

# The SERVANT SONG

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## Words, Wordlessness and Coping with Despair

by Suzanne Belote Shanley

The cascade of global and national catastrophes is so devastating that we hear repeatedly on newscasts phrases such as “There are no words to describe Yemen.” Nevertheless, a human rights official managed to locate a few: “Hell on earth for millions of children...starving and in jeopardy.” Wordlessness yields to words as collectively we struggle to give language to misery and innocent suffering. “Every ten minutes, a child dies in Yemen.” Imagine if we in the US heard: “Millions of American children in Boston are near starvation.” It would never happen. Why is this? What do we need to comprehend about the privilege of white, western protection from indiscriminate use of our first world bombs on other people’s children?

In California, in response to the Camp Fire conflagration in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, in the town of Paradise (note the grim irony of Hiroshima-like ash to describe a place named after the eternal sublime), a reporter on NPR referring to Paradise sounds like he is describing Yemen: “This is so devastating that I really don’t have words to describe it.” One survivor grimly states: “It’s all dirt.”

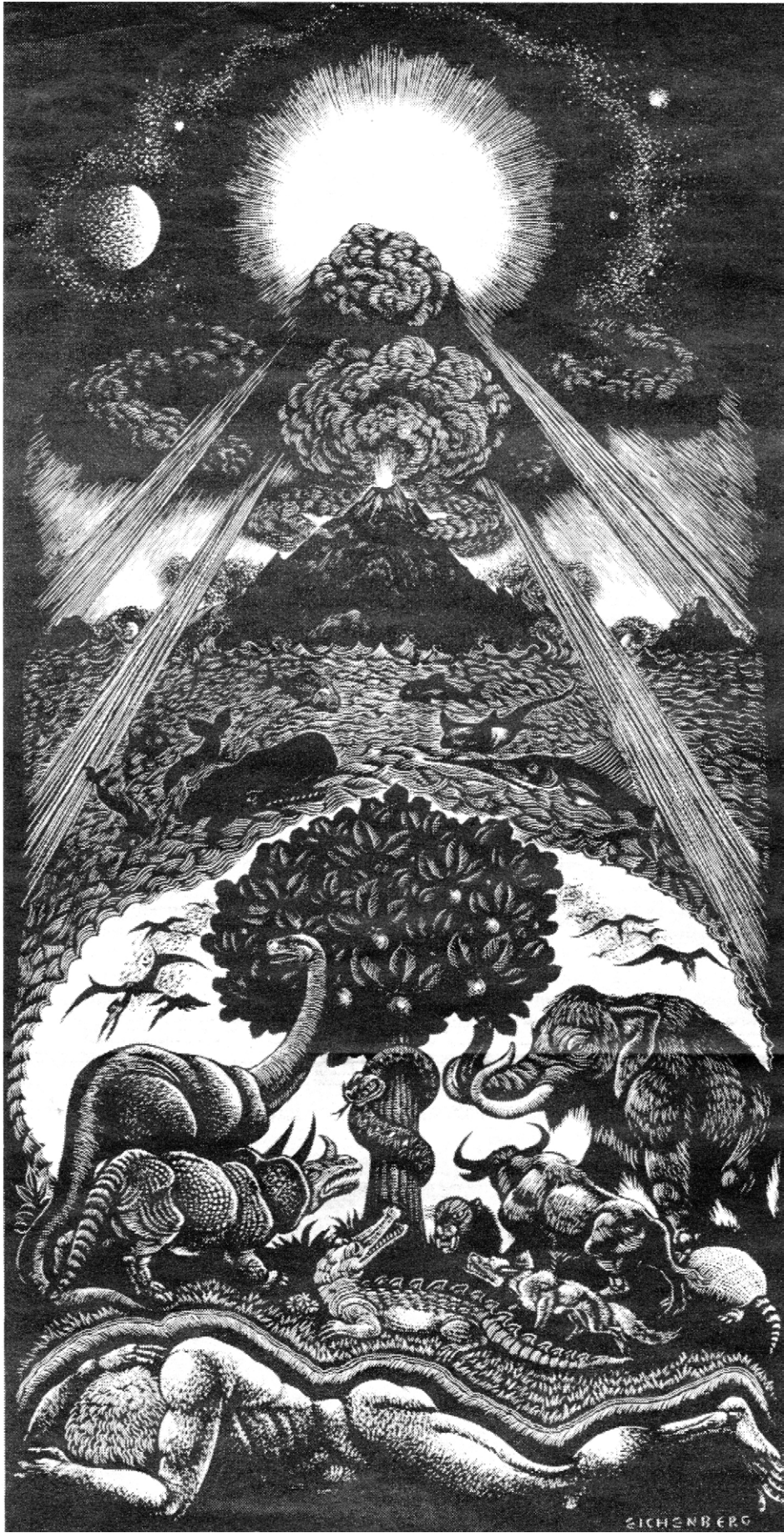
As I watched walls of flame chasing human beings in flight, many of them, elderly, like me, perhaps hundreds of them burned alive, a commentator cuts through to the cause: “We are staring at global warming in its malevolent eye. ...” The town of Paradise was flattened, incinerated, like Yemen, like similar towns in Syria and Mosul, Iraq. Americans experience “war zones” without an actual war.

Eerie footage of Paradise reminds us of the scorched earth that lays waste to children and cities in Yemen. The war in California, however, is war on the earth and its residents through Climate Change and human error, perpetrated by the same purveyors of war for profit and the manufacture of arms, the US in the forefront.

We, the world’s people, are on a collision course with planetary disaster, with an increasingly diminished threshold for action as alarmingly declared by the recent UN report on Climate Change. The chilling scenario is one of massive death and disruption over ensuing decades. Referring to the apocalypse in his state of California, Governor Jerry Brown calls it: “the new abnormal.”

Other aspects of American life also remind us of living in a war zone: American citizens are killing each other with 307 mass shootings in 311 days. The sites and names of the massacres begin to blur in our minds as Thousand Oaks, a town in California, the scene of a mass shooting just a month ago, has now become a place of a devastating wild fire. Words like blood bath are tragically common with the statistic that “4 of the largest mass shootings in 5 decades happened in 2018.” In the words of Marvin Gaye’s 60’s anthem: “What’s Goin’ on?”

How do we as human beings relate to this pervasive landscape of death as we are immersed both literally and figuratively in ongoing carnage and brutality? Lost and lonely young men, belonging to cells of domestic terrorists and white supremacists, gun down worshipers, whose members are now armed. What is the toll on the human heart and psyche as we try to grasp the national and international descent into homi-



Fritz Eichenberg

cide, hatred of the other and polarization?

Hate crimes are on the increase for the third consecutive year. In Massachusetts, five people a day die of opioids. The litany of death is endless. I am reminded of a line from the poet, Theodore Roethke: “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” But what do we see? Do we see, really, in the sense of entering into the suffering of others with our sight? Or do we turn away, close our eyes and hearts, and settle into numbness, incapable of empathy. “What’s goin on?”

Where do we find relief? In previous years, faith, prayer, reliance on one’s church might offer solace. However, even the Catholic Church is splintered, some say irretrievably. Pope Francis recently pe-

remptorily postponed the reforms on child abuse to be announced this week by American Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

Thomas Farragher of the Boston Globe observes that the child abuse scandal has “landed on the doorsteps of the chanceries and behind the velvet ropes of the Vatican.” (Boston Globe, 11/14/18). Jesuit Tom Reece amplifies the ubiquitous conflagration analogies: “What the Vatican doesn’t understand is that our house is on fire.” (Boston Globe 11/15/18).

I agree with a Paradise survivor who says: “I don’t know how to process this. My entire town is gone.” Familiar support structures are in collapse, with demonic power struggles at the top? What is re-

quired to process this?

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish mystic offers a profound insight:

Only one question therefore is worthy of supreme anxiety: How to live in a world pestered with lies and remain unpolluted. How to be stricken with despair...keeping the soul unsoiled and even aid in purifying the world.

Are we a country of polluted souls, wandering adrift with primary and secondary PTSD? What is our spiritual stance on all of this? “What’s goin’ on?” Is our soul pollution at such a level that we are succumbing, as Katherine Mangu-Ward warns, to a “temptation to binge watch” by compulsively tuning into these “snipe fests?” (NYTimes, 11/18/18).

