

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR - A NUCLEAR FAMILY

Kate Cell

[Back to Previous Page](#)

For four generations, my family has spent a week or so each year at Holden Beach in North Carolina. Holden's is a wide strand of yellow sand that's home to loggerhead turtles, foxes, deer, many species of sea and marsh birds, and a rotating crowd of families during the summer. I spent a week there in June, watching my 10-month-old nephew Will discover the essential indigestibility of sand and the joy of a warm wave pre-soaking your diaper. Once, chatting with my mother in the hot southern sun, Will cutting new teeth on a handy mollusk shell, I found myself wondering, "In whose lifetime?" Which will be the generation that finally frees us from the apocalyptic spell of nuclear weapons?

My grandfather, the first Cell to bring his family to Holden Beach, was a mathematician who worked on rocket design for the US Navy during WWII. He died when I was not yet three, so I never got to ask him what he thought of the use of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was likely in favor, though, and if he'd lived long enough I'm sure I would have argued with him about it. As Martin Amis writes in the introduction to *Einstein's Monsters*, "On the subject of nuclear weapons, we all argue with our fathers." My parents were married at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and my first short story, written at the age of four, ended with a bang: "And then a big bomb came, and there were no more things." My father, history professor and provocateur, used to read the story to his classes; invariably some students wept.

Nuclear weapons have been on my mind for years. In graduate school I tried desperately to make a poem about them, but found that Richard Wilbur had the first and last lyrical words on the subject in his "Advice to a Prophet":

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange

Then in 1999 I read Jonathan Schell's *The Gift of Time*, an inspiring abolitionist text, a book both terrifying and hopeful. Four months later I quit my job and found meaningful work at ECAAR, ironically an organization whose expertise lies precisely in the "long numbers," not simply the appalling number of times we can annihilate ourselves and all we know or hope to become, but the tremendous price the human race can expect to pay if we keep the fearful power of the cosmos at the center of our relations with our neighbors.

Ronald Reagan died during my holiday, he who spent his first four years presiding over the arms race but in 1985 announced with Mikhail Gorbachev that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Twenty years later, the Bush Administration proudly claims his legacy while its Nuclear Posture Review proclaims "nuclear weapons play a critical role in the defense capabilities of the United States, its allies and friends."

My first vote in a presidential race was against Ronald Reagan in 1984. While I deplore many of the legacies he bequeathed to our nation, twenty years later I find myself craving a president with the imagination to be an abolitionist. I seek a leader with the courage to "speak," as Richard Wilbur puts it, "of the world's own change" if we dare use our nuclear weapons: the history-ending loss of all loggerheads, herons, and nephews, the very idea of turtles, birds, children. I yearn to vote for someone who understands the tremendous opportunity we face in the task of eliminating the nuclear peril. We deserve a president who can make us understand that, in the words of Jonathan Schell: "To succeed in the task would, by securing human survival through human resolve and action,

go far toward restoring our faith. . . . in our capacity to make use of the amazing products of our hands and minds for our benefit rather than our destruction. It would bring undying honor to those who carried it to fulfillment and to their generation. It would have the character not of a desperate expedient resorted to under pressure of terror but of a tremendous free act, following upon calm public deliberation in every nation - among all humankind.”

Kate Cell is ECAAR's Director.

Economists for Peace and Security

<http://www.epsusa.org>