



STARCROSS
community

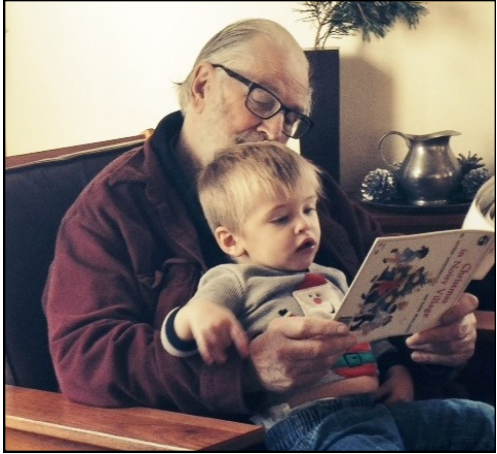
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Sharings

Spring 2015

A Reflection From Brother Toby



“I grew up thinking that we were always progressing,” fumed my old friend hitting the table and spilling his coffee in the process. “But this land of opportunity has turned into a place of broken dreams for my grandchildren.”

Poll after poll comes in showing that Americans have lost the optimism that has characterized our lives for many generations. A recent *Wall Street Journal* / *NBC* poll says that when asked if “*life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us*” 76% said NO. What can be done about this?

There are some big issues — income inequality, collapse of our political structures. But I'm part of a generation that has trouble putting their socks on in the morning! So, what can I do? I was born in the Great Depression and it does seem to me that we were more conscious of taking care of each other in previous critical times.

Is looking out after others a priority we teach our children now? Another poll from Harvard's *Making Caring Common* project says the answer again is NO. 80% of the young people involved with the project said that parents are more concerned about grades and trophies than whether they are “*a caring community member in class and school.*”

Every late afternoon at Vespers we read out names of loved ones friends of Starcross have asked us to remember on that day. In one, a man says that his late father would call him every day and ask if he had performed an act of human kindness — a *mitzvah*. It was something his son would always prioritize in his life.

That same Harvard study urges that both parents and children should understand that being kind is more important than being successful or even being happy. They make a special point of the need to “*encourage children to care for those who are vulnerable.*” Does this seem like an impossible task? Have we gone so far in our “*it's all about me*” perspective that there is no turning back? I don't think so.

I may not be able to solve financial inequality or make our institutions more credible. But I can attempt to be a kind person in an often unkind environment. Recently we remembered for the 70th year the liberation of one of the most savage places on earth — Auschwitz. Some felt, not without reason, that God and all goodness had disappeared. But I think often of the words Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) wrote just before she was murdered at Auschwitz, “*God is in good hands with us just so long as we care enough for each other.*”

This troubled and fractured world is also in good hands with us just so long as we care enough for each other. Shall we give it a try — each in our own small way? As an old Quaker saying puts it,

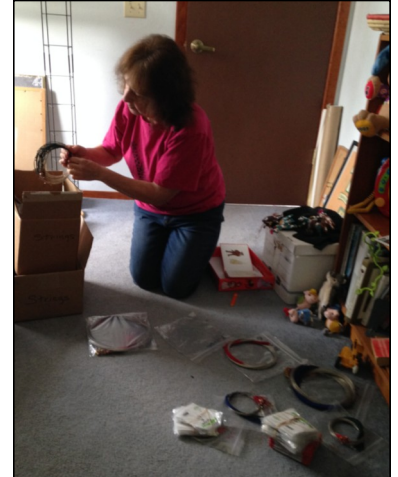
“God has no hands on earth but ours.”

A YOUNG FRIEND ASKED, "IS IT FUN TO BE A STARCROSS MONK?"

When I was her age most classmates wanted money, prestige, and power. Not me. What the young me wanted most was adventure. New experiences, variety, travel, and fun. You'd think that joining a contemplative monastic community in the middle of nowhere would not get me adventure. You'd be wrong. Along with quiet moments of reflection in the chapel and on the tractor, here's what a typical week brings for me.

SMUGGLING VIOLIN STRINGS TO CUBA. In the late 90's our budding violinist David (www.davidmccarroll.com) heard that due to the trade embargo, Cuban music students could not get proper strings. They improvised by unraveling old telephone wire, often cutting their fingers trying to practice. David collected used strings from friends and teachers and asked me to send them to the kids in Cuba. Since there was no legal way, I resorted to smuggling with the help of a radical activist who had a project called "Send-a-Piana-to-Havana" (that's another whole story...) I asked if we could put our strings inside the old upright pianos he was taking. No problemo!

Soon I was corresponding with faculty at the National Music School who also needed strings for cellos, guitars, etc. The project snowballed. I solicited strings and besides pianos we sent strings via a social worker going on a cultural exchange who crammed them in her socks and an art teacher who played Latin music on the side. The students in Cuba were delighted. Their instruments sounded beautiful again and their fingers felt fine.



Sister Julie packing strings for music students in Cuba.

Often the school director would rendezvous with our couriers at the airport. He'd drive up on a moped, his wife sitting behind. She'd reach out for the package and off they'd ride in true 007 style! Our next delivery will be discreetly carried by a group of missionaries from Minnesota. I've met an amazing cast of characters through this fun project!



