

The Servant Song

Volume 34, No. 1 - FALL 2026

The New Era for Servant Song

Interview with Brayton and Suzanne by Liam Myers

Liam: I'm thinking about what transition and change mean and how they are a constant part of all our lives. Considering the transitions or changes within the Catholic Church, or any organization, or community, I would like to talk about what is manifesting at Agape with the community journal, *Servant Song*. First, I want to ask, what came before you started Agape? What came before Servant Song, or how you transitioned into the broader peace movement of which Agape is part?

Suzanne: Life before *Servant Song* and Agape while it was unfolding seemed like a strong "calling." When Brayton and I met, I was teaching at Simmons College in Boston, aiming for a PhD in English. In 1978 Brayton and I met Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister. That meeting was the key motivator and life-changer as we were already wanting to leave the conventional ties to family and career, and to live more fully, a life in opposition to violence. Jesus as the central teacher and theme pulled us close, both of us exploring Quaker meeting, while not leaving our Catholic roots.

Brayton: The world looked precarious in the late 1970's. The arms race between the Soviet Union and the US unmasked the madness of two nuclear superpowers escalating threats about who was Number 1. With omnicide becoming an increasingly possibility, Suzanne and I felt we had to do something significant, like leaving our jobs and working for peace full-time. My job was that of a coordinator of an alternative educational non-profit in Boston. Suzanne and my grounding as Catholic Christians in the nonviolent Jesus were already involved with Quaker activists, The Buddhist Peace Pagoda and Atlantic Life Community, a band of small Christian pacifists dedicated to nuclear weapons resistance.

After joining this New England wide interfaith peace movement in 1978, we eventually began Agape in 1982, creating a mailing list of 800, our model for seeking the financial support of the wider peace community in opposition to nuclear weapons to all war and violence.

Liam: I want to ask about the relationship between Agape Community and *Servant Song* now, and what was the inspiration for starting the newspaper in those early years?

Brayton: Gandhi said, "You can't have a revolution without a printing press." He meant that you must get your tracts out, hand out your leaflets, and build a constituency of nonviolent love. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus commands us to go forth and make disciples of all nations in the name of our Abba God, the Son and Holy Spirit. Today at Agape, we have about 1,500 faithful readers of Servant Song, who are eager to receive news of a residential, pacifist, Catholic Community. Most of our local Servant Song readers attend our events and pray for us as we seek to transform this war-weary world. We began Servant Song in 1990, after we opened our community in Hardwick, MA and are now in our 36th year of publication.

Suzanne: Our opposition to the Death Penalty was another inspiration. In 1985, when Billy Neal Moore was on death row in Georgia, we found out that he had only 48 or 72 hours before his execution. We established a relationship with Billy, leading to our visiting him on Death Row. This is where Servant Song comes in as a vehicle for Agape's Anti-Death Penalty work as a financial support base for Billy and the community

Liam: When you're thinking about putting together an issue or writing an article, how does knowing your audience and the people that you're connected with influence what you're writing about?

Brayton: We encourage alternative living topics, including nonviolent resisting, living simply close to the land. Also, we pick socially relevant topics, like endless war, our unstable government at the top, and the need for many different forms of resistance. Suzanne and I are

Agitator, relinquished editorial control over the paper. It's not just transition, but an existential moment, and emotional for me to read about as Jeff and his wife, Catherine Morris, were passing the baton.

Liam: Can you speak to that process of "doing" Servant Song, in terms of who you ask to write? How do you approach that?

Brayton: For the past 36 years, our *Servant Songs* have had Suzanne and me as feature writers, with a contributing guest writer. We have

Liam: Francis Day 2025 was led primarily by the next generation. How did you feel about the role that you had in the day?

Suzanne: I was overjoyed by my hands off role in last year's Francis Day though there is always the prep work that is behind the scenes. Biblically speaking, and with the personal reality of aging, I feel it's important that I decrease and that Jesus and Agape's rising generation increase. People grow old, and younger people take over. Now Brayton and I are entering into a different context, one of diminishment, but not relinquishment in that we will continue to be a part of Agape. It is a strange feeling.

Brayton: The reality is that our generation has run its course in essential ways. We who came of age in the 60's and 70's can still teach and write, still be elders, have a presence in the community. We can still enjoy the hospitality of our community while the world is changing quickly and drastically. The natural cycle of life is that we gradually hand over the facilitating and teaching of Agape programs. We will be writing about these changes and the generational transition. For Agape, this includes continuing *Servant Song* and publishing it into the future.

Suzanne: Jim Robinson, a Mission Council and Board member, speaks of *Servant Song* as a sacred paper. It's the memory. It's remembering. It's the collective history of a moment in time of lay Catholic community. And certainly, it's changing and has changed, but it also is a repository of what I think we call nonviolent Christian Nonviolent lineage, or legacy.

Liam: What do you think about that whole landscape that we're within now with social media, AI, etc., and what role do you see, for yourselves?

Brayton: People of all ages tell us invariably that they get into conversations at Agape more deeply than they do anywhere else in the world. So why is it? A next generation woman said, "It is because at Agape people are not staring at their phones." Again, conversations are allowed to go deeper and longer. And, so that's what, I think, that Agape represents. The newspaper tries to accomplish that in a physical way.

Liam: To me, it's a big generational thing with technology. My life has been totally formed by technology, memories are entangled with technology, creating a generational gap. Young people are realizing that things are bleak online in tandem to where they were even six months ago.

Brayton: There's a revolution in embryo to become more analogue, to put the phone down. Many teachers are eliminating AI plagiarism with no phones in class by teaching writing and other subjects with paper and pencil in class. Some are eliminating homework. The educational process includes face to face with students learning from each other in small groups.

Liam: People say they have the deepest conversations at Agape; I gather that there are not many places for young people to commit not to use technology. It's quite another thing to have a community committed to that.

Brayton: But it is true, and I always say as gently as I can, that if you want the Agape experience, with more of the 5 senses engaged in direct experience not the indirect experience of technology, you won't get it if you're on your phone. Generation Z folks have a harder time living without the phone as they got their phones earlier in their lives, sometimes at age 5 or 6. But most we talk to agree the phones are just making them depressed and anxious.



SAVE THE DATE!
AGAPE'S ANNUAL FRANCIS DAY
Sat., Oct. 3rd, 2026 | 10am-5pm
"Instruments of Peace"
With Shane Claiborne, visionary
Co-Director of Red Letter Christians,
Claiborne's Divine Obedience has led to
recent arrests at the Capitol in D.C. with
interfaith leaders.
In collaboration with Pax Christi MA • Just Faith • Nehemiah Ministries •
MA Catholics for Indigenous Rights • End Palestine Genocide Task Force
RSVP: peace@agapecommunity.org

members of the war tax resistance network nationally.

I can't imagine living this Agape life and not writing about it. It's the love of the game. It's a satisfying and exciting process pulling together an edition of the newspaper, seeing it come together, bringing in new writers. Our readers often say reading *Servant Song* gives them hope. Will we remain a hard copy newspaper, an analogue publication in the digital world? That will be determined by the next generation.

Suzanne: The thought that Brayton and I won't be doing *Servant Song* forever is startling yet a needed reality. In a sense, we will be distancing ourselves from the people who read Servant Song, our audience, our friends. I was struck when Jeff Deitrich, the co-founder of the LA Catholic Worker, and editor of The Catholic

three major feature articles, usually by Suzanne, me and a contributing guest writer as we comment on the social questions of the day: war, the environment, prevailing violence of American culture, women's role in the church, contemplative life, nonviolent theology and practice. Shorter articles cover what people, especially our younger writers, experience here in community life when participating in Agape events or nonviolent actions. They often write about the kind of world they want to see as they grow into adulthood. This summer issue 2026 will be different. Some members of our Mission Council are taking steps to assume major responsibility for writing and publishing *Servant Song*, offering their articles, along with 3 guest writers who expand on how to survive in these times of Empire collapsing.

Take Heart, Amid Astonishing Destruction

by Art George

Take heart. Be saddened, dismayed, but neither distraught nor despairing over tragic world events. The world is turned upside down. Things that seemed to offer promise: solar power, wind power, scientific research, oceanic research, even the Weather Bureau!, access to voting, D.E.I. as foundational as “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence, are tossed aside as if they do not matter. In their place, warfare, a distant empire adventuring to Greenland, Iran, inflicting destruction, a rogue terrorist state, which is not us, but uses our name: U.S.

