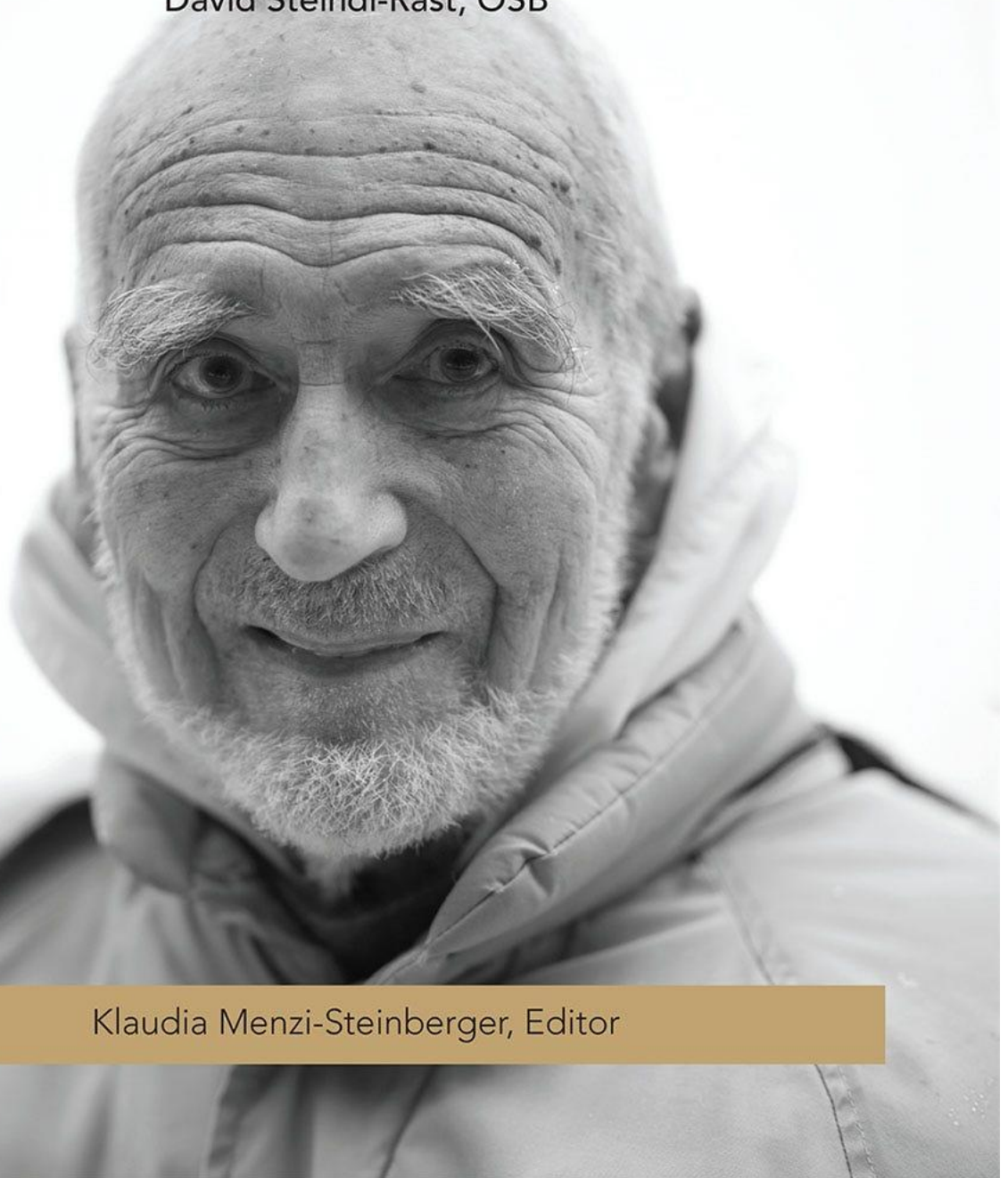


Honoring Brother David's 100th Birthday

IN WIDENING CIRCLES

Honoring the 100th Birthday of
David Steindl-Rast, OSB



Klaudia Menzi-Steinberger, Editor

On Sunday, July 12, Brother David Steindl-Rast turned 100 years old. For all of us who call him a friend and a teacher, this is a monumental event. But I'm sure Br. David himself, although definitely grateful for having reached such an age in good health, would be the first to downplay the occasion. For, ironically, he has long embraced the maxim: *Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away*. Throughout his life, he has been concerned precisely with those breath-taking moments – how to bring them about or recognize them by being grateful and awake to the wonder of life itself.

What is more astonishing is that Br. David has never stopped. Even now, he remains wonderfully active – writing from his monastery in Austria, recording his reflections, sending out letters of encouragement to a weary world. His mind is still clear and his arms as open as ever to embrace the world with love and gratefulness.

