

GRAINS OF SAND

An Interview with

RICHARD MOIR

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Edited by Robert E. Daggy

"Onward in my journey I come to understand that every hair is numbered like every grain of sand."
--- Bob Dylan

Jones: Good evening and welcome. This is Caroline Jones with another program in which we discover what gives meaning and purpose for us Australians in all our variety, to explore these ideas and to make our own personal response to them. To judge from your encouraging letters coming in from right 'round the country, there is a tremendous interest in these deeper questions. Some nights we meet quite well-known people and other times people you may never have heard of. This is quite deliberate because the vital factor is the story of the inner life, the belief, the strength a person has discovered on their particular journey. So we are seeking to move inside the personality, whoever it is, to a more profound level where we may all encounter each other and find things in common just as human beings.

Tonight we meet a well-known actor, Richard Moir. I'm sure you've seen him many times on television, most recently in *The Challenge*, based on the drama of the America's Cup. He is featured in so many popular films too, like *Heat Wave* and *An Indecent Obsession*, for which he was nominated best actor [by the Australian Film Institute]. In his early thirties, Richard is enjoying success in his work. He is married to the beautiful red-haired actress Julie Nihill, Bradman's wife (do you remember?) in the film *Body Line* and now in *Kangaroo*. Richard and Julie have a baby daughter Lucy.

□ **Richard Moir**, an actor, has appeared in Australia in theater, film, and television. His films include *27A* (1973), *In Search of Anna* (1977), *Going Down* (1982), *Plains of Heaven* (1982), *Heatwave* (1982), *Wrong World* (1985), and *An Indecent Obsession* (1985). He has won a "Sammy" Award as Best Actor for his television performance in *Players to the Gallery* and has twice been nominated as Best Actor by the Australian Film Institute: in 1979 for *In Search of Anna* and in 1985 for *An Indecent Obsession*. He is currently at work in a film whose production title is *Outback*.



RICHARD MOIR

Richard has been through a dramatic change in his real life recently, guided in part by the great Catholic contemplative writer Thomas Merton. Merton, as perhaps you know, was an American monk of the Cistercian Order. He died not so long ago. He spent much of his time in silence and solitude from where he thoroughly engaged himself, through his writing, as a peace activist, an advocate of civil rights and social justice, a Western monk in dialogue with Eastern religions and, above all, an authentic human being concerned about the advancement of the human condition everywhere. He was not averse to a cold beer or to playing Bob Dylan records. He had a great love of the natural world. He saw the ordinary things of everyday life as a gift. "We already have everything, but we don't know it," Merton says. He also wrote:

One of the best things for me when I went to the hermitage was becoming attentive to the times of the day when the birds began to sing and the deer came out of the morning fog and the sun came up. But today we don't take time, we feel we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. Time seems to us like a commodity mortgaged. We experience time as unlimited indebtedness. We are sharecroppers of time. We need to slow down to listen, to experience what we have and know that we have already what we seek."

Thomas Merton's many books are among the great spiritual classics of our time and they are very much companions of each day for actor Richard Moir. But how did a popular, pleasure-loving young actor used to the glamor of the film set and the television studio first become attracted to the contemplative life? Richard Moir's story begins in deepest outback Queensland.

Moir: I think the most important thing that I recall about my time in St. George was my first experience acting. My mother was involved in a dramatic group in the town with the local doctor and the school teachers and that sort of thing. I got to be the little boy on the left in a couple of things. I did reach the point of being Cinderella's cat on which I look back with real affection. It went on for two or three nights and I can remember just looking out into the audience and seeing school friends or people I knew and them pointing and saying, "There's Richard up there!" I enjoy that process. I enjoy that enormously, that sudden stepping into the limelight. I look back on that point and think that was probably the seed that has made me do what I do now.

Jones: Why do you think you wanted to be in the limelight?

Moir: Perhaps I was a little withdrawn or something and it allowed me to be at the center of things without any responsibility almost, without having to speak for myself. I think a lot of actors are actors because they are very shy people.

Jones: So, it saves you from exposing yourself, but it gives you what -- approval and excitement?

Moir: No, it gives you normality, I think. It gives you -- I mean I have in my life been extraordinarily shy, to the point of having to leave functions too frightened to say goodbye and having to sort of escape out the back door and climb fences and go through neighbors' yards and things. But I don't have that sort of problem on a set or in a theater. I think this attention thing is a desire to have a place that you can step into and be acceptable or feel that you're acceptable.

Jones: Now that you've done all these years of acting in films and on television, is your shyness banished or is it still there and you're using this way to get around it and express yourself or has your shyness vanished?

Moir: No, it is still there, self-consciousness it is. I think there is a bit of difference between that and shyness. I'm not sure what it is, but it's still there. I'm still not the greatest lover of parties and things.

