

Reflections toward Eternity

POEMS AND ESSAYS NEAR THE END OF LIFE



by Rosemary Burgo

A PATIENT OF SAMARITAN HEALTHCARE & HOSPICE

Reflections toward Eternity
Poems and Essays Near the End of Life



Presented by Samaritan Healthcare & Hospice
© 2016 by Rosemary Burgo

Cover: Mandala artwork by Caterina Martinico.
Reprinted with permission.
www.etsy.com/shop/SoulArteEclectica

Dedication

To Anne Butts, without whose vision and enthusiasm
this anthology would not exist.

To all hospice patients and their families
who may benefit from these words.

And to all others who have rendered their support.

Introduction

Rosemary Burgo began writing poetry at age 7 as a way to handle life's difficulties. When terminal illness struck at age 70, that lifelong practice helped her cope with many end-of-life challenges – including painful emotions, tough decisions, and reflections on the past.

Rosemary became determined to complete her life on her own terms. She quickly engaged hospice care from Samaritan, so she could feel as well as possible and make the most of her remaining time. One day, Rosemary shared some of her poetry and essays with Samaritan Chaplain Anne Butts – one of several staff members who supported Rosemary regularly in her home.

Anne was struck by the honesty, depth and clarity of Rosemary's writings. The chaplain recognized thoughts and experiences that are common among people with serious illnesses, as well as their loved ones. With Rosemary's blessing, Anne began showing some poems to other Samaritan patients, to help them with their own struggles.

That's when the idea for this collection was born, as a way to make Rosemary's works available to more people who could benefit from them. For Rosemary, this booklet is a legacy, the fulfillment of a long-held wish: that her words could someday help others.

Table of Contents

Love and Forgiveness

Memoir in Truth	9
Strength From Above, I.....	11

Just Listen

How Dare They!.....	15
Listen – Hear Me	16
Live with Dignity, Die with Grace.....	17
From Safety to the Unknown	18
Authenticity.....	19

Reflections

Be Not Afraid	23
Joy Within.....	24
A Need Unmet.....	26
Yin-Yang.....	27
A Caregiver’s Struggle.....	28

Revelations

A Wish	31
Freedom of Choice	32
Overlooked.....	33
Strength From Within, I.....	34
Strength From Within, II.....	35

Acceptance

Late Wisdom.....	39
Breathe	40
Strength From Above, II	41
A Different Path.....	43
<i>Notes</i>	45
<i>Color a Mandala</i>	47

Love and Forgiveness



Memor in Truth

We think we have forever
To say the things we ought to say
To right the wrongs we need to fix
To tell others we love them
Even though we think they should know
without our actually saying it.

We think the end will never come
That we for some reason will be the ones who will not pass
For there was no world before us
So there can be nothing when we leave

We think we are justified
In losing touch
In hitting back
In hurting
In protecting ourselves
For we are human are we not?
And that forgives everything does it not?

It is a blessed life
That gets a chance
To say the things that need to
Be said
To spread the love which is, in the end,
The only important thing
And to finally be able to reveal
Our truth to our most precious companions and fellow travelers.

Connected we were
Connected we are
Connected we will always be
Hopefully, we will return
To that place where we are loved
No longer needing to give or receive it – just be it

(continued)

Memoir in Truth (continued)

I have loved you all
Sometimes not enough
Sometimes not well
But know you have been my gifts
Of laughter, of joy, of deep friendship, of love
And I hope that in some small way
My life has been a gift to you
I always intended it to be
Even though I sometimes
Faltered greatly and, for that, I am truly sorry.



This is the first poem Rosemary wrote in the hospital after becoming gravely ill. Her condition was terminal unless she received a lung transplant – a high-risk procedure with an uncertain recovery. Here, Rosemary first reflects on her impending mortality. She considers her life’s meaning, love, and forgiveness.

Strength from Above, I

I am trying to die the way I lived
With integrity and courage
The things I am doing I have always
Done but now condensed
They look different

I am uncomfortable with others'
Thoughts of me
Both the admiring and the surprised
Because it is not I, it is those others
Around me
Those who inhabit this space, my soul
Unseen and full of love
From them comes my strength



Rosemary wrote this after her discharge from the hospital, while staying in a rehabilitation facility. "I was sharing my room with an elderly woman, who was surprised by my positive attitude. She said I was very lucky," Rosemary recalled. "I said I felt like I wasn't doing anything; like it was coming from somewhere else." This poem is about that unexpected assistance: the spiritual help Rosemary felt she'd received from a place unseen and spirits unknown.

