

# **Journeying with Charlotte through her Dying**

~ by Lee Klinger Lesser

*Journeying with Charlotte as she lived her dying*

*In the 102nd year of her life*

*August 2003*

Many years ago, Charlotte said something that stayed with me strongly. She commented that people so often spend time and energy in the beginning of things and in the middle of things, but they avoid the endings. She was saying that in living, we have to meet everything. She met the ending of her life and it was a gift to be able to accompany her along the way.

For so many years and on many different occasions, we expected Charlotte to die. And then somehow over the past thirty years she never did, and it seemed that maybe she wouldn't...that somehow Charlotte might make it out of this life, alive. And even though we were expecting her to die at any time over these past years, it is still a shock that she has actually died and moved on, on August 22, 2003.

## ***The Last Trip to Barra de Navidad***

This past January in Barra, we had another close encounter with dying with Charlotte. There was a medical emergency. Charlotte surprised everyone and lived through it. I gave most of the classes in the first eight-day workshop...but in the second workshop, Charlotte was back and she gave six out of eight classes. She was still quite frail and weak, but she gave the classes. At the end of the two workshops, we held a farewell party, for the ending of the workshops. In everyone's hearts this was a farewell to Charlotte. It was very present with all of us including Charlotte. Charlotte was keenly awake and alert during the party as people shared what had touched them in the workshop. Many people also shared a song or thought they wanted to offer. One person said his life was like one constant good bye. Charlotte responded, "Good byes can be sad. But they can also be beautiful when one feels what one feels." It was a beautiful good bye. And hopefully still is, as we all feel what we feel...whatever it is. At the end of the many heartfelt offerings, Luis, Pat Baxter's husband sang a song that had almost all of us in tears. It is a song in Spanish, called "La Vida Sigue Igual" (Life Continues the Same) by Julio Iglesias. Luis sang with elegant simplicity and great heart. It was a fitting way to end the evening...

Below is part of the song in Spanish with my rough translation:

### **LA VIDA SIGUE IGUAL**

- Julio Iglesias -

Unos que nacen, otros morirán;

unos que ríen, otros llorarán.

Aguas sin cauce, ríos sin mar,

penas y glorias, guerras y paz.

Siempre hay  
por qué vivir,  
por qué luchar.

Siempre hay  
por quién sufrir  
y a quien amar.

Al final  
las obras quedan, las gentes se van.  
Otros que vienen las continuarán...  
¡La vida sigue igual!

Some people are born, others will die;  
Some people laugh, others will cry.  
Waters with no river beds, rivers with no ocean,  
Difficulties and glories, wars and peace.  
There is always a reason to live, to struggle.  
There is always someone for whom we'll suffer,  
Whom we will love.  
In the end,  
The works stay, the people go.  
Others who come will carry them on...  
Life continues the same!

Album: YO CANTO (1969)

This song has stayed with me and has been part of the journey of saying good bye to Charlotte.

### ***Weekly Classes in Charlotte's Home in Muir Beach, California***

When Charlotte came back to Muir Beach, we began giving Thursday night sensing classes in her living room. She was too weak to go to other places to give classes, but she was eager to give them in her home. Her living room made a great studio and she admired it quite a bit, often just sitting and commenting on what a wonderful form the room had. From February through March, Charlotte gave most of the classes. I was there to support her, as needed. She gradually became weaker and weaker. One of the last classes she gave was one of the richest classes I have ever been in with Charlotte.

I usually came up early to have dinner with Charlotte. On this night when I arrived, Charlotte greeted me by exclaiming, "I could weep!" I was surprised by this greeting and waited to hear what more she had to say. She continued, "I could weep with joy at letting go." And she did let go and sank, with a smile on her face, further onto the couch. She continued repeating this and sinking with delight onto the couch several more times. Then she said, "But it is not so simple. There is a place deep in my heart, which resisting. I have to get to know that place."

Charlotte had been exhausted all day. I did not know whether she would give the class or not until people actually arrived and she began working with deep and quiet energy. We began with

sitting. Charlotte asked us to lean forward and feel what lets go and what holds on. We worked with this simple and profound exploration for most of the class. Charlotte herself was actively experimenting with us...feeling it out for herself. I know that Charlotte was working with her own dying...feeling how to take another step closer...and yet she was also vividly working with us and how we each live. She worked with a question that was so acute and vital for her and for all of us – what lets go and follows what is needed and what holds back...how do we get to know what is holding back?

### ***A Living Spiral***

Charlotte's journey towards dying felt like a living spiral...she would feel her way – moving out and then coming back again and then she would move away and then come back again. Each time moving a little further and further away. She lived with the changes happening in her and we accompanied her along the way.

