

The SERVANT SONG

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Corona Virus as Teacher

by **Brayton Shanley**

It has been six long months since Covid 19 arrived and began to shut the country down, bringing the mighty to their knees and the world's economic and social life to a halt. With some states opening prematurely, we are experiencing a second wave, with over 39 states reporting increases in the virus. It appears that we are losing our struggle to resist the virus and our lack of commitment to protocol is spreading it. The casual joys of summer relaxed strict protocols and the virus began spiking, spreading fear and trembling throughout the country.

Minus the human condition, the earth is flourishing. Wild animals are re-inhabiting towns and cities that have emptied. When Italy closed wild boars roamed through vacated towns. Birders are reporting more varieties of birds, more robust bird calls. Are these animal emissaries of hope, a counter sign of the befoulment of the human takeover of Mother Earth?

We moderns have been living in a frantic chronos, a tyranny of time and accomplishment. But now a more propitious, opportune time is upon us, kairos time, an historical moment ripe for critical action. "The time has come; the reign of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Kairos often comes as a surprise, but we can grow in the knowledge of ourselves if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

If we allow the extremity of this pandemic to awaken us, the wrong path on which we have been dangerously treading will be revealed. Can we, in the face of so much suffering and death, restore our lost connection to each other and to the earth? And where might we start?

Mind Our Minds

Gandhi is famous for saying "good travels at a snail's pace." The better, wiser, and more loving we become, the slower and less anxious our thinking becomes, the more measured our movements. Covid 19 has enforced a slower more uncertain pace, less commuting to a faraway workplace, fewer hours at the office, more time in and around home. Most of us could live a much less frantic dawn- to- dusk schedule, beholden to more quiet mindful movements, void of the customary noise and speed. This new, vibrating sense of awareness sheds light on our conditioned habits, making room for new life-giving habits. Mindful quiet is the indispensable environment for self-revelation.

Are we conditioned to listening to the dominant political voices around us insisting the corona virus is the enemy and that we must wage a successful war to defeat this deadly foe? How much of our thought process is lived in fear of "the deadly other" out there? Daily reports of the growing virus leave us no choice but to engage fully in the battle. Anxiety seeps into our inner

world when we observe these covid times leveling the daily routines around us. Conversely, can we see the pain and anguish of this virus, not as a terrible punishment, but as a remarkable, yet anguished opportunity to see ourselves as we really are?

The corona virus was spread throughout the entire planet by hundreds of thousands of airplanes in three months, so conditioned were we humans to race across the globe chasing more power, more money, more happiness. Likewise, we immerse ourselves in more action, noise, movement, work, work, work, every empty space in life to be filled, always gazing at a screen, always "doing" something. The pandemic

Our slower, limited movements in this pandemic can open a more contemplative door into our present state and mind and heal us.

Covid 19 Teaches Us Racism is Deadly

The lynchpin of a successful campaign to flatten the Corona virus curve is social distancing. Like other virus protocols and methods to slow this spiking disease, are often the privilege of the white economically comfortable class of Americans. Black and brown people and the poor are limited to finding work in essential but low paying jobs in food services, transportation, and construction where they are more likely to be infected by the virus.

These economically and racially op-

ly trapped in urban poverty.

Is the fact that Covid 19 is twice as deadly for African Americans as it is for Whites, just one more injustice that enrages them at a system where whites are always superior? Black Catholic radio host Gloria Purvis challenges our faith to the core; "Racism makes a liar of God. It states not everyone is made in God's image. What a horrible lie from the pit of hell."

It is not surprising that in the first months of the spread of Covid 19, Black people took to the streets immediately following the news of the public torture and murder of George Floyd.

Safety from the virus was instantly eclipsed by their demand to the "white power structure: "Stop killing Black people." Early in the Los Angeles protest, an African American woman held a banner reading: "White people, how do you want me to die? In prison? Covid 19? Murdered in the streets?" Is it any surprise that "No justice, No peace" is the movement's rallying cry?

Black writer, Frank Wilderson, comments in his book *Afropessimism* that "Black people are integral to human society but also excluded from it. The experience of slavery across all of history is the slave is exploited and robbed of his/her personhood. But the black person is always a slave and a perpetual corpse buried beneath the world. Blackness is coterminous with slaveness."

American society's pre-existing condition is the pandemic of white racial oppression of people of color. Covid 19's propensity to kill Black people burns a searing truth into white consciousness, a non-negotiable demand: this social death,

this perpetual "slavery" of Black people, must end as of George Floyd's murder.

Covid Virus and Climate Change

The pandemic that is spreading into 230 countries is threatening the life and well-being of billions of humans. But the threat, relatively speaking, is short term. Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and floods caused by planetary warming will be with us for hundreds of years and threaten the existence of every life form on earth.

How does the corona virus speak to the crisis of climate change? Is the virus nature's way of telling us how all of us, especially the comfortable, need to live? Is this nature's way of saying "No" to the road our extractive, high tech, modern life has taken?

Nature is feeding back her conclusion on our frenzied materialism, our industrial economy, and the fossil fuels to run it. She cries an adamant, unforgiving "NO" to all pre-covid norms of economic growth. To a simpler, slower way of being human, she is saying: "Adapt to the present more stripped-down style of life or perish."

Arvol Looking Horse, Chief of the Lakota tribe warned us at the 2017 St. Francis



DAVID KLEIN

has slowed us and anything that slows us can awaken us. Slower allows more awareness. Awareness can lead us to a more contemplative outlook, experiencing ourselves as we truly are.

Our Society's Immune System Failing?

In the first two months of the virus in the US, 90% of all Covid fatalities were people with pre-existing conditions. Covid was immediately lethal to those with serious health problems: elders with compromised immune systems, those suffering from hypertension, diabetes, heart problems, atrial fibrillation and obesity. Strong immune systems resist disease very well, even into older age. That is the body's design. Do we need to be running away from the virus as much as running toward a sane and healthy life?

Covid 19 is more a symptom than a cause. The larger questions besides how do we beat this virus may be: What is our paradigm of a healthy pattern of life? Can we take this pause in a frantic American cultural routine to restore our bodies and repair the misery of ill-health that makes us so vulnerable to diseases and sickness? How do we make peace within ourselves where there has been a constant inner war?

pressed people are more likely to bring the virus home to a cramped apartment where it is harder to quarantine and distance. Working from home is also a privilege. It can mean you own a home. Cleaning food to make it safe to eat, is a privilege. It means you have money to buy, especially healthy food. The poor do not ever have these luxuries.

But, the starkest and most unbearable statistic of Covid 19 is: Black people per capita, die of this virus at twice the numbers as whites and they are contracting the virus at three times the white average. Blacks often work at the lowest paid yet considered essential jobs. They are the last hired, the first fired, having paltry little if any savings to fall back on.

In addition, black wealth has decreased since the recession of 2008. Because our black sisters and brothers can't save money, they can't buy homes, preventing them from accumulating wealth. These oppressed who are 12% of the country's population do not have access to healthy, affordable food, or health care. In poverty housing, they face the Covid 19 virus with pre-existing health conditions that result from being economically and racial-

Irony and Perspective in Corona Times

by Suzanne Belote Shanley

As I walk to St. Francis House, I turn to the garden, just as the sun rises above the lush rows of broccoli, kale, lettuce, and all things green. The sun sheds her shining golden light over the sleeping clusters of green, stretching in anticipation of the day.

The dense grape vines beside me need a careful eye to discern clusters of light green baby grapes, nudging their tiny, nearly invisible heads from behind the leaves where they nuzzle. Preoccupied with my next task, in a constant state of distraction, I suppress the urge to hold the grapes in my hands and kiss them. Interiorly I tell myself: “Go ahead Suzanne. Just kiss the grapes. Just kiss them.”