Just Listen



How Dare They!

Like lava from a volcano
Dormant for years
It spews forth
How dare they?
How dare they ask me
to fight a battle
They know nothing of
How dare they care about
their own loss
Rather than about what I
will have to endure
Physically
Emotionally
Spiritually
A lifetime ago standards were
set
And I met them, one by one,
It never stopped
New problem, new solution
New mountain, higher climb
Unceasing
Unnoticed
How dare they!



Many of Rosemary's loved ones wanted her to have a lung transplant, in the hope of extending her life. But Rosemary chose not to undergo the risky procedure, and rather live as well and comfortably as possible for whatever time she would have left. This poem conveys her feelings about the conflict, and that she wanted those around her to really hear her.

Listen – Hear Me

Buy a ticket
She gives up
She gives in
Amazing she who
Fought and fought

And fought
Now you are telling her
To once again
enter a battle
For whom? With what?

Can you see her wounds?
Can you at least acknowledge
Her fears?
Do you really see her?
Have you ever really seen her?
Do you hear her when she says
She is done
A death should be about the dying



Like the previous poem (“How Dare They!”), this work reflects the conflict between Rosemary’s medical choices and the opinions of her loved ones. She wanted those around her to hear her and respect her decisions.

Live with Dignity, Die with Grace

I refuse to be erased from life
To have each day take a piece of my dignity
To depend on others who owe me nothing
To do things I am no longer able to do for
myself
I will not allow the essence of my spirit
To be dependent upon strangers who
may not be kind
And others who, though meaning well, do
Not have moments I may need
I will not sit waiting for a visit or try to cope
With all life's problems without
The strength to fight them
I refuse to be the voice on the other end of the
Phone, a pity outing, a guilt
I will not be a stranger in my own life
Dependent
Depleted
Depressed
For me this is not life
I alone have chosen the way I have lived
I alone will choose the way I die
I will leave whole with dignity and grace
I refuse to be erased
Day after painstaking day



Rosemary felt satisfied she had lived a very good life, with beloved friends and family members. "I see my life not in length but in breadth." To tell someone how to feel is to say "you are not good enough." Sometimes we are not asking for solutions, just understanding.

From Safety to the Unknown

I feel as an infant must feel all warm and safe
as she is ripped from her safety to
the harsh noise and lights of earth

It is all for the good I hear
Whose good may I ask?
When the only pronoun used is 'you'

The 'you' that was me no longer exists
Only her grace and dignity remain
Do you want them too?

Well you cannot have them
I have never told anyone how to live
Why do you think you can tell me how to die?

Authenticity

All my life I have been told how I should feel
You are too sensitive, they said
You shouldn't worry about that
Why are you working yourself up over
Someone so unimportant
But she was important enough that her
Ineptitude may have caused my death

Never tell me how I should feel because
When you are telling me to feel differently
You are negating the essence of my being
You are judging what is not yours to judge
Because you have absolutely no wisdom
To bring to this experience
Perhaps just bring compassion and empathy
Or better yet just listen



This was written after a frightening incident in a rehabilitation facility, when Rosemary suddenly had severe difficulty breathing. She pulled the emergency cord in her room, but the aide who responded didn't recognize the seriousness of the situation – and delayed getting appropriate help. Rosemary survived, but was angry and traumatized. Later, a friend's well-meaning reaction only made matters worse, by invalidating those feelings.

"If the person just listens, then maybe I won't have to be angry anymore," Rosemary said.

Reflections



Be Not Afraid

My mother raised a soldier
My mother raised a clown
The soldier keeps on marching
And never makes a sound

Pain? So what? Go forward!
Disappointment that's your due
Have no expectations
Nothing is owed to you

So you caught a bullet
So sweat is in your eyes
Keep crawling through the mayhem
No tears, no groans, no cries

My mother raised a soldier
My mother raised a clown
The soldier keeps on marching
The clown cries without a sound



“This is about how I felt growing up,” said Rosemary. “My mother didn’t pamper us; that’s the soldier part. The way I could make it palatable is I could laugh at it. But the tears were still there.”

