

DRAINED



stories of people who wanted more

Johann Christoph Arnold



Stories of People
Who Wanted More

JOHANN CHRISTOPH ARNOLD

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Prologue: Wanting More

*Only when you have made peace
within yourself will you be able
to make peace in the world.*

RABBI SIMCHA BUNIM

While working on this book, I came across an advert featuring a picture of a woman curled up in a lawn chair, gazing out over a lake toward a brilliant sunset. The advert reads: ‘A dream job. Beautiful kids. The best marriage. And a gnawing feeling of absolute emptiness.’ How many millions share her unspoken anxiety?

We work hard, play hard, love hard – and try to isolate ourselves on little islands of sanity in the midst of a raging sea in which stock markets surge and crash, biotech engineers redefine life’s boundaries and fashion designers dictate dress code. But somehow the tide keeps rising... And sometimes we’re too tired – too drained – even to care. We’re tempted to shut our eyes and just pretend it will all go away.

Of course, ‘it’ never does.

Whether we admit it or not, at a certain level all of us are in continual search for a life we can feel good about living – one where elusive ideals like harmony, joy, justice and peace are everyday realities. In the words of Monty Python, we’re looking ‘for something completely different’. Each of us has dreamed of a life where sorrow and pain do not exist. At the same time, none of us will deny that violence affects public life everywhere around our globe, from current hot spots such as Iraq, Northern Ireland, East Timor and Bosnia, to the streets of our own decaying cities. In personal life too, even in the most ‘peaceful’ suburbs, conflict is often the order of the day – in domestic violence, unhealthy addictions and the destructive tensions that divide businesses, schools and communities.

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Violence hides behind the most respectable façades of our supposedly enlightened society. It is there in the turbines of greed, deceit and injustice that drive our greatest financial and cultural institutions. It is there in the infidelity that can erode even the strongest of marriages. It is there in the hypocrisy that deadens our spiritual life and robs even the most devout expressions of religion of so much of their credibility.

Some of us look for fulfilment and peace by modifying our lifestyles: by changing careers, moving from the city to the suburbs (or from the suburbs to the country), cutting back, simplifying, or otherwise trying to improve our quality of life. But all too often, the peace we're seeking continues to elude us. We know all too well that ours is a world in ferment, and that despite constant talk about peace, there is very little. So little, in fact, that when I told a close friend about my plans for this book, he suggested it was not only naïve to write on the topic, but even somewhat perverse.

Against this dismal backdrop, it may indeed seem perverse to write a book on finding peace. Yet the longing for peace and harmony remains unchanged, and it is as ancient as it is universal. Thousands of years ago, the Jewish visionary Isaiah dreamed of a time and place where the lion would dwell peacefully with the lamb. And down through the centuries, no matter how dark the horizon or bloody the battlefield, men and women have found hope in his dream.

For the most part, however, our society has stripped 'peace' of any significant meaning. From greeting cards to bookmarks, from billboards to embroidered tea-towels, our culture is awash with the language of peace. Especially at Christmas-time, phrases such as 'peace and good will' appear so widely that they have been reduced to slogans and clichés. On another level, gov-ernments and the mass media speak of heavily armed 'peace-keeping' battalions stationed in war-torn regions around the world. In churches, priests and ministers close their services with 'go in peace', and though the words are intended as a blessing, they often seem to be little more than a dismissal until the following Sunday.

Call it what you will, the yearning for peace exists deep in every human being. We all hate stress, headaches, heartaches. We don't like feeling drained. We all want freedom from anxiety and doubt, violence and division. We all want stability and security. Peace.

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But though so many of us hanker after peace, we generally want an easy peace – on our own terms. The problem with this is that peace cannot come quickly or easily if it is to have any genuine staying power. It cannot merely mean temporary psychological well-being or equilibrium, a pleasant feeling that is here today and gone tomorrow. True peace is not a commodity to be had or bought. Nor is it a cause that can be taken up and pursued simply with good intentions. Paradoxically, real peace demands struggle. It is found by taking up the fundamental battles of life: life versus death, good versus evil, truth versus falsehood. It is a gift, but it is also the result of the most intense striving.

