

THE SERVANT SONG

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Do We Dare to Hope These Days?

by Brayton Shanley

In talking with the next generation friends about the dark and tragic state of our world, I usually try to end up on a note of hope. A surprising number of them respond somewhat spontaneously, “Oh, I don’t believe in hope. I believe in agency.” Others say, “Hope is something we manipulate the poor with.” Or “I too often see hope as an excuse for inaction” or “I work with the unhoused poor who may never get housing. In these situations, I don’t have hope.” Another says: “I prefer hope that is not attached to outcome.”

I was stunned when these young people declared so definitively their serious skepticism about hope. Do they mean I am without any hope? Life is a hopeless matter; you can’t rely on it? Their comments threw me back on myself. I often say: “A Christian’s job is hope.” But now, I had to ask myself: What do I mean? How is hope a good?

St. Paul preaches in 1 Corinthians 13: “Three gifts remain throughout our lives: Faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.” The more I was challenged to reflect on what I believe hope really means, I became aware of how frequently I use the word and the many ways the sentiment itself comes up.

The “everyday” hope is an urgent wish that some suffering situation or injustice would pass or be alleviated. It is often joined with a prayer: “Oh I will pray for your painful ordeal, and hope you get some relief.” We consistently pray in the community in the hope that our friends will be healed from cancer or serious diseases. It can overwhelm us when we see the endless need for prayer and hopefulness just about everywhere we look.

When we discover that someone, clearly innocent, is scheduled to be executed, we hope their case will be commuted to life and time served and the death penalty will be abolished. In these mostly hopeless cases, what hope are we trusting in? Our grief-stricken cry of the heart asks: What power can we truly rely on?

After Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis and 200 were taken hostage, in our totally powerless state, unable to stop the carnage, do we resort to St Paul’s “Hope against hope?” (Rom. 4:18) Doesn’t this kind of hope need agency or action? With the situation in Israel/Palestine, we need to look at our own complicity in the suffering we are “hoping” to mitigate.

Biden has made serious requests for a ceasefire and safe return of hostages. Without the courage of withdrawing all support of this war, if necessary, our hope is disingenuous and only aids in continuing the mass murder in Gaza.

Greta Thunberg, environmental activist, excoriates adults whom she sees as responsible for climate change: “I don’t want your hope. I do not want you to be hopeful. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is!”

Hope in a soft landing and self-satisfying for us First World, empire wielding adults, whose lifestyle is causing climate catastrophes we see daily in the news. By promising change without drastic and immediate radical sacrifices, our reassurances are the manipulations of vague promises, a betrayal of false hope.

The more I search through these questions, the more I notice that Jesus doesn’t have much to say in the gospels about hope. It is Saint Paul who does. Born in the extremes of human pain, hope is a uniquely human virtue whose meaning begins deep in the Hebrew Scripture and in the painful struggles of People Israel.

world as well. But suffering and oppressed People Israel ask the question: “What hope is ultimate hope?” Is such hope, a power of good that we can trust will deliver us from our trials? Religious belief and practice of ultimate hope for the Jews rest entirely on God. It is a thin hope that relies on humans’ strength and on humans alone whose hearts turn from God. (Jer. 17:5)

As people of faith, when the suffering of violence and oppression strike, we must have confidence that God’s compassionate presence is with us, sustaining us. Emboldened by suffering love, we find patience through persevering in the struggle, knowing we are not alone. Many of us observed this faith, relying on God in Jesus from the

towards God’s desperate poor.

Why not add that both parties are unanimously behind our capitalistic economic system which keeps 30% of the money at the top 1%, more than the combined wealth of the entire middle class? The bottom 20% own 3% of the wealth, enslaving the poor and working families in dire economic struggle. Elon Musk, who donated \$150 million dollars to Trump’s campaign, Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, together own more wealth than the 170 million poorest halves of the American population. Money stolen and kept at the top creating grinding poverty at the bottom is the most evil and cruel of injustices.

Is this economic system of Jesus or is it clearly the antithesis of everything Jesus teaches and lives? His prophecy? “Woe to you rich; blessed are you poor. The reign of God is yours.” (Luke 6:20) This mercenary unjust economic system is clearly not of God and therefore, effectively hopeless for the powerless poor.

This same capitalist system also savages the earth. The planet is warmed by fossil fuels burned to run our machines which need them to maintain our addiction to “getting and spending.” This drive to possess “more” wreaks havoc on our ecosystems, overwhelming our landfills, which are full of the stuff we buy, while increasing our carbon footprint.

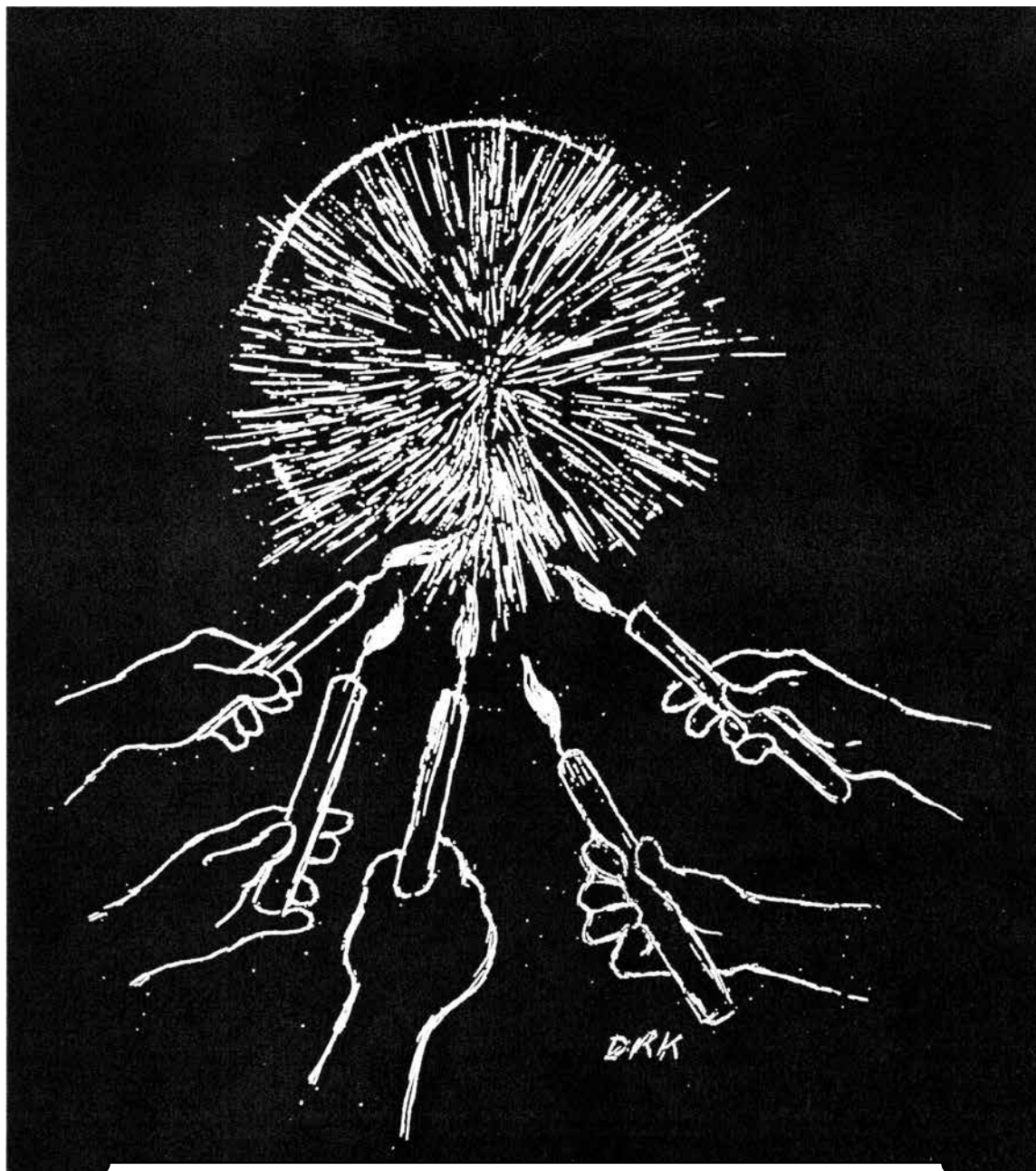
Did either Biden or Trump ever dare to speak of the evils of capitalism, and our rampant materialism? The frantic “getting and spending” is the bulwark of a strong economy. But that growth economy is precisely the “producing” that warms the planet, threatening to collapse our ecosystems, killing the survival potential of the entire human race.

