

Agape: Call to Community

By SUZANNE BELOTE SHANLEY

Signals from the Other World appear in dreams and in moments of epiphany or restlessness, and I am often not certain why. The notion of epiphany intoxicated me while I was teaching James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as did my study of Carl Jung's dream archetypes. So, I was not totally surprised when Philip Berrigan appeared to me on a sleepless, but not dreamless night, wearing the dark blue and green plaid shirt he wore at Simmons College where I taught in the 1970s. In a circle of people who were eager to confer an award on him, he lifted his hands in dismissal—palms out, message undeniable: "No," but with a shrug. Phil's dedicated life to communities of resistance and faith deserved, in his thinking, no special acknowledgment. He was responding to the call of the revolutionary Jesus.

The French *des choses, trouvées* call found things. And what a thing "I found," when I opened my sheaf of poems, written thirty years ago in the early years of my participation in Ailanthus, a resistance community, which was part of the Atlantic Life Community (ALC). Out fell a letter, dated 1983, addressed to the ALC, from Elizabeth McAlister. At the time of the "found" letter, I had been reading the new collection of Phil Berrigan's letters by Brad Wolf, *The Ministry of Risk*. Liz and Phil's letters took me back to the charged energy of the 60s and 70s and the strong pull to join the tribe of the emerging Catholic radicals. In 1983, Liz wrote of the harvest being rich, but the laborers few at Jonah House. With wince-provoking clarity, she truthfully asked: where is everybody?

A group of Agape post-grads, observed something similar, decades later: "We come to Agape in the Hardwick woods with the mythic landscape and trees planted to memorialize our nonviolent heritage. We come alive, are inspired, fueled up, on fire. We prayed at

the tree with Dave Dellinger's ashes, and to those dedicated to Indigenous people, African American men in prison, Wally and Juanita Nelson, grandparents of the tax resistance movement and Agape soul-friends. Then after the 'launch,' we go out into the world. We stayed there. We never really land anywhere but inside the culture."

Several years ago, members of an Agape formed group of college and post-grad members called The Creatively Maladjusted (after the title of an essay by Martin Luther King Jr.) had a rigorous exchange about commitment, one of them heatedly asking: "Why don't we land somewhere? Root somewhere? Why do we talk and talk? For God's sake, let's just do something for a change." King's warning was to beware of becoming well-adjusted to injustice and cultural values; rather become creatively maladjusted. King's prophetic challenge weighed heavily on these faith-convicted, service oriented young people who were pursuing advanced degrees in areas of medicine, law and theology. Their anguish was palpable. They chose King's phrase as their group logo. They felt trapped by loans, by expectations of meritocracy, and existential angst manifesting as a psychic wound. They genuinely longed to be maladjusted.

How do we of the elder generation of peacemakers meet our rising generation of Jesus inspired nonviolent believers? What is the something that we collectively feel called and moved to do and be? We have planted trees over the past twenty-five years at Agape to commemorate people and places, wars and their victims, anti-racist prophets. Jim Robinson, member of Agape's Mission Council, commented on the tree pilgrimage: "It displays Agape's rootedness in a wider web of people and communities committed to eco-social transformation." Dave Dellinger's ashes are buried here at his wife, Elizabeth Petersen's request, under a now thriving walnut tree. Other trees planted at Agape are rooted in the sacred Nipmuc landscape where Chief Arvol Looking Horse of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota nation, in Agape's holy silence, uttered his prophecy: "All nations should come together at their sacred places and unify with us in prayer." A weeping blue atlas cedar blessed by David Tall Pine White, was planted in honor of the Nipmuc tribes who inhabited the land encompassing Agape.

Jeremiah's prophetic verse reminds us that we too are metaphorically trees, "planted by the water that sends out its roots in the stream. It

does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green." (Jer. 17:8) These trees and the solemn procession we invite people to take to them memorialize the land, the past, the present, the significance of place, the need for the protection of the earth, its creatures. Further, the trees with their accompanying plaques pay homage to those who have gone before us, as we invite pilgrims to take steps to reverse climate change by living on the land in sustainable communities.

"After we launch, how do we land?" This reality of harvesting, numbers, laborers, landers, has become a mantra among some of us Wisdom Keepers, (a phrase a young person told me is a Native term of respect for elders) who have landed and stayed. In conversation with other elder community landers, we comment to each other: What will the next generation make of the nonviolent lineage? What will be the legacy that lasts, changes, yet remains rooted for those of us who follow him, in the nonviolent, Jesus? We have been told by young travelers to Agape that the realities of the culture, the monetary instability, the heavy burden of fulfilling the expectations of others, made them "risk averse," more willing to have one foot in, and one foot out of the culture. How can we assist in aiding them see that the path of non-violence is a "ministry of risk," as penned by Phil Berrigan, and that it is not meant to be taken alone, but in solidarity.

Agape Community 2024

It is August 2024, and the world has changed drastically, since the founding days of Agape in the 80s. Or has it? Wars, wars, wars. Empire crumbling, and after forty-two years of Agape community life, five years prior to Agape with ALC, Liz McAlister's call in the 1983 letter seems as relevant as ever: "If you have any wisdom to share with us, know it is welcome." This search for shared vision came to me in my pondering about the future of community.

