

A Celebration of the Life of Vijaya (Catherine) Claxton

9 DECEMBER 1947 – 23 DECEMBER 2009



FRIDAY, 22 JANUARY 2010, 1 P.M.
CHAPEL OF THE CHURCH CENTER FOR THE UNITED NATIONS
777 UNITED NATIONS PLAZA, NEW YORK

A Celebration of the Life of Vijaya Claxton

PRELUDE ON FLUTE

Upasana Young
UNICEF

WELCOME

Nilima Silver
Programme Coordinator
Sri Chinmoy: The Peace Meditation
at the United Nations

SONGS

“Vijaya”
and song dedicated to
the United Nations.
Words and music by Sri Chinmoy
Performed by the
**Choir of The Peace Meditation
at the United Nations**

SPEAKERS

Keith Claxton
Vijaya’s brother

Donna Fleming
Vijaya’s mother

Johnston S. Barkat
Assistant Secretary-General
United Nations Ombudsman
and Mediation Services

Andrei Terekhov
Executive Director
Office of Administration of Justice

Gordon H. Tapper
Chief, Facilities Management
Service, DM (retired)

Brian Gorlick
Chief, Office of Staff Legal Assistance

Ramu Damodaran
Deputy Director, UN Outreach Division,
DPI; President, UN Staff Recreation Council

Willard Hass
Chairperson, Steering Committee
of the former Panel of Counsel;
Vice President, U Thant Institute

Keith A. Beauchamp
Filmmaker

Bhikshuni Weisbrot
Vice-President, UNSRC Society
of Writers; UNDP staff member

POSTLUDE ON ORGAN

Martin Garratt
DGACM

PEACE DOVE COOKIES AND FLOWERS

It was Vijaya’s custom always to have
sweets in her office to welcome visitors.
Guests are invited to take a small gift
of a peace dove cookie, along with a
rose, at the end of the programme in
honour of her tradition.

SELECTED TRIBUTES TO VIJAYA

Below are excerpts from the generous outpouring of tributes received since Vijaya's passing.

From Vijaya's Family

Please join me in celebrating my sister Vijaya's life,
a life that was always directed in a positive direction,
a life that always wanted and sought purpose,
a life that recognized and celebrated the accomplishments of others,
a life that was always directed toward what we can do, not what we failed to do,
a life well and fully spent.

KEITH CLAXTON *Vijaya's brother*



“I am part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move,
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life!”

These lines by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem, “Ulysses,” mirror memories of my child, Vijaya. Ulysses was a warrior, a leader, a traveler, a protector, an adventurer — one who loved life and confronted challenges with intelligence. So was it with Vijaya. Her joy, her honesty, her sense of justice lives on in those of us who loved her. Vijaya was beauty; her beauty still dazzles me. She was independent and strong, unfazed by the fight against the English Channel, against the many confrontations that she weathered in her much too short life.

“As though to breathe were life, to rust unburnished, not to shine in use” — I never asked Vijaya for her definition of life, but just breathing, a life unburnished and not shining, would not have made the grade.

DONNA FLEMING *Vijaya's mother*

Tributes from United Nations Colleagues and Friends

I am very saddened to hear of Vijaya's passing away. I recall her warmth of spirit and intense humanity. Her strong swimming capabilities and her boundless cheerfulness. Please convey my heartfelt condolences to her family and close friends. She was a good soul.

VIJAY NAMBIAR *Under-Secretary-General and Chef de Cabinet of the United Nations*



I would like to express my sadness regarding the passing away of Catherine Vijaya Claxton. I had enormous regard for her and appreciated deeply her contribution and disposition to help in achieving the reform of the UN's internal system of justice. She worked tirelessly together with the Department of Management team in achieving this goal. Her passionate dedication to the Panel of Counsel was key in the establishment of the Office of Staff Legal Assistance to support staff. Her beautiful eyes mirrored her heart. My fond memories and high regards to her family for their wonderful daughter and sister – who was a friend to us all.

ALICIA BARCENA *UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director,
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*



Vijaya (aka Catherine) Claxton struggled for twenty years in the position of Coordinator of the Panel of Counsel and was a key advocate for reforming the system. Despite her efforts and victories, she ended up in a basement office, which produced more good work for staff than many could dream of. And she did this with almost hand-out resources. Vijaya was nevertheless able to build a credible platform to assist staff. Vijaya was successful because she worked endlessly, was excellent with people, and she cared. She was a credible voice with staff and management. While not formally trained as a lawyer, Vijaya was more knowledgeable about the rules, jurisprudence and how the system worked (or didn't) than anyone I know.

For those of us who knew Vijaya, her loss is great and seemingly unfair. Vijaya had retired from a long UN career only last summer, and she was looking forward to working again as a mediator. She would have been a forthright, knowledgeable and results-oriented mediator. Unfortunately her disease was too far progressed. I understand from the colleagues who visited her in the hospice that she fought hard to survive, as was her character.

What Vijaya created as a legal aid office for UN staff and, more importantly, what we now have in the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) as a global office, is her legacy to the United

Nations. OSLA must continue to do our best to make the internal system of UN administrative justice, of which OSLA is an integral part, the best it can be. We must do it for ourselves, for the staff — our clients, and for the memory of Vijaya.

BRIAN GORLICK *Chief, Office of Staff Legal Assistance, Office of Administration of Justice*



I met Vijaya in 1986 or so, when she worked with Cedric Thornberry in the Panel of Counsel (POC) and I worked with the Joint Appeals Board/Joint Disciplinary Committee, as Assistant Secretary. Cedric was a D-1, but after he went on to greener pastures, Vijaya practically single-handedly carried on the work of the office. Over the years, she really put the POC on the map, under often very difficult circumstances and without adequate resources. She just managed — always cheerful and willing to go the extra mile. Without her input and efforts, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance would not exist today.

MARITZA STRUYVENBERG *Principal Registrar, Office of the Administration of Justice*



I remember Vijaya, or Catherine as I knew her for most of my UN career, with fondness and admiration.

In the past two years I had the privilege of working closely with Vijaya, on the reform of the UN's internal justice system. Many people were involved in this effort. But she was the one with the true passion. She had seen a lot of injustice and unfair treatment of staff, and worked tirelessly on their behalf. She left no stone unturned, no path unexplored, to ensure that individual staff members had help in defending themselves or trying to find solutions to intractable situations. But she knew that even with the best intentions of volunteers across the UN, this was not enough. The system itself had to change.