ICE raids on our streets, masked agents grabbing people at random. We tell ourselves that’s what happens in other countries, but not here. Surprise!: now here. Svetlana Kirilenko told Tony Soprano in that mobster TV series: “That’s the trouble with Americans, you expect nothing bad to happen, when the rest of the world expects only bad things to happen, and they are not disappointed.” So now our turn to join the rest of the world in bad things happening – even if not yet directly upon us. Buildings not crumbling on our families, still happening far away. None of this is new, we are simply experiencing it for ourselves for the first time, magnified by the enhanced power of media and rhetoric.

The ferocity is astonishing. Watch the news if you can, if you choose to, or better yet, not. Sadistic fantasies, and masochistic as well: how much suffering can a people absorb? How much insatiable appetite is there to inflict and absorb more pain, death? And why?

Each side shapes its numbers to minimize losses, enhance claimed successes, commemorating and glorifying its sacrifice and commitment. The level of destruction is astonishing, staggering. One think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has called these numbers “extraordinary.” Indeed, as if a word can sum them up – and yet the nameless humans comprising those numbers are never identified. Nor those buried under rubble or dying of malnutrition and famine.

Beyond these names and dates and events are human beings, who had mothers and fathers and siblings, and names: individuals, people, who died, who were known to family and friends. Yet we think of them, if at all, impersonally as numbers, counting the devastation, numbers standing as monuments to tragedy, or heroism, or history, however you choose.

We were schooled to be knowledgeable about current events, yet that did not seem to foretell watching live action of international slaughter. Meanwhile, 1,500 ships on a given day sit idle in the Persian Gulf / Straits of Hormuz. Who knew there was such traffic? Who knew of Hormuz if at all as more than an elbow-bend of Mideast geography? The global economy....

Plenty of evil to go around; always has been. Nothing new. Just different, or more of the same. In Isaiah 1:23: princes corrupt, rebels, partners with thieves, lovers of bribes. Psalm 38:7-8: The world in angry turmoil. Matthew 6:34: Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, each day plenty enough trouble of its own.

But one may take heart, remain engaged, beyond the performative illusions of “diplomacy” – peace not even discussed, as only ceasefires are hoped for. The Trappist contemplative Thomas Merton wrote that one must keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers, that these are largely fabrications and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics: the human dimension which politics pretends to claim unto itself, but in which the human dimension is lost.

We study events in history in high school and college and give them names. Pick among many: the American Civil War, World Wars One and Two, Shakespeare’s Henry V in the Hundred Years War, the rise and fall

of the Roman Empire. How exactly does the Jesus of Bethlehem become the Christianity that is Roman Catholic and the Holy Roman Empire that ruled central Europe with lords and vassals and serfs and castles?

Merton saw this as the path of history, continuous dismemberment of the body of Christ. “In the whole world, throughout the whole of history, Christ suffers dismemberment... All over the face of the earth the avarice and lust of men breed unceasing divisions among them, and the wounds that tear men from union with one another widen and open out into huge wars, murder, massacres... Christ is massacred in His members, torn limb from limb.” Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that “only love – which means humility – can exorcise the fear which is at the root of all war.” But what about fear’s opposites?: glory, heroism, a willingness and enthusiasm to die for a cause



– actually, not rhetorically. “Live free or die” is the state motto of New Hampshire. Even Martin Luther King said that if one has nothing worth dying for, one has nothing worth living for. Always the invitation, even the aspiration, for death...

The Russian writer Anton Chekhov said that the task is to state the problem clearly. Solutions are elusive; history provides only temporary pauses in its forward, or backward, march. The theologian Cornel West tells us too that suffering is nothing new. A Black man, who orates in the rhythms of jazz, West finds the statement of the problem in the nature of the music of the blues: personal catastrophe, lyrically expressed. Chekhov, he says, forces us to wrestle with inescapable disillusionment, disappointment, disastrous events, yet compassionately endure the nobility of who and what we are, to look at the absurdity of so much history, and still sustain ourselves as struggling, shuddering, suffering agents in the world.

To sustain is to remain engaged, beyond enraged. Mere protest is too easy a default mechanism, feel-good echo chambers of the like-minded, while a juggernaut of force that takes on a life, or death, of its own grinds on. Thoughtful action is an antidote, even as made more difficult by wars that are mindless, senseless, without even any logic with

which one could rationally disagree.

Phil Klay is a Dartmouth grad and Marine veteran and author of *Uncertain Ground: Citizenship In An Age of Endless, Invisible War* (Penguin Random House, 2022), who has seen combat, and cannot comprehend today’s destruction. As he told The New York Times: “I don’t know what other option there is on a personal level than to get on one’s knees and beg for forgiveness. We’re so unequal to the challenges of the world that we nevertheless have a responsibility for. The current conflicts: one is just stupefied by the horror of it. It’s completely shattering. It is.”

C.S. Lewis wrote that he prayed because he could not help himself. “I pray because I am helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time...” Consider the awfulness and the awe-fullness. The commitment of arms and material to the tasks of war alone (food, water, and now fuel; aircraft carriers

teration between night and day, the formation of clouds and rain: flowers, trees, grain; even by the provision of need so that we may serve others.

The arc of Judeo-Christianity, from the Old Testament to the New, but not unique to this religion alone, ideally offers the rise of humanity from barbarism, the aspiration for something else, the path toward civilization. Isaiah 43:18-19: Forget the former things, do not dwell in the past. I am doing a new thing. I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Phillipians 3:13-14: forgetting what is behind and struggling toward what is ahead. 1 Thessalonians 5:11: encourage each other and build each other up. And this is all as other forces work against us. Colossians 2:6-8: See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.

Leonard Cohen said that the Biblical landscape was familiar to him, so that he used such landmarks as references. “Once they were universal experiences and everybody understood and knew them and located them. That’s no longer the case today but it is still my landscape. At our best we inhabit a biblical landscape and this is where we should situate ourselves without apology.”

Bob Dylan, for all his rebellious pose, has written that “gospel news is exemplary. You can pace your life accordingly, or try to anyway. There are theories of truth in gospel but to most people it’s unimportant. Their lives are lived out with too many bad influences. Sex and politics and murder is the way to go if you want to get people’s attention. It excites us, that’s the problem.”

And thus we have movie and music stars, amid the inflated Donald Trump and associates, offering political opinions, that we should follow because we follow them. Stadiums worship the spectacles of Mick Jagger, Taylor Swift, Bruce Springsteen, or the more benign Paul McCartney; or football, or NASCAR, driving in circles burning fuel we go to war for. Not evil on its face, but weird, to be sure. Is there any humility in any of this, as Merton sought? No reason not to enjoy oneself, but where is the balance toward higher values? James 1:27: Look after orphans and widows in their distress, and keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Do not indulge in being horrified. Do not use the word too easily. Many things are bad: words such as disaster are to be saved for exactly that, and when disaster befalls, all bets are off. One can be saddened, but look closely, rather than recoil in horror.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote of the stages of grief for those facing profound loss, significantly of personal death. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. We may go through each of these as we confront and mourn the decline of the American Experiment, of “democracy,” the perversions of a stumbling empire reduced to feeding on itself but voraciously devouring other countries and peoples, not caring on the harm caused abroad and at home.

Thus we should not be shocked, surprised, or depressed and immobilized by this madness. It is not even really about Donald Trump; he is just a performer albeit with power, an available piñata that we swing at blindly like exasperated children. The madness is in what creates a Donald Trump, that of all the possible ways to be in the world one would choose that.

We cannot expect to change the world, but we can make our contribution to it. Expecting change, demanding our change, is our arrogance in action, different only in exponential degree to another’s arrogant demands. Yet we can speak, from the guideposts that have been left for us, and, as Leonard Cohen suggested, situate ourselves there without apology.

Art George, a lawyer and journalist, traveled with Brayton to India and Nepal in 1972 and continue communicating in the never-ending journey.

What Will It Take?

by Edgar Hayes

“A transition is a change from one thing to the next, either in action or state of being.” - vocabulary.com

What will it take for America to transition from its racist, White-centered, scarcity mindset state to a more humane-centered, inclusive, diverse, abundance focused mindset? How long must the charade, the farce, the lie of race dominate the discourse and life of this country?

Since the birth of this nation, race has been propped up by junk science, junk intellectual thinkers, junk periodical writers, false preachers, false teachers, and false leaders who denied land access, dignity, and humanity to Africans and indigenous peoples.

We’d rather shut our eyes, hold our ears and close our mouths to the horrors that have been exacted upon an oppressed people than deal with it. Yes, the theft of indigenous land was a long time ago. Yes, the enslavement period was a long time ago, but the ripples of an evil system still perpetuate to this day.

