


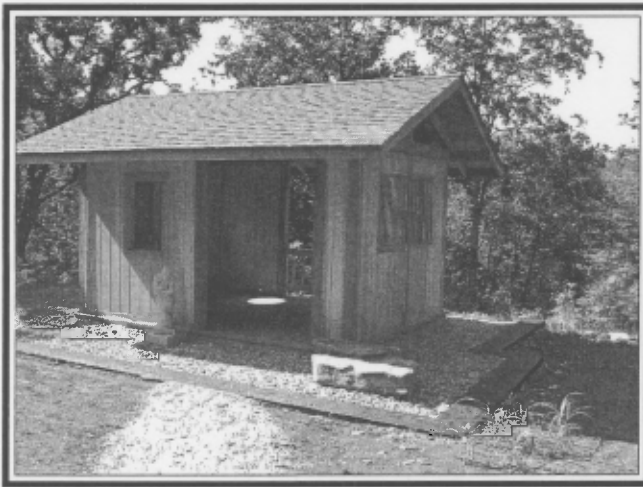
# *Fall Forest Letter — 2007*

Vol. 27, Number 5  November 2007

Dear Friends of the Forest,

Here in the Forest of Peace, we are enjoying the seasonal changes of autumn: cooler breezes, leaves dancing with the wind, and fall flowers in bloom. This time of year is often a blend of joy and sadness for me. Although I am truly a fan of summer days, I also revel in the change that autumn always brings. It seems that each day gifts us with more vibrant colors, the haunting sounds of geese passing by, and evenings filled with breath-taking sunsets. I'm also aware that within this world of awe and wonderment, there is wrapped a cocoon of death. The seemingly vibrant signs of life are a prelude to "letting-go." Autumn is a season that teaches us about inevitable endings, change, and anticipation. 

In this Forest letter, we are blessed with a reflection from Ed Canda, a longtime friend of Shantivanam, who shares with us some of his experiences of learning to dance with death in the midst of living life to the fullest. Enclosed with this newsletter is a remembrance card that carries with it this quote by Amelia Burr: "Because I have loved life, I shall have no sorrow to die." We invite you to return this card with the names of your family and friends who have journeyed ahead of us and whom you would like us to remember during our prayer times each day in our chapel.



Several years ago, in one of the Forest letters, Jennifer explained that in Thailand, wooden or stone structures are placed outside most homes to allow the spirits that reside on the land a place to dwell. She had begun plans to have a shrine built at Shantivanam where our guests could take some quiet moments to be with loved ones who have journeyed ahead of us and yet remain with us in our hearts. This summer, we were able to finish the plans and have that shrine built. It is called "Our Lady of the Four Seasons Spirit House," and you will find photos and a brief description of the shrine on page seven of this Forest letter. It is

important to us that you, our friends and benefactors, share in this celebration of gratitude for all those who have graced our lives with deep love, laughter, and joy.



During this season of autumn, let us embrace each new day as gift and pray for the grace to allow others to help us put on our dancing shoes so that we can learn to dance with death – that we may truly live.



Shanti, peace,  
*Eileen Haynes, SCL*

# Dancing with Death

by Edward R. Canda

As I write, many leaves are falling. We have recently passed the autumn equinox, when the daily proportion of dark grows noticeably greater than the light. Weather begins to cool, tall grasses of the prairie turn golden brown, and the leaves of myriad trees will soon show many shades. Cooling and the beautiful flush of landscape color always make autumn one of my favorite seasons. It is a good time to reflect on the profound beauty that comes from a seasonal blend of relief from heat and a wistful sense of nature's decline into the death-like sleep of winter. Farmers know this truth: To enjoy the harvest, we must reap the grain. As the book of Ecclesiastes has it: For everything there is a season—to be born, to die, to plant, and to harvest. Autumn in the Kansas climate is a fine season to contemplate the cycle of living and dying.