She played a key role in championing a professionalized administration of justice system, with legal assistance and mediation provided to staff. Whether in an internal coordination meeting of the justice reform team, or in informal meetings of the Fifth Committee, she gave one hundred per cent. She was persuasive, and I believe won over many simply as a result of the transparency of her convictions. I can still remember how her whole face shone when the General Assembly approved the new system, in 2008.

Vijaya touched a lot of staff all over the world. She honestly cared for people's wellbeing, and for justice and fairness, and she was never fearful to stand up to those more powerful.

Many staff owe a lot to Vijaya, whether directly or indirectly.

In some ways, I owe her my UN career: she was the person who first interviewed me when I applied for a job at the UN 30 years ago.

MLENA DISSIN *Deputy Director, Administration and Management Outreach Division, DPI*

I am sorry to say that I only came to know Vijaya in the last years of her life. I had the privilege of collaborating with her on one of her greatest legacies — the reform of the UN’s internal justice system. There is no one here, and probably no one in the entire UN system who encountered Vijaya, that didn’t feel her deep and abiding passion for justice.

Of all of the remarkable things about this very remarkable woman was the fact that Vijaya believed and lived the core values that all UN staff members are supposed to share. She believed in the mission of this place and knew instinctively that the UN couldn’t succeed in its varied global missions without providing justice to its staff and operating by rule-of-law principles within its own walls.

But as much as I came to know Vijaya through an issue that she felt great passion for, and could say much more about her dedication, determination and fortitude, I think what remains with me most is the warmth that she exuded and the deep sense of optimism with which she approached all her endeavours. Given her role advocating for staff, it would have been easy for her to become tired, jaded, or cynical. But to the contrary, Vijaya was, above all things, a builder and a solution finder. She was also genuine, open and honest — traits that made her a good friend as well as an outstanding colleague.

I miss her good counsel and great spirit, but feel privileged to have been able to know her and count her as a friend.

KRISTINA CAREY *Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Office of Administration of Justice*



Vijaya’s death is a tragic loss not only for her family, friends and colleagues, but also for all United Nations staff members around the world. She has dedicated many years of her service with the United Nations to defend the rights of staff members in her capacity as Coordinator of the Panel of Counsel. I had the pleasure and the privilege to work with her as part of the redesign of the system of administration of justice at the UN. She played an invaluable role in this exercise, always defending zealously the rights of staff members. The last time I visited Vijaya in her office, she kindly gave me copies of her beautiful artwork including a self-portrait of herself swimming across the English Channel. Vijaya will continue to be an inspiration for all of us and will be sorely missed.

OUSMANE KANE *Chief, Management Evaluation Unit Office of the USG for Management*



I started my career in Geneva and heard of the “Claxton” woman as part of my work all the way across the Atlantic. I only met her, however, when assigned to New York. This was still early in my career, and I was not sure what to expect. She walked into our first scheduled meeting in charge! In charge of her surroundings, her situation, her life. She exuded purpose

— a meaningful reason for all that she did, personally and professionally.

Some people were intimidated by this strength — though it was always a delight and often amusing. She was quick to take on the hard fight and not infrequently made me secretly smile at her clever ways of getting to the best solution even if it meant that I conceded defeat.

She always won the respect and admiration of us all. I will remember her as the person who single-handedly carved out the important function she served at the UN and against many, many challenges. I probably was one of her challenges, and she overcame me with skill, wisdom and a lot of just plain decency, which is not always easy to find in this world. It is impossible not to appreciate Vijaya, her work and her contribution to the lives of so many. I know she will always live in my memory and I feel better for it.

MICHAEL DUDLEY *Acting Director, Investigations Division, UN/OIOS*



Vijaya's fount of wisdom streamed through every river in her life and bore many along with her. She was an inspiration to so many of us, showing us how there could be a way forward, how people could be treated with justice and with dignity. Vijaya's wit, ready smile and gurgling laugh were great pleasures for us all, and the fact that they were accompanied by a resolve of steel brought strength and comfort when most needed. She was a champion in our midst and we will miss her sorely.

JAMES A. LEE *Consultant Ombudsman, Office of the United Nations Ombudsman*



All who met and interacted with Vijaya were deeply impacted by her sincerity, warmth, inclusiveness, vibrancy, and most of all, by her profound sense of justice. I had the privilege of working closely with Vijaya over the past three years and she was not only a friend and colleague, but also a true inspiration to me. In addition to being a joy to sit and dine with socially, she was also serious about professional improvements in the informal system.

Vijaya was fully committed to the cause of justice and celebrated every milestone of progress towards the eventual reform of the justice system of the United Nations. She maintained a relentless pace to ensure that no staff member's quest for justice and fair treatment fell through the cracks, spared no effort to discuss, meet, or look at the issues from diverse perspectives. She never thought that one more meeting to resolve an issue was too much, even after she had spent an entire night working with Committees to advocate for resources and a functional and effective justice system.

For Vijaya no issue was too trivial and each case was worth a thorough review of its merits. Once she could establish that there was injustice, she was resolute in trying to ensure that justice was done. She has left an indelible mark and standard in the informal system. It is indeed cruel irony that just as the promise of a more functional and effective justice system for

the United Nations loomed on the horizon, and a greater opportunity for Vijaya to play a vital role was emerging, she was suddenly taken from us. She is already sorely missed. I certainly will miss you, Vijaya, my colleague and friend.

VERONICA LUARD *Joint Ombudsperson (UNDP/UNFPA/UNICEF/UNOPS)*



Vijaya was so full of life, energy, compassion and determination; it is incomprehensible that she is no longer among us. I came to know Vijaya over the years as a colleague and friend and admired her humanism and readiness to always stand for what is fair and right. Her dreams took her across the Channel and into the study halls of Cornell and Columbia. She was always considering the next challenge. I shall miss her dearly.

SIMONA PETROVA *Principal Officer, Executive Office of the Secretary-General*



As one who worked closely with Vijaya in the Panel of Counsel for over fifteen years, the most striking quality I observed was her determination to take action toward what she considered right and good, without regard for its effect on her own wellbeing. When facing the challenges of her UN work, Vijaya never asked the question, “Is it possible?” but only, “Is it the right thing to do?” When the answer was affirmative, action immediately followed.

