

THE SERVANT SONG

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Our Sabbatical Year

by Brayton Shanley

After a few years of planning and preparing, Suzanne and I began our sabbatical October, 2007. With a commitment to stop our Agape work schedule we included in that category all the programs, activities, gatherings, retreats, feast day celebrations, and daily hospitality. At first, I resisted the idea of letting go completely of these rich and varied moments. But, as the fall unfolded with nothing to plan or prepare for, I found the gift of rest overtaking my sense of disappointment. Rest and the relaxed peace of rest made me aware of the first lesson I was to know about work: as much as work gives us purpose, it can also run us into the ground.

My life's work isn't just another activity; it is my primary task. My "good work" forms my identity. Most peace people don't have to be convinced to be responsible and diligent. We *do* need to be convinced to leave our work for rest and contemplation aware that we are all reared in a work-addicted society driven by financial security fears.

In my case, I am known for the activities of Agape that I help plan and animate. From time to time my activities gain some publicity in local newspapers. People become aware of me through my work. For example, we visited noted Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, during our sabbatical. In an email he said: "I have known of the good work of Agape for some time." Work may attract notoriety and appreciation. Then, there is the additional fact that I was educated primarily for gainful employment and to "make a living." So what happens to me when I quit, voluntarily, most, if not all the work of my community?

I Am Not What I Do

It took about a month or so of "closing up" the systems of Agape before we could say we were officially closed. It was a lengthy job, buttoning up twenty five years of work. Even then, I noticed the temptations to check email and voice mail. I became aware of the first few trials of sabbatical at home -- cues to work were persistently around me. Even if I could resist the temptation, my mind continually churned with still urgent tasks and unfinished business. I soon discover that it is far easier to break with the routine of work if I leave the community itself. True rest is relaxing the mind, not the body, simply because most of us think about work or actually work compulsively all day long. I began to learn a fierce lesson--let all familiar work tasks go, including closing up the garden.

Similar to our weekly practice of Sabbath during community life, our "sabbatical at home" required constant mindfulness, consistently walking away from the temptation to finish grinding the herbs, fulfill social obligations, return phone calls and email. Now I knew why, in the Jewish tradition of Sabbath, there are "39 prohibitions against working on the Sabbath." Sabbatical for me was becoming an extended Sabbath.

I took the first two months of our ten month sabbatical on the community property, seeking refuge in the stillness

of our hermitage tucked away a few of hundred yards behind Francis House, our main residence. It soon became clear to me that I wished the silence of retreat to be the main activity of my sabbatical. As Suzanne and I planned our new way of being, exploring the world and vacationing rest would not be our entire time. But as co-workers and founders who live in community, our Sabbatical time included--time together in silence, in enjoyment or celebration, and time away from each other. As a first generation lay community person blazing a new trail with no strong history of daily spiritual practices or Sabbatical to inherit, perfect and look forward to, I find myself creating or adapting traditions as I need them.

While spending half of my days in almost complete wilderness silence in Agape's hermitage, two surprises emerge. First, I observe the chatter of the mind, and a voice urging me: "Be more productive." This voice keeps asking: "Aren't you going to write to have something to show for all this?" My mind, like most people's minds is based on the progress model. We are drawn to produce, to perfect, and nothing I am accomplishing at the present moment is ever really good enough. Spending time meditating, reading Scripture and gazing out the window is not "progress" to this, my conditioned mind. For two months, I spent each full morning from sunrise to lunch, in or around the hermitage, with this voice, urging productivity, as a daily companion.

The second experience was silence. Of all the mysteries of faith, silence is the hardest to explain. Thoreau wrote about this mystery: "Silence doesn't translate well into English." The calling I felt to silence was the counter voice to this voice of productivity. To stop working and sit in silence immediately clashed with the daily drive to produce. We not only live in a speed-driven and acquisitive culture, but the most frantic and acquisitive in history.

The cultural air we breathe keeps us busy with "more, whetting the appetite for still more." We are always chasing something. "Busy" keeps us moving so we don't have to look within. Forward movement is enough satisfaction for now. Our love of technology (especially computers) accelerates the speed of forward movement.

But I am a Christian who follows a non-violent Jesus. Within that life, I can only give what I have. I had decided to stop "moving forward," for ten months, to stop being relevant to my culture, in an effort to "be still and know that God is still God." I seek this experience of Divine Presence, an inner reassurance of the love of God, with bare bones simplicity, an emptying out of anger, frustrations, and stress. While this process is happening, the fact exists that sitting atop this human frame is my conditioned mind, habitually afraid of doing nothing, of stilling the inner noise, allowing myself to become empty. Most of us fear the aching void within or are reluctant to look at ourselves, meet the person we might not like, who surely will be staring at us in our silence. I am convinced this fear of exposure keeps us from the effort to be still.

Stillness and quiet are too intangible for our minds which always choose more. More is better. More is important. More is secure. But in the truly spiritual life, the still small voice is always "just enough."

Therapeutic Fasting and Slowing Down

Creating this sabbatical environment had become a spiritual retreat wherein change of heart and mind leads to a change of daily routine. True change happens from the inside out. One powerful method that assists in altering our main inner landscapes is fasting. For the first three weeks of January, I engaged in a three week cleansing diet followed by a three day water fast. The cleansing diet consisted of limiting my eating to organic fruits and vegetables and drinking organic juice. The sabbatical was an attempt to let a changed person emerge from the old patterns of living. The old patterns include the daily assault of less than healthy food and drink. This most powerful of all asceticisms has tremendous therapeutic results of healing and rejuvenating body, mind, and soul. Without the subtle haze of too much eating, toxic food and caffeine, I began to feel slower, more at peace, more centered and clear headed. I slept more soundly, dreamt more deeply. I felt reborn. This was a good inner foundation for continuing my sabbatical journey.

Heading for the Inner Land

Three months into our Sabbatical, Suzanne and I headed for separate retreats at the Jesuit-run Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester, Massachusetts for eight days of total silence, daily Mass and spiritual direction with one of the trained staff. With meals taken in silence, this self-contained solitude established a contemplative environment for us to discern the direction of our lives without the usual daily distractions.

My director encouraged us to reflect on the 25 year period Suzanne and I had spent helping to form and then living the Agape Community experience. Therefore, my first assignment from my spiritual director was to ponder all the ways I was utterly and completely grateful for 25 years at Agape. The list was lengthy. The more I reflected on the grace of it all, the more reasons surfaced for gratitude, a fortune of thankfulness. Suzanne, our daughter Teresa, and all the countless thousands of people and resources have made this life for me, (more or less), a joyous pleasure-- superabundant, mindboggling, and challenging.

The next arena my director and I looked at was more daunting-- the future. At age 60, the future means looking at the remaining (God-willing) one-quarter of my life. In our discussion, we began to establish a singular priority that would



DRoberts Kirk

last for the remaining eight months of my sabbatical--the mystery of listening. If doing God's will is the basis of all fulfillment of our time on earth, then listening to that Divine whisper becomes the heart of the process. As the prophets spoke to their God: "speak your servant is listening." The Divine speaking to me remains one of the most exquisite of all mysteries, next to being alive at all.

My ego self is the voice I can usually hear, with the mind tirelessly analyzing, planning rehearsing, controlling. To listen to a speaking God, at times requires a secluded place, a spiritually charged atmosphere to have any realistic chance at "hearing." The voice I heard began to define my sabbatical--"slow down, disappear into the silence (good-bye to the ego noise) and listen."

The conversation with God, illuminated by the exchange with my spiritual director at Eastern Point, helped me to move outward to inward. "Contemplari" is what the Roman augers saw when they looked up to the sky into the sacred enclosure they called the "templum," related to the Greek word "theoria" or to look toward God. "Con" templation means looking toward this same God--within.

In the Beloved Community at Weston

After my retreat with the Jesuits, I headed to Weston Vermont. The Benedictine monks gave us a cabin in their snow-covered meadow surrounded by great pines and mountains. Since the beginning of our sabbatical, I knew that I desired long periods of solitude, but only within the embrace of a Christian Community of prayer. A month-long retreat at Weston provided the solace of two worlds. First, the pastoral quiet of winter snowscapes provided comfort to the soul, and second, Weston was the fullest sense of the beloved community that I have experienced in a great while. I have always felt a freedom in this natural world quiet where no volcanic insights come, just the same old "go slow, and trust." This spirit of retreat reminds me of Lao Tzu: "Who would prefer the jingle of jade pendants if one has heard stone growing on the cliff."

One can't be within the Weston Priory community long before love

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Drawn, Not Driven: A Call to Change

by Suzanne Belote Shanley



Paul Winter, Crestone, from cover of CD "Paul Winter Consort, Crestone".

