

Sydney Russell

February 23, 1948 – September 11, 2025

Funeral Service

Minister: Benjamin

November 15, 2025

Minister's Introduction

Welcome friends, and a special welcome to Sydney's nieces, Peggy and Penny, who are watching us from afar.

Once more we gather to bid farewell to an old and beloved friend, Sydney Russell. Death is always sudden and inexplicable. How strange that a fellow human being – solid, visible, breathing – should in a moment be hidden from our sight! Yet in this moment our love for Sydney is present and alive, and the moments we have spent with her are present and alive. These things have survived her death. And so death helps us to understand that it is the invisible world that endures.

Walt Whitman – a poet Sydney loved – said, “The best of me then, when no longer visible, for toward that I have been incessantly preparing.”

Let us stand and remember Sydney in silent presence.

(Silence)

Thank you.

Sydney takes with her the presence and being that she has gained in this lifetime, and her connection with Influence C. Our teacher has said, “That is all we can take with us, but it is more than enough.”

[Reading: Shakespeare, Sonnet 18]

(Reader: Catherine L.)

Sonnet 18, by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

[Eulogy: Robert Mac.]

Sydney Russell

Sydney Lee Russell was born February 23, 1948, in Springfield, Missouri. Family and friends fondly remember Sydney as a strong, beautiful woman with long black hair, who enjoyed all that life had to offer. Her father was a hunter and hunting instructor, and her family led an active outdoor life. Sydney grew up learning to shoot, hunt and fish, and became an accomplished cook. When she was very young, as a Camp Fire girl in middle school, she was often away on camping trips. She also loved swimming and water-skiing on the Lake of the Ozark.

Entertaining came naturally to Sydney. She studied dance and ballet, and at Missouri State University she majored in theater and dance. In 1972 she was invited to join a Song-and-Dance troupe that toured the US military bases in Vietnam and Southeast Asia to entertain the troops.

When she was in her early twenties, Sydney moved to Los Angeles with the intention of doing graduate work in theater, but she soon gravitated to San Francisco where she met the Fourth Way. She attended some of Alex Horn's performances without joining his group, and then in August 1973 Sydney met and joined the Fellowship.

Sydney at once found steady work in the Bay Area, regularly attended center meetings and Robert's weekly meeting, and spent most of her weekends here at the Ranch (Apollo), usually helping prepare meals in the kitchen. Sydney was by nature a true "free spirit," and from her first days in the School she brought a spritely openness and exuberance to all her interactions with other students. The charming lilt to her voice, and her characteristic giggle, often punctuated her conversation. In the evenings at the Lodge, when all the work and dining had ended and the furniture was set aside, Sydney could be found dancing around the living room—either waltzing with a partner or demonstrating ballet spins and twirls. On a few occasions she even dashed across the room and leapt into some gentleman's open arms.

Sydney was very intelligent, and an avid reader. She would regularly read an entire book in one day and share what she learned with others. Although she was perceptive about people and situations, her comments, photographs, and angles of thought were without judgement and always from the attitude of maintaining and deepening her friendships.

Sydney's life in the School soon became one of continual service. Over the decades she lived in many centers, as a supporting student, center director, regional coordinator, traveling teacher, and member of the Fellowship Council.

In the autumn of 1975, the Fellowship began the octave of opening centers across America. Sydney was asked to co-direct a new center in Newport Beach in Southern California. After serving as director for two years Sydney moved to New York to support that active and burgeoning center, where she worked as a manager at the famous Tavern on the Green in Central Park. Two years later she moved to Atlanta to direct the center there, then returned to California to support first San Francisco and then Apollo.

In the autumn of 1983, Sydney, along with her friend Frances Barrett, moved to Amsterdam—a move that would completely change her life. They lived in the large Herengracht teaching house, quickly found employment, and along with the new center directors, did much to liven the center and diversify its activities. And there Sydney met a young student by the name of Pieter Bruinsma. They married in 1984 and over the next ten years they lived in and supported the centers in Amsterdam, London, and Brussels. Sydney eventually became regional coordinator, and so began her many visits as traveling teacher to almost every center in Europe and the Near East.

In 1996 Sydney returned to Apollo and served as co-director for two years. During this time, she instituted the Sunday morning meetings at Apollo d'Oro, an octave that continued until Robert began teaching again in January 2001.

In the summer of 1998 Sydney returned to Amsterdam, where she was to live for the rest of her life. Sydney had been suffering from kidney failure, and eventually had to begin dialysis. In the Netherlands she was able to receive the medical and social service care she needed, which allowed her to lead a normal life for many years.

The Dutch state gave Sydney an apartment in the heart of Amsterdam, within walking distance of the Rijksmuseum and the Concertgebouw Concert Hall. This apartment, with its long steep staircase, became a famous and well-trodden Fellowship landmark. It is fair to say that a good percentage of the School spent time there, either as visitor or overnight guest.