Jones: Do you find it interesting that your art, your creative work, has come out of a vulnerability?

Moir: Yes, I do. I think that a lot of actors are actors as a healing process for personality defects. I'm sure, I know, in my case that's true -- at least partly true.

Jones: Can you identify other significant turning points in your life?

Moir: Yes, I can. I had a brother who was three years younger than I who died in 1970, and there's not a day goes by when I don't think about that event in some way. I don't see that as a problem. I see that as a fairly normal thing. That's an obvious point in my life when things changed for me and everyone in my family. I think I went off the rails a bit. I think I lost my grip on where I was going and what I had planned to do. Suddenly the ground opened up a little bit and it was a bit of a step into the unknown. The family unit that had been so strong and positive was suddenly altered.

Jones: Did you feel as though some of yourself had gone -- a sense of loss of part of your own identity?

Moir: Yes, at the time -- immediately at the time -- I felt nothing. It is only as time goes by that I realize what I was suppressing.

Jones: And what did going off the rails entail?

Moir: The usual. At the time I didn't think of it as going off the rails, but things just weren't as clear. Suddenly I had no real plan. Before that I was going to school and I found that I just couldn't continue with school and deal with the classes and discipline and that sort of thing. I had the urge just to go and get a job, any job, and I was lucky that I could get into the film business. I just got lost a bit. I may have got lost anyway, but I think it's only now (and I'm 37) that I'm really starting to hit firm ground again.

Jones: How do you think you've come towards firm ground? Have you insight into that?

Moir: I think that the only answer is a spiritual answer. It's the only thing that really gives you firmer ground.

Jones: A spiritual answer in the form of some specific religion or philosophy or belief?

Moir: Faith in God, an awareness of God, a discovery of God.

Jones: Do you know where it came from or how it became evident?

Moir: It's gradual you know. It's a gradual process, all these things. I got serum hepatitis at one point in my life and was quite sick for a number of months and read Malcolm Muggeridge's book *Jesus Rediscovered*. It wasn't so much that I had a blinding flash reading this book and saying, "Yes, this is amazing. This is it." It was just a very interesting book. It was beautifully written and seemed to me to be supremely intelligent. It is said that you don't take the steps, the steps are taken towards you. An important event in all our lives -- and I don't mind admitting it

and I don't mind saying it -- involved Bob Dylan. The media announced -- Bob had never said anything -- but it was announced that Bob had turned to Christianity and this, of course, produced waves of reaction among everyone who had been fans of his. It had a huge effect on a number of people. Friends of mine who were using heroin, I think because of the influence of Bob Dylan, became born-again Christians and dropped the heroin. I went through this process, this born-again process with them, or after them. While I don't think that was a turning point, speaking of turning points, it was a very strange time. We had been sort of drug-taking hedonists and suddenly, say on Wednesday, we became born-again Christians. It was difficult for me and probably not a totally successful leap into that area of Christianity. I don't think of myself as a born-again Christian, but that's a label that has been invented by people anyway and it's not so important anymore.

Jones: And did it stick or was it a very exciting event that happened and gradually filtered away?

Moir: No, it hasn't filtered away. It hasn't gone in the direction I thought it would have gone at the time. It's developed and become . . . maybe the word's sublime -- or more profound.

Jones: Have you found a religious home, if you like that phrase?

Moir: No, not really. I tend to find that I feel O. K. anyway. You know it doesn't really worry me that I can attend a mass or go to the Christian Life Center down the road here and feel the same basic thing is happening. I'm not a strong -- I don't attend church a lot -- I'm not a strong attendee.

Jones: It sounds as though you carry this faith with you.

Moir: Yes, I think so. I tend to believe that it grows. I think that the basic thing that happens and the best thing that happens for me is that I, as a practical response to something that is very profound, attempt to be more tolerant and more caring. I think the word I really like is compassionate. I would like that to be part of my character. That is the practical response of being awe-struck by something magnificent which I have felt I've glimpsed on two or three occasions -- an inspirational force or something which comes upon you that you don't know anything about, that you don't understand, but which gives you hope. You feel you get a glimpse of something eternal and that it's good. [**Jones:** Which helps to make sense of why we're here and what it's all about?] Yes! As time goes on the problems are less and less, less and less should the problems of everyday life worry you. I'm one that gets very anxious in this world of show business where the jobs can be few and far between. It's a hard place, too. I think probably it's one of the hardest -- (I can't say *the* hardest, I don't know) -- areas to have faith. It's an area of enormous ego but I guess that's the same in banking or whatever. I don't know.

Jones: Probably. I want to ask you about treasured moments in your life.

