

*Through the prism of nonviolence*

## Tess Koenig, Nurse, Mentor, Activist, Friend

By John Heid

*"Individuals can resist injustice but only in community can we do justice." — Jim Corbett*

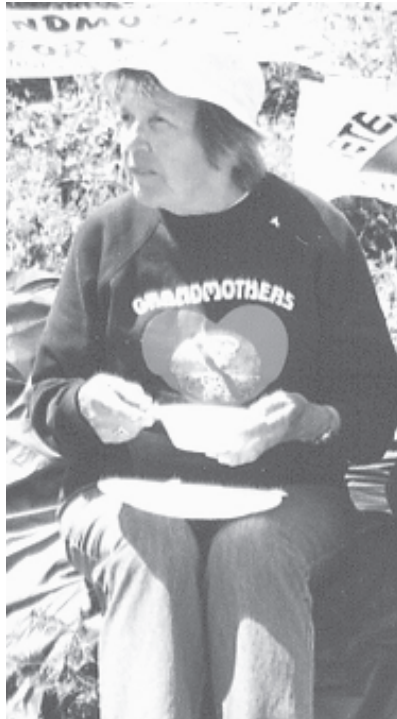
At sunset on a mid October Saturday, Tess Koenig died as she had lived — peacefully. There were no large font headlines in the *Los Angeles Times* the following morning. Amidst the fray of health care reform, H1N1, the housing market collapse, the World Series and war-without-end, Tess passed as inconspicuously as a soft autumn breeze through a stand of northern white pine.

Her death gave me pause. Not because it was sudden. It wasn't. Not because she was young. She wasn't, except at heart. What provoked me was a simple query. "What is the value of a singular life?"

In an American Idolized society chock full of air-brushed stars and super heroes, who counts? In a culture that mass markets the pleasure principle and militarizes identity — "be all you can be" — how does one stand?

Tess was one who found her bearings. Born on Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range between world wars, she knew something of modesty and making-do. She left the Range, but it never left her.

The so called "war effort" drew Tess into the service of caring for the wounded and ill as an army nurse and afterward, at the Veteran's Hospital in West Los Angeles, she continued this work. Tess witnessed war from the vantage point of its victims. She came to understand in a hands-on way how war turns the moral order inside out.



In later years Tess was to become a proud member of Grandmothers For Peace and Veterans For Peace. Post war, she married another veteran—later-to-become-peace-maker, Bob Koenig. The two became parents.

Stories are told of their dual energies. Bob coached youth basketball and baseball. Tess attended the injured players and kept score. Tess always knew the score on the court and later in the courts.

In their retirement Tess and Bob metamorphosed. Their family widened. They went communal. This was how I came to know her... at the Loaves and Fishes Catholic Worker in Duluth, Minnesota.

She prepared meals and faithfully attended peace vigils. Tess had the compassion to serve the hungry and the audacity to challenge the causes of their hunger.

In time I discovered that Tess (and Bob too) were known across the country. From Baltimore to LA, from Clam Lake, Wisconsin to Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Tess knew who she was, and what she wasn't. She lived life fully and by so doing helped others recognize what it means to do justice, to be fully human — warts and all.

Tess Koenig was not my heroine, but rather a mentor and friend. She eschewed the cul-de-sac mentality of the hero/heroine model, a model that panders to narcissism, a model of the impossible, the unattainable, the superfluous, a model antithetical to radical nonviolence.

Tess was down-to-earth, and roll-up-your-sleeves practical. This simplicity kindled a visionary spirit within her. She could delight in a pristine sunset over

Lake Vermillion or the diamond in the rough visage of each guest sitting at the dining room table, as clearly as she could decry war.

The last time I called Bob and Tess, their answering machine still had the familiar message in her voice: "The Koenigs say bring 'em home!" Tess's last words. A fitting epitaph.

## EPA's Plan to Raise Radiation Exposures Challenged

*Continued from cover page*

for delivery of documents or promises to provide records on a rolling basis, as they had been cleared for release.

"President Obama directed all agencies to act in a transparent way by placing important documents in the public domain in a timely fashion," said PEER counsel Christine Erickson who drafted the complaint. "Avoiding embarrassment is not a legal basis for deception or delay."

Congressman Edward Markey, a D-Mass., has expressed concerns about EPA's intentions to allow a different standard for radiation exposures following nuclear emergencies than are now in place in the Safe Drinking Water Act and other environmental laws.

On Oct. 29, Markey, who chairs the Energy and Environment Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, sent a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson raising "serious concerns over the potential for weakening federal policies designed to protect the public from the potentially dangerous effects of radiation."

In the letter, Rep. Markey expressed concern about ORIA's draft "Blue Book" released in December 2008. In the past, Blue Books have formed the basis for EPA's radiation protection regulations.

In this draft, ORIA proposes using risk figures that are almost all less protective than the National Academy of Sciences recommended in its [June 2005] BEIR VII study to assess health risks from exposure to low levels of ionizing radiation, which was partially sponsored and funded by EPA.

This study found that "even the smallest radiation dose has the potential to cause a small increase in risk to humans," Rep. Markey wrote.

But the guidelines proposed by Bush's administration "actually allow for levels of radioactivity that are thousands of times higher than the requirements found in traditional toxic clean-up guidance," Markey wrote.

"Additionally, long-term clean-up standards are proposed that are so remarkably high that they could result in a cancer risk that EPA itself estimates at a breathtaking one in four," he wrote.

Markey asked a series of questions related to EPA's use of "Reference Man" to evaluate compliance with radiation regulations. This model assumes that the typical exposed individual is an average-sized adult white male, even though pregnant women, children and other vulnerable populations could be much more impacted by radiation exposures.

"From disposing of nuclear waste to protecting the water we drink, we must do everything in our power to ensure that government policy follows the strongest possible standards governing exposure to radiation," said Markey.

"Why should people who have been victimized by a nuclear attack or accident be further subjected to a relaxation of the radiation protection standards EPA has previously deemed safe?," he [asked]. "The stakes are simply too high to accept anything less than the strongest scientific recommendations."

— *ENS, the Environment News Service, is a daily international wire service. Its reports are indexed by Reuters/Dow Jones Factiva, and KeepMedia.*