SURASHRI PARADIS *Legal Assistant, Office of Staff Legal Assistance*



Vijaya’s commitment to justice and doing what was right — even when it was the rockier path — endures in the many people she inspired at the Organization in which she believed. Protecting the rights of others with tenacity and heart was just one of her many gifts, as was her ability to fill a room with laughter.

JOANNA PAUL *Legal Officer, United Nations Dispute Tribunal;
and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



As a volunteer member of the Panel of Counsel, I worked with Vijaya from 1996 to 2009. Words cannot convey the extraordinary job she did as the Coordinator of the Panel. For most of this period, she worked with a single assistant and a variety of volunteers like myself, trying to ensure that staff could get the support they needed to navigate the treacherous seas

known as the UN system of justice. She was battling against all the odds, with a hopelessly understaffed office, and having to tread a fine line between serving staff members who needed help and maintaining an effective working relationship with her employer. Needless to say, this was a situation fraught with potential for misunderstandings and bad feelings. That she succeeded as Coordinator for 20 years underlines her dedication to both the staff and the Organization, and the exceptional skills and personal qualities she brought to the job.

Vijaya leaves a rich legacy. She strove tirelessly to address the serious flaws in the system of justice, and her efforts were rewarded when drastic reforms were approved by the General Assembly in 2008 and 2009. She guided the staff of the Panel of Counsel, and taught volunteers like me just about everything we know about justice at the UN. I fully expected to continue to see her in her new role as a mediator, and to continue to benefit from her unequalled knowledge and insights for many years to come. Her untimely demise is a huge loss to the Organization. She will be very sadly missed by her former colleagues, and most especially by the hundreds of staff who have benefited from her wisdom and compassion.

CHRISTOPHER RONALD *Volunteer Counsel, OSLA, and member, former Panel of Counsel*



I first met Vijaya Claxton soon after I was appointed Secretary of the Disciplinary Committee of UNDP/UNOPS/UNHCR. She graciously invited me to lunch to talk shop. We soon realized that we not only had many interests in common but also had mutual close friends. Immediately after my stint at UNDP ended, she invited me to join the Panel of Counsel office (POC), which was located in a three-room basement office in the Secretariat building.

The POC staff consisted of a less than a handful of people that was in effect charged with providing legal support to thousands of UN staff the world over. Totally unfazed by the near impossible task of servicing such a large labour force, Vijaya Claxton had ingeniously melded a hardy band of workers and allied retirees and volunteers into a powerful law office. We were all inspired by her pioneering spirit and keen commitment to the hapless staff members strewn across the world who looked to the POC office for not only legal support but also for emotional succor as well. Vijaya successfully instilled in the POC a deep sense of commitment and dedication to the varied needs of its clientele who would otherwise have been bereft of effective legal assistance. The skeletal staff was bided over by Vijaya Claxton's noble spirit of service and cheerfully took on the daunting task before them. We saw ourselves as the proletariat of the UN legal system pitted against the bourgeoisie of the Administration's legal support team. We all had heavy caseloads and shaky contracts, but we soldiered on, fueled by the powerful spirit of service Vijaya Claxton had instilled in us. The vast majority of clients we serviced came to respect us and repeatedly plumbed the POC for legal counsel in all phases of their careers and work.

But there was more to Vijaya Claxton than the workload of the POC; she had a panoramic view of the UN legal system and set herself the task of transforming and making it more re-

sponsive to the needs of the UN community. Long before it became fashionable, she started the campaign of getting the General Assembly to install a professional system of justice run by real judges. She tirelessly lobbied the various delegations of the GA for years until the idea of transforming the internal system of justice was first accepted and then a process was set in motion to make it a reality. For those who are in the know, Vijaya Claxton was the driving force behind the movement that led to the creation of the Office of Administration of Justice (OAJ). It is rather ironic that she had retired and was not available to receive the accolades due her for her selfless contributions. However, that will not detract from her achievement because in a very real sense, the OAJ will stand as her monument and a sure recognition of her patriotic commitment to the UN Organization.

The POC alumni can safely testify that it was Vijaya Claxton who single-handedly built a spirit of cooperation and cordiality within the POC which formed the cohesive element that impelled the tiny POC to pursue the claims of its large clientele without fussing over the obvious lack of resources. Vijaya Claxton kept up our spirits and was always available to provide the staff with directives, advice and solutions to knotty problems that cropped up all the time. Vijaya Claxton was so dedicated to the cause of clients and the effectiveness of the POC that even when she went on vacation or in “treatment” she freely responded to the questions we plied her about pressing problems. She never let on about any mishaps about her personal situation but was instead keenly concerned about the well-being of each and every member of the POC larger family. Vijaya Claxton’s noble spirit so pervaded the POC office that the staff developed a sibling interest in each other. This spirit of dedication has been carried over into OSLA (POC’S successor), which is in turn expanding the efforts of the POC to an ever increasing clientele base. OSLA is in effect carrying on Vijaya Claxton’s noble spirit of dedicated service (*sans* resources) to the great benefit of its wide array of clients.

It bears noting that the name she adopted in adulthood — Vijaya — which means victory, is truly apt because it sums up the outcome of her remarkable achievement to the service of the UN community.

DUKE DANQUAH *Legal Officer, OSLA; and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



Vijaya was one of the most peace-loving and compassionate human beings I have ever met. She showed great concern for the people she served and devoted herself wholeheartedly and tirelessly to ensuring that not only were their grievances handled in a professional manner, but that they understood that she cared about their being treated with dignity and respect.

Vijaya’s work at the UN and her relations with colleagues truly exemplified the lofty objectives of the UN — promoting and encouraging peace and respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction. She will never be forgotten and her legacy will endure.

ROSE MARIE DENNIS *Legal Officer, OSLA; and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*

Simply a lovely, wonderful person! My father's greatest compliment was, "S/he had good instincts." It was Vijaya's lot in life not only to have them, but to act on them, unfailingly — perhaps not the easiest thing to do at the United Nations. I will, like everyone else, miss her enormously.

C. STEPHEN BALDWIN *Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



Vijaya was a very accomplished athlete who, only a few years before retirement, crossed the English Channel. This achievement required years of training, willpower, great determination, perseverance, courage and strength. In the same manner, without ever being discouraged, with generosity and caring for her colleagues, Vijaya tackled the daunting task of their defense under a dysfunctional system and with such insufficient means at her disposal. She also contributed to the new system of administration of justice that she had at heart.

