

# MY FINAL HOUR

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I AM BEING GIVEN A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY.\* I will not have to postpone until my last gasp the imparting of the wisdom of my accumulated years to a breathlessly awaiting world. Just as well, as I have never been much of a believer in “famous last words.” I suppose this is why King Lear’s words, “Prithee, undo this button” seem infinitely more moving to me than any high-flown rhetoric purportedly uttered by some well-known person when on the point of departing this vale of tears. Anyway, here I am, faced with the prospect of delivering the message of My Final Hour. I do not promise that it will be My Finest Hour, but I will do my best.

First, I would like to pass on one piece of advice. If, as you grow older, you feel you are also growing stupider, do not worry. This is normal, and usually occurs around the time when your children, now grown, are discovering the opposite — they now see that you aren’t nearly as stupid as they had believed when they were young teen-agers. Take heart from that. True, your new-found sense of stupidity will no doubt be partly due to the fact that the technology of the age has far outstripped any feeble knowledge of it that you may once have felt you had. It may, however, also be due to the fact that at last you may be learning a little healthy humility — humility in its true and indeed religious sense, which of course has nothing at all to do with self-effacement but with a recognition of your human limitations. I would not claim that I have learned that kind of humility — that struggle to learn will never cease. But at least I now can accept with some sort of equanimity that many things are beyond my power. I can try to help friends or family or strangers, but I can never “save” another in the profoundest sense. I can do what is within my human power, that is all. Anything else is delusion or spiritual pride, or so I believe. My limitations extend to many fields. I know now that I will never know an enormous amount about music or painting. My knowledge of science is likely to remain minuscule. I will never know as much as I would like to about the planets and their patterned courses. Even in my own area of so-called expertise, I will never read all the novels I would like to read, even though I read great numbers of them yearly. I will also never write a novel with which I am really satisfied. There is so much to do, so

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much to learn and experience, and one lifetime, however long it may be, is so short. I think of the verse from Psalms 39: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears; for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were." Mothers, too, I feel compelled to add. Sojourner, yes, but this need not mean "tourist." My lifetime here is a short span, but I am not here as a visitor. Earth is my home. I have tried to read as widely as I can; I have always believed I had to live as well as write, to be a citizen and a person and a mother and a friend as well as a writer. But basically, I have spent a great part of my adult life in learning a profession — or, as I prefer to call it, a trade — that can never be mastered in its complexity and richness. I am fond of the story about the brain surgeon, who, meeting a novelist at a party, says, "Oh . . . you're a novelist, eh? When I retire, I plan to take up novel writing." "How interesting," the novelist replies. "When *I* retire, I plan to take up brain surgery."

Well, an acceptance of limitations does not mean that one is not constantly trying to extend the boundaries of knowledge and accomplishment. And it certainly does not mean an acceptance of defeat, in whatever fields our endeavours take place. It is my feeling that as we grow older we should become not *less* radical but *more* so. I do not, of course, mean this in any political-party sense, but in a willingness to struggle for those things in which we passionately believe. Social activism and the struggle for social justice are often thought of as natural activities of the young but not of the middle-aged or elderly. In fact, I don't think this was ever true, and certainly in our own era we are seeing an enormous upsurge of people of all ages who are deeply and committedly concerned about the state of our hurting and endangered world. There is a line from the old Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Battle of Maldon," that I think of frequently. It is this: "Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce, courage the greater, as our strength diminishes."

So the basic message of My Final Hour would have to be — do not despair. Act. Speak out. In the words of one of my heroines, Catharine Parr Traill, "In cases of emergency, it is folly to fold one's hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror. It is better to be up and doing."

