

## Caretaking the Gift: A Journey of Hospice

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



On Good Friday 2002, while in Lubbock, TX caretaking his 93 year old father, our dear friend Ladon Sheats discovered that he had become strangely jaundiced. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, after exploratory surgery, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I immediately left the Word and World School that was taking place in Greensboro, NC to join Catholic Workers Dennis Apel and Tensie Hernandez and several of Ladon's family and friends at his bedside.

It was an intense and difficult week in the Lubbock hospital. We were in shock. The last time any of us had seen Ladon he had been in good health; now we didn't know whether he'd make it out of the hospital. Then, when it appeared he'd be able to leave, having decided not to try any further medical intervention, a small group of us had to make quick determinations about 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 space to die.

Some years before Tensie had told Ladon that she wished to care for him when he was infirm. Now, as usual, the moment came in a way none of us imagined. She reiterated her offer, and without hesitation he accepted, though we didn't have a clue how we would get him to the west coast. "We can build a room in our garage," said Dennis, without a clue how this would actually happen. "Our home is yours."

We wheeled Ladon out of the hospital and onto a private jet that had been arranged by his brother Morris, singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as he boarded. He arrived hours later in Santa Maria, the central California home of Tensie and Dennis and their two children, Rosella and Thomas Ladon. There Ladon—and all of us who helped care for him—began four months of hospice that were both taxing and transforming. During this time, eighteen month year 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 a 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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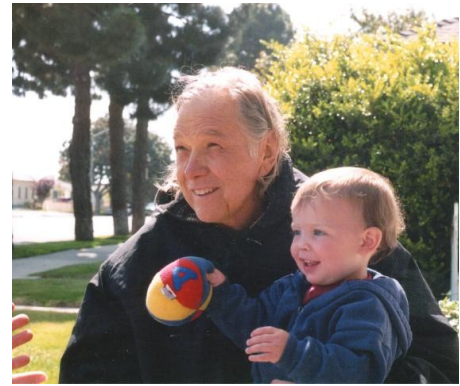
Find out which way God is moving, and move with it.

--Pastor Homer Sheats

Homer Ladon Sheats was born in 1934 in Brownfield, TX, 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. Church was their whole life. 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. He was living large, keeping offices and homes on both coasts, eating at the best restaurants and vacationing abroad. But he was spiritually uneasy, and thirsted 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. He was inspired and challenged by Clarence's exposition of the Way of Jesus in the gospels, and the witness of Koinonia Partners' experiments with interracial farming among the poor of south Georgia. Within a year Ladon had divested himself of his wealth and gone to be with Clarence—who died just a few months later. From that time on Ladon became, in many of our opinions, one of the most exemplary disciples to emerge from contemporary North American Christianity.

Ladon expressed his faith in three notable ways. First was a joining of 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. After leaving Koinonia in 1974 Ladon joined the Jonah House resistance community in Baltimore, then moved on to initiate a series of prayer pilgrimages at Rocky Flats and Pantex nuclear weapons plants. His prison time was hard because of his consistent commitment to noncooperation with an oppressive system, yet his times in solitary confinement nurtured a deep contemplative spirit. In the 1990s he traveled to Japan and Iraq as a grassroots ambassador for peace and to visit victims of U.S. warmaking. (Above, Ladon with Thomas Apel-Hernandez during hospice.)



A second and 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 the Lower East Side of New York to rural Georgia to Skid Row in Los Angeles. For the last 20 years of his life Ladon lived out of a backpack, itinerating around the country and helping numerous communities and individuals in their work. He served for long stretches with the L.A. Catholic Worker community. There and elsewhere he became deeply involved in hospice work, for friends and family as well as homeless persons.

Third, Ladon was a man of deep prayer, who desired intensely to know God ever more intimately. He spent many months in solitude, both in prison and at a Benedictine monastery in Colorado. Ladon loved and was profoundly nurtured by the creation; an avid hiker, he was happiest at an old hermitage cabin at the foot of his beloved Mt. Sopris. Yet he was able to appreciate beauty wherever it could be found, from mean inner city streets to wilderness peaks.

In all these 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.

Ladon was a complex person, a sometimes inscrutable contradiction of intimacy and solitude, of fierce initiative and quiet non-directiveness. But he was faithful friend to a remarkably wide and diverse circle of us across the U.S. He was the best listener I have ever known, with an extraordinary capacity to elicit our individual struggles and dreams, to help us discern, and to stay in touch from a distance. 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. (Above, Ladon and Ched, 1999.)

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*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" (Matt 6:33) 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!" I have come to feel the same way about the divine economy of gift and grace. Though I've spoken and written a fair bit on the topic, it has been the concrete experiences of it that most powerfully witnesses to its reality. This hospice journey was one.

Ladon had no assets, no pension plan, and no insurance, having bet his life on Jesus' promise that "whosoever would release themselves from family, possession and home would receive them back a hundredfold" (Mark 10:29). His "investments" were exclusively in relationships, in witness and in service. Yet it was precisely the amazing web of friendship and care he wove throughout his life that became his "social security." Never have I witnessed such a spontaneous outpouring of mutual aid, such unquestioned devotion to a beloved, such

determination to return kindnesses received, than during our cobbled-together hospice effort.

The work was led by the Guadalupe Catholic Worker, in partnership with the Los Angeles community and Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries. We each provided people, logistical, financial and moral support, and then relied heavily on the solidarity of people around the country. Countless persons from Ladon's extraordinary network of friends offered prayers, visits, body work, and enough financial support to cover the costs of the hospice project.

