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6

Caretaking the Gift

A Journey of Hospice

ELAINE ENNS AND CHED MYERS

*In the spiritual realm, something
is set in motion by every true act of faith.*

—LADON SHEATS

ON GOOD FRIDAY 2002, while in Lubbock, Texas, caretaking his ninety-three year-old father, our dear friend Homer Ladon Sheats discovered that he had become strangely jaundiced. A week later, after exploratory surgery, he was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. We were in Greensboro, North Carolina, helping to run the first Word and World School,¹ and the news hit our hearts like a sledgehammer. We immediately left to join Tensie Hernandez and Dennis Apel of the Guadalupe Catholic Worker and several of Ladon's family members and friends at his bedside in a Lubbock hospital.

It was an intense and difficult week. We were all in shock. The last time any of us had seen Ladon he had been in good health; now he looked awful. We didn't know whether he'd make it out of the hospital alive, and our late-night conversation centered on where we could bury him—and how to transport his body (illegally) across state lines.

1. Online: www.wordandworld.org

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Buoyed by prayer and our round-the-clock presence, Ladon rebounded. He decided not to try any further medical intervention, and we set about discerning how and where to take him for hospice. We were ill-prepared, but not half-hearted; this man was so important to us that we would do whatever it took to give him a good space to finish his journey.

Some years before, Tensie had told Ladon that she wished to care for him when he was infirm. Now the moment had arrived, in a way none of us could have imagined. She reiterated her offer, and without a clue how this would actually happen, Dennis added, "we can build a room in our garage. Our home is yours." Without hesitation Ladon accepted. Now we had to figure out how to get him to California.

Ladon was far too weak to endure a drive across four states. As we were mulling over this conundrum, his brother Morris offered to make a couple of phone calls, "to see about a plane." We shrugged, unaware of the fact that Morris—at that time the pastor of a wealthy Dallas megachurch—actually had *parishioners* with private jets. A few hours later, Morris reported that a Lear Jet had been arranged to fly Ladon and Tensie (as his attendant) from the local private airport to San Luis Obispo, CA.

We looked at each other with incredulity, gratitude, and no small measure of bemusement. It was beyond ironic: the man who thirty-five years previously had walked away from the world of high rolling executive jet-setting in order to commit his life to the poor and to peacemaking would now take one last flight. The next morning we wheeled Ladon out of the hospital onto the tarmac and into the plane, singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

They arrived hours later in Santa Maria, the central California home of Tensie and Dennis and their two children, Rozella and Thomas. There Ladon—and all of us who helped care for him—began a four-month journey of hospice that was in equal parts taxing and transforming. During this time, ten-month old Thomas Ladon took his first steps and said his first words—and Homer Ladon his last. Dennis and Tensie opened their lives in the deepest possible sense, and a crazy quilt of community arose to the task. It was an act of true faith, and what it set in motion we are still trying to fathom.



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Find out which way God is moving, and move with it.

—PASTOR HOMER SHEATS (LADON'S FATHER)

Ladon Sheats was born in 1934 in Brownfield, Texas, the middle of three sons. His father, Homer, was an Assemblies of God preacher who pulled cotton by day and built churches by night among the hardscrabble towns of west Texas. His mother, with whom he was exceptionally close, was equally hard working and faithful. Church was their whole life, and Ladon would occasionally spin stories about growing up that were both poignant and hilarious.

After completing a stint in the Air Force and a business degree from Texas Tech, Ladon became a top executive for IBM in the 1960s. In this era of the first great computer technology boom, Ladon came to live large: keeping offices and homes on both coasts, eating at the best restaurants and vacationing all over the world. But he was spiritually uneasy, and thirsted for the faith of his childhood to come alive again, and for the gospel to mean more than it did to most American Christians.

It was a 1967 meeting with Baptist activist-theologian Clarence Jordan that disrupted Ladon's upward mobility and led to a dramatic about-face. Ladon was radically inspired and challenged by Clarence's experiments with interracial farming communities among the poor of south Georgia and his exposition of the Way of Jesus in the gospels. After an agonizing year of discernment, Ladon divested himself of his wealth and went to live at Koinonia Partners in Americus Georgia.² Tragically Clarence died just a few months later. But from that time on, Ladon became a living witness to (and interpreter of) Clarence's vision of radical discipleship to many of us around the country.