In these soul-shredding days, I grapple with how to assuage the anguish that I live with daily. Where does God come in? I sometimes worry that the concept of prayer has become so trite, that I hesitate to use the phrase: “I’ll pray for you.” The teenage survivors of the Parkland massacre have disparaged the overuse of the gun-lovers’ and politicians’ slogan: “Our hearts and prayers are with you.” Still, I pray and believe I am heard, that healing flows outward from my unheard voice.

What kind of God do we pray to? Poet Denise Levertov suggests that our God is a “shivering God” whom we must hold to “our icy hearts,” where God may find “milk” there, sustenance. Could it really be true that God needs us? Are we the rescuers of God. How does one grasp such a notion? Does God feel pain, experience sorrow? Where do all of these ponderings take us?

Wendell Berry, poet and naturalist grapples with the inadequacy of words to describe “a world beyond words.” He believes that words are insufficient to describe the ineffable; therefore, we must “just stop”. His advice: “Sit still,” and “know for a moment the nearness/of the world, its vastness...” Is sitting a sufficient remedy for a blood bath, I ask myself? How do I say to the children of Yemen that “I sat.”

Thomas Merton tells us that as we awaken dread, we must acknowledge that “despair is everywhere.” We need not think that “our interior solitude consists in the acceptance of defeat.” Merton suggests that we need to “live facing despair...without consenting to it.” Easier said than done. Merton’s action step: “hope in the cross.” Not what I really want to hear.

As much as I don’t want to pick up the cross, the truth is that the cross I must bear now is the one of existential pain. I am so tired of all the suffering, the lying, the money, the greed, the war.

Merton means, I think, the same thing that Phil Berrigan did, when a year before his death he urged all of us: “Don’t get tired.” We have to keep carrying the dread, the pain, and the despair. Then, we pray and act—Merton’s remedy for my dilemma: contemplation and action.

I took my aching soul, my ravaged heart, with members of Agape to a Shabbat service at Temple Sinai in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, after the Pittsburgh Tree of Life massacre. At the Shabbat, we experienced an interfaith sharing amidst Hebrew prayer and chant. For the first time in months, I felt comforted. I realized that my pain, though not that of the immediate



# Listening to the Anguish of Racism

by Brayton Shanley

It all started in 2016 with Donald Trump's Muslim taunting. Our Mission Council members were gathered for our winter meeting and the planning our next St. Francis Day when John Paul Marosy, one of our crew asked of our group: "What is our world going to need by the time we reach October?"

Our collective response seemed simple enough: Muslims needed our support as the race-baiting would likely continue and grow with a following. We decided to name the October 2016 St. Francis Day "Listening to Muslim Voices in an Election Year." We spent the following months contacting mosques and Islamic Centers in Massachusetts in an attempt to find speakers who could address the growing Islamophobia, being driven to extremes by the Republican presidential nominee and his base.

As a result, we received responses from Muslim speakers, primary among them Mohammad Bajwa, leader of the West Springfield Muslim Society, who also located a Muezzin or prayer leader who called us to prayer on Agape grounds.

Nevertheless only ten or so Muslims joined the crowd of several hundred that day, our first warning that being white Christians, even though we were calling our event, Listening to Muslim Voices, still meant that a Christian community hosting such an event could present a barrier to Muslim sisters and brothers even if our intention was to support them.

A few years before the Muslim day, we asked a local Native leader to bless the planting of a cedar tree considered sacred to Nipmuc Natives from our area. When I shared with this easily engaged Native elder that we were a Christian community, his response was clear: "Oh no, I could never come to your community". We at Agape knew then we had some soul searching to do.

In December 2016 I went to Standing Rock in North Dakota to support the non-violent witness of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota people as they stood in civilly disobedient opposition to the oil pipeline going through their sacred ancestral lands. When I returned, our Mission Council supported a plan to dedicate our next Francis Day, 2017, to the noble tradition and painful history of our original people. We pledged to keep the theme on listening by inviting Indigenous people suffering from oppression in our country and as we listened compassionately to their stories. We named the day "Listening to Native American Voices: Standing Rock is Everywhere."

As we considered the specifics of the event, Suzanne offered a wild proposal: "Why not invite the Chief of Standing Rock, Arvol Looking Horse?" A great idea, I thought, but I knew he would be almost impossible to locate, yet alone agree to travel all the way from North Dakota to Agape. Through an odd coincidence, Suzanne found a Facebook post with information about a Standing Rock activist. We got in touch with her which led almost immediately to contact with Paula, the Chief's wife whom Suzanne immediately contacted. Within 48 hours Paula agreed that she and Chief Arvol would come to Francis Day in October.

When Chief Arvol finally made his way to Hardwick, I asked him: "Why did you come all this way to a Christian community you didn't know anything about?"



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He answered, "My wife and I looked into the community (I assume he read our website) and it looked good to us."

His "yes" to Agape may have origins in the nonviolence of Standing Rock Encampment, Oceti Sakoin. My experience of the camp, led by Native people, was that it was a safe place of welcome and acceptance of all who came. It was clear through constant testimonials at the Sacred Fire that the oppressor had always been white settler colonialists with a "take over" mentality, who called themselves "Christian". At the Oceti Sakoin Orientation meeting, the Native speakers encouraged the white allies present. "You will make mistakes, offend Native People and fall down in your efforts to help us. But remember to always get up quickly."

I attended a major three hour-long Interfaith service where six denominations of Christians and a Catholic Jesuit spoke to the gathering of hundreds. As he attentively listened to seven testimonials from Christians, Chief Arvol seemed to stand in the aura of nonviolent mercy and acceptance that was Standing Rock.

In a conversation with Chief Arvol, I asked with some trepidation: "Is it Ok to ask for forgiveness of Native peoples for how they had been beaten, driven off their land and killed?" He quickly answered, "Yes", then paused and added, "But it depends on who you are." I assumed that he meant that there would be no easy forgiveness and that asking for mercy needed to entail a repentant and humble request to be taken seriously by Native Peoples.

While inviting six Native speakers and members of ten tribes throughout the New England, I often found myself in the middle of uncomfortable tribal dynamics. We learned about communication protocols and how to judge native peoples' reactions, especially negative ones, toward our community and even between tribes. A man from a local Native tribe commented when I phoned to invite him: "If you invite inter-tribal groups, some other tribal people will not attend."

We had to ask ourselves: How do we navigate the painful terrain of Native American trauma resulting from centuries of our violence? Were it not for the generous help and council of Chief Arvol, Chief Cheryl Holly of the local Nipmuc tribe, John Gentle Hawk, Nicole Braithwait-Hunt and members of the Worcester Inter-tribal Indian Center, we would have "fallen down" more often in our planning.

## Listening to Voices for Racial Justice

Given our country's origins as a white Christian nation, whose founders built the American economy off the backs of enslaved Africans, it was very clear that we white Christians had more listening to do. In recent years, with the rise of White Nationalism, the depraved and unrelieved

injustice of enslaving and oppressing African-Americans, starting from the arrival of the first slave ships in 1619 to the present, comes into compelling view. Ten of Americas first twelve presidents were slave owners.

We approached St Francis Day, 2018, with a plan for a third listening session. At one of our early planning meetings, Mission Council member Hazel Dardano, born in El Salvador, challenged the plan to focus exclusively on African-Americans. "The problem with all ethnic groups in this country is racism. All non-white people are the ones who experience race prejudice from whites. On our next St. Francis Day we need to focus on racism." Her position came to define the third in a series of hearing the trauma narratives of oppressed peoples of color in our country which we called: "Confronting Systemic Racism: Listening to Voices of Racial Justice."

We decided to experiment with asking people of color not only to present themes of racism, but also to lead the prayer, music and to facilitate the entire day. This was the first time in thirty years of our Francis Days that we handed over the entire program to people outside of the community.

We invited people of amazing dynamism to carry out the day: scholars, poets, musicians, priests, ministers and activists, people who had spent their lives telling the truth about this painfully divided and racist country. They were to guide us into recognizing that only in acknowledging the cruelty of the scourge of racism of all non white people could we possibly see a way forward to heal from its self destructive delusions.

We spent an afternoon planning the morning schedule with Professor John H Bracey, the chair of the WEB DuBois Dept. of African-American Studies at UMass Amherst and Father Warren Savage an African-American priest and close friend of thirty years who has taught at Elms College and works as a chaplain at Westfield State College.

John and Warren bonded immediately realizing how many friends they had in common within their shared Black history of living in Western Massachusetts. Both are life-long activists in the Black struggle for liberation from oppression, and educators of primarily white folks on the evils of racism, perfect credentials for our day on confronting systemic racism.

