

# HOSPITALITY

Open Door: A Prophetic Discipleship Community Honoring The Black Jesus, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr.

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## Joan Browning

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By Nibs Stroupe

*Author's note: Late in 2023, Hospitality was blessed to receive a letter from Joan Browning of West Virginia. We recalled her extraordinary story as a farm girl growing up in Wheeler and Telfair Counties in south Georgia, and Ed asked me to write an article on her. Although I knew a bit about Ms. Browning, I was delighted to learn so much more, and we are sharing this short view of her life and work.*

In 2021, Joan Browning gave a speech in West Virginia which gave a capsule of her history and her times:

"Sixty years ago, we Freedom Riders challenged a reluctant United States federal government to enforce sacrificially obtained Supreme Court rulings and Interstate Commerce Commission orders. White supremacist state governments, elected by refusing the right to vote to African American citizens, said of those federal rulings: 'You and what army will make us obey?' Four hundred and thirty-six of us in 62 small groups enlisted in that army. As historian Raymond Arsenault wrote, Freedom Riders 'appeared to court martyrdom with a reckless disregard for personal safety or civic order. None of the obstacles placed in their path — not widespread censure, not political and financial pressure, not arrest and imprisonment, not even the threat of death — seemed to weaken their commitment to nonviolent struggle.'"

Joan Browning was one of the foot soldiers in that army, beginning when she was 18. How did she come to do this? Was she born to a socialist family who indoctrinated her in the liberation struggle? Was she a fire-breathing Northerner, come down to rescue the Black folk of the South? She was neither of these. She was a child of the South, born to a farming family in Wheeler County, Georgia, who moved to equally rural Telfair County during her childhood. She was born in 1942 in the shed room of her house in the July heat. Though the area was poor, her family had a stable farming income. Her mother sewed the clothes that her seven siblings and Joan wore from flour and chicken-feed sacks. They thought that these clothes were elegant and fashionable. When she was eight, her family became the first in the neighborhood to get electricity, and first to get a telephone. She grew up in the die-hard white supremacy of her time — segregationist governor Eugene Talmadge's farm was only four miles away.

Though she was not raised as a socialist, she was raised as a Christian, and she and her family were guided by the Micah 6 prophecy: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." She was raised in her daddy's Shiloh Methodist Church, where these values were lifted up. She was an excellent student and graduated from Lumber City High School in 1958 at age 16. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 had stirred her to want to become a scientist/engineer to help the USA catch up in the space race. She longed to go to Georgia Tech, but in 1958 it did not accept women (or Black people). Neither she nor fellow Freedom Rider Charles Person were able to attend Georgia Tech because of gender and racial discrimination. She went instead to Georgia State College for Women (GSCW) in



Joan Browning



The CitizenTribune | Chuck Hale

Milledgeville in the summer of 1958 — it is now Georgia College and State University.

She liked the academics of college, but as a 16-year-old Christian, she felt out of place in Milledgeville, missing her family, her church, and the community in which she grew up. She did attend the Wesley Fellowship at the YWCA and met Presbyterian minister (and later Moderator of the denomination) Isabel "Izzie" Rogers, who in turn introduced her to Milledgeville's most famous resident, Flannery O'Connor. Browning noted that O'Connor's peacocks impressed her more than O'Connor's writings.

Browning was a dedicated churchperson, and she attended the whites-only Milledgeville Methodist Church. She found it too large and cold, and she missed her rural family church, seeking the powerful community that it had provided. She also resented that as a young white Southern lady in training, she had to wear the girdle,

garter belt, stockings, hat and gloves mandated for church attendance. She began seeking retreats for herself and found a spot near campus where she could read and meditate.

It was in close proximity to Wesley Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and she shared the retreat space with 11-year-old Cassandra Mency, who introduced Joan to her father, Reverend T. Leander Mency. They began having conversations, and soon Reverend Mency invited her to worship at his church. In the autumn of 1960, she began attending his church with another white friend,

Faye Powell. Here she found

what she had desperately been seeking: vibrant worship, a sense of community and a genuine welcoming place. She had not gone to the AME church to break racial barriers, but rather to find a home in God's beloved community.

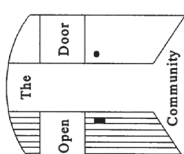
Unknowingly, however, she had crossed the white dividing line that made it taboo for white people and Black people to worship together. The president of GSCW called her into his office — his name was Dr. Robert E. Lee — and he warned her strongly against going to the AME church, indicating that 1960 was not yet the time to cross such a racial barrier. He told her that her continued attendance there would likely result in her being expelled from the college, harm to the Mency family, and possibly even the burning of Wesley Chapel A.M.E. Church. Browning was flabbergasted — what was her offense? Dr. Lee indicated that such racial boundaries could not be crossed, and he ordered her and Faye to cease attending the Black church.

Rather than submitting, she upped her game. She began attending reconciliation conferences at Paine College, and while she was there she participated in sit-ins in Augusta. Word got back to GSCW, and she was forced to withdraw from the college or be expelled. As she put it: "In Georgia in 1961, if you did not fit anywhere else, you could always go to Atlanta," which is what she did at the age of 18. She enrolled part-time at Georgia State College of Business Administration (now Georgia State University), and she began working at Emory University. While in Atlanta, she discovered the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and joined with them. Later that year, Jim Forman asked her to sign up for the Freedom Rides — this one from Atlanta to Albany. She agreed to do it.

Joan Browning continued on page 6

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# Who Is Responsible?

A review of *Poverty, by America*, by Matthew Desmond

By John Cole Vodicka

"We must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it." — Dorothy Day

"States are not moral agents, people are, and can impose moral standards on powerful institutions." — Noam Chomsky

"I would rather be a beggar in the street than a thief in the capitalist's house." — Eugene Debs

Many weekday mornings I ride bus #7 from my home to the Clarke County Courthouse. Coincidentally, the #7 is also the bus ridden by many of those who are experiencing homelessness in Athens, Georgia. One recent and very cold winter morning, I boarded the #7 to find it already occupied by several dozen rough sleepers. Some of the homeless I recognized, many I did not. I knew a handful of my riding companions would be getting off the bus at the homeless day center. Others were hoping to get to a big steeple church before the hot breakfast line closed. Several were dressed in layers and heading to the downtown business district to kite a sign. One or two would be disembarking at the Social Security office. And I'm certain that a few of these exhausted women and men who had spent the previous night outdoors were praying they would be allowed to remain on the bus throughout the morning, embracing its warmth and quiet, snatching bits of sleep.

Athens' homeless population numbers nearly 500 people today. Of Athens-Clarke County's 127,000 residents, 26.6% live in poverty, although the median income for someone living here is \$65,960. Apartments cost on average over \$1,600 a month, mostly because luxury housing for tens of thousands of University of Georgia students ramps up rents. (The University of Georgia, the county's largest employer by far, sits on \$1.9 billion in assets and owns 4,300 acres of property here in Clarke County alone.) Affordable housing, living-wage jobs and meaningful social services for the poor are practically non-existent in what some of my housed neighbors call the "Classic City."

Here in Athens, Georgia, like everywhere else in this country, abject poverty festers like an open sore. The United States, Matthew Desmond tells us in his latest book, *Poverty, by America*, "is the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy."