Recently elected Trump, believes climate change is a “hoax,” a reckless, preposterous lie shared by Republicans and the Evangelical Christians. I can hear Jesus saying to these White Supremacists now in power in Washington, and to the “Patriots” with their flag waving chant “my country over your country” --“Get behind me Satan” (Matt: 16:23). The extractive capitalism and the overconsumption they foster are clearly Godless, and fully supported by both the Democrats and Republicans, alike. Hopeless, yes, once again.

What Protects All This Wealth?

While the rich get richer and the poor more desperate, the planet continues to warm. Over 50 cents of every tax dollar is spent on the military for past, present and future wars-- \$841 billion in total for 2024. Isaiah and Jeremiah’s prophecies warn us again: “The people cannot hope in the security of foreign allegiances rather than Yahweh.” (Is 30:1). “Accursed be anyone who relies on human strength and whose heart turns from God.” (Jer 17:5).

What protects the wealth of our Empire is nothing less than the strongest and most expensive military operation in the history



Deborah Roberta Kirk

Advent Christmas 2024

Hope You Can Rely On

The Hebrew Bible breathes an atmosphere of hope. The closest Hebrew word corresponding to hope is “Kawah,” “to expect and “Batah” “to trust or have confidence.” As a religious virtue, hope relies entirely on Yahweh, not on humans alone. “But the person who hopes in Yahweh is blessed.” (Jer. 17:7) This hope is attained through patience and Sacred Scripture. (Rom. 15:4)

Driven by an urgent desire to lessen the pain of suffering, hope is a sign of compassion, a deep concern for the well-being of the other, and for the plant and animal

Black community’s life-threatening non-violence direct actions in the Civil Rights era. “We Shall Overcome” was their hope mantra.

Where Is Hope in American Electoral Politics?

With hope in God as the only enduring force of healing from injustice, how do we, as Christians, relate to politics, especially in an election year? Recently, Pope Francis challenged Christians to see that both candidates are “anti-life,” Democrats as pro-choice and Republicans with the anti-immigrant position, a hard-heartedness

A Time for Truth-Telling

by Suzanne Belote Shanley

It is 5 am, November 6, 2024, the day after what has been called for months, “the most consequential election in American history,” or “the dreaded American reckoning with fascism, dictatorship, insanity,” “caving of the American Empire,” and on.

I cannot bear to check the computer for tallies and results, having left the screens at 9 pm after several hours of chanting at the Buddhist Peace Pagoda with our friends of over 40 years, the Venerable Kato Shonin and Sr. Clare Carter and other participants who responded to Sr. Clare’s call for a Day of Prayer at the Pagoda on Election Day.

Some have likened this election to American Armageddon and prophetic voices like that of Reverend William Barber, call out church leaders for their hypocrisy and silence, while the news cycles focus on Donald Trump, all the time, nine years of his face, his ridicule, his humiliations. We are all exhausted at the sight of him, and some of what I anticipate and long for, not knowing the outcome yet, is relief from his ubiquitous Trump aura.

Yet, we are living in a time of existential dread, with the slaughter of innocent children continuing in Gaza unabated, the torturous daily images of babies’ bodies in white shrouds, and the wailing of beyond distraught mothers and fathers, screaming into cameras: “Just drop an atom bomb on us. Why don’t you just end our misery?”

Even among committed pacifists like me and many others in their seventh and eighth decade, the dire and penetrating question “Do you vote?” enters like an unwanted guest in an intimate and familiar meeting of like-minded souls. “Can a self-described Pacifist vote?” “Can a follower of Jesus vote for the ‘lesser of two evils?’” These questions, spoken or not, impose intimidating expectations of living up to a lineage of resistance, including no voting.

Dorothy Day apparently never voted after her arrest and forced-feeding in 1917, at age 20 for passage of the 19th Amendment and the Women’s Right to Vote. In Daniel Berrigan’s 10th Anniversary keynote address for Agape in 1992, he located voting from the Latin, *votum*, or vow. A “vote” for the future is to live in communities of resistance, adhering to “a visionary politics as opposed to an absolutely deadly and anti-humane one...” Such a vow “has nothing to do with a candidate and has everything to do with a life in community.”

The question of whether to vote unleashed familiar anger and outrage in with the urgencies of Gaza, of misogyny, racism, and the cascading reality every new epithet Trump and his minions threw at women.

Charlie McCarthy, Agape co-founder, wrote that voting in a time of genocide in Gaza, for the “lesser of two evils,” engages the Catholic voter in committing a mortal sin. A quick review of my Catholic Catechism revealed that the “Catholic Church teaches that a mortal sin is a serious offense against God’s law that can result in

eternal damnation.” I found that various clerics over the years helped to define mortal sin, including St. Augustine and St. Jerome, in the 3rd Century AD, a formidable patriarchal panoply of absolutists.

Then comes Pope Francis, who said before the election: that he has problems with both candidates for U.S. president, “both against life” and that Americans should vote for the person they believe to be the “lesser of two evils.”

Would voting for Kamala Harris by me or any other women lead to “eternal damnation?” Should women fear the directives of male clerics through the centuries as to the gravity of a “sin” that makes it mortal? Do I believe in such patriarchal mandates? My years as a Catholic consist

fore the election. I asked if they felt reluctance to share their stance on voting given the position of people in the pacifist lineage and the oft-state prohibition against voting for the “lesser of two evils” or voting at all. After all, the argument goes, Jesus was a pacifist, and all presidents command the military, go to war. Can’t vote.

Their responses, heartfelt and edifying, elicited a sense of dread over the election. They were grateful for the opportunity through a vote, for their voices, their opposing positions, to be heard. Jeanelle spoke of living in a world of duality and, as a person in her twenties, a sensitivity to the legacy of non-voting among some Christian pacifists. Nonetheless, she stated her need to find her own truth, that a

my condition. I struggle with the gnawing sense of contradiction. I am a committed Pacifist and tax resister who will not pay for killing. And yet...

I land in the world of Sr. Joan Chittister, who before the election met with Liz Cheney in a public forum praising Cheney’s courage. Is Liz Cheney a war-mongering woman, whom we should be chastising and not praising? Can a non-violent woman like me, admire her for her convictions, her stepping into a moral arena where she no longer has a base? Is Joan Chittister a sell-out to Jesus for meeting with Cheney about whom Trump recommended a firing squad?

It is now 7am. I still don’t know who won. But I know, in my heart, who I wanted to win. I did not fear “mortal sin” or a surrender to the “lesser of two evils.” Jesus understands that women are still oppressed, that Black women, women of Asian descent, like Harris, will be reviled and humiliated by the likes of a Donald Trump.

I have no desire to proclaim whom I voted for or didn’t, as a litmus test of my failure or success at embracing nonviolent purity, but the sense of betrayal to the absolute is palpable. No killing.

What I know now before I open the computer today, November 6, 2024, as I ponder the command of Jesus to “love” Netanyahu, Putin, Harris, Biden, is that I, like most people, carry an interior darkness, frequently unable to part with my loathing for the “enemy” in our midst. Categories are elusive, but I am “in the world,” and not being “of it” doesn’t mean that I suppress all the indignity, horror and revulsion I feel for the likes of a

Donald Trump. The contradictions, the hair-splitting, the dualities are endless.

As I approach my 80th year, I do more looking back that looking ahead, and I am acutely aware of lineage, of legacy. Do I not open the computer? Am I detached from results, as a good nonviolent practitioner should be? Do I congratulate myself for not voting, not being polluted; or do I embrace the world of ambiguity having voted?

When Philip Berrigan, my soul friend and mentor, whom I am sure never voted, lay on his death bed, and Brayton and I sat with him alone, for one last time. He looked at books on the shelves in the room where he lay and said weakly: “I wonder how it all stacked up?” I, too, near the closing chapters of my life, wonder how these dilemmas of conscience and call, convictions and haunting dualities stack up for me.