In the end, Rosemary overcame her emotionally difficult childhood. “I like myself and am satisfied with what I did. If I had been raised differently, I probably wouldn’t have written poetry or had a sense of humor, and they are my most precious gifts.”

Joy Within

I lie here waiting for sleep. I have believed always that there was someone or something larger than myself, a place better than here or if I haven't known, I have hoped.

My happiness has come from dancing with abandon and traveling through so many lives in the books I have read. My greatest happiness is from writing. It has provided me with an outlet unjudged by others wherein I have been able to express the truth of my soul. Joy has come through when the underdog triumphs.

I have loved to travel the earth observing and feeling its beauty. But my greatest journey was when I went within searching for peace and love. Sometimes I felt them, sometimes I didn't.

My ability to express myself also was in my humor. It brought such pleasure to my life and I shall be ever grateful that I could laugh at myself and had the gift to make others laugh. Great joy in that.

I was often impatient and judgmental. But I have often been patient and non-judgmental. I have loved deeply, which is the greatest gift of all. I have loved those who have been unable to love me back in the normal way but I would always receive that from others.

I have always tried to be better, not only in the earthly sense but in my heart and soul. When I have loved someone, I never stopped. I withdrew, felt hurt and angry, but the love remained.

I have felt pride in my accomplishments but never more than when they could help someone. I was never first with anyone, I believe, except for the 23 months before my brother was born, which I do not remember. I think this happened at first because I felt "unworthy." Then it became something else.

(continued)

Joy Within (continued)

I accepted that everyone else had family and that was okay with me. It never angered nor hurt me that I was never anyone's first thought. What did bother me was when I was given no thought at all. So I stood in the back of the line waiting my turn. But it was always my choice. I had many opportunities to take the traditional route but refused.

I think my life's purpose was a solitary one wherein I had to learn specific lessons for my soul. Aloneness. Humility. Unselfishness. Courage. All of this forced me to be my best friend, my advocate and, most importantly, to seek the help I needed and was not given from the heavens.

Everything always came from within. Anything outside us is momentary. That which is within is forever. It was always that great within who held me up when I faltered, who loved me when I felt unlovable and who continued to bestow gifts while systematically removing all that I had been.

I am proud that I stayed the course. I am proud that I did what was needed to the end. I am proud that I was given the honor of assisting others out of this life.

What I know for sure is that I have been loved and loved someone every day of my life. There is nothing luckier nor more blessed than that.



"This is a reflection on the way I lived my life," said Rosemary. "I knew I had a terminal illness. I wanted to leave something behind about it. It just flowed out of me."

The piece references the fact that Rosemary did not marry nor have children, but she had many other relationships that were important and meaningful to her.

A Need Unmet

My parents never considered what impact
Their actions would have
Did they not think? Did they not care?

I always cared too much what impact my
actions had on others
I always longed to be considered
For someone to protect me from the
harshness I often heard alone
For someone to buffer the news
To put me first for a moment

Not because the news would not be heard
But for once I would know
Someone fell silent
Someone raged in secret
Someone took the blows
for me

That has never happened.
And it is my most significant need unmet
Seven is too young to be left unprotected
From life's harsh truths and
Seventy is too old.



Rosemary was alone in the hospital when doctors told her she had a fatal disease. She was reminded of similar feelings of vulnerability as a child, when her parents failed to buffer painful news.

Yin - Yang

I believe that there is magic in the world – that Santa Claus exists in the unexpected gift of a friend – that people want to be better than they are – that we lose our focus because of life’s demands. I love the smile of a toddler, spontaneous laughter, dancing with abandon, that one “moment” which is perfect.

I tried to do my best, to be fair, to help the pain of others. I fought against judgment of others using some arbitrary yardstick, my inability to confront or show anger; rather I would choose to walk away without comment.

I have done some honorable things and others for which I have felt shame. There were times I could have done more but never better for I did my best every day. There have been people who have admired me and those who have actively disliked me.

I have laughed until I have cried and cried until I have laughed. I have ignored my “shadow” side more than I care to remember. After all, if I did not acknowledge it, it would remain hidden from others.

I have hurt people. I have helped people. I have disliked people. I have loved people. All this is being said because it represents the human experience. I – you – we are one. It is okay to fail. It is not okay not to try. It is okay to act less than stellar but not okay never to strive to be better.