As most readers know, Jennifer Sullivan, long-time director of Shantivanam and spiritual mentor for many, died on August 13, 2006. The Shantivanam Community recently celebrated a memorial liturgy for Jennifer and others close in the community's hearts, as well as the blessing of the new Spirit House in their memory and in honor of Mary, patroness of Shantivanam. Within the Spirit House is a restored painting by Father Ed Hays depicting Mary as the Mother of the Four Seasons—the rotation and complementarity of spring, summer, fall and winter in the cycle of living and dying. This shelter provides a place for pilgrims on the spiritual journey to rest and reflect on this cycle within the loving gaze of Mother Mary and to appreciate the lessons of all those who have graced our lives and moved on.

Earlier in 2006, Jennifer had asked me to write an essay for the Forest Letter. Little did I realize that the topic and timing would become shaped by her death. So this essay is in honor of her and the ways she inspired me through her manner of living and dying.

## Dancing with Death

In late July 2006, I stood with a few friends in St. Anna Chapel of Fussen, Germany, beneath Bavaria's oldest depiction (1602) of the Dance of Death. European Catholicism of the time used such images to help people reflect on mortality and to prepare for death, a matter made more pressing due to plagues and wars. The artist Jacob Hiebeler created twenty paintings, each depicting a personification of death come to dance away with a representative of every social class of the time, from pope and emperor to farmer, young maiden, and the artist himself. When death cuts in, no partner can refuse to dance.



*Death Dances with the Pope,  
Fussen, Germany, 2006*

A dialogue between death and his partner is written around each painting. My friends read each aloud as I quietly pondered the passing of my own loved ones and the mortality of everyone. Death delivers a personally tailored message that each person, high or low, must abandon attachments to wealth, prestige, and life itself. Many characters resist, but all succumb. Death takes each one's hand and dances away. Indeed, death says that he must dance the first dance with the pope and the second with the emperor.

In the final painting, death confronts the artist. "Stop your painting, throw down your brush, you must go away." Jacob replies: "I have painted the dance of death, I must join the game or it wouldn't be complete. Now this is my hard-earned reward. You all follow hereafter, I must be gone." Perhaps artistic contemplation prepared the painter to dance better than most.

I found this both inspiring and a bit macabre. For sure, this was not my usual image of a dance party. And anyway, reflecting on my loved ones who had already followed death didn't put me in a dancing mood.

And yet, I remembered another Catholic dance party where death was welcome. In 1988, in Mexico City on the Feast of the Epiphany, amid a religious parade, a rock band on stage pounded out rousing and joyous music, danced to by figures of saints, and death, and the devil himself. This was indeed an epiphany for me. Mexican traditions of the Day of the Dead, watermelon-eating skeletons in Last Supper formation, and cheerful dancing death figures have helped me consider the play of life and death more deeply and humorously. Can we find humor in death? Consider a comedic observation by Monty Python, the British comedy troupe, if I recall correctly. If you love life, keep this in mind: Life—is a sexually transmitted—terminal condition. Here is the paradox of life and death in a witty nutshell.



*Day of the Dead Celebration Window,  
Chicago, 2003*

This unexpected occasion for reflection on the Dance of Death turned out to be a serendipitous blessing. It put me in a better mind to be one of those who were honored to attend and support Jennifer's dying process just about two weeks later. This story is a reminder that it is wise to stay alert to events through which the Spirit calls us to be mindful of mortality, to prepare for our own deaths, to appreciate every moment of life, and to support those around us as they are called into the dance of death.

One of the lessons of the medieval Christian traditions of the Dance of Death and *ars moriendi* (art of dying) is that the best preparation for a good death is a good life. Jennifer's way of living and dying reflected this principle. I would like to share a few of the lessons I learned through the privilege of being with her and her loved ones during her time of dying. I must admit that I feel some hesitation, because being with dying can be an experience of great intimacy and privacy. But if we are to dance, we need to learn from others who are good dancers.

## A Good Death

How can the death of a loved one who was mentor and friend to many be called good? The very sound of the phrase, “Jennifer had a good death,” can slap like an affront. In no way did her dying feel good to her, her loved ones, or the wider community of Shantivanam. For many of us, bereavement continues. So a good death is *not* about *feeling* good. A good death is about *being and doing* good in relation with dying. A good death is a transformation of life through death into a greater life. As the Christian tradition proclaims, by participating in death, following the way of Christ, we share in his resurrection into eternal life.