**W** E ARE FACED NOW WITH AN EMERGENCY that concerns not only our own personal lives, but the lives of all people and all creatures on earth. Ours is a terrifying world. Injustice, suffering, and fear are everywhere to be found. It is difficult to maintain hope in such a world, and yet I believe there must be hope. I want to proclaim my belief in the social gospel, as a Christian, a

woman, a writer, a mother, and a member of humanity, a sharer in a life that I believe in some way to be informed by the holy spirit. I do not think it is enough to hope and pray that our own lives and souls will know grace, even though my entire life as a writer has been concerned with my belief that all individual human beings matter, that no one is ordinary. The new commandment of the man of Nazareth speaks very clearly. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

The social gospel is no easier now than it ever was. My generation was the first in human history to come into young adulthood knowing that the human race now had the dreadful ability to destroy all life on earth and possibly the earth itself. Only later did we realize the full extent of the destruction of life, a continuing destruction passed on to the then-unborn children of survivors, but we *did* know that after Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, the world would never be the same again. The annihilation caused by the first atomic bombs was unthinkable, but it had happened. Also, we had taken it for granted that through wars, through disasters, yet would the earth endure forever. It was clear to many of us in 1945 that this was no longer to be taken for granted. We have lived with that thought ever since, and have yet borne our children, lived our lives, done our work. The will to survive and to pass on important caring to future generations is very strong. But today we have to realize that the bombs used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were *small* bombs, compared to today's nuclear weapons.

I ask you to think of the Holocaust in Europe, when the Nazis murdered a very great part of all the Jewish communities. That horror, surely, must *never* be forgotten. No amount of mourning will *ever* be enough for those millions of children, women, and men whose lives were torn from them by the group of de-humanized humans who had taken power in Hitler's Germany. Are we to remember the Holocaust and the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and yet remain silent when we hear today about a "winnable" nuclear war or a "limited" nuclear war? I think not.

Our lives and the lives of all generations as yet unborn are being threatened, as never before, by the increasing possibility of a nuclear war. I believe that the question of disarmament is the most pressing practical, moral, and spiritual issue of our times. I'm not talking about abstractions. I'm talking about my life and your life and my kids' lives and the lives of people everywhere. If we value our own lives, and the lives of our children and all children everywhere, if we honour both the past and the future, then we must do everything in our power to work non-violently for peace. These beliefs are not only an integral part of my social and moral stance but of my religious faith as well. Human society now possesses the terrible ability to destroy all life on earth, and our planet itself. Can anyone who has ever marvelled at the miracle of creation — who has ever borne or fathered a beloved child, who has even looked closely at a tree or a plant or a

river — fail to feel concerned and indeed anguished, every single day, at this thought?

A central disagreement, of course, exists between those who think that more and yet more nuclear arms will ensure that nuclear arms will never be used, and those of us who believe that the proliferation of nuclear weapons brings us closer all the time to the actuality of nuclear war — a war that no side could possibly win; a war that would be so devastating that we cannot begin to imagine that horror. Whatever we are being told about a “limited” or a “winnable” nuclear war, the fact remains that such a war could destroy all that we, as humankind, have aspired to, have achieved. It could destroy the future, not only of the world’s peoples but of all creatures that share our planet with us.

As America and Russia develop more and more nuclear arms, so the other will inevitably respond in kind. Nuclear arms have long since ceased to be a “deterrent,” if indeed they were ever so, and have become by their very existence a monstrous threat. Daily, the chances are increasing for a nuclear war to break out by accident, by a failure of the intricate and not totally reliable control and warning systems on either side, or simply by human panic and a mutual mistrust between the superpowers.

Dr. Helen Caldicott, that courageous woman who has done so much in the struggle against nuclear arms, has said that both America and Russia have now enough nuclear weapons to “overkill every person on earth 16 times.” Think of that. Do the world’s leaders really suppose that it is all just an act on TV and that the dead would get up again and take on a different role in another TV series so they might be killed again and again? I fear greatly that many of the world’s leaders have so little imagination and so little real caring that they cannot visualize at all what a nuclear holocaust would mean. Do they really think that they and their families and executive staffs would survive in deep-buried bunkers? And if, by any unlikely chance they did, what kind of a world do they think they would emerge back into? It would be a dead and a putrefying world. Dr. Helen Caldicott says, “If we look behind the headlines and understand the historical perspective, we realize that America is preparing to fight a nuclear war. Now, that should make us all distinctly uncomfortable. In fact, we should be screaming in the streets, if we really care about ourselves, our children, and if we really love this planet.” With well-researched figures, Dr. Caldicott also says, “In the event of a nuclear war, we predict that within 30 days after an exchange, 90% of Americans will be dead. So will Canadians, probably Mexicans, certainly Russians, certainly Europeans, the British, and probably the Chinese.”

