

# Listen

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## SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP AND DEATH

I had known Ricardo since we were both 17. He had eventually settled in Barcelona, Spain, while I based myself in Seattle, WA, USA. He texted me one day about three years ago, saying he needed to speak urgently with me. During the call he told me he had been diagnosed with a particularly aggressive cancer, was at stage four, and he asked if I would be his companion as he wrestled with his condition and its consequences.

I immediately agreed.

For the next two years, we exchanged frequent texts, emails, conference calls, and video calls. And I was able to visit him in Barcelona as well, taking a wonderful walk with him through his favorite park, Montjuic, in his neighbourhood, where he went every day. We sat and meditated in his favorite spot, and he showed me his favorite tree (pictured right), where his ashes were eventually scattered, per his wishes.

We spoke mostly about spirituality and death, the meaning of life, art, music, love and poetry. Basically whatever he wanted to cover.



Being his companion was heartbreaking, illuminating, challenging and liberating.

He had good days and bad days. A committed idealist, he was always looking at the bright side, and squeezing lemonade out of lemons. In that vein, he would say things like: “when you accept life from the heart, every second is a gift, we enjoy it and value it more intensely.” And he radiated when he said it.

But he had his dark moments too: “I am not afraid, but I am unsettled,” he said, as the cancer steadily encroached on more and more organs in his body. “I don’t know how to disembodify,” he added, poignantly.

He had lived alone for most of his adult life, although his faithful cat, Pomelo, was his constant friend in his final years, always by his side, which gave him great joy and solace.

As the cancer inexorably coursed through his body, literally squeezing the life out of him, he decided to opt

# These Hands

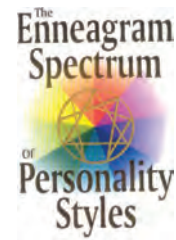
Poems by James M. Keegan, S.J.

These crisp, direct poems let readers feel both life's complexity and its simplicity. Keegan's tone spans the range from whimsy to tragedy. He ponders experiences of nature, relationships, prayer, history, and struggles with personal illness, but he creates verses which give them universal relevance.

A disciple of Mary Oliver, e.e. cummings, and others, Keegan keeps his poems accessible, his states of feeling precise, his images tangible. He does so by mastering various poetic forms: sonnets, other rhymed forms, free verse, and blank verse. Fr. Keegan has trained men and women in the practice of spiritual direction in the U.S. and around the world. He serves on the boards of Spiritual Directors International, Retreats International, and the journal, *Presence*.



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Julian of Norwich



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## SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP AND DEATH continued

out of chemotherapy, as the intensive treatments were too agonizing for him. I supported him fully, knowing that he was shortening his life-span thereby.

Despite moments of excruciating pain, constant visits to the hospital, and countless ambulance trips, he kept his spirits up, dabbling in poetry, etchings, and painting, all passions of his.

The last words I exchanged with him were about the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, whose poem on death you can see in the next page.

I speak openly of my friend and our companionship process, something spiritual companions almost never do, as Ricardo had wanted me to share his story, hoping that it might help at least one other person.

Which brings us to one of the core topics around spiritual companioning; preparing us for death. I can think of few subjects as important.

Spiritual companions help others (and ourselves in the process) wrestle with issues of transcendent, metaphysical import, such as: “Who am ‘I’ really?”, and “What is my purpose while I breathe and walk on this planet?” And among those questions, “What happens after I die?”, and its corollary “What happened before I was born,” are among the most essential. Indeed, if we push back all of the layers, our search for God/The Universe/Tao/Brahman/The Great Spirit, or however you name that ultimately nameless ground of all being, is really a longing to understand transcendence, and to recognize the limits of our own mortality while at the same time being able to go beyond them. We seek to confront death, our greatest fear, which we can often equate to complete dissolution, and loss of love, relevance, physicality and awareness.

In order to do this, spiritual companions listen, as deeply, quietly, patiently and supportively as we can.

We provide intimacy, safety and trust. Indeed, talk of life and death brings out the most deeply held considerations that a person may have: how we have been living our lives, whether those lives amount to something worthwhile, the nature of our relationships with all of the people around us, what our legacy will be after we die, and what regrets we might have about things we did, and things we didn’t do.

Our calling as spiritual companions is to facilitate that outpouring, and to allow those whom we accompany to explore it fully, freely, safely, and lovingly.

In the process, we respond when asked, but otherwise we try to keep noble silence. And we follow the orientation of those we are companioning, and try to respect their agency as much as possible.

In one of our last conversations a few days before his death, Ricardo shared these words with me:

“These days, I truly enjoy everything I do. Every second, every breath, and every person who crosses my path are immeasurable riches for me. We have to be only moderately mindful to be able to live like this every single instant.”

May it be so for all of us as well.

In every moment, and with each breath. ★

— Anil Singh-Molares

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*on any aspect of this issue of* **LISTEN**,  
*or on* **SDI** *as a whole.*

**PLEASE SEND** *your comments to*

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*Listen*

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**RICARDO CREMADES NOGUES**  
(1963-2015)

## **LAST CURTAIN** (Rabindranath Tagore)

I know that the day will come  
when my sight of this earth shall be lost,  
and life will take its leave in silence,  
drawing the last curtain over my eyes.  
Yet stars will watch at night,  
and morning rise as before,  
and hours heave like sea waves casting up pleasures and pains.  
When I think of this end of my moments,  
the barrier of the moments breaks  
and I see by the light of death  
thy world with its careless treasures.  
Rare is its lowliest seat,  
rare is its meanest of lives.  
Things that I longed for in vain  
and things that I got  
—let them pass.  
Let me but truly possess  
the things that I ever spurned  
and overlooked.