When Professor Bracey heard that we were inviting Native Americans to participate in the day, he shared emphatically: "Their prayer needs to start the day. We took their land; we need to hear from them first." One of John's special interests is Native American history and he knew volumes about the suffering and resiliency of Native peoples. Warren seconded the motion enthusiastically.

Suzanne and I were intrigued observ-

ing two experienced, compassionate, and knowledgeable men of color begin to shape the Agape day. And rightly so. Why wouldn't we have people of color planning a day on racism?

One of the major conundrums that emerged, however was: how many racial minorities do we include in a six-hour program? African-American and Latino and Native American and what about Asian Americans? And Islamophobia is alive and well? We found ourselves in consistent need of advice from people of color as to how to shape the day.

John's proposal to have Native Americans start the day was a relief. Here was a man who experienced racism himself as an African American saying in effect, "Native brothers and sisters and their story is primary. This is the original genocide. Our story can wait." John's was a generous nod to hold up an ethnic group other than his own. We realized through his concern that those who suffer race prejudice are one.

## Now For the White Experience

We white people have an inherited stigma of racism, especially as Christians. Crucifiers of non-whites, we subjugated Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans by our dominance. Our superiority is internalized. To incorporate the central theme of white privilege, we invited Eric and Brenna Cussen/Anglada from St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm in Wisconsin to speak about the efforts they have made with a mostly-white Catholic Worker Movement by building bridges of activism with Black Lives Matter.

Presenting the historical pattern of white supremacy in the US, Brenna helped us to see the inevitable internalized inferiority from which all non-whites suffer. People of color who spoke on this sacred day, echoed it clearly; that they have lived every day in a culture that tells them: If you are not white you are deficient.

If we at Agape are living in an all-white intentional community, in white rural New England, are we fostering privilege and benefitting from it simply based on skin color? We view ourselves as compassionate, certainly not racist, but haven't we grown oblivious to grave economic injustices of white privilege? Take , for example: If you are African American born in poverty, you stand a 5% chance of ever rising out of that poverty. The average median net worth of white households is 13 times that of people of color: \$144,000 white, \$13,700 Latino, \$11,200 black. Native Americans are the poorest ethnic group: 27% of all Native Americans live in grinding poverty. Ten of the twelve poorest counties in the US are on reservation land, an inhuman wretchedness. Is this not a genocidal poverty?

Edgar Hayes, an African American, born in Brooklyn, New York and an Agape Mission Council member, led prayer and animated the day. Before the program, Edgar told me, "We need to think about what people will take home from this day". For me, the take-away has to do with whether you are a person of color who needs to rise up out of oppression and poverty, or a white person who needs to renounce your privilege and the unearned advantages by moving downward on the economic ladder to meet the oppressed people rising up.



# “A Track to the Water’s Edge”

by John H Bracey

*The following is Dr. Bracey’s St Francis Day keynote*

A lot that has happened since I agreed to speak three months ago. The topic I gave Agape was an “umbrella” topic...I could make it big or small. It was called “Working for the Beloved Community In Perilous Times.”

I learned growing up in the Congregational Church that you begin with a bible quote; there is one for every occasion. So I dug around and what I found was Second Corinthians: 4, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed. We are perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

I want to talk about race and broader kinds of inequalities, how we got there, and look at some people that can guide us through and see if we can come out the other side. I’m not going to give an academic speech, but I have to start with history. Human beings have always grouped themselves, but sometimes it’s harmless. “My people live on this side of the river. Yours’ live over there. Doesn’t mean a thing, just means you live over there, and they live over here. It’s not a fight; it’s a description. Every people, think their people are the people.

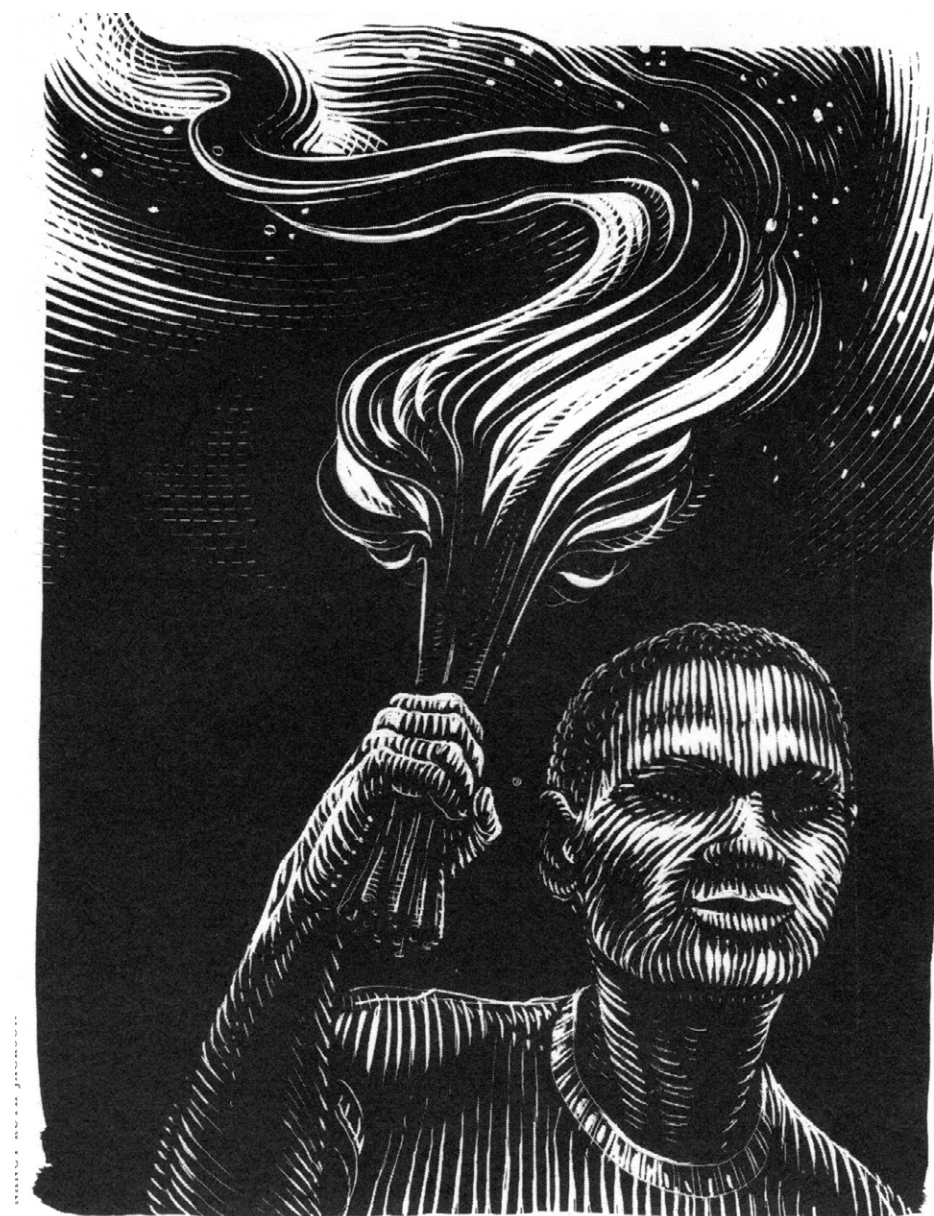
Starting about five hundred years ago, people have taken those groups and attached a meaning to them in such a way as to justify exploitation, slavery, expulsion of the Jews, continual oppression of women, stealing people’s land, murder, and genocide. Up to 1492, “Black” didn’t mean a thing. Then people came out of Europe with a new way of looking at people, which took away their dignity. Being Black did not describe them, it negated them. “You are Black, therefore, you are less than me.” You are red; therefore you are less than me.” That’s new to our planet, it hadn’t been here forever. We have genocide because Native Americans weren’t “entitled” to this land. They weren’t doing anything with it, so take it from them.

Four hundred year later, if you live in a world where scarcity is the law, then you have to invent something called Economics to explain to the people on the bottom why the people on the top are supposed to be on the top, and the rest of us on the bottom. Non-Western societies don’t have economics. They have sharing. Community. You don’t need a book about that. But if I own the land and all you can do is work for me, I have to explain that to you. Long complicated theories of buying land and of the marketplace are all designed to convince you that what I stole from you—whether your labor or your land, is justified. I’m smarter than you, God blessed me. “I’m white”.

