

*NOTE: This article, written by Ann Cason, contains sensitive information about the care involved when a high respected member of the Shambhala community, Ruth Astor, passed away. While writing the article Ann consulted with Peter Goldfarb who is the executor of Ms. Astor's estate and received permission to share this story with the general public as part of an effort to cultivate thoughtful discussion about how to relate with death in the context of the principles of enlightened society. We trust that readers will treat the information in the article with the respect. ---David Whitehorn, Chair, Shambhala Working Group on Aging.*

**CARING FOR RUTHIE**, by Ann Cason in consultation with Jacquie Bell, Arthur Jennings, Patricia Anderson, and Peter Goldfarb

In the late 1990's after Ruth Astor, longtime student of Trungpa Rinpoche, finished her three year retreat, she came to Karme Choling as head of Practice and Study. I, who lived nearby, first remember Ruth in April of 1999 at my father's Sukhavati. As I walked out of the shrine room, with my heart barely beating, so tenderized, Ruth approached me, "I felt your father's presence," she told me. "He is very joyful." I had heard that Ruth could see past and future lives so I was comforted. But that comfort was short-lived as my son left for college and I unexpectedly felt the emptiness of my nest. The century was passing away. In the real world, people feared a computer glitch would ruin the world. At KC the old red barn, symbol of the changing era, needed to go, but it was too precious to go lightly. New techniques such as talking circles and appreciative inquiry and deep listening tip toed into a world where the gong and conch called us each day to the ancient meditation practices. It was into this world of change that Ruth Astor, a woman of generosity and wisdom, would challenge me, and many others, by her death, to keep up with the relentless, unchanging Mukpo force of Windhorse.

One day I got a call from Suzanne Duquette, the co- director of Karme Choling. She told me that Ruth's cancer had come back. She wanted me to help them organize her care. Working with frail people at the end of life had been my work for 30 years. At the time I was taking care of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who had a house on her daughter's property near Karme Choling. I had also written a book, not yet out, about creating circles of care. I told Suzanne that I thought I could take care of Ruth, especially as her co-director, Tom Bell's wife, Jacquie Bell, MSW and specialist in palliative care and Arthur Jennings, RN, a hospice nurse and a friend of Ruthie's, who lived in the community, would be able to provide professional help. I didn't know how many friends, who cared deeply for Ruthie, would transform ordinary caring into magic.

The thought of taking care of Ruthie made me nervous. A raw human being, small, dark haired, and capable; she could cut through your deception in a flash. I was shy with her. Sometimes I would see Ruth in her little blue Volkswagen bug, with sunglasses and scarf, confident and avant-garde, buzzing down Vermont's country roads,

so magnetizing. Sometimes I would see her at Karme Choling and feel as if I should get down on my hands and knees and ask her forgiveness. But I didn't know what for.

Not long before, I had seen Ruth at a New Year's celebration, dressed in silver lame, dancing with the young people, as if she might live forever. Later, in the ladies room, as she bent her head over the basin, slapping cold water onto her face, she looked over at me. With bloodshot eyes, looking haggard and wise like a secret dakini, Ruthie, who loved life, asked, "Did you see that cute young guy I was dancing with?"

Now in the light of day, in the lunchroom at Karme Choling, I asked her "Are you all right?" She shrugged. "Looks like my cancer has come back." She didn't want to talk about it.

"Would you like to have tea?" I asked. Ruthie seemed indifferent until I continued, "I would like to ask your advice about the class I am teaching." So Ruth and I began a relationship based somewhat on false pretense. I asked her questions about dharma so I could get to know her better, because I had been asked to care for her. But I soon discovered that I loved her passion for dharma. We also talked about my work. She knew I had written a book. Ruth, who valued success, wanted to help me with workshops. In New York her work with film had been successful. In Boulder she had worked as assistant to the president of Naropa, Acharya Judith Leif. Later, she accomplished the three year retreat. I soon saw why she didn't want to talk about her cancer; to her, death was a failure, like a dance with the devil. Ruthie was relentless in avoiding the subject. "What did the doctor tell you today?" I might ask. "Oh I don't know, I think Karme Choling is trying to get rid of me" she would answer. I was startled to hear that. They were keeping her job open and her office and paying her salary. I realized that Ruth, like many others who feel the life force weaken, felt diminished and pushed aside. Old fears of victimization were rising up.

She knew she might die, but she didn't want to think about it. She finally had to relate, though, as practical issues pointed the way. As head of Practice and Study, Ruth held a crucial position at Karme Choling. Her work had to get done. Before her illness, she often worked late at night. Now, someone else must do her work.

Karme Choling gave Ruthie a nice suite at Ashoka Bhavan, their bed and breakfast down the road from the main building. Jacquie Bell set up a rota to take meals to Ruth, often taking the evening meal to Ruthie and sitting with her. Jacquie taught a class to Karme Choling staff and neighbors in the community on how to be with dying. Other friends ran errands, took her to the doctor and shopped. And visitors came from the community and around the world.