ANNE FOSTY *Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*

She was a very rare and unique staff member in the fashion she demonstrated her devotion to duty and in her humane and compassionate handling of each case. At the same time she maintained excellent relations all around and never failed to provide support to her colleagues and associates.

ANTONIO T. BAUTISTA *Volunteer Counsel, OSLA; and Member, former Panel of Counsel*



I first heard about Vijaya more than two decades ago when, as a young lawyer at the UN, I was trying to find out how to assist my colleagues in need of legal advice and representation. My phone rang in Santiago, and there was this encouraging and cheerful voice on the other end, inviting me to the great adventure of fighting for our internal justice. We kept a very encouraging phone and later email contact for years and I only met her personally during a mission to NY in 2005. I will never forget her welcoming attitude, the funny efforts to look for a place to sit amidst papers, folders, books, candles and flowers, and her offering me a tempting variety of incredible teas which we drank while talking for hours in the middle of her taking care of people, phone calls, her reviewing submissions and arranging beautiful flowers in fresh water. After that wonderful journey, I left her office with a reinforced conviction that, as many people wisely say, "Impossible is not a fact, only an opinion."

Some years afterwards, during a longer assignment in New York in 2007, I was finally able to assist the New York Panel of Counsel for a month. I had the opportunity to share cases (some of them that I still handle), approaches, initiatives and legal arguments with her, but also all her excitement, decisions and hope for the crossing of the Channel. Other friends in the office and I enjoyed learning about the Channel swimmers' fraternity. We examined maps, tide and winds information, and we walked in our minds and souls along Normandy. I really

felt like we were preparing for a D-Day.

Of course, one could speak about sadness, surprise, denial of the departure of somebody so cheerful, active, healthy. But let me say that I firmly believe that she departed in a time of joy, of life, of hope. I am sure she has entered that wonderful place in which she certainly believed through her strong and lively faith, smiling and transmitting courage, dreams for a better world, beauty, compassion, commitment. She will surely cast a different but equally powerful light as she did during her passage for this life on Earth.

I only hope that, as a pro-bono counselor for my colleagues worldwide, I am able to keep the flame that she once lit for all those in need of justice.

CARMEN ARTIGAS *Legal Officer, ECLAC, Santiago;
and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



As the Coordinator of the Panel of Counsel, Vijaya achieved much more than anyone believed was possible. Because of her efforts and influence, the administration of justice became much more fair and equitable. She also made major contributions to the development of the new system of justice.

In some legal cases in Peacekeeping Missions, staff felt abandoned and hopeless. Vijaya made an immediate and positive difference in their lives. Vijaya took risks instead of playing it safe; she boldly pursued what she believed in and she made a major difference in the lives of many people. Vijaya lived a life to be proud of.

BERNARD ADAMS *Volunteer Counsel, OSLA; and Member, former Panel of Counsel*



Vijaya will be remembered not only for her tireless efforts to assist staff in their time of need for a compassionate listener and advocate, but also as an effective voice for gender issues in the workplace. She has touched so many of us and will be truly missed.

AMAL OUMMIH *Legal Officer, OSLA; and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



Dear Vijaya, you have fought a good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for you a crown of righteousness. Rest in Peace!

ROSALIE AKA *Legal Specialist, Legal Support Office Bureau of Management, UNDP*

Vijaya Claxton was full of life and energy and, more importantly, lived life to the full. She was a fantastic advocate for many former and present UN employees who were wrongfully treated by the Organization and she gave a renewed sense that justice was still possible in this world despite the odds stacked against them. The richness and depth of her experience in advocacy of employees' rights in the UN is probably without equal. Vijaya was always willing to impart her knowledge and experience and give advice despite her hectic schedule.

Vijaya was in many ways a pioneer of the changes in the internal justice system and was constantly seeking and successfully using new ways to obtain justice for aggrieved staff members. The changes she pioneered were necessary for the UN and will, in the long term, be positive for the UN and its employees. One day when the history is written of Internal Justice at the UN, Vijaya's important role will undoubtedly be recognized.

Personally, many of the lessons Vijaya taught me about advocacy still form the basis of the work that I do now as a lawyer. I also remember the wonderful cookies and other goodies that she always made available to visitors of the Panel of Counsel. It was indeed a pleasure and great learning experience working with Vijaya, and her loss will be greatly felt by myself and countless others whose lives she touched.

CYRIL F. KUDIABOR *Assistant General Counsel, The City of New York,
Office of Labor Relations; and Member, former Panel of Counsel*



Over the last few weeks I have been thinking about the impact Vijaya has had on so many different people. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry explained that love is looking “together in the same direction.” Vijaya seemed to approach each person and the problems that they brought to her from this perspective. She would identify so completely that one felt she understood the situation better than someone who was in the middle of a difficulty. Then she would do everything possible to obtain the best result. People felt Vijaya's acceptance of them and the intense focus and commitment to their concerns as a sign of her great capacity to love.

She felt things so intensely and suffered deeply from people's disappointments; however, she would not give up. She was always willing to try one more thing. If she felt something was right, she would try another approach to cajole someone into taking progressive action.

She was a true warrior in the best sense of the word. She always strove to be an instrument for good. She loved to be victorious for something she felt was right and yet was able to accept temporary setbacks as experiences to be learned from and transcended. I am sure now she will be finding ways to assist the good and beautiful and all those she loved from the new plane where her soul resides.

ADHIRATHA KEEFE *Member, former Panel of Counsel; English Channel swimmer;
and Project Officer, Records and Archives Management Unit, UNICEF (retired)*

I worked with Catherine Vijaya Claxton for more than 20 years in the Panel of Counsel. I had the greatest admiration for her total dedication to her function. It was really much more than work for her; it was a sacerdotal activity. She devoted countless hours every day trying to help colleagues who were victims of the UN bureaucracy. Her generosity and devotion were exceptional and she will never be replaced.

JOFRED GRINBLAT *Volunteer Counsel, OSLA; and Member, former Panel of Counsel*



My contact with Catherine goes back to early 2004 when I requested assistance from the UN Panel of Counsel. I found in Catherine an officer in the very best sense supporting and guiding me in my case. Through her selfless work, Catherine has gained my profound respect and gratitude. She will be sorely missed by many colleagues in the UN and beyond. I shall remember Catherine Claxton forever!