I cannot strike Phil’s words about “dismantling the state” from my heart: “I see no point working within the system. Christ was never a reformer. He didn’t advocate for voting for one corrupt politician over another.”

Head spinning, heart beating, hoping against hope that in this fleeting moment, that God is not mocked, that Jesus will come to me, hold me close. I open the computer. I repeat the mantra, “You are loved because you love; you love because you are loved.”

I am in the world, but not of it, yet I turn to the world, from which I cannot detach, to find where the world stands today.



of all male declarations for sins mortal and venial including birth control and sex before marriage.

From other soulmates in the peace movement, like Catholic historian David O’Brien, voting is a moral and spiritual imperative, a significant part of our being “in the world” but perhaps, somehow, “not of it.” David writes in a recent article entitled, “Making American History” that: “Our country and the world face major challenges that make clear our in-fact interdependence and the need for policies aimed at common security ...urgent objectives of peace and some degree of fairness. ...” Reasonable? Yes.

How does a Christian woman calibrate such exigencies, such reasoned arguments when, these conflicting views on voting, emanate from male hierarchs from Catholic Universities, religious scholars, and Pope Francis? Two days before the election, a respected friend and Catholic educator, Thomas Groome, wrote a piece declaring his vote for Kamala Harris, given the enormity of the health care issues for poor women with the overturning of *Rowe vs. Wade*.

“Catholics” he said, “cannot impose our moral norms on the rest of society. Even as I embrace the position of being pro-life, I must respect the moral discernment of those who are pro-choice; until a majority agrees, I cannot insist on my minority view as if it is the will of the people.”

These questions were uppermost in my mind when some of Agape’s younger members arrived for dinner two days be-

fore the election. I asked if they felt reluctance to share their stance on voting given the position of people in the pacifist lineage and the oft-state prohibition against voting for the “lesser of two evils” or voting at all. After all, the argument goes, Jesus was a pacifist, and all presidents command the military, go to war. Can’t vote.

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The Outer Hurricane

by Nancy James

Steve and I were expecting to head to Agape to help the community get ready for our annual St. Francis Day after planning for months via zoom meetings. We had heard that Hurricane Helene was in Florida and could head north to Western North Carolina.

We wrongly assumed that our beautiful mountains would not take a big hit but get some heavy rain. Our phones repeatedly and loudly warned us of the possibility of a “historic, catastrophic flooding.” Somehow, we weren’t as concerned as we should have been. Our oldest daughter, Kirstin, invited us by text, to come and stay with them since we live near a creek, and they live about three miles up the road at a higher elevation. We thought about it but decided it might be good for us to stay at home and keep an eye on things. A day and night of rain had already saturated the ground before Hurricane Helene winds started on Thursday evening, continuing all night until Friday around noon bringing 31 inches of rain during in 2 ½ days.

Our normally small Browns Creek became a raging river, unimaginable and beyond belief, altering landscapes. Located on a hill, about 100 feet from our creek, we had always been protected from its waters.

We slept on and off through the night listening to the heavy rain but hearing new sounds, that of large boulders and rocks colliding, making cracking sounds never heard before. At 5:40 am our electricity went off. We used our flashlight to peer into the backyard where it still seemed that the water had not breached its banks.

We moved important documents and precious photographs to the second floor, waiting until daylight to see water entering our backyard, rushing with great speed around our house.

Another creek across the road streamed rapidly through our front yard carrying furniture from our neighbor’s home. Rushing brown water surrounding our house on all sides, no longer a creek but a desperate river.

Steve and I prayed together, telling each other we were grateful for a good life, having no idea if our 114-year-old farmhouse would hold to its foundation. Without power, we couldn’t get in touch with our family and learned later that Carrie, our third daughter, one of the head ER nurses at our local hospital and a mother of three little girls, spent three days and nights at the hospital as replacements were unable to arrive.

When the rain finally slowed down, and the waters didn’t continue their rush towards our home, we began to assess the damage. Brown, muddy water was creeping through our family room from the gravel parking lot. Water was coming through a closet in our bathroom downstairs.

A large section of a tree near our home that had fallen in front of our porch missing our house by inches. In the back yard two large trees that had fallen from the side of the creek as had others, now uprooted, creating a precarious bridge across the creek. Our propane gas tank had shifted and sat tilted but held fast by forsythia bushes and a small wild tree.

Our well stopped pumping water so we carried buckets from the still full creek as we wandered around in a daze, wondering what to do. We said our morning prayers and waited for words from the outside world. Around 1:30 pm we heard a truck come down our driveway and emerging from it, a longtime friend of ours, Kennedy Blough, and his friend, Sarah, who both looked stunned to see us. They had expected our house to be gone knowing

how close we live to the creek.

Their cabin was almost overwhelmed by an avalanche of mud and trees and debris. They managed to get out of the house unhurt but homeless. We were shocked to hear of roads, bridges, familiar places erased. Kennedy offered us a generator to keep our refrigerated food supply from spoiling, keeping lights on and our phones recharged.

It was days before we finally heard

All major and minor roads were badly damaged with electric lines looking like “spaghetti” fallen from broken poles. Trees and debris were everywhere. Heart-breaking stories have poured in over the past few weeks as repairs have begun for power and the internet.

Near our home, the beautiful South Toe River where the Celo Community is located, friends and family live close to the river, where, in the summer, everyone



James Family photo

Members of James Family, Asheville, cleaning up from Helene.

how the storm had impacted a large swath of Western North Carolina including Asheville, where three of our grown children and their families live.

As we look back now, the hardest thing for us during and after the storm was not being able to be in touch with friends and family. Finally, on the third night of the storm, our daughter Carrie was able to cross the badly damaged bridge near her home by descending a ladder and then going up another ladder to walk across the bridge to arrive at home where she was tearfully reunited with Matt, Opal 12, Willow 6, and Wren 4 ½.

enjoys swimming and picnicking. The Toe River rose over 26 feet and tore away homes, destroying the historic Celo Inn.

When the sun came out on that fateful Friday, neighbors were out checking on each other, getting out chain saws and tractors, fixing driveways and roads. We organized daily meetings, some starting with a song; others with a moment of silence and a check-in to find out how each one was coping. Spirits began to lift in these gatherings of neighbors and new friendships formed. On one of the early days after the storm, several women made a huge vat of curry to share.

A long-time Celo resident created a make-shift school for 15-20 kids of various ages in the community, a bright spot for the kids and their parents. The local fire department collected donated resources from other areas and states as people from out of state began showing up once the landslides were cleared.

The National Guard ensured roads were open, but schools were not, as they had been designated as shelters to receive clean drinking water and to supply diapers and formula, canned goods, warm blankets and flashlights. Emergency satellite internet was set up at the school to connect with family and friends who had been beside themselves with worry.

Many churches opened their doors for counseling services, free clothing. Friends who had lost their home, nevertheless volunteered daily in these shelters. It has been encouraging to see the generosity of so many people.

We discovered our vegetable garden was covered with mounds of sand from the creek bed as water poured out over its banks. I bemoaned my asparagus bed that I had been working on for several years. After looking carefully at the bed area, we were surprised to see new asparagus sprouts poking their heads up through the sand! Nature confused by the drastic changes, pushed Her way up through the sand to shout, “I’m still here!”

This, however, was not the case for a Ukrainian refugee family of four, lost to the raging river as it swept their mobile home down the river, including an 11-year-old son and grandmother. Having had to flee the war in Ukraine, they probably never dreamed that a flood in North Carolina would kill them. Our hearts are broken for them.

As we pick up the pieces in the weeks and months ahead, we continue to be communities of love, healing and restoration. We pray, that with God’s help, we can see our vulnerabilities, put down our political divisions and work together as we have been during this crisis. We want to be the hands and feet of Jesus, whose presence we have seen experienced so clearly in the last few weeks.

Steve and Nancy James are Agape’s co-founders, who, since 1982, during over 30 years in Haiti, have been returning to Agape for Francis Days. They are members of Agape’s Mission Council Advisory Board.

The Inner Hurricane

by Stephen James

Raging flood waters suddenly surrounded our 114-year-old mountain farmhouse in Western North Carolina, an island in the middle of raging waters, with flood water entering the family room and bathrooms. I listened for the sounds of the house breaking from its foundations as Nancy and I moved as quickly as possible, moving valuables to the second floor.