Epiphany

"This is an epiphany moment. Rest in it. Feel it. Know it," I say to myself, sitting next to Suzy Ryan and Connie Bielecki, lifetime members of the Carmelite-based Spiritual Life Institute, in the gorgeous, "green" outdoor amphitheatre at the Japanese Shumei Institute in Crestone, Colorado. On this brilliant May afternoon, the sun streaming down, creating record-high temperatures, Paul Winter, stands before a mesmerized crowd of 300, soprano saxophone in hand, with these words of caution: "I close my eyes when I play; the only way I can do it—eyes closed."

With humility and grace, body lithe and trim, for a man who appears to be in his late sixties to early seventies, Winter captures the essence of Crestone, the place, (also the unassuming title of his Grammy-winning CD)—its pure, rarified, eight thousand feet above sea level terrain of natural hot springs, prowling coyotes and the majestic Sangre de Cristo mountains, covered with snow, surrounding the theatre on all sides—staggering, intimidating, august. Winter's artistry dazzles and transports us. He inhabits another realm, totally outside of himself, taking us with him, beyond the moment, into music and mystery. With my senses heightened, I think: "This is bliss. Remember this."

The primitive sorcery of sound comes mid-way into my first sabbatical, perhaps the only extended time away from my stewardship of the Agape Community I will ever again experience. Elevated and profound, this moment of insight, reminds me of experiences, familiar in my youth, yet seldom visited in my sixth decade, of James Joyce's notion of epiphany, a sudden revelation of intensity that overtakes and transforms, or, in other words, a peak experience. Even prolonged meditation and deep silence in two monasteries—Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester, Massachusetts and Weston Priory in Weston, VT, before my arrival a Nada Hermitage, failed to yield this sense of euphoria.

Art merges with nature; nature with music, and with his horn, Winter becomes a living channel of communion with mountain elks and wolves, whose cries we humans emulate, yelping and moaning like Brother and Sister Wolf. For that brief moment, united with the wild, the primitive, I feel: This is an experience of God.

Of course, my rocky mountain, Paul-Winter high was also influenced by what became ongoing altitude sickness, including moments of vertigo and feelings of other-worldliness. Nevertheless, these strange somatic touches, only added to a sense of bliss. Back in my hermitage, still feeling transported, thrilling to the moment, I tried not to examine the experience too deeply, not

wanting to lessen its impact.

It wasn't long however, before the nagging thoughts appeared: "What is the music of my life? Why can't I live like Paul Winter, grounded in this glorious fusion of art, poetry and music? Why don't my experiences in community more resemble this effortless union with the Divine in nature and other creatures, in the souls of those I live with? Can I create such a sustained reality in the quotidian of intentional community?"

Concentration, purity of intention, and trust in the creative process, concepts that swirled about in my psyche, stirred the artist in my soul. I want to live on a more artistic plane, I thought. Too many dishes, too much laundry, too much cleaning, greeting communicating. Where is my Muse? Where are these peak experiences in community life?

These reflections persisted, one part of myself dialoguing with another, unique to my time in Crestone, sitting on a window ledge in my hermitage, named Juliana, the frigid, implacable mountains (which I found overbearing, powerful in a negative masculine sense) towering on all sides. The desert terrain and wandering packs of six to twelve mule deer, who peered at me almost daily through the hermitage window, provided a stark immersion in the elemental, the immediate, connecting me to where I had been, where I hoped to be after this time alone.

Looking Back

I had traversed the terrain from Agape's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration with Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, an ecstatic and elevated moment in of itself, shared with a crowd of nearly 300, with interfaith prayers, a native dance around Agape's sacred oak in a circle before the entrance to Francis House, to the sabbatical pilgrimage from monastery to monastery, through native lands in the South West.

Deepening and cultivating my love of solitude and contemplation and a need for rest began with an eight day retreat at the Jesuit Gonzaga Retreat House on the lofty sea-side cliffs of Gloucester, Massachusetts. An astute Jesuit spiritual director, in this first phase of my sabbatical, asked me to consider Christ's words to the blind Bartimeas: "What do you want me to do for you?" with the emphasis on the do. Spiritual direction is a demanding time, especially when one doesn't, if the truth were to be known, want Jesus to do anything. Still, Bartimeas' response to Jesus did ring true in my own life: "I want to see again."

Whether in the woods of Vermont and the Weston Priory, or back at Agape, then to Crestone, then onward to Scotland and the isle of Iona, to my beloved Ireland, each segment of this pilgrimage offered beauty and generosity, gifts of new vision from our many

hosts and new friends, like those we met hitch-hiking (never renting a car, using buses and thumbs, wanting to keep our carbon footprint low), or the priest, Colman McGrath who gave us shelter in Glasgow, Scotland, after we misread our plane flight.

The word that kept surfacing as I moved from one sacred haven to the next was TRUST. Could I trust God enough to let myself be drawn, without the drivenness of agendas, meetings, plans—to uncover what needed to be uncovered in my body, mind and soul, after 25 years plus, of community life?

Somewhere in my journal jottings, the words of poet Rainer Maria Rilke loom large: "There isn't any place that isn't looking at you. You must change your life." Every new place, it seemed, looked at me, my exhaustion, exhilaration, defeat, worry, love of community and detachment from its rigors. I looked back, finding consolation and anguish. Something about the significance of a quarter century and my age of 62, combined to reveal a truism: "I must change my life." How? Why?

The Task of Truth

Yeats speaks of "Truth's consuming ecstasy," with which I could heartily identify as I pondered the truth of my 62 years, more than half of them at the work of building community, parenting, teaching, and the riveting way that building a life of intimacy with and for others, makes one look deeply within. "You must change your life" a familiar conversion motif all throughout the years, took on a new and intense relevance on sabbatical, each stage offering a new sense of purpose, of regret over stalled dreams, awareness of failure and pain, accomplishment and surrender.

A poem I wrote while at Eastern Point reveals that before the Paul Winter moment at Crestone, I longed for an epiphany. I had heard of a rare gull being tracked by bird watchers on Niles Pond, not far from the retreat house. I thought as I watched the hushed birders in down jackets, puffy hats and binoculars, searching for a sign of the rare slaty-backed gull with pure white head and belly, white trim on gray wings, pink legs, orange spot on yellow bill that I would like to see Jesus as a slaty-backed gull.

Although I never did spot that slaty-backed gull, I recorded in my journal, my own or someone else's thought: "It seems to me that when one has a place of expansiveness and freedom from the grinding out of the realities of life, grace floats in much more easily." As part of the sabbatical, I had learned that a deep look into my naked soul revealed neurotic, fixated, even compulsive behavior, yet the yearning for and actual immersion in beauty, surrendering to the peace of nature, provided the long-for antidote. Even seeing Jesus as a slaty-backed gull was a new way of apprehending the Divine.

Drawn Not Driven

My spiritual director at Eastern Point, offered the phrase "drawn and not driven," from the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola about growth in the spiritual life. I felt keenly the reality of this insight while at Weston Priory in Weston, Vermont, where after arriving, I was "drawn" to the wooded grounds in the depths of winter (a week of 20 degrees below zero, newly acquainting me with thoughts about Brother Cold). Much of my perceived drivenness in community seemed to dissolve in the darkness at 5 am as I listened to my boots crunching on snow like ancient drums beating on the dawn, calling: "I belong. You belong. Mother Moon, I lift

my heart to you."

Mother Moon revealed herself in a breath-taking lunar eclipse I saw from my window, a rare cosmic moment, as the moon's glow decreased and eventually disappeared, in a riveting death drama. So too, I thought, will I disappear. But the after-glow of the eclipse, a faded rust-red circular orb, lifted me to a new place of reassurance, comforted by its eminence. Something of the moon still remained.

As Rilke suggested, many places looked at me, and I looked back at them. The Grand Canyon is such a looking at and back place with its own haunting stare, dizzying immensity, opening up unabashed awe, even though at 20 degrees on the South Rim where we fled from our tent to our beat up Mazda (which we called "The Wreck"), turning on the heat every hour for moment of warmth.

Traveling to the Kivas of the ancient Puebloan peoples at Mesa Verde, New Mexico, to the sprawling reservations of native peoples, I was face to face with reminders of colonization, invasion, misery and conquest. Yet even in this starkness, the ancient, the primitive were just a breath away, as we slept in a tent and in "The Wreck" on crisp, cold nights in Tuba City, Arizona where the native culture, the music from the local station, full of rock, jazz, folk and Indian chants, kept us spellbound, as we huddled in our sleeping bags and extra blankets in our roadside "motel." We are recording from Tuba City; this is Tuba City. We loved Tuba City, felt connected in a personal way to the DJ's, a strange, exotic time.