Even now, as almost half a million Black women have lost their jobs, Affirmative Action has become a byword; diversity-equity-and inclusion programs have been dismantled; DEI has become synonymous with Black; overly qualified soldiers have been kicked out of the military while racist- insurrectionist-traitor names have returned to army bases; Sections 4, 5, and now Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act have been made obsolete, and political (stop lying it’s actually racial) gerrymandering is the new expression of it, which is leading to the dissolution of Black representation. Project 2025 is in full swing with no accountability. Is this really who America is? Is this really what America wants?



Right now, we are at another crisis point, a fork in the road. Do we continue down the racist path of White supremacy, or the path God has chosen for us. We’ve been here many times before and have chosen the wrong path. The Reconstruction period was a way to course correct the enslavement period, but the authors of Jim and Jane Crow segregation wanted otherwise. The GI Bill was created to help ALL veterans returning from WWII, but most Black soldiers who fought for this country were denied its privileges.

At the same time, the FHA (government led) systematically denied African Americans low interest loans to purchase a new home (Redlining) and encouraged restrictive covenants (among other things) to keep African Americans away from newly created suburban and urban opportunities. Insurance companies, real estate agents, appraisers, banks, the police, judges, federal, state, and local government policy-

makers, housing associations, mortgage companies, thrift institutions, housing developers, and the federal reserve board ALL took part in the racist discriminatory practice against African Americans.

This was the beginning formation of the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites because wealth began to be tied to your home. America chose the path of racism. Yet God was not done with her yet.

Another opportunity for course correction came in the form of the Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights Act of ‘64 and the Voting Rights Act of ‘65 were created to bring teeth and accountability to laws that were already on the books since Reconstruction. This was the first time where America could say: “We are going to try this democracy thing where all are uplifted.”

Yet in the end, America chose Whiteness again. The killing of George Floyd,

Breanna Taylor, and Amaud Arbery (among many other people) began to open the eyes of the blind to racist systems. But America said: “Go back to sleep. Woke is dead.”

Now here we are again, asked to make the same choice. Should we choose the path of Whiteness and return to the days of Jim Crow (read up on Supreme Court decisions) and pre-Civil War era (listen to state senate leaders’ hope for an end to the 14th Amendment)? Or will we finally heed the warnings and Word of God to choose humanity over racism? What transition will America choose this time? What will you choose?

Edgar Hayes, a retired New York City firefighter, preacher, and farmer, co-founded Freedom Farm Community, a faith-based intentional community, in Mount Hope, New York in 2006 with his wife, Ann Rader.

Magnifica Humanitas and the Digital Transition

by Nathan Dufur Oglesby

At the time of this writing, Pope Leo XIV’s long-anticipated encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* is being read, shared and discussed with immense popular interest, not only because it articulates an incisive Roman Catholic perspective on artificial intelligence, but because it attempts to respond holistically to a question to which so many – Catholic and non-Catholic, religiously identifying and otherwise – are yearning for an authoritative answer: how are we to live in this digital age?

It was in seeking my own answer to this question that I first came to Agape a few years ago. I’d devoted much of my early thirties to a career in content creation, making songs and videos about philosophy and ecological activism — and my first stint at Agape offered me an opportunity to trade life on the internet for life on the land, as I explored in my first article for *Servant Song*.

Since that time there has been an explosion of discourse about the complex relationship between faith and technology. The Catholic Church has seen a recent surge in converts among Gen Z, a phenomenon that is inseparable from the increasing prominence of Catholic content on social media, and the rise of prayer apps and other “faith tech” — including, in spite of the Pope’s critical attitude, numerous Catholic AI chatbots.

Inspired by the recent encyclical, the culture of online Catholicism is abuzz with talk of AI resistance, while at the same time continuing to operate in precisely the digital spaces that feed into the larger problem. It is a moment of digitally-mediated religious exuberance, full of potential and paradox.

Now, as Agape faces its own crises of tran-

sition, it confronts questions that are a microcosm of these larger dynamics: how should we, as a community, engage with digital space? And as we discern our generational transition as a community, what wisdom can *Magnifica Humanitas* offer us?

While most directly concerned with the economic and sociological problems that attend AI itself, *Magnifica Humanitas* also broadly addresses what it calls the “digital transition” — this moment in which the Church, and the world at large, are transitioning into “digital environments”. The implication is that digital technologies are not only helpful-but-harmful tools, but constitute genuine spaces in which human experience occurs.

As the text emphasizes, the problem with these spaces is not in the nature of the digital itself, but who owns it — the few companies that control the major artificial intelligence platforms, and the social media networks and search engines from which our data is harvested to power them. Because digital space is inherently commodified, it runs the risk of commodifying people.

Thus the digital transition requires us to develop, as the Pope argues, an “ecology of communication”, one that is related to the integral ecology emphasized by his predecessor. He implicitly invites us to imagine a more communitarian internet, the same way other luminaries of our own tradition like Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin have invited us to imagine more just approaches to land, property and economic relations in physical space.

But how are these spaces related? How does an ecology of communication actually embed us more coherently in the soil, in the embodied works of mercy, in the mystery of the here and now?

Some readers of the encyclical, myself included, have been of two minds about it — on the one hand, it is thoroughly incisive about these economic imbalances; on the other, could it have been more direct about what the faithful can actually do about it?

One of the great ambivalent strengths of Roman Catholicism is its ability to enjoin extremely, even absurdly tangible prohibitions on its faithful — “don’t use contraception!” — “do observe days of obligation!” But one thing the encyclical doesn’t do is give a clear directive of how, or whether, to use AI.

Given the morally fraught nature of the technology, couldn’t this have been the moment when Catholics were asked to simply “say no” to AI the same way they were asked to “say no” to certain medical technologies in Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*? If ever there were a time for a clear and simple no, wouldn’t this be it?

I am sympathetic with this critique, and have extremely strong reservations about the use of AI myself. At the same time, like other dimensions of Leo XIV’s pontificate, I do think the encyclical captures the nuance and complexity that is needful in confronting this digital transition — pernicious as they can be, digital media give shape and fabric to the lives of so many today, particularly young people. If this digitization is to be resisted, one of the front lines of that resistance must be the digital medium itself.

In some ways Christianity has always been in tension with its media, the imperfect means through which it must express its transcendent message — the tension between the old order and the new, the spirit and the letter, the sign and the ineffable reality of which it is a sign.

Engaging with such ambiguities is precisely what Pope Leo XIV’s *Magnifica Humanitas*

invites its readers to do: not to flee from digital space, but to “disarm” its tendencies to domination and self-commodification. Inspired by the encyclical, a current viral trend among many Catholic influencers is the virulent critique of AI, as creators creatively proclaim their refusal to use it — a fascinating case of a digitally-mediated rejection of digital technology. This connects these online Catholics with other current “Neo-Luddite” youth movements that resist digital excess.

This implies a route from the online realm to the realm of embodiment precisely through the culture of digital Christianity that is so often blamed for being shallow, and merely “performative”. Getting “trad-Cath”-pilled online — even if it does start out as an aestheticized identity performance — does become meaningful if it becomes a kind of gateway to more radical paths of action.

Agape’s internet presence is not large or significant, but it does have a certain power of its own by virtue of its very humility. Rin in the office is helping Suzanne manage these things, and this is how many of our recent interns and prospective new community members have found us.

Can the growing culture of digital Catholicism be tapped to provide a pipeline to materially embedded communities like ours, to transition them from that digital environment to this embodied one? Finding out whether that’s possible is a good reason to be on the internet.

Nathan Dufour Oglesby is an educator, songwriter and video artist who works closely with Agape Community and the New York Catholic Worker. He holds a PhD in Classics, teaches at Hunter College, and is currently pursuing an MDiv at Yale Divinity School.

Book Review

Beyond Factory Farming By James Robinson

by Liam Myers

“Picture a hen waking up on a factory farm.” This is how James Robinson opens his book *Beyond Factory Farming: A Contemplative-Prophetic Approach to Food*. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), otherwise known as factory farms, are responsible for producing 98% of the meat, eggs, and dairy consumed in the United States. Throughout the book, Robinson seeks to confront us with the horrid conditions in these facilities. This confrontation begs the reader to deeply consider the implications of eating meat of animals who lived in restrictive and unnatural conditions. As theologian Elizabeth Johnson remarked of it, “warning: read it and be changed the next time you sit down to eat.”

“Eating is arguably our most intimate form of contact with the more-than-human world,” Robinson writes. As a meat-eater myself, I recognize the complexities that go into personal decisions around the food we consume. Meats contain vital nutrients, are an easy source of protein, and can be accessible for people with limited resources or education about plant-based eating. With this in mind, Robinson’s book does not condemn individual eating habits or choices – rather it opens us to a critique of a system, factory farming, that is dedicated to profit and efficiency, with no concern for the worth and dignity of animals.