RAINER LESAR *Former Director of UNMIK,
Directorate of Infrastructure Affairs, Communications*



Vijaya was a wonderful person with a lot of vigor, energy and trust in her clients. I was one who felt privileged as she really tried to assist me more than expected. Moreover, she was a good listener and gave comfort at times when many of my UN colleagues had turned away. I am currently working for the European Union in Tbilisi, but my thoughts will be with her family and friends and colleagues in New York.

GERARD FISCHER *Client, former Panel of Counsel*

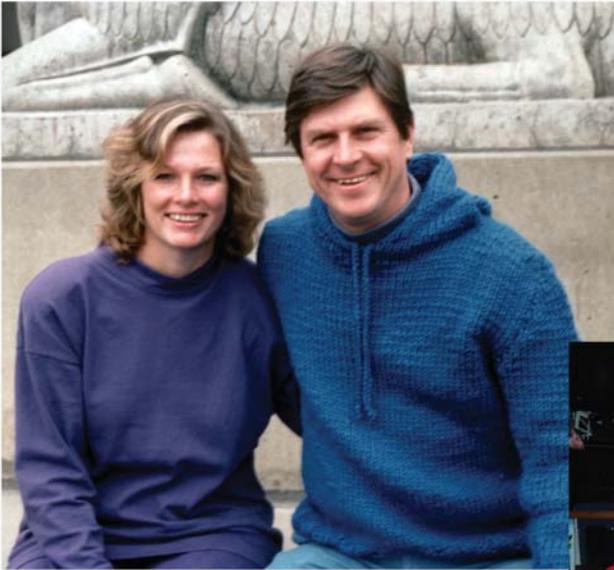


“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...”

Only these words from Keats can truly express the pain I feel at the loss of our dear sister, Vijaya.

GORDON H. TAPPER *Chief, Facilities Management Service,
Department of Management (retired)*





Left: Vijaya with her brother, Keith Claxton, above, in California; and below, in Dover, England, in July 2007, two months before Vijaya's successful English Channel swim.



Above: Vijaya with her mother, Donna Fleming.





Vijaya sporting a Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation cap.



Vijaya communicating with her support crew before a training swim.



Vijaya serving as Master of Ceremonies at the Poetry Reading Celebrating the United Nations Year of the Dialogue Among Civilizations held at the United Nations, 29 March 2001.

I was impressed by her care for the UN staff, her commitment to justice and her dedication to work beyond what was expected of her to reach this outstanding goal. This was a challenging job, but she did not yield and took up the challenge with confidence and belief. Colleagues are very proud of her great service, and she left us while being proud of all the good contributions she made. We are missing her greatly at this particular time of year when the sky opens up with blessings. Surely, she will be in a very good place before the Lord and she will be blessed by God.

MORTEZA MIRMOHAMMAD *Chief, Organizational Design and Classification Unit, Field Personnel Division, Department of Field Support*



I had the opportunity to work with Vijaya to try to help staff members struggling with substance abuse. Vijaya was compassionate. She worked with the energy of a true spiritual warrior. Vijaya helped me learn to negotiate, through her skills in mediation. I will not forget the day Vijaya invited me into her office to view the DVD of her swimming the English Channel. Over a cup of tea, she shared with me how she was feeling during each phase of her 22-hour swim. Vijaya is a strong example that we can accomplish whatever we set our intentions on.

KEN DALEY *UN Joint Staff Pension Fund, PES Section (retired)*



We were all very blessed to have Vijaya in our lives. She was always on the move and usually on someone else's behalf. She was a true live-wire — always onto something else, trying something new, climbing a higher mountain. I am very sorry to hear that she has left this world.

MAUREEN OTTO *UN Department of General Assembly and Conference Management*



Vijaya was a mentor, guide and spiritual big sister to me, like she was to many others. The last time I saw her, right before her retirement, I wanted to get advice on effecting a transformation in how the UN addresses external conflict prevention work, as she did with internal conflict work. Basically, she told me there is no secret; stay true to your vision and do it from a higher perspective, a spiritual perspective....not for one's own aggrandizement, but wholly for the cause. She really did incredible work despite so many challenges.

Vijaya was one of the strongest people I had ever met, physically (setting the record for the oldest American woman to swim the English Channel), mentally (figuring out and staying the course on moving the whole UN system, including the General Assembly to create the mas-

sive change of a new internal justice system), and spiritually (being a devoted disciple of Sri Chinmoy and upholding those standards unflinchingly). I just cannot believe there is a battle she lost, but not without a fight, the depths of which we cannot even imagine.

GAY ROSENBLUM-KUMAR *Secretary, Framework Team Bureau
for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, UNDP*



I am deeply saddened by the news of Vijaya's passing, and would like to offer my sincere condolences to her family, friends and colleagues. I only met Vijaya a few times, but she immediately struck me as a genuinely kind and compassionate person. The world needs more like her.

NICOLAS MORIN *Security Advisor, World Food Programme, Rome*



Vijaya reminds me of the great architect who places the right people in the right place at the right time. The Panel of Counsel was the perfect place for Vijaya. She embodied the spirit of a great counselor. When you sat in front of her with a problem, you immediately sensed her empathy and desire to be of help. You walked away relieved and uplifted, knowing there was hope and a solution to your problem, and that Vijaya and the Panel of Counsel were with you. This Organization is so much richer for the dedicated and inspiring work of Vijaya and her staff.

Under the guidance of Vijaya, I have seen the Panel of Counsel blossom from a small seed into the beautiful flower that it is today: the Office of Staff Legal Assistance. Thanks, Vijaya, thanks for your great spirit of inspiration, dedication and love for your brothers and sisters. God bless Vijaya.