Roger Molander, a former White House nuclear strategist for the National Security Council, in an article in *The Guardian* in April of 1982, tells of one of the many things that made him decide to give up that job. He is now Executive

Director of Ground Zero, an anti-nuclear weapons project. He says, "The final chance event that confirmed my determination to help correct our flaws involved another military officer. It happened at a meeting in the Pentagon when a Navy Captain offered the view that in America and Europe people were getting too excited over nuclear war. He argued that people were talking as if nuclear war would be the end of the world, when in fact only 500 million people would be killed. Only 500 million. I remember repeating it to myself . . . only 500 million. . . ." Exactly. These are cold figures, statistics. It takes no time at all to say 500 million. But it all looks different, as it did to Roger Molander, if we think of each one of those people as our own children, ourselves, our parents, our friends.

**I**T IS PRECISELY THIS FAILURE of the imagination on the part of militarists and leaders that is so dangerous today, the failure to visualize what a nuclear holocaust would mean, the apparent inability to imagine the scorched and charred bodies of children . . . our children or children of Russian parents or parents anywhere, and to know, by an extension of imagination that *all* children are our children. The jargon of the militarists is a distortion and a twisting of language, of our human ability to communicate. Language itself becomes the vehicle of concealment and deception. Such words as "overkill" and "megadeath" do not convey in any sense at all what would really happen — the dead, mutilated, and dying people clogging the ruined cities and towns like so much unvalued discarded rubbish, the suffering humans screaming for help with no medical help available, no water, no relief at all for the unbearable pain of millions of humans except finally the dark relief of death for all. Any shelters that the few might reach would in time turn into tombs. Civil defence plans are a sham. In a nuclear war there would be nowhere to hide, and nowhere except a dead and contaminated world to emerge back into.

I profoundly believe that we must proclaim that *this must not happen*.

Yes, but what about the Russians? If we try to persuade our government to refuse Cruise missile testing, aren't we playing into the hands of the bad guys? Won't the Soviet Union, as soon as they have clear superiority in nuclear arms, blow us all to hell without a second's thought? I do not think so. Isn't it necessary to have more and ever more nuclear weapons in the hands of the Americans so that we can feel *safe*? I do not think so. Let me make it clear that I hold no brief for the present Russian system of government. I hold no brief for *any* system of government that is repressive and cruel, and this includes those far-right regimes in countries such as El Salvador, to whom the U.S.A. is determinedly giving so much military aid. The U.S.A. and Russia, the two superpowers, must, I believe,

co-exist in this world, even if there are some terrible things wrong in *both* systems, and *there are*. Russia suffered horribly in World War II, whereas war has not been fought on American soil since the Civil War. I cannot believe that the Russian leaders are all that anxious to begin nuclear war in which the Soviet Union would be, if not totally annihilated, then certainly decimated beyond any hope of recovery. George Kennan, formerly U.S. ambassador to Russia, who has been awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the Albert Einstein Peace Prize, and who is a distinguished diplomat, academic, and writer, says in his book *The Nuclear Delusion*:

Aren't we then . . . being unrealistic in the amount of attention we devote to protecting ourselves from the Russians who, God knows, are not ten feet tall, who have all sorts of troubles of their own, who can't run an agricultural system that really works, who can't adequately house their population, who are rapidly losing their prestige and leadership in the world Communist movement, and have to reckon with China on their long frontier in the East? Isn't it grotesque to spend so much of our energy on opposing such a Russia in order to save a West which is honey-combed with bewilderment and a profound sense of internal decay?