Back to Community

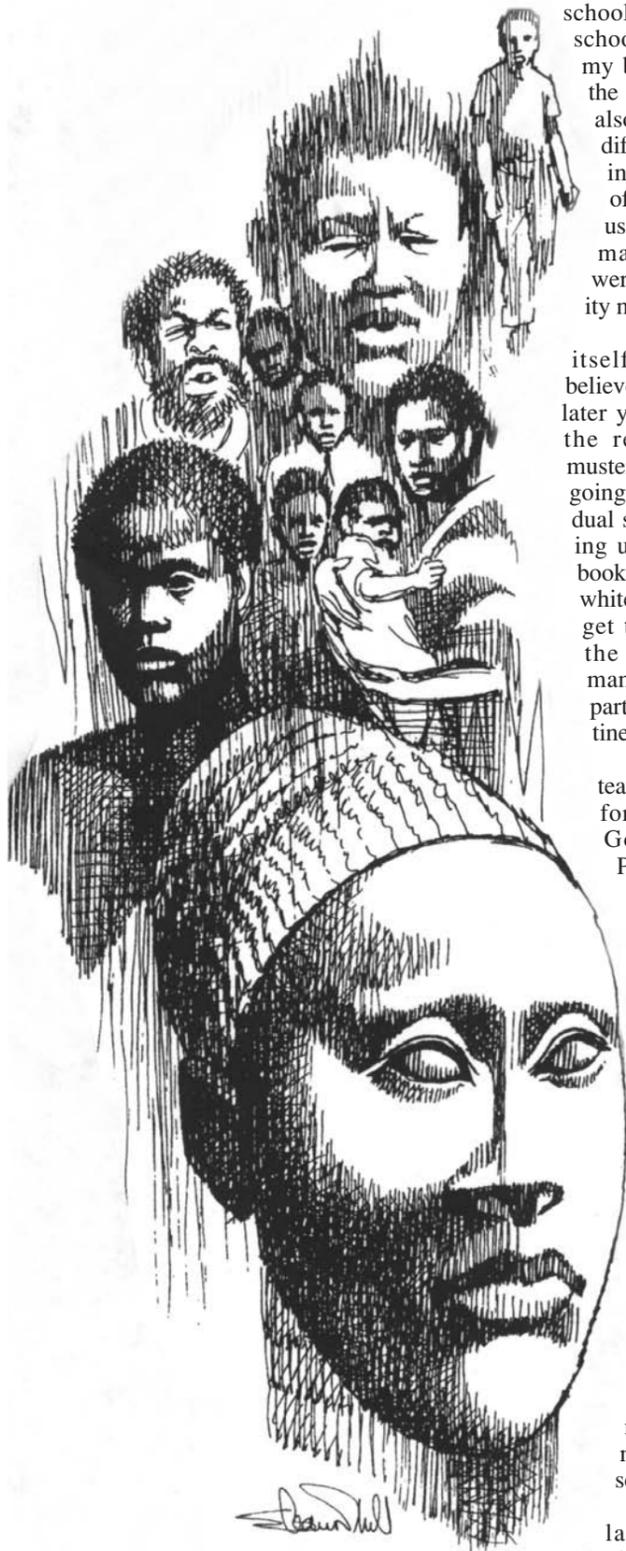
From the Iona Hostel, where we shared a room with Scottish youth, to the Giant's Causeway and the Corrymeela Peace Community in Northern Ireland, to the eerily quiet streets in Belfast, devastated by The Troubles (years of Catholic-Protestant violence which claimed over 3,000 lives), from the Scottish highlands to the generosity of our friends the Kennedys of Cavan, Ireland, and Sean O'Boyle, peacemaker in Afghanistan and the Glenree Center for Reconciliation, to the members of the Spiritual Life Communities at Holy Hill Ireland and Nada Hermitage in Crestone, I learned the lesson of generosity, of hospitality, of the unexpected goodness of people who took us in, gave us all we needed and more, without counting the cost. So our hitch-hiking, small carbon footprint attempt at sabbatical simplicity, ended in the lanes of Dunquin, Ireland in County Kerry, where every day, mostly gray and dark, we viewed the magnificent Blasket Islands.

With my skeptical and worrying nature, I learned that God does provide. Although I may never play a musical instrument with the celestial perfection of Paul Winter, I learned the music of life through community, and community responded.

I had hoped that Jesus would come to me as a slaty backed gull, and that didn't happen, but instead, Jesus came as all of the sisters and brothers who fed, housed and nourished us with stories of their lives. I saw Christ in the native faces throughout the Southwest and mourned their extermination by ransacking Whites who all but decimated their culture. And finally, I could look at building community as my creative task in life, the art of living in simplicity, in the moment, of following the call demonstrated so magnificently on this sabbatical, of hospitality and generosity. I neither owned nor played a soprano saxophone, but I discovered a melody unique and all my own, harmonizing in my being, waiting to be played.

Spiritually Grounded Leadership

On Dec. 3, 2008, Brayton Shanley, interviewed Jacquelyn Smith-Crooks, EdD, educator, spiritual coach and ministerial associate in the Protestant Chaplaincy at Smith College, who, along with Ingrid Askew, was a keynote speaker on St. Francis Day, October 4, 2008. Both Jacquelyn and Ingrid came out of the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage and set the tone for the day: "Breaking the Silence: Unheard Voices in an Election Year" as African-American, Latino and Anglo youth and adults shared their hopes and frustrations with politics and the electoral process.



Agape: Tell me a little of the significant aspects of your early life and upbringing?

JSC: I was born in Macon, Georgia and came up during the era of segregation back in the 40', 50's and 60's. I became involved in the community in different ways. Dad was both church-oriented as a Black Baptist minister and community-oriented because of his interest in the social conditions of time. One of the things that happened is that my Dad had enrolled me as a member of the youth division of the NAACP before I was a teenager and on into my teen years. That was a very important piece, being a card carrying member of NAACP.

Agape: I assume growing up in Georgia, you experienced some racism. So, what was it like growing up in Georgia?

JSC: We knew that our lives may have been dictated but not determined by racism. Dad was beaten bloody by police over a minor traffic incident which involved the accusation that he had run a stop light, which he didn't do.

In terms of the education, I came through a segregated system. We knew, even though we would be sitting at desks that had all the markings of a white

school, the books at my high school had the same date as my birth. We knew that was the approach to life, but we also knew that there was a different approach to creating life even in the midst of attempts to dehumanize us, to disenfranchise us, to make us feel that we weren't entitled to first quality materials.

As far as the school itself, the teaching staff, I believe was a master staff. In later years, I began to respect the resources they had to muster, knowing they were not going to get any more in this dual school system. In growing up, I wanted a new text book every year too, like the white kids got. But we didn't get the new books; we got the leftovers from many, many years ago. That was part of it. We were predestined to certain positions.

In high school, my teachers had nominated me for a program called The Governor's Honor Program, and we had to take a test to qualify, and you had to be 150% better than white person in order to make it. I was the only black person to take the exam, and I knew I had to do well because my parents, teachers and counselors were depending on it. I did. One would be eligible for the summer program, if they scored 125. A couple of days after the exam I learned that they had moved the score to 140, so it was clear that I must have scored 125, my high school counselor said.

The fountains were labeled "colored and white", and I learned very early which fountain not to drink from. The ones labeled colored were usually not clean, but if we wanted water when we were out, we had to use them. The restrooms were labeled "white gentlemen" for the Whites and "colored" for Black men who were not designated as men. For white women, it was "Ladies," and for black women, it was "colored".

Agape: So, when you think of the sweep of 50 years, since those early memories of Georgia, what has changed in terms of race between then and now?

JCS: When I go back home, the schools had been desegregated, but they were re-segregated because white affluent people are able to put their kids in public schools that operate as private entities.

I went back to Georgia from 1993 to 1997; it appeared that there were some things that had changed at the core of racism, such as Black kids having been disproportionately placed in educable-mentally retarded classes. We were not considered to be on par with white people intellectually.

The justice system still remains as some people would say, "just us," and a

disproportionate number of African-Americans, especially African-American males are in the penal system. In terms of being able to have pride in who we are, that is still a struggle because the internalization of oppression has impacted our young people in such a way that they are not about to discern between what is and what it not okay.

The progress on the one hand is that there are Black people living in parts of Macon when they can afford it, where we would not have been able to live, even if we could have afforded it. But, there is still not that recognition of the humanity of the people.

Agape: What are your impressions of the Obama candidacy and victory?

JCS: I think that it marked what could be a turning point in the life of this country in so many different levels, spiritual, political, social and psychological. I interviewed some older people down in Springfield, MA after the election, and clearly the psycho-spiritual impact of that election, was just enormous. Whatever the ultimate outcome is politically, it literally gave people hope. Did they feel that they had arrived? I don't think that they were naïve enough to think they had arrived. I don't think that it marks our destination, but it does mark having arrived at a certain point in history, being able to confront the monstrous system, being able to say that we can break down barriers to make a movement and turn that movement into progress.

Agape: Among our generation of the 50-60's, my impression is that we took Black leadership seriously because of truth of their suffering. How does suffering affect Black leadership?