One day Ruth asked me to read the tarot cards for her. Reading cards for someone who already knows that she will soon die didn't appeal to me. If I told her the truth, she wouldn't like it. If I tried to pretend, she wouldn't like it. I asked myself how I could be genuine with Ruthie in the face of death? Also, it embarrassed me to be known as a tarot reader, especially to read in front of two vajra sisters who had completed the three year retreat. But, working with dying often uncovers deception. I am often embarrassed with identity so low down and close to touch, tears, smell, the feel of it all. So I asked Ruth to shuffle the cards. As I laid down each card, I worried, would the outcome be the Death card or the penetrating ten of swords or maybe the Devil himself? But with relief I saw that the outcome card was the seven of pentacles: waiting for the harvest.

"Soon," I told her, "you will have a chance to use the training you have worked on for many, many years. You will be able to harvest your skills."

After that, Ruthie let me more into her world. "I watched you," she told me. "I wondered what you would say." Our eyes finally met when we spoke. She asked me to be her medical power of attorney. When I visited, we drank tea and ate pistachio nuts as we filled out the advanced directives for her dying.

Arthur Jennings, the wonderful hospice nurse who lived close to Karme Choling, counseled and nursed her. Ruth had been his first meditation instructor. Now Arthur, with deep loyalty and the strength of long friendship, prepared to help Ruth die.

The cancer progressed. I introduced Ruth to a wonderful woman from the local community who cared for her on the physical level. Her basic attendance was impeccable. I remember that Catherine Clark visited Ruth every day for two weeks, out of love.

Ruth's dwindling life force rose and fell. Ruthie was failing but with so many friends, the world around her expanded and lightened up. One night Ruthie attended a soiree at Mrs. Lindbergh's small house nearby. Neighbors came to sing or play the cello or read. Sherry was sipped and Vermont cheddar cheese was sliced and served on water crackers. Ruthie, making a giant effort, sang with passion. Later, she sat on the sofa, surrounded by admirers, almost squashed by love.

Then events speeded up. Mrs. Lindbergh died; I accepted a job in California.

Ruth told me she wanted me to go. We made a date to see each other in six weeks when I would return. Over the next few weeks, with tender heart, I spoke often with Ruth over the phone. Her death was coming closer. She was mostly in bed, but still trying to volunteer. Her impeccable devotion gave her the energy to help work for Karme

Choling in any way that she could. The night before she went into her final few days of active dying, she was helping to send out mailers.

I returned from California late in the evening on a Friday night. Ashoka Bhavan was brightly lit and full of people. Some came to see Ruthie and some came to stay there for the beginning of week-end programs. It was chaotic. I went into Ruthie's bedroom and I knelt by her bed. Her skin was like a cloudy green tea, she was strained around her eyes, and I knew at once that she did not have long. Part of me wanted to crawl into bed with her. I closed my eyes and for a moment felt a creeping nostalgia for the embrace of life at Karma Choling: smoke from camp fires, dathuns, solitary retreats, fire pujas, feasts, my friends, my gone to college son, and all the celebrations of life in Vermont. Where was the protection that came from serving the Sakyong as Dorje Kasung? Suddenly, I opened my eyes and realized that protection must now flow the other way. Ruthie needed something from me. She had the best nursing, the blessings of Karma Choling, she had practiced long and hard, and had close connections with the Sakyong and other teachers. She had lifetime friends and brand new students. She had Peter Goldfarb, a man fully capable of executing her will and looking after her interests. It was all there; we just had to get a little more organized, to communicate, to relax into doing our jobs. All of us in the circle of care needed the light flowing touch of the healing environment. I left that evening, a little tired from six weeks in California, but so energized by the challenge presented to me: how to help Ruth give birth to her death.

That night Ruthie had a heart attack. She didn't want to go to the hospital, but finally the next morning, because the pain was bad, she called Arthur. He called an ambulance and rode with her to the hospital where she stayed for several days. Arthur Jennings became her most trusted friend as well as nurse. She leaned on his strength, calling him from the hospital to get him to advise the hospital nurses and doctors about her needs. Sangha friends stayed with her at the hospital as well. She received phone calls from several teachers. Each time, when she was handed the phone, she would weakly say, "I'm afraid," and then listen to their instructions without further comment. The hospital finally sent her home with morphine and oxygen. There was nothing to be done.

Back at Ashoka Bhavan, with Ruthie in bed, people wanted to help, people wanted to understand the experience. Yet there was a nervousness in the face of her dying. Peacefulness is needed, but there may be agitation. Giving birth to death is different than giving birth to a baby. With Ruthie's dying people could feel it coming, but what is it, where is it, when is it coming?

As night came on at Ashoka Bhavan I didn't want to tell everyone to leave, to go to bed, to turn out the lights and be quiet. It would not have expressed Ruth's generosity.

Yet, Ruth needed rest as well as did the overnight caregiver. I came up with asking only one or two people at a time to see Ruthie, getting chairs for the others to sit on, suggesting a curfew, gradually turning down the light, and asking people to meditate before going in.

