

In Memory of Harriet



another way of dying

Introduction

In 1974 Peter and Harriet Cornish moved to Ireland to establish the retreat centre that has become Dzogchen Beara. In 1992, after many years of effort, the first stage of the development was completed and the centre became a registered charity under the spiritual guidance of Tibetan Lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the bestselling 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying'. In June 1993 Harriet died of cancer at the age of 44.

Harriet's death was an inspiration to many of her carers and an article entitled 'In Memory of Harriet' was written by Harriet's husband Peter and published in the Buddhist 'View' magazine in 1994. The article deeply touched many people and from this arose much interest and support to build the Spiritual Care Centre at Dzogchen Beara.

This booklet was especially published to commemorate the visit of the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese to the Spiritual Care Centre during its construction in September 2007. The President unveiled a bronze plaque in memory of Harriet. This image designed by her friend Jenny Richardson is shown on the front cover.



In Memory of Harriet

Inspired by the way in which Harriet lived and died, many people have asked for the manner of her death to be recorded. In the hope that it might be of use to some of you, here it is. There is really little that I can add to the advice given by Sogyal Rinpoche in his *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Nevertheless the story of this death might remind us of just how much there is to be done and show that we *can* actually do some of it.

For the twenty months of her illness, Harriet travelled back and forth to Cork University Hospital, nearly a hundred miles from the remote Dzogchen Beara. It is a large teaching hospital, as good as any in Europe, with the bonus of Irish nurses. It is a friendly place, which Harriet liked when she couldn't be in her own room at the retreat centre, high amongst the rocks and the fuchsia on the shores of Bantry Bay. We were told however that, due to the shortage of beds, terminal patients were moved in their last days, to the hospice.

The hospice is run by a Catholic order called the Sisters of Charity. It is a Victorian institution with muzak for entertainment and angels for staff. Harriet had been there



and didn't want to go back. She'd seen old people dying alone, six to a room, to the sound of a televised football match. This seemed to rob them of dignity, to steal their last rights to serenity at this the most important moment of all.

Three weeks before Harriet's death the doctor asked us what we would do when it became no longer possible to nurse her at home. Was there anything he could do to enable her to go to the hospice? I told him that we would have to make it like her room at home. Her own world that reflected herself. A single, south-facing room, free of television and piped music. We would re-furnish it with her own pictures and wall hangings, cushions, curtains and rugs. She would need to feel that it was really all right with the staff for us to replace the crucifixes with Tibetan thangkas. To assemble her shrine, to light candles and incense and play Tibetan music. After she died we would need to leave her totally untouched for twenty-four hours. The doctor, never batting an eyelid, agreed to all this. Harriet was grateful, but still we hoped that we might nurse her at home.

In the last days nursing became more difficult but friends gathered round and we coped. Finally it became clear that we could no longer be certain of giving her the care that she might need. Long before, I had promised her that if this time came, I would get her to Cork. In consultation with the district nurse and a doctor neighbour, we decided that



it was time. We were sad to move her, it was like giving up, but as it turned out Harriet's death in that hospice was her last gift for the benefit of others.

On calling for the ambulance I was told that, due to insurance problems the next-of-kin was not allowed to travel in it. I was able to quietly insist. I pointed out that she needed to go but that I would not let her travel alone with a nurse who she didn't know, especially as she could die on the journey. (It may be useful to note that at these times one holds most of the cards. People are usually cooperative provided that one is sensitive to their positions. Of course this may be easier in Ireland where people still come before rules). Had I not been there I believe that Harriet would have felt completely abandoned, riding in that ambulance alone to her death. It is absolutely imperative that we get this barbaric rule changed.

On arrival at the hospice we were shown to a room through double doors at the end of a corridor. Matron met us and straightaway told us to take down the pictures of Jesus and put them in a cupboard. I said that we'd be happy to leave them, or otherwise would she take them because we wouldn't like to show any disrespect. (This was out of a genuine respect for other religions. It was also an opportunity at an early stage to show the establishment that, although a bit different we did know how to behave).



We removed the table and chairs and spread rugs and cushions on the floor. Over the bed we hung colourful paintings of Tibetan deities framed in silk brocade. We set up Harriet's shrine near her bed and lit candles and incense. We hung warm yellow curtains in the window for the light to shine through and turn the grey walls to gold. In the gap between them we hung a cut-glass sphere that would fill the room with rainbow light if the sun shone. Quickly the room was transformed into a celestial realm of lilies and roses and peace.