Nancy pointed to the small window leading out to the roof, saying, “We go out this way if we have to leave.” The rain continued to pour down in buckets as 80-90 mph wind gusts brought down branches and trees, sweeping away lives and homes around us. Not knowing what might happen next, we thanked God and each other for the life of love we had had together for 51 years.

We moved into a place of deep abandonment to Divine Providence, Divine Love. Gratitude. Inner peace passing understanding descended upon us. We waited. Transformed by Hurricane Helene, iso-

lated in the middle of a raging river formed by two swollen mountain creeks coming together, this place, this home, this “paradise of beauty,” this “sanctuary” from the violence in Haiti, was no longer a sacrosanct place of safety and protection.

Hurricane. Sudden destruction. Killer storm. Destroyer of beauty. Tearing. Forcing. Violent. Unstoppable. Unreal. Overwhelming. Massive. Unjust. Unapproachable. Irrational. Forever Changed. When the historic three-day record-setting-never-seen-here-before rain and wind mercifully stopped, in two hours the flood waters receded, and the hurricane moved on.

But the “hurricane” has not moved out. The storm has turned inward for all of us who survived. Some of our neighbors upstream and downstream from us did not; many lost their homes and possessions. The “hurricane” is still at work in this shocked and suffering beloved community. Why did we survive? Trauma is an inner vehicle of suffering that travels without boundaries. What sudden inner beauty

is being destroyed in each of us right now? Is a natural disaster an enemy?

Attacked, we feel an enemy presence. What, does Jesus’ nonviolent enemy-love mean now? Is the “enemy” within each of us? Buffeted and blown now by anger, despair, confusion, depression, anxiety, we are on our knees. No clear “fixes” appear for the inner struggle, except for no more “othering.”

Our hearts cling to Gaza. Haiti. Burma. Ukraine, daily “hurricanes,” “disasters” beyond words. We are dealing with unwanted “one-ness” in suffering, anger without direction. Strange new emotions flood over us. Gratitude for having survived. Survivor guilt? “Guilt-itude?” Deep grief. “Grief-itude?” Lamentation. By the water, we weep. No song to soothe us. Desperate agony of mind and heart. Lost? Alone. Where is love? Mini-Wiconi. Water is life! Native Voices of wisdom flow forth. We are fighting to believe these words. Haiti—suffering, noble, courageous, beloved Haiti, carries us now and forever. Love Alone.

Warmed by the Flames of a Sacred Fire

by Jim Robinson

As we gather today on this beloved land, as an intergenerational community of communities, we are warmed by the flames of a sacred fire. This fire links us visually and viscerally with the vibrancy and light at the source of our lives. Maybe this sacred fire can remind us of our planet's delicate dance with the sun, the star that St. Francis of Assisi called brother, the star whose light brings life to us and to the countless beings with whom we live.

Maybe this sacred fire can even remind us of our common origins in the Big Bang, that fiery event which set everything into motion 13.8 billion years ago. Everything we see and sense, from the lettuce in this garden to the solar panels on the roof, from our music and our prayers to our own beating hearts, everything can be traced back to one unimaginably small and dense point, smaller than a mustard seed, which burst forth with heat, light, and power at the origin of this universe.

Maybe this sacred fire can aid us in purifying our perceptions, connecting us, again, with our interdependence, inviting us to imagine and to build societies that reflect this interdependence. As Elizabeth Johnson writes: "Woven into our lives is the very fire from the stars and genes from the sea creatures, and everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being." When we circle around a fire like the one that burns here, we are confronted with and comforted by our connectedness with one another and with the wider web of life. To intentionally form such a circle of compassionate presence in this world of hierarchical pyramids is a deeply necessary, subversive, and sustaining practice.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer offers these lines of wisdom regarding fires:

Fires do not make themselves. The earth provides the materials and the laws of thermodynamics. Humans must provide work and knowledge, and the wisdom to use the power of fire for good. The spark itself is a mystery, but we know that before a fire can be lit, we must gather the tinder, the thoughts, and the practices that will nurture the flame.

What kinds of fires do we make, personally and collectively? What are the flames that our thoughts and practices, our communities and institutions, nurture? Do we use the power of fire for good?

There are sacred fires, like the one which burns here at Agape. There are also deeply desecrating fires. There are violent and violating fires of militarism, which bring destruction to human beings and to the wider community of creation. There are the desecrating and devastating fires that ravage Palestine. The fires from five-hundred-pound bombs funded by U.S. taxpayers. The fires

that have torn apart families, that have brought ruin to communities and ecosystems, that have brutally consumed the lives of tens of thousands of our brothers and sisters since last October alone.

There are also the fires of a capitalist system that reduces the natural world to a stockpile of resources, a system that elevates the interests of corporations over people and the planet. There are the fires of climate change, the fires that ruin forests and the creatures who inhabit them, the fires whose smoke transcends human constructed borders, moving, for instance, from Canada to New York City. Driven by a deep sensitivity to the severity of our situation, Greta Thunberg calls us all to "act as if the house is on fire. Because it is."

And so, we find ourselves standing between two very different kinds of fire: one sacred and the other desecrating. We know that our task is to recognize the reality of both, to bear witness to both, to respond, creatively and urgently, to both: to extinguish that which desecrates while tending to the sacred.

In a talk given at Agape's 10th Anniversary Celebration in 1992, Dan Berrigan highlighted the significance of becoming, "responsible or responsive and spontaneous people who are capable of saying no to the enemies of life in order to say a resounding yes to life itself." On this St. Francis day, more than thirty years later, we are called together, in community, to deepen our "yes" to the goodness of life, to the sacred fire of life, and to clarify our "no" to the practices and systems that burn and distort and desecrate life.

We gather today in the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who referred to the fire as his brother and who simultaneously envisioned and embodied radical alternatives to the unjust order of his age. We are similarly guided by St. Paul's exhortation: "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind." We are invited to receive the transformative power of the sacred into our lives, to permit this power to transform us and to radiate out, like an echo of the Big Bang, generating a radically different world.

Throughout our time together today we will reflect on the transformations that we seek, and have already seen, and are actively striving toward. It is a deep blessing to be present together, as we strive to envision and embody the spirit of Agape, the spirit of radical love, as an ever-expanding circle of friends, as a community of communities.

Jim Robinson, PhD is a member of the Religious Studies Department at Iona University, where he serves as Director of the Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit. He is on the Agape Soul Board and Mission Council and is also involved at Benincasa Community and at Maryhouse Catholic Worker.



Imam Mirza Yawar Baig and Muhammed Saleem Bajwa MD from Islamic Society of Western MA.



Some attendees at the end of Francis Day.

Photo Fiona Murphy

Growing Community of Com



photo by Skip Schiel

Ricky and Nicole Brathwaite Hunt blessing the Sacred Fire

The Importance of Community

by Justin Duffy

Oxygen is a highly reactive element which combines readily with nearly every other element in a process called oxidation. The outermost shell of every oxygen atom contains six electrons, inherently unstable, ready to welcome newcomers, to become anything else.

Oxygen is essential to human life. Many religious practices draw us back to mindfulness through focusing on our breath, re-centering ourselves on the fundamentals that keep our cells alive. How is it that something so unstable can exist in such abundance on our planet? Are we taking something for granted with every breath?

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, nearly 20% of our planet's oxygen comes from marine cyanobacteria, producing more oxygen than every rainforest on earth, combined. Scientists believe the processes which kick-started our rich oxygen atmosphere began with bacteria such as this over 2 billion years ago. Rather than life depending on oxygen, the existence of oxygen itself depends on life.

About two million years ago animals discovered another critical process involving oxygen - the mastery of fire. Archaeologists believe that different species within the Homo genus mastered fire. Sometimes I imagine a time lapse—of north Africa speeding through pre-history towards our own evolution, as I watch small sparks wink in and out of existence. Nascent communities of early hominids harnessed a flame and then lost it, another critical process for human life enabled by oxygen.

Two thousand years before the birth of Christ, Abraham and Sara welcomed three strangers into their tent in a simple act of hospitality which begins the direct lineage of three major global world religions, creating the community referred to in Islam as Ahl al-Kitab - the people of the Book.

