

In memory of Ruth Tabrah

Eulogy for Ruth Tabrah by Alfred Bloom

Ruth Tabrah was a many-faceted person, larger than life. Simply listing her accomplishments does not do justice to the magnitude of her contributions to the community and to the world. Ruth was a highly professional person. She was an author, editor, scholar, artist, religious leader and social activist.

As an author, Ruth wrote novels such as “Pulaski Place” in 1950, which described so well the life of Polish-Americans in Buffalo, N.Y. that a Polish-American organization bought the movie rights. Another significant work was “The Voices of Others,” which was an alternate selection of the Book of the Month Club in 1959. Most recently her historical novels — “The Monk Who Dared,” about Shinran, the founder of the Hongwanji tradition, and “The Monk’s Wife” about Eshin-ni -- have been read widely and bring the ancient figures to life in our modern world. The “Monk Who Dared” has just been translated into Japanese and the translator is seeking a publisher. He will also do the second book.

On another level, she wrote many childrens’ books which introduced Hawaii to youth. Most famous, perhaps, is “Emily’s Hawaii,” which has had numerous editions.

As an editor, Ruth organized the Buddhist Study Center Press, giving Buddhism a voice in international and intercultural contexts beyond Hawaii through publication. She assisted many people in their writing, most notably myself, sacrificing time she might have spent on her own projects. She gave selflessly to seeing books through the publication process, and contributing to the propagation of Buddhism.

As a scholar, Ruth’s writings testify to her abilities and dedication to education. She was a scholar in the study of religion. She traveled widely, observing life in other cultures. She was deeply interested in the relation of religion and Buddhism and science, writing essays on Buddhism and the New Physics. She was especially interested in David Bohm’s concept of the Implicate Whole which she saw as an expression of reality as Amida Buddha. She wanted Buddhism to be in the forefront of modern intellectual studies. She participated in the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, writing the summaries of many conferences, beside her own contributions in the journal, *Pure Land*. She was a member of the steering committee.

Ruth’s research deeply explored Hawaiian history and she became an authority in that field. Also, she researched and authored the history of Hongwanji for the centennial volume: “A Grateful Past, A Promising Future.” She wrote biographies of outstanding people -- even a Russian explorer. Her interests were wide ranging indeed.

Ruth was an artist, embodying her view of life and reality in her paintings. Her pictures reflect her positive and optimistic perspective, through her use of colors.

As a religious leader, Ruth participated actively in temple life. She served on boards and committees, placing her skills at the service of the movement. Eventually she received tokudo ordination and was in demand as a speaker. She participated in the founding of Project Dana, giving it its name and remaining in the background as a strong supporter. She was also an organizer and active participant in the Hawaii Association of International Buddhists, an ecumenical Buddhist group devoted to education and social advancement through Buddhism. Many community groups and leaders constantly sought her advice and insight.

As a social activist, Ruth was a member of the Hawaii State Board of Education, representing the Big Island. She had great interest in women's issues and wrote on Buddhist ordination rites for women. Her novel, "Voices of Others," anticipated later women's liberation through her recognition of the independent woman.

In 1998, Ruth was honored with the Hongwanji 'Living Treasure of Hawaii' award. It was stated: "She is multifaceted and modest, a soaring talent who is self-effacing, a mainland born woman who has become so much a part of the Islands that it is hard to imagine Hawai'i without her books, her contributions, herself."

I have only given but a small sampling of Ruth's achievements. She is a model for contemporary people, combining intelligence, faith and dedication. She was a free and creative spirit. Motivated by Buddhist compassion, she was dedicated to the truth of Buddhism and the welfare of all people. She served humanity through the power of her pen.

Though our lives are like dewdrops, disappearing in the noon-day sun, yet the water brings nourishment to the soil and sparkle to the blossoms. A dew drop has vanished from our sight, but not from our hearts, as she continues to nourish our spirits.

Namu Amida Butsu.

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***RUTH MILANDER TABRAH -- A Memorial
by Connie Fukumoto***

Ruth Milander Tabrah was a modest, positive, multi-talented, witty, sensitive and compassionate person. She touched us with her wisdom and shared her knowledge through her writings and art. She was a Bodhisattva who walked among us. She was always a student in the process of becoming truly human.

Born in Buffalo, N.Y. on February 28, 1921, Ruth graduated with honors from the University of Buffalo at age 16. She taught at a school for refugee students under the guidance of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and did graduate studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. She married Dr. Frank Tabrah and had two sons, Joseph and Thomas. The family moved to Kohala, Hawaii in 1956. Some of the major events of that period were:

1. Her children grew up in the security of a plantation community made up of all ethnic groups.
2. The family sailed the Pacific on a yacht.
3. They joined the Bishop Museum crew in excavating and recording Hawaiian artifacts, which piqued her interest in Hawaiiana.
4. Buddhism entered her life. Asked to write about Buddhism by a publisher in New York, she researched and wrote "Buddhism -- Modern Way of Life & Thought," which is still in demand today.
5. She became a member of the Democratic Party, a member of the State Board of Education (1966-78) and later served as chairperson of the Democratic Committee for the island of Hawaii. As a member of the National Association of Boards of Education, she was invited to spend a month in Russia. Also, she was invited to visit Niihau when their doors first opened to outsiders.
6. After her divorce she lived at her beach house at Puako.