JSC: The theme of suffering is tied to what Howard Thurman, the black mystic theologian who was a confidant to MLK Jr (*Jesus and the Disinherited*) talked about. In looking at the suffering, I think it is important to see pain but to see built into it historically, the determination based on hope.

People have objections to black theologians and their view that suffering is transformed into hope. I think externally that the suffering piece is there, but I am not so sure that Black people interpret it in the same way as white people do. The suffering that we endure is something that I was programmed to believe. That's why I have to do what I have to do in terms of working in community and creating change.

Agape: One of the areas I think is important is to analyze Christian values as they impact governance in the United States. 2/3 of the world's population goes without adequate food, clothing and shelter while military spending in the US, at 600 billion dollars a year protects the privilege and economic power of empire. So what chances realistically, does any leader have, African-American or not, in making the government less warlike and more responsive to the needy, and is that even possible?

JSC: Two things come to my mind immediately, and one is that of spiritually grounded leadership. While I don't see Obama as a savior, I see him as a catalyst that can bring to our attention a possibility for peace when we begin to operate in a peaceful mode. His responses, highly criticized during the campaign, seem to have been done from a place of spiritual groundedness. What emanated from him has to emanate from us, whether we are

talking about leadership in a traditional way or whether we're looking at leadership personally, and that is that there has to be a spiritual grounding.

Agape: What spiritual values are at the heart of your ministry as an African-American woman minister?

JSC: First of all, there is hopefulness. Love the Lord your God. My life revolves around a relationship with God, in a world that embraces the god fearing men and women of many faiths whether they are Buddhist, Catholic, Baptist, and Hindu, Jewish, whatever. It is seeing a loving God and being grounded in God.

The great teacher of my religion said the second great commandment is love my neighbor as myself and in that is the theme of social justice, health care and resources for people throughout the world. A friend's bumper sticker says: "When Jesus says Love your enemies; I don't think he means kill them". I don't think he meant be at war.

What really resonated with me, and again, I know that Barak has some political pieces that are there, but his behavior says something about resolving differences in as peaceful a way as possible. And that's what guides me. I don't always adhere to it, but I ascribe to the belief that there is a way to resolve differences in very peaceful ways that respect the humanity in other people, that give hope not only for themselves personally, but for ourselves communally whether we're talking about a local community or a global community.

Agape: One of the ways that Obama comes across is as a man with a strong feminine, a man strongly influenced by women. Do you see a role women need to play in the world of politics, economics, and spirituality? Do we need more of a yin-yang balance between the masculine and the feminine?

JSC: Absolutely. And when we can do that in a way that redefines what leadership is, I think the world will be a better place. Unfortunately, too many of us as women think we should model our leadership styles after the white male military leadership style. And we see where that has gotten us in the past. It has been so up front and close and personal during the past few years, people very close to us being sent to Iraq and coming back, and even if they are intact physically, they are not intact psychologically or spiritually. There has to be incorporation, or a balance of the yin yang, without apology. I'm reminded of strong women leaders who have made the choice to employ a leadership style that is not about violence, but that is about resolving conflict.

Bishop Tutu as a man embodies this. When Nelson Mandela came out of prison, we can see the radically different evidence that what we end up with when we choose to resolve problems and engage in what we call leadership, is not a war-mongering approach. It's one of humanity, and that's the feminine in all of us—to affirm humanity, the creation, and the re-creation of life over and over and over. War is killing and killing and killing and killing. And when we engage that feminine side of us, it's like being in the womb again and employing that creative mechanism for turning life over and over and over.

Homesteading

Reflections from the Third Floor

by Fran Reagan

I arrived six months ago at Agape to serve as “caretaker” of the homestead while co-founders, Suzanne and Brayton, spent the remainder of their sabbatical on the road. Suzanne, the gracious hostess, gave me the initial tour and offered me my choice from among the half dozen rooms available in Francis House. When we reached the top floor, my decision was made: the quaint, cozy bedroom on the north side of the house, with its two skylights facing west. I remembered sleeping in that room a couple of years before, lingering till midnight after one of our legendary Agape music/poetry coffeehouse evenings. I settled into bed that night gazing on the brilliance of the Milky Way. What a peaceful way, not only to descend into sleep, but also to experience the serenity of the soft sunlight streaming through the same portals at dawn.

All who visit the Agape homestead in Hardwick recognize the beauty that abounds here. With its proximity to the pristine 182,000 acre Quabbin Reservoir Watershed, it's certainly among the most beautiful areas in Massachusetts. It is a beauty which impresses all of the senses, both in providing stimuli as well as removing it. It gives a walk in the forest in exchange for a walk down Main Street, U.S.A.

The lure of simplicity and of elemental things has always drawn people into the wider open spaces of the “country,” but to what limit do we keep probing into those mystical landscapes with our cellar pits and stick-built homes? When do our cherished open spaces simply cease to be? Recalling the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “proclaiming ‘peace, peace’ where there is no peace,” many come to the country for peace of mind, but their very presence disturbs that which they seek. Even back in 1839 the eloquent Henry David Thoreau already recognized the new phenomenon as he writes in *A Week On The Concord And Merrimack Rivers*:

The white man comes, pale as the dawn, with a load of thought, with a slumbering intelligence as a fire raked up, knowing well what he knows,

not guessing but calculating, ... dull but capable, ... a laboring man, ... building a house that endures, a framed house.

Twenty years ago Agape come to these woods, preceded by a mere one or two houses along this mile and a half stretch of Greenwich Road. Now there are at least 20 such “homesteads,” with more lots on the market. Just next door the whirl of saws and the toppling of tall oaks has been incessant now for two weeks straight, and down the road, grease-smearing logging equipment litters a future driveway to yet another country castle. In my relatively short stay here, the call of the jay, and the whisper of the wind through the leafy canopy have too often been disturbed by the droning buzz of development.

A few years have already passed since this building boom literally shook the front door of Francis House. Around that time, during an evening of sharing at Agape, most expressed their grief over the state of affairs, but one person spoke from quite a different point of view. A

resident of a nearby town, he remarked about the pleasantries and blessings of having good neighbors, in particular, the joys of having children about. His sensitive insight was well taken as the mood in the room shifted toward an “Agape self-reflection” of sorts. Imagine, for example, if those who preceded Agape twenty years ago on Greenwich Rd. were likewise unwelcoming?

Recently I shared with a friend some of the general ideas I had for this article. He responded, “Well, we all have to live somewhere.” I couldn't disagree, as he went on to recall how early in this nation's development, a squirrel was once able to literally tree hop from Boston to the Mississippi River. A thick carpet of virgin, mixed evergreen and deciduous forest stretched across most of today's eastern U.S.

The not-too-distant history of this special spot in Massachusetts tells how the land was already once denuded for agricultural and livestock grazing uses. In fact, you can still occasionally come

upon a rotting stump of an old-growth tree on a given walk through the woods. The hardwoods around Francis House are relatively young, second growth. In our modern era of refined industrialism, efficient technology, and population overgrowth, so much of what used to be “wilderness” is now too vulnerable to the wanton profiteering of human development. It seems that land conservation and preservation are now the only defenses against such a modern onslaught, and the Quabbin (albeit humanly made) is a classic example where a basic necessity (clean water for Boston and surrounding towns) provided the impetus for preservation.

Our natural dependency upon water supersedes our trend toward environmental destruction, and for this we can be none other than extraordinarily thankful. How many roads, gas stations, Wal-Marts and McDonald's may have sprouted amidst these now quiet, inundated valleys and watershed hills had they not been set aside?

So, despite Greenwich Road being besieged by residential development, the serenity and stillness of the Agape setting is still intact ... for now. The Community's proximity to the Quabbin Watershed assures that the beauty experienced here will remain for a very long time. For this we give thanks, and for this, may the God Who Comes continue to work in us a steadfast love for both land and neighbor.



Fran gardening, a sketch by Teresa Kerbaway.

Sowing Seeds

The Art of Communication

By Kyle Eilenfeldt

Computer use is kept to a minimum at Agape and remains off on the Sabbath. Despite the complexities of technology, on Sunday I found strong communication in the simple things in life. The Earth told me so much. At the end of my work day on Saturday, moving the last rotting tree stumps to be used in the wood heating of the houses. I came upon what looked to be baby snakes. With a naiveté, I gently tapped one with my glove, only to discover it had small legs. They were baby salamanders. With each stump that was rolled, more salamanders, a dozen upon count.

I thought of Annie Dillard and her mystic view of the environment. At this moment, I was able to see in Dillard's

lens. I was giddy from seeing so much life in as strange a place as a rotting tree stump. Embracing life, seemingly childish, speaks to the humility we should have toward nature. This feeling extended as I walked to the Quabbin Reservoir down our little country road. However, there were also harsh reminders of the work that still needs to be done. I counted three cups from Golden Arches, and the quiet was interrupted by two massive pick-up trucks barreling down. I found the contrast stark. I felt disheartened, that amidst the serenity the jarring effect of modernity spontaneously appeared. These instances communicated humankind's dominion over the earth; I was simply communicating by listening to nature, finding my own inner calmness in the process.

