HOSPITALITY
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Mary Catherine Johnson

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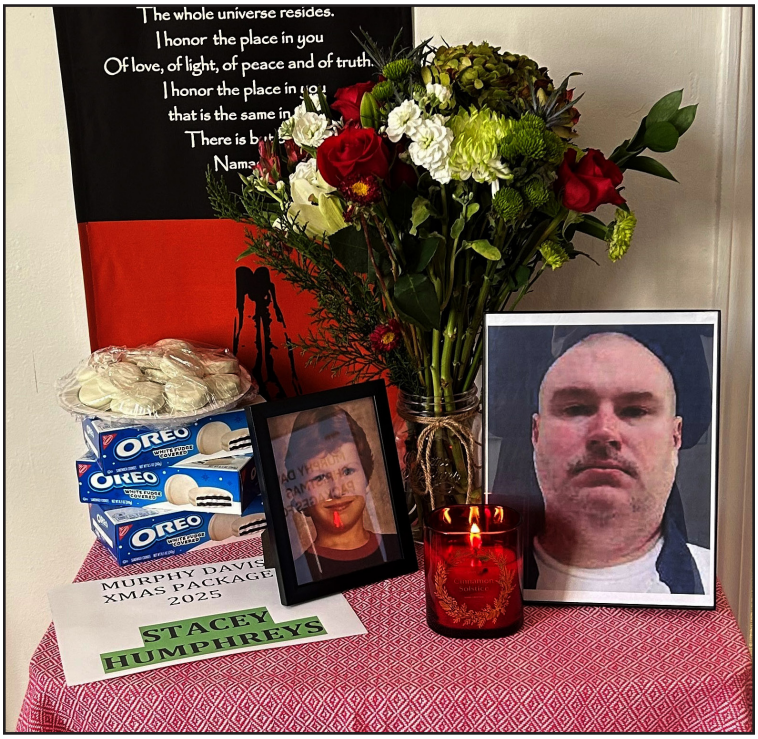
The Song Beyond the Ruins

The 2025 Murphy Davis Christmas Packages for Georgia's Death Row

By Mary Catherine Johnson

I had the whole month of December planned perfectly. I would get all of the ordering and shopping done for the Christmas boxes for death row, just in time for the volunteers to arrive at New Hope House to assemble the packages the day before the assigned delivery date at the prison. More than 40 years ago, Open Door Community co-founder Murphy Davis began an annual tradition of sending packages containing cookies, candy, condiments and toiletries to everyone on Georgia's death row. After her passing in 2020, the tradition was named in her honor. These care packages have brought immense holiday cheer to the recipients over the years, and as Murphy's successor steward for this program, I had every intention of carrying out a meticulous plan that would culminate with the delivery of an awesome set of gift boxes to death row on December 17, 2025.



Mary Catherine Johnson

But the State of Georgia had different plans. On December 1, a death warrant was signed for Stacey Ian Humphreys, with his execution date set for December 17. My joyful anticipation about shopping for the death row Christmas packages abruptly shifted into care and concern for Stacey and his family, and I wondered if we would even get to deliver the packages in 2025.

The men on death row usually start talking about the "Murphy Davis boxes" sometime during the summer months. They want to know what the boxes will include, and if they can suggest an item or two. The excitement builds throughout the fall, and I love fielding their questions about the items in the boxes and when they will be delivered, while I try to keep some of the contents a surprise. But with Stacey's warrant, the packages became an awkward subject. Was it okay to talk about Christmas gifts with an execution looming? I thought of canceling the package assembly party for the volunteers, thinking that a day of prayer for Stacey might be more appropriate. I wasn't sure how to move forward, so I did the only thing I knew to do — I asked God for guidance.

As so often happens with God's guidance, it came in the most unexpected way. In the midst of Stacey's warrant period, I heard the news that Chuck Culhane had died. A tireless advocate for prison reform and a published poet, Chuck was a dear friend of the Open Door Community and his writings often appeared in *Hospitality*. He was a member of the "Class of '72," referring to the hundreds of people on death row in 1972 whose death sentences were commuted when the U.S. Supreme Court halted capital punishment with *Furman v Georgia* — a decision that would lead to Chuck's parole and eventual release. As I revisited some of Chuck's writings from prison I found his poem, "First Day of Hanukkah," about his Jewish neighbor on death row. Through the final verse came the guidance about the death row Christmas packages that I had asked for:

> Amidst the bustle and the boredom
> of maximum security life
> he lit three candles on the bars
> & sat on the end of his bed w/prayerbook.
> He prayed in the small light
> in his sixty-ninth year
> neither murderer nor holy man
> just a bit of bone and spirit
> remembering the song beyond the ruins.