All this beauty, right at my doorstep and yet, I detect in me hesitancy to let such beauty own me. I live in the glorious woods of the Quabbin Reservoir watershed, and yet I haven’t prayed over or touched the vibrant life in the soil in a visceral and reverential way since Beatrice Menase Kwe Jackson, arrived to teach us Native American prayer in preparation for the visit of Chief Arvol Looking Horse of Standing Rock. It’s easy to miss “the splendor in the grass, the glory in the flower” (Wordsworth), if I don’t stop as Beatrice did each morning, to touch the ground, whisper greetings to the insects and scurrying creatures, hallow the water set before us in copper urns, calling by name, the animals in the forest.

Beauty as Sanctuary

Earlier, I sat with my coffee at the Brigid House kitchen window, staring at the rock garden forming an intersecting circle around myriad delicate perennials with cone and other patterned shapes. I admire the small boulders etched in gray and white forming a ring around and seeming to protect the vulnerable, delicate blossoms. In Mary Oliver fashion, I say to myself: “Thank you rocks,”. Again, what I really want to do is to touch, even hug them. Instead, I stay indoors. Beatrice would have blessed them, called on Creator Spirit who placed them there, maybe even offer tobacco or smudge them.

From an inaccessible room within my soul, my inner voice calls to me: “You are lost. Covid and Trump are disorienting you. Get a grip. Put your life in perspective.” This idea of perspective had recently caught my attention as I read the lines from a John O’Donoghue poem, “Equilibrium”: “May our sense of irony bring perspective.” Irony. I have always loved the richness of this word, suggesting a reversal of the normal, the expected. In literature and in life, a little irony can bring perspective.

Searching for Irony

I want to regain balance by living my covid life ironically, while catastrophe besets the planet and all living beings. But, how to do this? How do I access irony and perspective amid chasms which have opened in my life, in our collective life as a species? The cultural malignancies suffocating us, are shattering, debilitating: Endless zoom meetings, masking as a way of life, reading analysis of the precipice, staying on top of Trump’s latest racist lies, yield disequilibrium, and more—despair.

But then the discordant, the reversal appears, strikes a chord: My downcast sense of gloom at our worsening human condition, switches suddenly and a burst of goodness wells up inside of me. I am overwhelmed with love of grapes and stones, of flowers and trees, a sustaining song of goodness. I imagine the rock garden boulders as Protectors of the Perennials. I feel unprotected. Protect me God. Protect us God. Be my boulder, Jesus. Yellow and orange wildflowers, intoxicating dawn freshness, urge me into wistfulness, maybe even equilibrium, certainly gratitude.

At 7:30 am, I enter the chapel for Morning Prayer, sensing the perfection of just sitting. The kaleidoscopic colors,



View of Brigid House Rock Garden

earthy blues, greens and browns of the stained-glass windows say to me: “Color.” “See us. See our color.” The chapel silence before the first lifting of our collective community voices in chant, is familiar and reassuring. Brayton softly strikes the Buddha bowl eliciting an eternal chime, and I begin: “O God, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise.” I open my lips to pray and dark thoughts enter: Praise? During a pandemic, of such interminable suffering? Police brutality, right wing racist groups, violence in Portland. Praise?

I rarely lift my voice in prayer for Donald Trump, the mad potentate. Members of my extended family have died from the corona virus, and the daily death toll for people of color rises. How to pray? God, please give us courage to resist this satanic force field. Resistance during pandemic...distanced resistance...irony, reversal, response.

Jeremiah: The Weeping Prophet

Over these past months, given these realities, I whip myself up into a fever pitch politically while reading the prophetic words of Hosea, Micah and Amos. Jeremiah is particularly relevant to our times: His prophetic vision signals “the coming of terrors and horrors beyond imagining. When vision became reality, he witnessed those terrors and horrors.” (“From Creation to the Cross”).

Known as the “weeping prophet” Jeremiah’s Lamentations awaken in me the pain of our present reality. For Jeremiah, courage and hope arise in the midst of death and destruction. Yahweh reassures Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11) Jeremiah responds with resistance to the oppressor and persistence in the face of extremity, jail, persecution.

Tension is a way of life for the biblical prophets, who receive from God warnings of outrages, catastrophes, polarizations. As I move through our own prophetic times, distracted and angry, I receive a consolation, the comforting rhythm of a new day. I encounter the red radiance of the day’s harvest of tomatoes in a woven basket, the cacophony of bird song, the heart-thrilling, deep call of the full-throated bull frogs. So much goodness is revealed in “not harming,” in ahimsa, endurance in the face of colossal evil and God’s promise of release,

“hope for the future.”

Jeremiah’s journey appeals to me as he insists on God’s intervention. The sentiment of demanding, shouting in anger, lies on my own heart: stop this madness, this death-dealing, this power-hungry dictator. Yet, unlike Jeremiah, to whom God spoke, I know God as The Ineffable One, The Unreachable, Total Silence. During the universal distancing, you too, Oh God, feel remote, detached. Where are You? Will you intervene? Will you save us?

We are clamoring to be saved from Corona, a soothing word, soft o’s form in the throat and onto the lips. A “corona” is “a gaseous envelope of the sun and other stars.” In addition, “the sun’s corona is normally visible only during a total solar eclipse when it is seen as an irregularly shaped pearly glow surrounding the darkened disk of the moon.”

Certainly, given our present pandemic, there is symbolic resonance here. A taste of this celestial language, far beyond our present deadly concerns illustrates our need to name things to fit a transcendent mode, even a killer virus. Coronas are “white or colored” circles sometimes from “blue inside to red outside. ...caused by thin clouds, mist or dust.” I am reminded of the reds and blues in the perennial rock garden, cosmic connections, dust, ashes, death, corona.

I think of my sister-in-law, Tricia, dying of lung cancer during “the corona” as our granddaughter, Olivia refers to the plague. I wonder how Tricia experienced her last moments. How will I experience mine? Will there be a streaming of Divine Energy, indiscriminate, spectacular, inaccessible to us living on a material plane?

I long to remain in a consciousness of love for my home, this planet, the bitter travesty of its possible demise. Oh earth, how small and fragile you are. Who will protect you?

Jeremiah, called for Divine Retribution and judgment on those responsible for killing and death. Are we too being punished by a virus with a conspicuously cosmological name, for our neglect, our blindness? Do we reap what we sow? God speaks through the sun, the moon and stars, through the celestial as well as the death-dealing corona. A Voice shatters time and space with a reprimand: “Now look at what you have done!”

What is Required of Us?

Something is required beyond the daily fits and starts of my linear thinking. Mesmerized by the dance of death, I missed the appearance of the Comet Neowise in our night sky weeks ago, which will not occur again for 7,000 years. I wonder if I am too rooted in the planet’s technological cloud and less in the “Cloud of Unknowing,” as I struggle with the twin realities of needing to function and trying to come to grips with the violence that suffocates the planet.

At Agape, we ironically find comfort in the ordinary, such as our harvesting with two newly arrived interns who minister to us, healers with halos, Ohioans with a mission. Chloe and Ellen come as messengers, lending balance, insight, as they move through the quotidian at Agape with tender concern.

Yet, there are days when I feel like Dorothy Day as she records in her diary, *The Duty of Delight*, that I too am suffering from “nerves and fatigue” moving from task to community task, like “an empty cistern.” Reversal, upheaval creep in once again. I am reminded of the corona in my life, the crown of light hovering above everyone and everything here. The whiteness of cauliflower, the garlic cloves, basil, this sacred Nipmuc land.

During the pandemic, we learned of the cancer death of David Tall Pine White, the keeper of the Nipmuc language, with whom we dedicated a Weeping Blue Atlas Cedar tree, (cedar considered sacred by Indigenous people) at Agape four years ago, to honor the Nipmuc tribe, indigenous to this region. I gather in tree energy, a steadiness that encompasses poetry, cosmic blessings, Tall Pine’s gesture of love and healing.

Iliia Delio, the eco-feminist Franciscan sister and theologian recently suffered a concussion during these corona days. In the concussion’s aftermath, she drew a correlation between her crown of pain and the cosmos: “And the Cosmic Christ is the Christ of the corona, the cosmic crown of thorns, the perspective of the sublime.” This “concussion consciousness” as Delio defines it, means learning new ways of “minding the mind” as the Buddha realized. I am daily made aware of the work of healing, acquiring “cosmic consciousness” or, in Delio’s words, “healing the traumatized corona.”