Ladon expressed his gospel faith in three notable ways:

1. He joined prayer and protest in public witness for peace and an end to the arms race. His resistance to militarism at places such as the Pentagon and military air shows earned him many long stints in jail. A leader for five years at Koinonia, Ladon felt increasingly convicted about the evil of the continuing war in Vietnam, and wished to express more active resistance to it. In 1974 he joined the Jonah

2. For a good introduction to Jordan's writings see Hollyday, Joyce ed. *Clarence Jordan: Essential Writings*. Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009). Online: www.koinoniapartners.org/clarence/index.html

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House peace community in Baltimore,³ where he stayed until 1979, and where he is still dearly loved. After this he initiated a series of prayer pilgrimages at nuclear weapons plants such as Rocky Flats in Colorado and Pantex in Texas. The prison time that resulted from his many acts of nonviolent civil disobedience was hard because of his consistent refusal to cooperate with an oppressive system. Yet his long periods in solitary confinement in some ways also deepened his contemplative spirit. In the 1990s Ladon traveled to Japan and Iraq as a grassroots ambassador for peace and to visit victims of US war-making.

2. A related commitment was service to the poor. Ladon was a fierce critic of first world consumer affluence, while making himself available to hurting and marginalized persons wherever he encountered them. This took him from New York's Lower East Side to rural Georgia to Skid Row in Los Angeles. For the last twenty years of his life, Ladon lived out of a backpack, itinerating around the country between various communities and individuals to offer a hand in their work. He served for long stretches with the L.A. Catholic Worker community.⁴ There and elsewhere he became deeply involved in hospice work, for friends (including Kieran Prather⁵) and family as well as homeless persons.
3. Ladon was a man of deep prayer, who desired intensely to know God ever more intimately. He spent many months in solitude, not only involuntarily in prison, but also voluntarily at a Benedictine monastery in Colorado.⁶ Ladon was profoundly nurtured by Creation; an avid hiker, he was happiest at an old hermitage cabin at the foot of his beloved Mt. Sopris in Colorado. Yet he was able to appreciate beauty wherever it could be found, from inner city streets to wilderness peaks.

In these and other ways Ladon sought to embody the Way of Jesus that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. His discipleship was exemplary in its compassion, stubborn in its spiritual questing, and rich in its generous friendship.

3. Online: www.jonahhouse.org

4. Online: lacatholicworker.org

5. See contributions by and about Kieran in chapters 7-9.

6. Online: www.snowmass.org

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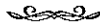
7. Matt 6:33

8. See Ched My Tell the Word Press

9. Translation by

Ched first met Ladon at a weekend retreat in 1976, a moment Ched now sees as his "second call to discipleship." At age twenty-one, Ched hitchhiked across the country to Baltimore to join Ladon at Jonah House. In an extraordinary act of hospitality, Ladon offered Ched space in his small room, sacrificing the only refuge he had as an introvert for the sake of a young seeker. From that time on, Ladon became a faithful friend to Ched, as he was for a remarkably wide and diverse circle of us across the US. Elaine met him in 1997, and Ladon made a particular impact on her close-knit Mennonite family when he came up to Saskatchewan for our 1999 wedding.

Ladon was a complex person, a sometimes inscrutable contradiction of intimacy and individualism, mobility and rootedness, initiative and quiet non-directiveness, fierce conviction and humble receptivity. He was the best listener many of us have ever known, with an extraordinary capacity to elicit our individual struggles and dreams, to help us discern, and to stay in touch despite distances. It is fair to say that no one who received Ladon's full attention, and who heard his remarkable story, was not deeply moved and changed.



We won't know if something is true or not unless we try it. I know now that Jesus' invitation to "Seek first the Kingdom, and all else will be provided for you" is true, more reliable than any of the rinky-dink rafts we've lashed together along this river of life.

—LADON SHEATS

Once, when asked if he believed in infant baptism, Mark Twain famously retorted, "Believe it?! Hell, I've *seen* it!" We have come to feel the same way about the divine economy of gift and grace, and though Ched has spoken and written widely on the topic,⁸ this hospice journey was perhaps our most concrete experience of that most powerfully alternative reality.

Ladon had no assets, no pension plan, and no health insurance, having bet his life on Jesus' promise that "whosoever would release themselves from family, possession, and home would receive them back a hundred-fold" (Mark 10:29).⁹ His "investments" were exclusively in relationships,

7. Matt 6:33

8. See Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell the Word Press, 2001). Online: www.chedmyers.org/catalog/sabbath-economics

9. Translation by Ched Myers.

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in witness, and in service. And it was precisely the amazing web of friendship and care he wove throughout his life that became his "social security." Never have we witnessed such a spontaneous and sustained outpouring of mutual aid, such unquestioned devotion to a friend, such determination to return kindnesses received, than during that hospice effort in central California.

