

Tablet - October 2008



Desley

Dear friends,

As she lay in bed, her morphine drip keeping her painfree and clear-minded, Desley was a little anxious about her garden. During the last months of her three-year illness it had been neglected and she wanted it tidied up before she died. Her four beautiful and strong-willed daughters had cared for her devotedly at every stage of her physical decline and had tried to keep up with her spiritual ascent. They still jumped, but lovingly, at her commands as if they were twenty years younger. They came in to tell her the gardener had finished and needed to be paid. How much and where was the money. Desley answered the questions decisively as she was used to doing. The man in the room observed admiringly as a woman ran the complex affairs of a home.

One of my less brilliant ideas was to take the mirror off the wall and hold it angled over her bed so she could see through the window. She kindly played along though I don't think she ever really saw it. But then we turned round and saw the gardener in the room. An ordinary looking man who worked outdoors and wanted to see Desley, he spoke about what he had done the garden not about the fact that she wouldn't be there to see the end of the summer's growth. There was also more work to be done and he spoke about that. With the ease and self-confidence of the manual worker he took his leave.

Alone, Desley and I spoke about her latest project for the community that she had served for years, as national coordinator in the UK and as the founder of the meditation retreat centre in London. I was surprised she was still coming up with plans but she said it would be her last. Every couple of minutes she would take a swill of water to refresh her mouth but she had not swallowed anything for three weeks. She showed me the design for an interfaith medallion she wanted to have made. A week later this rushed back into my mind while I was talking with a learned and holy theologian about his Order's conviction that wherever truth is found it is the duty of all who love the truth not only to revere it but actively to promote it. I liked the design for this reason and because it was Desley's passion of the moment and she was relieved that the project, she said it really was her last, was done. She was content, at peace and in a state

of joy, but could not understand why she was still there. What good was she serving anymore? Why hadn't he come and taken her home? 'He pokes his head round the door every so often,' she said. 'But when I turn he's gone again. But I'm watching for him and next time I'll catch him and won't let him go.'

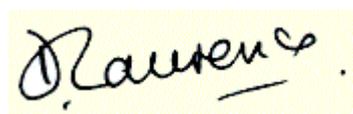
Was she curious about what would happen next? St Bernard said curiosity about things that did not directly concern our salvation should be rejected but that there is such a thing as holy curiosity. No, she answered with surprising certainty, she was not curious about the next world. Then she added, 'I think I know what it's like.' I waited. It was like what she was living now. Profound peace, unbelievable energy, joy, love. Only words, it's true, flat on the page as we skim the print eager for the next article. But it was one of those moments when the words meant exactly and everything they were meant to mean.

Is this why Jesus does not feed our curiosity about what happens next? Because our questions miss the answer they contain – that it is the time and place we are asking them in? I began to understand the Resurrection when it seemed to me less about the 'next life' and more about living this one in a new way. Desley at that instant was one of those who teach and serve just by being who they are. To sit with her was to know what the present moment means.

Her years of meditation, unstinting care for her family that she could let go of but never give up, her self-giving that combined with her strong will and forthright Aussie personality, her womanly practicality – all that was there, being rapidly tidied up like her garden. Always something more to do. We die as we live.

But there was something more in her. She was becoming an open window, a person without clinging, and when the angle was right you could see a long way into the garden; and even the gardener differently.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow rectangular background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line under the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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