ANSELMO EVANS *Assistant Archivist,
UN Archives and Records Management Service (retired)*

1947-2009

First comes the date of birth

Followed by a dash

Then comes the date we depart

What matters most in this life is not the date of our birth nor the date we depart this world

What matters most is HOW WE SPEND OUR DASH

I would like to share with you my impressions of my dear friend and colleague Vijaya, and more importantly, how I believe that she spent her DASH

To me, Vijaya “Catherine”, You Were

Loved<>Not liked,

Understood<>Misunderstood

This was the daily scene

Lived by Catherine

Humble<>outspoken

Sensitive<>in your face

Always addressing the issue at hand

As she thought deep down inside it should be

Accomplished artist

Accomplished athlete

The English Channel will

Not see the likes of a Vijaya

For a while, perhaps never

Because of her multi-talented

Multifaceted nature with

Multiple names, multiple friends

Multiple committee meetings

Multiple trainings

Multiple streams of output

Open in her own way to

Receiving inputs at times, yes

Ah, that, for me was my Vijaya

MURIEL GLASGOW *Member, former Panel of Counsel*



There Is So Much to Do in Your Honour

Besides the many cakes,
a small pot of berries to plant for the new spring
named victory — after you —
This is not sentiment.
It is an urban salute to the Van Gogh beauty of your garden,
one that could transfix
with a palette of vibrant primary colors.
So I will wear strong reds, yellows and blues — nothing lackluster.

As much as I can, I will challenge the physical world,
move forward on earth as if it were weightless stuff beneath the feet
to be tapped down hard with the clackity-clack of high heels.
And how your hug could bear witness to a maternal heart,
I will have to pass that on —
grip of affection and plain speak.

Ah my friend, in a sheltered car ride,
an hour's commute, I would shift the incomprehensible
onto your strong swimmer's shoulders
so I could kick back and daydream out the window.

We, who too, will one day be warriors
will miss your wise counsel.

There is so much to do in your honour.

BHIKSHUNI WEISBROT *Vice-President, UNSRC Society of Writers; and UNDP staff member*



Vijaya — Heroic Champion

To lift and inspire
You courageously braved the fire
Of forces undivine
With your manner gracious and kind;
Heroically you transcended
Ruthless failure — unbended —
And undaunted you strove,
Into cold waters you dove
To swim without ceasing —
Your victory-delight increasing.

The suffering ones you embraced
With wit, wisdom and grace.
Some knew you as Catherine —
How great your noble soul! And in
Our lives, Vijaya, you shone
As our fondest, trusted champion.
May Mother Earth's affection-smile be brightest
As you speedily journey to the highest.
Our gratitude-message we impart:
You are forever in our hearts.

NILPUSHPI WHITE *Member, UNSRC Society of Writers; and UNFPA staff member*



Often when one is on a journey for justice, you become so consumed on the path you have taken, that you forget the angelic people who have come into your life, to give you a clear perspective on your spiritual calling. No matter how long I prepared myself to overcome unforeseen obstacles that would come my way, Vijaya was always there with her sisterly and spiritual advice to help me see things through. I'll miss her dearly.

KEITH A. BEAUCHAMP *Filmmaker and Director, "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till"*



A tear in my heart falls for Catherine Claxton, a magnificent and dynamic spirit I met years ago at the United Nations. We met via a New York news article on a movie I worked on, and that article set in motion our meeting. Ms. Claxton was a joy and bundle of experience and knowledge, and we spoke of other projects that we could work on for the United Nations. I am deeply saddened to hear this news, but I am humbled and grateful to have met her, worked with her and laughed with her. I remember most her speaking about swimming the English Channel; her many tales of her journey were a gift to hear and inspiring.

I send my heartfelt condolences for her passing and pray for healing and comfort for her family, friends and all the staff at the U.N. To have known Catherine was an "honour"; we had become not only business associates but also friends. I will miss my friend and mentor and will always keep her in my heart.

ANTHONY ANDRE JONES *CEO/President, Senoj LLC, Movie/TV/Music Producer/Director*



I happened to be on the jetty when Vijaya came off the boat after her Channel swim and I recall being immensely impressed by how cheerful and energetic she was. She wasn't fast, but she had enormous determination. It was a long and therefore a tough swim — but you never would have known it. She was an inspiration.

KEVIN MURPHY *"King of the Channel" with 34 English Channel swims (UK)*



She was a remarkable individual who gave so much to others. It has been a real privilege to be her friend. She has enriched my life and that of many people who had the fortune of knowing her. She leaves a big gap in many of her friends' lives, because of the love and affection she transmitted to all of those around her. She will be dearly missed.

LAURA OPEZ-BONILLA *English Channel swimmer (Spain)*



I remember the day when Vijaya came back after her Channel swim. I was happy to be able to take a photo of her with Kevin Murphy and Alison Streeter (43 Channel swims) on the jetty. She was tired, but extremely happy, content and at peace, having succeeded at last. She was also proud as anything to have her photo taken with the King and Queen of the Channel.

CLIFF GOLDING *English Channel swimmer (UK)*



Vijaya Claxton from New York, one of the most respected, committed and cherished English Channel swimmers in recent history, passed away this week after losing her battle with cancer. In addition to her position as the Coordinator, Panel of Counsel at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, where she worked relentlessly as a public defender, she was similarly persistent in her pursuit of swimming the English Channel over the course of the years.

As the news of her passing was learned throughout the swimming community, tributes poured in from all over the world from people whom she touched and inspired by her actions, words and memory. She truly led a life worth living. May many others follow in her wake.

STEVE MUNATONES *Coach, USA Swimming National Open-Water Swimming Team*



Vijaya was someone who made a positive difference in the world. She strived to do, and be her best, and I think she inspired all of us.

LYNNE COX *American long-distance open-water swimmer and writer,
and English Channel swimmer*

With her wonderful determination, Vijaya finally became an English Channel swimmer. It was a longtime dream realized. The crossing fulfilled years of training and spiritual work on her part and her loyal support teams. The CS&PF [Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation] honored Vijaya with the Gertrude Ederle Award for her relentless effort to reach France, and I know that meant the world to her. Vijaya embodied Victory, which is the meaning of her name. She inspired many of us so much — beyond words for me here really.

AHELEE SUE OSBORN *Ironman Triathlete, English Channel swimmer and coach (USA)*



I only met her once, but was in awe when she told me about her swims. We had a great laugh, but not once did she ever mention her illness or complain. I am in even greater awe of her achievement and of her. She is definitely an inspiration to us all and will be sadly missed.