The song beyond the ruins. That phrase grabbed hold of me and helped me see the path forward, beyond the ruins of a possible execution. The poem reminded me that it is our ability to maintain hope, to light candles in our darkest hour — to pack

> We could not control what the State would do,
> but we could start singing the song
> that would transcend any ruins it left behind.

Christmas boxes for people on death row during an execution warrant — that makes us truly free from the chains of oppression and death. We could not control what the State would do, but we could start singing the song that would transcend any ruins it left behind. We would proceed as planned, gathering to pack the boxes on December 16, with the addition of an altar for Stacey in the room to remind us to maintain hope for him. We would hold two things simultaneously — our sadness for Stacey, and our joy over the assembly of bountiful gifts for our brothers and sister on Georgia's death row. It was not on the date I originally planned, but the 2025 Murphy Davis Christmas Packages for Georgia's Death Row did finally get delivered, and all the feedback from death row

thus far has been that it's the best package we ever assembled — a welcome light in an otherwise dark time.

When one of the men on death row called me on December 24 to wish me a Merry Christmas, the background noise from the cellblock was louder than normal. "Big Tex just got back!" he exclaimed, using Stacey Humphrey's prison nickname. A few days earlier, Stacey had received a stay, and his execution window had expired at 12 noon on Christmas Eve. I was hearing his return to his regular death row cellblock, and I was overcome with joy. During that phone call I could also hear the microwave beeping in the background over and over again — the sound of the popcorn from the Christmas packages being prepared. "This place has smelled like popcorn ever since the Murphy Davis boxes arrived," I was told. I smiled as I imagined Murphy Davis and Chuck Culhane rejoicing from beyond the ruins as they listened to the glorious song of the popcorn popping. ⌖

Mary Catherine Johnson is the executive director of New Hope House, a ministry that accompanies Georgia's death row prisoners and their families. (www.newhopehousega.org)

Photographs by Mary Catherine Johnson

Clockwise from above left:
Erin McFall and Anna Arceneaux;
Stephanie Jones;
Mary Catherine Johnson, Abby Brown and Cathy Harmon-Christian;
the group who gathered at New Hope House to pack the boxes.

Cathy Harmon-Christian

It Won't Be Long Now

Giving Thanks for the Life of Joe Beasley

By Ed Loring (with Nibs Stroupe)

One of the giants of social justice, compassion and equity, the Reverend Joe Beasley passed on to the other side at the age of 88 on December 9 in Atlanta. Joe was a powerful witness for those who were on the margins of life — prisoners, homeless people, hungry people, those forced to the outer darkness of health care. His parents were sharecroppers in Fayette County, so he knew firsthand the oppression of racism and poverty. His family became part of one of the waves of the Great Migration, moving out of the suffocating one-room schoolhouse of neo-slavery Georgia to Cincinnati, where Joe graduated from high school.

Joe spent 20 years in the U.S. Air Force, and although he continued to experience the ravages of racism there, the U.S. military was one of the few places in American culture where Black men could excel based on their merit, not their racial classification. He got a degree from Park College in Kansas City, and he became director of Operation PUSH there. He later became Southern Regional Director of Rainbow/PUSH, and that brought him to Atlanta in 1981, just as the Open Door was getting its start. He became an associate pastor at Antioch North Baptist Church and, under the leadership of the Reverend Cameron Alexander, Joe developed a deep and prophetic ministry to and on behalf of those forced to the margins of American society. He knew that was where he would find Jesus.

Joe became a powerful mentor for the ministry of the Open Door, pushing us into the streets to join him in a calling that would change all our lives. He was part of the takeover of the Imperial Hotel, the protest of city and state funding for Underground Atlanta (we were prescient in our opposition, because Underground continues to be a deep hole that gorges on public funding), the strong opposition to the death penalty and the development of the Grady Coalition, which sought to keep health care affordable for all people at Grady Hospital.

The last time Joe and I were together was in his apartment in downtown Atlanta three years ago. He was feeling good. Joe's mind was sharp. We began sharing our grief over Murphy's death; then we went into story telling. Central to our sharing and Joe's mentorship of me was the Takeover of the Imperial Hotel where we had 300 homeless people joining us. He came early every morning over the 13 days we were occupying the old, abandoned hotel on Peachtree Street. Joe would tell me what he learned from the office of Mayor Maynard Jackson. We always wondered when we would be arrested. Joe would ask about our daily needs, and he fetched them for us. Mainly, however, he offered his wisdom. Do not withdraw from the hotel. Watch out for Shirley Franklin, she is devious. When the time came for negotiations with the city, Joe brought Rev. Cameron Alexander into the process. We met at Antioch North. The negotiations were hard; Shirley Franklin went behind our backs and made deals with the homeless. We did, nonetheless, get an agreement for a shelter and 2,500 housing units. When Nelson Mandela came to town, Joe worked hard to bring the motorcade by the Imperial Hotel. He was unable to pull that off.

