

In Celebration of the Completed Life of
ELLEN MARIE RISSKY

The Presentation of the Symbols

Ellen died a victorious death even as she lived a victorious life. The symbols she lived before signify her resolve both in her solitary reflection and in her corporate engagement to care for the world through the covenanted groups through which she gave her life. These symbols will now be placed with her ashes.

THE FAMILY SYMBOL

We place here the symbol of Ellen's covenant with her family. Ellen believed that the family was an important part of her care in the world. Ellen fulfilled this covenant by giving particular care to her parents, sister and brothers and their families during her years with them, and later to her Order family in her personal and unique ways of encouraging others to live fulfilled lives.

THE SYMBOL OF PROFESSION

We place here the symbol of psychology which indicated Ellen's covenant with her profession. Ellen believed that adequate mental and physical health and access to exemplary care was the right of every human being. Ellen fulfilled this covenant with sixteen years of professional service and a lifetime of compassionate concern for humanity.

THE RING OF THE RELIGIOUS

We place here the ring of the religious which symbolized Ellen's covenant with the Order. Ellen believed that the Order was an authentic form through which she could live a life of service. Ellen fulfilled her covenant through participating fully in the vows of the Order with her detachment from material things, her faithfulness to her assignments, and her singleminded resolve to struggle any task through to victory.

THE BLUE DRESS

We place here the blue dress which symbolized Ellen's covenant with the spirit movement. Ellen believed there was a movement, an "invisible college" of those who care, which played the role of a servant force in enabling local people to determine their own future. Ellen fulfilled this covenant by investing her skills and energies with decisional detachment in the struggle to ensure the gifts of humanness for all.

THE CHRISTIAN CROSS

We place here the Christian cross which symbolized Ellen's covenant with the historical church. Ellen believed the mission of the church was to deliver the Word of forgiveness and possibility in every situation. Ellen fulfilled this covenant with passionate persistence in forging practical forms of structural care.

Ellen Risky was born in 1941 in Illinois, the youngest child of a family which includes another sister and four brothers.

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When she was 24 she graduated from college with a degree in History and Psychology and began working in Elgin State Hospital with emotionally disturbed children and completed her masters degree going to school part time. In 1975 she switched to Chicago Read Mental Health Centre where she rapidly advanced to become the senior clinician on a unit. She began night studies toward her PhD in Psychology.

I was assigned as a physician and (temporarily) administrator to her unit, and over the months, mostly because she had to phone me at home for one thing or another, she learned a lot about the Institute of Cultural Affairs. She was deeply drawn towards the community which we call the Order, and was eager to move in with the Order in Fifth City. Our lives became very close as we drove back and forth to work daily during the next two years. She deeply regretted the fact that she had never been married and had no children of her own and came to be very close to our children, first just Luke and Amara and later Ryan as well. Our assignment to London caused her great pain and she urged that she be assigned to London as well. Her great propensity for self depreciation often got the best of her and she felt that she would never be good enough to feel part of the Order, yet she carried on, trying one thing after another, consistently showing up for whatever was going on, consistently keeping focused on the task at hand and consistently getting results in which she seemed never to be able to take much satisfaction.

She participated in Academy, having taken a quasi permanent leave from Chicago-Read. There she experienced in an intellectual way the attraction of a self-story which she seemed to never be able to appropriate in her own feelings about herself, or at least that is what she said. She fell in love at the age of 41 and relished every minute of it - anticipating the best, fearing the worst, and finally seeing the man decide to marry another woman. Her academic efforts were cruelly rewarded when, after four years of evening classes during which time she had consistently earned grades of A and B, she was told that she had failed the comprehensive exam and therefore would be denied her PhD. In the midst of a profound trough of dispond, she soldiered on at her assignment and ended up prior to the InKind Team for the 1982 Research Assembly. She was assigned the most unlikely group of irratic colleagues that might ever be assembled, and with her usual consistent attention to the task significantly surpassed the most optimistic estimates for what InKind might provide for the Assembly. She accepted all of our congratulations and amazement with her usual mild smile and understatement, and protested that someone else could have done much more.

By the end of that Council, she had been assigned to Sevegram, the village in India where our staff happen to live in proximity to the Ashram which Ghandi founded as the site of his social demonstration many years ago. Sevegram - an assignment which she both wanted and was terrified to accept. She stopped for several days in London on her way to India and shared many good moments with us. I especially remember the night before she left she decided that her suitcases were much too heavy, so she took out (among other things) ten rolls of double stick tape which we have since used to tape the winter vinyl covers on our windows, and a bottle of Scotch which she and John Francis and I dramatically reduced in weight, ending up more or less silly and quite enjoying the chance to just laugh together. Then we all stayed up to bake cookies so she could take them with her to John's brother and sister-in-law who happen to be part of the staff at Sevegram village.

