

# LETTERS



## LETTER TO POETS

DEAR POETS,

For a long time I have felt the need to work more for peace but have been unsure about just what to do. As an active member of the Port Townsend Peace Coalition I have begun to educate myself on the medical, social and economic effects of nuclear war and preparation for nuclear war. I have participated in a variety of activities from planting peas along the fence of a local Navy munitions depot (Give Peas a Chance) to giving talks before various student and community groups on the arms race and what we can do to halt it. Though I have on the whole felt good about my involvement in these activities there has been a separation between my work for peace and my work as a poet. It is as if I were leading two lives that should be one.

Two groups whose members seem to work without this separation are Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) and the Union of Concerned Educators (UCE). I am inspired by these groups' insistence on developing programs based on their members' specific professional expertise. This has allowed them to be very effective because of their competence in the field under discussion. When a PSR doctor addresses a group on the medical effects of nuclear war — burns, radiation sickness, disease vectors, infection, leukemia, solid cancers, genetic damage — and on the medical community's inability to respond to these effects, most people are willing to listen. What a doctor says about medicine is normally more believable than what a businessman or politician or poet says about medicine. PSR speakers all over the country have been making clear the madness of believing we can medically meet the needs of even a few survivors of nuclear war, assuming there will be survivors. The Union of Concerned Educators speaks equally as effectively from its perspective. Recently I heard a UCE presentation on the Geography and History of the Soviet Union that clarified many questions people ask me about Soviet policy. I was surprised to realize that much American foreign policy is designed by individuals who are largely ignorant of some basic facts about the Soviet Union. Like PSR, members of the Union of Concerned Educators — historians, economists, political scientists, psychologists — speak about what they have studied in their professional lives.

I believe poets can and should work to bring about a nuclear-weapons-free world and that they can do so in ways similar to groups like PSR and UCE. Our knowledge as poets can be used to speak directly to two issues that threaten to bring on nuclear war. The first is the matter of euphemisms. Poets work with words. One of our tasks is to purify the language, to clarify rather than to confuse, to reveal meaning rather than to hide it. Military terms like pre-emptive strike, limited nuclear war, tactical nuclear

weapons, appropriate response, counterforce, acceptable casualties, and others must be unmasked.

Pre-emptive strike means attacking first. Limited nuclear war means a nuclear exchange in which twenty to one hundred million Americans might be killed, or one in which only Europeans are killed. Tactical nuclear weapon means a small battlefield weapon — the bombs America dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would now be classified as tactical nuclear weapons. Appropriate response means threatening to use nuclear weapons in the Middle East to guarantee the flow of oil to the United States. Counterforce means the development of highly accurate missile systems like the Minuteman II and the MX designed to destroy hardened missile silos and thus of use as a first strike weapon. Acceptable casualties may be ten million, twenty million, sixty million dead. Never in human history have sixty million people been murdered in an instant. It is unbearable to think of this.

In fact the unbearable quality of these possibilities may explain the presence of the euphemisms. They're not really meant to fool anyone. No one is fooled. They're meant to allow us to think we have fooled ourselves. And they lead us to the second thing poets can speak about — imagination. Nuclear war is a horrifying "unthinkable" possibility. So unthinkable that we pretend it can't happen. Or nothing can be done about it. Or that if it did happen some of us would somehow survive intact and quickly rebuild society. But what little we know of the multiple and synergistic effects of nuclear war suggests we may not survive at all. Neither may animals. Nor plants. The earth itself may not be able to support any but the most rudimentary life forms. Unimaginable!

Of course it's unimaginable. It's larger than any idea we've ever had to hold in our minds. And it's hypothetical. We can't even try out a nuclear war to find out what really would happen. We've got to be able to visualize it. And if we can visualize it then we won't support any nuclear weapons at all. Imagine. So poets must speak of the absolute necessity to stretch our power of imagination as a first step to ending the nuclear threat.

There are two things poets can address as poets — the use of words to hide the real nature of military planning and activity, and the necessity to imagine what a nuclear war is before we can cease preparing for it. Poets can speak out on these issues in several ways. If they teach, they can speak in their classes. They can speak at readings. They can write poems on the issues. And what if every book of poems published in-

cluded a statement by the poet on his/her commitment to peace and consequent refusal to participate in preparation for nuclear war?

There is much more we could do as poets. And we could do it as a group — Poets Opposed to War (POW) or some such thing. I've written to you to try out the idea of such a group. Share the idea with poet friends I haven't contacted. If you like the idea, think about how such a group could be started, how it would function. Write back to me what you think we might do next.

One foot in front of the other.

David Romvedt  
P. O. Box 484  
Port Townsend, Washington 98368

(If poets would like to cosign a version of this letter as national call to poets to begin an organization they can write to Dragon Gate, Inc., 508 Lincoln Street, Port Townsend, Washington, 98368.)

## DEATH VALLEY DAZE

TO THE EDITOR:

Swedish TV is something else. They have only two channels, limited hours, and no commercials. Not long ago, I was surprised to see a familiar face. Let's see now. Hmm. Oh, yes. Death Valley Days. Golly, what a long time ago. He certainly seems to have aged. What is the role he is in now? Why, it looks as if he is the make-believe President of the United States.

He is saying: "The way to have fewer nuclear missiles is to build more." I have to think that one over. More is less. Sounds like something from Orwell. Well, 1984 isn't so far off at that.

Then he is explaining. I can see his eyes following the text of the script behind the camera. No question about it, he is a good actor. "It's just like a big poker game. We have to have a bigger hand than our enemy if we are called." Hmm. A game, eh? I wonder what are the stakes? The human race? A hundred million? Then he explains further: "Of course, we won't ever really use those things. But we must have them, so if we do use them, we will win. I am having a little difficulty at this point in sorting this out. But the really interesting part is just coming.

"I now declare the state of Wyoming expendable. After all they have only three electoral votes, and any fallout would miss Southern California and all of our dear friends there. Our new plan — dunce pack for short — is to put a whole slew of weapons in a big hole there, and inform our enemy that he is to aim all of his there. Then, to use the immortal words of Caspar Weinberger, 'We shall prevail'."

It is quite a show, and I am glad it is make-believe. In real life, of course, about now the man with a net would close in and take our hero to a safe place. The show goes on:

"Then, to assure victory, we are basing a whole new generation of missiles in Europe. This is to draw our enemy's fire so that Europe is turned into a lake of molten glass. Remember, every missile that explodes in Europe is one less for us. And they surely want to stop communism."

It is a hilarious show. Old actors do have their uses.

Ben Lane

(Ben Lane, of Tolovana Park, is spending a year in Sweden with his wife and son.)

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