Today we witness the devastation of Gaza and a world hellbent on its own destruc-

tion. Humanity seems as unstable as oxygen itself, exploding in an increasingly volatile reaction. How do we reclaim our common history? Where is our shared humanity?

In *The Wisdom of Insecurity* Alan Watts writes:

...the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing. To hold your breath is to lose your breath. A society based on the quest for security is nothing but a breath-retention contest. ... We want the protection of being "exclusive" and "special," seeking to belong to the safest church, the best nation, the highest class, the right set, and the "nice" people. These defenses lead to divisions between us, ...insecurity demanding more defenses. ... done in the sincere belief that we are trying to do the right things and live in the best way. ... I am split in two pieces...a good "I" who is going to improve the bad "me." "I," who has the best intentions, will go to work on wayward "me". ...Consequently "I" will feel more separate than ever, increase the lonely and cut-off feelings which make "me" behave so badly.

I don't have answers for the dilemma Watts presents. I'm not sure that the fundamental interconnectedness of life on this planet can be expressed in words, and, if it is possible, I lack Watts' eloquence.

But, like everyone else, I feel the presence of things greater than me. In conversations around the community at Agape, Suzanne used the phrase "keepers of the flame." At Agape, surrounded by the community of love gathered for St. Francis's Day, I felt that same flame that has burned throughout our history. Thank you for being there with me.

Justin Duffy grew up at the Saints Francis and Therese Catholic Worker in Worcester and is committed to the transformative power of community. Justin and his wife, Patricia Kirkpatrick, are creatively involved with their three children in numerous peace activities, including exploring the meaning of tax resistance in a war economy.



Photo Fiona Murphy

Panelist Dior St.Hillaire, left, with Nathan Dufour Oglesby. MC of Francis Day.

Communities St. Francis Day 2024



Photo Skip Schiel-Quaker

Panel on next generation seeking community, from left, Jeanelle Wheeler, Agape; Nikko Joyce, Sirius Community; Ben Stegbauer, Catholic Worker; Sam Ashmankas, Makarioi.

Connected

by Jeanelle Wheeler

For my entire life, I have been connected to communities of peacemakers, thanks to my mom. Catholic Worker gatherings, disarmament vigils, and regular trips to Agape have grounded me in a Massachusetts-based network of spiritual, justice-oriented connections. While I feel so familiar with these notions of community, when I was invited to speak on the St. Francis Day panel of “Young People Seeking Community” this year, I wasn’t quite sure what I would share.

I’m not actively living in a community. And in the six years post-college, I have uprooted and re-rooted so many times that my branches feel torn, and my leaves scattered. Meanwhile, I absolutely rely on technology to keep me connected to far-away friends and family - leaving a voice memo or text, trying for a Zoom call or a phone chat.

Yet, I was surprised when I was asked, “How do I feel about the role of technology in young people’s lives?” My initial thought was to mention how, in my experience in groups like the youth climate Sunrise Movement or the Pax Christi Young Adult Caucus, it is through apps like Slack or WhatsApp or simply shared Google Docs, that communication, connection and action between people who otherwise can’t easily meet in person, is facilitated. And while the abilities of technology to connect across distance, spread information, and galvanize others for action is hard to dispute, this was perhaps the message that this multigenerational audience was expecting.

After all, I wrote an essay back in 2011 for Amnesty International about the roles of social media in the Arab Spring movement. In a post-pandemic world, technology’s power to connect us for good has only gotten more

powerful. And yet its capacity to disconnect and divide us has likewise increased.

I now work to support mostly first-generation students at a state university in New Jersey in accessing study abroad opportunities. I hear that my students would have no interest in exploring the world, that they don’t know how to make friends with those around them; and that when given the option between an in-person meeting or a meeting over Zoom, they will almost always opt for the virtual one.

With each smile of each student that I met, the validity of these claims disintegrated. Students wanted to meet in person. Almost always. So many have told me that they would prefer to talk rather than have a meeting online with me. My students have consistently stated “I would much rather meet in person” and “Can you give me a paper copy of that assignment?” and “I prefer taking notes in a notebook.”

Technology is convenient, and young people use it regularly and enthusiastically. I think the stereotype of technology-obsessed youth obscures the reality of how youth are also burned out on technology, especially in the wake of the pandemic. I consistently hear that youth “don’t know how to socialize anymore.” But the story is just how much they want to connect in a world that is telling them their life exists on screens.

How do we coexist with technology while fostering community and connection that is deeply human? I believe all generations are deeply motivated by the desire to be free of the loneliness that our devices enable and turn towards one another.

Jeanelle, a graduate of Brown University and a Fulbright scholar has been connected to Agape and Worcester’s Catholic Worker Community throughout her life.



Photo Fiona Murphy

From left, Sabah Kadar from Mosel, Iraq, with Ricky and Nicole.

An Insomniac’s Reflection on St. Francis Day

by Fiona Murphy

Sometimes I can’t sleep. I arrived at the Agape Community on Wednesday, October 2, 2024, from New York City, with that sinking feeling some insomniacs experience--a sense that you won’t be able to sleep. I was greeted by my boyfriend Nathan DuFour Oglesby who had been living in Francis House in preparation for this year’s gathering. We ate soup and talked and connected with Dixon. The energy was high as Brayton and Suzanne buzzed around with Nathan in tow, finalizing all the weeks of preparation leading to St. Francis Day that Saturday, October 6th.

I was on a writing deadline. I felt stressed. The first thing I did when I arrived was walk to the back of the garden near the violet Morning Glory vines and press my palms into the soil. My heart fluttered with excitement. I didn’t sleep for the first two nights.

On the Friday morning before the gathering, I wanted to tire myself out in order to sleep. I kept missing morning prayer and that was always my favorite part of the day. Brayton was on the grassy knoll, scything grass that seemed lush from an excess of rain, moving like he often does meditatively and with a quiet strength. He was clearing out the area where people would gather for song and prayer.

He handed me the scythe. I gripped the worn wooden handle and hacked through the grass recklessly, like a bull in a China shop. Sweaty and desperate to perform well, I looked up at him. He gently demonstrated a more comfortable way to swing the scythe, which felt much better than the hunched, stiff-shouldered method I had been frantically attempting on my own.

I was grateful to feel my muscles ache.

Later that day, Suzanne pulled me aside while I was folding envelopes. She said very coolly that she had heard I couldn’t sleep. She informed me that she, like me, was a recovering insomniac and had medication that could stop the long nights of counting and feeling like a broken toy. I felt so relieved. Every insomniac knows that it’s always helpful--probably more psychologically, than tactically--to have an emergency pill. I felt closer to her at that mo-

ment. She, someone I look up to and respect a great deal, struggled like me. Of course, I thought, lifelong peace activists probably never sleep.

The next morning St. Francis Day began, and I slept four glorious hours from 5 to 9 a.m. I had tea, watched smoke from the fire dance into the cool morning air and connected with some friends from the Catholic Worker.

I spoke on the first panel with Dior St. Hilliare, Nicole A. Brathwaite-Hunt, Ann Rader, and Edgar Hayes about a story I was writing for the religious newswire, Religion News Service, about faith-based ecological activism in New York City. I spoke about feeling connected to my Irish heritage when I plant food and about how integral my religious faith is to my sense of activism.

I listened to Nicole speak about fulfilling prophecies and uncovering sacred knowledge. I noticed that Ann had some of the most beautiful hands I had ever seen. Dior came to the panel late, and it was difficult for me to take my eyes off her sparkle. Edgar told us about following his dreams of being a farmer with the passion of a pastor. The first panel flew by, and I didn’t feel tired for a moment of it.

The rest of the day, including Buddhist chanting, discussions about war in Palestine and the dangers of technology went down as smoothly as honey. My face was buried in my camera for most of it. Chelsea MacMillan, who is the organizer for Green Faith, spoke on one panel about sacred activism and protesting major investors in the fossil fuel industry. Skip Schiel, an activist, photographer, and long-time friend of the Shanley’s, said that when he photographs demonstrations or intense political events, it’s as if he’s praying. He uses his camera to pray. That idea really stuck with me.

A few folks came up to me and complimented me for sharing about my life and work. I felt touched to meet so many people quick to kindness and often entrenched in their own war for goodness. I spoke with Judy, a nurse, who is trying to lobby the government to give more research dollars to natural medicine.