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 a different group sat around the dinner table—never fewer than a half dozen and often a houseful—which became community-building times of laughter and storytelling. It was as if Ladon was, even in convalescence, orchestrating a convergence of his widely scattered circles. Many of us finally got to know persons we had always heard of from him. And a particular bond formed with Ladon's brothers, niece and other family members, who visited often. It 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 corps (some of whom even knew something about building!) converged on Santa Maria to construct a beautiful hospice room. Visitors and helpers were lodged at Beatitude house of hospitality ten miles west in Guadalupe, as well as in the old Winnebago parked in the backyard of the Santa Maria house that friends from Monterey had loaned. Over the four months more than 100 people came to join our circle, some for a day or two, some for weeks, and a few for months. A website was developed to keep folks abreast, and two phones were steadily

in use. Amazingly, despite this intense new focus, much of the ongoing work of the Guadalupe Catholic Worker continued. Daily prayer circles sustained us, sage and song drifting through petitions, scripture and silence. (*Above, Ladon and Nicola Geiger during hospice.*)

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 68<sup>th</sup> 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 discouraging visits. Throughout Ladon received loving nursing care and experienced relatively little pain.

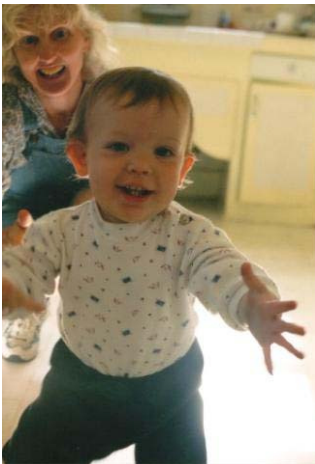
Though the process was exhausting, we were always mindful that we were in the midst of a miracle of grace, of "enough for the day." Indeed, every time we had a need someone showed up who had the right skills, whether it was fixing plumbing, laying tile—or building a coffin.

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*Do you think that if I let go of all of this, I'll fall? --Ladon to Dennis, late July*

As she did each morning, Karolla Dauber, a bodyworker and krone, was walking up to the Santa Maria house. It was mid-July, and I could see she was agitated. I asked her what was wrong. "You know, each day I come here I see the spirits gathered around this place," she said solemnly. "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!*" We hugged each other tight, shed a few tears, and then went inside to join the others in the day's work of hospice....

Upheld by a committed circle of prayer, love and care, Ladon hung on longer than any of us expected. Like all threshold life experiences—birth, learning to talk, falling in love, or creating art—dying comes on its own timeline, off the clock and calendar. Tensie, Dennis, Elaine and I often discussed the parallels between Ladon's process of dying and little Thomas' struggles to take his first upright steps (*left*). 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. 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."



The final weeks took on the shape of a vigil, as different ones of us stayed with him around the clock. In the end it became what could only be described as labor. Tensie often reflected eloquently on the similarities between birthing and dying. On August 5<sup>th</sup> we gathered for Vespers in Ladon's room and celebrated Eucharist. Early on August 6<sup>th</sup>, Hiroshima Day, he slipped quietly into a coma. Twenty-four hours later the long and arduous journey of crossing over was at last completed.



For three days we lived with Ladon's body, a powerful time for all of us. Some of us washed and prepared his corpse lovingly, while others dug his grave over at Guadalupe Community Cemetery. A great deal of research had gone into the effort to bury Ladon according to his wishes for simplicity. This was his final gift to us: inviting us to discover how to embrace the radical simplicity in death that he had embraced in life.

On August 9, Nagasaki Day, we laid Ladon's body in the ground with a sunrise ceremony attended by some one hundred friends. For the first time in weeks, the morning fog cleared for the exact time of our service. Then it moved back in, covering the newly-planted olive tree at the head of the grave with Pacific Ocean mist.

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

-- Kozom Ichityo, a 14<sup>th</sup> century  
Zen monk

Those words, which hung on the wall of Ladon's room beneath strands of brightly colored peace cranes, became the object of much reflection for all of us. In the aftermath of Ladon's passing, those of us who were intensely involved in this hospice work have struggled to understand its full meaning. We all put most of our other work aside during this time, and have never questioned that it was the right thing to do. We feel at peace about our efforts, knowing we did the best we could.



Through September and October Tensie, Dennis, Elaine and I have convened much-appreciated regional memorial gatherings for Ladon at various places around the country: with the L.A. Worker; at Trinity Church in Lubbock and Hillcrest Church in Dallas, TX, where Ladon's brother Morris ministers; at Heartland Community in Pawnee Rock, Kansas; Jubilee Partners in Comer, GA; Wilderbrook Farm in Massachusetts; and Martha House in Philadelphia. Each memorial helps the grieving process, not least for us. All of us are deeply grateful to Dennis and Tensie for their extraordinary love and hospitality—not only for Ladon, but for all of those who came to help. They exhibited incredible grace and patience under pressure throughout the journey.

Still, I have a sense that there is much we still have to learn about what we have just been through. Ladon was our teacher, but by showing, not telling. And there are more lessons to be fathomed from his passing: about our duty to take care of those who have given themselves to the Way of radical discipleship; about how to die with dignity in our death culture; about the mystery of how community is shaped; about trusting in the divine economy of grace.

Ladon's absence leaves a irreparable tear in the fabric of our lives. He was the first to challenge me with the fullness of the gospel Way, and was a faithful companion to me through all the joyful and difficult twists of that Way for more than 25 years. Tensie and so many others can give similar testimonies; their world, like mine, is now so much lonelier.

Yet I'm convinced that his 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 so much an example as a sort of Rorschach test, a mirror in which we may examine our faith. Just as his name means "the gift," so was his fidelity to the gospel a gift to those of us he accompanied. That gift came back to him a hundredfold in his hour of need. And it will continue to spread outward—like innumerable ripples in a pond emanating from one remarkable life—as we carry on his legacy in our own lives.