For me the Thursday night classes were a great gift...different people came each week with many of the same people coming regularly. Gradually, Charlotte went from giving the classes to sitting on the couch while I gave the classes. She would often participate by ringing the bell or greeting people. After some time, Charlotte began to lie down on the couch, rather than sit. After a time, she stopped using her hearing equipment (Charlotte was very hard of hearing) because it was too heavy for her to have on her head. Then Charlotte began sleeping in class. At some point she would wake up and interact with people who had come. The next change was that Charlotte moved from the couch to the hospital bed, which was brought into the living room. So she participated in the class from her bed. She continued to sleep and at some point to wake up during the class. When she woke up, each person would come and greet her. Occasionally, Charlotte would still send out a crisp comment about someone's extra effort or lack of presence. She surprised us all. In July for the first time, Charlotte slept through the whole class without waking up. This only happened three times, including the night that Charlotte died.

The classes were simple and direct occasions to be with whatever was happening just as it was ...to meet Charlotte in her own changing world and to continue to find our own way to sense and be present.

### ***The Last Class***

The last Thursday night class we had was on August 21. I had been away for one month and this was the first class after I returned. Charlotte was in a deep sleep all through the class. Her breathing was loud and distinctly audible. The class began late after a visit from Charlotte's doctor. As it was so late, we simply sat and sensed together, each of us being with Charlotte, with breathing and each other in silence. It was a time of deep quiet. After about 35 minutes, I invited the five of us to turn towards each other and sit in a circle, to share what we were feeling or to say anything to Charlotte that anyone wanted to say. Reza read a poem by Rumi that he had been carrying in his wallet. He said it came up very strongly in him as we were sitting and he hoped it was o.k. to read it, because it was about death. His voice resonated with depth and simplicity as he read this poem to us and to Charlotte:

On the day I die, when I'm being carried  
toward the grave, don't weep. Don't say,

He's gone! He's gone. Death has nothing  
to do with going away. The sun sets and

the moon sets, but they're not gone.  
Death is a coming together. The tomb

Looks like a prison, but it's really  
release into union. The human seed goes

Down in the ground like a bucket into  
the well where Joseph is. It grows and

Comes up full of some unimagined beauty.  
Your mouth closes here and immediately

opens with a shout of joy there.

~ Rumi

Marcela shared a beautiful mantra that had come up for her very strongly while we were sitting. She sang it also with clarity and love... the translation was something like "I bow before my own true self." The melody was beautiful and we all sang with her, filling the space around Charlotte and all of us with gentle, loving sound. Albert, Debra and I each shared some feelings and thoughts, and we ended the class. It was a quiet intimate space with Charlotte in the center of it. We left for the night around 10:30, speaking about meeting the following Thursday if it fit for Charlotte.

Peter, Charlotte's husband found her at 5:00 a.m., Friday morning. He had the monitor on during the night and Charlotte had been quiet. She found her way to slip away. When one friend found out about Charlotte's death, he said with joy, "She made it!" Our friend, Norman Fisher said Charlotte had to die alone. If anyone had been there she would have been too interested and connected and would have stayed...

### ***Like the Tides...***

About two months before her death, Charlotte was in bed with many of us gathered around her. She woke up and seemed very, very far away....somehow as though she was closer to the death side on her circling spiral. She began saying a few sentences at a time in German. She would make a comment in a slow, careful way. After a few minutes she would make another comment....it was as though she was realizing and incorporating the truth of what she was saying...as though she was feeling how to trust the truth of what she was saying:

*wir koennen uns ja ganz getrost der flut ueberlassen.  
We can safely surrender to the tide.*

*die flut ist ja ganz von selbst aktiv - man braucht nichts zu tun - alles kommt von selbst.  
The tide comes naturally - there's nothing to do - everything happens by itself.*

*die flut ist so maechtig, so selbsttaetig.  
The tide is mighty and happens naturally.*

To me this was another important passage in Charlotte's journey. It stayed with me strongly: seeing the power, naturalness and ongoing movement of the tides and feeling how much the tides have to teach us about dying and about letting go. Charlotte spent so much time living by the edge of the ocean in many parts of the world: Muir Beach, Monhegan Island, Maine; Barra de Navidad, Mexico and she had led so many of us to these places and other places on the edge of living...

### ***Saying Goodbye***

With the loving help of Zen Center and Zen Center hospice, we learned how to take care of Charlotte's body and create a space to be with her after she died. Peter dressed her in a cotton royal blue dress. I combed her hair. Green Gulch Farm Zen Center brought up buckets and buckets of flowers and herbs. Christina from Green Gulch made two beautiful flower arrangements for the rooms. Charlotte loved flowers and I think she especially loved Green Gulch flowers and most especially loved the flowers from the garden that Peter had planted and cared for outside her windows on the hill above the ocean in their Muir Beach home. Peter cut a long nasturtium vine with bright orange flowers. He put it in a vase and draped it across the top of Charlotte's bed. So there was a living flower growing above Charlotte's head and somehow still cradling her in life.