Are You Willing to Become an Anti-Racist?

by Edgar Hayes

While walking down the streets of NYC, I witnessed with ease how other peoples’ conscious or subconscious thoughts played out before me. I cannot recall when I became of age or when I became aware of my “place” in society. I thought I was obscure, invisible, undetected, yet time and time again, street after street, city after different city, people acted as if they knew me.

The scene would play out over and over like a broken record. In the minds of the observers, I was the menacing antagonist, the savage rapist, the brute, the thug, the thief, the drug dealer, the vile not-human who would pounce upon my prey (them) with unreasoned and precise incision. As my path drew closer to those who were observing me, slight gestures would occur unbeknownst to an inexperienced, uncaring eye—a tuck of a chain into a shirt, a clutch of a purse, the hasty crossing to the other side of the street, or a sped up walk.

Imagine, if you will, this scenario happening 365 days a year for 30 or 40 years. Don’t even get me started about walking into a department store! I would constantly ask myself: Do these observers know me? Do they know Edgar the preacher, fireman, teacher, farmer, father, husband, human being, and child of God? Or do they only want to see and know the racist, stereotypical image of my and other’s darker hued skin?

Jesus spoke to His disciples about the deafness and the blindness of heart of the early Israelites and Jews in His present time. When speaking of prophesy fulfilled, He quoted the prophet Isaiah saying: “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them”. (Matthew 13:14-15 – NRSV)

With the death of George Floyd, for the first time in a long while, white Americans’



Daniel Crowell

eyes, ears, and hearts have been awakened to the vicious, brutal, evil system of racism. Some have taken to the streets; others would rather go back to sleep. I ask you reader, are your eyes opened or closed? Are you willing to see and hear the pain and suffering of millions which began when human beings were brought to this country in chains like animals?

Growing Up Poor in Harlem and Brooklyn

As a child, I grew up poor and on welfare in Harlem and Brooklyn, the eighth of eight. Contrary to the stereotypical image of African American mothers on welfare as “welfare queens,” my mother worked hard all day, every day, to feed, shelter, and clothe us. We were homeless and fatherless for a time, but she always pushed us to know and love God, each other, and to go after our education. After graduating from college, I thought I knew everything and that I could take on the world. I was taught some Asian and lots of European history. I knew white poets and authors. I knew King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

I knew White American history, but if you ask me if I knew myself, there would be a pause. I did not know myself because I did not know my history, my cultural history.

I had low self-esteem and self-worth because I did not have an identity. It had been stripped over centuries since slavery. I internalized every negative image of Black America without question, every aspect of this society that says you are less than. Can you see these negative black images in magazines, television, and the movies, in healthcare, jobs, and housing? Can you see what we have been trying to show you year after year, century after century? Can you hear our black voices cry out? If not, look closer and listen more carefully.

Freedom Schools Program in East Tennessee

My naïveté was stripped when I went to the Alex Haley farm in Tennessee from 1997-98, to learn how to teach youth in the Freedom Schools which began in the 60s during Freedom Summer, a time when people in the north went down to the south to help with voter registration, and deseg-

regation. In the original Freedom Schools, instructors taught the young people reading, writing, and arithmetic because of the Separate but Equal Supreme Court ruling, as well as Jim Crow laws, which denied Black children an opportunity for a decent education.

When I arrived at Freedom Schools, I taught students critical thinking and their cultural heritage: that our black or African heritage did not begin in bondage with slavery. We come from a rich, beautiful, creative, distinct, African cultural heritage that helped to build the world, from a land rich in natural resources and from a lineage of kings, queens, and early civilizations. Have you learned of this African American History while you were in school?

At the Alex Haley farm, I told my wife, Ann, (my girlfriend at the time), that I think we should break up. I called her from Tennessee to say “I don’t think we can be together, because how am I supposed to look young African American girls in the eye and say you are beautiful, uniquely created and special while dating a woman who is White?” This pained me deeply and I thought God wasn’t with me. Yet by the time I left, I felt God without a doubt say to me: “It’s ok. I am with you and I want this union to happen.”

God is the deciding factor, not me or world opinion. God is the end all and be all. Without the love of God in all of us and the love of God in our hearts, we cannot see, hear, or love someone else. The evil of racism can only be conquered in the way of Jesus’ love or nonviolence. I ask you reader, what is your personal relationship with God like?

There is so much I can say, but are you willing to listen? There is so much to reveal but are you willing to see? Are you willing to become an anti-racist?

Edgar Hayes was an intern at Agape in the 1990’s and serves with his wife Ann as a member of Agape’s Mission Council Advisory Board. Modeled after Agape, Freedom Farm, focuses on nonviolent education, gardening, healthy eating, and is open for visits, internships, and volunteering.

We Demand Change Now

In this interview with Brayton Shanley, Julie Bradley shares her unique experience as a bi-racial daughter of a white mother and a black father, who grew up with her four siblings in various housing developments and projects in the Boston area. Julie and her family have been a part of the Agape Community for forty years.

Julie, can you share a bit about your background?

I was born to a white mother and a black father so my growing up years were quite complicated in the sense of trying to find a way to fit in. We were raised in a predominately black neighborhood so having a white mother in a black neighbor was challenging. At one point, I thought being of mixed race was not seen so often or not the norm. But as I got older, I realized that being of mixed race was quite prevalent. In my younger years I wanted to identify with both races, half white half black. But as I got older, as I started going through experiences with race, I decided I needed to fit into one, and that was black. My world was telling me I was black. It was time to deal with that.

What was your first experience of racism?

It was when I was in 3rd or 4th grade when my mom, for the betterment of my brother and sister, sent us to a Catholic school in Brighton Mass. During recess, I would have to ask the white kids every day if it was okay to play with them. It was a 90 ten flip...90 percent no...10 percent yes. At that point I started to see how I was

different as a mixed-race child.

You have said that your first experience of racism might not be understood as actual racism. What do you mean by that?

You don’t understand a gesture of racism until you understand what’s going on. I’m mixed race. I’m white and black and that’s what I stand on now, but I didn’t understand when these racial occurrences were happening, like the blatant racism at recess in the schoolyard. It was a game changer. I had to keep it in the forefront how I was treated, oppressed, demeaned.

What was the impact of knowing that you were surrounded by a racist society and what gave you that knowledge?

Just to hear racism mentioned was too painful so I just dismissed the whole thing. While I was growing up, there was one instance when I was literally called the “n” word. I applied it to me. I am black, and I lived in a predominantly all black neighborhood. Most in my neighborhood, including my family, struggled in severe poverty without enough to eat, living in projects. This was so painful, that I put history itself in the rear-view mirror, the past. It was a coping mechanism, to throw out my past as well as all black history as I dealt with my current struggle and what I was trying to accomplish in my life.

How Were You Affected by the George Floyd Killing?

I had heard of cops killing black men and I kind of disregarded this. This was just a no-no for me. I did not want to go there.

To save myself I did not touch that. It was just too emotionally upsetting to deal with. But when the George Floyd killing happened, because of all the publicity that it received, I had no choice but to dive into it. Watching for the first time a video of a cop killing a black man, the first thing that crossed my mind was my own son. He resembles Floyd, in the color of his skin and like Floyd, he had no hair on his head. I started thinking: George Floyd or Frank Bradley? I got into my motherly role and had to make sure that Frank Bradley doesn’t become George Floyd.

How does that happen? Did you discuss it with Frank? Get more active? Seems like you’re more ready to enter this fray.

I became more at peace with my own history and was beginning to put the pain behind me. After watching the emotionally provocative video, I knew I needed to be more involved. Facebook universe is when you put something on it, you are making that commitment. First thing I put was a post to my son, Frank: “Son, I am going to do everything in my power to ensure your safety in the future, and I intend to put that safety into everything I do. Once I said that, I had to start making the necessary steps to see that through. I had to figure out how to get active in this struggle. I realized that I had to feel involved in history and find out what had happened to Black people for many, many years.