I have had the great honor of being Br. David's friend for over 20 years. I also consider him to be my teacher, since his thought and overall philosophy have been central in my life. From our personal encounters over the years, I can also confirm that no one embodies his teachings more completely than he does.

To celebrate Br. David's centenary, Klaudia Menzi-Steinberger, the indefatigable creator of the digital German library of Br. David's work ([here](#)), has just edited and produced a very beautiful commemorative publication, *In Widening Circles* (in separate English and German editions). In this book, friends and renowned personalities paint a multifaceted portrait through essays, personal memories, and reflections. Contributors include, among others, the Dalai Lama, Anselm Grün, Fritjof Capra, Joan Halifax, Rupert Sheldrake, David Whyte, and Ken Wilber. All net proceeds from book sales will be donated to a charitable cause of Br. David's choosing.

I am more than elated that the conversation Jane and I filmed with Br. David in Argentina three years ago (see below), when he was 97, has been included in this book as well as [my piece about my first encounter with Br. David](#). The book is already available and you may order it from Amazon.com (US) [here](#) or Amazon.de (Germany) [here](#).

But who is this man whose life so many have gathered to celebrate?

Born in Vienna in 1926, he lived through war and occupation before emigrating to the US and finding his calling as a Benedictine monk at Mount Saviour Monastery in New York in 1953. But he was not your typical monk. He broke the confines of his own monastic order, and even religion, in order to approach and understand other faiths, embracing and bringing forth what is common in all of them. In the 1960s, with his abbot's blessing, he became one of the first Catholics officially delegated to Buddhist-Christian dialogue, studying Zen with Japanese masters and forming a friendship with Thomas Merton. He co-founded the Center for Spiritual Studies together with Jewish, Buddhist, Sufi, and Hindu teachers, convinced that at the mystical core of every tradition flows the same living water. For decades, he divided his time between a hermit's life and lecture tours on five continents, addressing audiences from Harvard professors to Buddhist monks to the United Nations. His many books include *The Music of Silence* (with S. Lebell), *Gratefulness – the Heart of Prayer*, *Belonging to the Universe* (1992 American Book Award), co-authored with F. Capra and T. Matus, and his autobiography, written when he had turned 90, *i am through you so i*.

His conversations know no boundaries: with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, with Desmond Tutu, with physicists like Fritjof Capra – for his curiosity extends beyond religion to the dialogue between spirituality and science – and with millions of ordinary seekers who find in his wisdom a doorway to

wonder. For him, interfaith dialogue is never about diplomacy between institutions; it is about true understanding of “the other” and about the friendship between human beings seeking and moving towards the same Great Mystery.

At the heart of his teaching stands an old word he rescued from obscurity and filled with new meaning: *gratefulness*. Gratitude, in the ordinary sense, depends on receiving something specific, so it comes and goes with circumstances: someone gives, we thank, the feeling fades. But gratefulness, as Br. David teaches it, doesn’t wait for gifts – it is a sustained wakefulness to the gift-character of life itself, to each moment as given. Grate-*full*-ness is the “great fullness” we experience when we are awake to the present moment. That is why he speaks of grateful *living* rather than feeling gratitude: it is an orientation we can practice in every moment, not an emotion that visits us occasionally.

Quoting from his little spiritual masterpiece, *The Music of Silence*, which has been most influential in my life:

- Life is given to us; every moment is given. The only appropriate response therefore is gratefulness.
- Joy is that kind of happiness that doesn’t depend on what happens. Normally, we are happy when something good happens, and we are unhappy when something happens that we do not consider good. We pick and choose. But joy is our wholehearted response to whatever opportunity is given to us in any moment. It does not depend on what happens.
- We think that people are grateful because they are happy. But is this true? Look closely, and you will find that people are happy because they are grateful... The opposite of gratefulness is just taking everything for granted.

Crucially, he teaches that we cannot be grateful for everything – no one can be grateful for war, for illness, for loss – but we can be grateful *in every moment*, for every moment offers its own opportunity, even if only the opportunity to learn through pain and suffering, to grow, or to stand with others.

This simple but radical teaching has reached far beyond his monastic walls: through his many books, through the worldwide community of Grateful Living that he founded, and through his many talks and interviews. His [TED talk](#) on gratefulness has been viewed ten million times, while his YouTube video, “[A Grateful Day](#),” is one of the best succinct expositions of his philosophy. He also gave us a simple practice in three steps: stop, look, go. Stop long enough to notice the gift; look at the opportunity it offers; and then go and do something with it. And this, in the end, is the secret behind those moments that take our breath away: they are not rare strokes of luck reserved for the fortunate few but are waiting *in every moment* for anyone focused and attentive enough to receive them. For Br. David, spirituality is aliveness on all levels. As he explains, “spirituality” comes from “spiritus,” which means “life,” “breath,” “aliveness.”

Happy birthday, dear friend and teacher.

The world is grateful for your work, message, and boundless love radiating in all directions – and so am I.