If your only value is profit, you’ll do anything. You’ll own people. You can’t justify capitalism if you can buy and sell human beings. My ancestors were capital, means of production, not people. There’s no moral basis for that kind of society or for child labor. You cannot claim to be civilized and allow children to go hungry, be hurt, not have a place to sleep, and claim you live in a civilization. But if profit is your only motive, then you put a child in a factory at eight years old.

We had no child labor laws until the 1920s. We have homeless children today in concentration camps out in Texas right now. Call them tents, but they are concentration camps. You can’t claim to be civilized if you do that to other people, brown people, brown children.

The greatest men who produced this country couldn’t figure out how to deal with race and slavery. Thomas Jefferson, a brilliant man, retired from the presidency and was asked what could be done about slavery. “When I think about that” he said, “It’s like a fire burning in the night; I wake up in a sweat. It’s like a terror. You have



Nancy Ruth Jackson

a wolf by the ears; you can’t hold it, you can’t let it go.” “Can’t hold it, can’t let it go”; that’s the best you can do? That’s not a plan! Jefferson says, “You deal with it, I’m outta here.”

Alexis de Toqueville wrote Democracy in America, and said that America is democratic except for colored people. Native Americans won’t be a problem; don’t worry about them. They’ll be dead. But about Black people: If there ever will be a revolution in this country, it’ll be because of Black people, not because of slavery. You can abolish slavery, but you can’t make Black people white. They came from slaves, so they’ll be mad and they’ll start a revolution in this country.

White people, abolitionists, spoke out against slavery. One named John Brown, had a very simple solution: kill the slave holders. No slave holders, no slavery. Obviously he was crazy, but he tried. Robert E Lee caught him, and John Brown was executed but he admitted with disappointment: “I made a mistake. In my vanity, I thought we could solve this problem with a little blood. We are going to have to purge this land with blood to get the scourge of slavery out of here.” He thought we could do it with a little bit of blood. We couldn’t.

Take the Civil War. What did armies sing when they went into battle? “John’s Brown’s body lies a-moulderin’ in the grave, but his soul goes marching on.” John Brown was right. If you oppress people, and they know they are oppressed, fixing it will cause a lot of bloodshed. Lincoln thought you could go back and forth and figure it out, but Black people said, “No, slavery, you can’t do it that way.”

In Lincoln’s second inaugural address, he said that we might have to destroy the entire South. Every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall have to be paid by one drawn with the sword. Everything built up by the labor of slaves has to be torn down, and the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous.

Grant and Sherman destroyed the

South. We are coming for your house, your cows, your fields. If you had said, “Give me a million people to die to free Black people,” people would say, “We are not doing that”. A million casualties. More people died in the Civil War than all of America’s wars put together in order to free Black people and treat them like human beings. That’s the price of inequality. Most of the people who died were white people. Their blood was shed because they wouldn’t deal with race.

Race doesn’t just hurt me, it hurts you too. Even today, you can’t get away with it. You free me peacefully, or you have to free me the hard way. Oppressed people don’t stay oppressed forever; if they can’t live, they will die fighting. White people are scared of people of color. They are not going to admit they are wrong and that they owe Black people. And they pay for that.

Today, white people have lynch mobs because they are afraid of Black men. Black teenagers. White men are afraid their daughters will marry Negroes. That’s the White man’s problem. Racism and patriarchy joined together, not to mention gay people-- having sex with no offspring is perverted. Sex is part of productivity. All these things are related: racism, sexism, homophobia. People only have value for what they can produce, and those that are different from us are not human. The only way to get past that is to talk about the Beloved Community.

King saw the Beloved Community in the swath of divinity in every human being. If we are all divine we are all the same. And if we are all the same, then we cannot hurt each other, because to hurt another human being is to hurt ourselves. Every human being, no exceptions. I’m going to love you not because you can give me something, but just because you are a human being. Once you understand this, you will not hurt another person and you will not take what is theirs’. Agape is the highest form of love.

In 1955, at a Unitarian Church, I heard Howard Thurman preach about the inner light, there is a light within you that makes you a human being. God’s divinity is in us all. If the light goes out, then oh, what a darkness. You hold on to that, you never give that up. That’s why we are here. That makes us move.

Have you heard of Olive Schreiner? No? Is it because she is a woman? In 1925, on a retreat, Thurman heard someone read something called “Dreams” written by a white South African woman named Olive Schreiner. He said, “That’s deep; Who is that? A white South African woman? Not a black man? How did she get in my head?” Thurman read her, translated her, and published the first edition of her writings in the US, called, “A Track to the Water’s Edge.”

I will close with that vignette: It is a powerful allegory in Schreiner’s book called “Dreams”. A woman who’s asleep and wakes up trying to go toward freedom. She goes up to the water’s edge but there is no bridge. An old man comes along and she asks: “How do I get across? There is no bridge”. He says: “Take off your clothes. They drag you down”. She takes off her clothes. She has a baby. He says: “Put that baby down, he draws blood from your breast.”

She puts it down. He says, “Go.”

“There’s no bridge” she says. “Be quiet, listen. What do you hear?” She answers: “I hear the sound of thousands and thousands and thousands of footsteps of those who came here before me.” He says, “How does a locust get across the stream? Some come down and jump into the water, and their bodies get washed away. Then some sink and the others pile up on top of them and their bodies build a bridge so the others can cross.” She said, “Who is going across this bridge?” His reply: “All of humanity.” “And what about those who are washed away? What do they get out of it?” she asks. “They beat a track to the water’s edge.”

You’re not going to win today, so don’t worry about Donald Trump. We may not get across in our lifetime or our children’s lifetime, but what we can do as an individual person is beat a path to the water’s edge.

Persecuted but not destroyed, we beat a path to the water’s edge. I get where I am because of where my parents and grandparents went. I keep moving so my children won’t have to walk where I went. With the rest of your life, the time you have left, you can beat a track to the water’s edge. That’s your life. I’m not a religious person. If religion is how I get to heaven, I don’t want to be there. What are you DOING to bring God’s kingdom? God will reward work, not ritual. Don’t talk about it, or pray about it, but do it!

Olive Schreiner lived in 1890, isolated in South Africa, isolated, but she empowered the Civil rights movement of the 20th century. Olive Schreiner, we should know her name. She had a vision that echoes in our lives in the 21st century.

It is not freedom unless everyone is free. Every human being on the planet is you: no exceptions. You are not perfect. Work on that. And if you work on that, you will be in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., Thurman, and you will validate Schreiner’s contribution to this world. That’s what I want you to take away from today. Olive Schreiner, “Dreams”, “Track to the Water’s Edge”.

**John Bracey, professor, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Excerpts from Olive Schreiner poem, “Three Dreams in a Desert” appear in Howard Thurman’s book, “A Track to the Water’s Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader”.**



# Listening to Voices for Racial

## Are We Contemplative Enough?

by Father Warren Savage

My mother would always say to us, do not forget where you come from. You are a child of God. Titles get in the way. We only should be introduced as children of God. We all come from a creator who does not have partiality, but who created us in love.

Our Intertribal Council from Worcester gathered us around a fire of love... and called upon the spirit from north, south, east, and west: that spirit of love that nurtures us, cultivates us, and heals us, and grows us into a marvelous human community. We notice that the beautiful brother had to keep that fire kindled because it can go out. And when it goes out, it is cold. Maybe what we are experiencing, here and beyond, is a need to rekindle a fire so that it doesn't ever go out again. Then we are all warmed by a common fire, a purpose and a mission to eradicate the world of anything that is against love.

We shall overcome. We shall only

overcome in the silence, listening to the voice of the Creator, the voice of silence. We shall only overcome in a place of silence to be contemplative enough to know that silence eradicates everything. There is just too much noise in the world, the noise of hatred. That noise can only be dispelled when we take the silence and create Agape.

We are not here by ourselves. We got here because someone else fought to get us here, freedom fighters, who had to die along the way so that we could get up here and sound intelligent.

Howard Thurman's grandmother was a slave, so he comes from a heritage of bondage. Still, he found a way, with the help of others, to become a professor and a Baptist preacher who taught at Morehouse and Spelman colleges. He worked for reconciliation as a pacifist who promoted interracial fellowship.

"The movement of the spirit of God, in the heart of men, often calls them to act against the spirit of their

times, or causes them to anticipate a spirit for a new world which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are giving wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges, and to kindle a hope that inspires."