Where did you begin?

There is no way to move forward if you don’t know where you came from. I

started to delve into what happened to our people, our economic status. I have been deeply affected by cultural prejudices and black stereotypes. I even thought that most black men were criminals. So, I had to face the realization that I was programmed for many years to think the way white people portrayed black people.

You have mentioned recently being inspired by a black activist.

Grand master J is the founder of militia group NFAC or No F ‘in Around Coalition. What stood out the most for me as a mother is that when it comes to my black sons, I cannot have them die at the hands of a cop or any racial encounter. He reminds me of Malcom X and Malcom’s “by any means necessary.” I will put my life on the line because I want my black sons to see another day, to live well into the future.

What do you think “by any means necessary” means today for black people?

It means we need to demand change now. Fifty years of protests has not been effective. There is still no racial equality. Take for example, the brutal injustice of black families living in poverty versus white privileged families, living in wealth. Grand Master J is demanding accountability. He went to the site where Ahmaud Arbery was killed and to the houses of the three involved; nobody was hurt, no shots were fired. He wanted to hold these people accountable for what they did to Arbery. In Atlanta he went to the birthplace of KKK.

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COVID-19, Environmental Racism, and the Legacy of Dr. James Cone

by Jim Robinson

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, the radical evil of systemic racism and the death-dealing impact of COVID-19 have occupied the center of our collective consciousness. After the brutal and callous murder of George Floyd by Minnesota police on May 25, 2020, masked protesters have come out of lockdown to fill city streets, chanting “Black Lives Matter!” in the face of white supremacy. As we awaken to the fact that the pandemic and systemic racism are intertwined realities, we are also awakening to the fact that they are inextricable from our ecological crisis.

On April 3, 2020, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made a post on social media that linked the disproportionate increase in COVID-19 deaths among black and brown communities to environmental racism. The term “environmental racism” was coined by Dr. Benjamin Chavis in the early 1980’s in order to illuminate the racist nature of environmental policy, the disproportionate presence of environmental pollutants and toxic waste facilities in communities of color, and the marginalization of people of color as voices of authority within the environmentalist movement.

In her post, Ocasio-Cortez identifies environmental racism, as well as the related injustices of economic inequality and housing discrimination through the practice of redlining, as “underlying health conditions,” which leave black and brown people more vulnerable to COVID-19. With this in mind, Ocasio-Cortez asserts that “COVID relief should be drafted with a lens of reparations.”

Over the summer, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released age-adjusted statistics showing that as of June 12, 2020, black Americans face a COVID-19 hospitalization rate that is 5 times higher than it is for white Americans. The CDC has identified a number of root causes of this hospitalization rate, including “institutional racism in the form of racial housing segregation.” Through the influence of the racist practice of housing segregation, people of color disproportionately live in densely populated contexts in which they are exposed to a wide array of environmental hazards. This exposure is linked to the development of the very underlying medical conditions which put people at an increased risk for a severe and potentially fatal response to COVID-19. These are the fruits of environmental racism.

As we navigate the interweaving impacts of COVID-19, systemic racism, and environmental degradation, we can find wise guidance in the work of Dr. James Cone, and particularly his essay “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” which was published two decades ago in the Spring/Summer 2000 edition of *CrossCurrents*. Cone, a pioneer in the field of Black Theology, served as a professor at Union Theological Seminary from 1970 until his death in

2017. In “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” he emphasizes the need to connect resistance to environmental degradation with resistance to racism.

Cone opens his essay with the assertion that “the logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and Apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature.” In this respect, if we are interested in resisting and transforming either racism or environmental degradation, we must attend to the shared logic that underlies both of these intertwining evils. Cone identifies this as “a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy.” This logic attempts to deny the inherent value of black and brown bodies, by reducing them to instruments in the service of the system of white supremacy. This logic similarly impacts the “more-than-human world” (to use a phrase coined by David Abram, which uniquely evokes the abundance, diversity, and wonder of the natural world, including the vast array of beings with whom the human species shares this planet). This logic must be subverted.

It is important to note that Cone does not critique an “anthropocentric” worldview or ethical framework in this essay. Such critiques, which dominate environmental discourse, operate on the assumption that the ecological crisis is caused by the elevation of the human species and its interests above the more-than-human world. However, as Rosemary Radford

Ruether has it in “Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and the Bible,” “all humans do not dominate nature equally, view themselves as over nature or benefit from such domination.” Like Ruether, Cone challenges his readers to recognize that the ecological crisis is simultaneously a social crisis. The ecological crisis is entangled in white supremacy, and it is driven by a mechanistic and instrumental logic that elevates the interests of particular human beings (those with access to power in the system of white supremacy) over the interests of othered beings, human and more-than-human.

In resisting this death-dealing logic and the system of white supremacy that it buttresses, Cone intends to “promote genuine solidarity” between environmentalists and those working for racial justice. In fact, he strongly asserts that those who attempt to resist racism without linking it to ecological abuse are “anti-ecological,” whether they are aware of it or not, and that those who attempt to resist ecological abuse without linking it to racism are “racists,” whether they are aware of it or not. Cone challenges his readers to do our anti-racist work with the environment in mind, and to do our environmental work with racial justice in mind.

In order to display how we might weave together our commitments to environmental flourishing and racial justice, Cone points to the work and witness of a number of women of color. He highlights womanist theologians, namely Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, and Karen Baker-Fletcher, who have connected resistance to racism with resistance to ecological abuse in their scholarship. He also

highlights the embodied efforts of black churchwomen in Warren County, North Carolina, who lay down on a road to block trucks loaded with PCB-contaminated soil from dumping that soil in a landfill in their community. Cone notes that in the span of two weeks in 1982, hundreds of protestors were arrested, and that this incident has inspired the environmental justice movement.

In “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” James Cone calls his readers to recognize that ecocide and systemic racism are entangled atrocities. He calls us to convert away from the instrumental and mechanistic logic which has led to the desecration of black and brown bodies and more-than-human beings, and to resist and transform the death-dealing system of white supremacy from which the Eco crisis is inextricable. May Cone guide us as we read the signs of the times and respond to the exigencies of the present. As we address the COVID-19 pandemic, may we do so with an attentiveness to its entanglement in the intertwining evils of white supremacy and environmental degradation. May we recognize, as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez reminds us, that environmental racism is an “underlying health condition,” and that “COVID relief should be drafted with a lens of reparations.”

Jim Robinson is a member of the Agape Community Mission Council. Jim defended his dissertation, which included an analysis of Agape Community, and received his PhD in Theology from Fordham University in May, 2020.



D Roberts Kirk

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Then he went to the site where Rashard Brook was killed and met Ahmaud’s sister. So, to me, by “any means necessary” is less about violence and more about: “We’re here and we want answers and we want to see results.”

So, does it, it really come down to how you are going to struggle, what tactics you use and your attitude toward the oppressor?

I have taken nonviolent approaches as well, joining movements fighting poverty. I have supported nonviolent organizations financially. There is a large group of inter-

faith religions and I have joined some of them.

The recent Black Lives Matter marches have been essentially peaceful, with some burning of police cars and looting, but a very small minority were involved. What are the value of these protests for you?

Yes, the protestors are making strides in their nonviolent approach. And, there are so many of them in the streets... how can their voices not be heard? And there is so much diversity and so much potential positive change in this racial diversity. It

was exciting seeing women, mothers risking their lives to take a stand. It inspired me to imagine what I am ready to do!

What do you think about reparations for black people?

I think that reparations are in order after many years of economic and physical destruction of the black family. Once we can be economically sound, we can move forward because as long as we are struggling economically it is going to be very tough. Economics is huge with all of us and we all want what we see dangled out there. It’s about basic justice. So why do

my people loot? Why should people feel so impoverished that they have to loot? One thing we know from the Equal Justice Initiative (9/14/17) from a fact sheet on is that racial disparity in youth incarceration has increased since 2001 as Black youth are four times as likely as whites to be incarcerated.