We were arrested on July 3 because the business community and other powers did not want us on Peachtree for the July Fourth parade. Again, Joe tried to keep us there until July 5, but no deals worked. After our arrest, Brian Spears got us off with light sentences. It would not be too long before we began the March for Medicine confronting the budget cuts at Grady Memorial Hospital. Rev. Tim McDonald, another mentor and a pastor to Murphy and me, was a leader. Joe loomed large, though in the background. This campaign was one of the most successful of the Open Door's justice struggle in Atlanta.

As Joe and I remembered together in his apartment, we told stories of the genesis of our relationship. Concerned Black Clergy was one of the most significant organizations in my and Murphy's lives. We were regularly in weekly attendance for 30 years. Joe had a strong and prophetic voice in the meeting. Often one could hear Joe saying, "My, my, my." Just what he meant was never quite clear. We laughed remembering when I jumped up on a table to make a point. "That crazy white man," was the interpretation.

I am almost 86. Many of my friends and teachers have died. I will miss Joe Beasley. I would not be who I am without him guiding me. A saying he often used, and I use unto this day: "Remember you can't get to heaven unless you raise hell." I think Joe is in heaven, likely joining Murphy in working for even greater justice.

ODC

Murphy Davis, Joe Beasley and Ed Loring, at the Troy Davis Rally and March September 16, 2011. Troy Davis was executed by Georgia September 21, 2011.

Joe became a powerful mentor for the ministry of the Open Door, pushing us into the streets to join him in a calling that would change all our lives.

We could say many things about the power and profundity of the life and witness and ministry of Joe Beasley, but we want to close with a poem by Maya Angelou, which seems especially written for Joe:

When Great Trees Fall
Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
slumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of
dark, cold
caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

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

February 12, 1963

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital
Columbus, Ohio,
USA—
a country caught
between Black and White.

I am born not long from the time
or far from the place
where
my great-great-grandparents
worked the deep rich land
unfree
dawn till dusk
unpaid
drank cool water from scooped-out gourds
looked up and followed
the sky's mirrored constellation
to freedom.

I am born as the South explodes,
too many people too many years
enslaved, then emancipated
but not free, the people
who look like me
keep fighting
and marching
and getting killed
so that today—
February 12, 1963
and every day from this moment on,
brown children like me can grow up
free. Can grow up
learning and voting and walking and riding
wherever *we* want.

I am born in Ohio but
the stories of South Carolina already run
like rivers
through my veins.

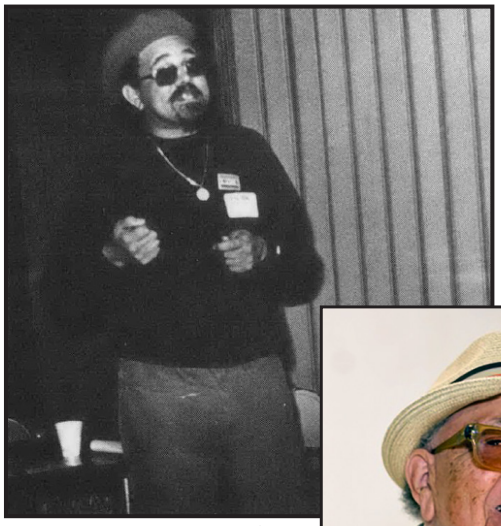
— Jacqueline Woodson

Jacqueline Woodson is an American writer of books for adults, children and adolescents. She is best known for her National Book Award-winning memoir, Brown Girl Dreaming *(which includes this poem), and her Newbery Honor-winning titles* After Tupac *And* D Foster, Feathers, *and* Show Way. *Her picture books* The Day You Begin *and* The Year We Learned to Fly *were NY Times Bestsellers. She was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 2020. Later that same year, she was named a MacArthur Fellow.*

Ron Chisom: The Real Deal

By David Billings

I met Ron Chisom in New Orleans in 1972 shortly after being hired to work at St. Mark's Community Center. St. Mark's was in the French Quarter across the neutral ground (New Orleans' name for a median) from the Treme neighborhood. Treme is one of the oldest Black neighborhoods in the United States. Despite being a neighborhood center, St. Mark's had been for "whites only" until the mid-1960s in a still-segregated New Orleans. By the early 1970s, neighborhood Black kids were starting to come over to play basketball; white kids were gradually leaving — for good.