Quite frankly, I can't believe that Russia any longer has hopes of a world revolution. I can believe, though, that the Russian people, the ordinary people who love their children just as much as I love mine, are frightened, just as I am frightened, just as a very large proportion of the American people are frightened and are expressing that fear and outrage. The American people are indeed our cousins, and a very great many of them, young and old, are saying virtually the same things as I am saying here.

No American president has as yet declared himself willing to embrace a policy of "no first strike" in terms of nuclear weapons. President Reagan recently made the statement that America must reduce Marxism-Leninism "to the ash heap of history." If he proposed to do this by making his country such a true and fine example of social justice, of caring for the poor, of equal rights for women, of peace-making on the international scene, and of a refusal to support corrupt and violent regimes in, say, Central and South America, so that people the world over would look to America, as indeed once they did, as the home of the free, then I would say — *Great*. But I do not think that is what he had in mind. The president also, not long ago, addressed a group of fundamentalist Christians and told them that good and evil exist in the world and that the good must utterly destroy the evil. By evil, he was not referring to organized crime in his own land, or unemployment or poverty in the richest nation in the world. He was talking about America as wearing the white cowboy hat (to use a metaphor from his Hollywood days) and Russia wearing the black one. Good guys and bad guys. George Kennan says:

I do not have, and have never had, any sympathy for the ideology of the Soviet leadership. I know that this is a regime with which it is not possible for us to have a fully satisfactory relationship. I know that there are many important matters on which no collaboration between us is possible, just as there are other matters on which we can collaborate. There are a number of Soviet habits and practises that I deeply deplore. . . .

He goes on to say:

All this being said, I must . . . say that I find the view of the Soviet Union that prevails today in large portions of our governmental and journalistic establishments so extreme, so subjective, so far removed from what any sober scrutiny of external reality would reveal, that it is not only ineffective but dangerous as a guide to political action.

He concludes this portion of an essay written in 1981 by saying:

And we shall not be able to turn these things around as they should be turned, in the plane of military and nuclear rivalry, until we learn to correct these childish distortions . . . until we correct our tendency to see in the Soviet Union only a mirror in which we look for the reflection of our own virtue — until we consent to see there another great people, one of the world's greatest, in all its complexity and variety, embracing the good with the bad, a people whose life, whose views, whose habits, whose fears and aspirations, whose successes and failures, are the products, just as ours are the products, not of any inherent iniquity but of the relentless discipline of history, tradition and national experience. Above all, we must learn to see the behavior of the leadership of that country as partly the reflection of our own treatment of it. If we insist on demonizing these Soviet leaders . . . on viewing them as total and incorrigible enemies, consumed only with their fear or hatred of us and dedicated to nothing other than our destruction — that, in the end, is the way we shall assuredly have them, if for no other reason than that our view of them allows for nothing else, either for them or for us.

In a moving essay written in 1982, entitled "A Christian's View of the Arms Race," Kennan also says, "utterly unacceptable, from the Christian viewpoint as I see it, is the holding of innocent people hostage to the policies of their government, and the readiness, or the threat to punish them as a means of punishing their government."

Our Prime Minister recently asked the NDP leader, Ed Broadbent, who was seeking to have the whole issue of the Cruise missile testing debated in the Commons, if he, Broadbent, had written to Soviet leader Andropov to tell *him* to stop testing, too. This snide remark was, of course, beside the point. Our federal government, at the present time talking out of both sides of its collective mouth, says that on the one hand the actual testing of the Cruise hasn't yet been agreed upon and on the other hand Canada must honour its commitment to NATO. According to Pauline Jewett, NDP defence critic, who has done much research on this matter, Canada's commitment to NATO does *not* include the necessity of our

allowing *America* — America, not NATO — to test nuclear weapons here. My point is that Canada could have . . . and must have, in my view . . . considerable impact as a mediator in nuclear arms talks, as a non-nuclear nation, as a country that might conceivably be helpful in lowering the present climate of hysteria between the two superpowers, and in bringing about world disarmament.