Are you hopeful Julie?

Yes, I am. There are many more people caring about the injustice of racism. There is power in these numbers. The more people that are involved the more effective and sooner the change will happen.

Harmony with the Cycles of Nature

by Merwyn DeMello

My wife, Kirstin and I, returned to the US in March, after a six-year span of service with Mennonite Central Committee in Afghanistan and Bangladesh. We then embarked upon a pilgrimage, seekers of intentional community in which to live and love with over the next years.

Agape Community was the first stop on this journey, one that is traveled in tumultuous times, when the air and the mind are dominated and suffocated by the Covid-19 virus, and when misguided political leadership drives a wedge of divisiveness. Agape became our oasis allowing for healing and nourishment of body, soul, and spirit.

Brayton Shanley's book, *The Many Sides of Peace* and the recent co-authored memoir, *Loving Life on the Margins*, by Brayton and Suzanne, as well as issues of the Agape Community journal, *Servant Song*, became our compass point for insight into the history and life of the community.

After several years of humanitarian service in countries impacted by US policy and action stemming from the immorality of its military-industrial complex, I was eager to learn from and experience how a community in the USA offers a radical model of action and resistance charted by a deliberate choice for lived non-violence, subsistence off the land, and contemplative prayer.

I quickly immersed myself into the rhythm at Agape. I realized that the emphasis of living in harmony with nature meant that all acts of labor whether outdoors or indoors are an extension of the sacred. Early morning prayer with *Taizé* chant sets the tone. We performed as *ora*



Merwyn and Kirstin DeMello in the garden

et labora, the daily rigors of outdoor work -- weeding, scything, building woodpiles, picking raspberries - and the indoor work -- shared tasks of processing greens, cooking, and cleaning. This did not preclude healthy debate, exchange of opinions on a variety of topics, sharing life-experiences and exotic recipes.

On the few occasions Kirstin and I ventured out of our oasis, it was to bask in the sunshine by the waters of the Quabbin Reservoir, connect with friends of Agape, and to participate in the Black Lives Matter vigil in the nearby town of Ware. In interpersonal interactions during the vig-

il, I could feel a peaceful energy from our group, derived from contemplative practice at Agape. Also, in this spirit, the vigil's non-violent protest became for me, an authentic manifestation of *Ahimsa*, or non-injury in *Sanskrit*.

A night spent in the Hermitage, led me down the path of reflection and reminiscence. I recalled years spent in Bangladesh where I was wondrously struck by how peoples' lives are intrinsically linked to each other and to nature. The ushering in of each season, the multiple auspicious religious festivals, and even auspicious days in the socio-political calendar are celebrat-

ed by people across the faith spectrum with the sharing of food, song, and dance.

The Bengali poet-philosopher Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore describes the mystical connection when life or physical existence is in harmony with the cycles of nature.

Necessity seems to be the only thing in nature for which everything moves and works; the bud becomes the flower, the flower becomes the fruit, the fruit becomes the seed, the seed becomes a new plant and so it goes; the chain of activity goes on without interruption. When, through the mental and physical barriers that we erect, we bluntly separate ourselves from the inexhaustible life of nature, when we become just a person, and no longer 'person in the universe', then we create fearful problems -- and when the fount of their solution has run dry, we essay all sorts of artificial processes, each of which brings with it a rich harvest of interminable difficulties.

So, for that magical span of two weeks at Agape Community, I could live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. As the sun set on each day, I felt a deep sense of peace, that the Holy, *God*, resides everywhere and in all things.

How important it is then, to constantly remind myself that no matter where I am, I endeavor to live in harmony with the cycles of nature. It is by recognizing the abundance and wellness to be found in the relationship with nature that one can break out of the violence of the destructive cycles of accumulation and production.

A rich blessing for all of us at Agape to share Merwyn and Kirstin's lives from Afghanistan to Bangladesh and India as we built community together. Thank you both.

Racial Justice for the Indigenous People: *Change the State Flag of Massachusetts*

by David Detmold

Sometime in the middle of 2016, as Native activists and their allies struggled through an emotionally charged series of public hearings to get across to our beleaguered school committee the gross iniquity of our high school -- named after Captain William Turner, the leader of an infamous dawn massacre of Native refugees camped on the Great Falls on the Connecticut River in May of 1676 -- calling their sports teams the Indians, an indignant white alumnus stood up and demanded: "If we have to change our mascot, why doesn't the state of Massachusetts have to change theirs?"

He was pointing toward the state flag, which stands, furred in shame, on the corner of the Turner's high school stage, as it stands on the side of every school auditorium stage, every town hall meeting room, every courtroom dais in the Commonwealth. A moderator unfurled the flag so we could all get a good look at it: the white hand holding a Colonial Broadsword poised to strike the head off a composite figure of a Native man, with the Latin phrase scrolled beneath: "Peace Under the Sword..."

I thought, the man has a good point. Ever since, I have been doing what I can to change this hideous state symbol of white supremacy, so that it may no longer be taught to our grade school children, passing along old prejudice in the noxious, centuries long tide of racism in which our ancestors first sailed to greet their Native hosts on the shores of this beautiful continent.

On the eve of the decisive 6-3 vote to

retire the Indian mascot at Turner's High, former Gill-Montague superintendent Michael Sullivan remarked, "Our review process has... revealed that Native American mascots have helped legitimize and perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes and that these symbols exist within a context of historical oppression against Indigenous people, including an act of tragic violence that occurred right in this community, only to be followed by centuries of ongoing assault, subjugation, and dispossession.... That we did not understand these things in the past need not be anyone's fault, but if we do not act upon what we understand now it will be a lost opportunity to be our best selves."

Now, as the statues of conquistadors come down in New Mexico, as the hide-bound Washington NFL football team agrees to change its name, as statues to Confederate generals who fought to keep African American in chains are removed from the public square, as the state of Mississippi votes at long last to remove the Confederate Stars and Bars from its flag, Massachusetts is left alone among the 50 states still upholding a flag of overt white supremacy.

Although our school district, with the help of Native activists, succeeded in removing the offensive "Indian" logo from its high school banners, nearly 40 other public schools in Massachusetts continue to cling to racist, often cartoonish, Native sports mascots. Last year, the state of Maine, once a colony of Massachusetts, voted to approve a statewide ban on the use of Native sports mascots in all its public schools. If Maine can ban racist mascots

in public schools -- if Mississippi can take down its flag of white supremacy -- why cannot Massachusetts do the same?

On Tuesday, July 28th, after 35 continuous years of stalling the bill to change the state flag and seal in legislative committees, the State Senate voted unanimously to invite Native leaders of the area now known as Massachusetts to sit with state legislators and come up with a new state flag and seal. That is a long-delayed step forward toward racial justice for the Indigenous people of this land. But the House must also act, and the governor must sign the bill, for the measure to become law. Meanwhile the bill to ban the use of Native sports mascots has yet to move forward to a final vote in either chamber.

As one of the leading legislative sponsors of the bills to change the Massachusetts flag and seal and to ban the use of Native sports mascots in Massachusetts -- Sen. Jo Comerford of Northampton -- said at a recent rally on the State House steps, "There is a tidal wave of justice rolling across this land -- and it is about to crash into Massachusetts."

In order to make that happen, each of you who read these words must go to the MaIndigenousAgenda.org website, and take a few minutes to access the automated letter you will find there, to let key legislators and the governor know you support these bills. This is a necessary first step toward establishing a new relationship of respect and understanding with Indigenous people in Massachusetts. We all must work to make that happen.

The past harms -- the land theft, the spread of viral plagues, the despoliation of

the natural world that supports all life, the enslavement of Native people, the taking of their children for enforced assimilation in white boarding schools, the continued use of racist images of Native people on our state flag and high school sports jerseys, rendering the living cultures of Native Nations in this land invisible to their cultural appropriators -- are manifold and cannot be undone with the stroke of a state governor's pen.