In our search for peace, perhaps nothing is so vital – or painful – as first coming to terms with the lack of peace in our own lives, with the arid places of our hearts. For some of us this may mean confronting hatred or resentment; for others, deceit, divided loyalties or confusion; for still others, mere emptiness or depression. In the deepest sense it is all violence, and must therefore be faced and overcome.

In the following pages I have tried to resist formulating neat theses or presenting loophole-proof arguments. I have also tried to avoid dwelling on the roots of our feeling of being drained. Though one could write a whole book on that subject, it would be too depressing to wade through. What's more, it might not even help.

Sadhu Sundar Singh, an Indian Christian mystic who lived at the turn of the century, used an analogy to show how the 'secret and reality of a blissful life' cannot be discovered through intellectual probing:

A scientist had a bird in his hand. He saw that it had life and, wanting to find out in what part of the bird's body its life lay, he began dissecting the bird. The result was that the very life he was in search of disappeared. Those who try to understand the mysteries of the inner life intellectually will meet with similar failure. The life they are looking for will vanish in the analysis.

Spiritual 'how-to' guides can be found in any bookshop, but in my experience life is never so tidy as they suggest. More often than not, it's a tangled mess. Many of the stories told in this book come from friends of mine, some whom I've known for years, and others only for a short time. Few of them claim to 'have peace' as a permanent state of being. Rather, they attest to the journey that leads towards peace, towards that hard-to-define 'more' we all want. Each of us will be at a different place in our

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search. My aim in this book, very simply, has been to offer you stepping stones along the way – and enough hope to keep you going.

1 Life in the Slow Lane

*A man is in bondage
to whatever he cannot part with
that is less than himself.*

GEORGE MACDONALD

In a recent 'trends' item, *Time* magazine reported on a young couple who moved away from their wealthy Ohio suburb because the woman was sick of living in a neighbourhood where people 'spend all their time working their backs off so they can fill their big, empty houses with expensive crap'. She wanted 'serenity, simplicity, some peace of mind'.

At first, life in their new small-town surroundings seemed perfect, but before long, joblessness pushed the crime rate up, and trouble with narrow-minded neighbours brought headaches. Determined not to give up, the woman threw herself into historic real-estate renovation and school board issues. This didn't seem to bring fulfilment either. Finally the couple hit on a great plan for achieving the serene lifestyle they so wanted: they headed off to New England's Nantucket island to start a bed-and-breakfast...

In the last twenty-five years alone, new inventions and improvements have utterly transformed the way we live. Personal computers and fax machines, mobile phones and wireless speakers, e-mail and other hi-tech labour-saving conveniences have revolutionized our homes and workplaces. Yet have they brought us the peace and freedom they seemed to promise?

Without realizing it we have become dulled, if not brainwashed, in our eagerness to embrace technology. We have become slaves to a system that presses us to spend money on new gadgets, and we have accepted without question the argument that, by working harder, we will have more time to do more important things. It is a perverse logic. When upgrades on everything from software packages to cars keep us on the constant run; when we are always struggling to keep up with the Joneses

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(even against our better judgement), we ought to ask ourselves what we have saved, and whether our lives are any more peaceful.

If anything, the increasing complexity of life today has only robbed us of peace and resulted in a quiet but widespread epidemic of nervousness, insecurity and confusion. Fifty years ago German educator Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster wrote:

More than ever before, our technical civilization has cushioned life on all sides, yet more than ever, people helplessly succumb to the blows of life. This is very simply because a merely material, technical culture cannot give help in the face of tragedy. The man of today, externalized as he is, has no ideas, no strength, to enable him to master his own restlessness and division.... He has no peace.

Our culture is not only marked by frenzy, but driven by it. We are obsessed (to quote American monk Thomas Merton) with our lack of time and space: with saving time, with conquering space, with making conjectures about the future, and ‘worrying about size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration’.

As the couple who moved to Nantucket found, simplicity cannot be an end in itself. I have no idea whether they ever succeeded in finding the unhampered calm they so much craved. But I have learnt – through my own experiences and those of others – that simplicity can be as elusive as peace of mind. Nature abhors a vacuum, and our attempts to empty our lives of clutter will often achieve nothing more in the long run than clearing space for *new* clutter. If we are disillusioned with a materialistic lifestyle and want to escape its clutches, more will be required of us than a change of pace.