This is why I think we must keep on trying to make our government hear us. Why would I write to Andropov or Reagan? I don't have a vote or a voice in those countries. I have both vote and voice here, though.

I believe that our land should be declared a nuclear-weapons-free zone, with absolutely no testing of nuclear arms or production of parts for those arms allowed in our country. I think that Canada could do a great deal to bring about a gradual and verifiable reduction of nuclear arms by both sides, monitored by neutral countries such as the Scandinavian countries, and to bring about a freeze on the production and testing of nuclear weapons. Canada could be a strong influence for a "no-first-strike" agreement among nations, for multilateral disarmament and for world peace.

Canada is not powerless nor are we insignificant in a world sense. Yet our present government appears to be quite willing to allow the Cruise missile to be tested over our land, in Alberta. The Cruise missile, an American nuclear weapon, was not designed as a deterrent weapon — it was designed as a "first-strike weapon." Its presence in the nuclear arsenal will not be verifiable, thus making any kind of nuclear-weapons control virtually impossible. The Litton plant in Ontario is producing, with the aid of millions of *our* tax dollars, guidance systems for the Cruise missile. Canada has sold nuclear reactors to such repressive regimes as Argentina, and is delivering fuel for those reactors, despite the fact that our government is aware that nuclear weapons could soon be within Argentina's capability. These are only a few of the many examples of Canada's complicity in the nuclear arms race.

Do we care so little about our children? Do we honour life so little that we will not speak out? I believe we do care, passionately and profoundly. Indeed, one thing that gives me hope is that so many of our churches and synagogues, so many people of all faiths, of all professions and trades, of all ages, are speaking out against the arms race and the descent into total madness. *Physicians For Social Responsibility*, active in this country as well as in America and elsewhere, are telling us what human damage would be done, and how impossible any thought of medical aid would be in a nuclear war. Inter-church groups such as *Project Ploughshares* are making strong representations to our government, as are labour unions, academics, and indeed and perhaps most importantly, women and men everywhere, in every walk of life. This is true in so very many places in the world today. When I speak of lobbying our own government, that is because we must



begin where we are. But we join our voices with those everywhere who believe as we do.

The money spent on arms, including nuclear arms, continues to mount. Recently I read that \$550 billion dollars are being spent, world-wide, yearly, on arms. An even more recent estimate puts it at \$600 billion dollars. That sum is so great we cannot really comprehend it. But we *can* comprehend that for the cost of *one* Trident nuclear submarine, malaria could be wiped out from the world. Think of that for one minute. I think of the people in the world who are suffering from thirst, from starvation, from preventable diseases, from ceaseless fighting, and the brutality of oppressive regimes. I think, too, of the growing number of unemployed people in our own land. I think of the Reagan program in America — more and yet more money spent on nuclear arms; less and less spent on social programs and help to the poor and the disabled.

I HAVE TO SPEAK ABOUT HOW I FEEL as a writer. I don't like calling myself "an artist," but I guess I am, and would join with my tribal sisters and brothers in many ways. I believe that as a writer . . . an artist, if you will . . . I have a responsibility, a moral responsibility, to work against the nuclear arms race, to work for a recognition on the part of governments and military leaders that nuclear weapons must never be used and must systematically be reduced. Throughout human history, artists have affirmed and celebrated life. Whether we work in words, in music, in painting, in film, in bronze or stone or whatever our medium may be, the artist affirms the value of life itself and of our only home, the planet Earth. Art mirrors and ponders the pain and joy of our experience as human beings. In many parts of the world, and over many centuries, artists have risked and even given their own lives to portray the society around them as they perceived it, and to speak out against injustices. Since the most ancient times, artists have passed on to succeeding generations the tales, the histories, the songs, the sagas, the skills of their trade. Can we conceive of a world in which there would be no succeeding generations? A world in which all the powerful works of the human imagination would be destroyed, would never again be seen or listened to or experienced? We must conceive that this is now a possibility, and one not too far in our uncertain future, either. We must not, as artists, or so I feel, stand by and passively allow this to happen. The death of the individual is the end which we will all one day meet, but in the knowledge that our children and their children will live, that *someone's* children will go on, that the great works of humankind will endure in art, in recorded history, in medicine, in the sciences and philosophies and technologies that our species has developed with devotion