It is not okay to fail to learn why we are here, what we need to do — because not knowing does not release you from the pain you cause to others. Jesus had one teaching, really: “Be kind to one another.” So the excuses of “I didn’t know, I should have, I didn’t realize” are just covering up the fact that you failed to learn.



After her terminal diagnosis, Rosemary spent a lot of time thinking about – and writing – what she’d learned about life. She felt a spiritual force was helping her to cope during this difficult time.

A Caregiver's Struggle

I have been a caregiver
I know how difficult it is
to incorporate yet another
thing into a too busy life
At first you are impassioned
trembling with the rage
that this plight would befall
someone you love
I will do it all you promise
Then quickly it becomes old
like something you feel
an obligation to do sometimes
while other times you do
it purely from love
Often it brings you to your knees
overwhelming you and you
long for it to end while
hoping never to lose the
spirit of the one for whom
you care
We are of good intent
We want to do it always with love
But we cannot. I know because
I have been a caregiver



Before she became seriously ill, Rosemary spent four years taking care of an elderly aunt with Alzheimer's disease. She also helped care for her younger brother, who had developmental disabilities, throughout his life.

Revelations



A Wish

No more masks
No more pretense
No more lies
No more façade
I wish I had known earlier
That you are good enough
As long as you do your best
It took time to learn that one

I wish I had known earlier
That most of the slights, insults
And hurts don't add up to much
For no one knows you in your nakedness
And that is all that counts

I wish I would have known earlier
That no one feels good enough
That everyone is good enough
Because there really isn't a good enough

I wish I would have known earlier
That there were such things to know

Freedom of Choice

You look at me and say how sad a young
Life is being cut short
I look at me and say how wonderful it is
That I finished everything

You look at me and say I have more to do
I look at me and say I can do no more
You look at me and think how much
I will miss
I look at me and know how much I won't

You look at me and think she suffered so much
I look at me and know that along with the
Travails came great joys
You look at me and think I am giving up
I look at me as giving in – surrendering

You look at me as choosing a negative
I look at me as choosing the best to happen
Neither of us knows what that is
You think it is here
I think it is there



“My cousin was very adamant that I should get the lung transplant,” said Rosemary. “But to me, it was too big a risk for too little return. I truly believe that what I was supposed to do in my life, I’ve done.”

Overlooked

There is so much kindness in the world
Hidden behind the fears that there is no
 Kindness in the world
Every day everyday people perform simple
 acts – a smile, a kind word,
 a favor barely noticed
Every day someone wins a prize or loses one
 And it is noticed only for a moment

 But I think the simple acts
The kindnesses extended without thought
 That bring a smile
 The words said to lift a spirit
 Or comfort a pain
 To make someone laugh
 These are the things of value
While all those other things are forgotten
 By the next champion or the next one
 Who loses
While the simple things remain forever in
 The people they try to touch
 Multiplying in every person for there is
 Truly great kindness in the
 World
 Of this, I am certain

Strength from Within, I

I was feeling that I was
Vulnerable and helpless
Because people failed me
Truth is that I failed me

I forgot that I am the
Master of my fate
While others tried to take
Over the helm of my ship

“We could do this” they say
“Or this” All of it making sense
But as I saw busy lives swirling
around me
Handling their own cares and
I knew in my soul

They would never have time
To weave the pieces
To fit together to give me an
Existence I never wanted

Existence is not life to me
Death is life to me



“People mean well and they want to help,” said Rosemary. “But everyone is so busy with their own life that they can’t really give you what you need. I know this because I’ve been a caregiver, too...”

“You’re human; you want to laugh and have fun. You often feel so guilty about that.”

Strength from Within, II

I would like to say there have been no
disappointments
As certain people did nothing
But – no – anger perhaps hurt
But all the others have so taken the
Place of the disappointments that
at the end it didn't
matter

People do what they must and
Cannot do what they cannot but the
Gift to me is that I don't need it
Sad really because the only important

Thing in the world has never been a
Thing
But how you made someone feel.

I always wanted to be that person whose
Name was met with a smile
I don't believe we are ships in the night
But souls travelling together to ease each
other's loads and help each
other carry them

Life is hard. On our death beds, it is not the
Things of life which matter but the things
Of the heart Of the soul

Acceptance



Late Wisdom

I started these writings to say all those lofty,
Beautiful things that remained
Unsaid by me
But all the hurts, pain, anger and disappointments
Crept in on their own
I decided then that the reason was to empty all
The needs suppressed
The feelings unsaid
The disappointments hidden
The hurts unrecognized
For they are all a part of me.
I always tried to be the “perfect child”
For I always knew that unconditional love
Was always conditional
I never became that child for how could I have
There is no perfection except perhaps to
Continue to be better today than yesterday
And that I have done every day of my life.