Nonetheless simplicity remains something we must strive for continually when possessions and activities and agendas distract us from the important things of life – family, friends, meaningful relationships and constructive work. These are the things that connect us and draw us together.

Born in the East German city of Dresden to parents dedicated to Communist Party ideals, Stefan grew up fully aware that a world of material bounty lay just beyond his grasp – on the far side of the Berlin Wall. In primary school, students learned the principles of Marxism and listened as teachers expounded on the vision of a classless society. On the playground, however, Stefan and his friends swapped

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Western gimmicks – Matchbox cars were all the rage – and conjured up their own images of the mysterious place called ‘the West’.

Most of my growing-up years, my parents, my three brothers and I lived in a tower block flat, in a neighbourhood of tower blocks. A lot of people lived like that, and looking back, I’d say it was like living in a bunker, but at that time I never thought like that. I mean, how many people in the world have a roof over their head? We certainly never went hungry. And we had running water, hot and cold. There were no water metres; the bill was the same, regardless of how much you used.

When I was thirteen, I was selected to attend a special sports school, and I left home and began training in judo. The trainers at the school tried to impress on us how important our task was. Everything was geared towards the Olympic Games. We were told that if a member of an Eastern Bloc country were to win a gold medal, it would strike a major blow against imperialism.

It was hard to figure out why they made such a big deal out of everything. As young teenagers, we could never understand why artists like Michael Jackson or Bruce Springsteen couldn’t just come over to the East and give concerts.

By the time I reached secondary school age, I was feeling pretty disillusioned. I could see that communism wasn’t everything it was chalked up to be – it was just bureaucracy. At the same time, I didn’t think capitalism was much of an answer, either; our schooling made us aware of injustices and exploitation going on in Western countries.

I was seventeen when the Berlin Wall came down, in November 1989, and I couldn’t have cared less. Sure, there was a certain amount of natural excitement. But it seemed a bit overdone: ‘Finally freedom! We can unite with our brothers and sisters in the West.’ But it didn’t seem to me that people cared very much about their brothers and sisters in the West; they were much more interested in the well-stocked department stores. And people in the West seemed far more intent on gaining access to the East’s markets than on befriending its people.

A few days before Christmas I went into former West Berlin, just to check it out. A lot of people had moved into the city, and others went shopping as often as they could, coming back loaded with stuff. But I had a hard time spending any money at all; I only bought a few chocolate bars. As I walked past all those jam-packed shop

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displays and gazed up at the billboards, I just couldn't imagine living in such an environment.

Both communism and capitalism seemed to fall woefully short of the truth. So I began to dream about other alternatives. I planned it out in my head, and even drew up my ideas on paper: a place where everyone got along, where poverty didn't exist. Life would be simple and unhurried, and people would have time for each other.

Not long after that, a friend told me about a small, rural community near Cologne, where men and women actually lived and worked together in a money-free environment. I made my first visit and was impressed by their no-frills lifestyle and their commitment to honest, straightforward relationships. A year later I returned to stay. I had found the 'third way' I had been looking for.

Looking back, I know that the lifestyle of my childhood was simple, by Western standards. We didn't choose to live that way; that's just how it was. Today I meet people who make a big deal out of living simply – they won't drink supermarket milk, or they'll only eat whole-wheat bread. There are people who live simply because they can't afford anything better, and there are those who live simply because of a social consciousness, or something.

To me, simplicity for its own sake is pointless. But when it results from a decision to stand against the trend of hand-over-fist accumulation, and to give rather than to get, then simplicity is a fruit of the truth.

2 Noise Pollution

*Words are, of course,
the most powerful drug
used by mankind.*

RUDYARD KIPLING

One of the biggest drains on our energy and emotion, and one of the greatest hindrances to peace, is our inability to be silent. For every situation in which we decide to hold our tongue or mind our own business, there are others where we let our heads be turned and join the chatter. We are constantly robbing ourselves of peace, because we choose to meddle in the affairs of others. We talk. We gossip.

