



**STARCROSS**  
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# Sharings

Spring 2005

## THE STARCROSS STORY: *SPIRITUAL SOLIDARITY*

*by sister Marti*

*This is the second in a series we are doing about the 30-year history and mission of Starcross. The first statement, in our last newsletter, was on children. Next time we will have something about Starcross as protected sacred space. These are in preparation for our next 30 years.*

It is important for the Starcross Community to be a place where there is sacred space, in addition to our specific programs for children, and especially AIDS orphans in Africa. But in these very challenging and changing times, this isn't enough. There has to be a way of sharing whatever we have with others. It is an ongoing process of learning how the sacred breaks through into different cultures and life experiences.

We have 18,000 people on our mailing list, all of whom face unique life situations, and all are a facet of the awesome touching of the human and divine in our moment in history. At various times in our story we at Starcross have tried to stand in solidarity, not only with those people we know and work with, but also with all people who are part of the unfolding spiritual evolution of humanity, and who have called on us in times of need for many different reasons.

We are always exploring ways to reach people where they are and also invite them to help us evolve. Some of the ways we have found so far include these areas:



*A recent session at Starcross Volunteer Center, where high school students learn about specific AIDS orphans in Africa and open communication with them about the world they will share in the future.*

1) **Acts of Remembrance.** Helping people not feel alone at certain points that really matter. Memorial books are an example of this. We keep a book in the chapel for each month of the year, and each day at Vespers we read out the names of people we have been asked to remember, and a few words about them sent to us by their loved ones.

We are also dedicating olive trees, both in memory of people who have died and to honor living people or events. We send out a certificate telling which olive tree is being commemorated, and we record it in a book and put a marker by the tree.

There is a Garden of Memories where the ashes of loved ones may be placed (without charge).

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2) **Prayer Requests.** These are not just words we say in the chapel. People often feel it helps them for us to know what is going on with them and to have the sense that we are with them somehow in their difficulty. It creates a circle of compassion, which is an important part of our life. We keep them in mind, and it gives increased authenticity to our own contemplative existence.

3) **Spiritual Companions.** At times of special need we can offer spiritual connections, especially for the severely ill and dying and their families.

4) **Youth.** We encourage young people to participate in our work through activities that expand their awareness of how the orphan children in Africa live, and also through helping with office work and farm activities. We work with individuals and groups of young people who wish to explore their own and others' spiritual heritage, to help equip themselves for the times they will live in, as they inherit this planet.

5) **Publications.** We try to reach out to others through SHARINGS, our quarterly newsletter. If we can reveal our own journeys, thoughts and reflections, others can relate to our story and feel connected. We also are planning other publications for our friends, and there are brother Toby's books which tell our story and share his inner journey. We hope a new book will appear next year.

6) **E-mail Network.** We can share more informally with the e-mail list than in the newsletter, and people have a chance to respond. We find this very enriching. There are currently about 1,000 who are on the list.

7) **Meetings.** We have begun to have periodic meetings which allow us to have more contact with friends in Northern California and give us insight into what is going on with other people. Although there is a limit to how many people we can contact locally, this significantly expands the base of people working with us.

8) **A New Challenge.** Many people associated with us find they are comfortable with spiritual communities of some sort, while others do not feel at home in those settings, but they do not want to jettison their whole spiritual life and tradition. There is a growing population of spiritually homeless people who have to find new paths. Everyone has spiritual longings they are seeking to fulfill. People are relying more on their own families, on circles of friends and the spiritual stepping stones that are natural in anyone's life. They are having to rely less on institutions and more on other resources. We have a lot of experience to share in this process, and are consulting with friends on the best way to do it.

So, a major focus for the Starcross community is always working with our friends, new and old, to see what we have in our spiritual experience which can be a source of encouragement and practical help for them. And, to expand our own horizon of what it means to live at this moment of history.



*On Wednesday of Holy Week friends gathered in Santa Rosa. Five readers presented anonymous excerpts brother Toby had put together from the hundreds of emails he had received after asking people to share with him some of the light and darkness in their lives. The experiences were profoundly moving. Music was provided by David McCarrroll (violin) and by a special tape from our AIDS orphans in South Africa. Sponsors of these children provided a lovely supper as a support for gentle and deep discussion.*

## DOUBT IS A NECESSARY STEP IN OUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

After Easter I drove by a school with a sign “Diversity is Patriotic.” Nearby a church sign announced “There is Only One Road to Heaven.” I think we have a problem here. No, I don’t mean the growing uneasiness about mounting support of conservative religious agendas. The question which is increasingly presented to me is, “How do young people today mature with an authentic spiritual faith?”

