



St. Catherine of Sienna

# Merging the Realms

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The level-headed and Medieval Saint Catherine and the rousing paintings of Hollis Sigler, a 20<sup>th</sup> century painter, show us how to live in the world of our two natures, the human and Divine. Through a simple phrase and oil on canvas they lodge their appeals and take us into heaven.

1

This morning as most mornings, as it is my practiced habit, I sit at the kitchen counter and drink a cup of tea. The dogs curl themselves on the ceramic tile underneath my dangling legs for it is their habit to be nearby. I read some noteworthy teaching from the sages of the world and feel the dark morning brighten this interior room.

This morning I read from the Letters of Saint Catherine, a medieval woman who lived a life of a contemplative in her family home. She apparently at one point made promises to the Dominican Order, but never made any vows to become a Dominican nun. Yet, she lived as one and carried a strong and expansive voice to both cloistered sisters and to the clerics of her time including two popes.

Her diminutive light cast in words led my contemplation: "Honour to God, toil to man." I read it and felt the words collide with knowing this to be true. As it is also my habit, I changed the words as someone tunes a string on a personal instrument. The tuning is necessary since it allows me to hear the words as a song within and I sing them silently.

"The Good for you, is to honor the holy ones and to work and offer goodwill to man."

Yes, I thought, It is exactly so. And it is indeed the means to humility which is the singing. I did not set it down there but continued to reflect on this clear measure and slowly the melody led to notes and sweet refrains. It began with "purify the mind." And slowly it unfolded with "strain" brings purity. "Heat" burns off the dross. "Washing, restraining and caring" purify.

Impurities are natural and continuous as the dust gathers and appears on windowsills. It is a natural occurrence. It is nature's calling card to remind us where we are and what is going on here.

When I neglect the strain, the heat, or forget the washing and care I am covered with the dust of the world. When I turn towards these ordinary means right here in this ordinary house the dust collects and the windowsill is clearer. And clarity if not all is the better half of the effect.

Sickness, aging and death cannot be jumped or skipped, no one skips the crucifixion nor the maggot covered bitch. The desire to honor God and toil to man is a workable means to traverse the human

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved 2/3/2012 <http://www.nndb.com/people/253/000095965/>

dilemma. Nothing is held against anyone except by the eternal desire to find the Way. Everything conspires to awaken the glory and honor to the holy ones and the work and goodwill to man.

Hollis Sigler, an American artist who died from breast cancer in 2001 exemplifies this truth in her painting, *To Kiss the Spirits: Now This is What It is Really Like*, 1993.



2

It is hard to say whether the opening begins where the woman stands on the ordinary street or from the star-filled angel sky. The stairway to heaven reaches into heavens from the street below while the stairway descends downward to the earth. The feminine figure, it appears, begins on the ground and travels upward to disappear into the angelic starry night.<sup>3</sup> “Honour to God, toil to man” expressed as a lighted stairway upward where the figure transforms into a radiantly feminine messenger of god.

Images such as this one are useful means to help us remember Catherine of Sienna’s medieval proclamation on what is good for you and me. Using a short combination of words, Catherine of Sienna makes sense of the world and tells us what belongs where. Hollis Sigler shows us how it really is in her rendering in *To Kiss the Spirits*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hollis Sigler’s *Breast Cancer Journal*, p. 51, Hudson Hills Press, N.Y. 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Hollis Sigler, like her mother and grandmother before her was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1985. She died in 2001 at the age of 53. This painting was done in 1993, oil on canvas.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *Breast Cancer Journal*