Jennifer lived out the implications of Jesus’ prayer that all may be one even as he and the Father are one (John 17:21). She kept the ideal that Shantivanam shall be a place of prayer for all people, without judgment or exclusion. Together with her fellow community members, she nurtured the Forest of Peace as a place where people can come to pray quietly in private, without ostentation or public show, as Jesus recommended (Matthew 6). Her manner of serving with the presider at liturgies and her aesthetic style of arranging sacred spaces reflected a deeply loving and beautiful contemplative heart.



When Jennifer received the news of her terminal cancer, she was of course shocked and dismayed. When the cancer spread at a stunning rate, she had times of difficulty adjusting to the suddenness and the pain and the impending separation from loved ones. But through the hours I spent with her during her last two weeks, I was inspired by the way she attended to the circumstance of her death as an opportunity for deeper contemplation of life and God. Her main concerns were for the welfare of the Shantivanam community and her loved ones, even while she began to separate physically from them.

When she moved into a room at Lawrence Memorial Hospital for palliative care, she asked her friends to arrange a prayer table nearby. She and her friends transformed this room into a sacred nurturing space, like a womb of passage into the next life. As long as she had a bit of physical strength, Jennifer greeted visitors with prayerfully folded hands and a bow of ‘namaste’—I honor the divine within you.

During my time with her, I actually did almost nothing. All her closest friends and family took on the labors of love to attend to all her needs. I was very moved to watch them blend skillful attention to every practical detail with loving care and contemplative mind. Jennifer and her loved ones inspired the hospital staff to also enter the room and conduct themselves in a mindful way. Jennifer greatly appreciated the loving care and prayer of all her friends and the larger Shantivanam community. “I could not do this without the support of friends,” she said.

When Jennifer knew that there was not a realistic medical cure, she wisely opted for palliative care. Her caring physician, social worker, nurses and other hospital staff helped her to manage pain, be with loving family and friends, and attend to preparation for death. She was wise enough not to prolong her pain by giving in to an illusion that drastic medical interventions might produce a physical cure. Rather, she readied herself for the ultimate cure—dying into life. Jennifer said, “I am not giving up, but I am moving forward. I only desire the Heart of God.”

I mentioned that I did almost nothing. This was a blessing from Jennifer. Most of the time I simply sat with her quietly. We were immersed together in peaceful silence for many hours. A sense of prayerfulness deeper than words permeated her room. That nothing was full of the greatest Something. In a sense, I was helping by keeping her company and keeping watch for her condition. But in a deeper sense, she was helping me by sharing her presence during such a precious and profound process of moving ever deeper into the Heart of God.

For 30 years, Jennifer was consistently committed to the well-being of the Shantivanam community, the church, all people, and all creation. When she prayed with us in chapel, she would open the glass door facing out to the forest. Together with her, we extended our prayers to all on this earth and beyond. Her example continues through the work of those who live in the Forest of Peace and through the lives of the many she touched.

## Lessons Learned

Jennifer and the friends who attended her during her time of dying were excellent dance teachers. They taught me some of the essential points for good dying. First, don't wait to prepare for death until death is already tapping you on the shoulder. One never knows whether death might come soon or suddenly. Take dance lessons early and often by cherishing and using to the best each moment of this life. Cultivate life well that death may bear good fruit. Nurture relationships among family, friends, and the wider community. They may become great sources of comfort and support during one's last days. Love all this earth deeply enough to be ready to leave it when called. Reserve significant time each day for prayer, stillness, and receptivity to the Divine Indwelling. Regard respectfully all you meet with a heart of 'namaste': honoring the divine within them. Do not leave relationships torn ragged by lack of love or forgiveness. Work out with yourself and loved ones how you wish to deal with contingencies of your death: advance directives for medical care during life-threatening medical emergency, including issues of resuscitation and extraordinary life sustaining measures; details of disposition of the body and organ/tissue donation; wishes for the wake and funeral processes; and matters of inheritance. Let your loved ones and health care providers know your wishes. And most of all, as Jennifer said, only desire the Heart of God.