Moir: My most recent treasured moment is the birth of my daughter Lucy and being there and seeing that happen. It was a fairly phenomenal moment and will be treasured because I think the older you get the more you look at birth with wonder. I think when it happens when you're twenty, you can be bit sort of blasé about it. But seeing that little creature moving into the world is my most recent treasured moment. I haven't quite got over it yet, I don't think.

Jones: You don't have to get over it, do you? [**Moir:** No.] Do you think that your faith somehow illuminates that happening?

Moir: I think that the birth of a child is a phenomenal thing and it is pretty dramatic. But I think that I find the most ordinary things, the most mundane things -- just people going to work and so on -- can be illuminated by faith. I think the ordinary things, the simple experiences are the best things.

Jones: You are sounding to me suddenly like Thomas Merton. Do you read him?

Moir: I do, yes. I was looking in a novel called *Real Presence* by American author Richard Bush. I dabble in writing scripts and things and looking for ideas for scripts, and I think this would make a tremendous film. Anyway there was a quote from this man called Thomas Merton in the front of the book which was, I thought, terrific, beautiful.

Then in prayer all sweetness becomes a sickness, consolation repels you, all life brings pain to the mind by its insufficiency. Your will no longer seems able to dare to act. The slightest movement reminds it of its uselessness and it dies of shame. And yet strangely it is in this helplessness that we come upon the beginning of joy. We discover that as long as we stay still the pain is not so bad and there is even a certain peace, a certain richness, a certain strength, a certain companionship that makes itself present to us when we are beaten down and hoping for hope.

That was in the front of this novel and is what the novel is about basically. It caused me to look into Thomas Merton and contemplation, which is where I think I'm at. Nothing inspires me more or interests me more except perhaps pieces of the Bible and so on. I find this is good -- contemplation. I'd like to be a contemplative, I think.

Jones: Would you say some more about how Merton and his ideas affect you -- the way you live your life right now?

Moir: Well, I read a piec of Merton every day and I write it down and I just attempt to allow it to sink in. It's a sense of awe at everything. I think that is what contemplation is. There's nothing that isn't amazing. There's nothing that isn't completely strange. I find that most of my time is spent thinking like that now. I mean I get on with things - I wash up and do stuff -- but I think about the strangeness of life. I can't help but think about it. I think I've got that from Merton, more than anything else. He was very involved in Zen. He was a Trappist monk, of course, but he was looking for ways to bridge the gap between Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, and Christianity. He died in fact in Bangkok in a very strange way. He touched a faulty electrical cord on a fan. But he was there in Bangkok to give a lecture to Buddhist and Christian monks, which I think is fantastic.

Jones: Does the way you look at life now help you to cope with or understand or go through suffering or pain or loss when it comes to you?

Moir: I think there is no confidence greater than spiritual confidence and if you can get that and maintain that you can deal with things. If you have managed to catch a glimpse of the back of God or feel and believe you have, have the faith that you have, then you must be O. K.

Jones: Does the faith that you have remove any fear of death? [**Moir:** Yes.] What do you think happens at the time of death?

Moir: I believe that life is eternal, that our life is capable of being eternal. I think we have to take a step towards it, but it does mean having faith.

Jones: What is the place of love in your life?

Moir: I guess there are different forms of love and different types. The love of God is very different from the love one feels in a relationship, I suppose. I've been married about two years, nearly two years. I believed I would marry someone with whom I was passionately and deeply in love and had fallen in love with. I don't think it occurred that way. Obviously we like each other, but neither of us was aware of anything like "This is the person, this is the one, this is the person I have to marry, this is my one true love I've been searching for all my life." It was nothing like that. We entered into a relationship and an agreement and a companionship that, I believe, is growing into love, that is developing all the time, that is getting stronger with friendship and support and loyalty. That wasn't all there then. We'd known each other for six months or something and that's not enough time to establish all those things that you think you need to marry someone. But we did it and luckily those things are happening. Love grows in that sense, in the human sense. I think love grows.

Jones: And is the spiritual dimension strong in that friendship, in that love, in that marriage?

Moir: Very much so, very much so. Julie is a very religious person and I believe that I am.

Jones: Do you think faith nourishes the growth of love?

Moir: Yes, I would agree with that. Faith and love work together. I'd like to read one of my favorite passages from Merton which, I think, illustrates that point.

The Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho, we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a splash -- at such times, the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the "newness," the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood whether we want it to or not.

Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance. (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 296-297)

Jones: Actor Richard Moir reading from a book by the Catholic contemplative writer Thomas Merton. The title -- *New Seeds of Contemplation*, published by Anthony Clark. Richard mentioned also the influence of Bob Dylan in his life. We conclude with a line from a song which Dylan wrote with the intention of making a healing piece of music.

Onward in my journey,
I come to understand
That every hair is numbered
Like every grain of sand.