Throughout the book, Robinson provides a searing critique of U.S. capitalism, which laid the groundwork for the logic of the relatively recently developed system of factory farming thrive. The origin of factory farming can be traced to a fateful mistake that a farmer made in 1923. When Cecile Steele accidentally ordered 500 chicks, instead of 50, she kept them all in a 16 square foot building, having nowhere else to put them. Then, she realized how much more money she could make by forcing animals to live in close proximity with less care therefore resulting in poor, unnatural conditions. Steele went on to capitalize on this method, and others followed along –marking the beginning of the factory farming industry.

In this review I not only seek to highlight Robinson’s scholarship in the book, but his way of life, which I’ve come to know through our friendship. To know Jim is to witness someone who constantly considers how to live ethically within our broken and spiritually dead society; he contemplates deeply, then acts accordingly and speaks prophetically. To read his book is to likewise be challenged to confront the unjust status quo, to ponder one’s own complicity within it, and to live anew in this light.

The New York Catholic Worker community plays a central role in Robinson’s life and work, as he is informed by the communities he finds himself within. He volunteers twice a week with the soup line at Maryhouse and St. Joseph House, and he shared the book as a work in progress at a Friday Night Meeting at Maryhouse. This book has also had the support of other communities, including Agape Community, Benincasa, Freedom Farm, and more. As Robinson writes, “[the] illusion that we could do anything alone is the crux of our problem.”

Throughout the book he references the old Catholic Worker imperative, one that is repeated in many communities throughout the country: to “build a new society in the shell of the old one... a society in which it is easier for people to be good.” Translating this idea to his critique of food systems, Robinson asks, “What’s on the menu?” He recognizes that even beyond our personal decisions lie the decisions of those who set the table for us, both metaphorically and literally. He knows that it would be easier for people to eat ethically sourced foods if

institutions, like Catholic Schools, took this concern on as a mandate.

Robinson traces the origin of his commitment to plant-based eating to one day in high school when his twin brother Pat encouraged him to give up eating meat. He had read Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, and his relationship with Pat allowed him to incorporate this life change. Whereas up to that time he had consumed his food in a thoughtless way, Robinson began to make connections between his Hamburger Helper and the cow whose life was given for it. He writes, “A cheeseburger was just dinner. It had nothing to do with the suffering of cows.” Robinson doesn’t present himself as someone who has all the answers, but as an honest companion who himself has often lived a life in conflict with his values. He introduces us to the many

more for exploitation and profit rather than recognized as the gift that it is. Echoing this, Robinson writes that factory farming is ultimately “the application of technology to manipulate living beings as if they were formless resources to be freely molded with impunity.” He goes on to share specific examples of how factory farming is a manifestation of this lack of regard for dignity. Robinson writes: “We can see the technocratic paradigm at work in a particularly horrifying manner in the veal industry, in which calves are manipulated in extremely unnatural conditions in order to produce a desired commodity.” He also points out how “sows are confined to gestation crates that restrict their capacity for even turning around.”

Central to Robinson’s critique of factory farming is that of Trappist monk Thomas

throughout the book invites readers to slow down, to re-read, to contemplate. He writes alliteratively about our “fully fleshy selves”, about capitalism’s “fundamental forgetfulness”, and how the unjust status quo must be “recognized, resisted, replaced” – and that to remember is a “vividly visceral” experience.

A few weeks ago Robinson came to my class at Iona University, where he also teaches as a Professor of Religious Studies, and gave a guest lecture on his book. He sought to ground our class discussion of the beauty of creation in an examination of icons, while uncovering the often hidden injustice of factory farming. The cover of the book has four icons: a cow, a chicken, a salmon, and a pig. Robinson said that the icons on the cover of his book, “written” by artist Angela Monno, are an invitation to slow down and notice the beauty of each animal. In an age of instant gratification, becoming aware of an icon is, as he describes it, the opposite of scrolling through videos on social media. Sitting and gazing at an icon for one, two, or even thirty minutes allows us to cultivate attention and love for the cow as a manifestation of God. Robinson writes: “We encounter here a sacramental being, shining with divine light. We encounter an icon of God’s presence. We encounter a being who teems with aliveness, whose instincts are oriented toward freely gazing in a group.” On the other hand, scrolling through videos on TikTok or Instagram and moving on after 2 seconds if a video doesn’t catch our interest, is harming our attention and ability to engage in real-life community. The technocratic paradigm manifests here too, through companies like Meta and X, where our culture of immediacy and efficiency creates more profit the longer we give our attention to it.

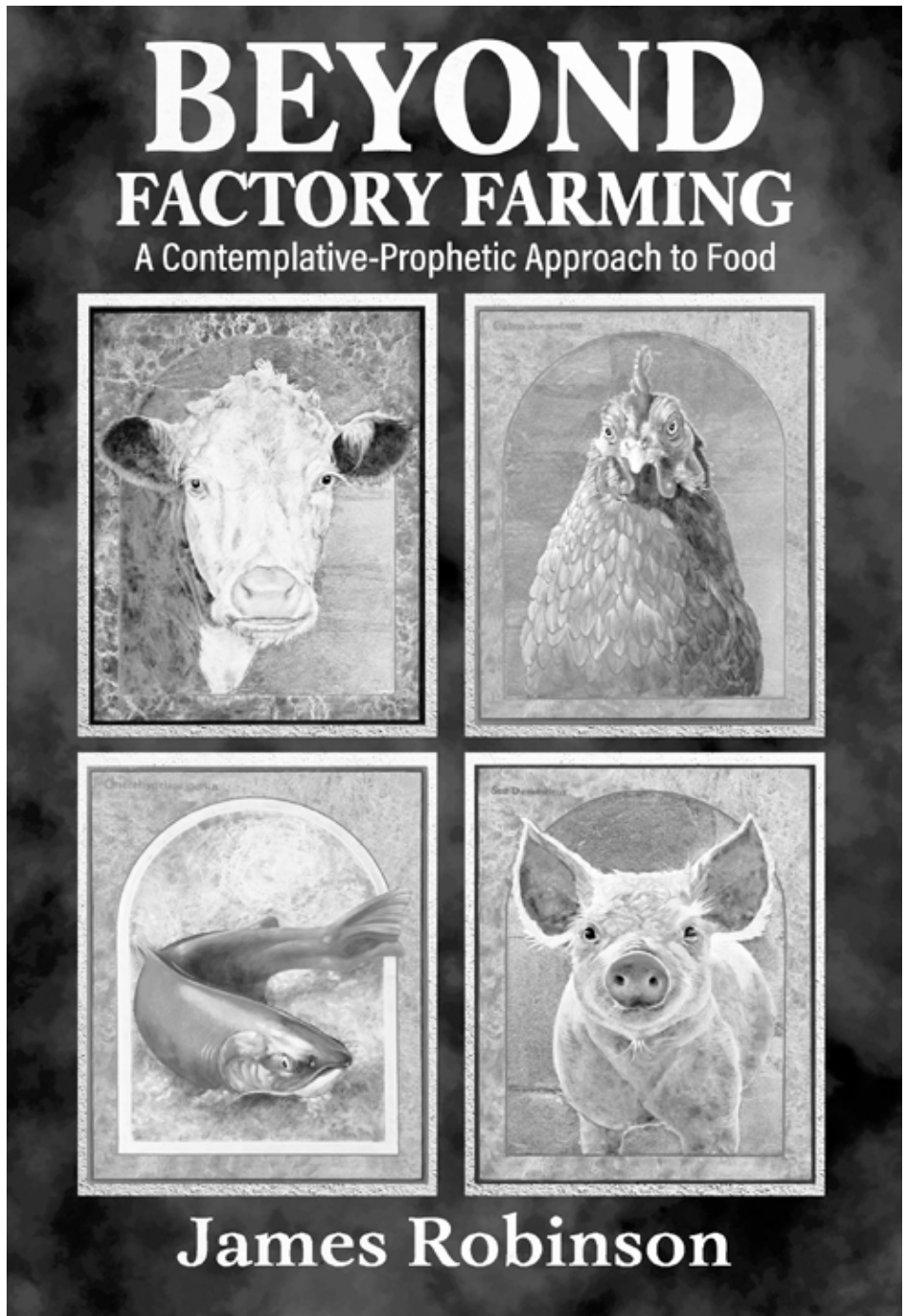
The morning after his lecture for my class, I went to my local diner to practice what Robinson describes as “sensitive eating.” At the diner, I ordered a spinach and feta omelet then took one bite at a time. After each bite I set down my utensils and chewed to completion before I picked up my utensils and continued. For those of us like myself who typically rush through our meals to move on to the next thing, often walking or driving while eating, this practice was a huge challenge. The practices in the book open up a different way of not only eating, but of moving through the world.