Breathe

Simple — breath
In — out
No thought
Out — in
Natural
Until it is not
In — out
And then no more
Breath — our spirit —
Our life
Where does it go
When it is no longer



This short poem reflects multiple thoughts, said Rosemary: "We take so much for granted. Am I afraid of dying? It's OK to still have questions. It's ok not to have all the answers."

Strength from Above. II

It is as if I am cleaning house and ridding myself of all the outworn, painful, unsaid hurts, pains, love, gratitude and secrets of my entire life. Only my house is my mind, heart and soul. It is as if all the faces I have worn are fading into the reality of who I really am. This, I believe, was the child I had been until I was scared and erected too many walls to be “strong” in order to protect myself.

It seems I am being given an opportunity to expel, one by one, every earthly tie as if I am taking a long, hot shower removing all the dirt and grime which had accumulated over many years – therefore unseen or unfelt.

Love to me seems to me to feel joy with someone’s success as if it is yours. That is why parental love is the best. There is no division between parent and child. And there it lies – the division – the parent of every pain we feel. The moment we feel “apart” we lose the best of us. The moment we need to be better or first or win, we lose. Because we are connected, our battles become a fungus within us. Egos are sometimes necessary to survive, but survival should not be our goal.

We do not take our degrees nor our earthly goods with us. We take love only. And yet the majority of our time and effort is spent on that which doesn’t matter in the end.

I am proud of my accomplishments but most proud of the intention of my heart. And my pride in my accomplishments has more to do with the strength it took to provide a safe place for my sensitive child so she could be happy in this world. Primarily, I have been happy.

I have been extremely lucky and extremely burdened. But it was quite a ride. Different from most, but I chose it. I wrote the script, played my parts. I wish I had made it easier sometimes.

And many, many times I was scared but I did it anyway. I always dared greatly. I was able to dare greatly because I felt that I had help from Someone larger than myself.

(Continued)

Strength from Above, II (continued)

When I am gone, you will say that I was strong. But it was a strength born of profound vulnerability. You will say I was kind, but it was a kindness born of experiencing overwhelming pain and wanting to alleviate it when I saw it in others. You will say I was humorous, talented and smart, but they were gifts given to me at birth. I hope to take them back well used.

I know people say “don’t cry” but I am not going to say that. How can you not when someone you loved and who loved you is gone? So you can cry – but then smile at my oddities and the relationship we enjoyed. All of you have stories to tell at my expense. I so loved telling them.

Life will go back to normal. And at some point something said or seen will remind you of me. Smile then and send a prayer. We will meet again and I will hold you to this.