Ruth was a woman of strong conviction and great strength. In an effort to find herself, she embarked on a world tour even though she had very limited assets. The Pan Am round-the-world ticket allowed her to travel whenever and wherever the plane flew. She visited Turkey, India, Pakistan, Tibet, Inner and Outer Mongolia, China and New Guinea. She came home with \$2.00 in her pocket, refreshed and renewed.

After renting her beach home to wealthy vacationers, Ruth moved to a walk-up apartment in Honolulu and began a new life. She was sought after as a speaker at many Buddhist temples where she encouraged the young to learn about the Buddhist way of life before embracing another religion. She continued to write Hawaiiana books, biographies, historical novels, and children's books and put aside her own priorities to edit books, periodicals and messages for others.

In the early 1970s, Ruth began to study Shin Buddhism in earnest. She joined a group of dedicated listeners at the Buddhist Study Center (BSC) every week and attended services at the Hawaii Betsuin. Nembutsu retreats, seminars, study classes, and listening tours to Japan convinced her that this was her main thrust in life. She began the BSC Press by recording and editing dharma messages by various teachers and publishing them for general consumption. She became active in radio broadcasts, wrote articles in *Metta* (the BSC monthly that had international readership) and many other publications. She carefully gave credit to proper resources and never to herself. In collaboration with minister scholars, she translated sutras -- Shoshinge, Sanbutsuge and Juseige -- and published them as "Shin Sutras to Live By."

In 1998, Ruth was honored as a 'Living Treasure' by the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. This award is bestowed upon individuals who contributed to the community as a writer, a Buddhist and as an educator in an inspirational way.

By invitation, she joined the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS) and broadened her scholarship. She served as secretary to this group and edited their publication "The Pure Land Journal." Her contribution included facilitating and coordinating new resources. One example of this was when she came upon a small poem written by George Gatenby, an Australian Buddhist. She contacted him and got permission to print his poem in *Metta*. Several short articles followed. His work caught the attention of some scholars in Japan and he was invited to the next IASBS conference. Gatenby received his ordination at Honzan in Kyoto and is actively propagating Shin Buddhism in Australia. Ruth was the facilitator like this to many others in Alaska as well as London, Austria and Switzerland through her activities with the European Shin Buddhist Association.

At one of the European conferences, she was encouraged by Zenmon Sama and Lady Ohtani to write about Shinran Shonin and his wife Eshinni Sama. It took about 10-12 years of research before "The Monk Who Dared" was published, followed by "Eshinni, The Monk's Wife" a few years later. "The Monk Who Dared" has been translated into Japanese by Rev. Esho Shimazu, a noted scholar in Kyoto and is awaiting a publisher. Her last manuscript, an autobiography, is complete and will enter the publishing process soon.

Ruth received her tokudo ordination in Kyoto in 1982. She continued to propagate the teachings innovatively and creatively to meet the needs of members, including the divorce ceremony to fill the needs of many who experience this pain of separation. She paved the way for a different kind of minister, unattached to a temple but creative and active in Dharma propagation.

In 1986, she began classes in watercolor at the art academy and enjoyed it tremendously. Soon she was exhibited in juried shows about town. She maintained warm relations with many well known artists.

Ruth was also a linguist in possession of an uncanny memory. A quick study to learn new languages, she used them whenever feasible. In Japan she got immediate response when she greeted anyone in their language. In France, she was able to communicate with people with ease. Once en route home from Berlin, we were on a slow East German train to Frankfurt (two-and-a half hours late). The conductor kept insisting that we were lacking some documents. Ruth tried in English to appease him to no avail. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she blurted out her frustration in German and the conductor did not bother us again. She surprised herself because she had not spoken German since her college days.

Ruth was a loving mother to her family, a wonderful Tutu to her grandchildren. They loved Tutu and Puako, their home base. She visited her sons Joe and Thomas at every home they occupied (Equador, Florida, Washington, Arizona, etc.). Her grandchildren always kept in touch. And, with a new generation of great-grandchildren appearing, she felt great joy. Besides her sons, Ruth is survived by a half-brother, Robert Flock.

Ruth was so happy to have her children and their families in Honolulu during the last three years of her life. They gave her support and lots of love. Joe and Sharon have five children --

Celeste Bauer, Jennifer, Melissa, Jessica, and Joseph Frank -- and a grandchild, Emma Ruth Bauer. Joe is employed as an engineer at the Oceanic Research Institute. Thomas and Helayne have two children, Ryan and Laura. Ryan and Kristen are soon to be parents. Laura and David are parents to Jack David Chiavacchi. Thomas is Commander of Coastguard Group Hawaii.

Ruth Tabrah left us on Buddha Day, April 8 at 4:30 p.m. at Arcadia Hospice Facility. She will be missed. Her legacy of selfless giving will enrich our lives forever. We have been blessed by being touched by a person of Nembutsu -- a truly humane human being -- and hope that it bears fruit in our lives.

Namu Amida Butsu.