"Poverty is a misery and national disgrace," Desmond writes. "The citizens of the richest nation in the world can and should finally put an end to it."

According to Desmond, the 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning

author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, what's stopping the richest country on earth from eradicating poverty is us. He writes that we who have the privilege of "deciding where we work and live, what we buy, how we vote, and where we put our energies as citizens all have consequences for poor families."

Why so much poverty in America? In *Poverty, by America* Desmond advances factors that include race and class, diminished labor unions, exploitative employers, tax breaks that help the privileged, housing restrictions and greater spending on personal consumption than on public works. Desmond repeatedly outs those who "have amassed the most power and capital from bearing the most responsibility for America's vast poverty." Throughout this provocative book, he slams the "political elites who have utterly failed low-income Americans over the past half-century; the corporate bosses who have spent and schemed to prioritize profits over people; lobbyists blocking the will of the American people with their self-serving interests; and property owners who have exiled the poor from entire cities and fueled the affordable housing crisis."

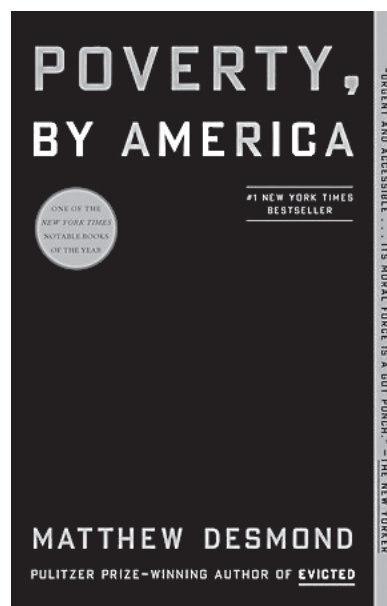
"The better off are fighting a class war, keeping the poor down by design," Desmond indicts. "The rich keep the poor down for their own benefit. The poor remain poor because the wealthier want it that way."

The poor are crucified by public policy, Desmond maintains. And, he convincingly adds, the impoverished are crushed, too by societal indifference.

To overcome this indifference, Desmond encourages us to become *poverty abolitionists*. And to do that, he says we must first conduct "an audit of our lives, personalizing poverty by examining all the ways we are connected to the problem — and to the solution."

"To live and strive in modern America is to participate in a series of morally fraught systems," Desmond explains. But he also insists that the "arrangement where the advantages of the rich often come at the expense of the poor is not inevitable or permanent. It was made by human hands and can be unmade by them." Like Chomsky said, we the people are moral agents and can, if committed and well-organized, "impose those moral standards on powerful institutions."

*Poverty, by America* should be read as a "poverty abolitionist manifesto." With chapter titles "Invest in Ending Poverty," "Empower the Poor," and "Tear Down the Walls," Desmond insists



## Poverty, By America

Matthew Desmond

Crown Publishing

March 2023

Hardcover, 304 pages

that those of us who have benefited from the nation's excesses will need to take less so that others may share in the bounty. He calls for fair tax implementation, an end to subsidizing the rich, and putting a stop to supporting policies that "accommodate poverty and not those that disrupt it."

"We don't need deeper antipoverty investments," he writes. "We need different ones, policies that refuse to partner with poverty,

policies that threaten its survival. We need to ensure that aid directed at the poor stays in their pockets, instead of being captured by companies whose low wages are subsidized by government benefits, or by landlords who raise rents as their tenants' wages rise, or by banks and payday loan outlets that issue exorbitant fines and fees."

And, Desmond reminds us, "The biggest beneficiaries of federal aid are affluent families." "If I want to aid the poor, that is, to help the poor not to be poor," Desmond said in a recent interview, "then I ought not to make them poor."

Matthew Desmond believes, as did Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. before him, that poverty will be abolished only when a mass movement demands it. "Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability," Rev. King told us 60 years ago. "Nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."

After reading *Poverty, by America*, I was reminded of the similar challenge Isabel Wilkerson issued in her persuasive 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. "The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly," she wrote. "And the least that a person in the dominant caste can do is not make the pain any worse."

Matthew Desmond writes near the conclusion of his stimulating manifesto: "Doing the right thing is often a highly inconvenient, time-consuming, even costly process. I know. I try, fail, and try again. But that's the price of our restored humanity."

Read *Poverty, by America*. Commit to poverty abolitionism. Help restore humanity. ♣

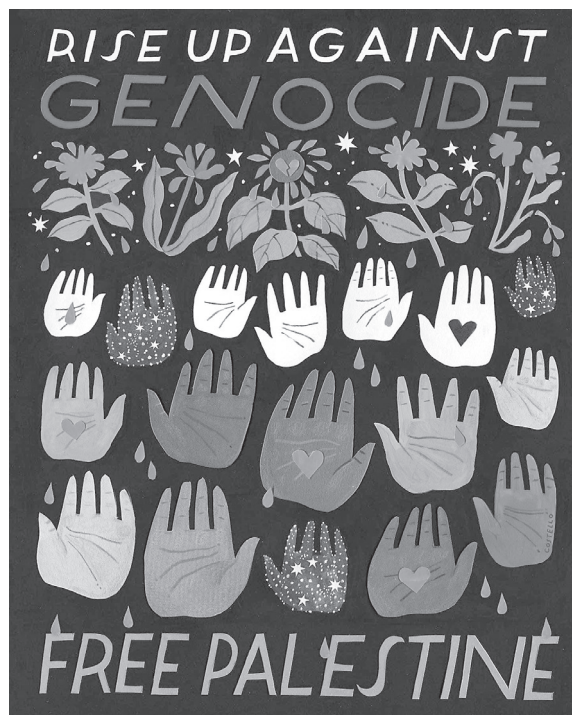
*John and Dee Cole Vodicka and sons were Resident Volunteers at the Open Door Community in 1985-86 and 1992-93. John founded and, for 15 years, directed the Prison & Jail Project in Americus, Georgia. Today he is an activist, writer and community organizer who lives in Athens, Georgia. (johnvodicka@comcast.net)*

## HOSPITALITY

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Please join us on Facebook for the continuing journey of the Open Door Community in Baltimore.