Despite the dichotomies of communication, I found a balance when working with people. Upon entering Agape's grounds, I found instant community. There are people of all backgrounds who

live there. Some stay for a few months; others just a few days. Despite this diversity, our intention is the same: to find peace in the setting and to have an unflagging commitment to Agape. On that September weekend, we enjoyed great stories, many laughs, as we shared meals. I communicated my gratitude for everyone's company through the culinary skills I have attained in the past few months.

In November, as part of the College Retreat I took the same walk to the Quabbin, this time in silence. I was not expecting much since the walks had become routine. Retreat leader, Bob Thieffels, set a tone through the Buddhist understanding of time, asking us to walk with his lead at a much slower pace than my normal haste. This intentionality brought about greater awareness and took me away from my usual stride. We came to the Quabbin and were invited to roam the perimeter. Every other time, I had simply stopped at the beach and

reflected there, thinking the terrain too difficult to traverse.

Once I was invited to go further, however, I found exuberance. I went up the bluff as if I were back in middle school, daringly hanging onto trees and sliding down the sandy banks. I viewed the beautiful Quabbin at a greater height, admiring the magnificence of its many hills.

Kyle is interning at Agape through the School of Theology and Ministry and IREPM (Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry) at Boston College, as part of the Contextual Education Program. We treasure his insights and his great assistance, his humor and openness.

Circle of Being

The Here and Now is Just A Bridge

by Julia Nicole Krauss

I am a so-called WWOOFer - short for Willing Worker On Organic Farms. I have been traveling in Canada for the last six months working on seven different farms from Ontario all the way to Vancouver Island. Through the American WWOOF organization I found the Agape Community. I have been at Agape now for almost one month.

The last place in Canada that I stayed at was an intentional community called Whole Village, and I deeply fell in love with that place and the people. I really enjoyed the community factor of Whole Village, so I was very interested when I read about Agape. I was raised in a Christian home but growing up and watching my parents' faith and their fear of God coming out of it, I was really cautious when I noticed that Agape was a Catholic Community.

Leaving Germany I didn't want to be involved in a religious lifestyle I only knew as being strict and judgmental about what is right or wrong and with a judging and punishing God to please and worship. Now that I am here and I am able to see how a religious life CAN also be inter-faith, ecumenical, totally open to different ways of worshiping our Creator no matter if you call the Creator God, Allah, Divine Spirit or all the other ways to name this energy that is behind all living beings, I am very happy that I decided to WWOOF at Agape. It has been an incredible experience so far to stay here, and I am very thankful to Agape for all the conversations we had and the wisdom all the people at the community so freely shared with me!!

I started my journey to find my place and purpose in this world by leaving Germany last July. I felt for a long time before my departure that there is something waiting outside the world I was living in. A lot has to do with my desire to get away from the religious lifestyle that my parents and relatives were living which was very dictated by the church and the people in charge at that church. I think I was seventeen when I read a book called *Dream*

Catcher by Marlon Morgan and from that point on, my spiritual life changed.

Finally, somebody could formulate the thoughts I had for a long time but couldn't express. Also, I wasn't able to share those ideas with my family because I knew it would be something totally out of their world and something they would not understand. Every time I did try to reach out to them I faced exactly this reaction.

Reading this book though, I finally felt understood. *Dream Catcher* is a book about Aborigines in Australia and how a

heaven who promises a better life if people lived a good life on this planet. Everything focuses on a life after our time here; the here and now is just a bridge and nothing to enjoy or hold on to. Nature doesn't play an important role in one's religious life.

For me it became more and more obvious that God is not a person but everything around me, the people I meet and the nature I see and live in every day. I am very aware that I might just have this one life and I want to live it as fully and enjoy as much of it as I can while I

the only choice we have to make. It is not enough to go to church every Sunday and pray for something to happen in order to change our situation. WE have to start something like Agape, we have to say NO! to what is happening and refuse to participate. It is hard especially when you are young.

I am twenty years old and there are so many things I am supposed to do in this society. Money, success, competition and the urge to be important and to leave something behind when you die is nothing that appeals to me but is the reason that drives people crazy today. I don't want to be rich, work 24-7 and support a company that I don't 100% agree with because they might use chemicals or create a lot of garbage or toxic fumes through their production. I want to pay attention to our planet, mother earth, and leave as few footprints as possible behind.

When I leave this form of being I want to leave as quiet and unnoticed as possible, except for the experience of my spirit and the people who might remember me. No money in banks, no Memorial Statue or Memorial Day. And once those people die who remembered me I might just be a sweet memory in the air, the trees and the soil where my body nourishes other living creatures.

Many people I meet during my travels are impressed by what I do. They are impressed by my courage to leave everything that was familiar as well as my family. For me this was something that I HAD to do in order to find myself, to grow and continue being who I really am. For me the distance from my previous life was necessary. But this journey can also start in your own back yard because really what counts is the changes you make within yourself. And these changes are not dependent on the distances you go on this world.

I believe this journey is why we are here on this planet—to find out who you are and what your purpose is as this human being. That is the essential question. And once you find out, you are able to serve the life around you, and you can live the life you were made to live. Don't get stuck in the patterns of our society. Question it, find your own answers. I don't know where my path is leading me but I am certain that it will take me SOMEWHERE. So I might as well enjoy it while I am finding out!



Teresa Kerbaway and Julia Krauss .

woman who was taken away from her family and put in an orphanage run by Christian missionaries (a destiny that thousands of children had to face in every country where Europeans settled down) and begins to find out where she came from and who she is. The book describes her struggle on her journey back to her people, culture and traditions. The part in the book where she finally meets up with her people who were still living the old way and she finally feels right and home was the part that made me want to start my journey.

The connection Native People had to the land and the Spirits impressed me and seemed so much more natural and "right" to me than the explanations I received growing up with the religion of my parents. People worshiped a God in

grow and gain experience and wisdom. For me this is the whole picture.

Feeling right, understood and appreciated for who I am is something that seems so natural and being here at Agape for sure shows me that it is possible. It shows me that there IS such a place as home for my soul where people around me reconnect with the Earth, the Spirit/God and other people. Living at Agape is more than talking about sustainability, peace, love, non-violence, understanding, openness and justice. It is a LIFESTYLE. That is what I missed growing up in my family!

The more I travel the clearer it is to me that it is not about talking or supporting something that is good or right (no matter if it is religious, environmental or political) but to LIVE it. For me this is

Drinkin' with Lincoln

By Teresa Kerbaway

Unlike many interns who come to Agape out of curiosity, personal interest, or eco-consciousness, I visited Agape for slightly different reasons. My parents, tax-resisting, Catholic pacifists-and fantastic Montessori educators-knew Brayton and Suzanne in the 1980's and suggested Agape as an interesting post college experience. Having spent three months among Agape's unique blend of non-violence, sustainability, and simplicity, I've had the opportunity to retreat from the real world—a place I entered in 6th grade when I stopped attending the schools my parents taught at-to garden, promote, and most importantly reflect.

What has been confirmed since coming to Agape is that without a common vocabulary, it's impossible to communicate. Reviewing the speckling of young people who have crossed into the loving threshold of Agape's Francis House, I realize that my high-school years were spent struggling to find common ground with my peers. For me, who was raised on healthy food and Preferential Option for the Poor, I really

didn't know what to do with my friends' general interest in pop-culture and culture-at-large.

On the one hand, there was a desire to at least fake being rich, exciting, and interested; on the other was an extreme sense of "being right" for believing much of what my parents taught me. I searched for "fun" and "happiness" in similar places as my friends but didn't connect. And when I found meaning elsewhere (anti-war protests, gay rights rallies, etc...), I felt obligated to justify the abnormality.

By the time I'd sifted through a few boyfriends, jobs, and the hoop-jumping necessary to graduate college on time, I still couldn't fit my interests and ideals together. I loved college—the social life, the academics, the co-curricular opportunities, but I was definitely the only person who braved the snowy roads of small-town Missouri to drive from the nearest eco-village's sewing circle in time to hit the bars for \$5 "Drinkin With Lincoln" drink specials—and look cute when I arrived. It was a delicate negotiation, and more honestly, an impossible one, trying to embody thoughts, ideals, and female social customs that are intrinsically mutually-exclusive.

Smugness sometimes came with my duplicate identity-cute leggings for Thursday night drinking, unshaved legs

underneath-but it never lasted long. I kept up appearances but tied my heart in knots. I yearned for peers who wanted to talk feminism without the usual "it's my body" pro-choice justifications; thinkers who sought social justice, and environmentalism without the self-righteousness and exclusivity; people who used yoga as a spiritual practice of putting the pieces back together, not just toning glutes, or experiencing a fad. This tension pushed me at times to relinquish my sense of heritage, pretend I was happy sitting there playing darts on Thursday nights—which was complicated by the fact that sometimes I really was.