## A Funny Thing Happened

A funny thing happened on my way to Hong Kong. Coincidentally, I departed for a conference there on my birthday in December 2006. So last year my birthday disappeared into the limbo of travel across so many time zones that day and night reverse. My birthdays always remind me to think about my possible deathdays. And the passing of Jennifer was still strong in my mind.

While waiting for my flight transfer in Chicago, a disconcerting announcement came over the public address system. "Due to unexpectedly strong headwinds, the flight to Hong Kong will be slightly delayed and will also make an unscheduled stop in Anchorage for refueling. It shouldn't delay arrival by more than a few hours."

As other passengers grumbled, I thought to myself, "Strong headwinds? Possible fuel shortage? Well, I hope this isn't a sign of trouble."

Given some extra time, I stopped in a nearby bookstore and picked up a copy of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom. I didn't know anything about it, but since the author had also written the popular book on death reflection, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I thought I'd try it out. I opened the book and read the first sentence: "This is a story about a man named Eddie and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun."

That coincidence hit me. There I am, on my birthday, wondering about the flight's safety, with death in the back of my mind, and here is a book in which the main character, who shares my name, is declared dead in the first sentence. I prayed internally, "Thank you, God, for this great opportunity for meditation!"

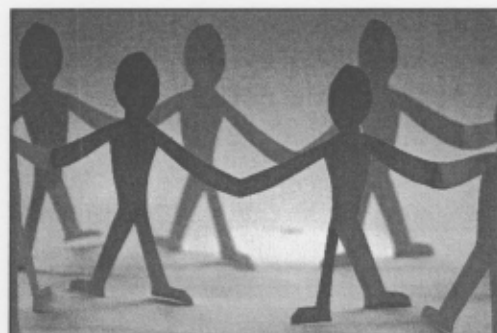
Then while in the air, my neighbor passenger engaged me in a long conversation about how he survived a life-threatening case of prostate cancer and became an organizer for cancer survivors' support groups. Following that, the plane's electronic equipment malfunctioned, causing further concern about landing as well as an overnight stay in a hotel in the dead of dark Alaskan winter.

Sometimes like this, death does us the favor of visiting us in the guise of special people, serendipitous encounters, and odd events. Death asks us to dance, not the final dance, but rather a dance to celebrate life and to practice for the dance that wisks us away to an altogether different kind of ballroom—one that has no floor, no walls, no ceiling, and no time or place.

## The Dance of Life

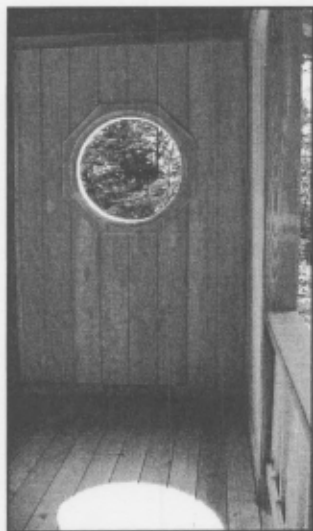
However, none of this means we should be preoccupied with death. Jennifer's spiritual style was certainly not. Her main concern as director of Shantivanam was to provide a place of rest, nurture, and nature for contemplative prayer, to renew and sustain our lives so that we may in turn help to renew and sustain all others' lives within the loving Divine Embrace.

Not so long before her death, Jennifer invited the Shantivanam community to join in a Circle of Hope. She provided to many a gift of a stone with the word 'namaste' embossed in it. This stone was to remind us to pray to honor "the Divine within each person, regardless of nationality, religion, sexual preference or color. One respects and honors diversity!" She asked us to join in a web of prayer that has "power to change and hopefully create a world of trust and not of fear, a world of hope, rather than one of discouragement." This kind of hope springs from boundless love.



While the artist Jacob Hiebeler learned to dance by painting death, I believe that Jennifer learned to dance by painting life. I can imagine her Dance of Life pictures. In these, all people from pope to president to farmer and herself are swept away in the loving arms of God.