She arrived in Sevegram where she and Diane formed an alliance of mutual support that enabled Ellen to not get consumed by her attention to details and Diane to not get sucked up into stoicism. Ellen was as stubborn in India as she had been in Chicago. Having gone to the next city and been advised not to spend more than two rupees on the taxi home, she shopped around for a driver who would bring her home for two rupees. Finding none, and perhaps not knowing exactly how to bargain down from the 12 rupees demanded, she set out to walk home and was half-way there when Charles Jago, already carrying a rider on his motor bike, passed her. He figured out a way for all three of them to ride on together - a sight I would have given a lot to see for myself.

Ellen developed dystentery about the middle of November. She entered the local hospital as many of our staff have done in the past and seemed initially to be responding routinely to treatment. This is a teaching hospital, and the head of the department of medicine was her physician. During her illness she was attended in the hospital around the clock by women from our staff. Her dysentery apparently overwhelmed her body defenses and it became evident about last Friday or Saturday that she was gravely ill. On Sunday her heart failed and many of us were notified by phone and consulted as to what to do. She was placed in Intensive care, and from that point on Ronnie and Diane stayed with her, reading her letters, singing songs, reminiscing with her and writing out notes of what she had to say. Ruth and I decided to try to get through by phone, and with luck and the cooperation of a long string of phone operators, did get a connection to her ward. The operator in Bombay could hear both ends of the connection, so relayed our questions and our messages of concern. Cyprian was there and said things seemed stable, that we should not worry. On Monday, Ellen died about 11 in the morning. Charles and Heidi arrived just afterwards, and Heidi eventually came through London and brought the details of the following events to us.

That evening our staff in Sevegram held a memorial service. The next morning the house ate in silence as everybody tried to absorb the tragedy and the loss. Arrangements were made for cremation. The men from the village got on with building the bamboo platform, the women made garlands of marigolds. The men went to the hospital to get the body and covering it with Ellens beautiful shiny thread shawl and the marigolds, walked with it in procession to an open space in the village. This procession is traditionally one in which only men participate but, perhaps to acknowledge the impact of this strange Western Woman who had no husband but was willing to travel on her own to be interested in people everywhere, a dozen of the village women walked in the procession.

As it happened, a Chinese man, who in his youth had been a disciple of Gandi, had recently been allowed to return to Sevegram from mainland China to write about the life of Ghandi for the Chinese people. He had lived there with his wife and adult grandchildren for two years and had died Monday Evening of a stomach cancer. His bier was being carried to the field at the same time as Ellens. Urmilla Ghandi, the wife of Ghandi's youngest son, had urged that the two cremations be marked as one event. The pyres were build about ten feet apart. Ellen's obituary was read, and her care and concern for all people was rehearsed with translation going on so that everyone could participate. The same was done for the old man, who happened to be Buddist. By now, nearly all the ward staff who had gotten to know Ellen had arrived in deep grief. They and our extra-national staff are mostly Christian. The village people are mostly Moslem. The Ashram of Ghandi's disciples and most of our national staff are Hindu. There were some two hundred people in all.

DonFrancis ignited the wood. The flames from thepyres burned fiercely, causing people to back away. Diane and Heidi ended up next to each other, and Diane said, maybe to herself, "Boy, this is the way to go. When I die I hope someone cares enough to do this for me. No stuffy funeral parlour. Just the community gathered in the midst of this kind of awe".

That evening, families from Sevegram came calling at the house, the first to call being the family whose own son is serving as one of our staff in Kenya. In the morning the ashes were gathered and collected in a bronze water pot, wrapped in heavy cotton cloth, and sealed with wax and official seals. Heidi carried these back to Chicago, stopping on her way to share a great deal with us.

Ellen and my family were very close, but certainly no closer than we are to dozens of other people in this community we call Order. My grief at her death was slow to come, at first being blocked by the hard rock of disbelief and anger and denial. I kept expecting the phone to ring saying she was really OK and would be on her way to London to recuperate. By about Thursday I was overwhelmed with grief, weary beyond endurance, and managing just barely to get through the basics of the day without dissolving into great hot sobs. I have had illuminated just how much we do care for each other and how deeply our attachments develop - even when we are half a world away from one another.

In her last letter to us, one dated 11 November, Ellen said:

Have been thinking about this letter for some days and also about you. Found a copy of Kazantzakis' book, Report to Greco. Read just the introduction and started thinking about his book on St Francis. The struggle within began again when I read St Francis. I was struck by the fact that more and more was required of Francis by God - Mystery or whatever you want to call it. I identified with his companion who kept saying, "enough already". I struggled then with whether I would yield to my destiny. Destiny being living alone. Part of me says accept your fate and part of me says "Hell No! ". It would be accepting what everyone says I am already, a symbol of a single woman choosing to live alone. Guess it only changes my internal struggle, not my external situation. ... So now I agree to accept my destiny - being alone. You can help by reminding me of it whenever I revert. Maybe all this is words. ... Say Happy Birthday to Luke for me. Hope he uses the money for something he'll really like. Acceptance of destiny woun't cure my loneliness. Love Ellen.

I believe that life has been for Ellen vitally full of life, richly blessed with struggle, deeply aware of herself as a human being, and more deeply loved than we had ever known.