Many people seem to regard silence as a trapping of an unnecessarily severe life – something for monks or nuns, for ‘religious’ people. It is true that in many religious orders, members observe periods of silence. But why should this be seen in a negative light? Silence can relieve us of the burden of having to respond. It can help us to avoid getting worked up over petty things.

Writer Max Picard points out that silence, ‘Stands outside the world of profit and utility. It cannot be exploited; you cannot get anything out of it. It is “unproductive”; therefore it is regarded as useless. Yet there is more help and healing in silence than in all the useful things.’

Sometimes silence requires physical solitude. Personally, I think it is important to make time for solitude every day, even if only for a few minutes. My wife and I take a quiet walk in the morning as often as we can, and find it a good way to focus our thoughts. One elderly couple I know take a short walk before dinner every day, simply to be quiet together and enjoy the evening.

If we live or work closely with others – in a close-knit family, business or community, for instance – it is especially necessary to find times to be quiet and alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who founded a small religious community in Northeast

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Germany in 1935 and was hanged by the Nazis ten years later for his part in the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life, said that those who cannot live in community cannot live with themselves. But the reverse is just as true. Those who cannot live with themselves cannot live in community.

When we are alone, outward silence is easy to cultivate. (Inwardly, we may not be quiet at all, but may be buzzing with ideas and plans.) When we are with others, it becomes more difficult. Silence involves more than not talking – it means learning to listen.

Not to react, not to revise or embellish or expound, not even to respond, but simply to *listen* is a gift. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta once pointed out: 'All our words are useless if they do not come from within.'

All of us know what it is like to sit with someone we love, not saying anything yet feeling perfectly at ease. But silence is not always a source of peace. Sometimes even a slight pause in a conversation is enough to unsettle and embarrass us, and we grope for a quick reply to bridge the uncomfortable gap. When things are not right inside – when we are not at peace with ourselves, or not comfortable in the presence of another person – silence can even be frightening.

Recently, a friend told me how hard she finds it to drop everything that occupies her thoughts – the clamour of work, the distraction of plans, worries about tomorrow – and become inwardly still:

It seems that when you are not at peace with yourself, you will have a hard time coping with blank spaces, either visually (nothing to watch or read), auditorily (nothing to listen to or hear), or physically (nothing to do, or the inability to do anything). You try to keep yourself distracted from the trouble inside – pain, conflicting goals, fear, accusations, whatever – but you only become more flustered.

Sophie Loeber, a childhood friend of my father's whom I have known all my life, recently wrote to me in a similar vein. 'I have often had to fight for peace in my life,' she says, 'but silence helped me turn inward.'

In 1937 the German religious community where Sophie lived was raided and dissolved by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police). After rounding them up, lining the men against a wall and locking the women and children in a room, the police

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interrogated them and announced that they had twenty-four hours to leave the premises and get out of the country. Sophie remembers:

When the Nazis forced us to leave our beloved home in the Rhön hills, we were not allowed to take anything with us other than the clothes on our backs. But we carried our treasures – joys and sorrows, struggles and times of celebration, and everything we had experienced there over many years – in our hearts. No one could take those from us, even if we were utterly stripped of all material goods. That filled me with a silent joy and brought peace to my heart.

Many years later Sophie and her husband, Christian, lost two sons to a rare disease. First the boys went blind; then they became mentally debilitated. Both died in their teens, only a few years apart. Sophie was stricken beyond words. Questions tortured her, but gradually they gave way to a silence in which she found the strength to go on – and peace:

Again and again I asked myself: why this terrible trial? Sometimes the discouragement seemed too much to bear. Yet later, in times when I was able to collect my thoughts and become inwardly silent, I realized that my concerns were much too small, too personal. Christian and I had been circling around our own needs, forgetting that there were people right next door who had needs too.

More recently, Sophie lost her husband to cancer, and then a third son (married, with children) in an electrical accident. Yet she will still tell you that not only has her suffering taught her to become quiet, but also ‘to let go of everything that ties us down’. Inner silence and detachment, she says, have made her better able to respond to the pain of others.

Perhaps the ‘letting go’ that Sophie refers to is what seventeenth-century Quaker William Penn (after whom Pennsylvania is named) meant when he set down these words of advice: ‘Love silence even in the mind; for thoughts are to that as words to the body, troublesome. True silence is the rest of the mind, and is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.’

