





ADVERTISEMENT

## *Bernard Glassman, Zen Master and Social Activist, Dies at 79*

---

 Give this article   

The American Buddhist teacher Bernie Glassman in 2013. His activism was as much a product of his Buddhist spiritualism as it was of the liberal Jewish tradition into which he was born; one commentator called him “a Zen mensch.” Dia Dipasupil/FilmMagic

By **Katharine Q. Seelye**

Nov. 23, 2018

Bernard Glassman, an acclaimed American Buddhist teacher known for his social activism and, briefly, a venture with the actor Jeff Bridges to capitalize on Zen-like traces in the movie “The Big Lebowski,” died on Nov. 4 at a hospital in Greenfield, Mass.

He was 79.

The cause was sepsis, his wife, Eve Marko, said. He lived in the Greenfield area.

Contrary to the stereotype of a Zen practitioner lost in meditation, Mr. Glassman was deeply active in the world, trying to address its ills. His activism was as much a product of his Buddhist spiritualism as it was of the liberal Jewish tradition into which he was born; those two influences remained inseparable throughout his life.

In a tribute in the newspaper *The Forward* after Mr. Glassman's death, the columnist [Jay Michaelson described](#) Mr. Glassman as “one of the most important figures in ‘Engaged Buddhism,’ which applies Buddhist teachings to what many Jews call *tikkun olam*, the project of ‘repairing’ the brokenness in the world.”

ADVERTISEMENT

He was “a Zen mensch,” Mr. Michaelson wrote.

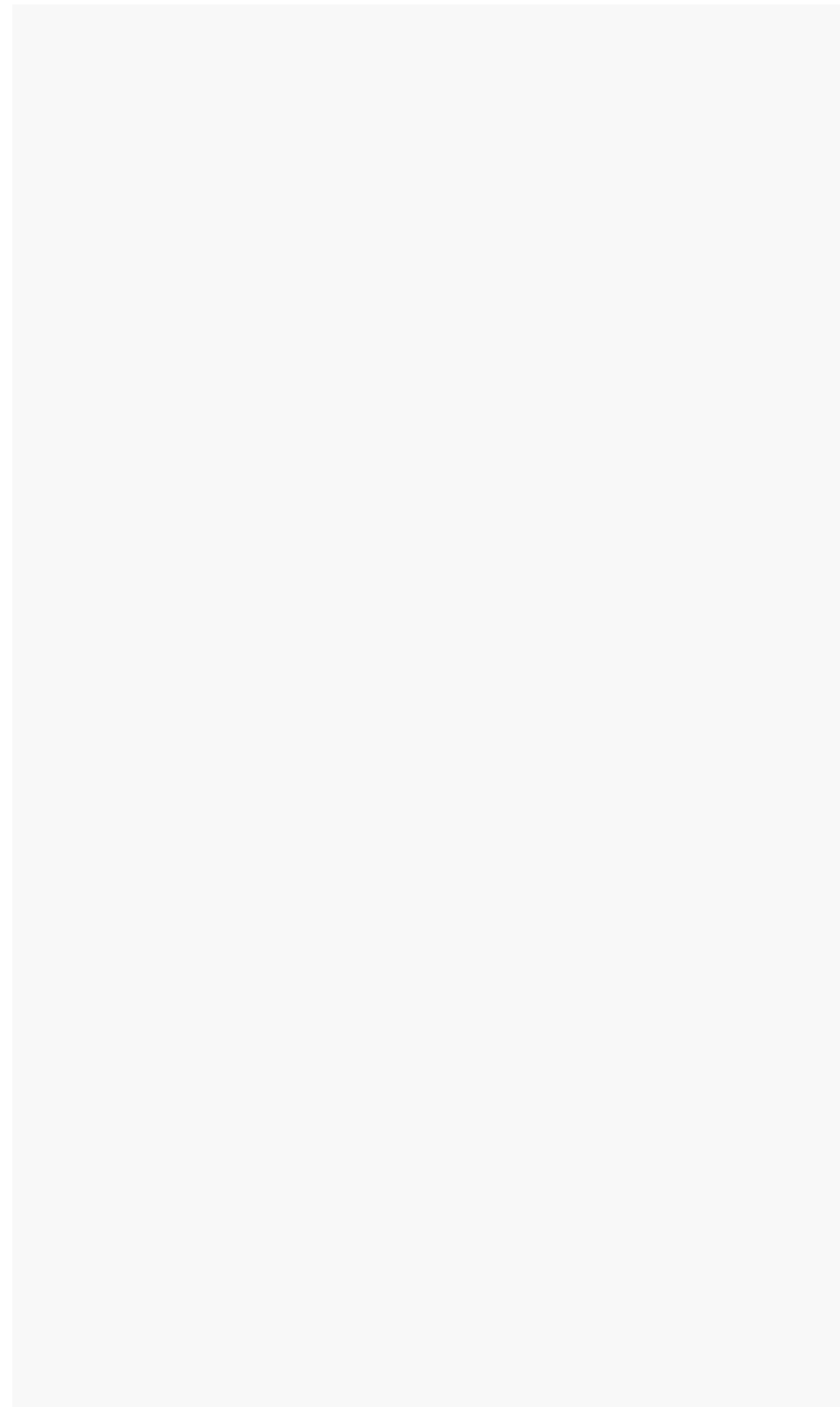
Mr. Glassman broke into pop culture, sort of, when he got together with the actor Jeff Bridges, a friend, to write a slim volume called [“\*The Dude and the Zen Master\*,”](#) published in 2013. Mr. Bridges played Jeffrey Lebowski, a California slacker known as “The Dude,” in Joel and Ethan Coen’s cult movie [“\*The Big Lebowski\*”](#) (1998).