We began putting rose petals, lavender, rose geranium, lemon verbena, rosemary and sage around and over Charlotte. As people came in to visit or say goodbye, they added flowers and herbs to Charlotte. All of the doors and windows were open and the room was filled with air, love and quiet. In the midst of grief was also laughter and joy with the memories and stories of Charlotte's living. We had 11 yartzheit candles (Jewish memorial candles that burn for 24 hours) burning throughout the room, one for each decade of Charlotte's life. As people came they were also invited to sound the big gong that Charlotte brought back from Japan many years ago. She loved that gong and used it in many workshops, listening to the sound until it was completed. Even when she was very weak and being pushed in her wheelchair to the bathroom in her home, she would often stop on the way back from the bathroom, lift up the striker and sound the bell with delight! So we also sounded the bell throughout the 2 ½ days that she stayed in her home after her death...hoping to greet her in her new passage with the sound of the bell.

### ***In the Garden, All Offerings are Received***

We had arranged with the Neptune Society, to come and get Charlotte's body at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday. I woke up early Sunday morning, just on the edge of light and dark. Smoky, Charlotte's cat jumped up on my chest and lay down there. We were breathing quietly together. As I lay there on the couch in Charlotte's living room seeing Charlotte, the flickering candles and the arriving morning, I heard an owl call from nearby. Then another owl answered. The two owls spoke with

each other, calling back and forth, then they gradually flew away, still calling back and forth to each other. It felt like a greeting from Charlotte.

The morning before I had gone for an early morning run up through Green Gulch and up into the hills. As I began running towards the ocean, I saw the fog begin to roll in. In front of the fog was a big fat rainbow. It was not raining, but the rainbow was there. It felt like another greeting from Charlotte. A friend said that she felt a strong wind on Monhegan Island just as they were gathering there to honor Charlotte. She felt sure it was Charlotte coming to greet them. And another friend described seeing a finger of fog coming from the ocean to her house, and she was sure it was Charlotte beckoning her. So it seems as though Charlotte has been quite busy... even in her new place of business, she is actively reaching out to us in different places, in different moments and still with great mystery and power.

After the morning greeting from the owls, I was greeted by Jill Harris, a dear and old friend. She had also awakened and was feeling quite sad. She sat and cried for a while. We agreed that we would spread all of the remaining herbs and flowers over Charlotte, leaving some roses and rose petals as offerings for people who would come later in the day to say goodbye. I began to offer the flowers, while Jill was still offering her tears. Wendy Johnson from Zen Center came up while we were in the midst of our offerings. She sat down on the side of Charlotte's bed and began quietly meditating. After a while, Jill was ready to help cover Charlotte with the herbs and flowers. She wiped her face and eyes and was trying to put the tissues away, when Wendy reached out from her meditation and gently snatched the tissues out of Jill's hands. I was rather flabbergasted and wondered what was going on with Wendy. Wendy steadily and gently placed the tissues on Charlotte, underneath some of the flowers. Jill and I were surprised and then we all smiled with delight. It seemed like an inclusive and true offering.

Jill and I worked together for about one half hour, arranging flowers and herbs all around Charlotte. Charlotte's hands were resting on her chest above the sheet, gently touching each other. Her hands and head were not covered with flowers and herbs...but everywhere else on the bed and on her were splendidly and outrageously adorned with flowers. I put a small stone from Pebble Beach from Monhegan Island (another one of Charlotte's beloved homes) underneath her hands. She loved stones and especially from Pebble Beach. They always brought a distinct gleam to her eyes.

Wendy said that she had a song she wanted to sing for Charlotte when we were finished. So when all of the flowers and herbs found their places, Jill and I knelt on either side of Wendy at the foot of Charlotte's bed. We held hands and Wendy spoke to Charlotte and then began to sing the following song. I have spent hours singing it since, feeling it is an ongoing offering to Charlotte and to me too, a way of somehow staying connected essence to essence.

You are a Buddha.  
And you are in my heart.  
You are a part of me.  
You are a Buddha.

