

Starcross monk offers encouragement and insight through book, 'Stepping Stones'

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'Nature is something which brings us pleasure. But it does more than that, it takes us beyond the daily grind and therefor helps us gain perspective, refreshes our spirit, helps us find more meaning in life, and gives us a sense of wholeness.'

— "Stepping Stones; Daily Reflections by an Unconventional Monk," by Tolbert McCarroll

Brother Toby McCarroll, the lay monk from tiny Annapolis, has spent the past 40 years easing the suffering of neglected orphans and children with AIDS. He is still using his gentle, yet powerful voice, to foster peace. In this case, inner peace.

His newest book, "Stepping Stones: Daily Reflections by an Unconventional Monk," offers day-by-day balm to people like himself, who are, as he puts it, "violet seekers."

They are the ones who look up at the mountains but also look down, people who "use nature, ordinary daily life, and the ground under our feet, as signposts in finding the sacred core of existence."

It is a practice that has helped McCarroll stay on the path even in the heavy "fogs" of life. "Holding a dying child in a heartless environment was the precises moment when I realized that I must frequently check my course to the violets," he writes.

"Stepping Stones" is an attempt to share "little daily nudges of encouragement" with those seeking to live in harmony with nature and the season — whatever season of life they may happen to be moving through.

For the white-bearded monk, who now relies on a walker, it is winter. Not a fierce and cold time, but a quiet time, like soft snowfall.

Woven throughout the passages, which he culled from previous writings, are references to aging. But his book is more of a reflection than a lamentation.

"It has been said that as we grow older we are, if we so choose, better able to hear the music that has lain quietly in our souls," he writes. "And we become more aware of those moments when it is very important to sing our song. Perhaps that is the lesson to be learned. We just sing our song as best we can, and hopefully in that process our soul grows younger."

McCarroll hopes that by drawing on nature, a universal connection that transcends age and nationality, "Stepping Stones" can provide a pathway for those approaching the end of life as well as those in the thick of it.

"I found that it was quite interesting to make sure that what I wrote was understood by any age group. But that kept me closer to nature," he said. "It seems like it's a common ground for all of us."

The former civil rights attorney and organizing activist began turning inward in the 1960s and co-founded the small ecumenical Starcross Spiritual Monastery with two other seekers, Sister Mary Martha "Marti" Aggeler and Sister Julian "Julie" DeRossi.

They started in San Francisco but 40 years ago moved to an old farm in Annapolis, in the far northwest corner of Sonoma County. The focus of their work has been children, orphaned or ill. In the early days of the AIDS pandemic they began taking in children with the disease, then a virtual death sentence, and extended their work globally, working with AIDS-stricken orphans in Romania and Africa.

Although in those dark days they gained the support of medical community, social workers, lawyers, judges and journalists, Starcross also had to fight fear and resistance.

"We were denounced in public meetings. The county dump would not take our garbage. Store clerks would not touch our money. A volunteer fireman would not respond to a call for help. Some social welfare and educational agencies responded to us with panic and hostility," they write on their website.

Over many years the group parented 19 children, two of which McCarroll adopted — David McCarroll, 30, a concert violinist who performs around the world, and Holly, 26, who lives at Starcross with her husband, Lance Baker and their 3-year-old son, Damien Tolbert. That makes Brother Toby a grandfather.

Sister Julie adopted a third child, Andrew DeRossi, who is 24 and works with the Job Corps in Sacramento.

Although several of the children loved and nurtured at Starcross did not live to adulthood, others are still in McCarroll's life, keeping him connected to the millennial generation.

Starcross also welcomes young farming interns to help with the olive groves, fruit orchards and vegetable garden. To support their work — primarily The House of Hope in Kampala, Uganda, for children orphaned by AIDS — by selling olive oil, fruit and wreaths at Christmas. Their gardens also supply a food pantry for rural neighbors and people with compromised immune systems.

McCarroll has written 10 other books. His latest was the idea of his friend and agent, Edite Kroll. Although he was initially resistant, he set about looking among his writings for pieces that "reflected the spirituality in nature."

It was a challenging practice to sculpt and distill those deep reflections in three or four paragraphs, particularly for a writer who concedes that he tends to be "long winded." But he managed to create 365 thoughts, one for each day of the year. Many were mined from his "Friday Reflections," a blog that appears on the Starcross website.

Books that include daily reflections comprise an emerging genre, with perhaps the most famous by poet and philosopher Mark Nepo, the best-selling "Book of Awakening."

McCarroll does see changes in the way people now engage their inner lives.

"The way people are living out their spirituality is very different from the old monastic form. But we do have people living here — I'm not sure what to call them — who are spiritual residents. In all aspects they are," he said.

Among them is a 29-year-old woman who came to work in the garden but found herself deeply involved in caring for Sister Marti, who died in February, a year after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

"We get quite a few young people who are not going on the traditional career path," McCarroll said. "The vast majority who come here are people who are seriously examining what they want to do in life. I would call that a spiritual quest. Maybe those are old-fashioned terms.

"We have times when we get together for prayer. Sometimes they join us. Sometimes they do their own thing. We have one who loves to run as a contemplative gesture."

McCarroll is grieved by what many see as a continuing race war in the United State more than half a century after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

"I'm not optimistic about where this is going to go," he said with sad resignation in his voice. "I would be willing to help, but who in the heck needs an 85-year-old guy who needs a walker to get around?"

"But I am hopeful for our young people. I'm not sure they're engaged yet, but I do have some confidence they will get engaged."

Exactly 40 years after Starcross moved from San Francisco into the old farmhouse, it carries on, even in the absence of Sister Marti. McCarroll conceded that he struggles with the loss.

"For me personally, it's a mess. I get some information, and I still find myself picking up the phone to call Marti," he said. "In the Jewish tradition it takes a year at least. At my age, maybe I'll just choose to always be having conversations with Marti.

"Sister Marti used to say, 'He's an old lion, but he's still a lion to watch out for.' If something happened locally that was radical, I might be out there hobbling along. But I'm at peace with how things are working out in my life. I'm comfortable on this path."

The independently published "Stepping Stones" is available for \$15 on [Amazon](#) or through [Starcross](#) at 707-886-1919 or community@starcross.org.