A Different Path

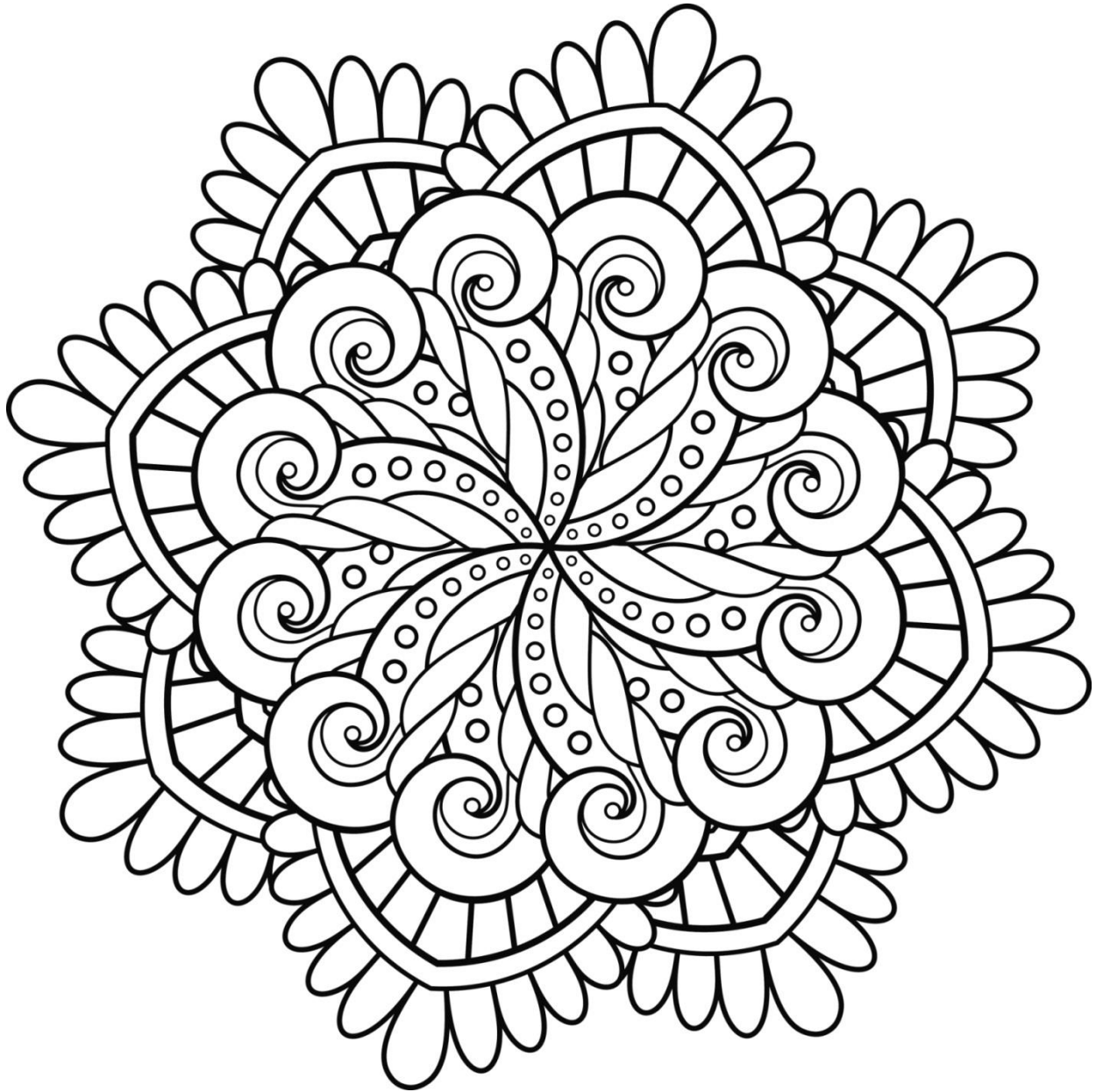
She doesn't cry
She is strong
The weak cry
She never cries
Why? What good
Does it do?
Feeling sorry for
Yourself
She is tough
She is strong
But she cried today
Silently
Completely
Unapologetically
And it felt good



*Rosemary recognized and wanted others to understand the value of expressing one's authentic feelings.
This piece also is about being human, and the gift of tears.*

