



STARCROSS community

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Sharings

Autumn 2014

TAKING A PATH TO NOTHING

With every passing breeze the trees are letting go of their beautiful leaves. It is expected but I am still sorry to see them go. All that color called forth feelings of joy and satisfaction. But that is exactly the point for some spiritual seekers. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Catholic monk with a deep respect for Asian spirituality, once wrote a poem which he entitled “*Love Winter When The Plant Says Nothing.*”

If we stop focusing on what the landscape has lost, the piles of leaves on the ground and in the gutters, we can see the tree as it really is — bare, unadorned, essential. I think this was Merton’s point. We all spend a lot of time adorning our personality and environment to avoid looking at what is essential — in the tree and in me. So for a few weeks now nature can encourage us to be more at home with who we really are. And this usually means finding a way from complexity to simplicity. That is becoming increasingly difficult!

Steve Jobs (1955-2011), the genius of all the Apple iThings wrote, “*Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.*” That is very true, but the trouble is those mountains we are moving are part of the problem.

Through the digital world we can be connected to so many things that we are overpowered. There is nothing we cannot plug into. We can become so involved with other people's stories that we cannot find our own. So we are reversing the old adage and today we can't find the tree because of the forest. But nature can help us turn the tide in our own lives. It can become a spiritual compass leading to a simpler life. People like Wendell Berry (1934-) see the earth as a sacrament — a physical sign of a divine spark in existence and in each of us. He wrote, in *The Peace of Wild Things*, that when overcome by worries, “*I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds*”.



In this cusp between Autumn and Winter even a short walk can be a pilgrimage from complexity and anxiety toward simplicity and peace. How do we start? Just open the door. Step into a garden, or city street, a forest path, or a little park. Birds may be singing. Cars may be moving up and down the road. Different stories may be unfolding. There will probably be trees with the leaves falling. And there will always be the sky, and most likely a horizon that seems to somehow call us.

This can be a blessed time when both we and the world are saying nothing.

Brother Toby



SISTER MARTI — *The Real Story*

A visitor recently asked if Marti used to be a Mother Superior in a Catholic religious order. Well, not exactly....

Mary Martha Aggeler was born in Boise, Idaho in 1939. She had to go to work right after high school. By age 21 she was a stewardess flying with United Airlines.

For awhile Marti lived life in the fast-lane in San Francisco. When not out sailing, she rode her Honda bike around the Bay Area as part of “The Hated Red Barons Motorcycle

Gang.” (Woody Allen once borrowed her bike.) But she felt a spiritual longing and a need for a more meaningful life.

Marti went back to school at UC Berkeley. As part of a psychology class assignment, she interviewed Brother Toby — and her life dramatically changed direction! She became involved in human potential programs Toby was organizing in San Francisco. She was soon a popular facilitator there, leading over 2,000 encounter groups and journal workshops. A core group from this experience formed Starcross Monastic Community and moved to rural Sonoma County in 1976.

During the early homesteading days at Starcross, Marti worked from sunup to sundown caring for foster children and farm animals. She heard of a lovely Brown Swiss cow who was slated to be “culled” because she got an infection from the multiple daily machine-milkings. Marti brought her home and named her “Noel”. At the first milking the ever patient Noel stood for 2 hours, as Marti sat on a stool holding a copy of “The Family Cow”. It turned out the slow milking cured Noel and brought us a lot of milk! Marti was our “Cow Person” until 1993 when our last “retired cow” died a natural death as Marti softly sang a favorite lullaby.



Over the years Marti has been Mom, nurse, gardener, canning supervisor, business manager, IT person, administrator, CFO, resident listener, counselor and soother of hurt feelings. Of late she has been writing beautiful haiku and taking photographs to go with them. In the midst of every busy day, she is able to find contemplative moments that are an inspiration and blessing to us all. Sister Marti has been called the heart of Starcross. She is.



BROTHER TOBY AND HIS PUMPKIN PATCH!

For years there has been an annual struggle between Brother Toby, who loves to grow pumpkins because of their color and beauty, and everybody else, who point out that no one here likes to EAT pumpkins much, and you can only have so many pies!

This year he jumped on the idea of creating a pumpkin patch for the children who come to the food pantry and cannot afford to buy one. When this overcame all objections, he proceeded to plant 5 different varieties of pumpkins in patches all over the farm! So now we have a colorful and decorative Autumn environment!