I watched through my camera as Nathan and Brayton brought everyone together for a final song. I cheered excitedly when Dior got on the microphone and rapped about sun, water, and prayer. I took many videos and pictures because there was so much beauty in Hardwick that day. Through my camera, the light seemed to be sparkling. I am not sure if it was the lack of sleep or the goodness in the people around me, but I felt electrified. By dinner time, I had made so many new friends. I felt a sense of strength. I felt proud of Nathan for helping organize this day. I saw flickers of his spirit in many parts of it. The friends he invited made me laugh and learn, and we remain connected to this day.

Several people stayed up late. After singing a few old gospel songs, we talked into the night about the difference between agape and eros, romantic love, different Christian denominations, and Richard Rohr’s interpretation of the enneagram. I looked at my watch sitting on the couch, knowing I was going to sleep soundly that night.

Fiona Murphy is a multimedia journalist at Religious News Service based in New York city, whose work investigates faith and belief currently at the Agape Community and the New York Catholic Worker.



Rev. Kato Shonin with Sr. Clare Carter from the Buddhist Peace Pagoda.



Photo Dave Legg

Final circle with song “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

A Native Perspective on the Sacredness of Mother Earth

by Nicole Brathwaite-Hunt

I would like my fellow human beings to consider the topic of the innate sacredness of Mother Earth, from my Indigenous perspectives as a mixed Native person. While Native Americans are by no means a single monolithic culture, a few select beliefs show up almost universally across the spectrum of tribes. One of the most fundamental traditional beliefs is that the Earth is sacred, a holy, conscious being, Mother, provider, teacher, and protector, for all the “children” She carries. Indigenous people feel an innate kinship, and collective reciprocity with the land, and their environment, seeing themselves as uniquely “of” that land where their families and friends have lived.

When the elders told their ancestor stories to their community, they were teaching the young ones time-tested ways to look for the Spirit within Nature and how to discern what was happening and needed in their environment. The signs that Mother Earth left directed them. Her ever-present resources sustained them. The beauty She shared fed their souls. The creatures around them inspired their imaginations. The earth’s energetic vibrations created pathways of communication, which could be used for their good (if they choose to use it that way.)

Her relationship with the Creator helped to facilitate prayers, anytime, anywhere, and directly from their hearts. These traditional ways survive to this very day and distinguish our viewpoint. We believe Mother Earth is a sacred being, worthy of respect. Yes, nature is actually “our church.”

The colonizers who came to these lands seemed to have long since lost their sense of reverence for the earth, being too long removed from their own tribal roots. They behaved with no regard for Her health, sustainability, or the future. This means that while She could hear them, they had lost their ability to hear Her. They were deaf to Her voice, Her warnings, Her



cries, and screams. Any empathy for our Mother, or even themselves, did not exist. They just keep plowing through, reaping every grain, with no concern for the cost, or damage done.

We all know the stories of the horrendous conditions our lands, waters, air, and food are in right now. We must stop turning a blind eye to this malignant illness of ego and insecurity. Very soon, these systems are destined to implode and could take

us down with them! Mother Earth needs changed hearts and minds to act, and to give Her relief from the onslaught of our harmful ways. Remembering our compassionate hearts again will create space for Her to heal Herself which can only result in positive gifts for all the beings on Her.

Our mission is to clear our eyes, open our ears, and change our hearts. If you can hear Her again, and are so moved, please think about ways you can realign to re-

spect Mother Earth more and remitting some of the damage. Use your voice, vote, volunteer for land/water cleanup projects, support local farming, and clean energy, etc. Reach out to local Native American tribes, or persons, to see if what they are doing is something you can support, or ally with, in some way.

Lastly, while giving “land back” to Native Americans can be a tricky, complicated endeavor (with the legalities of both US land laws and tribal designation laws,) this is no excuse for not trying to do so, if you have the privilege of being in that position. On general principle alone, giving land back to the original people is a wonderful thing! It is a moral thing to do because we know this land was stolen from those Indigenous people.

Receiving land back would start addressing some of the restitution owed, as well as being a conduit for healing; supporting the coming back together of shredded Native spirits, torn apart by forced separation. Healing the connection to nature can enable envisioning a healthy, safe, whole future again. Laying down roots, listening and responding to the environment, and the people again working with the land as they feel called to (not dictated by anyone else’s agenda). The people, living with their land, will demonstrate and teach the world how to elevate and properly respect Mother Earth.

We are striving to hit critical mass, with enough like-minded hearts, to bring the balance back to center. We are unique puzzle pieces, sacred parts to a sacred circle, which makes a complete whole. We must all come together, work as one, and never give up. No more excuses for treating Mother Earth as anything less than sacred.

Nicole Shining-from-the-East Brathwaite-Hunt is an artisan, knowledge keeper, ceremonial practitioner, and Grandmother of her Native and Black heritages. She’s been tasked by her Blackfoot Elders to share her teachings, spiritual practices, and medicines, with many circles.

Online at Agape

by Nathan Dufour Oglesby

What does it mean to be “in the world, but not of the world,” when the world is increasingly defined by virtual experience -- by online content, by Zoom meetings, by the here-yet-elsewhere of digital screens? In some ways this is what I came to Agape to find out.

In recent years I’ve been plying my trade as an artist and educator on social media, circulating songs and videos and promoting online courses. My whole life has hinged on the cultivation of digital tools. But I’d come to feel recently that the tools were using me. Not only was I feeling a sense of physical deprivation, living in a basement in Brooklyn and seeing more LED light than sunlight -- but I also felt a deprivation of spirit, a sense of being cut off from the pith of life, from the material immediacy of things, and trapped in a constant representation of reality, in the relentless creation of content.

I had become convinced that something about this way of life was deeply wrong. At the same time, I felt that utterly rejecting it, that unplugging altogether would be a kind of abandonment of the very world that needs saving -- that at least to some degree, one needs to be where the people are -- and where are they now, if not on their phones?

I came to Agape holding this contradiction, yearning to resolve the tension in me between the self-commodifying effects of content creation and the self-emptying call of Christ. Brayton Shanley, Agape’s cofounder, has written about how “the present moment”

is increasingly obscured by the omnipresence of devices designed to draw our attention away from it. The information economy makes a commodity out of our time, a commodity that is extracted from us in such a way that we struggle to access the eternity hidden within time, the stillness and silence of the moment.

The culture of life at Agape reflects this critique. One can feel the sort of penetration that digital devices make, when bringing them into a space that is so alive with the quiet intensity of the present.

Nonetheless, ironically, being on my laptop and my phone was the primary task for which I was called to Agape. My principal role was to promote the annual St. Francis Day event among new and younger folks who may be interested in the community -- and how to find such folks but by seeking them in the digital realm? I had found an Edenic refuge from the technological contexts that so afflicted me; yet I needed to constantly re-enter them, in order to spread the word about the possibility of another way. So, there I was, on my phone in paradise.

These tensions have led me to reflect on the concept of evangelization on social media, and in other forms of virtual encounter and informational exchange. If this is where the people are, isn’t this where we should try to spread the Good News -- the news that there exists a place of refuge, a way to recover the sacredness of life, a way to recover the present moment itself? St. Paul said, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22) -- so

would Paul have become an “influencer”?

In July 2024 Pope Francis approved the canonization process for Carlo Acutis, who will become the first millennial saint. Acutis, known for his online ministry of documenting eucharistic miracles and Marian apparitions, is sometimes called “God’s influencer,” and “the patron saint of the internet.”

What then is the difference between a mere Influencer and a true Evangelist? My own answer to this question began to reveal itself, thank God, during my time at Agape -- the kind of answer that changes the question itself, from a stark either-or in the head to a more embodied understanding in the heart.

The difference, as I came to understand it, is that the Evangelist is actually in relationship with the Good that the Good News is about. This is akin Plato’s distinction between the Sophist and the Philosopher -- the former being someone who has become skilled in cultivating the appearance of the Good, the latter being someone who has grasped the Good itself. And this grasping is not just the neutral acquisition of a concept but is ultimately a relationship with the person of the Good -- that is to say, God.

How did I find The Good at Agape? -- I found it in silence, and in material actions. I found it in the silence that I cultivated in the hermitage, in weeding and harvesting in the garden, in the clatter of dishes. In these material actions I glimpsed anew the Good itself, the opportunity to simply be, that primacy that underlies the gestures of self-representation into which our devices invite us. One incident in particular illustrates the distinction

between these realms.