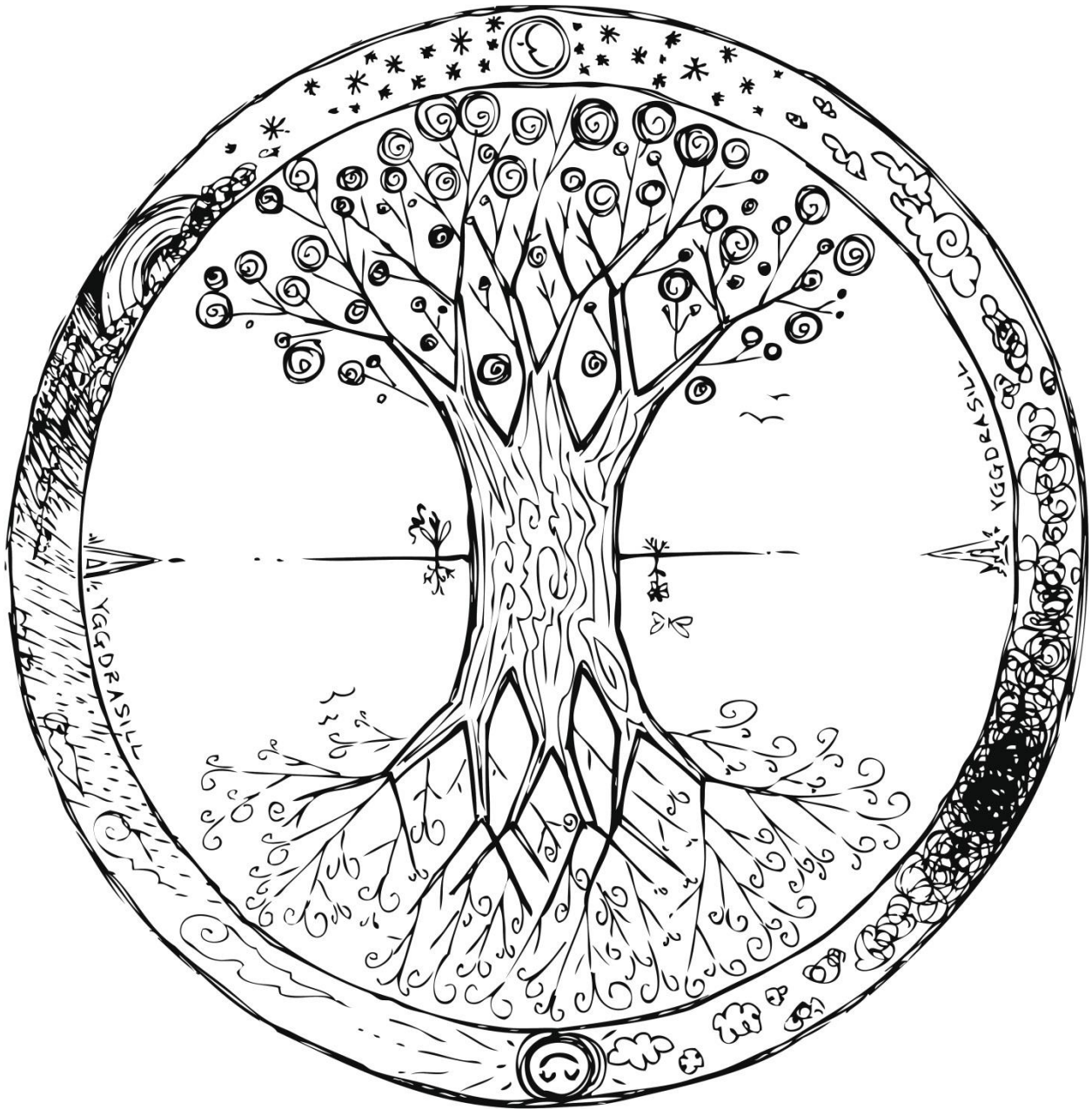
Mandala Coloring Page

A mandala is a Hindu and Buddhist symbol of the universe, usually in the form of a circle. It is often used as an aid to meditation.



Mandala Coloring Page

Rosemary chose a mandala with a beautiful tree design for the cover of this collection.
The tree also symbolizes nature and Creation.



About the Author



A teacher by nature, **Rosemary Burgo** has sought to mentor and assist others throughout her life. The lifelong South Jersey resident has worked as a lawyer, college English professor, and private tutor. An award-winning poet, she has also written three books and numerous essays.

Through her writing, Rosemary seeks answers to life's mysteries, including a connection with a higher power and a path to peace and wisdom, while helping others do the same.

Books by Rosemary Burgo

Whispers of Truth | A Baby Boomer's Memoir, 2007

The Path, 2010

Dark Night of the Soul (working title), In press; projected 2016

About Samaritan

Samaritan Healthcare & Hospice is a leading, not-for-profit provider of hospice and palliative care. Founded in 1980, the organization offers a wide range of services that enable people and families coping with serious or terminal illness to have the best quality of life possible.

Services include hospice (end-of-life) care, non-hospice palliative (comfort) care, grief support and counseling, geriatric care management, professional training, and community education.

Samaritan's holistic approach addresses each person's physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs, and includes support for family members. For more information, please visit SamaritanNJ.org or call (800) 229-8183.



Administrative Office

5 Eves Drive, Suite 300
Marlton, NJ 08053
(800) 229-8183

Samaritan Center for Grief Support

5 Eves Drive, Suite 180
Marlton, NJ 08053
(800) 596-8550

Samaritan Inpatient Hospice Center

175 Madison Avenue, 2 South
Mt. Holly, NJ 08060
(609) 845-2200

Samaritan Thrift

33 Haddon Avenue
Westmont, NJ 08108
(856) 240-7248

20 S. Broadway
Pitman, NJ 08071
(856) 761-7294

SamaritanNJ.org