In 2010 Sydney had a successful transplant operation, which liberated her to enjoy several more years of normal living and travel. From then on she was able to visit Apollo every year. After one such visit, she wrote to Robert, "It is my hope that the pace of Apollo, the impulse to work in the moment, has now become a part of me."

Sydney was a model of transformation. She never talked about her physical issues, and she refused to be defined by them. She graciously accepted all the support that was given her, but she never insisted on more than was offered nor demanded special treatment or consideration. Sydney maintained her buoyant and outgoing demeanor, and gave the world little indication that her daily suffering was increasing. And there was always that giggle. She continued to support the School in every way open to her, attending online meetings, sharing her love and understanding with students, and working toward the same conscious aims of presence and devotion to her Teacher.

Robert said about her, “Sydney is quite a heroine. I have watched her transforming suffering almost since I met her. She has had a lot of instinctive friction, but it has made her a much better person. You cannot miss it. She has used it to produce the internal wealth of self-remembering.”

Sydney paid her last visit to Apollo in May 2024, the last time she would see many of her close friends. Her condition had already deteriorated considerably, and it was apparent that her health was taking a sharp decline. She was soon unable to walk and was confined to a wheelchair. Her vision had been steadily declining, and for quite some time she was unable to see faces or read text. Sydney was eventually confined to her bed in the last month of her life and, after an episode of fever and hallucinations, she was taken to hospital for the last time.

On Sydney’s last day, the hospital let her caregivers know that the end was very close. Leda was the first to arrive, and over the next few hours more and more friends appeared, until the nurse became concerned that Sydney would be overwhelmed. The nurse asked that only three people be present in the room at any one time, so students took turns saying goodbye and sharing one last word and one last kiss. Dear friends living abroad called in to cell phones in the room to send her their love and bid her farewell.

Sydney’s last night on earth found her surrounded by a host of loving presence. In her last waking hour, struggling to breathe, brave and cheerful to the last, the students with her could recognize that every hair of effort was counted: every moment of struggle, every moment of presence, was gathered together within her. And all the features, mechanics, foibles, were revealed as meaningless and void. Her friends witnessed the weighing of Sydney’s life, as she made her final effort to return that which was divine in her to that which is divine in the universe.

During the last years of Sydney's life, she and Pieter met by phone every day. Pieter would read to her from the works of John Milton, and over time they completed readings of his most famous works: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. They then started on Milton's play *Comus*, a project they were not able to complete. However, quite poetically, the final time they met by phone, the reading ended with these lines, where the poet is describing the character of a Maiden who is pure of heart:

So dear to Heaven is Saintly chastity,
That when a soul is found sincerely so,
A thousand liveried Angels honor her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in clear dream and solemn vision
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
Until converse with heavenly habitants
Begins to cast a beam on the outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
Till all be made immortal.

[**Music:** J. S. Bach, Flute Sonata in E Minor, BWV 1034, Andante]
(Musician – Rustam, flute)

Minister's Conclusion:

The death of a friend reminds us that our bodies are fragile; our period on this earth temporary. Only the realm of uncreated light – which unites us and is us – is boundless and eternal.

Sydney was dauntless, giving us the priceless gift of her buoyancy and courage in the face of unrelenting physical suffering. Her lively essence was unquenched. She remained cheerful, interested in the lives and inner work of her many friends, always finding new ways to serve the school and the teacher. Her valuation for presence was unwavering. May her example continue to inspire us as we navigate our own challenges.

Dear Sydney, we thank thee.

The task of this lifetime has been fulfilled. The role of Sydney is complete, and the soul that played that role is released to continue its divine journey.

Minister motions to Pieter to approach the altar table.

Asks everyone to rise.

Pieter will lift the Urn.

You are all invited to proceed to the gravesite for the interment.

[Minister leads participants to the gravesite.]

[Minister:]

We return Sydney's ashes to the ground, here at Apollo, where she longed to be. Words fade in the face of a great reality. We, too, arrive at this simplest of moments – our friend, Sydney, showing us the way.

[Reading: Shakespeare, from "Venus and Adonis"]

(Reader: Pieter B.)

Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
Or like a fairy, trip upon the green,
Or, like a nymph, with long disheveled hair,
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen:
Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire.

Urn is placed in the grave by Pieter.

Let us offer these rose petals in memory of our departed friend Sydney.
With gratitude for having known her and a renewed love for one another.

[Minister scatters rose petals.]

The earth returns to the earth, and a divine spark returns to its divine source. The circle of life is complete, and the next step begins for the soul of Sydney Russell.

[Participants scatter rose petals and then move to the table for the toast.]

[Toast: Michael R]