Robinson acknowledges that the goal of his work is to challenge people not only to think differently, but to act and to exist differently. Considering the story of the rich young man who walks away sad in the gospels, Robinson writes that Jesus did not ask the man to “be less attached” to money, but rather “implores the man to sell his hoarded abundance and to share it with the poor.” In a similar way, he asks us to not only be more aware of the evil of factory farming, but to change our habits, individually and collectively, in response to it.

In reading this book, I felt the Holy Spirit moving through the pages as I was challenged to love God, and thereby love cows suffering in factory farms, more deeply. And for myself, while I still consume food from factory farms, I am more attuned to what I am eating, and I’m questioning more the process behind the product on my plate. I echo the challenge this book makes to communities and institutions that purchase meat in the United States, and I encourage a thoughtful reading of it, and consideration of what it means for our own lives.

Copies can be ordered from Orbis Press.

Liam Myers is a freelance writer, an adjunct professor of religious studies at Iona University, and program coordinator at The Center at Mariandale in Ossining, NY.



alternatives to factory farmed meat and does not propose any one-size-fits-all answer. Ultimately the book emphatically encourages us to “make the connection between the products [we] consume and the cruel conditions of factory farms.”

Robinson points to the interconnected nature of harmful systems that prioritize wealth and greed over the dignity of life. He provocatively asks: “Do we have any sense of the quality of life of the pig whose body has become bacon, or the lives of the laborers who raised and then slaughtered this pig, or the communities living in close proximity to the factory farm on which this pig was raised?” This framework allows us to consider the whole ecosystem, even beyond the animals who are harmed within it

The book describes the system of Factory Farming as a particular manifestation of what Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* termed the “technocratic paradigm”. This lens allows us to look at the ways God’s creation is used

Merton In a 1956 pamphlet Merton wrote: “Since factory farming exerts a violent and unnatural force upon the living organisms of animals and birds in order to increase production and profits... I must join in the protest being uttered against it.” Robinson sees Merton as an example for us to follow, as one whose deep contemplative life fueled his prophetic writing: “Merton’s deep respect for the integrity of animals... fuels his condemnation of a system that utterly crutches and exploits such beings.”

Robinson’s own writing weaves a tapestry of diverse thinkers In the introduction alone, he brings together insights from Catholic Theologian M. Shawn Copeland, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, activist Greta Thunberg, Catholic Pope Francis and John Paul II, and more. His voice provides the thread of connection that brings all these voices together, elevates them, and produces new insights. Furthermore, the use of language

Rejoice In All Circumstances

by Ryan O’Connell

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” Brueggemann continues by explaining that this alternative consciousness both critiques the present order and energizes communities with the hope that accompanies a different way of living.

When I think about the dominant consciousness of our culture, I can think of no clearer expression of it than President Donald Trump shouting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!” after being shot at while he delivered a speech in July 2024. Beyond politics, that phrase captures something deeper about our society. Many of us feel as though we are constantly fighting—some people fight to maintain a perception of their own dominance or superiority, while others fight simply to be heard or to survive. Embodying this dominant consciousness often means that life feels less like a gift and more like a battle.

So, what might the alternative consciousness that Brueggeman asserts a prophetic ministry will foster look like? For me, this consciousness is best articulated by St. Paul in the fifth chapter of First Thessalonians: “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.” This way of being stands in direct contrast to the mentality expressed by the President and many others who share his orientation toward life.

As I navigate adulthood, I have come to realize how deeply I was shaped by the “Fight! Fight! Fight!” consciousness that pervades the dominant American culture. I identified as a follower of Jesus, but if I am honest, prayer mattered less to me than escapism, and community mattered less than satisfying my own appetites. Looking back, what saddens me most is not simply my own spiritual malaise, but how this malaise continues to seem the norm for so many of my peers.

Despite my parents’ sincere efforts and years of religious formation, I did not rejoice



always, pray continually, or give thanks in all circumstances. In fact, despite attending Mass weekly, attending Catholic schools, and praying regularly, I remained deeply unhappy. Beneath the surface, I carried a great deal of resentment. I resented my attachments. I resented the mistakes I had made and my inability to change what I wanted to change about myself and my life. I resented my fallibility and so, in a way, I resented my own humanity. Even as a part of me wanted to be grateful, another part of me was fixated on comparing myself to others, on what I perceived was wrong with me, and the question why can’t I be better than I am?

As the dominant consciousness weighed on my spiritual life during the first three decades of my life, I felt often like I was trapped in a fight I never asked for and one I did know how to finish. Eventually, I no longer cared whether I won or lost; I simply wanted the struggle to end. As this internal fight continued and I continued

to experience my resentments I drank to cope.

I got married, but the fight continued, and I continued to drink. I became a father of two young children, but the fight continued, and I continued to drink. All the while, I searched for something that could free me from the resentment and confusion I carried within me. My family and friends as well as my religious and spiritual convictions helped me stay afloat, but nothing seemed to inspire the psychological and behavioral changes I wanted to make.

I first came to Agape on June 15, 2024. There I met Suzanne and Brayton, along with Steve and Nancy James, who invited me to share my story. I told them about my background and the various ministries of which I had been a part. What I did not tell them was that I was struggling—that I felt overwhelmed by insecurity and confusion and was wrestling with alcohol abuse. As Suzanne toured me around Francis House, I sensed that I was

in the middle of a transformative experience. I had finally encountered the alternative consciousness that Brueggemann describes—the kind of consciousness at the heart of prophetic ministry, and one I wanted to integrate into my own life. Put simply, Agape offered a way of life that inverted the dominant “Fight! Fight! Fight!” mentality of our culture and replaced it with “Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!”

On the drive home, I made the decision to stop struggling against the resentments and ingratitude I had developed and surrender to a new way of living. My encounter at Agape taught me the profound lesson that comparisons, negative self-talk, and escapism would not help me become the person I wanted to become or live a lifestyle that could foster authentic and nourishing relationships. I was done fighting. I wanted to rejoice too!

Why am I telling you this story? Because I identify now as a part of the prophetic ministry of Agape and seek to share this ministry with you. I have experienced the transformative power of a community that illuminates existential and spiritual truths by following the way of the nonviolent Jesus. What are these truths?

The truth that fighting is not the way; peace-making is the way.

The truth that hiding is not the way; vulnerability and transparency is the way.

The truth that control is not the way; Love is the way.

Each time I return to the Agape community, I find new opportunities to participate in this prophetic ministry. Whether through conversation, singing and communal prayer, or even just by stacking wood, Agape continually invites me to share in the rejoicing that results from living these truths. Agape has taught me how life in community can be one continual prayer. I am no longer resentful. I am grateful.

Ryan O’Connell is a Fordham graduate, former Jesuit volunteer, clinical social worker and a member of Agape’s Mission Council who lives in Vermont with his wife Mollie and three children Rita, Eamon, and Tom.

The Invention of the Airplane

by Freddie Swindal-Endres

Every year at my elementary school in Pittsburgh, the third graders would put on a Wax Museum. Each of us picked a historical figure and did a biographical report on them to share. We dressed up as whomever we picked, and gathered in the cafeteria while the rest of the school would walk up to each of us and hear our biographical spiel. I decided to be the Wright Brothers – Orville and Wilbur Wright, two brothers credited with inventing the airplane. And so, an eight-year-old Freddie dressed in a mustache and aviator goggles shared the story of the Wright Brothers with the whole school. It was first time I ever crossdressed.

The story of the Wright Brothers fascinated me because to invent the airplane was such a marvel. It was something considered impossible that we take advantage of so much today, a daily wonder of transition. How incredible is it that, at this very moment, a plane is in the air bringing passengers from one part of the country to another. How incredible it is that we can mix together ingredients, put them in an oven, and bake delicious bread to eat and share. How incredible it is that we have medicine and cures for ailments. That we have buildings, that we have the materials to make skyscrapers we can go to the very top of and look out and see the view from above.

It is pretty wild to think that there was a day before all of these things existed. These wonders that we see every day once were not here, were not seen even as possibilities. There was a time without these things. A new world became possible.

This same kid who showed so much joy wearing a fake mustache, happily sharing about the Wright Brothers with their classmates, would cry while watching the news. I did not understand how the world could carry an unimaginable amount of suffering and grief. Now having spent more time on this planet, I have learned about greed, colonialism, war, institutional racism, misogyny, fascism, white

supremacy, Christian nationalism, the list of intertwined evils goes on. I picture these evils as big and tall and snaky and plastic, spreading throughout my city towards yours and beyond.