But now, on the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim landing, passing these long-stalled measures number (S.2848) has been transferred to the House Ways and Means Committee, where passage is "the final step" before it gets to the floor for a full vote of the House and into law in Massachusetts is a necessary start. Native leaders have long called for their enactment. Following their leadership on racial justice legislation is a prelude to accepting their leadership on so many other pressing issues that affect all communities in these perilous days of renewed plague, species loss, racial oppression and climate change.

Never before have we been so far from the vital truths of Nature and the original instructions of a commonly perceived Creator, which the Indigenous People of the world have kept -- and may still be willing to share -- with any society willing to listen. Even ours.

David Detmold is a tireless advocate for Native People and website coordinator for ChangetheMassFlag.org. Please sign petitions and alert state reps in your area to the urgency of this measure.

AGAPE'S MISSION COUNCIL CHANGES: TRANSITIONS

Farewell to Skip Schiel and El Maclellan RSCJ

Agape's Mission Council is our lifeblood and advisory community which meets since the 1990's at least four times a year to plan Francis Day and to consult on various aspects of Agape community life.

The commitments of members are usually life-long, and so we were sad to see the retirement and departure from Mission Council by two of our treasured and dearly loved members, Skip Schiel and Sr. Eleanor Maclellan RSCJ, both of who have been companions and more for over thirty years. The best way to honor them is in their own words, as they describe their years at Agape. We celebrated El's 90th birthday and Skip's 80th with deep gratitude



for their many years of life and so many of them spent with Agape. It is important to note that Skip brought the community to the Quabbin Reservoir watershed, recommending Hardwick and the area as a site for the still unformed community. 33 years later, we are flourishing in the Hardwick woods. Thank you Skip and El:

El: I was first introduced to Agape as a chaplain at Boston College. As a Religious of the Sacred Heart. I see the spreading of the love of community expressed tangibly at Agape. I have travelled to Agape for Mission Council Meetings for over 30 years, and I am especially inspired by Agape's commitment to the environment. With their

organic garden, solar heated home, grease car and compost toilet, Agape practices what I preach.

Skip: I met Brayton and Suzanne in 1980 at Friends Meeting in Cambridge as they brought a noisy cluster of young black children to the "silent" meeting. Many years later, I befriended one of those children as he navigated his way through the tortuous channels of Maximum Security at Walpole prison.

Agape has blessed me with hands-on benedictions when I embark on yet another journey of photographic discovery, mostly through yearly trips to Gaza and the West Bank. I love the members of Mission Council as brothers and sisters, as well as the Her-



mitage, my place of refuge.
Welcome to Jeanelle Wheeler, new member, Agape Mission Council

Jeanelle Wheeler is the daughter of Teresa Wheeler, one of the original and founding members of Agape's Mission Council. We call Jeanelle an "in-utero" Agape member as she has been coming to Agape since before her birth, and now, after achieving both a bachelor and master's degree from Brown University, as well

as a Fulbright Scholarship which took her to Europe, we are blessed to welcome her gifts of music, writing, wisdom and an abiding devotion to nonviolence, as she joins her Mom on Agape's Mission Council.

Intrepid: Our Call

by Sr. Rita Raboin SND

In July, I was blessed with a seven-day retreat at Agape. I am a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, having served 36 years in Northern Brazil with a return to the United States two years ago.

I chose to stay in Agape's small Hermitage on a hill about 400 feet from the main community dwelling. The Hermitage is rustic, with a two-burner camping stove and two battery charged lanterns, a comfortable chair and bed and eight windows, framing the strong trees surrounding this small but inviting space. The woods were all embracing, and I loved it.

In the center of the room, firmly rooted on rocks on the wooden floor is a small, cast iron stove. What called my attention to the stove after a short time was one word, engraved on its side: Intrepid, the call of our foundress, Saint Julie Billiart. Saint Julie said that we must be intrepid women in living out our charisma to proclaim the goodness of God to the poor in the most abandoned places. Our foundress herself was intrepid, unstoppable, even as a paralytic. How could this word find me here? The Holy Spirit never rests!

The demand of this call is not limited to our worldwide congregation, though we pray that we are faithful to this challenge. The global crisis in

which we find ourselves today calls us unrelentingly to respond with continual, collective planning, not giving up even with the unexpected that occurs every day.

Accompanying this call is a personal certitude that "Silence is Someone," apt for retreat, but not limited to this time. In any silence, our thoughts and prayers nourish the call: how to respond to these challenges and struggles that confront us: Covid 19, the political divide in the country, racial inequality, the immigrant crisis, police brutality, unemployment, family conflicts. How are we to become intrepid, face-to-face with these challenges?

We are encouraged by Christ who tells us that if we cannot follow His call, then we cannot continue the journey with Him. (Mt. 16:24) During these retreat days, John Lewis left us with the challenge that reiterates this call to be intrepid in our quest for justice. He tells us that together we can save the soul of this country. Together.

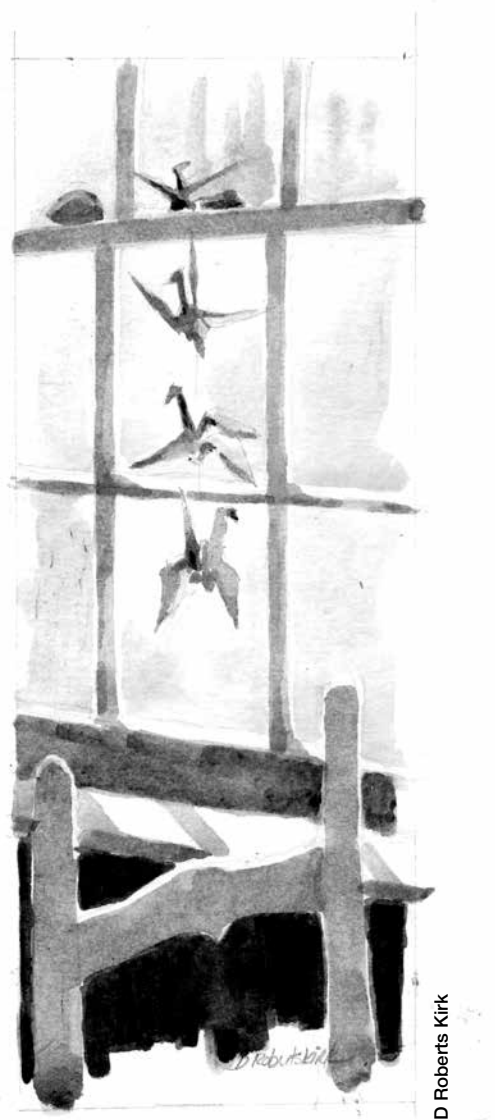
In our morning prayers at Agape, we reflected on collectivity, what it means to be intrepid; dauntless, fearless. In Francis House, I saw collectivity in dozens of photos of people who are dedicated to the quest for justice, many of whom helped construct the very house where we pray and share meals. Many had practiced civil disobedience, in the middle of "Good

Trouble" that John Lewis recommended.

We are called to continue, even with setbacks, if we want to save the soul of this country, while struggling for jobs, housing, racial equality, gender issues, voter rights, nonviolence against militarism. We cannot accomplish any of these things alone. I project myself more as a social activist than a contemplative retreatant in a hermitage. Then again, I think at times that there is not too much of a distance between the two. It is difficult to leave the world of pain out there. Agape members take the gospel seriously and managed to share the treasure of its call and integrated contemplation and action in your book, *Loving Life on the Margins*.

My time in the Hermitage was fertile ground to reflect on John Lewis' message to redeem the best of what this country can offer to the most forgotten of its population. Through my retreat at Agape, I am strengthened in the certitude that collectivity and intrepidness are indispensable on this journey together.

Sr. Rita has been a friend for over 30 years and represents the bond that we at Agape has shared for our 40-year history with women religious. Thank you, Sr. Rita, for your years as a missionary sister, serving the poor in Brazil.



