

BOOK REVIEWS

LOVING LIFE ON THE MARGINS: The Story of the Agape Community by Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley. Haley's Press, Athol, Massachusetts, 2019. Reviewed by Michael Boover.

Readers of *The Catholic Worker* will find in this latest book by long-time fellow travelers of the movement much that is kindred, sympathetic and hopeful. Authors Suzanne and Brayton gift readers with sacred vision birthed in the bittersweet growing pains of coming of age in loving yet troubled families of origin. Familiarity with personal crises in their youth spilled over into their young adult years when they and many of their generation entered another crucible... that of faith-filled resistance to the Vietnam War. Suzanne and Brayton were, early on, seekers after a blessed peace that had circumstantially eluded them. But the couple grew wise, savvy, and determined in faith and hope to experience and secure the gift of peace on both personal and social fronts. Their consciences, however, remained restless as they went on to oppose nuclearism and the Orwellian waging of perpetual war.

Their new book is about their ongoing search for blessed rest in God and the peacemaking work that attends it. It is also about how wonderfully, even miraculously, their holy labors have been rewarded. Their efforts to cultivate peace in their own hearts and invite the yearning hearts of fellow seekers into a blessed vision, that of a culture of peace, have drawn the attention and support of spiritual kin from across the country and indeed from the far corners of the world. Their writing is also an invitation to curious readers to enter more deeply and fully into their particular vision of peace that is realized in their providential founding of Agape, their Catholic lay peace community that is currently edging towards its fourth decade.

The read is also a lively history of that communal adventure and an appeal for others to join them in stemming any further injury to the beloved community and precludes any further defilement of creation.



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Loving Life on the Margins is dedicated to the authors' respective mothers, signaling an honoring of their personal roots as much as their social starts. As regards the latter, the book begins with an appreciative foreword by renowned Catholic historian David J. O'Brien, an upholder in academia of the Catholic Worker vision and an admirer of Agape. Professor O'Brien makes particular mention of Agape's connection to the vision of Adin Ballou's utopian Christian experiment of Hopedale, Massachusetts in the mid-nineteenth century. Another noted scholar of peace and dear friend of the *Catholic Worker*, the late Michael D. True, also wrote of Agape as the contemporary expression of Hopedale's Christian utopian experiment in nonviolent living. In Professor True's estimate, Agape is the model heir of the utopian community's visionary pacifist mantle. Indeed, Agape has that something special about it that was Hopedale's and that Thomas Merton viewed

the communitarian Shakers as also having, a realized eschatology. Agape is a dream come true, a foretaste of the Promised Land, a bringing of transformative Christian compassion to bear in easing the sufferings of the nations and in extending the hand of human friendship to all of creation. Suzanne and Brayton



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thus bring synthesis and newness to these traditions. They also bring a more recent criticalness to aspects of their own beloved Catholic tradition when it too easily accommodates the morally injurious in the US way of life. They challenge the Church when it is too oblivious to patriarchal clericalism. They score hierarchical negligence of the bishops not emphatically condemning the scourge of all war. They seek change.

Here is the story, then, of two extraordinarily graced lives who decidedly met and confronted themselves and their own times with bold and persevering faith in the non-violent Christ. That faith was given flesh in their founding of Agape where holy dreams were translated into realities despite many hardships and episodic struggles with a kind

of starkness that attended the project. They used wood and stone on the property to build their homestead, set upon a once lonely patch of woodland running below the rim of a vast human-made reservoir. The immense waters of the Quabbin are themselves contained by the surrounding hills of the deep wood of Central/Western Massachusetts.

It was here that Suzanne and Brayton were led. They too were hugged by hills that held and comforted them, where they could root and flower, where they could decidedly set themselves and their hopes down. As urban activists heading for the country without experience in the rural arts, theirs was a brave and perhaps a tad naive undertaking. But akin to the ancient Israelites, they would walk by faith and not by sight, if guided by the equivalent in graces received by the Israelites' following of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. This was indeed frontier labor begun on an initially thickly forested glade on the lower back side of the great waters. The holy pioneers set out with what they had—their faith, their dreams, a few simple tools and the goodwill of friends who wished them well. They would not be forsaken nor disappointed. Here the Agapans befriended and were befriended by their natural surroundings. They learned to love "the way each day is phrased in Massachusetts" in the words of folksinger Arlo Guthrie of the nearby Berkshires.

The text is a mix of genres. It is autobiographical, a story of stories, a history book, a tale of the physical and spiritual maturation of two highly sensitive and conscientious youth whose lives and learning brought them to a defining radical departure from convention. The narrative is a lively and appropriately anecdotal look back at an especially significant "experiment in truth" as viewed in Gandhian terms. It is filled with stories of friends and luminaries who theologically and philosophically engaged them in the best kind of ethical questioning. "How, then, should we live?" is the question that their mentors and guides educated them to ask, some implicitly, some explicitly. Suzanne and Brayton answered their lives as told about in this truth-seeking

and truth-telling document written with much warmth, candor and panache.