— Poem above is in the public domain

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## POEM

### TWELVE

She slowly extracted  
a softly wrapped porcelain bowl  
from damask cloths she  
later said were her mother's.

The bowl was flared and balanced,  
crazed uniformly across the glaze.  
Twelve leaves of even and easy colour  
were imprinted around the upper side,  
twelve leaves mirrored on the underside  
where the artist wrote his name and date.

She presented the bowl to me.  
I held it as a potter does  
feeling the clay and shape,  
sensing the occasion.  
This was an earthy incarnated rite  
I was connected to.

This is not like me, she said,  
to share a rite of gratitude.  
I could only do it with you.  
You are a witness.

With their silent history,  
twelve glass eggs were hatched  
so gently from the heirloom cloths.  
Three each of orange,  
yellow, green and blue.

The eggs filled the bowl.  
I saw the grace between them  
and expected them to float.

Each egg had a name, somewhere  
between deep love and deep sorrow.  
All of it, her blessed story,  
my blessed story witnessed.

— Dr Marlene Marburg

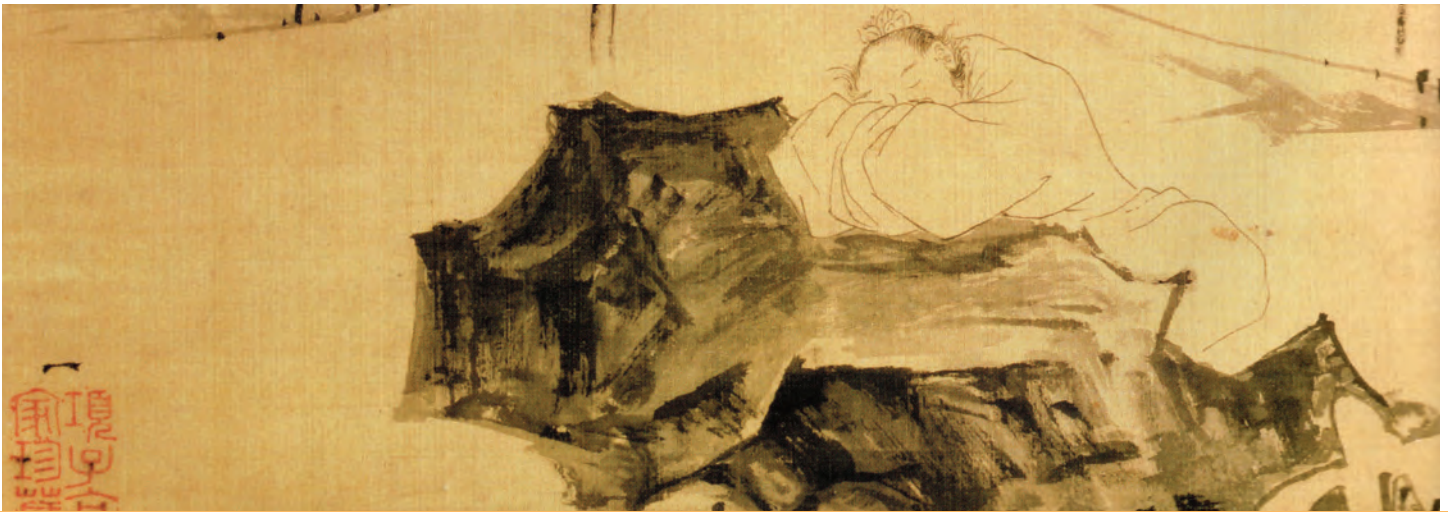
Marlene Marburg PhD is Co-Director of Kardia Formation in Melbourne, Australia, where people dream possibilities in their relationship with God. Marlene is an experienced lecturer and educator of spiritual directors. Her poetry series *Grace Undone* emerges from the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in everyday life.

NB The editor wishes to express his apologies to Marlene for the unintentional lack of attribution for her poem "Witness," in the November 2017 edition of *Listen*.

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spiritual traditions, and discover excellent questions to ask yourself and any potential spiritual directors you choose to interview. To locate a spiritual director or guide, go online to *Seek and Find Guide: A Worldwide Resource of Available Spiritual Directors*. More than 6,000 spiritual directors are listed at [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org). ★



P O E M

P O E M

## BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

This speck of space which we can see—  
The foggy light which passes through  
from what faint bodies we may view...

Does it ordain what we can be?  
Can it confine what we may know  
and so presage how we will grow?

Does that which lies beyond our sight  
entice our minds to slow and hedge  
for fear of all beyond the edge.

When we neglect our private plight,  
ignore our own fragility,  
kind hope comes calling silently.

Once we conceive that we may soar  
embrace our own gethsemane,  
seek joy within our destiny,

we have entered the once closed door,  
bathed in the great baptistery,  
entered the gate of mystery.

— Mary Ann Goodwin

Mary Ann Goodwin, a retired aerospace worker, is now engaged in spiritual direction, dream work and writing poetry and children stories. Her most recent poetry book is entitle *Aliens and Strangers*. She may be contacted at [mgoodwin004@comcast.net](mailto:mgoodwin004@comcast.net) .

## ZHUANGZI DREAMING OF A BUTTERFLY

“Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering here and there. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Zhuangzi. Soon I awoke, and there I was, truly myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.”  
(trans. Anil Singh-Molares)



Ming dynasty,  
mid-16th century Ink on silk





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