But with no venue for discussion, drinking a beer or going to the gym was just easier. I might as well happily surrender, have fun while I can, right? My peers may have seen me contentedly swimming along, but for me a visit to the bar is mostly a cross-cultural excursion, or a comforting place to forget, momentarily, who I am.

For people who grew up around Catholic Worker Houses and the nation's few "Agapes," the matters of life go far beyond finding a fulfilling job, a caring spouse, a hobby, and a neighborhood with great social dynamics and a good public school (quite a load, in itself). For the youth of this strange and complicated niche, the problems and the solutions are manifold, and they begin in us and our

surroundings. I suspect that problem we see in this world is the same one we are figuring out inside ourselves: the attempt to complete a puzzle that only fits because half the pieces are upside down.

We see people buy hemp mittens, or a Prius, and think the job is done. Admittedly the availability of these commodities foretells a new cultural enlightenment, but part of me views this enlightenment as just another commodification of good ideas, a sign the marketplace has won the highest bid in our culture's search for novelty and self-satisfaction. The fact is, we haven't yet turned all the puzzle pieces over.

But Agape has given me hope through great modeling, and the opportunity to integrate ideals into lifestyle. Since arriving I've found beauty in driving one of the junkiest cars I've ever seen, eating collard greens every day, wearing line-dried jeans, and listening to more than my head.

Agape's contemplative model has also brought a quest for inner-peace, awareness, and honest communication. After almost three months here, I'm more firmly rooted in what I believe are the necessary ascetic, contemplative motions we all must adopt in order to cut through what society feeds us, and find peace.

Canticles of Silence

The Subversive, Non-violent Word

by Philip Schmidt

It is hard not to be drawn into the autumnal beauty of this New England mid-morning. The bright sun filters through the leafy forest that dwarfs the Agape hermitage, where I sit and write at this very moment. All this beauty is sustained by an Invisible and Peaceful Presence.

There is a mystery about how I have returned to the Agape Community after a hiatus of 25 years, a mystery that is mostly about hospitality, welcome and connection. I must confess that I have intuited it all along but have not always been able to respond to it. The mystery of who I am entirely before God was so desecrated as to render me, a gay man, incapable of acknowledging my deep bond with creation and the rest of humanity. There was a time in my life when I felt such an icy numbness that I yearned not just for death; I yearned for nothingness. Mine is a story of rebirth, of being brought, as Henri Nouwen declares, from the house of fear to the house of love.

My earliest memory is one of immobility. As a four or five year old child, I stand on the front veranda of our home on a fall morning, just like today. Looking out onto the front lawn and street, I am stunned, as I think, "I cannot go out there." As I think about moving back into the house, I am overcome: "I cannot go inside either". I am in the grip of unconscious fear. I am awaiting a truth, deeper than what I can see or hear. I will remain here not just for years but for decades. I live mostly by faith, not by sight. I struggle with seemingly irreconcilable understandings. I have little choice but to hold onto whatever disparate clues that will sustain me and a sense of my own value.

The painful stripping away of the fear surrounding my homosexual identity has been a life-long process in a hostile institutional church and society that I so innocently trusted. I have been so devastatingly betrayed. Layer upon layer of insight has slowly dismantled the wall that has kept me from lovingly embracing myself and the world around me. Step by step, I have moved toward what the church and my society have unquestioningly repelled, out of sheer fear. It has not been a revolution. It has been a transformation by Grace, accompanied by a deepening awareness of the goodness, truth and beauty of all creation, particularly my own.



David Klein

I have finally understood that my own goodness, truth and beauty are connected to all created things and to the Source of all Goodness, Truth and Beauty. Henri Nouwen says it so well, when he declares that what is most personal is truly most universal. It has been a joy to discover that what mysteriously resides in our deepest self (sexuality and sexual orientation included) participates in a Reality beyond our full comprehension.

In retrospect, I now understand some of the hurdles that have broken my stride in my attempts to come to maturity. Most have not been so lucky, having undergone fall, after fall, after fall. The major hurdle has been the inability to trust myself. How does one integrate a spurned identity, so spurned, that in my time, it was not even on the "radar screen"? What advantages are there in welcoming interiorly what is so unwelcome in your religious and secular culture that, even when many finally understand what it is, they resist it, deny it as strongly as does the culture itself.

Not to deny this spurned identity is to welcome at first painfully what others disdain. Moving beyond what the culture does not trust is to move into a profound vulnerability. And yet, if one is to grow, this is what must be done psychologically and spiritually, despite the fear that is dictated by many respected religious authorities. Surrender to the deepest self is the call. Integration is the process.

Identification with the non-violent Christ, the Christ of unconditional Love has allowed me to understand the Church, which I love, as a means to communion with God, but not an end. Identification

with Christ's Whole Life, the call to emulate that Life, with all the questions that under gird His parables, His severe criticism of the Law as an end in itself and the religious authorities who upheld that perspective, all of these I absorbed through the subversive Word and Sacrament, in the downward mobility and identification with the disenfranchised.

And what is especially a part of this path is forgiveness of religious authority that is deaf to the suffering of all who, in their disagreement with the institutional Church, seek a way to be heard but are ignored, dismissed and often psychologically wounded or crushed. Resurrection from the pain of subtle and not so subtle exclusion, from systemic evil, emerges through the transformative Grace of Forgiveness. Conscience has developed out of consciousness. All of this is embedded in the paradigm of Christ's Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection. What an ongoing mystery!

The tomb is now empty. Who would have thought that out of that entire struggle, all that numbness and pain would emerge such Truth and Beauty, experienced even now in the leafy calm of the hermitage here at the Agape Community in New England, in the autumn of 2008? Gratitude provides the energy to work in joyful hope for the conversion of those under the influence of the darkness of injustice, of exclusion, of blind dominance.

Gratias agimus Tibi!
Resurrexit sicut dixit!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

age of 25 or even 30. He stood with a sign that said "Youth for Peace," in order that the schoolchildren might not be brainwashed into joining the military.

The reaction that Micah got from the crowd of kids was different than the reac-



Teresa Kerbaway

tion they gave the adult protestors. Several kids were looking at these "old" people, when suddenly, bam! There's a kid in the peace crowd. "Why isn't he in school?" and "He's protesting?!" were probably some of the questions going through the minds of these schoolchildren.

Many faces looked as if they didn't know who to believe: the military or the protestors, war or peace. Towards the ends of the demonstration, a camera-person began filming our whole "sh-bam." And as we were leaving, an older man who could have been a Vietnam vet got into an argument with one of our guys about 9/11 and the people who died. Micah thinks we made an impact on the children's way of thinking by protesting that day.

I am Micah James, and I am glad to have participated in an act of peace by gently protesting.

Micah age 14 and his parents, long-time friends, Steve and Nancy James, visited Agape in the fall from their home in Haiti as Baptist medical missionaries.

Voices

My Comfort Zone

My comfort zone is a place, probably in the Tropic of Cancer, on a beach somewhere where the breeze does not ruffle the pages of my magazine, the water is virgin blue, the sand I bury my head in is pure white, and my cocktail is served on a tray by one of the indigenous.

My comfort zone is a place where I can escape the questions: "Do I believe in the homicidal violence of war?" "Do I believe in loving my enemies or do I believe in killing my enemies?"

Please, do not disturb me right now.

I am not taking questions. I am in my comfort zone. I am on a cruise of creature comfort.

At the sound of the beep, please leave a message.

Paul McNeil is a member of Agape's Mission Council and a darn good poet.

But what a year in which to return with our new President-elect, so different in manner and substance (I hope) from the dead hands steering the ship of state through much of our adult lives. At least a President who plays basketball has got to be an improvement over Nixon walking on the beach with his shoes and socks on!

Art George; Sebastopol, CA

In the end, after the summer and all the hours of class, I couldn't help but feel hypocritical. I'd spent two months studying the teachings of Jesus and the history of the Church and some methods of catechesis and everything still amounts to the same thing that I already knew: Christ wanted his followers to be a community caring for the neediest, uplifting the oppressed, bringing true peace to the world. And, well, I can study it all I want to, but it won't do me any good if I'm in a dorm on campus reading and writing all the time.

Anthony Paz, former Agape intern, is pursuing a Masters Degree at the University of Notre Dame and is spending this year in a Florida parish in training as a pastoral assistant.

I am writing to you to let you know that I have been thinking of you. I started Boston University courses in September and have now finished two semesters. My grade point average is 2.83. I have asked if it would be possible for you to purchase books that will assist me with my studies. I thank you in advance.

Brian Gilligan, MCI Norfolk, serving a 20 year sentence. (Assistance may be mailed to Agape).