Loving Life on the Margins is, a serious compilation of descriptive pacific responses to critical issues such as they presented themselves to the authors and is thus a handbook for practitioners of Christian ethics. It is a guide for would-be as well as seasoned apostolic farmers and Earth tenders. It is a practical manual for those seeking to fuse faith, principle and the utterly quotidian. It is a finely woven tapestry of the "dos" of shared living in hopes of reversing cultures of violence and world-weariness. Very importantly, it is, at heart, a mystical story of the holy tugs, the mysterious twists and turns, that brought the seeking pair together to the agape (unconditional love) of the Risen Christ, to their marriage as a model of such love, to their raising up of their daughter, Teresa, and to the raising up of a surprisingly wide, deep and wondrous spiritual community. This literary labor of love is as faith-filled and dramatic an explanation and exposition of the significance and beauty of lay vocation as can be had.

Confessional and honest, the authors do not shirk from relaying how challenging and difficult the exercise of faith in Gospel nonviolence can be as practiced day in and day out, year in and year out, decade to decade when very good souls are yet still put to the test. The Shanleys' narrative is both a balm for the wounded and a goad to begin or persevere with healing labors. The authors have been sculpted, constructed if you will, by divine and human forces. Like their neighbor, the great waters, they too are called to contain, and then graciously disperse fresh, deep and renewing waters. For them, of course, the waters are of the spiritual sort although they are also familiar with actual well-digging. Many go out to Agape and some hike up the high hill from the main houses to the hermitage located closer to the great waters for the purpose of slaking their souls' thirst for the sacred and peaceful sublime.

Loving Life on the Margins is also a tale of how the holy pair came to have so many friends, among them urban and rural poor, the victims of war, veterans morally injured by violence searching for healing, fellow communitarians, Native Americans (including the Sioux of Standing Rock), African Americans, civil rights workers, nuns and religious brothers, Gandhians, prisoners on and off of death row, interfaith leaders, Christians of all kinds, students and teachers, artists and poets, architects, carpenters, environmentalists, solar technicians, refugees, foresters, priests and people of God, spiritual feminists, scholars, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, local homesteaders and hippies, organic farmers, critics, Quakers, friendly and not so friendly locals, Benedictines, the poor and sick of other lands, musicians and writers, dancers, the famous and the non-famous, war tax resisters, academics, actors and rascals, monks of various kinds and traditions, Catholic Workers, the despairing and the hoping, the living and the dying, and more. All these making for a large and amazingly diverse community of fellow travelers. These friends arrived in Hardwick from many directions to both receive and share the blessed waters of justice "flowing like a mighty stream" from the Agapan reservoir of healing silence and prayerful activism.

The comings and goings of these friends constitute a veritable adventure story as well where the giving and the taking of so many gifts have been a mutual blessing. Suzanne and Brayton have been called to the holy and challenging task of proffering a summation of the telling of Agape's role in facilitating a graced gathering of so many tribes in a union of spiritual solidarity.

Catholic Workers will happily find in these pages erudite reflections and practical tips for upholding a host of CW ideals in the course of the daily round—communitarian personalism, worker scholarship, the influence and hopeful prevalence of deep Charity and Love that instigates and solidifies the daily performance of the Works of Mercy and meets the need for the ongoing nurturance of the empathic disposition on behalf of the poor, of victims of

all kinds, of enemies as with friends.

There is here good sowing of Gospel seed in season after season through educational initiatives with the young in the arts and sciences of nonviolent living via rural immersion retreats. We learn of how through years of schooling themselves, Suzanne and Brayton learned to teach the young drawn to them how to study the philosophy of Christian agrarianism and to practice the mechanics of realizing and maintaining an agronomic university whose curriculum includes subjects of study to both entertain and sustain a simple and peaceful life in a troubled world. Agape is surely a school the likes of which Peter Maurin envisioned.

Readers would likely take an interest in the couple's and the community's journalistic labors and would do well to make inquiries about their paper *The Servant Song* and their poetry, pamphlets and other books. Readers may also wish to help celebrate Agape's 37th anniversary by attending Francis Day on October 5th: from 10 am to 4:30 pm. More information can be had by writing to Agape, 2062 Greenwich Road, Hardwick, MA 01037 or to peace@agapecommunity.org. *Loving Life on the Margins* can be ordered through Agape www.agapecommunity.org and Haley's Publisher: antique@verizon.net 978-249-9400.



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