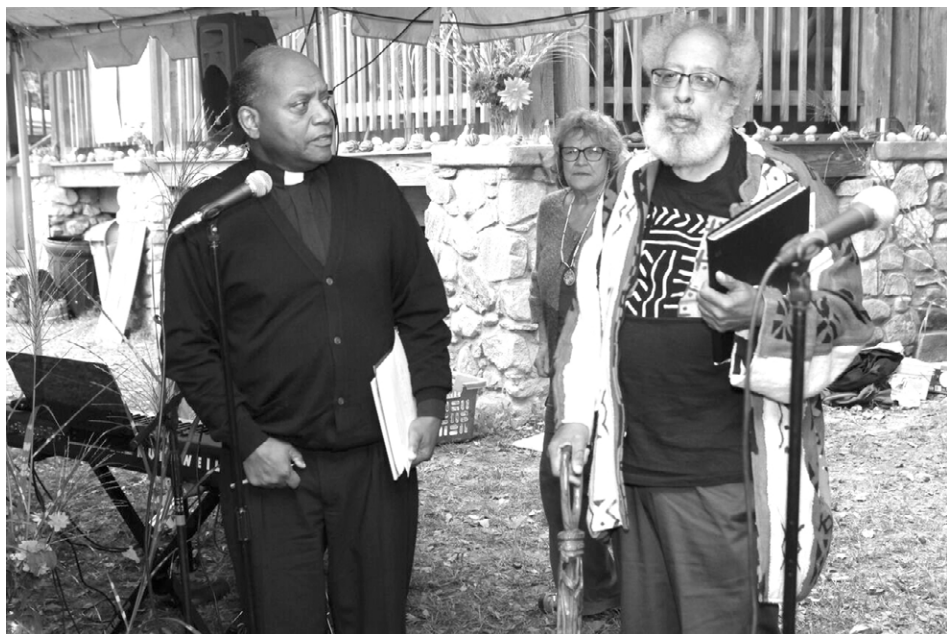
That quote reminds me of Dr. John Bracey, a man moved by the spirit, in whose heart is only goodness and kindness. He has taught many students and called them to act against the spirit of their times. He has been the provocateur, asking students to anticipate a spirit which is in the making. In a moment of dedication, he calls them to listen to those who have gone before, to dare a deed that challenges, and to kindle a hope that inspires.

Our actions speak louder than words. You don't need a degree to eradicate racism. All you need is an open heart, open arms, and people who speak by their actions.

**Father Warren Savage, Chaplain, Westfield State University; National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus**



FRANCIS DAY CROWD AROUND LIGHTING



WARREN SAVAGE LEFT AND DR. JOHN BRACEY AT THE PODIUM

## Defending the Victims

by Alex Mooradian

To me, what stood out at St. Francis Day was the sense of caring among the attendees. Everyone who spoke at the event, and who participated in the day as guests, shared the same desire to become more educated and involved. Not everyone shared the same life histories, backgrounds, beliefs, or baseline of knowledge. But sitting outside together, everyone shared a common passion for learning more in order to promote peace. While some may disagree on the methods, or the nuances around how to best address racial disparity, violence, oppression, and discrimination, including phenomena that affect immigrants, all present had a recognition and understanding of how important efforts toward peace truly are. That shared understanding was very unifying throughout the day. I wouldn't have changed a thing.

**Alex Mooradian is an immigration lawyer in Worcester, MA**



OUR RAINBOW OF COLOR DURING TREE PLANTING CEREMONY

## On the Side of God, Light and Justice

by Edgar Hayes

A wonderful start to the conversation of race in America--the day, music, panelists, food, attendees were all wonderful at Francis Day. Yet, it only scratched the surface. Its seedling is just bursting forth from the earth. One day, it will produce Godly abundance. For me, to keep the conversation within the realm of religious is key to its dismantling. It will never be reached pragmatically, metaphysically, existentially, and definitely not politically. To say that racism and its systemic outreach is antithetical to God, to the teaching of Jesus Christ is important. The devil loves division, death, hatred, bigotry, sexism, etc., so what side do you choose? The side of God, life, light, and justice for all, or the other side? Even if you say you don't believe, would you choose pain, suffering, and division over love, social uplift, and creation? The conversation will be sad, painful, loud, soul-splitting, excruciating, exhausting. But it will produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

**Edgar Hayes, co-Founder, Freedom Farm, Agape's sister community in Middletown, NY, member of Agape's Mission Council**



EDGAR HAYES DRUMMING NEXT TO A CHERRY TREE PLANTED TO "END ALL SYSTEMIC RACISM"

## It's Not Easy Living with the Truth

by Ruth Bass Green

The experience on October 6, at Agape will stay in my heart and mind forevermore. I was challenged in more ways than I'd hoped  
Never did I think I'd be enhanced by the sage smoke  
Nor the panelist and the topics they shared  
Which was no joke  
No joke to hear the truth  
As I heard that day  
The truth that changed the way I think  
Me, an African American Woman with the desire to be  
A living example of royalty  
Oh Lord it's not easy living with the truth  
And what role I will take to make it work  
I pray for the strength that allows me to say,  
To speak my mind

And to do what I may  
To let truth of social justice  
Be the guide  
To let my light shine  
So others will see  
The light of God  
As it shines in me  
I now know more than ever  
To let hate go and let love grow  
So that as a human being  
I'll feel the powerful source of energy  
That leads to peace, harmony and love  
For all creatures  
Great and small  
And the environment that we  
Must protect to save us all

**Ruth Bass Green, musician, teacher, leads group singing for social justice groups locally and nationally.**

Thank you to Agape photo archivists Claudia McNeil, Peter Wuelfing, and Dave Legg for their photo art on this page.

## Courage to Change

by Brenna Cussen

I was beyond impressed that Agape was willing to dive into such a difficult and necessary issue. The diversity of the speakers, musicians, and prayer leaders were a testament not only to the relevance of the topic, but also to Agape's reputation and dedication to building relationships. How important it was to begin and end the day with ceremony and re-

flections from Worcester's Native community, recognizing that the event took place on occupied land.

As one of the only white speakers, I recognized how incredibly important it is for me, and white people in general, to continue to do our own work learning about structural racism in this country, how it has harmed us and how it has devastated other communities - despite how uncomfortable it may be for us. For

too long our privilege has blinded us to the gross reality of our own history and present, and it is encouraging that so many are willing to be challenged to change.

**Brenna Cussen Anglada, co-founder of the St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm in Wisconsin, is learning how to dismantle white supremacy within the movement.**



# Justice, St. Francis Day 2018



OF THE SACRED FIRE TO START THE DAY

## We Must Rid Ourselves of Systemic Racism

As our country experiences such difficulty and we as a people are hurt by betrayal at its core, the single most important thing to me is to build and nurture ourselves and our community every way and every day that we can. It was cathartic to safely engage in an uncomfortable (at times) but intellectually stimulating (always) discussion on systemic racism at Agape. It's good to be having this conversation.

We need to look at the reality of systemic racism, which is pervasive and manifests in all things from money allocated to public schools and the value of homes in communities of color, to the disparity of addiction treatment when you are a person of color. We have to be intentional about getting rid of it.

**Tahirah Amatul-Wadud, Attorney, Board member of the Council on American Islamic Relations**



Photo by Paula owens

**TAHIRAH RIGHT WITH DAUGHTER ZAHRA TALKING TO AGAPE FRIEND PATRICK MURRAY**

## Give Us a Seat at the Table

Systemic racism has, throughout my whole life, prevented me from being in spaces like this today, from going to college, from feeling like I belong, and from finding people like me who want a revolution!

What do we want? We want dignity; we want respect; we want permanent solutions, and we want to do it now. I feel so much love and so much compassion for everyone who has been on this journey with me. I just want to encourage people to use their access, their connections, and their webs of community to open up to people like me.

The people I grew up with are not in these spaces, and I just want to acknowledge that we can make sure they are getting their needs met.

Hope is a weird concept, but I always feel it when I am with women, people of color, other undocumented people, and classmates from Smith.

Give us a seat at the table, and we will take it from there.

**Julieta Mendoza, Smith College student, DACA, volunteer with the Pioneer Valley Workers Center.**

by **Maritza Cruz**

Race still matters. In 2018, there are persistent social, political, and environmental inequities, and racism is only one component of the complex system of oppression. Rules and standards in our society are not race neutral.

As children of color, we learn from a very young age that racism exists. We are seen as subhuman. Immigration has been racialized; it's about people of color being seen as "less than." When it is black and brown or indigenous people, immigration is not okay. We indigenous people have been here and have been crossing borders for thousands of years, but we are ignored.