When all was prepared and Harriet slept, her friends Bernadette and Penny sat in silence on the rugs on the floor. Always over the next three days and nights there were to be one or more people sitting quietly in practice like that. Late that night and each night, the kind old matron would look in and thinking I slept, tiptoe over and blow out the candles. That evening Bernie was alone with Harriet for a while. Harriet had got up and was standing gazing at her shrine. She was looking at her picture of Khandro, a great lady Buddhist 'master' who some years before had visited her at Dzogchen Beara. Bernie held the picture up for Harriet and she smiled. From this moment her earlier restlessness ceased. She didn't get up again but lay in bed with the picture of Khandro beside her head on the pillow.

In the morning the doctor told me that Harriet had only a few hours to live. At 10am Bernie and Penny returned and



sat quietly in meditation. We had made a tape of Harriet's favourite Buddhist chants with the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa and other great Tibetan masters. This played softly over and over. A great peace had settled on the room. Even the smoke from the incense as it curled through the roses seemed to say that it was all right. Friends came in without speaking, sat in meditation and left. Sometimes the nurses would come to stand by the bed and whisper a prayer.

Then someone came to get me from the telephone saying that Harriet's breathing had changed. I knelt by the bed and placed my mala (rosary), blessed by the Dalai Lama in her hand. The whole room felt so sacred that my feeble attempts at 'practice' or 'prayer' seemed irrelevant, almost irreverent. I united my breathing with hers. In a timeless space beyond sorrow or pain, thoughts rose and subsided without meaning. Small events splashed like raindrops on a distant window-pane. The Dalai Lama started to chant the mandala offering. This seemed so perfectly appropriate at that moment. Harriet's whole life was an offering for the preservation of the ancient wisdom and now, so too was her death.

Then the sun came out to shine through the crystal that stirred in a light breeze, to spread dancing shapes of rainbow light around Harriet's head on the pillow. Time lapped without passing on the limitless shores of existence. In the silence of a peace beyond words there had settled a



space in which the whole universe had come slowly to rest. Harriet gave three long and gentle out breaths. Her final out breath coincided exactly with the last long syllable, and the chanting ceased.

After a while the nurses asked if they could come in. They formed a line, kneeling one by one at the bed and their rosaries clicked with the click of the malas. Some of them were moved to tears by the scene while another reached out to touch Harriet and then remembered that we'd asked that she shouldn't be touched.

All that day and the next people came and went, bringing flowers and sitting in silence. Sometimes the nurses would join us for a while. I spent the next two nights alone in the room. Each night matron would tiptoe in and blow out the candles. It all seemed so natural and right. In those nights I think I began to understand a few things. A few not-very-profound things about death, one of which it might be worthwhile to pass on.

When we can see the ultimate purity and perfection of everything, which is but a reflection of our own true nature, then it doesn't matter where we are. But until that time, environment is everything. Having created this sacred space for Harriet and ourselves, the practice almost practised itself. How sad and lonely and bereft we would have felt had Harriet died in a cold grey ward, had a sheet pulled quickly over her face and been wheeled away to the fridge.



In the next two days all of the staff came to me at various intervals. Some of them in tears, all of them saying that they couldn't believe the peace in that room and thanking us for allowing them to be part of it. They said that the warmth seemed to spread out to the whole of the hospice. They found that they kept making excuses to come in, and they hoped that they hadn't disturbed us. Disturbed us? Oh yes they'd disturbed us all right. They disturbed us with their serenity, with their loving kindness and compassion and grace. Even the doctors were moved. Perhaps I expected them to be case-hardened and taut. A slightly embarrassed woman doctor thanked me. She turned away and then came back. She put her hand on my shoulder and with tears running down her cheeks she said. "Harriet has shown us that there is another way to die. It's as though I've been asleep all my life".

We would like to thank the staff of Marymount Hospice, Cork for helping us. For making all of this possible and for doing the most difficult and worthwhile job in the world. I've tried, but I can't find the words to express my gratitude to you. I'm sorry we didn't like the piped music and football. I know that the times must change before we can change that. It is one year later now. Still when things get a bit tough I think of you to give me inspiration and I will do so until I die. At that time, if I'm really fortunate, I'll see you again.







*Images of Harriet
page before: top right, with daughter Flora
bottom, with Peter in Castletownbere*