprets the words and witness of the nonviolent Jesus in the midst of escalating violence around the world.

John’s statements expressing his deeply held and courageously lived out religious convictions, as well as equally compelling statements from other Christian peacemakers like Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, plus some of the more political visuals disturb and challenge viewers at many levels. John makes us hear and see what we would rather not. This film engages us emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and behaviorally. It invites us to feel and empathize more broadly, to think more critically, to pray more faithfully, and to act more courageously. His personal witness is as inspiring as it is troubling.

A Note from the Filmmaker, Gerry Straub

“For me, there was only one person to address the explosive topic of peace and nonviolence—John Dear, SJ. Father Dear is a celebrated peace activist and the author of over twenty books. His life story has been a journey into the radical message of the Gospel and Jesus’ instruction to love our enemies. Following in the footsteps of the great apostles of nonviolence, John Dear, who has been arrested and imprisoned over 75 times, crisscrosses the country and the world tirelessly preaching the message of the nonviolent Jesus. Sadly, this film will upset and disturb many people. But the Gospel is disturbing, if you take it seriously. Making this film changed the lives of those who made, and I pray it changes the lives of many who watch it.”

A Note about the Filmmaker, Gerry Straub

As the result of his life-changing encounter with the spirit of Francis of Assisi in 1995, Gerry Straub left a profitable and successful career as a producer of Hollywood soap operas for a radically different vocation. He spent months living with the poor all over the world, so that he could capture their faces and share their stories to all who would open their eyes, ears, and hearts to see, listen, and be converted. His radical conversion reveals the radical message and witness of Jesus. Gerry challenges us to join him in following this Jesus who is to be found in the lives of God’s special people, the poor and marginalized of this world.

Outline

(Time and Description of the 26 Segments)

Part One—Jesus and Nonviolence (35 min)

1. 2:45 The “anti-Beatitudes” of domination, war, injustice
2. 1:40 Introduction and the importance of the desert for a peaceful heart
3. 2:45 Title and the song “Peace Train” calling us to be peacemakers
4. 4:50 John Dear’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land where he encounters the Beatitudes
5. 4:28 A life of peace begins with solitude
6. 1:10 Thich Nhat Hanh’s way of “walking mindfulness”
7. 4:35 Competing images of God and the narrow path of nonviolence
8. 1:15 The story of St. Maximillian’s refusal to serve in the Roman army
9. 3:55 John’s story of challenging the soldiers surrounding his New Mexico home
10. 3:05 Nonviolence is the essence of Jesus and other faith traditions also
11. 4:20 **“Put down the sword”—Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence**

Part Two—Nonviolence is publicly active resistance to all forms of violence (34 min)

12. 7:50 **John tells the challenging story of the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador**
13. 7:00 John’s words and public witness calling us to publicly active resistance
14. 1:05 John publicly challenges Jesuit universities to drop ROTC
15. 14:30 John tells the story of his Plowshares action with Phil Berrigan
16. 4:05 “Lives in the Balance” song calls us to challenge war

Part Three—“It’s nonviolence or non-existence” and we must choose nonviolence (38 min)

17. 2:55 John’s translation of the Beatitudes as “Walk on, you peacemakers...”
18. 4:00 John tells the story of how he stopped the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian
19. 2:50 **Nonviolence is actively giving our lives in the service of God’s vision of peace**
20. 6:00 John amplifies Martin Luther King’s words – “It’s nonviolence or non-existence”
21. 7:00 Examples of how nonviolence “works,” plus the need to confront the spirituality of war
22. 6:00 John’s experience in Iraq and call to us to challenge such violence

- 23. 2:15 At Los Alamos, John describes the evil of nuclear weapons
- 24. 2:05 Over images of Hiroshima, John invites us to repent for such evil
- 25. 5:00 Over the song “Let It Be,” John leads a peace march to Los Alamos
- 26. 1:40 Credits over a sung version of the “Peace Prayer” of St. Francis

Planning Your Time Together

This 108-minute DVD can be used in a variety of settings, including adult faith formation sessions, high school or university classrooms, parish Advent or Lenten retreats, parish social justice committee formation meetings, RCIA sessions, parish staff meetings, pastoral council meetings, and more. **If you have time for only one or two segments to insert into a meeting, consider the ones highlighted in bold.**

One Session (Half-Day or Full-Day Retreat)

Plan time to view and discuss the entire film (or most of it for a half-day), share simple food, pray together, and plan a parish, group, or class response.