Systemic racism is nothing new.

## No One Is Illegal

This country was built on racism and colonialism; the conquering of other people who are seen as less than has been going on for over 500 years. The physical, spiritual and emotional genocide is still happening. If you are not "written in," you cease to exist, you are not acknowledged. Why am I illegal? Because you made the rules. You are the dominant culture? No one is "illegal." These are the terms you use.

White people see racism as conscious hate. But it is insidious, built into our institutions, a complex system of levers and pulleys set up generations ago to continue working on behalf of whites at the expense of others. It infects how you deal with people who don't look like you, or

have the same culture as you. Hate is just one manifestation of racism. Privilege, Access, Ignorance, Apathy, Silence, are others.

While no one is born a racist, racism is a powerful system we are born into, like air; it is not like a cold you can get over. There are no anti-racist certification classes or trainings. It is a set of socio-economic traps and values that are fired up every time we interact in the world. It is a thing, a monster you have to keep scooping out of your life to keep from drowning in it. I know it is hard work, but it is the price you pay for owing and owning everything.

**Maritza Cruz, Director, Racial and Gender Equity, YWCA of Central Massachusetts**



**PANEL SPEAKERS, JULIETA, MARITZA, ALEX, BRENNA ENJOYING THE MUSIC**

## Worcester Inter-Tribal Indian Council: Sacred Fire and Pipe Ceremony

By **Nicole and Rick Braithewait Hunt and John Joubert**

"[The challenge is] how do we come back to being one people again. We have the same spirit within us all. We've forgotten that." Nicole Brathwaite-Hunt

"The native part of me tells me that we're a culture that is totally ignored and people don't believe we exist anymore. The African side of me, basically tells me we're a culture that hasn't treated as humans." Rick Hunt

John Gentlehawk Joubert said of his friend Rick: "You are trapped. As a Native American, you were not worthy enough to co-exist and the rest of the world wanted to wipe you out. In the black culture, people wanted to own you. You were a commodity so they wouldn't have to do work. That is not 'civilized'."

**Nicole, Rick, and John Gentlehawk are all members of Worcester Inter-tribal Indian Center**

## St. Francis Day on Replay

by **Jonathan Betts Fields**

Nonviolent love looks like friendship; embrace it and end all the isms.

Race justice, lament, and forgiveness mix well with laughter, baked goods and singing.

Heart work requires standing room only workshops, co-facilitation.

Quick! Someone tell the Millennials there's much more wisdom in the woods.

We can't wait for the tree we planted to blossom... in soil and Spirit.

**Poem read by Rev. Jonathan Betts Fields (or JB), a teacher, preacher, workshop leader and summer camp director.**

## Great Spirit—Jesus—God—Allah-- Heal Us

by **Ann Rader**

It was so important for there to be a white Christian voice saying- we repent, forgive us Lord, we reject the ways of the "white Christian" militarized economic system that has wreaked havoc upon your sacred people. Which has offended you. You - the Great Spirit - Jesus-God (Allah)--the Holy Spirit-- who has been so painfully misrepresented, misunderstood and missed over the centuries.

Seeing Josiah and Frankie plant the tree... These are very healing moments...

**Ann Rader, co-Founder of Freedom Farm with her husband, Edgar Hayes, is also a member of Agape's Mission Council**



**RUTH BASS GREENE LEADS THE SINGING WITH ST. FRANCIS DAY CHOIR BEHIND**



## Thumbs Down

By Aria Killough-Miller

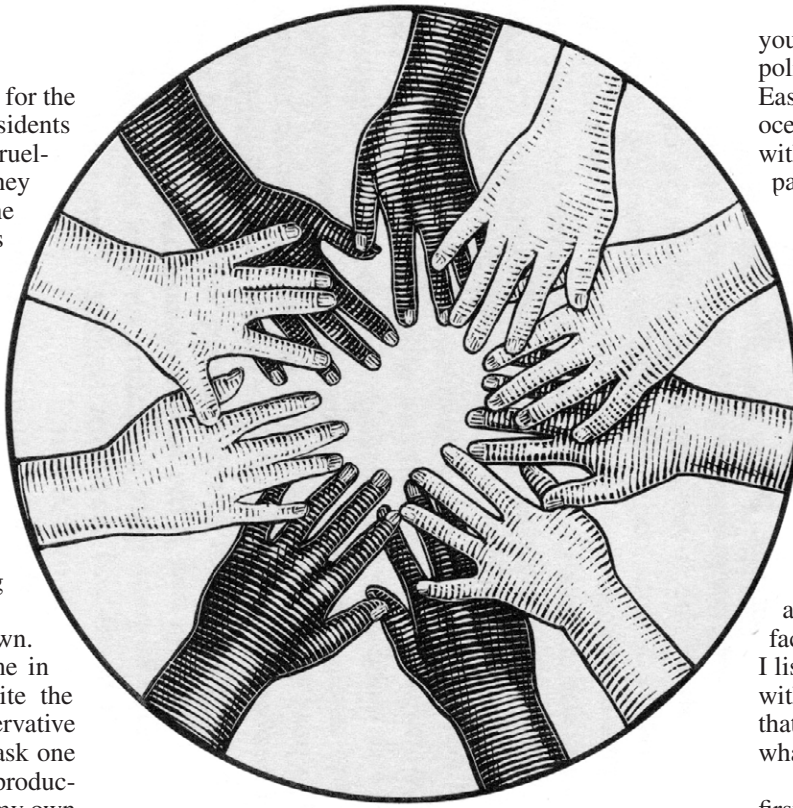
After the Pittsburgh shooting and mail-bombs, for the week leading up to midterm elections, Agape’s residents held a witness in Ware’s center as a reminder that cruelty—both from these terrorists and the presidency they acted under—isn’t the only way to co-exist in the US. Instead, our banner proclaimed, “Love Trumps Hate.”

The majority of passers-by ignored us or didn’t react. Many honked their horns and smiled, said “Thank you! I love you guys!”, or flashed thumbs up. But the reaction that most interested me was thumbs down.

Sam Leuschner, present for many days of the witness, was relieved. At a previous protest she joined, one against ROTC at Holy Cross College, someone spat at protestors’ feet. Unlike spitting or bombing, showing thumbs down counters a message without hostility toward the people saying it.

But usually, I don’t feel like seeing thumbs down. Most of my life, liberal circles have cocooned me in near-unanimous affirmation of my beliefs, despite the placement of these cocoons in rural, fairly conservative towns. But, while it’s comfortable to rhetorically ask one another how anyone could back Trump, it’s not productive. About half of the voters chose this president, my own small-town neighbors among them. They have answers that liberal echo chambers need.

For those too vulnerable to engage for whatever rea-



son, I don’t encourage emotional and psychological bullying. However, a book from Agape’s library, *Your Life is Your Message*, has challenged my thinking that you are

your beliefs, even the core ones that define the US’ current political divide. Meditation lets Gandhian disciple Eknath Easwaran face disagreement, even angry criticism, like ocean waves that surge and then leave, handling censure without becoming a doormat. For those who are so prepared, that’s where growth, even enrichment, can occur.

So seeing thumbs down was a good reminder that people exist outside my “Love Trumps Hate” bubble. But really, it’s barely a beginning. What’s behind those thumbs down? The deepest we got into finding-out was a short exchange on election night.

“Mind if I stand here, Trump hat and all?” asked a woman campaigning for a state candidate. “Sure,” we from Agape chorused. Brayton and the campaigner briefly debated whether Trump abused women, ending in the wearer of the “Make America Great Again” hat somewhat tersely wishing us a pleasant day and moving to another corner, one with signs she must have agreed with more.

I didn’t speak because I am wired to avoid saying anything “not nice,” and I didn’t have well-organized facts and arguments. Can I learn how to speak out? Can I listen to Trump supporters’ side of the argument closely without judging them as cartoon idiots, reminding myself that they’re three-dimensional humans like me? Or, I fear, what if they change my mind?

I’m not yet committing to such inner work. But if the first step is choosing banners over bombs, the next step is walking up to people with thumbs down.

## Holy Cross College Fall Break Rural Immersion

By Aria Killough-Miller

The week after Francis Day, Agape facilitated a Rural Immersion for six students from Holy Cross. Intern Aria and Mission Council member Samantha Lueschner assisted for the four days.