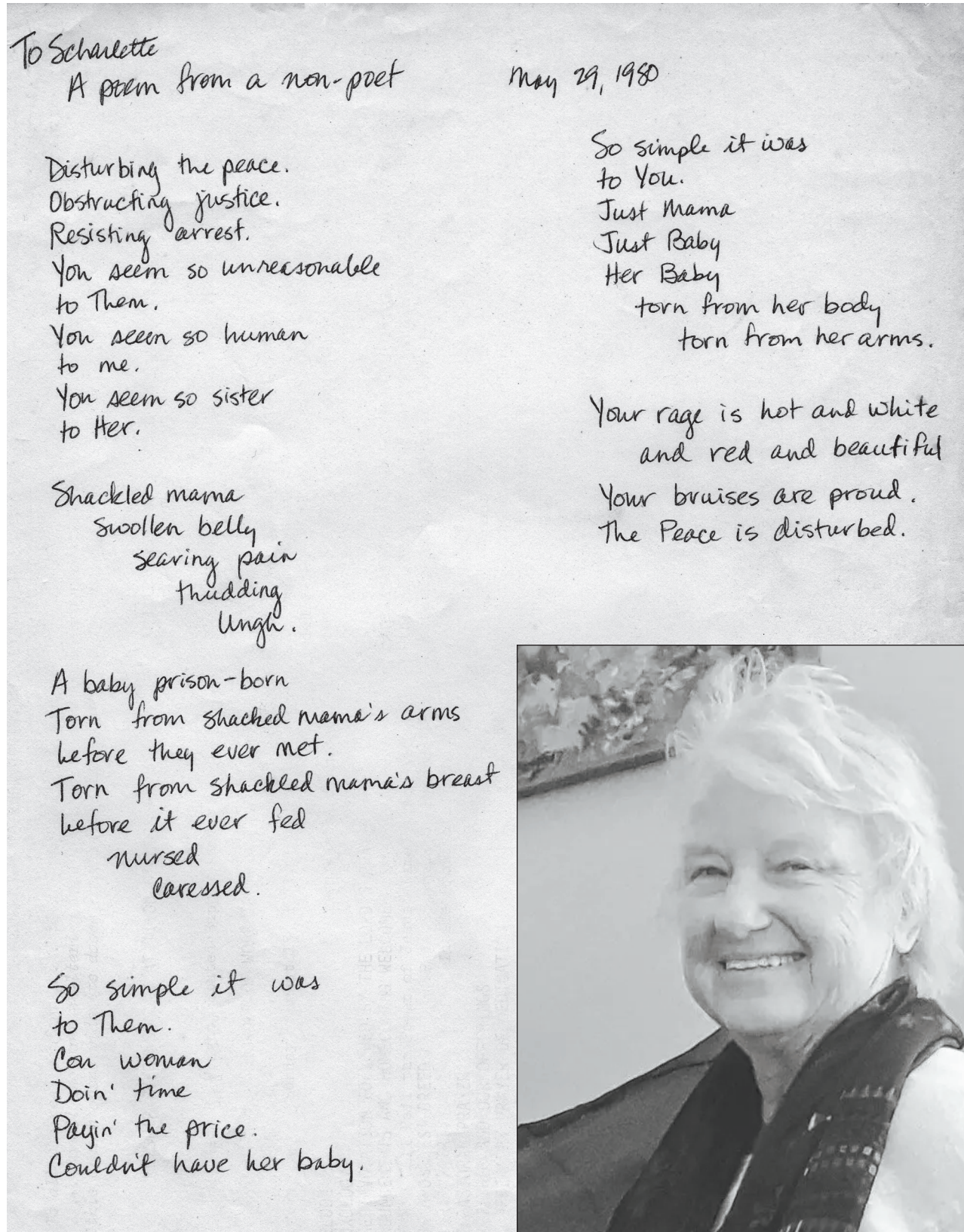
# Murphy Davis ¡Presente!



## To Scharlette

A poem from a non-poet

By Murphy Davis



## Scharlette Holdman

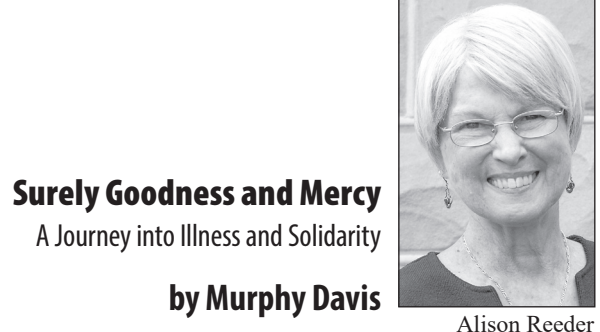
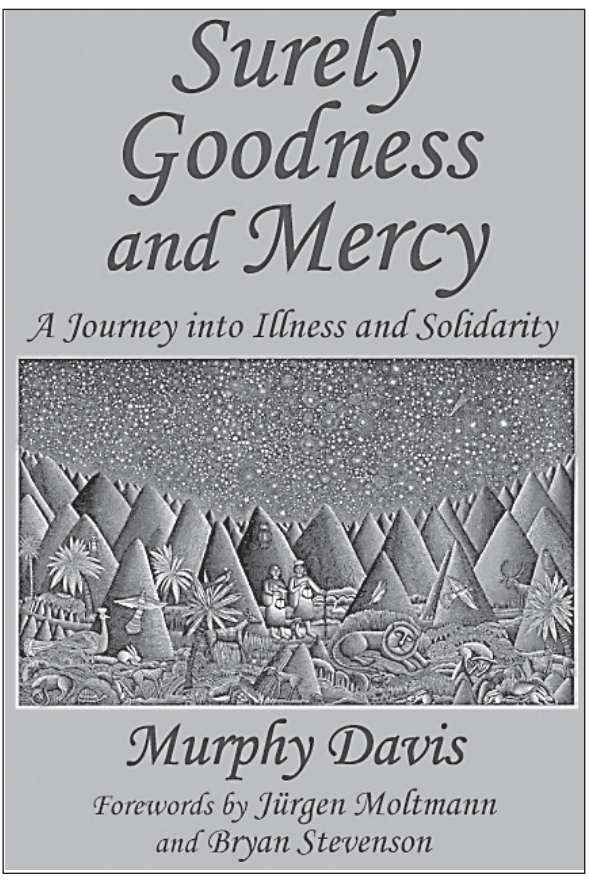


Samantha Kennedy

Scharlette Holdman was a force of nature. She came to Atlanta in 1976 to teach Ed and Murphy as they organized the Witness Against Executions held in Atlanta in April 1977. Murphy and Ed's activism became radicalized and politically sharp, thanks to Scharlette. Her home base was in Tallahassee, Florida. When the execution of John Spinklink was drawing nigh, the first non-voluntary execution under the perverse "new" anti-death penalty law, Scharlette planned a major civil disobedience action. May 23, 1979, Ed and other members of PAX (People Against Executions) locked themselves to Governor Bob Graham's Governor's Mansion. The next day PAX took over the lobby to Graham's office. Ed got control of the phones for 10 minutes. Each time the phone rang, he answered, saying, "The Governor has granted a stay." The Governor had not. John was executed on May 25, 1979. Scharlette Holdman was among the most beloved and lauded anti-death penalty leaders in the nation. When the ODC opened in 1981, Scharlette moved to Atlanta for a while and lived next door to the Open Door. She died on July 12, 2017 at the age of 70. ♣

Eduard Nuessner Loring is an Activist/Advocate/Ally at the Open Door Community in Baltimore. Pronouns: he, him, his. (edloring@opendoorcommunity.org)

## Open Door Community Press



**Surely Goodness and Mercy**  
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by **Murphy Davis**

Alison Reeder

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# At the Crossroads

## A Tribute to Joe Barndt

By David Billings

No one who met Rev. Joe Barndt went away unaffected. Certainly no one who wanted to be a part of changing U.S. society toward a more inclusive and just democracy. His soft-spoken manner belied his all-encompassing passion for an anti-racist world. Joe died in California on August 19.