CHRIS SHEPPARD *English Channel swimmer (UK)*



Vijaya was a bubbly person known to a lot of us in the Channel swimming world. She came into our lives determined to swim the Channel and did it on her fourth attempt with Eddie [the boat pilot] in 2007. Her first three attempts were with me. All were long swims, all were great advances on the previous swim. All were very happy swims with a great support team of girls who enjoyed life to the full. Vijaya, complete with her smile and her willingness to help all around her, will be sadly missed by the people who knew her. Those who did not know her missed out on one of the little pleasures of life. (Angela Oram) Vijaya had a very good understanding of life and the Channel. Her positive attitude made everything shine. (Mike Oram)

MIKE AND ANGELA ORAM *Heads of the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation (CS&PF)*



She was truly an inspiration. Vijaya taught me so much, and I am a better person for having known her.

ANNE CLEVELAND *English Channel swimmer (multiple swims, including a double) (USA)*



I remember Vijaya swimming in the Dover harbor, always having a smile on her face, no matter how long she was in the water. The love she had for the water and our sport will be missed.

MARCY MCDONALD *American Channel Queen (10 Channel swims, including several doubles)*

Vijaya was a tremendous inspiration with her unflagging and powerful determination, perseverance and poise, plus her cheerful spirit and great sense of humour. I was so proud of her when she made it in 2007, after three heroic attempts. In July of her victory year, she had to return to New York without getting her feet wet, hoping to get a go at it a bit later. She was called back to Dover in September 2007 when the weather improved, and she finally made it with her pilot Eddie. Vijaya's sudden passing is a powerful reminder of how important it is to value time and not postpone fulfilling your heart's and soul's dreams!

VASANTI NIEMZ *English Channel swimmer (Germany)*



Vijaya was an inspiration. I had several conversations with her on the Dover beach in 2004. On August 10, 2004, it was pouring heavily at 5:45 a.m. in the Dover Marina. I was waiting for the Marina gates to open to get on to Lance's boat. I was nervous, drenched in rain and shivering from cold. Vijaya and her team came into the Marina and changed my morale. I will never forget that moment, when she changed my "state of mind", contributing to my successful Channel crossing. On that day Vijaya swam for 19 hours in the Channel, and she was smiling when I met her the following day. She was a hardcore aqua-athlete — we'll miss her.

MADHU NAGARAJA *English Channel swimmer (India)*



I had a talk with Vijaya in the summer of 2007 in New York before her successful swim. At that time I had crossed the Channel on my first attempt, and she was about to make her fourth attempt. I felt great inspiration from her never-give-up determination, and I hope she was inspired by the story of my successful swim. The inspiration from our conversation will live in my heart forever.

IGOR NENKO *English Channel swimmer (Ukraine)*



We are very sorry to hear the sad news of dear Vijaya's passing. Betty and I went down to the seafront in Dover today to find the flowers offered in her honour. We found them in a corner on the grass lawn, and felt they would be better placed on the Channel Swimmers' sculpture.

ALASTAIR AND BETTY DIMECH *Bed and Breakfast owners in Dover*



Vijaya: An Indomitable Spirit

Vijaya was born Catherine Grace Claxton on 9 December 1947 in Atlanta, Georgia, into the military family of Edward Wesley and Grace Catherine Claxton, joining her older brother, Keith. She spent much of her childhood in tropical climes such as the Philippines and the Caribbean, and eventually attended high school in Grand Forks, North Dakota, when her father was stationed there.

After her mother's untimely death, she asked to stay in North Dakota instead of following her father to his next posting in Iran, so that she could finish her schooling there. It was at that time that one of her teachers, Donna Fleming, generously invited Vijaya to stay with her family. Donna became Vijaya's foster mother and a lifelong friend. Vijaya finished high school and one year of university in North Dakota, later receiving a B.A. with distinction from Ohio State, with a major in theatre.

During university, Vijaya became very interested in realms beyond the physical, even working with the police as a medium and locating crime victims. Vijaya eventually came to New York to pursue a career in acting. In 1973, after attending a concert by the spiritual leader Sri Chinmoy and being inspired by the deeply contemplative atmosphere, she became a member of the Sri Chinmoy Centre.

Vijaya joined the UN in 1974, serving as Legal Liaison on Visa Matters between the United Nations Personnel Office and the United States Mission to the United Nations, and also recruiting Tour Guides for the United Nations Tour Guide Unit. From 1981 to 1990 she was married to Henry Withers, who also worked at the UN. In 1989 she began serving as Coordinator of the UN Panel of Counsel, a position which she held until her retirement on 30 June 2009.

In 1983, Sri Chinmoy gave Catherine the spiritual name Vijaya, which means "victory," and against any and all odds, Vijaya's life was splendidly victorious in so many remarkable ways. Indeed, Vijaya was untiringly courageous in conquering all obstacles, be it in acting as public defender for United Nations staff, or swimming across the English Channel, or serving as the main envoy of the Peace Meditation at the United Nations.

For over two decades, in her role as Coordinator, Panel of Counsel, Vijaya served as public defender for UN staff in the UN's internal justice system. She oversaw thousands of cases, guiding and supporting staff with her wide-ranging legal knowledge, energy, concern and compassion. It was her sincere dream to see the reform of the UN's internal justice system, and with her unique experience and insight, she was one of the most enthusiastic in spearheading the effort.

Indeed, Vijaya's contract was extended three times beyond her official UN retirement age

to enable her to continue as part of the team working to reform the justice system. It was only when the new system took effect on 1 July 2009 that Vijaya retired after over 35 years at the UN — again, with the satisfaction of a job well done that few would have had the vision and energy to complete.

Actually, she was not even thinking of resting on her laurels or taking permanent retirement. Towards the end of her UN career, Vijaya invested much time and energy in obtaining certification as a mediator from Cornell University, with additional courses at Columbia University, for a second career. She had already started mediating in the New York Civil Courts in lower Manhattan, was serving on several Boards of Directors of mediation organizations, and had received an offer to work in the UN's newly created Mediation Division as an on-call mediator/ombudsman after her retirement.

Over the years, because of her commitment to truth and her unprecedented concern for each of her clients, Vijaya earned the respect and trust of countless UN staff. Her myriad professional contacts and friendships, and her dedication to the goals and vision of the Peace Meditation Group, prompted Sri Chinmoy to call Vijaya his main envoy at the UN. In all situations, she used her wisdom and negotiating skills to find solutions. Most of this work was done behind the scenes, with very few of us even aware of her astute interventions. Vijaya was also one of the main spokespersons for the Meditation Group, serving as Master of Ceremonies for many of our programmes held at the UN, with her usual grace and poise. Sri Chinmoy was especially grateful that Vijaya, in cooperation with Ranjana Ghose, the curator of the Jharna-Kala Foundation, organized several exhibits of his Jharna-Kala art at the UN, which drew acclaim both from UN officials and from important figures in the art world.

