

# 'Homing I Keep You'

## A TRIBUTE TO LIBBY RADCLIFFE.

by CHED MYERS

**S**ometimes the advent of death is like a thief in the night, too. Though we are surrounded by its presence daily, on the mean streets of our cities and in the countrysides of the imperial peripheries, though we so often have skirmished publicly with its political accessories, still, when it comes for one of our own, we are stunned. We who labor to confront reality with the gospel's dreams of justice and peace have often had our dreams pulled up short by the reality of death. But never more rudely, more intrusively, than when it invades our circle, especially in a manner sudden and senseless.

So with the abrupt and profoundly untimely departure of Elizabeth Anne Radcliffe. It haunts, like an unresolved chord in an unfinished symphony. She was surely among the finest people ever to identify herself with "radical Christianity"; not a saint, but bloody faithful.

*Sojourners* readers would not have known Libby, an Australian. But it is in part because her journey paralleled so many of ours over the last two decades, and in part just because our lives as Christians seeking the kingdom are woven (whether we acknowledge it or not) from a common fabric, that it seems important to try to understand and honor her passing.

DURING THE 1970s, at the same time that "alternative" Christian communities were springing up around North America, a similar movement was under way in Australia. With the uncompromising fervor indigenous to evangelical Protestant renewal, a small group of lay young people, ministers, and theologians were challenging both the established churches and the burgeoning "Jesus movement" of Australia with the gospel of radical discipleship.

In 1972 a critical mass formed into a community called the House of Freedom in Brisbane. Libby Radcliffe, then in her late teens, was one of the house's first converts. Gifted, sensitive, strong, blessed with an extraordinary sense of humor, she soon became one of the leaders of the house. When a few years later it was decided that another community should start in Sydney, Libby was dispatched to help.

At the House of the New World she

again became a pillar, wise beyond her years, forever available, and thus forever vulnerable to the vicissitudes of community life. A third community sprang up in Melbourne, the House of the Gentle Bunyip, and in time Libby also found her way there, initially in order to recover from burnout and to study theology, but eventually wooed into leadership again.

Among the hundreds of personalities who came and went through the three houses (which were representative, if not exhaustive, of the Australian movement),

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only Libby had the distinction of life and service in each. By the time she left the Bunyip in 1985 to work with the Australian Council of Churches as coordinator of national hearings on peace and justice, she had become, in her mid-30s, a true "elder" in the movement—and had the scars to prove it. Libby was widely beloved, but only in her passing have we realized the extent to which she represented "in her flesh" a unique, common strand that wove the communities, and the movement, together.

IN AUSTRALIA, AS IN the United States, the heady days of building "families of the Spirit" have long since given way to

harder times. Many communities have gone under, and many good people have given up and returned to languish in the social or religious mainstream. Few dare speak anymore of the radical Christian movement that midwived, and was midwived by, Libby Radcliffe. Perhaps the gospel was too demanding, we too frail, the world too overwhelming.

In her letters to me over the last few years Libby anguished over the future shape of the vision, in her own life and in that of our common circle. She by now was deeply involved in Third World development issues, working with the Australian Overseas Service Bureau placing volunteers in the Pacific islands.

It was not that she didn't struggle with the siren call of security promised by the Great Society; it was that she knew too much to be able to return to bourgeois mediocrity. "With those of us," she wrote, "who are relatively well-off by birth, culture, and class, the system is always willing to forgive and forget our little flirtations with alternative living, and to draw us back into its bosom, its benefits—and ultimately its worldview."

Like many of us, Libby was determined to begin to attend to a host of personal and family issues, long shelved because of movement demands. She longed for loving relationships, she awaited a rekindling of community (though on healthier and wiser terms). In the meantime, however, she refused to compromise the work of justice.

It was only when Libby slipped from consciousness for the last time, friends later recounted to me, that it dawned upon those gathered by her bedside that the dengue fever she had contracted in the Pacific islands was more than a passing nuisance. She had been hospitalized only a few days, and in typical feisty manner had complained of being cooped up, talking of all that had to be done. Suddenly she was battling for her very life.

I suppose that when I received the phone call advising me that her situation had become critical, our small circle in Los Angeles, thousands of miles away from Melbourne, was among the last to join the fierce and earnest prayer vigil for her life. In retrospect we marveled how the old, long-unused networks from the communities suddenly shook to life during those hours, and after. The vigil swelled, across Australia, across the Pacific. Hundreds of



been taken from us, it lies here. If in some mystical way, our movement—broken and scattered as it may be—has truly been established, then in our grieving also lies a challenge to remember who we are. To recall all the years, the visions spawned and faltered, relationships built and broken, hearths tended and gone cold, enmities reconciled and still simmering among us. Libby was always so deeply distressed over the infighting and provincialisms of our movement, over our inability to forgive. Might we not see in her death a summons to renewed commitment to nurturing each other in the face of the fragility of life?

Libby's life was a sacrament to unity among Christians who thirst for God's justice and peace. Surely her death can be no less. To remember her is to remember where we have been, and to refuse to let the vision of the gospel atrophy in our lives. Jesus, too, had a saying about community and death: "Do this in remembrance of me."

It was at the Bunyip that I first met Libby, exactly four years ago from the day I write these thoughts. I recall vividly the way her eyes sparkled with life, as they almost always did. For me, our family of the Spirit, now established, will forever hold an empty space for her, an absence that cannot be occupied.

A poem, "Revelation," once offered to our community by Daniel Berrigan, now years later strikes me as articulating the beauty of Libby's life, the pain of her passing, and most of all the love she whispered into our lives and into the world:

*then showed me he  
in right hand held  
everything that is*

*the hand was a woman's  
creation all lusty  
a meek bird's egg*

*nesting there waiting  
her word and I heard it*

*new born I make you  
nestling I love you  
homing I keep you*

Godspeed, dear sister. □

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anxious hearts, caught unawares, cried out in disbelieving unison. Twelve hours later the devastating news came, like a sledgehammer on my heart.

That God chose not to answer our petitions for Libby's life, to try to put the matter charitably, must I suppose be relegated to the realm of mystery, where theology best remains silent. At that moment, all that came to my mind was Will Campbell's requiem in *The Glad River*:

*What the Giver gave, so freely, we now return.  
Without apology for the grudge.  
We will long harbor and nourish the grudge.  
Not against the Giver,  
but against this day and its foolishness.*

It was early in the morning of Easter Monday.

TO EASE OUR GRIEF, we who mourn inevitably feel an overwhelming imperative to eulogize the life of the loved one who has departed. In the case of Libby Radcliffe,

no eulogy could ever exhaust what she meant to us—she was truly that good. It is far more difficult, however, to know what the "good word" might be to those of us left bereft and crushed by her passing. Nothing, least of all words, can fill the absence.

But something good must be said to the many who were knit together by the reach of Libby's life, and now drawn together once again in grieving. The funeral in Melbourne was an extraordinary regathering of this great extended community. It was there that Athol Gill, veteran theologian of the Australian radical discipleship movement, offered this thought, which upon reflection I have come to take as that good word to us. Among the medieval monks, he said, there was an adage about community and death: The monastery is not truly established until one of its members has been received into paradise.

I believe that if there is anything to be learned from our beloved sister having