

Rita May Weidmann 24.5.1929 – 25.7.2020

Early on a Saturday morning of a weekend where all three of her children were already scheduled to come to spend time with her, Rita quietly departed from her long life of 91 years. By her own admission it was a very fulfilling and rewarding life. Her wide range of interests included the natural world, wildlife research and observation, gardening, a love of classical music, and particularly the realm of education where she used her knowledge of the physical world and spiritual science (anthroposophy) to educate many children in a large variety of different subjects.

Rita loved people and was always interested in other people's lives (and their pets' lives). She felt a strong need to be helpful to others and was at her happiest surrounded by large groups of friends.

The Story of her Life

Rita White was born in England, an only child, and spent her early years in London. Her father was a builder and decorator and her mother an office worker. Sadly, her father died when she was 9 years old, and there was only an embryonic welfare state; life cannot have been easy.

We know very little of her early life as she rarely wished to talk about it. However, out of the adversity she developed two of the key attributes that she carried through life; she never looked back and she never complained.

When war broke out, Rita's mother was keen to leave London. She found a live-in job near Guildford as a housekeeper where luckily the family allowed Rita to live with her there.

Rita was educated at Guildford Grammar School for girls where she demonstrated her intelligence and eagerness to learn. Amazingly, she was still in touch with friends she made there until only a few months before her death. She loved sports and played hockey at county level. This sporting prowess enabled her to take a place at Oxford University (St Anne's College, we think) on a Hockey Blue (scholarship). She initially studied chemistry, and would have changed to medicine; but that was too expensive, and she opted for zoology instead.

After graduation she started a DPhil on the behaviour of black-headed gulls under the care of Professor Nico Tinbergen, one of the first scientists to study the behaviour of animals in their natural habitat—ethology. As part of her studies she was able to visit Professor Konrad Lorenz—the other prominent early ethologist—in Germany.

One of Konrad Lorenz's students was a Swiss man named Ulrich Weidmann; he already had a picture of Rita—holding a cute baby seal—on his hut wall when she first arrived. Which of the two first caught his eye became a long-standing family joke.

Rita and Uli quickly fell in love and were engaged within 3 weeks of meeting! They shared a love of the natural world, exploring, classifying and spotting flora and fauna of all types. They were married in Switzerland in September 1952, once Rita had been 'approved' by Uli's mother! They moved to Oxford, where Uli became a lecturer, Rita continued with her DPhil (completed in 1956), and their first child, Sarah, was born in 1954. Their research included studies of gulls at Ravenglass in Cumbria where they lived in a tent, accompanied by their young daughter, for months at a time.

The family then moved to London to live with Rita's mother, where Uli lectured at Birkbeck College, and their second child, Nicholas, was born in 1957.

Uli had been brought up with anthroposophy, and Rita became increasingly interested in the work of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophy was not the focus of Uli's life, but it quickly became the focus of hers, and she joined the Anthroposophical Society in 1962. The family moved to Kings Langley so that Sarah and Nicholas could attend the Steiner Kindergarten there and where Rita started teaching biology at the school. Rita and family were joined by their third child, Crispin, in 1965.

In 1968, following a year abroad in the USA to support Uli's career, Rita and family moved to Leicester. As there were no local Steiner schools, Rita undertook specialist teacher training and spent several years at a school for children with special needs.

When Crispin was 10, Rita felt that he should also benefit from a Steiner education and that it was time for her to return to teaching in Kings Langley. This time she took on a lower school class, commuting weekly (with Crispin initially) between Leicester and Kings Langley for 12 years. This commitment was at a high price because Rita and Uli never had the long retirement together they had hoped for. Rita was 4 years into her second class when Uli became ill, and she returned to Leicester to be with him for the remaining time they had together before his death in 1992. Rita was noted for her discipline in class, allowing learning to occur, mixed with great compassion and support to the children. She was held in very high regard by former pupils, parents and colleagues.

After Uli's death Rita needed to find a new means of fulfilment in her life, and she joined the Milton Keynes Camphill as a house parent and stayed for many years. There she gave discipline, love and support to adults with a wide range of learning difficulties.

At the age of 75 Rita finally retired and moved back to Kings Langley where she quickly became involved in local Anthroposophical and Christian Community meetings and the local Biodynamic Allotment Society. She developed skills as a recorder player and joined many local groups as well as attending recorder courses around the country. She was a loyal supporter of many local amateur and professional music societies. She met many people in these areas and forged new friendships.

Rita continued her lifelong interest in learning and attended many local WEA and U3A history courses. And, of course, made even more friends!

Rita's first grandchild was born in 2004, and she delighted in getting to know Isabel and her younger sisters, Jessica and Charlotte. She was only too happy to jump in her car and drive 75 miles to baby-sit for an evening.

In 2009 Rita was found to have lymphoma (with a 2–4 year prognosis!) and developed bowel cancer in 2018. She fought back from both of these illnesses, certain that she had more life to live.

In 2019 she decided it was time to give up her large house with its beautiful garden and moved to a small flat, still in Kings Langley, where she made yet another set of friends.

In the few months before her death Rita gradually let go, deciding to join her husband of 40 years in the spritual world—a world in which she was a firm believer, along anthroposophical lines. Thankfully she died in her sleep in her own bed in her own home and, we hope, with a firm sense that she had amply lived up to her manifold destiny.

SW/NW/CW, transcribed by RW