In addition, for over 20 years, Vijaya was President of the United Nations SRC Film Society. She organized many film showings with question-and-answer panel discussions, often in conjunction with the UN Department of Public Information. At one point she orchestrated the technical renovation of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium, raising thousands of dollars from film studios and other sources. She was also Vice-President and then President of the United Nations SRC Society of Writers, and helped edit the *Reflections* Magazine. She served on the nominating committee of the United Nations Staff Recreation Council. In every endeavour, her energy and capacity were extraordinary.

Amidst all this UN activity, Vijaya threw her heart and soul into training for and preparing to swim across the English Channel, all the time maintaining her demanding work schedule. After seven years, she finally succeeded on her fourth try, on 8 September 2007, a few months before her 60th birthday. Afterwards, Vijaya would wryly note that because it took her so many attempts, she attained the distinction of being the oldest American woman ever to have accomplished this feat. She never wanted to surrender to age, and some staff cited her achievement as proof that it was time to reform the UN's retirement policy as well.

We have all been inspired by the video showing Vijaya climbing at last onto French shores, after over 22 hours of non-stop effort. Her heroism won her the Gertrude Ederle Award from the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation, named after the first woman to swim the

Channel, for the most meritorious swim of the year by a woman, as well as the Cape Storm Award 2007 for the longest solo swim of 2007.

Vijaya also had a love of beauty and the capacity to create beauty. It is hard to imagine that when she bought her house in Queens about 12 years ago, the grounds were totally barren and littered with old oil tanks and other such debris. Undaunted, Vijaya worked indefatigably to transform her house and garden, from doing much of the sheet rock installation, painting and other renovations of the house herself, to turning her backyard into a beautiful oasis adorned with flowers and statues. There was an enormous hole on one side of the yard where the previous owner had kept a boat. In her inimitable style and with her amazing strength, Vijaya single-handedly filled in the hole one day, pushing wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow full of dirt that had become available on the next block as a result of some neighbourhood landscaping project. She was always someone who managed to get the job done. It helped considerably that she was an avid weightlifter and runner who completed 27 marathons!

Vijaya always maintained her love of acting, and the Sri Chinmoy Centre many a time enjoyed seeing her on stage in homespun productions, be it in comedy or drama. In comedy, Lucille Ball was one of her idols, and there was nobody who could do the “I Love Lucy” style better. Needless to say, no matter what the genre, Vijaya always stole the show.

Vijaya was an artist as well, for years studying Chinese painting and also receiving lessons from art teachers at the UN. She painted quite a few portraits of UN colleagues over the years. Her portrait of President Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa Maximovna, was on display at the memorial for Raisa Maximovna held at the UN in 1999 and again when President Gorbachev came to visit Sri Chinmoy in Queens in October 2006. At one point, the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation commissioned Vijaya to design its logo. Vijaya also loved painting Indian gods and goddesses, and many of us have received T-shirts and cards she designed and printed herself.

Just as she approached life with phenomenal strength and fortitude, even so Vijaya courageously battled illness for several months, always looking forward with dynamism and hope. Vijaya was extremely grateful for the tremendous outpouring of concern and support from UN colleagues, family and friends during her hospital stays. Her room was always flooded with flowers, cards, photographs, stuffed animals of every size, videos and CDs, and food and drinks.

Visits from her brother, Keith, and her mother, Donna, meant the world to Vijaya and gave her much joy, as did visits from friends and colleagues. She was so appreciative of her tirelessly dedicated English Channel supporters — also UN staff — as well as an amazing nurse-friend, along with some of my mother’s devoted former caregivers and myself, who were with her 24/7 in the hospital during these months.

On her good days, Vijaya would be sitting up and entertaining her guests and anyone who came by, quite endearing herself to all the hospital staff. When she had finished her treatment in New York Hospital-Queens, and was preparing to transfer to Calvary Hospital, Vijaya or-

dered 200 roses and chocolates to give to the hospital staff, along with thank-you cards with Sri Chinmoy's aphorisms. The hospital had never seen anything like it. There was a steady stream of doctors, nurses, case managers, technicians, transport workers and others, coming to thank her and wish her well, calling her their princess, and saying how inspired they were by her resolute determination. Many said that very few had ever thanked them for their service, and they were deeply moved by Vijaya's initiative. No matter what the circumstances, Vijaya's appreciation and concern for others always came forward.

Sri Chinmoy often said that life and death are like two rooms of our own house. When we are in the living room, it is full of activity; and when we are in the bedroom, it is all rest. We can be sure that Vijaya is now taking a well-deserved rest in a realm fit for a tireless truth-warrior who fought valiantly for both divinity and humanity on earth.

NILIMA SILVER *Programme Coordinator of Sri Chinmoy:
The Peace Meditation at the United Nations; and UN staff member*

Selected Poems by Sri Chinmoy

Following are seven of the 75 poems by Sri Chinmoy that Vijaya selected as her favourites.
These 75 poems were displayed on her support boat to inspire Vijaya during her victorious Channel swim.

Daring enthusiasm and abiding cheerfulness
Can accomplish everything on earth
Without fail.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames,
Part 96, no. 9,515*

Do what you must,
And not only
What you can.

*Seventy-Seven Thousand
Service-Trees,
Part 27, no. 26,731*

Go deep within.
To your great surprise,
All obstacles
Will turn into opportunities.

*Seventy-Seven Thousand
Service-Trees,
Part 2, no. 1,741*

Mine is a God-Dream
That bravely swims across
The ocean of impossibilities.

*My Master,
no. 39*

Just make tremendous progress
And tremendous improvement
In your own life.
Others will definitely be inspired
By the result.

*Twenty-Seven Thousand
Aspiration-Plants,
Part 19, no. 1,875*

Let us swim and swim
Across the ignorance-sea
To reach the Golden Shore
Of the Beyond.

*Seventy-Seven Thousand
Service-Trees,
Part 16, no. 15,225*

I accept no limits
Because I come from
The limitless One.

*Seventy-Seven Thousand
Service-Trees,
Part 27, no. 26,807*



Vijaya on the boat before starting her successful English Channel swim in 2007.