Southern Exposure | 1985

I knew nothing about New Orleans; I was just looking for a job. I was very naive about how these things worked. As soon as the person interviewing me learned that I had some bookkeeping experience, she hired me part-time. But shortly after I started, the regular bookkeeper quit, so I became full-time.

When I was hired at St. Mark's, I was not aware it was affiliated with The United Methodist Church and was owned by the Women's Division. This proved to be fortuitous for me. My Aunt Peggy was a high-ranking staff person for the Women's Division and she, often behind the scenes, looked out for me throughout my early career.

The job required little of me, and I had a lot of free time. I would wander the streets, go to the music clubs and eat a lot of good food. Buster Holmes was a small "hole in the wall" restaurant in the French Quarter where you could eat a lunch of red beans and rice for 25 cents. Professor Longhair played guitar in Jackson Square for nickels and dimes mostly from tourists. I soaked it all up. This was the New Orleans where I would meet Ron Chisom and be introduced to a street-level education in community organizing and what it meant to be an organizer.

It was 1972. Ron was part of a neighborhood group called the Treme Community Improvement Association. It was not a 501c(3). In fact, at that time, none of us even knew what that meant, other than every funder seemed to require that you have one.

University of Maryland School of Social Work

TCIA, as everyone called it, had no budget and no real address. It operated out of a room in the Laffite Housing Project and concerned itself with getting rid of drugs, police harassment and evictions of poor people from apartments no one should have to live in anyway.

Ron was the real deal. Everyone knew him. Together with his partner, Jim Hayes, he personified the culture of Treme. He could "hambone," "do the dozens" and "second-line" with the best of them. He was not trained as an organizer but he organized as a way of life. He was later asked, "What does an organizer do exactly?" He would say an organizer laughs and jokes and talks about folk. This was New Orleans and Ron was/is New Orleans.

In 1980 Ron and Dr. Jim Dunn co-founded The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). A small group of others of us were part of the founding. "We" included Barbara Major, Diana Dunn and me from New Orleans; John Morin from the Tribal Council of White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota; Dr. Michael Washington, a history professor at Northern Kentucky University and Rev. Daniel Buford from Cincinnati, Ohio. Shortly thereafter we were joined by Dr. Kimberley Richards and Margery Freeman, New Orleans educators, and Maria Reinat-Pumarejo, a social worker/organizer from Puerto Rico.

Ron was in many ways the heart and soul of PISAB. For the first five years he worked for no pay. He traveled the country relentlessly. I knew him in one instance to fly from New Orleans to Portland, Maine to support someone who was facing a difficult situation at work. Just to be there. At other times, he would fly home to spend a night with his wife and daughter, knowing he had to catch a plane at 5:00 a.m. the next morning. He was one of those frequent flyers that flight attendants know by name.

Ron did not go to college, but he educated many who did. He didn't write books, but many who did quoted him. His co-founder, Dr. Jim Dunn, developed a deadly disease just a few years after they launched The People's Institute. Jim died in 1989, and Ron took over as director. Under his leadership, PISAB grew exponentially, training thousands of people each year and developing offices from Seattle to New York. Last year The University of Maryland School of Social Work awarded him an honorary Ph.D. for his lifetime impact on the profession.

Ron has been both colleague and friend to me. He has been a key influence on me. Much of what I have accomplished I can attribute to his guidance. It is rare to know someone for over 50 years professionally, yet I can say this is true in our case. ⌖

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)*

Renee Good Should Not Be Dead Today!

By Catherine Meeks

ICE has to be stopped. Many of us have worked and done all that we could do to stand against extrajudicial police killings. While that problem has not been totally solved, it has gotten a bit better — it is never acceptable.

Thus, we cannot accept a crew of armed, mostly masked men acting like gangsters and out-of-control, trigger-happy thugs on our streets. It has to be stopped. And it is going to take more than protests to do it.

Congress needs to put some checks and balances on these folks. Their budgets need to be cut until Homeland Security has done something to curb this indefensible structure that they have created to terrorize the immigrant community and all of the rest of us. They are not trained, and some of them are probably not well, because there is no reliable vetting system to determine who can become an ICE agent. The large start-up salaries make the job very attractive. This is a travesty and cannot be tolerated. We cannot continue to act as if we can have people treated in any violent manner simply because somebody has declared them a candidate for violence.

We need to speak with a single voice against this madness. It must be done with peace and constraint so that Trump and his Regime do not have a reason to declare martial law so he can hinder the midterm elections, because we have to get a new season of legislators in Congress as we move forward.

We are in a very serious moment and we do not need to allow it to be lost on us. We all need to stand up for peace and hope and the determination that this country can be the land of the free and the home of the brave for everyone and anyone who lives within its borders. We have to stand together for the sake of our community, and we have to be vigilant.

