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Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action offers the opportunity to explore the meaning and practice of nonviolence from a perspective of deep spiritual reflection, providing a means for witnessing to and resisting all nuclear weapons. We welcome all to join us in our work toward a nuclear weapons-free world.

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SUNFLOWERS: THE SYMBOL OF A WORLD FREE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS



by David Krieger

Sunflowers are a simple miracle. They grow from a seed. They rise from the earth. They are natural. They are bright and beautiful. They bring a smile to one's face. They produce seeds that are nutritious, and from these seeds oil is produced. Native Americans once used parts of the sunflower plant to treat rattlesnake bites, and sunflower meal to make bread. Sunflowers were even used near Chernobyl to extract radionuclides cesium 137 and strontium 90 from contaminated ponds following the catastrophic nuclear reactor accident there.

Now sunflowers carry new meaning. They have become the symbol of a world free of nuclear weapons. This came about after an extraordinary celebration of Ukraine achieving the status of a nuclear free state. On June 1, 1996, Ukraine transferred to Russia for dismantlement the last of the 1,900 nuclear warheads it had inherited from the former Soviet Union. Celebrating the occasion a few days later, the Defense Ministers of Ukraine, Russia, and the United States met at a former nuclear missile base in the Ukraine that once housed 80 SS-19 missiles aimed at the United States.

The three Defense Ministers planted sunflowers and scattered sunflower seeds. Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma said, "With the completion of our task, Ukraine has demonstrated its support of a nuclear weapons free world." He called on other nations to follow in Ukraine's path and "to do everything to wipe nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth as soon as possible." U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry said, "Sunflowers instead of missiles in the soil would ensure peace for future generations."

This dramatic sunflower ceremony at Pervomaisk military base showed the world the possibility of a nation giving up nuclear weapons as a means of achieving security. It is an important example, featuring the sunflower as a symbol of hope. The comparison between sunflowers and nuclear missiles is stark—sunflowers representing life, growth, beauty and nature, and

nuclear armed missiles representing death and destruction on a massive, unspeakable scale. Sunflowers represent light instead of darkness, transparency instead of secrecy, security instead of threat, and joy instead of fear.

The Defense Ministers were not the first to use sunflowers. In the 1980s a group of brave and committed resisters known as "The Missouri Peace Planters" entered onto nuclear silos in Missouri and planted sunflowers as a symbol of nuclear disarmament. On August 15, 1988, fourteen peace activists simultaneously entered ten of Missouri's 150 nuclear missile silos, and planted sunflowers. They issued a statement that said, "**We reclaim this land for ourselves, the beasts of the land upon which we depend, and our children. We interpose our bodies, if just for a moment, between these weapons and their intended victims.**"

Which shall we choose for our Earth? Shall we choose life or shall we choose death? Shall we choose sunflowers, or shall we choose nuclear armed missiles? All but a small number of nations would choose life. But the handful of nations that choose to base their security on these weapons of omnicide threaten us all with massive uncontrollable slaughter.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, many people believe that the nuclear threat has ended, but this is not the case. In fact, there are still more than 15,000 nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the nine nuclear-armed countries. These countries have given their solemn promise in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which entered into force in 1970, to negotiate in good faith to achieve nuclear disarmament, but they have not acted in good faith. It is likely that until the people of the world demand the total elimination of nuclear weapons, the nuclear weapons states will find ways to retain their special status as nuclear "haves." Only one power on Earth is greater than the power of nuclear weapons, and that is the power of the People once engaged.