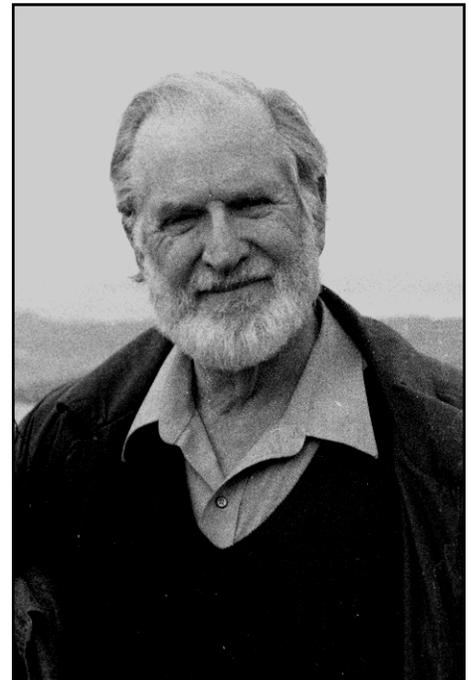
I have contact with a lot of spiritually questioning young adults. It used to be simple. Parents went to church and adolescents rejected the whole scene. Now it is more complex. In recent years I have spent many an hour with young people who start out with, “Well, I was raised Catholic, but. . .” The issues for them? Sexual abuse and weirdness. Attitudes toward women. Toward gays and lesbians. Clericalism and a feudal structure. Hypocrisy. Cultural and political conservatism. And on and on.

Recently there have also been more young people in my life from Buddhist families. Jewish families. New Age families. Agnostic families. And, yes, Christian fundamentalist families.

To a growing number of young people, Starcross is seen as a safe, neutral place to meet in what many perceive as a present climate of religious intolerance and suspicion. From our beginning, and especially in the early days of the AIDS hysteria, I hope we demonstrated our respect for all spiritual journeys. Even so, the young people assume I have an agenda. And, they are right.

I don’t want them to throw out everything because they have serious problems with clergy or creed. There is a whole spiritual tradition they are heir to and entitled to use as an enrichment in their lives. I’m not sure I ever convinced anyone about this but they do listen to me.

Also, I want them to understand that personal doubt is really holy and natural. A religious organization which does not accept this is twisted and probably soul-dead. Our spiritual life must be reformed and refreshed and this is partly possible by questioning and reformulating our understanding of the sacred dimensions of life. And, we must trust our experiences. That is a bad word in some hierarchies, for experience is beyond the control of authority, and I will admit it can be a two-edged sword. A young child opens her heart to a fundamentalist view of God. Then she is burned by the realities of church life and her becoming a person. She may be too hurt to ever open up again. There are secret tears in many of the young cynics I have met. Nonetheless, our actual experiences, positive and negative, are the only lasting foundations we have for faith, hope and love.



I have another, usually unannounced, agenda. Paul Clasper, an old friend of mine, was a missionary. First he was a Baptist and then an Anglican. He told me that the missionary’s primary duty should be to see how God was breaking through in other cultures and bring this knowledge back home to our faith communities. I don’t know how many missionaries would agree with Paul but it impressed me. The presence of the sacred is in all these young doubting Thomases among us. I sometimes learn more from their rejection of unexamined parts of my own spiritual life than I do from any other source. Their questioning is holy not only for them but for all of us.

*brother Toby*

# STARCROSS

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*The olive trees grow, and so do we . . .*

## THE STARCROSS STORY: SPRING 2005

### THANK YOU!

You recently received a fund appeal letter from us, and if you have already responded, we thank you for your support. Financial security is not something we have ever counted on, but somehow, for the past 30 years, with the generous help of our friends our programs continue and grow. However, without your help we would have real difficulty in continuing what we are able to do, and especially helping children in Africa who have been orphaned by AIDS.

So thank you for making what we do possible, and if you have not yet responded to the fund appeal, — then thank you in advance!



### OUR NEWEST “BRIGHT LIGHTS”

These children were recently orphaned when their parents died from AIDS, Bongani (10), Yolande (7), and Thabiso (4) had no one to look after them until they came to our Houses of Hope in KwaZulu Natal. Sponsors are still needed for these children and several others, who, because of a shortage of funds we shouldn't have taken in — but we did.

### August 5-7: HAIKU and HOUSEPAINTING

Mark your calendar to join us at Starcross for a unique weekend. We will attempt to combine spiritual nourishment with manual labor as we simultaneously learn the art of haiku and paint a one hundred year old Victorian farmhouse. Come for all or any part of the weekend.

A tentative schedule is: Friday afternoon prep work, Friday evening a brief orientation on Starcross and “Haiku 101”. Saturday we paint the house. In the late afternoon we will break for swimming, an update on our African programs for AIDS orphans and Vespers. After dark we plan a night haiku walk. Sunday morning we hope to finish the work. There will be an ecumenical meditative gathering, followed by lunch in the barn. Those who can, are welcome to stay the afternoon for clean up and swimming. This should be a fun, high-energy event. Bring friends and family. We'll cook together and camp out with sleeping bags. Please contact Sister Julie ([sj@starcross.org](mailto:sj@starcross.org)) for more information and to sign up.