We have to be a half shade braver.

Catherine Meeks was the recipient of the Joseph R. Biden Lifetime Achievement and Service Award in 2022. She is the Founder and Executive Director of the Turquoise and Lavender Institute for Transformation and Healing. She has published eight books, including her latest, The Quilted Life: Reflections of a Sharecropper's Daughter, *in 2024. 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. (cmeeks@turquoiseandlavende.com)*

We cannot accept a crew of armed, mostly masked men acting like gangsters and out-of-control, trigger-happy thugs on our streets. It has to be stopped.

Nicole Hester | *Tennessean*

Tennessee State Representative Justin Jones on the first day of the Legislative Session, January 13, 2026.

Solidarity Psalm

The Lord is our protector
not the police
But sometimes we kneel down to
help a neighbor
who is being attacked
by rogue agents of the empire

God leads us beside
schools & restaurants & churches
to comfort the vulnerable
for the immigrant is our neighbor
for God name's sake

Even though we face the worst aggression
We fear no evil
We support each other

The whistle & the megaphone
they comfort us

You prepare a protest before us
in the presence of our enemies
they anoint our heads with tear gas
the blocked intersection overflows

Surely solidarity & justice will follow us
all the days of our lives
& we will remember Renee & Alex &
abolish ICE forever
Amen

— Andrew/Sunfrog
26 January 2026

Andrew Smith (he/him) is a poet, teacher, theologian and activist living in middle Tennessee (Cherokee land). In 1987, Andrew was a Resident Volunteer at the Open Door Community in Atlanta, and it joyfully ruined him for life.

January 13, 2026
Gathering for the Opening Session of the Tennessee Legislature

Faith Leaders from across Tennessee joined together at the State Capitol to welcome legislators and pray for the Legislative Session.

Photographs by Calvin Kimbrough

We came as people of many faiths, united by a common call to justice and compassion.

We stood in this place of power, where choices made will shape the lives of all Tennesseans. We shared liturgy, prayers and songs. And we welcomed the arriving Legislators (and Lobbyists) with singing and chanting.

January 14

The front page of the Tennessean *featured our call for the Legislature to care for the vulnerable, to pursue justice, to speak truth to power and to pass legislation upholding a committment to the common good.*


THE TENNESSEAN

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2026 | TENNESSEAN.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

TENNESSEE LEGISLATURE

Session starts, and so do protests

Arguments, ejections, noise seen and heard at the Capitol

Vivian Jones
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

Shouts of "Whose House? Our House! Whose House? Our House!" could be heard from a throng in the state Capitol rotunda as House Speaker Cameron Sexton, R-Crossville, and Lt. Gov. Randy McNally, R-Oak Ridge, called the legislature to order at noon on Jan. 13, formally beginning the 2026 legislative session.

Amid a national outcry over the shooting death of 37-year-old Minneapolis mother Renee Good by an ICE agent last week, immigration is becoming a central issue during this year's session.

Republican leadership has been working with the White

See SESSION, Page 9A

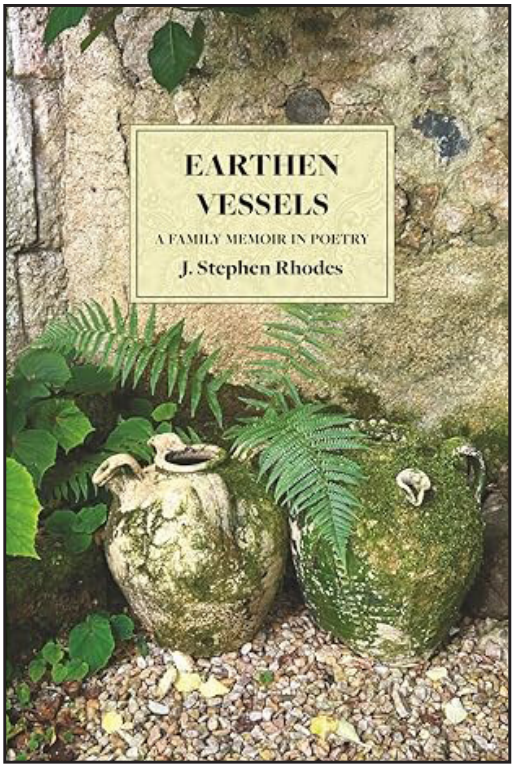
Nelia Kimbrough speaks Jan. 13 alongside other faith leaders before the first day of the Tennessee legislative session at the Tennessee Capitol.