*Photos on pages 2 & 3 by Edward R. Canda*



*Let us not grieve  
— beyond letting go —  
for in the Tree of Life  
their roots and ours are  
forever intertwined.*

## Our Lady of the Four Seasons Spirit House

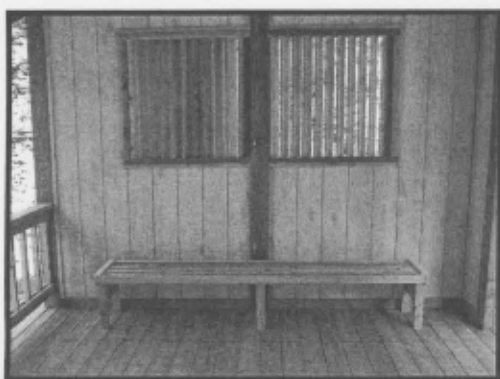


*The entrance to the Shrine from the north.*

*In Thailand, devout Buddhists typically place wooden or stone structures outside their homes to give the spirits who reside on the land a place to dwell. Though spirit houses are not a part of our tradition, Our Lady of the Four Seasons Spirit House was built to remember and celebrate those who have journeyed through the doorway of death, but who still reside in our hearts and souls.*



*Inside view facing east.*



*Inside view facing west of sitting bench.*

*The painting of Our Lady of the Four Seasons that hangs inside the Spirit House was painted 35 years ago by Fr. Ed Hays and this site was its first home. It was important to Fr. Ed that Shantivanam be dedicated to Mary, a woman who certainly experienced the loss of loved ones. Since we are celebrating 35 years as a House of Prayer, we know this is where Our Lady of the Four Seasons belongs.*

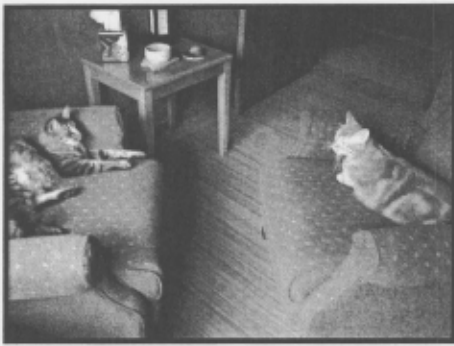


*"Our Lady of the Four Seasons" painting.*



*Sculpture*

*The Shrine was built with memorial gifts from the family and friends of Fr. Tom O'Brien, Ruth Slickman, Ed Schukman, and Jennifer Sullivan.*



**Spanky:** Well, Tiger, the new shrine, “Our Lady of the Four Seasons Spirit House,” is ready for visitors. It’s got some great cat perches! The railing, the moon window, and you should see the view from the roof! Fabulous!

**Tiger:** Sounds like a perfect memorial to all our loved ones who’ve died.

**Spanky:** That reminds me; I’ve been meaning to ask you: What happens to us when we die?

**Tiger:** Even we cats don’t know the answer to that question! You’ll just have to wait and see.

**Spanky:** That’s not very reassuring! Good thing I still have eight more lives.

**Tiger:** How do you know? Maybe you’ve forgotten your previous lives and this is your last one.

**Spanky:** What!? I don’t like the sound of that at all!

**Tiger:** If you want to be ready for death when it comes, you should read *Getting Used to Dying* by Zhang Xianliang, who got thrown into a Chinese labor camp for his poetry. He says, “One should not ask what is more terrifying than death, but rather what is more important than life.”

**Spanky:** Hmm... Yes, that’s like what Meow Tzu says in the Meow Te Ching, “Nine lives cannot repair a moment’s loss of honor.” I guess I’d better watch my step.

**Tiger:** Or, if you really want to get to the heart of the matter, read Thich Nhat Hanh’s *No Death, No Fear*. He says, “Our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death.”

**Spanky:** Whoa! That’s deep! I’d better go back outside and contemplate that for a while.



Spanky



Tiger



The Forest Letter is a bimonthly newsletter of spiritual support. It is sent as a "Thank You" to our friends who by their kind donations support our ministry of prayer, peace and solitude here at Shantivanam House of Prayer. No permission is required to reproduce its contents if it is not used for profit.

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