Two Sessions (90–120 Minutes per Session)

Follow steps 1 to 4 for segments 1–16.

Follow steps 1 to 4 for segments 17–26, plus add steps 5 to 7.

Three to Four Sessions (60–90 Minutes per Session)

Follow steps 1 to 4 for each of the three parts outlined above; plus add steps 5 to 7 in a third session. Or carry out steps 5 to 7 in a separate fourth session.

Steps and Directions for the Session(s)

1. Open with prayer. Start by asking for the courage to open your eyes, ears, and heart to the often silent cries of the poor and the victims of violence and for the grace to respond with compassion and courage.

2. Share feelings and reflection. Because the visual images are so overwhelming, participants may need time to reflect on their feelings before discussing their reactions to the film. Begin with these questions:

- What image(s) or scene(s) most disturbed you?
- What were your feelings as you watched?
- What did you find yourself resisting as you watched?
- Why do you think you experienced that resistance?

After a moment for silent reflection on the first two questions, you might have participants share their answers in pairs or small groups before a discussion of the last two questions as a whole group.

3. Identify challenging statements. Invite participants to identify any statements or statistics that especially challenged them and the questions that the statement(s) raised in their minds.

4. Discuss “Quotes and Questions.” Select quotes and questions from the segment(s) you viewed, then follow the steps below.

- Read the quotation aloud, have someone in the group read it aloud, or replay it from the DVD.
- Ask participants to reflect silently for a moment on the question(s) following each quotation, share their answers in pairs or small groups, and invite them to share their responses with the whole group, depending on time.
- Any action suggestions that are identified in these responses could be posted on newsprint.
- A good final question, if time permits, would be:
As you watched the film, what changed about the way you see the explosive topic of peace and nonviolence?

5. Consider action suggestions.

- Invite questions on any action suggestions that may have been identified and posted on newsprint during your discussion.
- Duplicate and distribute “Suggested Responses” and discuss the action suggestions from each of the three sections according to the time available.
- Also depending on time, invite participants to identify additional action suggestions.

6. Move to decisions.

- Invite participants to decide on their next step as an individual or family, sharing their decisions in pairs, if time permits.
- Discuss and decide whether to come up with an action for the whole group, class, or parish and what that action might be. Create an implementation plan for the action.

7. Conclude with prayer.

- As the conclusion to part one, read aloud the Beatitudes (see *Matthew 5:1–12*), followed by a moment of silent reflection and then pray for the grace to put these ideas into practice. Perhaps replay the “Peace Train” song in segment 3 to reinforce this word from Scripture.
- Use the “Lives in the Balance” song in segment 16 as the conclusion to part two, plus add a spontaneous prayer in response to the song.
- Use the “Let It Be” song in segment 25 and/or the “Peace Prayer” song in segment 26 as the conclusion to part three.

Quotes and Questions from Specific Segments

[1] “Blessed are the war-makers, those who make war, fund war, design war, make enemies, send our young people to kill and be killed. They shall be called the sons and daughters of the culture of death. . . . Blessed are those who are never persecuted, never in trouble, for whom nothing ever goes wrong because they never spoke out for justice and peace. They are perfectly comfortable.’ All of that is the opposite of what Jesus says.”

- What are your feelings and thoughts about these “anti-Beatitudes” and the accompanying images?
- How do they apply to you? And why?
- Do you agree that they are the “opposite of what Jesus says”? Why or why not?

