

*No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion, and therefore from God. The obstacle is in our "self," that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egocentric will.*

—THOMAS MERTON,  
*New Seeds of Contemplation*



*Assisi, Italy*



**Y**OUNG FRANCIS OF ASSISI was in the rag trade—at the upper end. He fitted out the rich in exotic plumes so they need never forget that they were a different breed from the grubby unwashed in their hovels. And Francis ached to be like them, a bird of paradise.

Things, however, took a strange turn. Francis found himself a prisoner of war for a year (there being no Geneva Convention, things were rough). After his release, he had a complete physical and mental breakdown, followed by a very gradual recovery. When he tried to piece together the shattered fragments of his life, he found they wouldn't go back the right way, but insisted on making a new pattern that frightened but also excited him. At its center was—well, Francis said God, but if God doesn't make sense for you, call it the Oneness of everything, benign and gracious and inexpressibly tender toward all that exists.

Francis felt the embrace of God and saw with a pang that he had been conniving in a tragic sham, one that God longed to undo. God's Son Jesus died for wanting to open

people's eyes to their folly and convince them that happiness is in reaching out, not in shutting out. Elbowing others aside so I can grab more for myself may seem like a good idea, but it conflicts with the way we've been made and doing it is doing violence to my real self. We've all got one Father and everything is related, and so Francis with unassailable logic began to call everybody and everything "sister" and "brother." This wasn't just a romantic affectation. It was the manifesto of a campaign.

Francis spent his life trying to convince us that we're free only when we accept responsibility for everyone and for all creation. His most unforgettable lessons are the things he does:

*He stands before the people of Assisi and strips off all his clothes, for by clothes people are divided and categorized—but this is not our truth.*

*He constantly gives away what has been given to him, because to keep something*

*when someone else needs it more is stealing—and this is not our truth.*

*He refuses to be the owner of any house or place or thing, because what you own you must defend—and this cannot be our truth.*

*He embraces and kisses the leper thrust out by town and family, and in so doing is conscious that he is the one who is blessed—and this he knows to be our truth.*

*He makes friends with the fierce wolf of Gubbio and shows the people it is hunger that has made him a killer—and they come to see that this is our truth.*

*He walks unarmed through the din of battle to speak of love and peace to the sultan of Egypt and is heard with reverence—for this is assuredly our truth.*

*He speaks to the birds of the air and invites them to give thanks to the One*

*who made them and all that lives—  
and they too seem to know that this  
is our truth.*

*He sings the praises of God Most High,  
whose love and care is seen in sun and  
moon, in earth and air and water, in  
people who tenderly care for one another,  
and even in our sister death—and here is  
the heart of our truth.*

Francis tries everything he can think of to jolt us into seeing and feeling the truth that is so clear to him. We need that jolt, badly. We need to see with new eyes the blasphemy of being comfortable while God's children suffer and starve to death, of daring to pray to God when we are indifferent to the fate of the sisters and the brothers God has asked us to cherish. "Receivers of stolen goods" is Francis' phrase for us when we cocoon ourselves in comfort when millions have nothing.

The book you are holding in your hands is dangerous and should probably carry a government health warning. Gerry Straub is a modern-day Francis, jolting us into the truth by the power of images. You may be glad or sorry you opened this book, but you can't set it down and remain as you were before you picked it up: Whatever you do

now is a decision. There's no neutral option. You will either do something—or you reject your truth, our truth, the truth at the heart of everything.

When Francis looked back, at the end of a fairly short life, on the decision he had made twenty years before, he tells how it affected him. "What I used to find so disgusting," he says, "was changed into my greatest satisfaction and joy." When I stop being a "thief" and begin to go straight, the same will happen to me. Try it and see.

PART ONE *A Photographic Meditation*



*Manila, the Philippines*



Kingston, Jamaica



Wang'uru, Kenya



Manila, the Philippines

*When Did I See You Hungry?*

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*Nairobi, Kenya*



*Kingston, Jamaica*



*Manaus, Brazil*



*Kingston, Jamaica*