I was making near-daily trips to the hermitage to pray and meditate, and on one occasion, having numerous writing tasks still to accomplish that day, I brought my laptop along to do a little work before coming back down the hill. It so happened that Brayton made his way up to the hermitage then as well, and he found me working there. The next day he pulled me aside and gently suggested that I not bring my laptop to the hermitage but treat it as a space of refuge.

At first, I felt that this was a little contradictory -- after all, was it not to type away at “God’s work” that I had brought my device along? But I came to feel that he was right -- and that precisely what I had forgotten in my years in Brooklyn, or perhaps never learned, was the art of taking refuge -- the cultivation of the desire to return home to the moment, to put away my discourse, to re-encounter that for the sake of which one speaks.

These technologies of discourse are not inherently accursed. As St. Paul also says, “all things are lawful for me, but I will not be used (*exousiazain*) by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). In order not to be used by our own tools, we must return, with ritual consistency, to our finite materiality, and to recover the silence that abides beneath our technologies of self-representation, even beneath the representational gesture of language itself. Grounded in that reality, we are all the more attuned to voice the radical call.

The radical call is not an advertisement

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Remembering Randy Kehler

By Brayton Shanley

One of the first things I discovered about Randy when I met him 30 years ago was that he hailed from the same part of the world that I grew up in, Westchester County, New York; he lived in Scarsdale, two towns north of my hometown of Pelham. These are well-to-do towns, and Scarsdale is almost a metaphor of a wealthy suburb of New York. It can seem to the children who are raised in such wealth that living in a mansion and going to the Country Club are normal.

Then I found out he went to Phillips Exeter Academy and on then to Harvard, the aura of elite privilege is intensified. But suddenly, two years out of Harvard, he burns his draft card in opposition to our war on Vietnam and spends two years in prison. Upon his release, Randy embarks on what kind of life? Simple-living, civil disobedience activism, and tax resistance.

How do you put together the hyper-privileged upbringing with radical simplicity and jail witness at age 24? Randy appeared to do this seamlessly as if his early years were a formation for the humble road he would take of simplicity and radical non-violence. It would be hard to spot in him any trace of entitlement which came out of the advantages of his youth. Instead, what you saw was simple goodness, with that frequent gentle smile, never campaigning for himself. His gifted intellect did shine consistently in the eloquence of his presentations, his deep and lively conversations, and his writing.

His active nonviolence seemed to be built on his spiritual life and love of meditation and spiritual practice. He was most known for his public witness for peace and jobs like National Coordinator of the National Nuclear Freeze Movement, while establishing Land Trusts as well as doing significant jail time. His last arrest was in his own living room for refusing to pay war taxes, and through it all, he always carried that peripatetic spirit of peace, gentle but intentional eye gaze and easy smile to accompany his unwavering, uncompromising commitment to his radical positions on peace.

His active nonviolence seemed to be built on what Buddhists might call “the inner revolution.” I believe he attained the required inner foundations for peace for all his nonviolent activism in the teachings and practices of Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Han, one of Randy’s spiritual guides. Be aware “Peace is every step” even when walking into the lion’s den of the IRS or Westover Air Force Base or Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant.

When I joined the witness of the “Colrain House,” Randy and Betsy’s home seized by the IRS for their refusal to pay war taxes, I was present for many of the 24-hour vigils. A couple who bought their seized house for about \$12,000, were living in

it surrounded by what seemed like a 24/7 vigil protesting this IRS takeover and resale. Randy came to me with a concerned look and said: “The situation here is getting very tense with the family and some of their supporters. I want you to make the rounds, see where there might be danger and potential violence in the couple’s friends or neighbors who don’t support us and be a peacekeeper. I do not want to be naïve about the real threat of violence here. We need to stay on top of it.” I could feel his tension, nerves constantly fraying on both sides.

These were the most volatile moments on the front lines that I ever experienced with Randy. Much of the stress of Colrain witness, an uncontrollable, and open-ended trial by fire for three years long years fell on Randy, his wife and Betsy and their twelve-year-old daughter, Lillian. Yet, that day, there remained a deep calm in Randy, as we walked together around the house trying to carry peace in the face of the obvious trouble brewing.

Randy’s passing leaves a huge void in my life. Because he was such an ongoing part of our life at Agape, such a soul mate, such a strong and beautiful example of living nonviolence, he is irreplaceable. What a love he was and how he was loved by Suzanne and me and legions more who admired and learned so much from his example.

Betsy and Randy

by Suzanne Belote Shanley

These two names were intertwined. When I began my tax resistance, I was inspired by the role of women like Betsy and Juanita Nelson, Randy, and Betsy’s mentor, along with Juanita’s husband, Wally. Betsy was a steady presence throughout the many years of the public attention over the Colrain house seizure, her steadfastness evident in the movie, “Call to Conscience.”

Randy gave Betsy and Juanita an uppermost place in his recognition that without both women guides and supporters, his life would not have shaped up the way it did. When I think of Betsy, I think of Randy. Together they offered sacred space for Juanita as she languished for years with dementia, and for Kip Mueller, and Betsy’s mother, both of whom died in their home. Randy and Betsy were expert caretakers doing the hidden work of love.

After Wally’s death, Randy faithfully brought Juanita to Agape every Francis Day, stooped yet strong, movingly planting a tree together on Agape land in honor of Wally and tax resisters nationally.

Betsy, a contemplative woman, opened her heart to me as she paced through the dilemma of raising a child in the whirlwind of public resistance. At Randy’s memorial service, mother and daughter shared their love for each other and for Randy in their family journey. The strong Divine Feminine shown in them both, as they wept and honored their husband and father.

Voices

In these days right after

by Meghan Breen

(excerpts from longer prose poem)

In these days right after, please don’t ask me to look for common ground.

Please don’t ask me to look for what unites us.

In these days right after, please don’t ask me to have hope or to look for the light or tell me we’ll get through this.

I have kids now who will not be kids in four years.

I have sadness now that so many people are OK with this and assisted in making this happen.

I have frustration now that so many people said yes. That nothing he said or did deterred them.

I have discomfort now that as a Catholic, I should be politically homeless, yet so many Catholics are declaring that their side is home.

I have anger now at Empire – the model of domination that both major parties espouse – that always leaves a trail of suffering and carnage.

I have grief now for the time wasted picking up the broken pieces of systems of oppression.

I have discouragement now that the breaking free from two corporate parties may not happen before irrevocable damage is done.

Meghan Breen graduated from Le Moyne College and Syracuse University and is a homeschooling/homesteading/herbalist mom of five kids, outside Albany, NY. Please find complete lamentation at: https://open.substack.com/pub/meghanbreen/p/in-these-days-right-after?r=15lqr&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

Francis Day

So much to be thankful for and so many things to continue to reflect upon/ consider/question. I left Agape feeling quite overwhelmed, not in a negative sense, but more like overwhelmed by the feeling of being called and not exactly knowing how to respond.

Over the day, I bounced between feeling stupefied and sincerely grateful at the Mystery that shapes our world and brings us together. The presence of the Spirit in our midst was almost overpowering, an extraordinary blessing to have found and been welcomed by Agape during this chapter of my life. I’ve just been sitting with this gratitude and trying to respond to it when maybe all there is to do is just bask in it.

Ryan O’Connell is a Fordham graduate and Jesuit volunteer who lives in Schenectady New York with his family.

An Agape Retreatant Reflects

It was a nice “homey” retreat such as I’ve never had before with the prayer together, the tasty food, and sharing of meals in between the silent times. I enjoyed the option of the hermitage, which I imagine is stuffed full of prayers from my predecessors – a Sacred Space – Prayer Power!

Plus, I think my father must be happy that I’ve finally seen a bit of the Quabbin Reservoir, at last – and with the autumn leaves still showing off.

Sr. Judianne Beltz, SND Congregation of Ipswich, MA

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but a call to conversion. “Advertisement” literally means turning-toward, a disruption of attention from one thing to another, whereas, “conversion” is a turning-with, an integrated movement of the whole self. What I must seek to cultivate in my digital sharing, going forward, is not a turning of others’ attention toward myself, but an example of my own conversion -- my meta-noia, this recent and ongoing change of my mind (Romans 12:2).