There was something quite glorious singing this song to Charlotte, seeing her royally decked out in flowers and knowing the depth of which she is a part of us and in our hearts. We sang it over and over again... Smoky, Charlotte's cat, didn't quite think it was as glorious as we did, however....Because as we were singing, Smoky began heaving loudly and trying to vomit behind us. We kept singing and listening to Smoky and laughing. After a few more verses, Wendy stopped and said, "You know I am a gardener, and in the garden all offerings are received....and Smoky has made her offering too." I sat there, considered and agreed....So I went to get a new Kleenex, and I scraped up a little of Smoky's offering and it too went under the flowers to accompany Charlotte. So we continued singing and then began to sing the song in Spanish. As we sang in Spanish, Jill's voice came out loud and strong and full, and in a few minutes, Smoky was right there howling and meowing along with us as we sang....four female voices offering their love and goodbyes

### ***A Big Charlotte Burrito***

Throughout the day, old friends came to say goodbye and to be there....Around one o'clock some of us gathered to meditate and be present with Charlotte in this last hour in her home. Peter brought sunflowers from the garden and placed them on Charlotte. We took turns sounding the bell as we sat quietly together. After about thirty minutes of this quiet being, it felt a little somber to me and that didn't seem quite fitting for Charlotte. I asked if anyone had a joke to tell or a song to sing.

Jill said she had a joke and she told it in her warm, full voice: Sherlock Holmes and Watson went camping together. Sherlock asked Watson what he saw out there in the wilderness in the dark. Watson eagerly replied as he looked up at the stars, "Why I see stars. Many, many stars. Whole galaxies! And even galaxies beyond galaxies! And galaxies beyond those galaxies!" Watson continued on for quite a while and then said, "So Holmes, what do you see?" Holmes replied, "I see that someone has taken our tent."

This joke seemed just right to me and I could hear Charlotte laughing and bringing us right back down to the ground from the swirling galaxies. Kathie Fisher led us in a rendition of "Don't fence me in." Kate and I went and got some sweet white wine and we toasted with a "Prosit" and a clink of each glass to Charlotte. Then Kate brought down a CD of Marlene Dietrich whose songs Charlotte loved, especially the one about being ready for love from head to toe. As none of us spoke German, we didn't know which song on the CD was the song we were looking for, so we listened to two rather strange Marlene Dietrich songs and I hoped that somehow, somewhere, Charlotte liked them better than I did... As we heard the car approaching, we gathered together and we sang "You are my sunshine..."

People said good bye in whatever way they needed to and then two very sensitive men from the Neptune Society came in. We gathered around Charlotte and all together we wrapped her in the sheet from her bed, swaddling her close with all of the flowers, herbs and offerings, covering her face for the last time. Peter said, "Even like this she looks beautiful." And she did. Just seeing the form of Charlotte was a beautiful sight. Earlier, Wendy had described this process to me, as wrapping Charlotte up and making a "big, Charlotte burrito". So Charlotte was bundled and wrapped with love and together we lifted her and put her gently down onto the gurney. The two men wrapped her in a kind of paper shroud and they took her outside and loaded her into the car. We all gathered outside and waved goodbye until the car disappeared. I have so many

memories of other goodbyes and partings when Charlotte would drive away, waving her little hand until she was out of sight.

On Friday, August 29, one week after her death, Charlotte was cremated. Ten of us went to accompany her there in this next part of her journey. The room was stark, with concrete walls and floor and two ovens where cremations happen. The starkness was startling at first...but we created an altar and brought warmth through our presence and love for Charlotte. The altar had a photo of Charlotte draped with a powerfully fragrant lei that my friend Lisa brought me from Hawaii. There was incense, candles, photos and a stone on the altar as well as the statue of the hand that Charles (Charlotte's second husband) gave to Charlotte many years ago. We also had the big gong that Charlotte loved and a tray of strawberries and little glasses of fresh squeezed orange juice.

Norman gave an opening statement. We chanted together. Then we put offerings that people brought or sent onto Charlotte. She was in a cardboard box, covered with the shroud. The box lid was taken off so that Charlotte could receive these new offerings. I put a big fat strawberry where I imagined her diaphragm to be. Peter brought a fresh bouquet of garden sunflowers. Many letters sent from different places were placed with Charlotte, including a letter that Tony sent from Mexico City that I read out loud on behalf of many of us. Charlotte was rolled into the oven. We all held hands. I was touching the switch to turn on the fire. Wendy was touching the photo of Charlotte at the other end of the line. I pressed the buttons to start the fires. The sound was quite loud. Norman chanted in a strong voice over the sound of the fire. We chanted with him and then stood together in silence feeling Charlotte's passing in a new way. After a short time of standing, we drew together in a close circle. Wendy sang the Buddha song again. We sang or said it in English, Spanish and German. Then we offered a new toast with the clinking of glasses and we drank the fresh orange juice and ate one strawberry in honor of Charlotte. Julian, Stefan's and Sara's almost one-year old son, was a great delight and comfort in the midst of this passage and he received lots of strawberries bequeathed to him from others in the group. Julian thoroughly enjoyed the strawberries and I imagine that Charlotte would have been delighted with his enjoyment and uncensored devouring of strawberries. I would describe Charlotte's encounters with strawberries in a similar way. After the strawberries, we bowed to each other and once again said goodbye to Charlotte.