Ruthie continued to teach to the very end. One day her bed was surrounded by friends. Patricia Anderson was standing closest to Ruthie. At some point, Ruthie said to Patricia, "Hold me." Patricia was concerned that she might hurt her, and was hesitant, asking, "How?" Ruthie answered, "Just do it." Patricia laughed and embraced Ruthie.

The care became more organized. Arthur moved into Ashoka Bhavan to stay with Ruthie until she died, although it is very unusual to have a live-in hospice nurse. We were able to arrange a meeting between the doctor, Jacquie Bell from Karma Choling, Arthur Jennings, and Ruth's executor, Peter Goldfarb. As her medical power of attorney, I had to make decisions about her care which I followed according to her instructions and in consultation with this precious team of helpers.

It was a dharmic dying for that chaotic time. In one part of the house, Patricia Anderson set up a table with food and drink for the caregivers and friends. Eric Salter cooked. In another part of the house, we set up a shrine room for practice. In Ruthie's room there were chairs for the people who would be sitting with her. Ruthie was semi-comatose. She could be roused for phone calls such as when the Sakyong called, or to speak to dignitaries and friends from around the country.

Finally the chaos settled. There is a natural tendency to create, unintentionally, a death watch. The task is to learn how to be with dying without turning death into a thing. Sometimes, we get stuck sitting with bated breath and it goes on and on. *It is not easy to have it peaceful and flowing, just breathing in and breathing out.* And through it all Lady Kunchok, the Sakyong's dear mother who still lived at Karma Choling at that time, advised us. She told us to whisper into Ruthie's ear, "Remember Trungpa Rinpoche and Vajrayogini, this is the time to practice."

I wondered if she could hear the instructions with so much oxygen. She had a big mask with a little horn curling out in front and loud noise. The mask and the noise almost seemed to separate her from her world. One evening I came late to Ashoka Bhavan. A single light overhead shone on about 10 people sitting around Ruthie's bed meditating. The exhausted caregiver sat in the corner trying to stay awake. The sound of the oxygen and the click of the mala beads roared. But Ruthie was not dying yet. Gradually the friends left. The caregiver turned down the light and lay down. The energy began to settle more.

The next day I asked hospice to have the oxygen-turned way down or taken off. Ruthie's friends were invited to a party away from Ashoka Bhavan. Jacquie Bell and Arthur Jennings stayed with Ruth along with two people who were meditating. Others came to the party. There was singing, especially Peter Goldfarb, Ruthie's friend and executor, who sang from the Pirates of Penzance. As he sang I thought of Ruthie the night that she had sung. For a moment my heart thudded and then I breathed out.

The phone rang. Arthur called to say that Ruthie had slipped away. We stood to sing the Shambhala Anthem and to dedicate it to Ruth Astor. Back at Ashoka Bhavan, Jacquie and Arthur had sat with Ruthie meditating. Ruthie died so peacefully, with such deep quiet, that the other meditators did not even know she had died. One young woman meditator was so grateful to have the experience of being with dying. Arthur, as instructed by Lady Kunchok, had whispered into Ruthie's ear. "Now you have died. Remember Trungpa Rinpoche and Vajrayogini. Don't be distracted. This is the time to practice. You can do it sweetheart."

The next morning when Lady Kunchok came into the room, she was startled to see that Ruth's appearance had not changed. When she felt her heart center, it was quite warm. She instructed us at this point to leave Ruthie alone. "Do not touch the body until I tell you," she advised. Lady Kunchok took our hands and placed them one by one on Ruthie's heart center. It was warm. I had never felt that warmth before. Lady Kunchok twirled around. "I'm so happy, practice works," she told us.

Ruthie, had met Trungpa Rinpoche nearly thirty years before. Moving to Boulder, Colorado to work for him, to study with him, to immerse herself in the dharma with every ounce of her passionate nature, she trained and worked hard and it had worked for her dying. Her heart center stayed warm for a long time, indicating a good Samadhi. (this explanation is not accepted by all. Some think that the warmth indicates attachment to the body, but I personally, think the heat was from Ruth's practice.)

Jacquie Bell and Arthur Jennings and Patricia Anderson attended to the body. Arthur and Patricia washed and dressed her for the lying in. They rubbed her with a favorite sweet smelling lotion before putting her on dry ice to lie in front of the shrine at Ashoka Bhavan until time for her Sukhavati.

I would not be able to attend the funeral since I had to get back to California. As I gathered my things, Eric Salter, one of Ruth's trusted friends, came to me with a big tray. He told me to pick a piece of Ruthie's jewelry. I selected a black onyx necklace, and he gave me the gold knotted chain that she had worn around her neck. I ran out the door to catch my ride to the airport. Going up the steep driveway, listening to the gravel crunch, reminded me that my life was heading in a new direction. That era of my life,

like the old red barn and Ruth Astor and being the child of someone, had closed. I didn't know why, but I knew it was true.