I write this, two days after the re-election of Donald Trump, feeling more than ever that while we cannot be indifferent to online conversations, our relationship to digital discourse must change. We must sanctify our spaces of discourse, grounded in this transformational attitude, and in the refuge that abides. We need a silence that is a substance, a silence that can cut through the noise, a silence that can be heard -- in other words, the Voice of God.

Dimly but daily, while I was at Agape, beneath all the promotion and fraught evangelization, beneath these conceptualizations that I now put in words, beneath my own self, that silent voice I heard.

Nathan Defour Oglesby, PhD is an educator and artist, whose work explores topics under the moniker, Nathanology, and who is involved with Agape and The New York Catholic Worker.

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of the world. This age-old routine of using or threatening violence on other nations cannot be relying on Jesus. This is not “love your enemies; pray for those who spitefully use you.” (Matt 5:38-48) We must return to the nonviolent God or perish as killers.

Life on Earth is Threatened Regardless of What Party is in Power

These times are dangerous and uncertain in ways we have never seen before in all of history. Our very existence as a human race is threatened by two realities: first is nuclear weapons that could end human life in a matter of hours.

We believe that the threat of nuclear war is so great that we would never use these weapons. But today, we are currently witnessing a kind of escalation of threat among several nuclear weapons’ countries which could result in a nuclear war. The problematic nations are the United States, Russia, China, and North Korea. Putin is threatening to use nuclear weapons around the Russian-Ukraine war.

The second issue is climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN body of 195 member governments tasked with assessing the science related to climate change, has studied the issues, and proposed a timetable for each

country to follow. First, each country needs to peak greenhouse gas emissions by 2025; then they must reduce GHG emissions by 40% by 2030 and reach net zero CO2 emissions around 2050.

Time to Pray, Love, and Resist

If we do not start reducing our greenhouse gas emissions on the timeline schedule, according to the IPCC findings, extreme weather will begin to make some parts of earth uninhabitable beginning sometime in the late 2030’s.

If governments, from their leaders down, can make necessary environmental policy happen and stay to the IPCC deadlines, and if they adopt crisis-driven policy and the funding incentives that encourage green energy, then the warming trends will begin to slow. Trump and his party of climate deniers, must be seen as a grave threat to the future of our country, humanity, and the natural world.

Therefore, we must resist and oppose everything the Republicans propose, i.e., “drill, baby, drill,” as if our lives depended on it – because they do. Resist the climate deniers and learn to live without fossil fuels is the only possible way we have for our own survival and for of earth’s inhabitants, all requiring healthy ecosystem to thrive into the future.

A Message of Hope

A monk friend reflected deeply on the question of how does a Christian relate to the climate change crisis, where even human survival is in question? His answer included numerous remarks, the totality of which are these:

“The climate crisis is a matter of my faith in God, that I have a complete trust in God. God loves us, loves all of creation. God loves Mother Earth, so somehow God is at the heart of the Earth. Will God not allow us all to collapse and die? I don’t know. All I know is God is good, and God loves. What would you do with somebody you love, would you let them perish? Perhaps God is a humble God, humble means Earthy. That is where we find the God of love, in the Earth with us all. If God is good and loves all of creation it transforms everything. We have to trust. What trust adds to confidence is love. We cherish Mother Earth, we care for her, we help one another to do that.”

All life in creation is given to us as Sacred. Yet we have treated creation like an “It” instead of a “Thou.” With violence we have desecrated ourselves and humanity and turned creation into a thing, reduced to a resource for our own needs instead of the Divine Source to be cherished. The God of Love desires us to become transformed by love and live. Are we ready to Trust?

News Notes

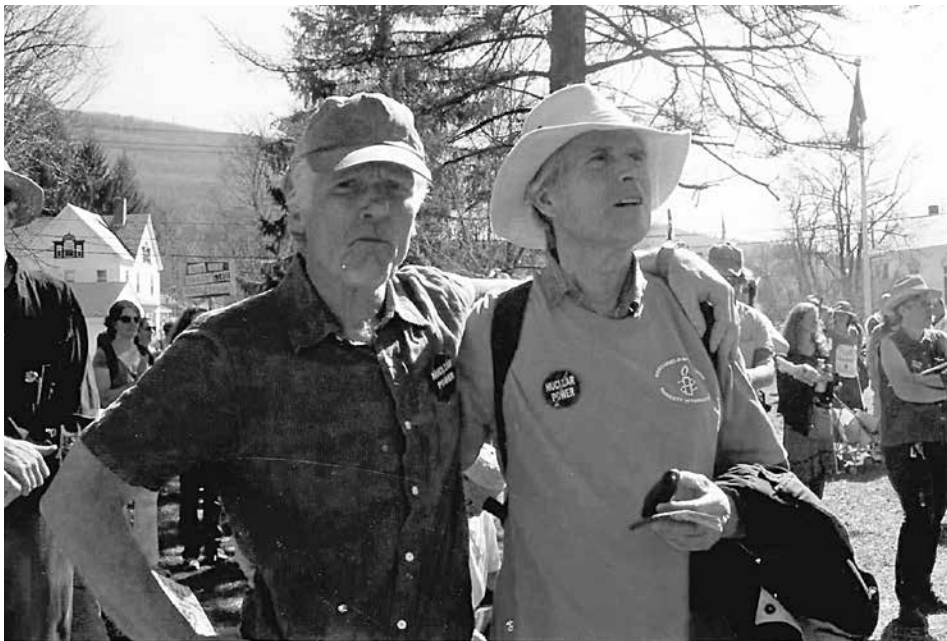
Urgent Need for Prayers for Agape Friends

Tara Wegener, wife of Bob Wegener, Agape's chief architect, member of Agape's Mission Council and Board, suffered a stroke during brain surgery for Parkinsons. Tara is currently at Spaulding Rehabilitation Center in Boston. **We pray for Tara's healing daily.**

Walter Wheeler, husband Teresa Wheeler, and father of Jeanelle Wheeler, both members of Agape's Mission Council, is in Mass General Hospital with severe pancreatitis. **We pray for Walter's healing daily.**



Katherine Escobar has been a regular at Agape since her retreat and workday visits as a student at St. Joseph's College, Long Island. She brought her boyfriend, sister and brother down and back for Francis Day, all smiles and good will.



Randy Kehler, on the right with Brayton before their arrest protesting nuclear power at the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant in Vermont. Our hearts go out to Randy's wife, Betsy and daughter, Lillian.

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In Memoriam

Mary Polom

March 20, 2024

Mary's last letter to Agape with her regular donation explains the vibrancy she brought to her devoted time at Agape. "I may see you at some Pax Christi event. I no longer drive at 97 – a family decision. I read in today's paper of a man who still drives at 105! Not generally recommended." Mary frequently put our petitions at Agape before her prayer group and was steadfastly committed to Jesus and nonviolence.

Mary Bennett

October 4, 2024

Mary was ever smiling, with a warm and affirming heart and hand, expanding compassion as a member of Agape's Mission Council Advisory Board. A strong environmentalist, she was a great affirmer of Agape's sustainable life. Her voice and smile will be with us always.

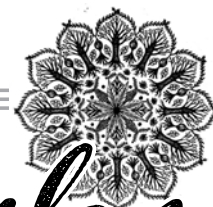
*Interns and Volunteers are welcome all year.
Call Agape for short and long-term residency opportunities.*



Michael Hardgrove and Rae Poole interns readying Agape winter wood



Gathered work day crew from Sirius and other communities and friends



Calendar

December 7, 5:30 pm

Advent Evening. Agape's oldest tradition, bonfire, reading from the prophets, chanting of Advent songs, Lighting the Advent wreath. Vegan Potluck to follow.

December 14

Yearly Agape Caroling with Mustard Seed and Catholic Worker Communities to nursing homes and shelter. Call Agape if you would like to join.

February 8, 2025

Celebrate the Feast of St. Brigid. Join this midwinter Celtic feast of poetry, prayer and song. Vegan pot-luck to follow.

Please remember Agape in your will and in estate planning as we hope that Agape's future will be sustained by the generosity of our supporters. Call Agape for details of how to forward bequest funds. We rely on our supporters in all things Agape.