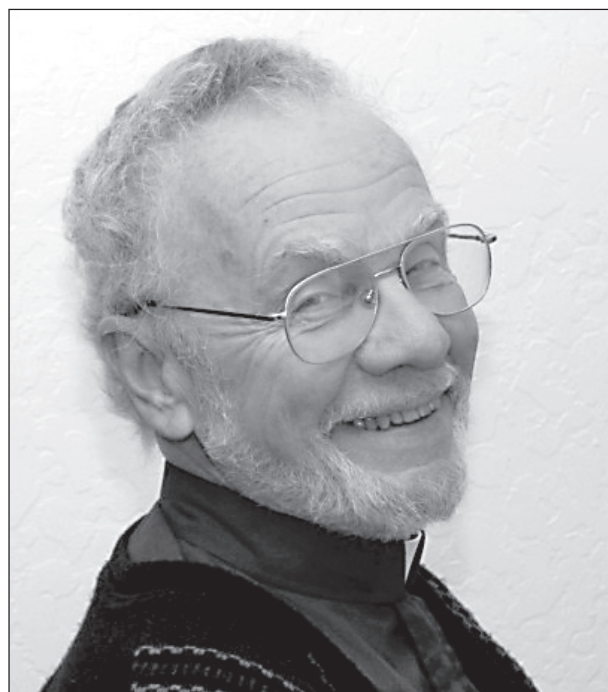
Joe grounded his life in the church, whose redemptive ethic he believed spoke to everyone's full humanity. Joe was ordained as a Lutheran pastor in 1962. He was both preacher and prophet. He saw community-based organizing as a method that could bring Gospel truth to a sinful world where selfishness too often overwhelmed compassion. From the very beginning of his ministry, he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and in all aspects of that ministry he worked extensively with communities of color. Early in his ministry, however, he heard the call as a white person to work among his own people in the movement. His work in communities across the country convinced him that powerful systems resist efforts to bring equity among all peoples. Those experiences led him to what today is called anti-racism. He credited his understanding of race, whiteness and racism to people of color who invested in him. He felt a strong calling to collective struggles for justice, and found his place as an anti-racist white person working and organizing to dismantle white supremacy and racism.

He founded Crossroads Ministries in the early 1980s and by 1986 was working in close alliance with The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). He approached organizing with the principles of Saul Alinsky coupled with an anti-racist value system.

Joe exemplified what it meant to be a crusader for justice and a freedom fighter, inspiring thousands from all walks of life. His close partnership with Ron Chisom and Barbara Major in both Crossroads and PISAB enriched both organizations. For us he was teacher, mentor and friend.

When I first met Joe Barndt, I must admit to some defensiveness. I was somewhat jealous and was not sure there was room at The People's Institute for two white male organizers and trainers in its leadership circle. I'm just telling it like it was. I didn't say anything to him or to other core trainers, but I, at first, kept a certain distance from him. But I was quickly won over. The same people skills that made him such a good organizer made him a good friend. He reached out to me with such warmth and positive energy, I quickly had to swallow my pride and welcome him to PISAB, recognizing him as someone I could learn from and with whom I could become a friend. He modeled for me the importance of staying in touch with other organizers by whatever means necessary. For the year preceding his death we talked at least once a week — sometimes about personal matters and always about challenges confronting us in the work.

Joe put much of his thinking and experiences into writing. Before I even knew him and his work, I ran across an article Joe wrote entitled "Setting the White Man Free." Jim Dunn always passed it out in our early meetings of the Peoples Institute. Its thesis was that our liberation as white people (men, in particular) was, inexorably, tied to our getting clear on racism and its power as we did our work in the church or in the community in an antiracist framework. Some of his major books are: *Becoming an Antiracist Church: Journeying Toward Wholeness* (2011), *Liberating the*



www.legacy.com

*White Ghetto* (1972), *Beyond Brokenness* (1980), *Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America* (1991) and *Deconstructing Racism: A Path Toward Lasting Social Change* (2023), written with Barbara Major.

He loved the church, but he was a critical lover. His passion was helping white churches and white church people understand our complicity with white supremacy in every phase of our existence from the liturgy to the training and education of the clergy. As a pastor he was also an organizer and helped start many collective efforts for change in the broader community as well as in the church.

Joe was active in movement work until the day he died. Although ravaged by the effects of Parkinson's disease in his final year and severely limited in his physical activities, his powerful voice commanded attention and his ability to touch those in his audience never wavered. We give thanks for his powerful witness, and we will miss him on so many levels. ✦

David Billings is a United Methodist minister born in McComb, Mississippi, and raised in Helena, Arkansas. He has been a trainer and organizer with The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond since its inception in 1980. Today he facilitates "Undoing Racism/Community Organizing" sessions as part of that team. He is the author of *Deep Denial* and has written for many publications and journals. He is also a partner in the United Nations Committee on Human Rights and the Center for the Study of White American Culture. (revdavidbillings@gmail.com)

# Entering Deeply Into the Story

## Introducing the "Radical Bible" YouTube Channel

By Wes Howard-Brook

As a Jewish kid growing up in the LA of the 60s, the Bible was a strange artefact. It was presented in my Bar Mitzvah training as the "history" of our people. But as an inquisitive person who early on was in search of truth, the Bible seemed like an obsolete relic, a record of a bygone and now largely irrelevant time and place. Best to nod to its historical importance and just leave it on the shelf.

In this moment when politicians claim the Bible as their source for the most venal behaviors and policies, we need grounded sources that refute the nonsense with solid scholarship and the lived experience of discipleship.

But two decades later, I was taken aback to discover the old stories anew. I had been working as a government attorney in Washington, D.C. and then in Seattle, when I chose to make a big break: I gave up the law and enrolled in a new MDiv program for Catholic laypeople at Seattle University. I had no idea where it would lead, and certainly didn't expect to launch into more than three decades (and counting) of teaching the Bible in churches, classrooms and homes. The few Scripture courses I had were interesting enough, but didn't quite spark the fire.

It was the publication of Ched Myers' landmark commentary on the Gospel of Mark, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis, 1988) that, literally, showed me the Way. I consumed Ched's 500-page tome like a novel. I wondered: was it *Mark's Gospel* that was being shown to be radically relevant to our own struggles for peace and justice, or was it the *reading method* Ched had developed? I

decided to test the method on the most different of the four gospels, John. That experiment produced my own first book, itself a 500-page commentary, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Orbis 1994). I was launched!

Since then, I've written a series of books, pamphlets and articles on the Bible. But now, as I near the end of my seventh decade of life on this precious bluegreen ball, I'm feeling the pull to offer the fruit of the scholarship I've gathered over the decades in a new way. I've inaugurated a YouTube channel, *Radical Bible*, which

provides a verse-by-verse commentary on the Bible in a video format of 15-20 minutes per session. I'm beginning with four texts: Genesis, the books of Samuel, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Revelation. (That series is now complete!) I expect it will take me about six years to complete the entire series. I've resigned my position at Seattle University to give me more time to make this happen. With 437 videos posted so far, *Radical Bible* is on the way!

I'm deeply aware after two decades in a college classroom how few young adults carry with them any "story" that binds them to others in a meaningful way. They are very good at knowing what stories they *don't* adhere to: the U.S. story of imperialism; of global capitalism; of white supremacy; of homophobia; of Christianity. But they are like deer in the headlights when asked what story they *do* claim as the foundation of their lives. It's as if no one has asked them the question before. And in this moment when politicians

claim the Bible as their source for the most venal behaviors and policies, we need grounded sources that refute the nonsense with solid scholarship and the lived experience of discipleship. I hope *Radical Bible* can be one of those sources.