Another world became possible for me when I interacted with members of the trans community for the first time. I was living in New York, the summer of 2017, and working for an LGBT organization. Meeting my coworkers who were openly trans and non-binary shifted something in me. I saw in them a life I wanted but I never had the words for. I saw in them a new way of being that I had never known. A new hope emerged: another world shown possible to me by my trans coworkers, these prophets. A world where transition, movement, and not stasis, can

be held within. A world that has always been there, as long as there has been breath.

The problem is people in power love those big, plastic, snaky death-dealing structures. They’ll tell us that these structures are natural and unworthy of the risk of comfort to try to change. That our God has a problem with us. Our God who created us, who searches us and knows us, who created the heavens and the earth and every phase of the moon and every sky from sunrise to sunset. They tell us our God has a problem with trans folks living their lives, desiring to be treated with dignity, playing sports, using the bathroom, getting life-saving healthcare. I counter those in power with this truth: Trans existence, trans breath, trans life,

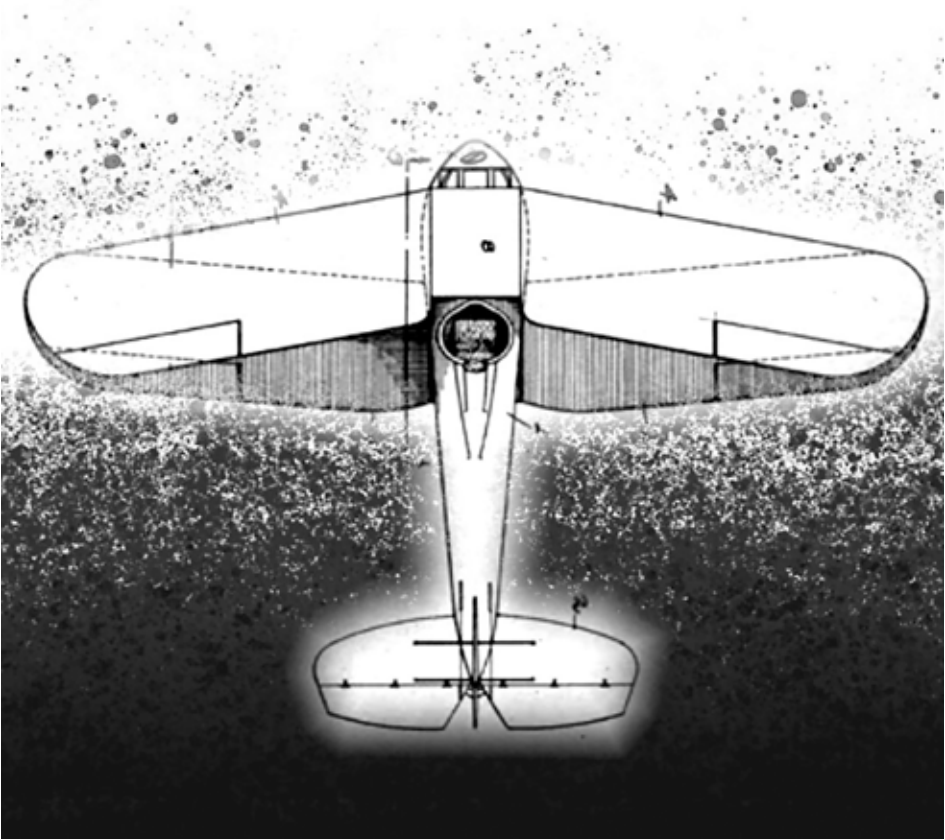
shows that not only is another world possible, another world is here. And no matter what any government says, we’ll be here, just like we have always been.

Throughout my transition, the trans community has shown up for me in ways I never expected. The first time I picked up my testosterone prescription, the pharmacist was non-binary, and they just knew that this moment was special without me having to say a word. They asked me for my real name and they wrote “Freddie! Congrats!” on the CVS bag. Months later, I nervously walked into a UPS store with name change paperwork in hand. Then, my notary happened to be a trans man and we joyously discussed Elliot Page, who had just come out as trans that day. These moments of connection occurred in the blandest of places, in the most bureaucratic of places, in the shadow of corporation. These two were my angels. A possible world shown under fluorescent lights.

People and governments try to rein in the boundaries of gender. They never will succeed. May we remain steadfast in our joy, our celebration of gender’s bending boundaries. May we hold each other in the murkiness of the unknown. And may trans people be celebrated as sources of joy, of gladness that our world holds more possibilities than the status quo will have us believe. That we resemble and spread a radical joy for our future kids, who might find themselves looking in the mirror wearing aviator goggles and a fake mustache. That every kid who cries watching the news, who is told by adults that the problems of this world are going to be up to them to fix, finds their angels through the noise.

May my trans and non-binary kin know we can never be erased. We are beloved by God, no system can ever come between us and God. May we know and feel the love of God with each breath, today and every day.

Freddie Swindal-Endres graduated from Yale Divinity School with an MDiv in May, 2026



We Will Transition

by Jeanelle Wheeler

As a child growing up at Agape, I liked hiding in the Francis House stairwell. I sat in the corner of the wooden platform, blending into the wall behind me. The platform was the in-between space of the stairs. I sat there, just low enough that I could hear the adults speaking in their urgent-social-justice whispers. I sat there, just high enough that I couldn't be seen as I diligently completed my homework.

Fast-forward a couple decades. I am one of the adults. I've stepped down from my hiding spot on the stairs. Stepped into the circle of voices asking, What can we do?

When a delightful quintet of Holy Cross students arrived at Agape this past winter, I helped to convene these circles. And one day, I spoke to them about immigrant rights alongside a former long-time Mission Council member from El Salvador. She speaks to her lived experience locally. Her years of advocacy. I speak to my work within Rhode Island's Deportation Defense Network. Observing ICE. Knocking on doors within immigrant communities to spread the word about the hotline. Volunteering at community meetings. Speaking in Spanish with local businesses so that they can sign defense zone pledges and not allow ICE in. Spreading the word of general strikes. We speak to this moment.

The deeply disturbed refrain of the group is: How is this happening? Once again, the Francis House question emerges: What can we do?

Two decades later, the Francis House whispers have become cries.

As a 30-year-old living through the dystopian chaos of this administration, hope is hard. As a solidly-adult young person, my transition to a new decade has been accompanied by a national transition away from democracy, peace, and justice.

The (simplified) refrain I hear in majority-older progressive spaces? We've got to stop Trump. This is shocking and unprecedented. We've worked our whole lives for justice and he is unraveling all of the progress that we've made. We've got to talk about all the awful every chance we get and go out in the streets. Where are all of the young people at the No Kings Day rallies? We need everyone on board, putting up signs on highway overhangs and stopping business as usual. We need to restore democracy.

The (simplified) refrain I hear in majority-younger progressive spaces? Trump is bad. But this is not a surprise. The US has always been a racist, sexist, settler colonial empire. This administration is just empowering the

evil that's always been here. We've got to support each other locally and we've mostly given up on anything federal, at least for now. We are too overwhelmed to talk about Trump all the time and want to take care of our mental health. Protesting in the streets may be too risky depending on your citizenship status and race. We don't trust our institutions and need to envision something entirely new.

My point of view is solely anecdotal. But as a young white woman who splits my time between majority-older activist spaces and majority-younger activist spaces, I distinctly notice these subtle differences in perspectives.

Sometimes I feel puzzled as to why my younger friends are not flocking to No Kings Day rallies or Resistance Choirs. When it comes to consistently organized public anti-Trump demonstrations, my older friends seem to be out-organizing the youth. But then other times I feel puzzled that there are few older people that are part of our local rapid response networks to directly mobilize in response to reported ICE presence. Sometimes I wonder if the problem is ageism within the movement. I believe ageism works both ways. It is a problem when young people dismiss being a part of a majority-older space, thinking "We know best." And it is a problem when older people don't take young people seriously, thinking "We know best." The truth is, we've got a lot to learn from one another. We need each other...especially now.

Agape has always tried to cultivate a multigenerational space. It has tried to live models of resistance. When faced with the urgency of this moment, we need models of resistance.

That's why Minneapolis matters.

At Agape this past year, I've pointed to Minneapolis during the Holy Cross retreat. During Brigid Day. And during a keynote that I shared with Suzanne at Emmanuel College.

I spoke of Minneapolis in the abstract. I spoke of coordinated efforts between a variety of grassroots organizing. I spoke of neighbors who had each other's back. Through Signal chats and mutual aid. Through marching through the streets. Through singing. Through striking. Minneapolis did not activate extensive, complex resistance networks from thin air. The city was prepared. It had already activated in the wake of George Floyd's murder. And when it became like a war zone this past winter, the city pushed out ICE through non-violent resistance.