and a sense of vocation throughout the ages. The individual is the leaf on the tree. The leaves fall but the tree endures. New leaves are born. This concept has been the mainstay of our species from time immemorial. Now the tree itself is threatened. All art is a product of the human imagination. It is, deeply, an honouring of the past, a perception of the present in one way or another, and a looking towards the future. Whatever the medium of any particular artist, art is reaching out, an attempt to communicate those things which most concern us seriously in our sojourn here on earth. Artists, the real ones, the committed ones, have always sought, sometimes in ways prophetic and beyond their own times, to clarify and proclaim and enhance life, not to obscure and demean and destroy it. Even the so-called literature of despair is not really that at all. Despair is total silence, total withdrawal. Art, by its very nature of necessary expression, is an act of faith, an acknowledgement of the profound mystery at the core of life.

As a writer, therefore, I feel I have a responsibility. Not to write pamphlets, not to write didactic fiction. That would be, in many ways, a betrayal of how I feel about my work. But my responsibility seems to me to be to write as truthfully as I can, about human individuals and their dilemmas, to honour them as living, suffering, and sometimes joyful people. My responsibility also must extend into my life as a citizen of my own land and ultimately of the world.

I do not claim to have done this well. There are no personal victories in those areas. The individual, here, becomes part of a community and only as a part of that community can one person ever be effective and true to herself or himself. There has to be the resolve not to give up, and to join with all others who believe that life itself is more important than our own individual lives, important though these certainly are.

Dr. Helen Caldicott speaks of “psychic numbing,” the temptation to shut out from our minds and hearts all the terrifying things in our world. To think that the problems may just possibly go away if we ignore them. To feel that we are totally helpless, and so . . . why bother trying to do anything? What Dr. Caldicott calls “psychic numbing” I would call “despair,” and although I would take issue with the early Church Fathers on many things, I would agree that despair is rightly placed as one of the deadly sins. The problems of our world will not go away if we ignore them. It is not all happening on TV. It is happening on our earth, and we, humankind, are the custodians of that earth. We cannot afford passivity. We must take on responsibility for our lives and our world and we must be prepared to make our government listen to and hear us. Our aim must be no less than human and caring justice, and peace . . . *for all people that on earth do dwell.*

So, if this were indeed my Final Hour, these would be my words to you. I would not claim to pass on any secret of life, for there is none, or any wisdom

except the passionate plea of caring. In your dedication to your own life's work, whatever it may be, live as though you had forever, for no amount of careful and devoted doing is too great in carrying out that work to which you have set your hands. Cultivate in your work and your life the art of patience, and come to terms with your inevitable human limitations, while striving also to extend the boundaries of your understanding, your knowledge, and your compassion. These words are easily said; they are not easily lived. Learn from those who are older than you are; learn from your contemporaries; and never cease to learn from children. Try to feel, in your heart's core, the reality of others. This is the most painful thing in the world, probably, and the most necessary. In times of personal adversity, know that you are not alone. Know that although in the eternal scheme of things you are small, you are also unique and irreplaceable, as are all your fellow humans everywhere in the world. Know that your commitment is above all to life itself. Your own life and work and friendships and loves will come to an end, because one day you will die, and whatever happens after that, or if anything happens at all, it will not be on this earth. But life and work and friendship and love will go on, in others, your inheritors. The struggle for peace and for social justice will go on — provided that our earth survives and that caring humans still live. It is up to you, now, to do all that you can, and that means a commitment, at this perilous moment in our human history, to ensure that life itself *will* go on.

In closing, I want to quote one verse from that mighty book . . . more like a vast library . . . that Dr. Northrop Frye calls "The Great Code," and which has so shaped, sometimes so ambiguously, the imagination, the art, and the many facets of faith in our world. This verse is from Deuteronomy, Chapter 30:

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