3 Let Go

*To surrender to too many demands,
to commit oneself to too many projects,
to want to help everyone in everything
is to succumb to violence.*

THOMAS MERTON

The best way not to experience peace of mind is to focus continually on yourself. Some people seem inclined to watch themselves constantly, as if in a mirror. They make themselves unnecessarily tense—and wind up completely drained. Others may not be so conscious of their inner state, but they are just as tense because they cannot let go of old hurts. With one it may be a smouldering resentment; with another an unfulfilled desire or an unconquered frustration.

Winifred went through a period of deep grief after her only son was stillborn. Unable to let go of her loss, she clung to the idea that she must have done something wrong to bring it about, even though her doctor assured her this could not have been the case. Only years later was she able to stop torturing herself. By sharing with someone else the full details of everything she imagined she had done wrong, she was able to let go of her self-accusations.

Winifred's long inner conflict points to a source of anxiety that causes many people heartache: their attempt to come to terms with a tragedy they feel responsible for. Whether or not they objectively bear guilt, the key to resolving it is letting go. Self-recrimination never brings healing but leads to unhealthy introspection.

For some, another source of inner frustration is their inability to relinquish the control they try to exert over others. As a family counsellor, I have seen how crippling this can be in the home, especially when it defines the relationship between a parent and child. In many homes, a great deal of unpeace, particularly between older teenagers (or even adult children) and parents, could be solved

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if parents were able to let go of their children and not fret incessantly over them or pressure them with plans for their future. My mother, a teacher, used to tell parents, 'The greatest disservice you can do your children is to chain them to yourselves. Let go of them.'

Emotional ties can create tensions outside the home, too. The tendency to meddle, advise or criticize others runs countless people to a frazzle and makes life miserable for everyone around them.

Molly Kelly, a friend who is known for her expertise in teenage sexuality, has valuable insights on the search for peace of mind—and the role of letting go in finding it.

I grew up in a Catholic family with five brothers and a sister, and Mom and Dad loved us very much. Not everything always went right, but love was the glue that bound us together. I went off to college and met the love of my life: Jim, a handsome young medical student at Georgetown University. Ours was a marriage made in heaven, as they say. He loved me, I loved him. Over the next eleven years, we were blessed with eight children.

Then one day, twenty-two years ago, my life changed forever. Jim and I were away for the weekend with our best friends. It wasn't easy to get away because of Jim's schedule at the hospital, and because of our children. So we were very excited. We were going to spend the weekend at a winter resort in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. But let me now fast-forward you to the event that catapulted me into an unrest and sadness that permeated every fibre of my being and remained there for years...

I was at the top of a sled run, chatting with our friends, when I noticed a commotion at the bottom of the slope. Jim had just gone down the hill on the sled, but I hadn't watched him so I didn't know it had anything to do with him. I saw several people waving to us, and I wondered what was going on. Then someone yelled for me to come down quickly because Jim had been hurt. I ran the whole way down the hill, slipping and falling and getting up again, and when I arrived at the scene there was a crowd around Jim. They stepped aside and made room for me, and I knelt at his side. He was semi-conscious and bleeding profusely. I'll skip the details and get to the end. Jim died.

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I was devastated. Jim was my best friend, my pillow-talk buddy, the father of our children, the builder of our dreams. I couldn't begin to fathom life without him. I will never forget going home and hugging each one of the children, who had already been told that their dad had died. Our eldest, Jim, was twelve, and our youngest, Dan, was fourteen months. The older ones were pale, sad and clinging to each other. The younger ones weren't sure what was going on. The house was filled with people, noise, and lots and lots of food. (It's interesting how people bring food to console a grieving family.) We were shielded and surrounded with family and good friends, and I was grateful for the outpouring of love, but I was too hurt to thank anyone. I was wounded and bleeding just like Jim, and no one could fix my wounds either, so they seeped and festered for years.