On the weekend of May Day, my activist street band (Extraordinary Rendition Band) had the privilege to be invited to Minnesota by the band Brass Solidarity. With clarinet in hand, I was there alongside the red, white, and

shiny outfits of my bandmates. I didn't realize how much this journey to George Floyd Square would feel like a pilgrimage. The streets by the site of his murder had been transformed. The autonomous zone was marked by a series of raised fist statues.

Standing beside the community-created "Say Their Names" cemetery, the Black-led organizing team announced, "George Floyd's fists are the ribcage of resistance. But it's the music that provides the heart beat." Tubas honk in affirmation. "We are the blood pumping through the veins of this movement... We have shown the world, in Minneapolis and around the world, what it means to resist."

They sure have. Brass Solidarity has gathered here every week since the killing of George Floyd. The main street is renamed "The People's Way" as volunteers actively repaint the names of hundreds of people of color killed by police in the United States. As Brass Solidarity leads us in "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us 'Round," they give out to the crowd tall flowers and butterflies that double as percussion instruments. Instruments from other bands join in. We dance to the harmonies of resistance.

At the opening ceremony of this "MinneHONK" gathering, we were led through a grieving ritual. Led through movements and sounds to embody the brokenness, the despair. And then let it out.

Music allows us to let it out. Music allows us to heal.

Back in Providence, I had advertised for a general strike. At Powderhorn Park, I noticed a poster with the same purple and pink background as the ones I taped on storefronts in the immigrant community of Rhode Island's Central Falls. From Minneapolis to Providence, our cities were rising up with the simple refrain... "NO!"

But now the May Day strikes have passed. Summer's heat curls the strike fliers at their paper edges as their memory remains on lamp-posts. A leader in the local movement calls me to say that the movement is restructuring. It is shifting based on the needs of this moment. Instead of our previous neighborhood groups, we will combine the forces of those who are left. We will reach new spots in the city. We will transition.

So quickly? What about our neighborhood groups? I am left feeling confused. At age 30, I am ready to dig into the ground. Deeper and deeper. Plant seeds and watch them grow roots. Isn't that grassroots?

Fearing a loss in momentum and community among my specific team, I ask my fellow organizer, "How do you feel about change?"



8 year-old Jeanelle sits in the office at Agape

She surprises me when she says, "Excited. I think we're building from all that we've done. I think the change will be good."

And so there is the balance. Like a folk song that knows an old tune but adapts its lyrics. Like solo-ing in a brass band, using the melody to create something new. Like elders and youth, holding hands and asking, "Tell me what you know?" Like the presence of Francis House voices.

The Catholic Worker mission, that of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin is this: "Building the new community in the shell of the old." That is what the raised fists and murals of George Floyd Square teach us.

To start that building requires joining hands. Requires music. Requires trust.

Jeanelle Wheeler is a lifelong member of the Agape Community, currently serving on its Mission Council and Board of Directors. She is an educator, writer, musician, and activist from Worcester, MA and based in Providence, RI.

8-Day Retreat at Agape

by Bobby Karle SJ

Like so many of us, my life in recent months has been far too busy, filled with constant stimulation, technology, and entanglement with the outer world. This retreat became a process of cutting away distractions, detaching from what did not truly need my time and energy, and ultimately growing in a deeper intimacy with God.

Appropriately, Thomas Keating's Intimacy with God became my companion throughout the retreat. I discovered it on the shelves of the Agape library, and its introduction to Centering Prayer beautifully guided and inspired my days of prayer. Keating's invitation to consent to God's presence and action resonated deeply with my own experience. As he writes, contemplation unfolds when "the work of the Spirit absorbs our prayer and takes over" (p. 145). I found myself gradually surrendering to that work.

During the first few days of the retreat, I spent only a couple of hours in the hermitage. Yet it kept calling me. As I entered the second half of the retreat, I finally settled in and committed to spending several nights there. I suppose it simply took time to reach the interior freedom—and willingness—to venture into the woods and spend extended time alone, without electricity, running water, or even a toilet (aside from the woods!). I am so grateful that I finally did.

There is something deeply holy about the hermitage. The intentionality with which it was created, together with the prayers of the many people who have dwelt there over the years, felt almost tangible. Suzanne remarked, "When someone is there, we can definitely feel their presence." That rang true. It is a sacred place that seems to hold the prayers of countless seekers who have come before, inviting each new visitor into the same silence and communion with God.

This retreat renewed my desire to live a more contemplative life—not one removed from the world, but one rooted more deeply in God's loving presence amid the activity of daily life.

My hope is that many more people will find their way to this little hermitage—or, if not there, discover ways to create small hermitages within their own active lives: spaces of silence, simplicity, and prayer where they, too, can encounter the Divine Presence who is always waiting for them, longing to dwell within them, and gently inviting them into ever deeper communion with God, one another, and all of creation.

Fr. Bobby Karle, SJ is a Jesuit priest, yoga instructor, and therapist at the Pope Francis Center in Detroit, where he accompanies people experiencing homelessness.



Fr. Bobby entering the Hermitage

Pat McSweeney: Wisdom Woman Par Excellence

In Memoriam by Suzanne Shanley

Pat McSweeney, friend of nearly three decades, supporter of all things Agape, at all times, died within months of another friend, Paki Wieland, both knowing each other, both aware of their final hours. Brayton and I, with Joe Kebartas of Veterans for Peace, were privileged to bid a poignant farewell with Pat, at her beloved home in Taunton, MA.

Pat died in February; Paki in March 2026, both deeply involved in peacemaking, Paki as a public resister, Pat, a behind-the-scenes supporter of countless peace groups. Paki, knowing her time on this earth was limited, wrote to me in December inquiring about Pat's health. Pat had been conveying to me: "My time is up."

Still, shortly before a deep decline, Pat sent boxes of fruit and candies to pick up community spirit here at Agape and contributed toward many of the ongoing Agape homesteading perils in the midst of flooded basements and countless needs.

I suggested to Pat's allies across the country, including Roy Bougeois, the champion of Women's Ordination and former Maryknoll priest, (Pat accompanied Roy to the Vatican in 2010, unfurling a banner, "God is Calling Women to be Priests") that those of us in Pat's circle, call ourselves: "Friends of Pat," or FOP.

Paki loved this idea and on Winter Solstice eve wrote to me: "May we delight on this cold winter evening, in the warmth and love Pat

gives the world."

As a top-level FOP, I responded: "Approaching a new year of war, war, war, Pat's steadfast support of peacemaking and peacemakers means that we can confer on her the Peacemaker in Perpetuity, for her great writing, her magnificent efforts on fronts innumerable."

One such effort over 20 years ago occurred when Pat visited a young friend of Agape, Allah Mathematics Allah, in solitary confinement at Concord MCI, literally in a cage and in handcuffs and leg chains, which horrified Pat. Elder Wisdom Woman, Pat screamed at the guards, "This is Nazi Germany. You are Nazis."

Pat assisted the Kader family from Iraq, Sabah, the dad, and Omar and Ali his two sons, whose car was bombed by American occupiers in Mosul, twenty years ago. Suad, wife and mother was killed. Rescuer father, Sabah, was shot in the back trying to save Omar, then four, who sustained burns over 60% of his body.

Pat's devotion to the Iraqi family, coincided with her links to VFP, Veterans for Peace, and her participation in the alternative St. Patrick's Day Parade (see photo right) with another Agape friend, Agatha Lapointe, outspoken champion of nonviolence and women's ordination who also died this year.

Pat carried an Irish spirit that embodied Solstice, meaning rebirth and renewal, the return of the sun, the triumph of light over darkness. Blessings on us FOP'S as we pray for the Light of the Celtic Solstice and honor our Wisdom Woman, Pat McSweeney.

We trust that the burning flame of Pat's life, and the countless number of people who were devoted to her, will sustain us in these darkest of dark days.

Another FOP, Joe Kebartas, VFP, writes of Pat:

Pat was a pillar in the Peace Community for decades. I met Pat in 2003 walking with a group of people going toward Representative Stephen Lynch's office whose congressional

district went from South Boston to Bridgewater, asking Stephen to Stop the war in Iraq. Pat and I became friends that day, and over the next two decades, we would meet at Peace vigils, rallies, and Conventions. She had a great sense of humor, and we kept each other updated in latest Peace news. Pat's energy working for Peace will be carried on by all the people in the Peace Community.



Suzanne, Agatha, Pat McSweeney, and Brayton at Boston's Alternative St. Patrick's Day Parade



David Gill SJ in the Agape kitchen with Teresa Shanley and youth from St. Mary of the Angels

New Era | from page 7

Liam: Part of the generational conversation, is what it means to be totally committed to a community. What is your perspective on those who are committed to Agape but are not necessarily living here and the effect that not being in residence has on *Servant Song*?