The Guadalupe and Los Angeles Catholic Worker communities and our Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries (BCM)¹⁰ cobbled together the basic personnel, logistical, financial, and moral resources, then relied heavily on the solidarity of people around the country. Countless individuals and families from Ladon's extraordinary network of friends offered whatever was needed, from prayers and visits to bodywork and cooking, and just enough financial support to cover the costs of this hospice "ad-hocracy."

Gifts flowed in from the Four Directions: hot meals and fresh produce from Santa Barbara, hundreds of origami cranes from Monterey, a sheepskin from the Sierras, flowers, pictures, a walking stick, and dozens of other expressions of love and concern. Each evening for four months a different group sat around the dinner table—never fewer than a half dozen and sometimes three times that many—and joined in community-building times of laughter and storytelling. Many of us finally got to know persons we had always heard of from Ladon, and we formed a special bond with Ladon's brothers, niece and other family members. It was as if Ladon, in this last chapter, was orchestrating a convergence of his widely scattered circles. Here was a parable of death and resurrection: as Ladon's body atrophied, the body of those in communion with him over the years expanded.

In the first six weeks after Ladon arrived, a volunteer crew (some of whom even knew something about building!) converged on Santa Maria to transform a dilapidated garage into a beautiful hospice room. We commuted up from Los Angeles for at least half of every week, and along with visitors and helpers, lodged at Beatitude House of hospitality ten miles west in Guadalupe. When the house was full, we put folk in an old Winnebago loaned by friends and parked in the backyard of the Santa Maria house. Our job was cooking, cleaning, and helping to keep the ongoing activist and hospitality work of the Guadalupe Catholic Worker¹¹ going. Over four months, more than one hundred people came

10. Online: www.bcm-net.org

11. Online: www.catholicworker.org/communities/commllistall.cfm#CA

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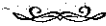
One day in the house as she see that she was here I see the spi thick German ac if a great banner *dying here!*"

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to join our circle, some for a day or two, some for weeks. BCM developed a website to keep folks abreast, and two phones were steadily in use. Daily prayer circles sustained us, with sage and song drifting through petitions, scripture and silence.

For the first two months Ladon was strong enough to receive most visitors, and occasionally got out for a walk or drive. We celebrated his sixty-eighth birthday in late June with two big parties, beautiful times of commemoration and thanksgiving. After that he declined slowly but steadily, and we had to start limiting visits. Throughout Ladon received loving nursing care—particularly from Tensie—and experienced relatively little pain.

Though the process was exhausting, we were always mindful that we were in the midst of a miracle of grace, of “just enough for the day,” as the Lord’s Prayer puts it. Indeed, every time we had a need, someone showed up: who had the right skills, whether fixing plumbing, laying tile—or building a coffin.



Do you think that if I let go of all of this, I'll fall?

—LADON TO DENNIS, A FEW WEEKS BEFORE PASSING

Like all “threshold” experiences—birth, learning to talk, falling in love, creating art—dying proceeds on its own timeline, off the clock and calendar. Upheld by a committed circle of prayer, love and care, Ladon hung on longer than any of us expected.

One day in mid-July, local crone Karolla Dauber was walking up to the house as she did each morning to do bodywork on Ladon. We could see that she was agitated, and asked what was wrong. “Each day I come here I see the spirits gathered around this place,” she said solemnly in her thick German accent. “This morning their voices were so loud. It was as if a great banner was hanging over the house announcing: *A holy man is dying here!*”

But dying is a mysterious process—even for holy people. We often discussed with Tensie and Dennis the parallels between Ladon’s process of letting go, and his namesake little Thomas Ladon’s struggles to take his first upright steps. Toward the end we imagined the cloud of witnesses cheering Ladon on toward his new way of being, just as we adults were encouraging Thomas. To be sure, Ladon struggled with many aspects of this difficult passage, understandably riding an emotional roller coaster.

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And we rode it with him. But in the end he came to a place of acceptance. "Whether or not I am physically cured," Ladon intoned more than once, "I believe the real healing has already begun."