[2] “The desert is a good place to learn the wisdom of peace.”

- What is the “wisdom of peace”?
- Where do you or could you experience such “desert places” in your life?

[7] “The whole point is to make your life story fit into the life story of Jesus” (Dan Berrigan)

- What are the essentials of the life story of Jesus?
- In what ways does your life story fit (and not fit) the life story of Jesus?
- What one or two changes would significantly bring your life story closer to Jesus’ life story?

[11] “The last words of Jesus to the Church . . . to us: ‘Put down the sword.’ So Jesus is arrested, he’s tortured, he’s executed . . . The way he died was the most perfect nonviolent act in history . . . He dies saying ‘the violence stops here in my body. You’re all forgiven, but you’re not allowed to kill anymore. The killing is over.’ And God raises him from the dead and he comes back and he says ‘peace be with you . . . Now you walk the . . . narrow path of nonviolence, and follow me all the way even to the cross and to the new life of resurrection.’”

- What do you think Jesus meant by “put down the sword”? Have you done so?
- If you were to follow Jesus along this narrow path of nonviolence, what changes would you make in your personal relationships? In the institutional policies you support or oppose and how you do so?

[12] “If you are going to be for the reign of God, you have to stand up publicly against the anti-reign . . . You cannot be for peace unless you are publicly, actively against war. You can’t be for justice unless you are publicly, actively against injustice. You can’t say ‘I’m going to [do good] . . . unless you stand up publicly, actively against structured, systemic, institutionalized evil . . .”

- What parts of this do you agree with and why? Which parts trouble you and why?
- How does “non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good” apply to your life?
- How can you stand up against such evil?

[13] Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., Ron Kovic says, “A time comes when silence is betrayal . . .” What do you think of the ways in which he, John Dear, and others were breaking the silence?

- How have you broken your silence on these issues?
- Are there some issues or situations where you should break your silence? How?
- If you didn’t break the silence, who or what would you be betraying?

[15] “But the government takes [us] very seriously, because the government knows if you’ve got people in a surge of nonviolence marching onto military bases and saying—‘No, that’s it. We are not going to allow the mass murder of our sisters and brothers in Iraq or Afghanistan ever again. In fact, you can put us in jail. You can even . . . kill us. But we have had it. Not in our names. Not with our money. Not in the name of the God of peace’—they’ve got a problem. They’ve got to nip that in the bud, because they know better than us that nonviolence is a power that’s contagious.”

- Are you ready to say “not in my name, not with my money”? Why or why not?
- What would be appropriate for you to do as part of such resistance?
- What do the words of Jesus in Mark 13:9–13 say to you on this?
- Do you agree with John’s sense of the power of such nonviolent resistance? Why or why not?

[18] We need to expose “the myth of redemptive violence . . . that these weapons protect us. . . . It’s all a lie. It’s all about military . . . domination . . . Part of the work of peace is to look our sins of war in the eye and why we did it and to repent, and to honor the dead, and to ask for forgiveness, and then to dismantle all our weapons so that this could never happen again.”

- Do you agree that it’s a lie to say that these weapons protect us? Why or why not?
- Should our country repent for the sins of vaporizing people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
- How could you participate in this repentance?

[19] “Nonviolence is not passive. . . . It’s active love and truth. You’re going to give your entire life for the whole human family for the rest of your life, persistently reconciling with every person on the planet, persistently resisting every form of structured violence, allowing God to disarm your heart and becoming part of God’s disarmament of the human race and practicing this universal, unconditional, even sacrificial non-retaliatory, all-inclusive love toward everybody, with one condition: there is no cause, however noble, for which we will ever again support the taking of a single human life, ever Not only are we not going to inflict suffering on others; we are willing to accept suffering in the struggle for justice and peace. . . . We’re willing to lay down our lives for humanity and that’s the soul of peacemaking and nonviolence. That’s why it is such a narrow path, because who wants to do that. It’s the cross”

- In what ways does this nonviolence appeal to you and why? And/or scare you and why?
- Do you think this is what all of us are called to as disciples of Jesus? Or does it apply primarily to people in religious life or who don’t have lots of family obligations? And why?
- What would you need in order to start or advance on such a journey?