Witness

Gently Protesting

by Micah James

The Worcester protesting "sh-bam" went quite well. Micah, a fourteen-year-old visiting the Agape Community decided to tag along with Brayton Shanley and another guest at Agape named Fran.

He decided to come because he felt quite strongly about how the military is wrong. The U.S. Military was inviting children from local school districts to come see how "cool" they are in "protecting their country." The fact is, they wanted them to join. That's why people protested.

There were about 20 or 30 people who came to demonstrate. Micah, however, was the only protestor under the

Our Sabbatical Year

Continued from page 1

comes up, arriving like glowing candle-light, with the faces of the monks accenting the intoxicating cadences of the sweet love songs to God. Suzanne and I woke at 4:30 am, before the sun rose, for "lauds", and we spent each day within the rhythm of four daily prayer times, ending with Compline at 8pm.

Ninety per cent of the prayers and liturgies consist of twelve monks singing, accompanied by the gathered faithful singing with them. I observe that the brothers love each other, love those that attend these liturgies and the extended community reciprocates with great love for them. The author William Gass observes: "Because you are loved you are now fuel for another's fire." Rilke adds that "to be loved means to be consumed in the flames." It seems that this month-long retreat at Weston accomplished learning and relearning something I've always known in the deep--the whole point of the life in Christ, is to give and receive love. The daily prayer, meals in silence, the discussion with monks over the dishes, the conversation with the many extraordinary retreatants were just this-- being consumed in this gentle and sweet conflagration. At month's end it was hard to leave.

The Immense, Untamed God

Seven months into the Sabbatical, the time came for pilgrimage travel which begins with leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar, moving from predictable routines to seeking God in the new and uncertain. I drove 2,500 miles from Massachusetts to Colorado to spend two months at Nada Hermitage with community members from the Spiritual Life Institute, friends whom I had known for 25 years.

Driving from Pennsylvania on, I began to encounter a sense of vast limitless space. By the time I crossed the Mississippi and preceded to Colorado, rural quickly replaced urban. Except for St. Louis, Kansas City and Topeka, I saw almost limitless, uninhabited landscape. The flatlands of Kansas gave way to the sudden, dramatic 14,000 foot Rockies. These mountains revealed the massive display of the untamed God. Throughout my entire stay in Colorado, I felt this gnawing, pervasive sense of immensity. What could be more ancient, I thought, more immovable, more impervious to the

human imprint and folly than these mountain ranges? Limitless size and space were my companions for two months, both overwhelming, and oddly reassuring.

I arrived at Nada Hermitage after a breathtaking four hour car ride through the most beautiful of the southern Rockies. I easily settled into my hermitage, Juliana, in a community of six other retreatants and three community members with whom I began my two month stay. Most of my daily hermitage routine was solitary--up at 6 am for morning meditation. I also participated in communal prayers and liturgy at midday, ending with 5 pm Vespers-- three days a week. Sunday Mass was open to the public, followed by a brunch and lively conversation. Except for an hour here or an hour there, these two months were solitary. I spent a month alone, with Suzanne joining me for a month of a similar schedule.

Our hermitage community was located in Crestone, nestled in a flat desert valley, surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Southern Colorado, where I was immersed in what is called "desert spirituality," the path of sparse, stripped-down simplicity. The landscape sets the tone--sparse desert for miles right outside my window. Sounds are exceedingly sparse--wind during the day, coyotes howling at night. As the native people, who considered the specific land I was standing on as sacred, would say: "This land is so remote, so sacred, that only the wind could make a home here."

The solitude at the hermitage was a "place apart," and thankfully, almost completely void of our 21st Century sights and sounds. For two months, I experienced a sweetness in the somewhat barren, dry desert. Silence has always attracted me, and these two months in the quiet, taught me why. In a meditative environment, silence yields to a sense of peace, and this peace, is still and undriven, and an un-driven peace moves slowly; slow is quieting and yields to an even deeper stillness, which brings me into a sense of the serene. To experience this serenity is to feel the goodness of life, and to feel this goodness, empties out somewhat, the burning frustrations of life. I feel less the heat of this inner turmoil, and am my truer self before God. Being my more true self before God makes God more available and more known. So I continue to seek the Divine in this silence. The Trappists call it the "sweetness of God." We humans like

sweet, as it represents God's reassuring goodness. Alone in silence, I was reminded of the words of St. John of the Cross: "Your fragrant breathing stills me."

To trade Agape's incessant demands for this solitude, deeply satisfied my inner need for the true rest and a change. I intensified this solitude by leaving the hermitage community and traveling another 1,000 feet up the mountain to 9,000 feet and stayed four days in St. John of the Cross Hermitage. Although somewhat weakened by the lessening of oxygen, I was greeted by the most visually ecstatic moments of my entire sabbatical. Words would fail to describe this mountain view overlooking out over the valley. Again, no music, radio, no other people, no other sound, except the wind and a vigorous stream flowing audibly next to my hermitage. I drank daily from this stream and bathed in its primitive and frigid purity.

The demands of Agape that I had left at home had always seemed like urgent ones. The painful state of the world and the cry of its people, combine with the everyday work that needs to be done, and done today. By contrast, in this solitude, I am before God, totally alone in the natural world--no breaking in from other humans. No one even knows where I am (except the Nada Community members down in the valley). The life of the natural world has its friendly interruptions, mostly hawks hovering and dramatic changes throughout the vast summer sky.

True solitude is the work of restoration for which, almost everyone I know yearns. But it is so much more. This more contemplative perch attunes me first to listening to myself and what I can continue to learn. In addition to the unusual gift of wilderness, solitude also attunes me, undistracted, to nature herself and the way nature lives around me.

The power of John Muir's journals and Thoreau's Walden is that in their actual writing process, their wisdom flowed from being totally alone in the natural world. Thoreau chose human centered metaphors to grasp at the mystical nature of the untrammelled natural world around him. Muir wrote that he simply wanted others to fall in love with nature's loveliness. What could be more urgent for me than to feel nature's loveliness given that I am often immersed in a society of human excess, living within the

ever present image of a damaged environment caused by a world gone wrong?

But even more intensely felt is the pure mystique of solitude. This mystery of being utterly alone always ends in a paradox. In being "alone," I share this aloneness with everything around me, everything that is. In this wilderness solitude, I grow closer to the core of who I really am, more successfully than in much of human encounter. Philosopher John Cowper Powys cuts to the heart of this silence: "Only when the soul is alone can the magic of the universe flow through it. Our soul needs the silence for the murmurs of the long centuries to grow audible, for the mystery of the cosmic procession to make it felt." Being "alone" is a glimpse of how my life really is.

Iona, Sacred Place and the Final Pilgrimage

Fr. Colman McGrath, a Scottish priest in residence at Iona, gave a homily at St. Michael's Chapel at the Abbey of Iona. "Always remember" he said, "that you are in a very sacred place, where people have sacrificed to make a pilgrimage here for the past 1,500 years, trusting that they would find healing, reconciliation and love." The Isle of Iona, off the West Coast of Scotland was a propitious place indeed, to end our sabbatical. This island is made famous by St. Columba, a monk of the 6th Century, who started a war over a holy book, then repented this sin of war-making by following his call to repentance. Columba left his beloved Ireland, finally establishing a community on Iona, still thriving after all these centuries. The Abbey of Iona is a community dedicated to nonviolent peace and works to abolish nuclear weapons and is a peace witness in the name of God. To deepen this ministry, the community gathers for prayer three times a day with pilgrims from all over the world.

So, as we completed our sabbatical by making this pilgrimage to Iona, Suzanne and I begged forgiveness for our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and like Columba we sought to repent. For what? The ongoing sin of US lifestyle that makes for war and a church that says nothing about that war. With that tall order we still left Iona feeling cleansed and blessed, filled and restored by this beloved community, and ready to be called back to the beloved community at Agape.

Rachelle Comptois, a member of Agape's Mission Council and devoted friend, died in January, 2008, after a long and valiant battle with cancer. This poem speaks of her last visit to Agape, a week before her death.

Rachelle's Last Request

"I'm bringing my brothers Pierre and Joseph," you tell me, that morning, almost as soon as I pick up the phone.

Your voice weak, wavering, you ask: "How's your sabbatical coming?" and immediately, I sense tension, pain your rapid breath emerging from a world I cannot enter.

"I am coming to Agape, to my community," you say, half-command, half-sob, forceful and fitful, in what turns out to be, your last request.

II

"I will drive two hours," (you cannot be persuaded otherwise), you dictate, in your clear organizer, parish director, soup kitchen, shelter volunteer, focused voice.

"We'll arrive between five and seven pm." Your emphatic, unquestioning, expectations, I realize now, with no little admiration, were the script in progress you were writing for your last visit.

A sob, a stammer, a series of sharp in-breaths, then the words: "My brothers need to come to Agape."

Finally, in a soft, frightened voice: "I have brain cancer. one month, maybe two, if I'm lucky."