Is it too late to inspire a new generation to embrace the Good News of Jesus, grounded in the "religion of creation" expressed in Genesis, Exodus and the prophets? Maybe so, but I'm willing to take the risk that it's not. I'm giving all I've got to putting out there on YouTube the best of what I've learned from so many scholars whose work is not easily accessible for most folk. *Radical Bible* is and will always be free of charge, free of ads, and available for anyone, anytime. So, I hope friends of the Open Door will find *Radical Bible* a source of strength and perhaps even inspiration. And just maybe, together, we can call forth a new love and passion for the Story of God and God's People! In Jesus' Name, may it be so. ✦

Wes Howard-Brook shares with his wife, Sue Ferguson Johnson, the ministry "Abide in Me" ([abideinme.net](http://abideinme.net)). His current project is *Radical Bible* (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIEJwHfIN-7OtG4Hko9s3Jg>). His books include *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (with Anthony Gwyther), *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship*, and "Come Out My People": God's Call Out of Empire From the Beginning to the End.



**The Radical Bible**  
with Wes Howard-Brook

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIEJwHfIN-7OtG4Hko9s3Jg>



# The Power of One

By Catherine Meeks

The cultural echo chamber continues to bellow out that one person, one voice, one action of any sort basically makes little to no difference when put up against the vastness of collective negativity that is running rampant in our country at this moment. But some of us do not believe it.

Let me tell you about a small group of folks in the city of Atlanta where the actions of one person make a major difference to them. The group is made up of men and women who live without shelter. Many of their days are spent with no food or water, along with other challenges that come with having no shelter.

One day a young man was walking his large, beautiful husky, Zizous, on the street where several of the folks who sleep outside were searching the garbage for food and something to drink, and a spark was lit. The young man was outraged at the sight and said to himself and to his dog, "This is scandalous, and I have to do something to help." He finished the walk but was haunted by that sight of the folks searching for food.

He had seen unsheltered people before, but this was the first time that he had seen someone literally searching the garbage in an attempt to find food. Though he had very limited funds himself, he decided that day to buy a couple of five-dollar pizzas and bottles of water to give to those he'd seen searching in the garbage can for food.

He began carrying granola bars, nuts, peanut butter crackers and small bottles of water with him when he walked Zizous to hand out to anyone who was on his path. Sometimes when he did not have snacks to distribute, he carried food from his apartment to share with the small group of folks whom he encountered.

One day he mentioned to family members what he was doing and asked for a little help because his money was in short supply. Family members chipped in and he was able to get sandwiches and wings at times for the folks, sometimes fruit and always water.



Zizous

Along with food, he bought a few pairs of gloves and some umbrellas, and would even take blankets from his home to share with folks who were battling to stay warm in the winter. He paid for one person to spend a couple of nights in a shelter, who told him, "Even though it is warmer, I still want to go to the shelter because I have not slept in a bed in such a long time." Now on a weekly basis, he provides enough food and snacks to as many as a dozen people so they have something to eat each day. When those numbers grow,

he goes back home for more. When he can, he saves what is left for the next time.

Along with sharing food, he shares his dog. The folks whom he meets on the street love to interact with Zizous, who is very friendly and delighted to have the attention. The young man said recently that the greatest delight for him comes from watching how the folks enjoy playing with his dog and the joy that it brings to them. He said, "It is the best part of all of this for me, even though folks thank me for the food. I just like seeing how they enjoy Zizous."

No, this young man and his husky are not going to alleviate hunger in their neighborhood or on the planet, but a small group of folks are less hungry than they would be, because this one young person allowed a spark of compassion and empathy to ignite in his heart. One person can make a difference. It is the small acts of kindness, compassion and open-heartedness coupled with whatever action is possible that will help to save this planet.

May we all become braver in our daily journey. May we watch for opportunities to be kind, compassionate and open-hearted. May our hearts be broken by the suffering of others in ways that move us to action. ✦

*Catherine Meeks is the Public Scholar/Executive Director/Chief Midwife at Turquoise and Lavender Institute for Transformation and Healing, after retiring from the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Justice and Healing. Her latest book is "A Quilted Life: Reflections of a Sharecropper's Daughter," published earlier this year. She and Nibs Stroupe are authors of Passionate for Justice (2019), a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. She is involved with prison work, visits on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (kayma46@gmail.com)*

# Resisting Georgia's Death Penalty

By Lee Carroll

Georgia — like 26 other states — continues to support the death penalty. A majority of the state's legislators apparently believe "we kill people who kill people because killing people is wrong," or that executing those convicted of crimes will reduce violent crimes. As a consequence, 38 human beings are now living out their days locked away in cages on Georgia's Death Row, suffering the mental anguish of knowing that they can be put to death at any time.

In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court declared a nationwide moratorium against the death penalty, but it was lifted after only four years, in 1976. Since that time, Georgia has executed 76 prisoners. In that same period, seven people on Georgia's death row have been exonerated, with all charges dismissed — narrowly evading unjustifiable executions. This leads one to wonder if there might still be other prisoners on Death Row today who should be cleared of the charges that put them there.

People of many religious traditions believe that the death penalty — even for murder — is immoral and unjust. Many religious organizations have published public statements calling for the abolition of the death penalty. But in spite of that, the Death Penalty Research Center recently reported that a majority (55%) of U.S. citizens still support the death penalty for murder.

That is why the non-profit organization Georgians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (GFADP) continues its quest to abolish the death penalty in Georgia.

That is also why, on October 10, 2023, a group of 75 faith leaders from various religious traditions — Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islam and Hindu — all converged upon the State Capitol in Atlanta to protest the death penalty. They advocated for Georgia to discontinue this inhumane and irreversible practice at a time when there is a global trend toward abolishing the death penalty.

GFADP is currently seeking to change one particular provision in the state's practices — executing those with intellectual disabilities. To that end, many people of faith signed the following



October 10, 2023 | Georgia Capitol | World Day Against the Death Penalty

GFADP

letter. The letter was delivered to Georgia's General Assembly on February 7, 2024.

*We, as faith leaders from every corner of the state of Georgia, come together to bring to your attention an injustice occurring in our state and urge you to take action to stop it.*

*In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that executing those with intellectual disabilities was a violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment's protection against cruel and unusual punishment. The court left it up to individual states to develop standards for determining intellectual disability. Sadly, Georgia stands alone among all the states in requiring the highest standard of proof—beyond a reasonable doubt. As a result, individuals with intellectual disabilities have been executed, and are at risk of being executed again.*

*Although our sacred texts and traditions differ, all our faith*

*traditions call us to protect the dignity of all people, especially the most vulnerable among us. We cannot stand by while our state laws, though designed to protect people with intellectual disabilities, ensure that they have no chance of proving their disability in a court of law. Therefore, we urge you to support legislation that would change this standard of proof from "beyond a reasonable doubt" to "preponderance of the evidence." Only through this change in the standard of proof can we prevent the wrongful execution of a person with an intellectual disability from occurring.*

*This issue has come before our state legislature many times before. Let this be the year that we say no more to this injustice, and pass legislation that will protect the constitutional rights of people with intellectual disabilities.*

*Together, we represent millions of faithful Georgians, united*

**Resisting continued on page 7**



Joan Browning *continued from page 1*

On Sunday, December 10, 1961, she boarded the train in Atlanta with the integrated Freedom Riders group, and when they arrived in Albany, there were police officers waiting for them. For the first time in her life, Joan Browning would spend time in jail, the only white woman arrested in the Albany Freedom Ride. She was in a cell by herself, and she felt a crushing loneliness. She was released after 24 hours, then jailed two days later for five long days. Howard Zinn recorded that she went to a rally at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and she looked around in awe — the Black sanctuary was filled to overflowing. She was asked to speak, and she noted how lonely she had been in jail but how good it was: “It’s a funny, mixed-up feeling to hate being in a dirty place, but to be glad you’re there for a good reason. We hope that you’ll keep it going.”