NICOLE HESTER/
THE TENNESSEAN

On Life's Journey

A review of J. Stephen Rhodes' *Earthen Vessels*

By Nibs Stroupe



Earthen Vessels
A Family Memoir in Poetry
by **J. Stephen Rhodes**

Pine Row Press
Paperback
104 pages
September 1, 2025

I first met Steve Rhodes at Columbia Seminary when we were both students there. I was a transfer from Vanderbilt Divinity School, and we didn't have many classes together. We went our separate ways after graduation, but I kept up with him tangentially, mainly through our relationship with the Open Door. I was delighted, then, to be invited to review his latest book of poetry, *Earthen Vessels: A Family Memoir in Poetry*.

Rhodes introduces the book with a short prose history of his family through his young adulthood. Let me say at the outset that I was thrilled and deepened by this fine book of 50 short poems. I wish I had thought of this approach in doing my own memoir. One minor problem, though; I am not the poet that Steve Rhodes is.

The prose introduction hooked me right away because the opening paragraph talks about a family discussion over supper that included his brother, Alec. The discussion revolved around the city of Atlanta destroying Black neighborhoods in order to build stadia for the pro football Falcons and for the pro baseball Atlantans (I no longer say "Braves" because of its racist underpinnings.) At the dinner table, his mother was fuming over the displacement of Black families, and the connection for me was clear. Most of my adult ministry, along with my spouse, the Reverend Caroline Leach, was spent at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, a church and a neighborhood affected dramatically by this Black displacement. Many Black families moved into the Oakhurst neighborhood, and white people fled the neighborhood and the church, as we always seem to do, no matter the city or the decade.

A second connection with Steve is that he served as a conscientious objector to the immoral Vietnam War, as I did also. His alternative service was done as an orderly in an Atlanta hospital, while mine was as director in Nashville for a halfway house for men getting out of prison. A third connection for me was that almost all of these poems emphasize the reality and necessity of brokenness in our lives, an experience which ironically teaches us how to love. He says it well in the final paragraph of his introduction:

> Thus, the more I have read these poems, the more I appreciate the goods — even blessings — that are either interwoven with what is broken, or have come forth as its fruit. The older I become, the more I realize there can be no beauty, let alone love, without breaking.

Steve comes from a "normal," middle-class white family of the 1950s and 1960s — two parents, two kids, mom stays home, dad goes out to work. Yet, as in all families, beneath the photo op are deeper realities — his mom was an alcoholic; his dad was often distant and stern. It is this intersection — the photo of a seemingly normal family connecting with the deeper human realities of pain and longing and brokenness — that gives this book of poetry its power. These poems acknowledge this intersection and invite us to go deeper into the journey of this particular family and into the story of our own families and journeys. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that these poems invite us into the darkness. Quite the contrary — they give us a glimpse of the depth and particularities of this family while also inviting us to consider the depth of our own stories and journeys. Steve reminds us that visiting the depths of our lives and journeys is a necessity if we are to find the true meaning of love and of our lives. Steve indicates that he often found himself on the margins of life.

Steve reminds us that visiting the depths of our lives and journeys is a necessity if we are to find the true meaning of love and of our lives.

Early on in *Earthen Vessels*, Rhodes remembers fondly his mother's protection of him when he was scared from a thunderstorm in the poem, "Her Dears."

> she picks me up rushing
> to open the basement
> door where we watch
> the sky go white
> then black the *devil's*
> *beating his wife*
> she laughs her eyes
> shining her own
> private thunderstorm

In another poem, he addresses the tensions between his mother and father as she spirals downward into what he calls a "drunkalogue."

Men from the 'Institute,'
white uniforms,
rolled her out
to the ambulance,
neighbors staring,
preacher praying,
Dad standing by the window,
wondering, wandering,
(from "Invisible Man")

Rhodes also addresses his father's calm but stern presence as he sought to honor his marriage vows while having to work both outside the home and inside the home. Steve acknowledges the amount of weight that his dad had to carry in the poem, "Able to Leap Tall Buildings in a Single Bound."

That is the great mystery —
how you are almost always right,
Even if you disavow the claim,
we all believe it, and mostly,
you do, too,
thus carrying that heaviest of burdens,
you, blindfolded, holding the scales.

Even in the midst of his mother's "drunkalogues," Steve praises his mother for her ability to affirm his worth and ignite his passion to create. In "You Must Be Born Again," he puts it this way:

And, thank you Jesus,
through electroshocking,
boozy night after night,
you issued forth unsolvable
koan upon *koan,*
enough insistent questions
for a lifetime,
a vocational boot-camp of sorts,
you who kept calling forth
my selfhood
from the protozoic ooze,
irony your new queendom,
you yourself pushing my little skiff
out to sea.