Peace cranes on hermitage window.

D Roberts Kirk

400 Years after 1620: Prayers for Seven Generations

by Peter Blood

In this 400th anniversary of the beginning of European settlement in the Northeastern U.S., two interfaith associations in Western Massachusetts are taking this opportunity to reflect and act towards justice for our Native sisters and brothers in our region. This concern was brought to us by Sr. Clare Carter of the New England Peace Pagoda and the following statement:

2020 is the 400th anniversary of the Plymouth Landing by the Pilgrims.... For Native Peoples, this marker in time signals a great cataclysm visited upon the Native peoples of the Northeast

The drive to fully 'take over' these beautiful lands grew as more settlers came to these shores, and in 50 brief years, Native People were dispossessed of their ancestral lands. Their spiritually based culture and

sacred tribal life came under full assault, making them outcasts in a European-dominated power structure. The loss and pervasive grief, as well as determined resistance of Native people continued. Even with this generational loss and tragedy, Native People are still living and still holding on to the spiritual threads stretching over 400 years.

2020 gives a needed opportunity to learn the truth of this history which Native People say it is still held in the earth, the waters, the air of the region and in the deep spirit of the people. The monks at the Peace Pagoda have come to understand that this time of reflection is a Divine gift for all of us. By learning the profound harm and destruction inherent in the way of colonization and conquest we can see more clearly how deeply we are called to change. What seeds do we need to plant to make a different, life-giving future for all human beings

and all the sacred web of life.

Pathways Forward:

Towards Truth: Listening to Indigenous voices

Towards Kinship: Owning and repudiating racist beliefs and doctrines

Towards Justice: Working together for respect, rights, and land for Native Peoples of the Northeast

You are invited to participate in a commemorative event at:

Unity Park in Turners Falls on Sunday, October 18th at 2pm (rain date of Oct. 25th).

If the pandemic prevents us from gathering safely, we will hold a virtual event. The program includes talks by Native leaders, prayers, music, and a decolonization ritual.

Fund raising for two reparational proj-

ects that support the needs and aspirations of Native People in our area.

Preparing a study guide and online films to help congregations explore ways they can act in solidarity with our Native neighbors.

The Massachusetts Senate voted unanimously to start the process of changing the genocidal imagery on our state flag and seal.

We will plan ways to get both houses of the legislature to act on this next year.

Please join us in this! If you are not in Western Massachusetts, plan activities in your own communities. Watch for more details in local papers and our websites:

Interfaith Opportunities Network <https://interfaithamherst.org/>

Interfaith Council of Franklin County <https://www.facebook.com/allarewelcomethistable/>

Eradicating Racism: Transforming Human Hearts

by Fr. Warren Savage

The racial tension and unrest in Minneapolis and other major cities across the country and the COVID-19 pandemic have only exposed the real pandemic that has infected this nation for four centuries, the pandemic of racism and hatred.

At the moment, my energies are devoted to comforting families that have lost loved ones from the virus, presiding over funeral services and burials, and offering spiritual direction to people who are overwhelmed with fear, anxiety, depression, and uncertainty.

The real work of eradicating racism is not more riots and protests, but the deep

spiritual work of transforming human hearts to be what they were created to be, energy fields of love and compassion. We need to promote an inner spiritual revolution of the heart.

I believe the Holy Spirit is calling the whole world to be still, to be contemplative, to be more mindful of the interconnectedness of all people with creation.

In this time of such human upheaval on so many levels, we need to step back and breathe for the whole world, breathe in memory of George Floyd who was killed by a cop’s kneeling on his neck preventing him from breathing as he called out for his Mama! We need to breathe in memory of all the people whose lives are being choked

to death by injustices of every sort.

I believe we need a day for the nation and the whole world to step back from everything and breathe for everyone who cannot breathe because of forces choking them to death, cutting them off from the source of life.

Fr. Warren Savage served as the convenor of Agape’s 2018 Francis Day: Voices for Racial Justice. He is a member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, founder of the Albert and Amelia Ferst Interfaith Center at Westfield State University, international speaker, lecturer and preacher, and close friend of Agape for 30 years.

There are so many people who call themselves Christians and yet are not faithful to this core teaching of Jesus. John Lewis was an authentic disciple of Jesus’ unconditional love, as were Martin Luther King, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. That is why John Lewis was called the “Conscience of Congress” by both the Republicans and the Democrats, his famous quote guiding us to a life of resistance: “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Father John Sullivan M. S. La-salette Shrine, Enfield, NH who celebrated 50 years of priesthood this July.

Death Sentence Of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev Reversed On July 31, 2020

NOTE: Agape’s witness Against the Death Penalty for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev can be found in the chapter, “Judy and Dzhokhar” of the Agape co-founders’, Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley’s, memoir: *Loving Life on the Margins: The Story of the Agape Community*.

Dzhokhar Anzorovich Tsarnaev was convicted of terrorism in planting pressure cooker bombs at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, along with his brother Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The bombings killed three people and injured approximately 280.

The First Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston reversed Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s death sentence rendered on June 24, 2015 in the Boston Marathon Bombing case. Excerpts below are from an interview with **Daniel Medwed**, Northeastern University law professor:

Daniel Medwed: Appellate courts scrutinize death penalty trials carefully.

It found that Judge O’Toole should have engaged in a more thorough and robust questioning process of prospective jurors and allowed defense lawyers to dig more deeply into what jurors specifically might have heard, read or watched with respect to media coverage of the case. ... where there’s a lot of pretrial publicity, trial judges have to do much more than is the typical case to make sure that the jury isn’t biased. Here he (Judge George A. O’Toole) simply didn’t do quite enough.

The second issue that the First Circuit cited was that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was deprived of the chance to fully develop the argument that his late brother, Tamerlan, was the driving force in the bombing and that Dzhokhar was more of a sidekick. ... called mitigation evidence, an attempt by the defense to convince the jury to spare his life. The judge didn’t allow Dzhokhar to introduce evidence that Tamerlan had perpetrated a triple homicide in Waltham, an unrelated crime to develop that argu-

ment.

It’s not a question of whether Tsarnaev will be found guilty or innocent — that question has been resolved — it’s just a question of whether he will get life or death. ... He’s going to spend the rest of his life in a horrible supermax facility in Florence, Colorado. The only real question is whether he’ll face a new death penalty trial on six counts.

President Trump and Attorney General Barr, in collaboration with our local U.S. attorney’s office, may seek a new death penalty trial. The Justice Department, led by US Attorney General William Barr, must choose among three options: Appeal the ruling in the hopes that a higher court will restore the sentence; return to court in an effort to convince a jury to sentence Tsarnaev to death again; or abandon the pursuit of capital punishment — secure in the knowledge that Tsarnaev will remain in prison for the rest of his life regardless of the latest ruling.

The Verdict: “Dzhokhar’s death sentence was devastating—guilty on all thirty counts. Given Dzhokhar’s age at the time of the bombing (19) and other mitigating family circumstances presented at the trial, we had held out some hope for a sentence of life in prison. But the combined suffering of hundreds of victims obviously took its toll on the jury, death-qualified by virtue of being eligible for selection only if they identified themselves as able to vote in favor of the death penalty given the circumstances of the conviction. If a potential juror, acting in conscience, expressed moral grounds of opposition to execution, he or she would be disqualified from the beginning from serving on the jury.”

by Suzanne Shanley

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Day at Agape, “humans are the only species that are destroying the foundations of life on earth.” In China it wasn’t telecommuting or grounded airplanes that caused the immediate 25% drop in carbon emissions; it was the cessation of the industrial economy, machines and manufacturing. The pandemic is showing the human addiction to macro-industrial, oil and gas glutted getting and spending. The prophecy of Covid 19 is: learn to thrive closer to home- walk, bike, live on less, enjoy more.

In China just two months of reduced pollution saved the lives of 4,000 children under the age of 5 and 73,000 adults over the ages of 70. (*Science Alert*, Jacinta Bowler, March 17, 2020).