Following the tradition of Holy Cross Agape Rural Immersions before them, this group stacked nearly a season’s worth of wood in Francis House, Brigid House, and the Hermitage in mere days, something that would take weeks with three full-time residents. Thanks for the reminder that a “Many hands make light work” mentality is key to community life! Students further helped Agape by preparing compost and storing dried herbs.

When not bonding over washing dishes or befriending snakes and salamanders found during wood stacking, the group participated in discussions on nonvio-

lence, social media, vegetarianism/veganism, and Eco-feminism. They drummed and read poems before afternoon meals. Suzanne followed up a screening of “Awake: A Dream of Standing Rock” on Thursday night with a discussion and David Legg’s slideshow from 2017’s Francis Day dedicated to Native Peoples on Friday night.

Brayton’s time-honored meditative walk to the Quabbin remained silent despite the distraction of a long flooded stretch, when a few students who had boots offered piggy-back rides to those in less-waterproof footwear. Later that night, they enjoyed a bonfire.

Singing “Hallelujah” at prayer was a highlight of the final morning, along with creating and sharing artwork inspired by the Immersion and by Wendell Berry’s “Words”. Many thanks to a funny, reflective, and hardworking group.

## Unplugging for Five Days

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and listen to the wind. Feel it touch your skin. Breathe in, breathe out. Listen to the water splash the shore. This is a glimpse of my peak moment during my Fall break at the Quabbin Reservoir. This past month, I made a very last minute decision to go on a rural immersion trip with a few other classmates from College of the Holy Cross to Agape Community. I signed up because I saw the words “vegetarian meals and farming”, and that was enough to get me an hour away from campus for a few days.

“Disconnecting” helped me make sure I was in touch with the moment and created a focus on the experience of living together, working, composting, breaking branches for kindling, stacking wood, and showing each other critters like salamanders, caterpillars, or a cool worm. By making our work intentional, Agape made the experience very enriching.

The movie on the Standing Rock witness against the oil pipeline definitely reflected nonviolence, translating our prayers into action that serve, help, and heal communities (we spent some time learning ecofeminism, sustainability and nonviolent lifestyle among other things).

I felt very empowered and full of hope. I came back to Holy Cross with a bigger realization of how important my work is there and how much of an impact I can have because of the power I have as a person and as a student.

**Xochitl Tapia, Class of 2021**

## Embrace Life, Every Wild and Precious Moment of It

“Tell me what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” is the last line of Mary Oliver’s poem, *Summer Day*. Even though the Holy Cross Fall Break Rural Immersion at Agape was during beautiful and lush autumn, the poem was still intimately relevant to our time at the community. Much of our trip took advantage of good and bad weather as we laughed while learning from each other and observing God’s little creatures from snakes and salamanders to caterpillars and inchworms. Then we enjoyed each other’s company over fresh, home-cooked meals.

**Grace Mascha, Class of 2019**

## Way More Than a Day

by George Aquiar

From September 13th to October 10th, I was beyond blessed to have been a member of the Agape Community where I worked hard, prayed hard and ate unbelievably well - paraphrasing a small hand-written note on the refrigerator. Working, praying, singing, eating, and being with Aria, Brayton, Dixon, Suzanne and others for those 28 days all the while focused on a common goal: organizing a day where some 200 people would join together in celebration of St Francis of Assisi. We would learn

about how to confront systemic racism and that St. Francis Day was way more than a day.

On the very evening of my arrival an intense story was told around the dinner table. Eduardo, an important voice planned for this year’s Francis Day, shared his story as a community organizer and Mexican immigrant who found himself here “illegally.” Eduardo’s heritage as a Mexican American reflects a long history of people thriving in these Americas going back centuries. Listening to Eduardo led me to believe that he deserved our warm welcome with open

arms.

With all of this guidance from St. Francis to Eduardo, it is incumbent on all of us to notice what is happening to the animals, to our environment, to our future, or at the very least, our children’s future. These are not ordinary times: forests are burning; oceans are rising while the intensity and frequency of weather destruction is causing so much damage that recovery often takes longer than the next storm. The trend is clear; yet our political system is so broken that hope is difficult to maintain.

There is hope. We have St Francis,

Chief Looking Horse, MLK, Gandhi, Eduardo and so many others who have the courage and vision to see through all the lies being fed to us by the 1%, the deep state and Trump and his people whose only faith seems to be more, more, more!

Finally, we have solar-powered Agape Community. Agape is a spiritual beacon which recognizes and resists tyranny, loves the animals, and recognizes and values community, and the sacred Nipmuck land on which it is built. So, there really is still hope!



# Voices

**Elizabeth McAlister writes the following from her prison cell in Georgia:**

“In the Beatitudes, Jesus laid out the conduct that God desires of us. To be poor in spirit (dependent on God and one another - certainly not on weapons of mass destruction). To be alive enough to the suffering of people and creatures in general and to be able to mourn, to have our eyes, ears, and hearts open to those who are suffering, to be willing to share that suffering and to build a sense of community that embraces victims of injustice and brings them into the beloved community.”

**Terence Moran**

As a Catholic priest, I did the unspeakable. I called for the ordination of women in the church. The Vatican was swift in its response. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith informed me that I was “causing grave scandal” in the church and that I had 30 days to recant my public support for the ordination of women or I would be expelled from the priesthood.

I am convinced that if the Catholic Church had women priests, it would not be in the crisis it is in today. I am equally confident that if the Catholic Church does not dismantle its corrupt all-male priesthood and welcome women as equals, it will continue to drift into irrelevance.

**Roy Bourgeois,**  
*Former Maryknoll Priest  
excommunicated for his belief  
in women’s ordination*

I notice you have five themes listed for Frances Day on your leaflet, but anti-Semitism is not one of them. Since Charlottesville, which should have been a major eye opener for people of conscience and the rapidly rising rates of anti-Semitism throughout the country, it surprises me that it is not deemed important enough to be included this year at your Frances Day brochure.

**Sadly,  
Hattie Nestel**

In Haiti rarely a day goes by without a parent or child knocking on our door to ask if we can help with tuition fees. Since there are no government grants or loans, in some poor families, the younger children lose years of schooling instead of learning to read, write, and calculate.

We would like to respond to this ever present need by establishing a new, International Ministries sanctioned fund that will receive donations specifically designated for tuition and educational supplies at the elementary, high school, and university levels. Our initial annual goal is \$5,000.

Please prayerfully consider lending your support.

**Nancy and Steve James,**  
*Agape co-founders  
reporting from Haiti*

## The Mystic’s View

### BOOK REVIEW by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

Robert Thiefels has written a thoughtful and valuable book about consciousness as it pertains to the Christian faith journey. In *Standing in the Midst of Grace: Essays on Living in Christ Consciousness*, he invites us to look beyond the Jesus we have created in our own image and see the unfolding Christ Who loves us into full participation with an evolving universe.

We human beings suffer from the narrow view. A judgmental and transactional approach to life has limited our field of vision, and we keep looping through inadequate solutions conceived in a framework of consciousness that Thiefels believes is no longer viable for our survival. The Christian response to this dilemma is what St. Paul advises: Let go of the egoic self,

with its dualistic, exclusionary orientation, and put on the mind of Christ. See the world as Jesus did and relate to in like manner. Thiefels calls this level of awareness “Christ consciousness.” It is, for him, the life-giving seedbed of true change.

“How can we create a better world if we cannot imagine one?” he asks. “And how can we imagine such a world except from a different vantage point than the one we now inhabit? We must be transformed.”

A retired social worker and adjunct professor of theology and religious studies, Thiefels began his study of consciousness more than thirty years ago. This book represents a compilation of his years of inquiry. Seven essays explore how a change in consciousness – a waking up to the Christ Who infuses all of reality – might transform our understanding of God, inspire new structures in our churches, alter our

allegiances, and deepen our interpretation of Scripture. Two are formatted as if for a parish study guide with bullet points summing up main points. One includes ruminations in response to the writings of theologian Walter Brueggemann. The unevenness in style does not negate the richness of thought presented.

Thiefels aligns with today’s evolutionary theologians who are synthesizing the revelations of science with the revelations of Scripture. Theirs is a deeply optimistic theology, one that includes everything. “Another name for Christ consciousness,” he writes, “is unity consciousness.” Here is the mystic’s view. God not as exacting judge, but as the ground of all being, infusing every atom and cell with love.