When Mr. Glassman told Mr. Bridges that some Buddhists considered his character a Zen master, based in part on his enigmatic utterances (“The Dude abides,” “The Dude is not in”), Mr. Bridges agreed to collaborate with him on a book about the movie’s Zen lessons.

“Not being in — not being attached to Jeff or Bernie or whoever you are — is the essence of Zen,” Mr. Glassman explains in the book. “When we’re not attached to our identity, it allows all the messages of the world to come in and be heard. When we’re not in



messages of the world to come in and be heard. When we're not in, creation can happen."



When Mr. Glassman told Mr. Bridges that some Buddhists saw the character he played in "The Big Lebowski" as a Zen master, Mr. Bridges agreed to collaborate with him on a book about the movie's Zen lessons. Jake Guevara/The New York Times

**Bernard Alan Glassman** was born on Jan. 18, 1939, in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, to Pauline (Finkelstein) and Albert Glassman, Jewish immigrants. His father, who was from what is now Moldova, was a printer and construction foreman; his mother, who was from Poland and lost much of her family in the Holocaust, worked in a factory.

ADVERTISEMENT

Bernard's mother died of mercury poisoning when he was a child, and his four older sisters raised him. One of his first jobs was hawking Good Humor ice cream at Brighton Beach; when sales were slow, he would call out that he had "dietetic" ice cream, and customers would come running, his daughter, Alisa Glassman, said in a telephone interview.

Mr. Glassman obtained an engineering degree from Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and went to Israel to attend the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, where he had an assistant teaching fellowship; on the boat on the way over, he met Helen Silverberg. They married in 1963.

Mr. Glassman earned a Ph.D. in applied mathematics at the University of California, Los Angeles. While in California, he also worked as an aeronautical engineer at McDonnell Douglas, developing plans under contract with NASA for what were expected to be manned spaceflights to Mars.

He first became interested in Zen in 1958 when he read "The Religions of Man," [Huston Smith](#)'s survey of the world's great religions, published that year. What struck him about Zen, he said in a 2014 NPR interview, was "the interconnectedness of life and living in the moment."

He began meditating, sought out a local Zen teacher, got involved with the Zen Center of Los Angeles and became a Zen teacher himself.

Even as his family lived in the Zen center, he and his wife sent their children, Alisa and Marc, to Jewish schools.

---

### [Notable Deaths](#) 2018

A memorial to those who lost their lives in 2018



“We kept the Sabbath,” his daughter said.

In 1979 the family moved to New York, where Mr. Glassman founded the Zen Community of New York and began a period of intense social commitment.

ADVERTISEMENT

In 1982 he opened the Greyston Bakery in Yonkers, initially as a way to provide jobs for Zen students. He eventually hired anyone who wanted a job, regardless of employment history or arrest record.

The bakery was soon making brownies and supplying them to ice cream makers, supermarkets and restaurants; today its food processing plant turns out [35,000 pounds of brownies a day](#). Its slogan is “We don’t hire people to bake brownies. We bake brownies to hire people.”

Mr. Glassman (whose first marriage ended in divorce) and his second wife, Sandra Holmes, founded the [Greyston Foundation](#), sometimes called Greyston Mandala, in 1989 to address community needs in Yonkers. Its programs provide day care, job training, produce-growing gardens, medical care and housing for about 5,000 people a year.

In 1996, Mr. Glassman and Ms. Holmes established the Zen Peacemaker Order, an interfaith group dedicated to peace and social justice. In 1998, shortly after they moved to Santa Fe, N.M., to develop the organization, [Ms. Holmes — who as a Zen Buddhist priest took the name Sandra Jishu Holmes — died of a heart attack](#).

In addition to his wife, Ms. Marko, and his daughter, Mr. Glassman’s survivors include his son, Marc; a sister, Sally Blatter; and four grandchildren.

Mr. Glassman developed a series of retreats, including “street retreats,” in which participants live among the homeless, and “bearing witness” retreats, holding them at Auschwitz and other

sites of atrocities around the world.

“When we bear witness, when we become the situation — homelessness, poverty, illness, violence, death — the right action arises by itself,” Mr. Glassman said. “Once we listen with our entire body and mind, loving action arises.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Comments 7

[Bernard Glassman, Zen Master and Social Activist, Dies at 79](#)[Skip to Comments](#)

The comments section is closed. To submit a letter to the editor for publication, write to [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).