I was able to go on as far as taking care of the kids was concerned because I loved them so much, and because I promised myself I would never dishonour Jim's memory by doing a shabby job of raising our children. I still had two in nappies, and because children want things to be better quickly, the rest of them went back to playing football in the living room, making a playhouse out of my sofa cushions, and making demands on my time and patience. Time I had; in fact it weighed heavily on me, even though I never seemed to get done all that I had to do. Each day dragged on, and I couldn't wait for bedtime so I could go to sleep and forget for just a little while that Jim had died. I was short on patience.

I was never alone, yet I was lonely beyond belief. It was only later, when peace came, that I discovered the difference between loneliness and being alone. I still dread loneliness, but I have come to cherish times when I am alone.

Some time after her husband's death, Molly took up an issue that had concerned him greatly: abortion. As a Catholic physician who believed in the sacredness of all life, Jim had been an ardent critic of abortion, and Molly shared his views.

I began by addressing the issue in classes at local Catholic high schools, and within a few years I was speaking quite a bit. I arranged my schedule so that I would be home when the kids got back from school in the afternoon.

After a while I realized that I wasn't getting to the heart of the problem. I realized I needed to talk about the root of abortion, which had to do with unwanted pregnancies, which had to do with casual sex. So I began to speak about sexual

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responsibility. The invitations to speak came pouring in. I was asked to speak in so many schools and so many other venues that I became overwhelmed and didn't know where to turn.

Friends suggested that I cut down on my speaking, but I felt called to it, and I wasn't about to give it up. Still, something had to give. It was then that I realized that what had to give was *me*.

I liked to be in control. I was the mother of eight children, and I ran a tight ship. I bought the food, I made the dinners, I washed the clothes, I helped with the homework, I went to the plays and ball games, I was home and school president. The word 'surrender' was not in my vocabulary. What I didn't realize was that surrender does not mean giving up so much as it means giving over. I had to give over my control, my unrest, my loneliness, my being overwhelmed – even my children – and let Someone stronger than me take the reins. And in each area of my life where I was able to do this, the tangible peace I experienced was almost instantaneous.

Molly has found this realization of her own limitations and letting go of what she cannot handle vital in her role as a speaker. She has spoken to more than a million teenagers – 'my favourite people in the whole world' – and to thousands and thousands of parents. Recently she addressed a gathering of six thousand priests in Rome, and a meeting of fifty cardinals and bishops in California.

My schedule can be overwhelming, but it no longer overwhelms me. My peace is deep. It's a serenity that seems to have settled in for the long haul, for as long as I keep renewing my surrender. I say yes to speaking engagements when I can, and I say no when I can't. Am I always right? I doubt it. But I have come to realize that it is only in surrender that true peace will come.

Countless people struggle on bravely, even when they feel burnt out, simply because they are not willing to let down their guard. They are determined to steer their own lives, cost what it may. Such people over-commit and then take days off to recuperate. They work at balancing their schedule, at discerning their priorities. They try to be kind and loving at home and patient at work. At the end of the day they still have no real peace.

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Even with the best efforts, our strength is minuscule, and our solutions patchy. There is a real limit to what each of us can do. Acknowledging this makes it easier to let go of our problems and relinquish our need to solve every one of them our way. As Martin Luther King used to say, we are not so much independent as interdependent. When we realize this, we will discover that even the highest hurdle is no longer insurmountable.

El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero, whose outspokenness on behalf of his country's exploited poor people earned him an assassin's bullet in 1980, was not born brave. In fact, he was appointed archbishop because both church authorities and the country's military leaders figured he was a safe bet – a conservative defender of the *status quo*. But three short years transformed Romero into a champion of human rights. Though he knew the meaning of self-doubt and hesitation, he chose to focus his sights on a cause greater than himself. The following words, attributed to him, summarize his approach to the hurdles he faced:

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view.... Nothing we do is complete.... No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: we plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development....

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. It enables us to do something small, and to try to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.... We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

Looking back, it seems Romero spoke these words as much for himself as for his listeners. His life would soon end abruptly and violently, and he would die without the satisfaction of seeing the positive changes that would eventually come in the condition of the people he was fighting for. But when, two weeks before his murder, a journalist asked him if he was afraid to die, Romero responded:

If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. I tell you this without any boasting, with the greatest humility.... May my death be for the freedom of my people and as a witness to hope in the future. You can say, if they come to kill me,