[23] “How ridiculous to be going around the world saying we’re taking the high moral ground and you can’t have one nuclear weapon, when we’ve churned out tens of thousands. What would Jesus say about this? He’d say, ‘this is the number one moral issue of our time.’ . . . the whole way of nonviolence is to break the cycle. Somebody’s got to do it and stop it. And we have to do it personally in our own lives and we have to begin to stand up against our country . . . and break the cycle: Stop threatening the world and building these weapons of mass destruction, and lead the way, because we’re the ones holding the whole world hostage. We’re the ones threatening every nation on the planet. And so if we stop, they will learn and follow our example.”

- To what extent do you agree with John’s analysis and why?
- What do you think Jesus would say about all this?
- How can you break the cycle of violence in your own life?
- Is it possible to break the cycle globally? Why or why not? Where should we start?

Suggested Responses

Individual, Group, Class, or Parish

“Every one of us has to do something for peace and justice. Every one of us can make a difference. None of us can do everything, Oscar Romera said, but all of us have to do something . . .” [13]

Pray

- Prayerfully read and reflect on key biblical passages from this film—the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:38–48); see also Mark 13:9–13 (testifying to your faith in court).
- Recalling John’s words that “the roots of violence are in all of us . . . Our only hope is in the God of peace and that requires prayer,” pray regularly that God will help you see the violence in your own heart and what its roots are and then help you deal honestly and consistently with it.
- Recalling the inspirational stories of the Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador [12], choose as spiritual reading, especially during Lent, the lives of such martyrs and pray for such faith and courage.
- Pray daily for peacemakers around the world.

“Followers of Jesus are called to believe that nonviolence, poverty, openness, and forgiveness are the surest way for them . . . to receive life from God and to give life, peace, and unity to the world” —Jean Vanier [16]

Adjust your lifestyle

- Examine your primary personal relationships and decide how to make them more nonviolent.
- Examine your possessions and activities and begin to let go of those that separate you from others.
- Listen more carefully to the thoughts of others, especially those with whom you disagree.
- Identify the grudges that you are still holding on to and begin to let go of them one by one.
- Recalling John Dear’s observation that “a life of peace really begins with silence and solitude . . . and [we need to] be at peace with ourselves, so that we have something positive to offer the world” [5], decide where and when to build more silence and solitude in your life and balance your activities to create greater inner peace.
- Recalling John’s concerns about our culture— “So many things in the culture are trying to distract us from the truth of reality. I don’t want to . . . waste my entire life, this precious gift of life, just having watched TV all day long and reading the bad news. I want to get my direction from the Gospel and . . . the risen Christ” [5], limit the amount of trivial entertainment and use some of that time for serious reading and reflection.
- Fast periodically from food, soda, TV or other forms of entertainment as a way of doing penance for the sins of war.

When John asked Cesar Chavez just before he died what he would say to the question ‘what should people do?’ he said, “tell everybody public action, public action, public action!” [13]

Engage yourself and your parish in public action for peace

- Recalling John Dear's list of issues and his suggestion to pick one or two, both local and global, and do them well [13], identify those issues of peace and justice that most appeal to your heart and match with your skills and opportunities and begin working on them.
- Recalling John Dear's observation that "the money going into these weapons [20,000 nuclear weapons] is making 3 billion people starve and suffer, our sisters and brothers. What will I do?" [15], join Pax Christi USA* and their efforts to abolish nuclear weapons or find other public actions for peace to take part in.
- Recalling John's witness of civil disobedience in the Plowshares action with Phil Berigan [15], discuss with this prophetic community (or individual) whether such dramatic action is needed to stop the war in Iraq or any other U.S. policy and how you might personally participate.