Some might find such an inclusionary stance unsettlingly open-ended, (Don’t we need judgment?), but Thiefels encourages

us to mature in our Christianity. Centering prayer, a contemplative study of Scriptures are among some of the practices that can help us put on the mind of Christ which is ultimately becoming what we already are. God-bearers. What a grace to encounter this book in this time of fractures, when states, like famine-ridden Yemen, endure a de-civilization, and our own homeland appears to come apart at the seams. To read of God constantly, continually loving the world into wholeness lessened my fear and energized my faith.

**Claire Schaeffer-Duffy and her family at Therese-Francis Catholic Worker in Worcester have been family to us at Agape for over thirty years.**

**To order book: From Barnes and Noble online or from the author at [bthiefels@gmail.com](mailto:bthiefels@gmail.com)**

### WORDS | from page 1

families of sufferers, is not trivial. The Jewish strangers in the congregation offered me solace, welcoming me to share their grief.

Entering into grief for the world means accepting my emptiness, my powerlessness. I am not alone in my despair. It is a collective condition. We lament over our mutual brokenness and try to stay “unsoiled” in the process.

These motions might bring some “illumination” which Hannah Arendt, in her book **Men in Dark Times** says “come less from theories...than from the flickering and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and in their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth. ...”

Relying on my “weak light,” I seek a remedy to my continued sorrow at our human predicament. Dorothy Day lived through this dual conundrum of despair and light, dismissing discouragement by saying that her despair was a luxury for which she didn’t have the time. Similarly, poet Paul Goodman, calling on Creator Spirit, to “join in our consultation,” wrote that “we do not have the leisure to despair.”

Inspired by Standing Rock and Indigenous Peoples’ witness world-wide against pipe-lines that desecrate sacred lands, voter suppression and a legacy of intergenerational trauma, I have drawn comfort in the words of Natalie Diaz, a Native American poet from Standing Rock. She says that the medicine we need for the extraction of evil is water: “Water is the first medicine” that helps us remember “from where we came.”

In the Agape chapel recently, we read the mystical passage from Ezekiel 47:1-12, which one commentator referred to as “Return of the Divine Presence.” Water is flowing everywhere in Ezekiel’s vision. He measures and re-measures

the flow, saying in a mystical transport: “Wherever the river goes, every living creature which swarms will live...” Mni Wiconi, Water is Life.

All of the “waste places” of a nation’s history, Ezekiel promises, will be redeemed for “nothing is beyond the reach of God’s grace.” The exegesis offers consolation to those of us trapped in the metaphorical or actual fires of our time. “There is no hopeless situation, no group of people who are beyond redemption, no ...unhappy past which need condemn us to a future delivered over to despair.”

Perhaps this is my weak illumination for now. I must trust in a return to Divine Presence. Ezekiel, the women of Standing Rock are manifestations of that presence as guides, as are the mystics and prophets.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in “The Poet Speaks of Praising,” offers a remedy which takes me beyond the secular, the political, and the temporal. In response to a hypothetical question: “But the monstrosities and the murderous days, /how to you endure them, how do you take them?” Rilke replies: “I praise.” In praise of powerlessness, I return to Jesus, my Catholic faith, to hope in the cross?

I wrestle with despair, yearning for relief for all those suffering in such staggering misery. Is it possible that beauty and goodness still flow out to and through us frail, depressed and mortal souls?

Maybe in time, I will discover that my sorrow, the tears of the world, will at some point in the future be transformed into the Balm of Gilead, but not in the linear way I expect. We may need to rest in the contradiction, the paradox, until the moment of release arrives in a gesture, a word, an action, as fleeting as breath.

### LISTENING | from page 2

We live in the most religiously diverse nation in the world. As Christians, we pledge to step down from the faith pedestal of Christian superiority as the best or only true religion and promise to live in harmony with the other 22 religions of this world as faith traditions we can revere and learn from.

While living in one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world as well, we as a white community are obliged to repent our allegiance to all our systemic, structural racist institutions and move downward off the pedestal of privilege to learn from, love and live in peace with those we have oppressed: Asian Americans, African Americans, Arab Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans.

The mountaintop experience for me at St. Francis Day’s “Confronting Systemic Racism” was singing “We Shall Overcome” led by Ruth Bass Green, a African American woman who lived through the Civil Rights era. I have sung this song countless times at peace rallies, folk concerts, and song fests at Agape with groups of mostly white confreres. I have been told by Black activists and music historians that “We Shall Overcome” belongs to the Civil Rights movement as a Black person’s freedom song. Singing this anthem carried them through their anguish, including life-threatening campaigns for freedom. It does not, they insist, belong to the 1960s peace movement.

This musical ode to the struggle for

justice seemed to have a secure place in all movements for social change, a rallying cry of hope and perseverance. But when we sing these familiar lyrics in our primarily white gatherings, even with tens of thousands at peace rallies in Washington D.C. are we just going through the motions? Have the majority of us really suffered enough to cry for relief and deliverance: “Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday?”

The song offers reassurance for a people whose lives are in daily peril. In spite of the odds at “overcoming” injustice, hope will, absolutely... prevail. Doesn’t this sound more like a Black freedom song?

When Ruth told me that she wanted to sing “We Shall Overcome,” I thought to myself, “Is it too familiar? Will it speak to these times?” But when she broke into this historic melody and lyric, Ruth led as an African American woman whose suffering and perseverance were wrapped up in the moving cadence of the anthem. She belted out this song uniting a wide spectrum of people of color in the audience who were singing from the gut of their experience of trial.

They led the rest of us white activist allies in the audience, pulling us into the historical forces of memory, hope and commitment to persist in the struggle to end this cruel systemic racism. It is their song. Is it any wonder that Jesus, the one who loves the poor, loves them so?



# News Notes

## Agape Welcomes New Office Manager

I am grateful and honored to be part of the Agape team as the office assistant. Having lived in Ware most of my life, I was not expecting to find Agape, but it has been such a learning experience being here: listening, reading, and talking to Suzanne, Brayton, Dixon, and all the visitors I have met. It is easy to see why this place is so special to so many.

Betsy Azarowski

**We Grow Into Courage** is a dramatic reading of civil rights texts excerpted from “Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC”, which is being presented by a group of bi-racial women from Worcester, with Claire Schaeffer-Duffy as one of the presenters and editors of the script. It is a tremendous piece. For more information, contact Claire Schaeffer-Duffy at theresecw@aol.com

## Alden Poole, Agape Friend and Mission Council Member Honored at Simmons College

Gwen Ifill, co-anchor with Judith Woodruff at PBS Evening News, always mentioned Alden Poole, her professor of journalism at Simmons as her inspiration. Ifill died in 2016 after a private battle with cancer. Simmons named the new Gwen Ifill College of Media, Arts & Humanities in her honor. Alden died at age 89 in October 2017, and Simmons has announced the Alden Poole Faculty Mentor Award which embodies all the qualities Alden demonstrated as a professor and a devoted Agape Mission Council member.

**“Loving Life on the Margins: The Story of the Agape Community”, by Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley, co-founders of Agape**, will soon be published. The authors will launch a book tour to present their 40 years of founding of Agape. Please contact Agape to host a book signing in late winter through the fall of 2019.

**Kings Bay Plowshare 7 Update:**  
On 26 September the Kings Bay Plowshares legal team filed briefings under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that the seven were exercising their “sincerely held Catholic beliefs” when they symbolicallydisarmed Trident nuclear weapons, and that the government must demonstrate a “compelling state interest” for the excessive charges brought against them. Liz McAlister and Steve Kelly SJ remain in prison. See the Kings Bay Plowshare website [www.kingsbayplowshares7.org](http://www.kingsbayplowshares7.org) for further information.



BETSY AZAROWSKI, THIRD FROM RIGHT, AT ST. FRANCIS DAY.



GWEN LEFT, ALDEN RIGHT



BOB WEGENER, THIRD FROM RIGHT, BRINGS PAULIST CENTER GROUP “CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME” IN OCTOBER

XOCHITL  
PIGGYBACKING  
ON CARLEY ON  
WALK TO  
QUABBIN  
AT HOLY  
CROSS RURAL  
IMMERSION



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## Calendar

**December 20, 2018** — Yearly Agape Caroling at Worcester Nursing Homes and the Mustard Seed.  
Call if you want to join us.

**January 14-17, 2019** — St. Joseph's College, Long Island, N.Y., Retreat at Agape, remembering Pat Tracy, departed Agape stalwart.

**February 2, 2019 5:30pm** —The Feast of St. Brigid. Join this midwinter Celtic feast of Poetry, Prayer and Song, celebrating St. Brigid of Kildare. Bring a dish for pot luck.