The sit-ins and the Freedom Rides were part of the body of civil rights work that Joan Browning engaged in. She lived in Atlanta for a while, then the north Georgia mountains, then the mountains of West Virginia, where she now lives in a doublewide mobile home on a hillside. Ever the warrior and witness, she had these words to say in early 2023 in an op-ed piece for the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*:

“Now, I speak as an ordinary citizen and challenge students and others who consider themselves ordinary to see themselves as living lives of purpose, of grabbing what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. described as the ‘moral arc of the universe’ to help bend it more toward justice. I try to convey to citizens and students alike that even those who consider themselves as ‘ordinary’ citizens can make a difference. My work has been recognized and honored with a long list of awards and appointments.

But now, all that many others and I are doing — and have done — is in danger of being erased as legislatures around the

country, including in West Virginia, try to stifle discussion of those parts of America’s past.

For the first time in three and a half decades of speaking about the Freedom Rides, I have had two presentations cancelled because leaders in those states had issued an edict forbidding the discussion of race, diversity, equality or inclusion.

It seems that the West Virginia Legislature, through the proposed Anti-Racism Act of 2023 and other legislation, also intends to forbid me to speak about being an ordinary person who, by going on a Freedom Ride, helped take down those illegal, discriminatory signs and also inspire other ordinary citizens to help make this a better place for all of us.

I might have seen this coming. In 2018, Gov. Jim Justice appointed me to serve another term on the West Virginia Human Rights Commission, but the state Senate Confirmations Committee unanimously rejected that appointment, saying that I have an ‘agenda.’”

West Virginia did not pass the Anti-Racism Act (though it may return in 2024), and witnesses like Joan Browning helped to derail it. Browning’s life and witness remind us that we are all called out of our ordinariness to be extraordinary witnesses. Let us find our places in this great cloud of witnesses. ✦

*Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door; retired pastor and author of Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision. He and Catherine Meeks are authors of Passionate for Justice, a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. He is managing editor of Hospitality. He writes a weekly blog at www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com. (nibs.stroupe@gmail.com)*

**HOSPITALITY** *prays*

*Prayer is the heart of a genuine Christian radicalism. — Ron Ferguson*

**Prayer for Living in a War of Narratives**

O faithful God,

We live in a “war of narratives”!

Some see Israel as the land promised to the Jews,  
and others insist that the Palestinian people  
have survived far too long with no permanent home;  
Some think Donald Trump will “make America great again,”  
and others believe he is a narcissistic, power-hungry demon;  
Some believe that abortion is murder and must be prohibited by law,  
and others argue that women must be free  
to choose what is faithful and moral.

So many competing narratives leave us polarized...  
as our nation stands at the brink of war;  
as race and gender are used as excuses to exclude some folks;  
as evangelical and progressive Christians debate what the church is to be and to do.

So, dear God,  
grant us wisdom;  
grant us courage...  
that we shall discern *your* narrative for godly living —  
as different as it may be from self-serving, unjust narratives;  
that we shall gladly accept our vocation as ...  
a people who are thankful for your gifts of grace and love,  
a people who value strangers and those with whom we disagree,  
a people who champion your call to act justly and seek peace, and  
a people who — day by day — walk faithfully with you.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who embodied your godly narrative as your gift for the world.  
Amen!

— Lee Carroll

*Lee Carroll is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Associate Professor Emeritus of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. He is the current chair of the Board of Directors of the Open Door Community. (lcarroll@ix.netcom.com)*

## poetry corner



Julie Lonneman

**Masters of War**

Come you masters of war  
You that build the big guns  
You that build the death planes  
You that build all the bombs  
You that hide behind walls  
You that hide behind desks  
I just want you to know  
I can see through your masks

You that never done nothin’  
But build to destroy  
You play with my world  
Like it’s your little toy  
You put a gun in my hand  
And you hide from my eyes  
And you turn and run farther  
When the fast bullets fly

Like Judas of old  
You lie and deceive  
A world war can be won  
You want me to believe  
But I see through your eyes  
And I see through your brain  
Like I see through the water  
That runs down my drain

You fasten all the triggers  
For the others to fire  
Then you sit back and watch  
When the death count gets higher  
You hide in your mansion  
While the young people’s blood  
Flows out of their bodies  
And is buried in the mud

You’ve thrown the worst fear  
That can ever be hurled  
Fear to bring children  
Into the world  
For threatening my baby  
Unborn and unnamed  
You ain’t worth the blood  
That runs in your veins

How much do I know  
To talk out of turn  
You might say that I’m young  
You might say I’m unlearned  
But there’s one thing I know  
Though I’m younger than you  
That even Jesus would never  
Forgive what you do

Let me ask you one question  
Is your money that good?  
Will it buy you forgiveness  
Do you think that it could?  
I think you will find  
When your death takes its toll  
All the money you made  
Will never buy back your soul

And I hope that you die  
And your death will come soon  
I’ll follow your casket  
By the pale afternoon  
And I’ll watch while you’re lowered  
Down to your deathbed  
And I’ll stand over your grave  
‘Til I’m sure that you’re dead

— Bob Dylan | 1963

# Update: A Bag of Snakes

By Ed Loring

Dear Friends,

Barry Lee Burnside, a gaggle of great writers and copy editors and I are finishing up *A Bag of Snakes: Selected Writings on Prisons and the Death Penalty*, by Murphy Davis and Eduard Loring, edited by Barry Lee Burnside. I am writing today to ask you to pre-order a copy. Your donation will give us a needed financial boost toward our printing costs. The suggested donation is \$20 for one copy, or \$30 for your copy and an additional copy for a prisoner or someone in need. Any donation is appreciated, and we will send you the book.

Barry and the team have spent over two years putting this book together. We began with outlines and notes I found in the boxes of materials Murphy left when she ascended. The work is a work of love and every one of us involved is proud of the fruit borne by seeds nourished in good soil.

*A Bag of Snakes* will be available on April 13, 2024 at a gathering at First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta. We will celebrate the life of Murphy Davis and The Open Door Community.

David Payne will send out invitations next month. Please let us know if you plan to attend, and how many will be in your party because we will serve an Open Door Supper — vegetarian chili, Willie Dee Wimberly combread, salad and chocolate chip cookies.

Below are endorsements by people who know what the hell they are talking about with some inflation to bemuse the reader:

“I was introduced to Christ in the prisoner by Murphy Davis and Ed Loring some 35 years ago. Their liberative work with prisoners, especially those on death row, remains a key resource for those who seek justice in resistance to the criminal justice system. In their writings, the Bible and theology are put into creative theological interrogation of the realities of imprisonment, always informed by Jesus’ words, ‘I was in prison and you visited me.’”