Complicating the spiritual process of dying, however, are the *politics* of the "death-care industry." For weeks Elaine researched green burials, in an effort to lay Ladon in the ground according to his wishes for simplicity and our desires to tend to his body. We agreed with him that nature's intention was for our bodies to be reunited with the earth and eventually to recycle into new life. However, the local mortuary told us that embalming was *necessary* and that the coffin *must* be placed in a concrete vault. Elaine found out that the law requires none of this—and in the process discovered a lively grassroots movement committed to burial that is healthy for the earth, meaningful for the caregivers, and respectful of the deceased.¹²

We decided with Ladon that the local village cemetery was the most practicable place to lay him to rest, given our limitations of land and resources. We then met with the caretaker to explore the possibility of a green burial. An indigenous Chumash man, he had never had anyone ask for this before, and was sure the board wouldn't like it. But he also knew that it was not illegal, and to him it sounded more "in keeping with the old ways." When Elaine broached the subject of Ladon's strong wish that the cemetery's American flag not be flying on the day he would be buried. The caretaker asked why and listened carefully as she described Ladon's commitments. "You know," the caretaker responded, "I think I would have liked your friend."

Elaine gave regular updates to the community on her research, and we discussed dimensions for digging the grave and options for markers. When she reported that dry ice was the best way to preserve a corpse, Ladon quipped, "Elaine, you know how much I *hate* to be cold." As we wondered how we were going to get the body to the cemetery, and how to wrangle it into a grave four feet deep, yet again the right skills appeared just as we needed them. A Mennonite friend from the Midwest made a beautiful pine coffin in the backyard, which we would use to transport the body (but not to bury it); another friend sewed an exquisite hammock strong enough for us to lower the body into the grave.

Ladon's final weeks took on the shape of a vigil, as we stayed with him in turn around the clock. In the end it became what could only be

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12. Online: www.greenburials.org; www.greenburialcouncil.org

described as "labor"; indeed, Tensie reflected frequently and eloquently on the similarities between birthing and dying.

On August fifth we gathered for Vespers in Ladon's room and celebrated Eucharist. Early on August sixth—the day we commemorate both the Transfiguration of Christ and the disfiguration of Hiroshima—he slipped quietly into a coma. Twenty-four hours later, his arduous journey of crossing over was completed.

For fifty-six hours we lived with Ladon's body, a powerful time for all of us. The women washed and prepared his corpse lovingly, while the men dug his grave over at Guadalupe Community Cemetery. The hospice room was converted into a chapel, and dozens of people came to pay last respects. We continued to pray around the body, noting how curious and unafraid little Rozella and Thomas were. And of course we wept, laughed and told stories late into the night, a memorial bonfire burning in the backyard the whole time. This was Ladon's final gift to us: inviting us to discover how to embrace in death the radical simplicity and profundity that Ladon had embraced in life.

On August ninth, Nagasaki Day, we laid Ladon's body in the ground with a sunrise ceremony attended by more than a hundred friends. For the first time in weeks, for the exact time of our service, the morning fog cleared. There were some songs, only a few words, and then his body, clothed in his old plaid shirt, jeans and beloved bandana, was lowered—the sling almost but not quite tearing ("Just like my birth canal when I had Rozella," said Tensie). And when we were done, the fog moved back in, covering the newly-planted olive tree at the head of the grave with Pacific Ocean mist. The cemetery flag wasn't raised that morning until long after we were gone.



*Empty handed I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going
Two simple happenings that got entangled.*

—KOZOM ICHITYO,
A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY JAPANESE ZEN MONK

Those words, which hung on the wall of Ladon's hospice room beneath strands of brightly colored peace cranes, became the object of much

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reflection for all of us. In the aftermath of his passing, those of us who were intensely involved in this experiment have struggled to understand its full meaning. We were at peace about our efforts, knowing we did the best we could. Having put most of our other work aside during this time, we feel now that this was perhaps the most significant work we have ever done.

Still, we have a sense that there is much we have to learn about what we went through. Ladon was our teacher by showing, not telling. We now sense a deeper duty to take care of those who have given themselves to the Way of radical discipleship. And we continue to ponder how to die with dignity in our death culture; marvel at the mystery of how community is shaped; and long to trust more profoundly in the divine economy of grace.

Ladon's absence is an irreparable tear in the fabric of our lives. He challenged us with the fullness of the gospel Way, and was a faithful companion through all the joyful and difficult twists of that Way for decades. Our world is lonelier without him. Yet we are convinced that Ladon's death, like his life, will continue to present a singular challenge and inspiration to our discipleship.

For decades Ladon wove a rich and extraordinary tapestry of witness, relationship and service around North America. His discipleship was not just an example; it was a mirror in which we examined our own faith. His name means "the gift," and indeed Ladon's fidelity to the gospel was a gift to those of us he accompanied. In the end, that gift came back around to him a hundredfold in his hour of need. And it will continue to spread outward as we carry on his legacy in our own discipleship: innumerable ripples in a pond, emanating from one remarkable life.

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