How many more lives would we save in the US if we lived the life that this pandemic is demanding?We must evolve economic cultures that support all human life living on 50 million barrels of oil a day instead of customary 100 million barrels. The extreme weather of climate change will not give us a choice. Masking and social distancing will not save the planet; it will only save humans. But once saved, will we be ready to do simpler things with smaller amounts of money in our pockets? This kairos time calls out an urgent demand--reinvent yourselves.

What Work Is Good Work

What are the inconveniences of Covid showing us about what work is essential? Can we take a page from the spiritual master, Buddha, and his teaching on “right livelihood?” Does our burning oil sitting for hours in traffic jams foster a peaceful

life only to arrive at a job we have no love for, willing to be someone else’s tool in a culture of takers? Al Kaline, legendary Baseball Hall of Famer said after he retired from the game: “Did spending my life hitting baseballs do any good? Did it really improve anyone? Could I have instead gone into medicine and helped people?”

In this moment do we have the courage to ask the same question? Do I just continue the lethal stress of working for more money? Do I add my labor to a growth-obsessed economic system that cooks the earth and cooks our children’s futures? The science tells us that a 32-hour work week would significantly lower carbon emissions and vastly de-stress our frantic pace. Let’s hope that this forced “sheltering in place” awakens us to the kind of livelihood that is truly a right livelihood.

What about our most sacred industrial society machine, the beloved automobile? America’s cities waste enormous square miles on cars, for driving and parking. The sparse Covid-limited cities sound quieter, look more at peace, feel more humane to humans while making equal room for the more than human plants and animals. Thanks to the efforts of Mayor Anne Hidalgo, more of Paris is built for pedestrians, a major city miracle with 40% less traffic.

We cannot afford to go back to pre-Covid automobile use. We must reinvent transportation. But how? We are kinder to the earth when we humans are doing what we are designed to do-- walk, the most natural, rhythmic way to a strong and healthy body. Harvard human evolutionary biologist, Dr. Daniel Lieberman, reminds us:

“Our bodies are still those of endurance athletes, evolved to walk many miles a day, and often run, as well as dig, climb and carry.” Just walking on our two feet, along God’s green earth, is what we were made for, not sitting, and pushing buttons and pressing down on gas and brake pedals, cursing our lives.

What are people of faith to do

If we underestimate the virus, it will find us. If we survive the virus, rebuild, and reinvent our ways of being, we will live more as God intended us to. Kairos is revealing a true experience of “oneness” in these crisis times. All humanity, the entire world population, is united in one effort; to survive this virus.

The New Testament gospel of Matthew offers us an image: “New wine into new wine skins” which narrates the clash of old forms with new faith (Mt 9:17). “New” speaks to the prophetic urgency of now. When you put new wine in old wineskins, gases from the new wine will burst open old skins. Similarly, a new more evolved and living faith is incompatible with tired out-of-date religious beliefs and practices.

The crisis of Covid 19 and Climate Change is crying out to us— “spending yourselves relying on speed, and the ferocity of competitive win/lose ways of living and working is too old. You need to be done with them.”

The Navajo nation in Colorado, gave up farming five years ago when 3 million gallons of metal contaminated waste was dumped in the south west river system in Colorado. Adding to their woes, the Navajos were suffering the highest Corona Virus

rate in the country. Their reservation, located in one of the poorest counties in the nation was federally deemed a food desert, requiring the natives to travel 40 minutes to the nearest food store.

Navajo farmer, Tyrone Thompson responded by starting a food-growing revolution within the reservation. “We are going back to using the tools that were given to us by our elders and ancestors,” he said. “Our planting stick, our steering stick. These are the tools against hunger, poverty and sickness.” Many Navajos are spending these uncertain pandemic days at home, reclaiming their traditional native farming. Recently, the virus has seen a steady decline across the reservation. Sometimes “new” is so old it looks new! (Peter Maurin).

Pope Francis insists that we must fully acknowledge our broken humanity and wounded earth and treat this spiritual and physical reality as a field hospital, that is, tend to each other’s healing first. Grateful that we can rely on the life sustaining abundance of our mother the earth, she will “serve our need not our greed” (Gandhi).

“The meek shall inherit the earth,” preaches Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount. The meek, meaning the “God-molded” do not need to conquer, subdue, or control the earth. The earth is given to the meek as gift. All Christians, indeed, all people of faith, are called to pray for this new faith and the courage to live convincingly a more contemplative life. Reliance on the God of all life will surely change us in time and pull us back from the self-inflicted brink of destruction.

IN MEMORIAM

Patricia Shanley, Brayton’s sister, died on April 22, 2020 of cancer. Since the inception of Agape in 1982, Trish was a generous supporter of the community and a friend to many Agape folks. A stalwart advocate for Christian Nonviolence and the social justice values of Agape and the reform movement within the Catholic Church, Call to Action, she was also active in the cause to abolish the Death Penalty. She joined with Agape in the successful five-year campaign to help Billy Neal Moore gain commutation from Georgia’s Death Row in 1990, as well being a regular participant in the Little Compton, RI peace vigil. A loyal and loving sister, faithful friend and family member, Trish will be deeply missed. Rest in Peace, Trish.

Katie Flaherty: Katie was an avid supporter of her brother, Tony Flaherty, the former Marine, whose energy and tireless devotion to peace, thrust him into the role, with Katie’s assistance, of the convenor of the annual St. Patrick’s Day, alternative Peace March, by Veterans for Peace, of which they were both members. VFP members were not allowed to march in the official parade because of their commitment to peace. Katie last visited Agape when we planted a tree at Agape in Tony’s honor and in honor of VFP after his death several years ago. Katie and Tony are guiding us still in our march for peace and nonviolence.

Jane Petrella: The mother of Mission Council member, Teresa Wheeler, and grandmother of new Mission Council member, Jeanelle Wheeler, Jane was the Petrella matriarch who paved the way for the Christ-centered commitment to neighborhood restoration in Worcester, initiating solar energy projects and countless other devotions to the cause of peace. Jane graced Agape with a visit shortly before her death, and her radiant face shone in all of its usual splendor.



Volunteer Barry Winkelman, Brayton’s childhood friend, gathers firewood



Agape legacy book tour in March, with Pax Christi National and Johnny Zokovitch, director, fourth from let.

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News Note

Julie Bradley, part of the Agape family for forty years, has assumed the role of office manager at Agape, complete with guiding our office into the cloud, and assuming many of the myriad other functions of the pulse of the Agape community, communicating with our beloved community. Betsy Azarowski faithfully served as office manager for two years and laid a foundation for Julie and this transition.



July Agape Workday crew, Julie Bradley fourth from left with her family.



Ellen Guerra, left, Chloe Haydel Brown Woofer, right volunteers from Ohio spent August tending the garden.

Calendar

AGAPE’S ANNUAL FRANCIS DAY PENDING:
OCTOBER 3, 2020

Due to Covid, what would have been Agape’s 31ST consecutive year of Francis Days is on hold as an in-person gathering. pending a decision to hold a virtual event. Please consult the website, facebook or call Agape for updates. 413-967-9369

VIRTUAL PRESENTATIONS ON AGAPE’S NEW BOOK:
LOVING LIFE ON THE MARGINS:
THE STORY OF THE AGAPE COMMUNITY

SPECIAL NOTICE: Contact Agape for a virtual presentation on Agape memoir of 40 years, Loving Life on the Margins: The Story of the Agape Community by Brayton Shanley and Suzanne Belote Shanley

The book can be discussed thematically with chapters related to 40 years of nonviolent practice through sustainability, contemplation, action, gardening and witness against systemic violence and racism. Several book chapters focus on how Agape has dealt with issues of race and our community efforts to address anti-racist movements. A chapter on Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, called “Judy and Dzhokhar” offers an in-depth view of the recent sentencing reversal.

“Loving Life on the Margins” may be ordered on line through the publisher at the Agape website, or through Agape 2062 Greenwich Rd. Ware, MA 01082 by sending a check for \$28 which includes postage.