Suzanne: At the moment, people do live, retreat, intern and visit here, yet, without permanent residents, a new model must emerge. We are working with our Mission Council as to what that model might be.

Brayton: In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: "The way to ruin is wide and spacious and many travel it, but it's a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it." So, the fewness of those at Agape is not an anomaly. The hard road can be painful and uncertain, but I think it's a true road. But there are two generations interacting at Agape. There are people over 40 and under 40. The under 40 have been given a bad world: wars without end. The violent madness of politics. College costs enslave them in debt, the dangers and uncertainties of AI, a divided country that is toxic and climate change. Next Generation people are thinking "How do we survive? Not, "let's give it all up for Jesus and Nonviolence in community". Most people who write in *Servant Song* do not live here. Yet, we ask them to write about what is true for them, especially the young, speak to the injustices done to them.

Liam: Just imagine, like 40 years from now, 2066. Sounds crazy. Just imagine 2066 and, whatever, whoever is involved is preparing *Servant Song* for the next issue. What is important as the core of the paper, and what do you hope that will remain in the future?

Suzanne: You'll be 70.

Liam: It's a good age, 70. I'll be an elder.

Brayton: I've seen a steady change of heart, a revolution brewing with every next generation, ever since we started this community. This revolution is the "No" to the institutions that aren't working. Our government does not meet the needs of the people. Necessities seem unaffordable, especially for the under 40 crowd.

The Church is not speaking to them. We have hope that people will be living and thriving in community and writing about the core message of *Servant Song*, which is that the future lies in a commitment to nonviolence, human to human, human to all creatures, while walking lightly on the earth.

Now there's a revolution with the phone, which young people are beginning to see is killing them. Now they need a "Yes" ... to life as good despite it all, and that we need each other and our mother, the earth, to survive and thrive. Young and old, we cannot stay imprisoned in our own houses, rooms, our own heads. The core message of *Servant Song* needs to remain, "There is another way to live" that does not rely on pursuit of getting and spending.

Suzanne: I don't know that as a species we will make it 40 more years with nuclear war looming. I remember over the years Phil Berrigan used to say, "if we make it at all, it will be because of the small faith-based communities who are resist" the defeat of NOT making it. Phil says: "I see no point in working within an evil system. Christ was never a reformer. He didn't advocate voting for one corrupt politician over another. He never urged people to embrace the state. He told a parable about putting a patch on an old garment that would soon unravel. He preached that we should dismantle, not attempt to patch the state."

Brayton: We Christians and others who believe in a nonviolent vision of life must continue to respond to the domination of American Empire of the rich from within communities living the truth of nonviolent love, resisting the State's violence, in spite of our fears and without compromise. We live resistance or bow to complicity. The role of *Servant Song* is to tell an ongoing story, inspired by the biblical Jesus, that "there is another way".

Liam Myers is a freelance writer, an adjunct professor of religious studies at Iona University, and program coordinator at The Center at Marlandale in Ossining, NY.

David Gill SJ: Agape Chaplain in Non-Residence RIP Jan. 30, 2026

For 13 years, David Gill SJ was the dedicated chaplain in non-residence for the Agape Community in Hardwick, MA, where he presided over Easter Vigil Mass yearly. A member of Agape's Mission Council Advisory Board, Dave contributed to prayer, discussion, and action around gospel nonviolence, all of which he carried to the Condoleezza Rice protest at BC (May 2006) where Rice was awarded an honorary degree. Dave became the behind-the-scenes organizer of the faculty stand out with over 200 faculty holding signs, which read "Not in My Name," backs turned to Rice, who was the architect of the US invasion of Iraq.

In his address that day, to the honors class and guests, David prophetically proclaimed Jesus as the nonviolent One, invoking the nonviolent lineage of Jesus, Dorothy Day, MLK. As Brayton, Suzanne and Teresa, listened to Dave's address, we silently added David Gill SJ, to the list. As always, David's style: self-effacing, humble, yet clear and convicted, with younger faculty, praising his spirit.

As Agape's chaplain, David presided over the burial of Dave Dellinger's ashes here at Agape with Dave's wife, Elizabeth Petersen present.

For fifteen years, Dave came faithfully to

Agape Mission Council Meetings, driving the distance from Boston with Sr. El Maclellan RSCJ. Their devotion to Agape as vowed religious gave all who met them at Agape events, a sense of Catholic inclusivity as they participated in many interfaith events.

David brought to all he encountered his humor, a gift for storytelling, and a sense of intimacy and committed friendship which never faltered. His homilies were in depth comments on Scripture reflecting his scholarship and mastery of Greek, evidence of his position at Boston College as the chair of the Classics Department.

Transferred from Boston, to Berkeley School of Theology in CA, where he continued teaching at the college level, David had a serious stroke while at Berkeley where Brayton and Suzanne visited him. David returned to Boston and to the embrace of his Jesuit community at Campion Center in Weston, MA. His love of those on the margins was always a dominant theme in this life. He carried their suffering imparting grace and dignity to their struggles, lifting the spirits of those with whom he shared his life in both Roxbury, MA and later, in Oakland, CA.

Presente David. We carry your lineage in the Jesuit tradition of Daniel Berrigan SJ with us at Agape. You gave so much to so many, and we carry your spirit here at Agape where your life and memory shine.

A Place of Five Senses: My Stay at Agape

Excerpt from article by Anonymous Brown University student

It is a house lined with wood and powered by wood and surrounded by wood, rooted deep into the earth, drowning in sunlight that bathes every edge. Ricky is rolling on the grass near the porch and getting himself very dirty; My new friend is inhaling a mouthful of smoke from the campfire we make for s'mores at 9pm; I am lifting and stacking firewood into a wall between two trees and a splinter gets in my skin.

Once I leave Agape and head back to the much more chaotic rhythm of university and life and work, the splinters of wood in my skin and the smoke in my lungs and the dirt I've rolled in will not disappear, at least, I hope.

One dinner conversation after a day of planting seedlings and cleaning the house, my friend asks me: "If life was a soup, do you scoop it or slurp it?"

"Scoop. No doubt."

"What does that even mean?"

We debate what it means for life to be soup for hours and the best way to drink it and it seems like a ridiculous question at first but it really does get us talking and is an apt metaphor. I head to sleep with a glow in my chest because bonding like that can feel so out of reach these days. It might be because we spend so much time looking down onto our phone screens, when we can look up and see:

stars and constellations
beckoning
the bare branches of winter trees
reaching
where are they reaching?
quiet that is not quiet,
loving

We just have to listen and see and smell and touch and taste. Agape is a place of five senses.

News Notes



The O’Brien family from Florida visits Agape: Rachel and Dave O’Brien and three of their five children, pictured here on one of their visits from their home in Florida, exploring a move to join Agape. The O’Brien family spent missionary time in Uganda, and all are involved in teaching youth gospel values of Jesus. Dave has peace studies degrees from University of Notre Dame. Rachel brings community experience, together with hospitality and office skills. We are excited by the prospect of their contributions to Agape.



Agape’s Jim Robinson has brought Iona University students annually to Agape for a five-day Rural Immersion, pictured here at the Quabbin Reservoir.



Agape’s Ware, Mass Peace Vigil
Suzanne and Brayton are committed to a daily presence for peace in downtown Ware during these violent and unstable times, standing with banners: “Stop Trump Now.” “Ice Kills.” “Woe to You Rich: Jesus.” Responses range from supporters leaning on horns, yelling, “Yes, yes.” The naysayers’ rebukes are mostly vulgar, F bombs, fingers and sometimes even uncontrollable rage.



Holy Cross College students, March Immersion at Agape with Shanley’s granddaughter in mask.



The McCarthy Family adults and children, with Brayton and Suzanne at the Agape Workday.

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Guy, (left) and Micah James, son of Agape co-founders, Steve and Nancy James, reunited at Agape’s workday.

Agape co-founder, Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy, continues his Fast for Nonviolence, from July through August 9th, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki Days. Charlie’s fast began when Suzanne and Brayton lived in Brockton, MA near the McCarthy family. For details: <https://www.emmanuelcharlesmccarthy.org/2026/07/04/daily-readings-on-the-decades-long-fast>.

New Book - “Available Details: Wonder, Adventure and More” by Agape’s friend, Maria Termini, noted artist, contains thirty-one stories from her rich life. She imagines herself reporting live at the scene of certain events and times in her life. Gifted with curiosity, imagination led Maria to travels and pursuits. Maria comments that her “lifelong desire for adventure that would not be dimmed by my lack of money or the demands of single motherhood.” Tune into this book and be inspired to follow your own dreams. www.amazon.com search: For author events, contact Maria Termini, maria Termini2013@gmail.com, (617) 319-4141