Namukose was born AIDS free! Thanks to Tina Caring Association's efforts to prevent mother-to-baby HIV transmission.

BORN FREE OFAIDS. Across the globe, the young people who grew up at Starcross Kin Worldwide House of Hope in Uganda spread hope in their own creative ways from running schools to staffing clinics. Close to my heart is the *Tina Caring Association* a Ugandan nonprofit they formed and named after my adopted daughter who died of AIDS before her third birthday.

Through AIDS education and testing, TCA's goal is to reduce mother-to-baby HIV transmission in remote villages far from clinics. Thanks to them Namukose's pregnant mother found out she was HIV positive and got the medications she needed to deliver a healthy, AIDS-free baby. Young people we've been privileged to raise from childhood brought this child the gift of life!

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. Starcross Monastic Community is a 501(c)3 tax exempt non-profit organization.

A SANCTUARY FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE. Meanwhile back at the ranch, spring is springing. Fruit trees are budding. We're itching to get the garden started. And 1,800 organically grown olive trees need attention! The forest is alive with birds and small creatures. Plans are underway to help the forest increase resilience in a changing climate and to protect this sacred space into the future. It will be a sanctuary where wildlife and nature can be free and where people can rejuvenate their spirits. We've been fortunate to live here. We feel a responsibility to share this gift.



Long-time Friends of Starcross on a regular trip to bring food to the pantry.

STRUGGLING NEIGHBORS. Life at Starcross is good. Not so for many of our neighbors. I love visiting with folks every other week when they pick up food in our barn, but I don't like the stories I hear. This week the sad news came from vivacious young Laura (not her real name). As we were establishing the Starcross Food Pantry, she often volunteered to arrange the groceries, carry heavy bags to cars, and clean up. We lost touch for a while and now she's back as a recipient. Laid off from her job, Laura moved in with her disabled parents. A failed relationship brought Laura's sister and two toddlers back home, too. Six people share a tiny cottage with the only source of income being Laura's part time minimum wage job. Clearly, putting food on the table is a challenge for them. Despite the sad stories, our barn is an upbeat place on pantry days. People check in with each other and offer bits of encouragement along with the food. Last week Carmen brought in cupcakes she made with dried cranberries from a recent pantry.

“SING A NEW SONG UNTO THE LORD.” Unlike most monasteries, Starcross has always been blessed with children who provide great energy and entertainment. These days our adopted daughter Holly's two-year-old Damien “helps” me in the office or garden nearly every day. Things get a little messy but where else can you sing and dance and play trucks with your office assistant? Yes, being a Starcross monk is fun!

Sister Julie

HOW WE SUPPORT WHAT WE DO WITH YOUR HELP

Because we do not take government or institutional grants, we are able to act when needs arise without concern about rules and restrictions. This means that our support comes from our friends and our self-support activities, such as our Christmas sales of wreaths, fruit and books, and our olive oil sales.

This year the Christmas sales improved after several years of hard times, and the olive oil is great but the crops for the last several years have been small because of climate change. So self-support is an important part of the picture, but it doesn't go far enough.

That leaves you, our friends, who keep us going. Once a year we send out a fund appeal, and that will be happening soon. The most important way we have been helped through the last several years has been friends remembering us in their wills. These gifts have made a huge difference in our ability to continue our work and our life. Please consider remembering us in your future planning. Most of the bequests we have received have been from people of ordinary means.

Thank you for all that you do to encourage and support us.



Sister Marti



WHAT IN THE WORLD IS STARCROSS?

Do you have trouble defining Starcross? So do we! One North Bay newspaper calls us *"The Quiet Monastery."* Well we try to be, but sometimes it doesn't quite work out that way.

Recently, journalist and historian Gaye Le Baron wrote a column in the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* entitled *"Remembering Starcross' Selfless Good Works."* She ended the piece with the suggestion that if you wanted a simple answer to *"What is Starcross?"* it would have to be — a few people and their friends *"... tucked away in the northwest corner of Sonoma County, saving the world in small segments."* That's probably as nice a definition as there will ever be!

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In this issue of *SHARINGS* you will find out about:

- Sister Julie Smuggling Violin Strings Into Cuba.
- Young People Raised by Starcross Successfully Reducing Mother-To-Child HIV/AIDS Transmission In Impoverished Eastern Uganda.
- Using Our Barn To Provide A Food Pantry For Struggling Neighbors In This Underserved Area.
- Working To Safeguard The Sacred Space On Which We Live As A Forever-Protected Sanctuary For Nature And For People.
- Reclaiming Some Dreams By Encouraging Kindness In An Often Unkind Environment.

BROTHER TOBY'S FRIDAY REFLECTIONS started appearing 3 years ago at the request of friends. From our e-list they seem to be spreading into many households as friends forward them to others.

If you or a friend would like to receive them, just send your email address (which is never given out to anyone else!) to community@starcross.org. They are also posted on our website at www.starcross.org.