**Dr. Peter R. Gathje**

*Co-Founder of Manna House, Professor of Religion, LeMoyné-Owen College*

“This remarkable work takes us inside the minds and hearts of two contemporary American disciples of the radical gospel, Murphy Davis and Eduard Loring, who somehow, with divine foolishness, took seriously the teachings of Jesus: to love the poor, to stand with the prisoner, to break bread with the oppressed. Not a word of sanctimony, but instead a decades-long, joyful embrace of the homeless on the streets of Atlanta, the condemned on Georgia’s death row, and marginalized families who faced years of struggle, sorrow and loss. Called not merely to believe but to act, Murphy and Ed carried on an open-hearted Open Door Ministry over the decades as their hospitality to the poor mixed with daily religious and philosophical reflection. The tone of the meditations, sermons and accounts of their lives and interactions in this wonderful book is fresh, sometimes amusing and always deeply humane. Their bravery is stunning and their kindness seems inexhaustible.”

**John Charles Boger** is a longtime NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer who, for years, worked closely with Murphy Davis in support of the men on Georgia’s death row.

“Murphy Davis dares us to look honestly at the criminal legal system in order to see how it treats people who are poor, Black or vulnerable. After spending decades visiting people in prison and on death row, she saw firsthand the damage the criminal legal system inflicts, not just to those inside, but on every person and every community it touches. Through *A Bag of Snakes*, we hear Murphy’s prophetic voice calling us to take a hard look at the destruction wreaked by this dehumanizing system. She challenges us to share these truths in order to help us move away from inflicting more harm and toward creating communities of healing, to move away from our thirst for vengeance and toward the wellspring of mercy. Murphy hands over this bag of snakes for us to carry now, so that one day, no one has to.”

**Reverend Stacy Rector** serves as Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty Executive Director; a vocation that she began discerning as a member of the Open Door Community in 1996. For 10 years, Stacy visited Steve Henley, a man on Tennessee’s death row, and served as his spiritual advisor when he was executed in 2009.

## A Bag of Snakes

Selected Writings on Prisons and the Death Penalty

by **Murphy Davis and Eduard Loring**  
edited by **Barry Lee Burnside**

Open Door Press  
April 2024

“When Reverends Murphy Davis and Ed Loring started their lifelong journey together, they made a decision that only a few have the courage to make: they entered the straight gate and followed the narrow way, where few members of our society reside, and where the limits of Christian faith are constantly tested. Murphy and Ed encountered many metaphorical serpents on their journey. *A Bag of Snakes* is the story of that journey, of the human suffering they observed, and of their ceaseless efforts to relieve it. Every person interested in the justice system should read it.”

**Wade Crumbley**

*Attorney at Law, Judge, Superior Courts of Georgia (2006-2021)*

“I never step into a prison without hearing Ed say, ‘There are people dying in here and it is good to visit them.’ In *A Bag of Snakes*, Murphy and Ed are unflinchingly honest as to the emotional cost and spiritual challenge of living in solidarity with incarcerated people — and the gifts of answering Jesus’ call. *A Bag of Snakes* invites all of us to grab hold of that goodness and keep holding on.”

**Amy Harwell**

*Assistant Chief, Capital Habeas Unit, Office of the Federal Defender, Nashville, Tennessee*

“I feel the presence of Murphy Davis and Ed Loring every time I visit the prison in Georgia where death row is located. The love and acceptance that they brought there for over 40 years surrounds me as I walk the prison halls, and the liberation theology that they wrote and preached and lived at the Open Door Community guides and sustains me in my prison ministry. How wonderful that Murphy and Ed’s writings on prison are now all in one place in *A Bag of Snakes* to inspire the next generation of activists who are ready to break down the prison walls with boundless love.”

**Mary Catherine Johnson**

*Executive Director of New Hope House*

“Murphy Davis and Ed Loring demonstrate in this volume and in their ways of being in the world that one has to confront the bag of snakes with courage and resistance. Their resistance was best exemplified by their work at the Open Door, Atlanta, with poor people. They looked at the snakes and named them. They took the snakes on in resistance through multiple ways of protesting and this book stands in witness to that while it reminds us that the night is long and we are still far from home.”

**Catherine Meeks, Ph.D**

*Author; Founding Director of Turquoise and Lavender Institute for Transformation and Healing*

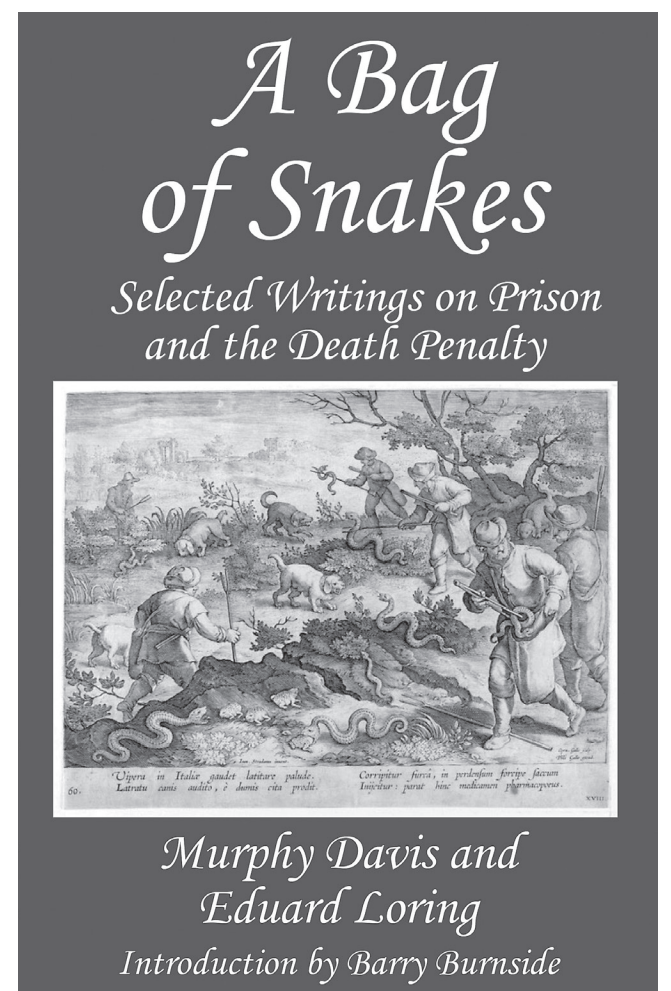
“My monthly digestion of the sustaining words of *Hospitality* has been essential to my ability to accompany and advocate for clients in jails and prisons in Georgia. To be with their family and friends, to argue for their freedom and lives in Georgia courts, I so often lean on the teachings and preachings of Murphy Davis and Eduard Loring. *A Bag of Snakes* is a treasury of the inspiration and truth-telling that keep my lamp lit in the fight for those who are incarcerated to be treated humanely and one day freed. I am so glad to have more of Murphy Davis’ and Eduard Loring’s words to feed me!”

**Amy Vosburg-Casey**

*Co-Director of Mitigation Casework, Advancing Real Change, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland*

**To order by mail** please send a check made out to the

Open Door Community:  
The Open Door Community,  
PO Box 10980,  
Baltimore, MD 21234



**You can make a donation through our online portal:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/OpenDoorCommunity>.