In my search for "signs and wonders," I am struck by a phrase that surfaces in my soul: Keepers of the Flame. How do we keep the flame lit? What do today's seekers want from us as together we carry the flame? This year we grounded the annual Francis day with the theme "Community of Communities" as we allowed the next generation of leaders to guide us through the day. It started with a sacred fire ceremony in the Blackfoot tradition, involving a pipe, a whistle, sage and other elements. This ritual was led by Nicole Shining from the East Hunt and Rick (last name) After this, we were led through the traditional Muslim call to prayer by (names). Sam Ashmankas offered St. Francis's "Canticle of Creation." Jim Robinson offered a reflection on the call to foster sacred fires around which we can build up the community of communities while resisting the desecrating fires brought about by militarism and climate change. Nathan Dufour Oglesby led us in an eco-themed freestyle as well as a "roll call" of all of the various communities gathered. We then moved from the sacred fire to the tent, where three panels were held. The first was on the theme of urban and rural eco-justice, which included Nicole BH, Dior, Edgar, Ann, and Fiona.

During lunchtime, while people were making connections and talking to one another, some joined Skip Shiel in the chapel as he discussed his photography exhibition, titled "The Ongoing and Relentless Nakba." We then entered into a contemplative moment led by Brayton followed by a chant led by Ven. Katoshonin and Sr. Claire of the Peace Pagoda. Then, we moved into a presentation on Palestinian liberation which featured Rev. Chelsea MacMillan, Marisa Hulstine, Collin Pugh, and Skip Shiel. Our final panel, on next generation people seeking community, was moderated by Sam Ashmankas and featured Nikko Joyce, Ben S, Scott Duffy, and Jeanelle Wheeler. After this panel, we went back over to the sacred fire, which has been tended throughout the day by Lucas Pasquina. Dior St. Hilarie performed two raps, and then Suzanne Belote Shanley led us in a closing reflection. During the reflection Suzanne invited Chief Timothy (full name) to lead everyone assembled in a chant. We all held hands in



Ade Bethune

a large circle as he chanted and offered a closing reflection. We are still warmed by the sustaining fire here in Hardwick, and all those who tend to it in various ways.

A Radical, Nonviolent Call

In our search for new laborers in the Agape vineyard, we do not search alone. The core Agape community consists of Edgar Hayes and Ann Rader, who galvanized what they learned at Agape in the 80s and launched their own model, Freedom Farm. As a bi-racial couple, they give impetus to the ongoing question of why our peace communities are so white. We are constantly pondering what is missing in our call that doesn't attract sisters and brothers of color to the launch pad?

Agape's non-residential core community is strong, but the long-term laborers are few. James Robinson, an Agape Mission Council and Soul Board member, has been networking, inspiring and landing the rising generation of friends at the NYCW, for connections to the Maurin-like paradigm of city-country alliances.

We have stayed rooted in resistance as we link with our war tax resistance communities nationally, and when we are able, to the Atlantic Life Community. We are dwellers in tradition, in the realm of the nonviolent lineage, about which Gandhi said: "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try to experiment in both on as vast a scale as I could." In this sense, "old" takes on a new meaning for those of us aging out, moving into the final stages of our lives. Old is new; new is old, and the duality conundrum raises the spiritual ante to a new level of thinking: What is the scale, the measure of our experiment, our call, from Jesus to Dorothy, from Gandhi to the Conscientious Objectors to the Gaza genocide? Such questions transcend categories of young and old, moving us to insight and prayer as to where we want to land.

At Agape's launch pad in 1989, one of our keynote speakers was Tom Cornell. Others were Fr. Richard McSorley, Michael True and, our leader of the day, Sr. Jane Morrissey, with a guest appearance of Sr. MaryAnne Guertin, portraying in real time the spirit of Dorothy Day. Then Bishop Timothy Harrington of the Diocese of Worcester, celebrated Mass and gave an iconoclastic homily about the need for prophetic communities. We have given our lives to the Maurin back-to-the land inspired vision of a place for scholars, farmers, wood cutters and stackers (and do we ever need them now to prepare for winter), teachers and vegetable steamers and freezers, country livers who relate to the city, risk-takers, war tax refusers who might want to launch. We are reaching out and saying as Jesus did: "Come and See." We are in the care of the spirits of nonviolent past, present and future. Your coming may be a movement in the direction of new leadership, the writing of a new gospel: "The Harvest is Rich, and the Laborers are Abundant, Overflowing."

Please see Agape's website: www.agapecommunity.org for Agape's Invitation to respond to the "Call to Community" by becoming a resident member at Agape. ❖

Praise for the Gift of Your Son

Leader: In your unceasing desire to bring us into communion with you, you sent us the gift of your Son, Jesus. His birth was first announced to shepherds keeping watch in the fields where they lived. Do not be afraid, an angel told them, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people, glory to God in the highest, peace on Earth. Peace was your first hope for the human family. But we, reaching for the fruit of the wrong tree, chose greed over care for creation, domination over service, retaliation over forgiveness, and fell into an abyss of harm and violence, infliction of suffering without end. By your Spirit, through your Son, you were eternally born into the world to bring us the healing knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins: a dawn from on high to shine on those who dwell in the shadow of death and guide our feet into the way of peace. And so, joining with all your angels and saints, we sing your praise.

All: Glory to God in the highest.

Excerpt from "A Eucharistic Celebration of Gospel Nonviolence"

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Artist Unknown