THE SIMPLE LIFE — PLUS AIDS

When we first came to our Northern California land in 1976, we had a vision of a contemplative life with a garden and orchard and some way to sustain ourselves with our labor. We brought with us a number of children who were in need of special care.

Our first chapel was in the hay loft of the barn. We milked the cows morning and evening and then went upstairs for our chapel services. There were old apple orchards here, so they were a staple in our diet. The first year we canned 400 quarts of apple sauce on a wood stove outside! We began making Christmas wreaths to sell. They continue to be our major means self-support. In 2002 we put in 1800 olive trees and began pressing our own premium organic extra virgin olive oil.

The simple life continued and grew, but the contemplative part became more challenging when we decided to make a home for some children with AIDS. We felt able to provide the care that was so badly needed, but we were completely unprepared for the opposition, nearby and around the world. People were standing in the road yelling at us, and holding meetings to express concerns about everything from our “infecting” a cemetery to contaminating a garbage dump. The media descended and we could hardly get anything done.

Gradually we became involved with the issues surrounding AIDS in general. Sister Julie did excursions into local poverty areas with free baby clothes and advice on how to prevent transmission. That upset some churchmen.

At last the hysteria died down in this country and the number of HIV+ children dramatically dropped. Not so in other places, and we turned our attention to children in Romania and Africa who were impacted by the pandemic. We never were able to do a lot, but we did what we could and sometimes that grew or inspired others. UNICEFF used one of our programs as a model.

The children we cared for, loved, and lost taught us much about life. From these incredible experiences we learned to add to our goal of simple and contemplative living a sense of mission to do what we can when a need presents itself. Finding that balance has been our greatest challenge. Why do it? It just seems the right thing to do.



IT'S TIME TO ORDER YOUR STARCROSS WREATHS — PLEASE!

Attached to this newsletter is our Holiday flyer for this year. The sale of Christmas wreaths and Dried Fruit are our primary source of self-support, so we ask that you consider sending them to friends and family, and celebrating the holidays by bringing them into your own home. For premium quality, and much appreciated gifts at moderate prices, please remember us!

We have been associated with Christmas ever since we began 38 years ago, and we thank all of you for including us in yours. We do not like to ask for money, and send only one other Fund Appeal each year. None of the members of Starcross Monastic Community receive a salary. We have no Development Director. Our only support comes from our friends, either in contributions or sales.

So, thank you for helping us make the world a little better. Like many other people, our income in recent years has been down, and we are very grateful for your support.

Sister Marti

YOU GAVE HAPPY ENDINGS TO SAD STORIES!

Alex and Ivan were very young brothers when they lost their parents to AIDS in a Ugandan village. The boys were brought to the Starcross Kin Worldwide *House of Hope* in Kampala to grow up and go to school. They thrived. Alex has become a social worker, HIV/AIDS educator and community organizer. Ivan, is now in his final year of medical school, and will become the doctor in a rural clinic.



You also probably remember Teddy, an AIDS orphan who went from a village hut to the *House of Hope* to interviewing heads of state for national TV. She now has two new jobs. In addition to being public relations officer for the *Foundation for Human Rights* and heading up the team to recruit 10,000 poll workers for the next election, Teddy will be vice-president of a new Ugandan non-profit corporation for orphans, expanding the work you helped start.



Alex then & now

These young people, and so many others, thank you for your support and faith in them. **Sister Julie**

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AUTUMN NEWSLETTER 2014



LEARNING WITH A SHOVEL — To farm organically and to raise a garden sustainably requires considerable manual labor. There is great satisfaction in bringing forth beautiful, healthy foods for our table, to share with neighbors in need at the Starcross Food Pantry and to give a little bit of healing to the earth. We have been helped by 25 optimistic and hardworking young people working beside us at various times this year. They are part of the WWOOF program (*WorldWide Opportunities on Organic Farms*) to get hands on education. After their experience with us, many go on to put what they have learned into practice on their own projects. Our energetic, helpful Wwoofers came from all over – Florida to France, Iowa to Israel and India!

STARCROSS MONASTIC COMMUNITY is a small independent and autonomous community of lay-people trying to live peaceful lives in the monastic tradition and offering encouragement and affirmation to gentle folk on all spiritual paths. Our home is in Sonoma County's coastal hills. We adopted and have been caregivers and advocates for children who have unique gifts and needs, most of whom were born HIV positive. We also support individual children around the world, and established HOUSES OF HOPE for children impacted by the AIDS pandemic in Romania and East Africa.