Rhodes chronicles his journey into manhood in several poems, including "Herbie, Wayne, and I," in which he discovers that girls can hit as hard as boys, and "Sex Education," "Sport of Champions" and "Afterward," in which he seeks advice from his Marine father on the art of fighting and receives a frustrating non-committal from his dad. In "Undercover Brothers," he pays tribute to his brother, Alec, and notes that they took different paths in relation to the Vietnam War — Alec becoming a Naval officer and Steve becoming a conscientious objector. In all these poems of his passage into manhood, Rhodes guides us into a complexity that makes moral and emotional demands on us. In these poems, his work reminds me of that of Wendell Berry, who also grounds many of his poems in the search for authentic manhood. Both of his parents are now deceased, and he pays fine tribute to them in "Life Throes" for his mother and "Lament" for his father.

This book of poems is provocative and evocative. They reveal to us the profound humanity of the poet and of the family who gave him life and raised him to discern a deeper reality than is presented to us on the surface of life. If you have not encountered the poetry of Steve Rhodes, please start with *Earthen Vessels* and then investigate his other poetry. Most of all, in this book, Rhodes reminds us of our own humanity and urges us to explore our own journeys. It is an exploration that will lead us to the power of love, as he notes in the closing of his poem, "What Held Me Together, Grades Seven Through Ten."

Mina
my grandmother
who said "I loved you
before you were born"
the priest who said
"Come on up for Communion
you don't have to believe"
Mother
for all her debits
who kept saying
"You matter.
You are much loved." ✠

Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door, retired pastor and author of Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision *and* She Made a Way: Mother and Me in a Deep South World*. 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)*

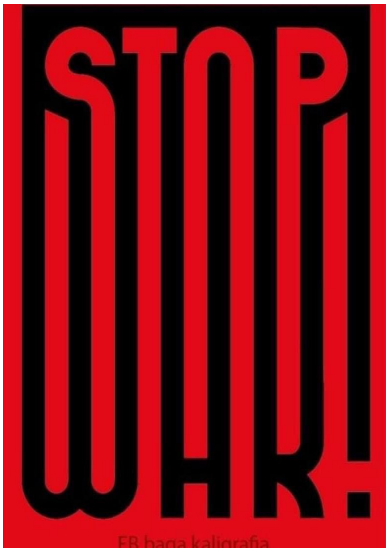
Every Bombed Village Is My Hometown

Every bombed village is my hometown. — James Baldwin

And every dead child is my child.
Every grieving mother is my mother.
Every crying father is my father.
Every home turned to rubble
is the home I grew up in.
Every brother carrying the remains
of his brother across borders
is my brother.
Every sister waiting for a sister
who will never come home
is my sister.

Every one of these people are ours,
Just like we are theirs.
We belong to them
and they belong to us.

— Nikita Gill



Barbara Galinska

Nikita Gill is an Irish-Indian poet, playwright, illustrator and author based in the south of England. "Every bombed village is my hometown," copyright © 2024 by Nikita Gill. (Instagram @nikita_gill)

Grace and Peaces of Mail

Dear Nibs Stroupe,

I remember working with Ed Loring in the World and Word Movement in Philadelphia and am glad that this work is moving forward.

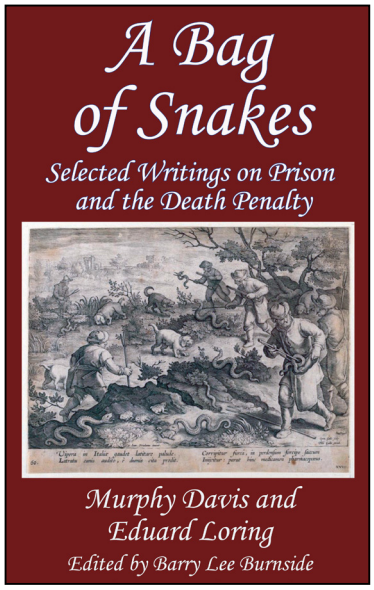
Peace and blessings,
Raymond Torres
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Dear Open Door Community,

I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your committed justice endeavors — justice for all. Your attempts to create a community of love, a beloved community of no ifs, ands, or buts, in this our broken moment are needed more than ever.

All the Best,
Patricia Waters
Athens, Tennessee

Ricardo Levins Morales



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

HOSPITALITY

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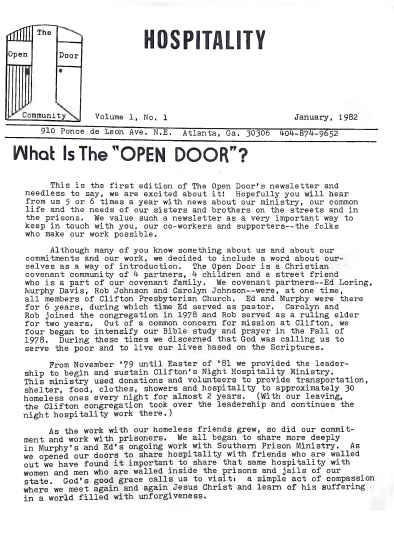

HOSPITALITY

The Open Door Community

Volume 1, No. 1 January, 1982

910 Ponce de Leon Ave. N.E. Atlanta, Ga. 30306 404-874-9652

What Is The "OPEN DOOR"?