**You can also donate through our Facebook Donate button** on our main page at: <https://www.facebook.com/ODCBalt>.

**On our website, click on the GIVE NOW button** at the bottom of our main page at [www.opendoorcommunity.org](http://www.opendoorcommunity.org). In the notes please indicate that the Donation is for *A Bag of Snakes* and how many books you would like.

Any questions, contact David Payne, 404-290-2047  
[davidpayne@opendoorcommunity.org](mailto:davidpayne@opendoorcommunity.org) ☎

## Resisting *continued from page 5*

*in a common commitment to protecting human life and dignity. We ask you to respect the values of Georgia’s people of faith, as well as the supreme law of the land, and take action to prevent any more executions of our most vulnerable from occurring.*

To learn more about this intellectual disability bill use the following link: [https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/georgia-faith-leaders-oppose-the-execution-of-people-with-intellectual-disabilities?source=direct\\_link&](https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/georgia-faith-leaders-oppose-the-execution-of-people-with-intellectual-disabilities?source=direct_link&)

**Editors Note:** The state of Georgia is scheduled to execute Wille James Pye on March 20. It will be the first execution in Georgia since 2020. Pye’s case is a classic example of why the use of the death penalty is an abomination. Mr. Pye is an intellectually disabled man with an IQ of 68, and his trial attorney was wildly ineffective. Georgia is the only state in the country which allows the execution of someone so disabled. Contact Georgians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (GFADP) for more information: [www.gfadp.org](http://www.gfadp.org) or contact Executive Director Dr. Cathy Harmon-Christian at [charmon-christian@gfadp.org](mailto:charmon-christian@gfadp.org) ☎

*Lee Carroll is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Associate Professor Emeritus of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. He is the current chair of the Board of Directors of the Open Door Community. (lcarroll@ix.netcom.com)*



# Grace and Peaces of Mail

*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*

— Martin Luther King Jr.

There is hope in Martin's belief that the "arc of the moral universe is long" (very, very long). And we share his faith that it will bend toward justice. The bloodbaths in Israel and Gaza are indescribable horrors and they certainly question any bending toward justice. Hamas murders 1200 Israeli citizens and takes over 240 hostages. Israel retaliates with indiscriminate bombings and develops an eliminationist mind-set.

As we write, 18,000 Palestinians have been slaughtered; at least 70% are women and children. We are shamed at the complicity of the U.S. government in this carnage. The world cries out for unconditional ceasefire and meaningful negotiations, but thus far that cry has been dismissed. The United States refuses to back a ceasefire and U.S. arms dealers are dancing in the streets, counting all the profits. Think about it. The death merchants are supplying Ukraine, too, as they fight the Russian machine. My God, how the money rolls in.

Regarding the Hamas/Israel war: if you mention genocide, holocaust, occupation or display any concern for Palestinians, you are branded antisemitic. We condemn all the violence and the wanton slaughter of the innocent. All war is terrorism in the extreme and there are many forms of nonviolent ethical resistance that are not even considered. Israel and Hamas have chosen the path of war and hostility for too long. War brings neither security nor peace. Violence just adds hot coals to the fire. Every time even one person stands up and says, "No! No to the killing! the arc of the moral universe bends ever so slowly toward justice.

We need peacemakers not warmongers. Dan Berrigan, SJ wrote, "Peacemaking is hard. Hard almost as war. The difference being one we can stake life on, and limb and hope and love."

Brendan Walsh  
VIVA HOUSE  
Baltimore Catholic Worker  
Baltimore, Maryland

Dear Pastor Ed,

My appreciation of you goes back decades, but Pastor Appreciation Month inspires me to tell you! You have gifted me through *Hospitality* writings and by your lived example. You have helped me understand how to "carry on" with a grief-broken heart.

Thank you,  
Joan Browning  
Lewisburg, West Virginia

It is always good to read of the great work you continue. You are all a blessing to those who are under attack. God be with you.

My prayers are with you as well.  
Merry Christmas,  
Elizabeth Biddle  
Alexandria, Virginia

Thank you for the work you do. The Open Door paper, *Hospitality*. The Calendar and Artwork. The writing from wonderful people in *Hospitality*.

Thank you,  
Rev. Richard K. Gibson  
Lynnwood, Washington

Thank you Ed, David, et al for letting your light shine. It reaches to many places and reminds us that the darkness has never overcome.

May you be blessed as you have been,  
Grant MacLean  
Dalton Gardens, Idaho

Thank you for your work & witness! Thank you for your paper!

Wishing you all a good (better) New Year!  
Susanna Juon-Gilk  
Merrill, Wisconsin

Dear Ed & David,

Please accept this donation in honor of my late parents, Dick & Gladys Rustay, and the mission they served. As their souls continue their journey, I acknowledge & recognize the opportunity that the Open Door Community provided for their spiritual growth. Thank you.

Peace,  
Holly Rustay  
Ben Lomond, California

Hi Ed,

Amy and I enjoyed your account of the European Adventure, and we find your emails are enlightening and moving us to be better followers of Jesus.

We are very active at the Murphy Shelter and with immigrant families. We are making a trip to El Salvador in January with the Fuller Housing Center. I still enjoy the challenge of building homes.

Wishing you a meaningful year,  
Gil Nicolson  
Hayesville, North Carolina

Dear Open Door Community,

Thank you for the 2024 calendar. We continue to remember Murphy Davis, New Hope House and the D.C. Dorothy Day workers who, like Open Door, work to help so many in need.

Happy Holidays,  
Eileen & Richard Melia  
Arlington, Virginia

Dear Ed, Family, Friends & Community,

Wishing you Justice, Peace & Joy to all people in the coming year.

Thank you for your part in this existential struggle.  
Love to all,  
Mary Howard  
Atlanta, Georgia

Ed,

Keep on truckin' plenty of work to do!! Violence breeds violence — current examples, both groups are victims of hate, abuse, denial of lands and rights; anger builds and explodes! Help us, Quaker friends.

Best wishes for a better year!

Love,  
Ed & Barb Kusek  
Hartford, Wisconsin



Calvin Kimbrough

**Nashville, Tennessee** | 2/27/24 | Capitol Hill | Day on the Hill Against Gun Violence

Over 100 faith communities and organizations joined together to call for common sense gun controls and an end to gun violence.

## Welcome Pantry Needs:

- Small OJ Bottles, Shelf Stable Milk
- Pop Tarts
- Single Serve Oatmeal Packets
- Assorted Small Cereal Boxes
- Pretzels
- Crackers
- Granola Bars
- Baby Wipes
- Travel Tissue Packs and Toothpaste
- 2 in 1 travel shampoo - 1oz. size
- small hand sanitizer containers

We have an Amazon Wish List: <https://tinyurl.com/yfjcr3bm>



## The Box

Compiled by Ed Loring

**December 1** As Israel debates what to do next in Gaza, I hope Israel's political-military leadership will reflect on the adage often attributed to Confucius: "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves."

"The struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

— Milan Kundera

**Women Wage Peace — Rabbi Sharon Brous**

November 25, 2023 — Parshat Vayetze

Watch on YouTube or listen on Spotify/Apple

When women's voices are ignored, diminished and marginalized, everyone loses. Jacob loved Rachel, but he failed to take seriously her anguished voice. Thousands of years later, Israeli spotters — women in intelligence — were ignored ... at the peril of the nation. Why we must center women's voices in the quest for peace, and in the work for a better, safer world.