You compose yourself, return to the task at hand, restate arrival times: "Between two and seven" you sigh in weak, falling down fragments of the unreal.

I say to myself: "Rachelle is dying. I need to write this down. Rachelle is dying."

You do not shed your in-charge self, give commands that thud, one at a time, like pieces of wood thrown on Agape's back wood pile.

"I'll bring dinner. My brothers have to see the straw bale house, the solar panels, the green house. They need to see. They don't understand."

Simple, clear, sounding biblical, your sorrow so sacred, so serious. You are coming home.

And you do. Two days later with Jacques and Pierre, we, your extended family, gather to receive you, our shock suppressed as you emerge from the back seat of the station wagon,

face distorted, swollen, twice its normal size, your hair, is completely white, blunt and curly. You try to lift your grotesquely swollen legs. You reach down with your arms to move them one at a time, like bags of cement with a wince and a groan.

Your hands flutter like exotic birds, elegant fingers fitted into white gloves with lace cuffs, as you grip the railing, take one excruciating step at a time.

Each lifting is a fierce, urgent rejection of forces beyond words, inexplicable. With clutching resolve, you thrust your unfamiliar form forward.

We stand, helpless, frozen, watch you ascend up the steps, to Francis house, one last time.

Once inside, you sit on a straight-backed chair like a character from a Tennessee Williams' play, desolate, haunted, hungry for connection.

You begin your monologue, recount the years, a mere forty-seven, your memory outpacing your breath, and mid-sentence, your cry out: "Pillows, get me pillows, seven pillows. I need seven."

We scurry about searching for pillows, as if responding to orders from a tyrant director, yelling from the stage, with few props. Your agony is unfeigned, convincing. You sigh, "Ice. I need ice."

We move you from a chair to the couch, prop you up like an ancient queen on a catafalque.

I think back to last year when you first heard the word "terminal" and some of us gathered with you then, as we do today, to hear your anger, your bargaining: "I want more time. I tell God: I need more time."

We are mesmerized by the hurried recitation of your life as you compose its cadences "Nothing ever worked. Everything I tried was a failure, a failure."

In animated bursts of drugged energy you play out scenes of your life, names, dates, sequences flowing-- Indian reservation, Mississippi, where you were stabbed, blood-gushing wounds by a teen assaulter, her friends shrieking: "She's gonna die."

Then, disjointed, matter-of-factly, you move on: "Forget peace and justice. They don't care," your lament over a heartless Bishop, a cold church, harsh priests, a legacy of hurt. "Nothing worked," you sigh. It is seven pm, your leave-taking near,

the final curtain. You lift your eyes to the ceiling, observe the cobwebs in a corner: "I always liked that you didn't clean the cobwebs. They just stay. Beautiful." You smile.

We, your community, form a circle, clasp hands for one last time, attempt, with the eerie feeling of being at your wake, to revise your story, to tell the truth, that you mattered, worked hard, made a difference to us, to others.

We pay tribute, knowing we will never see you again.

We sing off-key with fits and starts, the song you request, then change to another, as you stand there with us crying crying.

"Courage, Rachelle, you do not walk alone. We will walk with you and sing your spirit home."

Ten short days later, you were there.

Suzanne Belote Shanley

News Notes



Photo by Peter Wuelfing

Youth Speakers at St. Francis Day from left: Anthony Wilson(17); Amena Mendez (16) and Christa Elliott (21), offered insights on the topic: "Breaking the Silence, Unheard Voices in an Election Year" sharing their concerns about their future and about their determination to contribute to the solutions needed to stem the tide of violence on the planet.

Youth Forum on St. Francis Day
High school and college students, among them, Latino and African-American youth, spoke of their hopes for the future--country, neighborhood, and planet, sharing struggles with the "me first" generation and focusing on compassion for the lost, the hungry, and the suffering in our inner cities.

Teresa Shanley, age 22, lifetime member of Agape, endured her third open-heart surgery on November 17 at Children's Hospital where, skilled surgeon, Dr. Pedro Del Nido, from Chile, performed a Cone Procedure, which repaired her tricuspid valve, malfunctioning since birth because of a rare heart disease. Although Teresa developed a form of pneumonia and was in ICU for about 10 days, she is now recovering at Agape with a nearly perfect outcome for her valve. Many prayers from around the country and beyond were sustenance for us all. The outpouring of love was profound and *we thank you with deep gratitude*. Teresa returns to her job as a staff member at the L'Arche Community in Haverhill, MA, Irenicon sometime in January.



Teresa Shanley

Soul Friend, Tom Lewis: Artist, Visionary, Friend March 17, 1940 - April 4, 2008

Tom's artistic nature called us to into a process of reading his nuanced tone and quiet inwardness. Humble in the extreme, the full force of Tom's talent was displayed in the many gigantic murals lining the Emma House staircase where he lived and offered hospitality. Tom's art, larger than life, suggested the hugeness of his vision and pain.

His murals signified the passion and the suffering he bore in his artist's heart, where images of death, destruction and the horror of war, seemed to move with prophetic force out of his psyche onto the canvas, with devastatingly brilliant results. Some are marked by such bloody specificity and alarming bluntness, they are difficult to take in. Indeed, Tom's technique integrated photography, news clippings and sketches to create a mirror of our century, its triviality and media distancing from pain.

Tom's inner spirit claimed him with such deep intensity that this anguish

originated from and resulted in deep silences as he integrated the reality of what his brush, pen and pencil conceived and birthed.

On one of his last visits to Agape, a restful and lovely time, sun flaming brightly, Tom sat in the sun, wanting to be close to the Agape garden, as he admired and sketched our towering sun flowers. All smiles, relaxed and joyful, I think of Tom in that pose now, as I am also reminded of the legacy of his Vietnam era art, and his classic sketch called "Prison Sunflower", which some of us had received as a gift of friendship from Tom.

Tom Lewis, soul friend, shared half of our lives on this planet. Now, we look to the silence his death leaves as a confirmation of how he made his life a work of art, ineffable, lasting, and wordless.

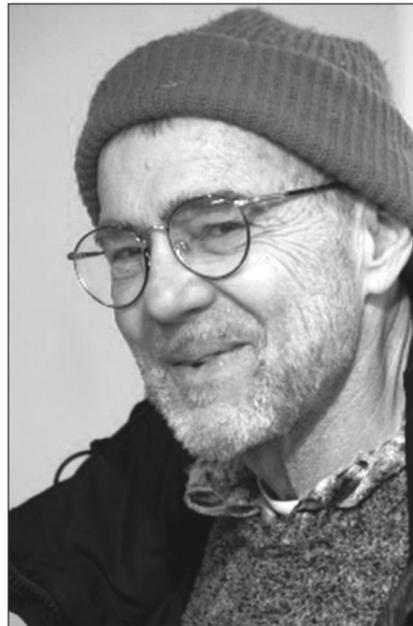


Photo by Paul Gingras

Please pray for members of the Agape Community who are hospitalized or ill:

Bob Lueders, member of Agape Mission Council for over 20 years, in a Needham Rehab facility.

Bob Solari, devoted caretaker and homesteader, ill with Parkinson's.

Rest in Peace:

Rhoda McDonald, Brayton Shanley's aunt and long-time supporter of Agape died in November, 2008.

Hector Silva, steadfast friend of Agape since the 80's, died suddenly in February at home in The Dominican Republic. We will remember his selfless service and love of the community.

URGENT MESSAGE:
MAILING AND PRINTING COSTS
HAVE RISEN ASTRONOMICALLY:
PLEASE ALERT US
BY RETURNING THIS FORM
IF YOU NO LONGER WISH
TO RECEIVE OUR MAILINGS.

- Yes, I want to receive Servant Song twice yearly.
Enclosed is \$10 Other donation \$ _____
- I can't subscribe, but please keep me on your mailing list.
- Enclosed is a donation of for the work of Agape. _____
 \$100 \$50 \$25 Other \$ _____
- Please take me off your mailing list. (We urge you to please remove your name if you do not read Servant Song or other Agape mailings.)

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Telephone _____

AGAPE CALENDAR

Sat.-Sun. January 24-25, 2000:

Just Faith Retreat. A weekend retreat for those who have completed the Just Faith program on nonviolence in Catholic Parishes.

Sat. January 31, 2009, 5:30 pm:

Annual St. Brigid Day, honoring the Celtic Saint with winter fire, songs, poetry. Bring instruments, poetry, readings and friends. Pot-luck to follow.

Fri.-Sun. March 27-29, 2009:

Annual Spring College Retreat at Agape; Campus Ministers invited.

Fri. April 10, 2009 12 noon:

Annual Good Friday Stations of the Cross of Nonviolence in front of Boston's State House, co-sponsored with Pax Christi, MA

Sat. April 11, 2009 7pm :

Annual Easter Vigil at Agape; pot luck to follow.