This is the first edition of The Open Door's newsletter and needless to say, we are excited about it! Hopefully you will hear from us 5 or 6 times a year with news about our ministry, our common life and the needs of our sisters and brothers on the streets and in the prisons. We value such a newsletter as a very important way to keep in touch with you, our co-workers and supporters--the folks who make our work possible.

Although many of you know something about us and about our commitments and our work, we decided to include a word about ourselves as a way of introduction. The Open Door is a Christian covenant community of 6 partners, 4 children and a street friend who is a part of our covenant family. We covenant partners--Ed Loring, Murphy Davis, Rob Johnson and Carolyn Johnson--were, at one time, all members of Clifton Presbyterian Church. Ed and Murphy were there for 6 years, during which time Ed served as pastor. Carolyn and Rob joined the congregation in 1978 and Rob served as a ruling elder for two years. Out of a common concern for mission at Clifton, we four began to intensify our Bible study and prayer in the Fall of 1978. During these times we discerned that God was calling us to serve the poor and to live our lives based on the Scriptures.

From November '79 until Easter of '81 we provided the leadership to begin and sustain Clifton's Night Hospitality Ministry. This ministry used donations and volunteers to provide transportation, shelter, food, clothes, showers and hospitality to approximately 30 homeless ones every night for almost 2 years. (With our leaving, the Clifton congregation took over the leadership and continues the night hospitality work there.)

As the work with our homeless friends grew, so did our commitment and work with prisoners. We all began to share more deeply in Murphy's and Ed's ongoing work with Southern Prison Ministry. As we opened our doors to share hospitality with friends who are walled out we have found it important to share that same hospitality with women and men who are walled inside the prisons and jails of our state. God's good grace calls us to visit; a simple act of compassion where we meet again and again Jesus Christ and learn of his suffering in a world filled with unforgiveness.

HOSPITALITY

HOSPITALITY is published by the Open Door Community, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland. The Open Door is a Prophetic Discipleship Community honoring the Black Jesus, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Manuscripts and letters are welcomed. Inclusive language editing is standard.

Issues of *Hospitality* are posted to the Open Door Community website under the "Archives" Tab. If you would like to be notified when we post *Hospitality* issues, updates, photographs and writings on our website, please go to **www.opendoorcommunity.org** and at the bottom of our main page enter your email address and subscribe. Subscriptions are free.

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HOSPITALITY *prays*

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

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."
But I say to you… If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.
—Matthew 5: 38-39

A Prayer for Ending the Death Penalty

O redeeming God, the criminal justice system in our nation is broken!
Hundreds of people are incarcerated
simply because they cannot afford bail or pay for a competent attorney.
Racism is too often a factor in our trials.
Our jails and prisons are crowded, unsanitary, unsafe, and understaffed.
Employees in our penal institutions are poorly paid.
Trial dockets are overloaded, making it difficult to get timely verdicts.

Perhaps the worst part of our broken system
is that many states continue to execute people found guilty of violent crimes.
We labor under the false impressions
that killing those who kill others will end violence,
that the loved ones of victims will gain closure to their losses,
that punishing the guilty is better than rehabilitating them.

O God, please help us!
Help those who grieve for loved ones.
Help those guilty of committing violent crimes.
Help those who adjudicate violent transgressions.

We pray for those living on death row, often waiting for many years to be executed.
We pray for those grieving the murder or injury of loved ones.
We pray for those employed by our criminal justice institutions.
We pray for lawmakers,
that they shall have the wisdom and moral strength to end the death penalty.

O God, mercifully you choose to live among us,
calling us to work for your mission of a peaceable world with justice for all.
Even when your beloved son, Jesus, was executed by the reigning empire,
you showed forgiveness,
and mercifully, you continue to do so.
Jesus demonstrated how to honor each person.
Jesus taught us that compassion is more godly than "an eye for an eye."

O God, thank you for loving us despite our wrong doings.
It is your *grace* that brings us hope.
It is your *justice* that makes peace possible.
It is your *love* that enables us to forgive those who wrong us.

Grant, O wise God, that your vision for criminal justice shall be reflected in our laws.
Grant, O loving God, that our criminal justice system will show the justice that Jesus embodied.
Grant, O just God that we will soon see an end to our archaic death penalty.

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)