



PROJECT MUSE®

Remembering Roger Corless

Mark Gonnerman

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 27, 2007, pp. 155-157 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2007.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220083>



When I think of Roger Corless, I think of the bristlecone pine trees in the White Mountains of east-central California, about an hour's drive from Bishop up White Mountain Road. These trees (*Pinus longaeva*) are the world's oldest living beings. The senior member of the stand in Patriarch Grove, named Methuselah, is more than 4,700 years old.

It is not because Roger lived an especially long life—he was granted only sixty-nine-and-a-half years of calendar time—that he and these trees fuse in my mind. While Roger was an old soul from an older world, this association arises from Roger's adherence to the kind of “become who you are” eccentricity celebrated by Henry David Thoreau and other sages who remind each of us to “step to the music” of “a different drummer.”

When visiting the bristlecones, one is impressed by the various odd poses struck by each tree. Of course no two are alike; each holds a unique gnarly stance that says, “You are among a community of nonconformists.” These trees remind us that each being is a unique expression of Nature and ought to be honored as such.

Thoreau does not use the word “eccentric” in *Walden*, but writes of extravagance instead:

I fear chiefly lest my expression not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra vagance!*

it depends on how you are yarded. . . . I desire to speak somewhat without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments.

A lover of words, as was Roger, Thoreau splits *extravagance* in two to highlight its root meaning: “to wander” (*vagari*) “outside” (*extra*). To learn the truth of matters requires the courage to follow one’s own path, even when—especially when—it takes one beyond the pale. Only then might wanderers become convinced of those truths they know, for they have been encountered firsthand and tested, experimentally, in the realm of personal experience.

When one sets about the challenging work of claiming a natural right to eccentricity, one discovers self-authenticating feedback loops that encourage further steps along an always unfolding, yet untrammelled path. It takes courage to stay in motion, for the way is often rough. People get lost—and found. One’s own authentic way leads to wakefulness. This in turn enables recognition and enjoyment of other liberated beings and compassion for those who have yet to hear chanticleer crow (to stay with Thoreau) or the lion’s roar (as Buddhists might say).

As Mas Kodani, a Jodoshinshu minister in South-Central Los Angeles has observed, “One does not stand still looking for a path. One walks; and as one walks a path comes into being.” This walk requires a balance of both confident perseverance and an ability to respond to ever-changing conditions. Lives of both the bristlecones and Roger demonstrate perseverance in spite of hostile habitats: the pines, rooted in sandstone and dolomite, hang on in a cold and dry climate at 11,200 feet; Roger made his way with difficulty in spite of challenges he faced as a gay, Buddhist-and-Christian intellectual in Durham County, North Carolina. When, after thirty years, Roger became an emeritus professor at Duke and relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area, he found himself in a much more hospitable setting.

It may seem strange to draw out this comparison of Roger and those ancient White Mountain pines, but when I first met those trees in the summer of 1998, they set a standard for authenticity that came to mind whenever Roger and I interacted. His extravagant accomplishments as a teacher, scholar, and person who lived a life of genuine service to others were attained through the real work of daily spiritual practice, critical reflection, and adherence to the truths—always plural for Roger—of which he had been convinced. I’ll always be grateful for his inspiring example of a human life well lived. It is so helpful to know that the honest witness and rare heart-mind integrity Roger demonstrated are possible here and now.

I conclude with one more comparison: the bristlecone’s dead wood remains in the ecosystem for thousands of years because of its dense cell structure, and part of *Pinus longaeva* will continue living even after most of the tree has died. Through his commitment to scholarship and publishing, Roger’s work as a “di-

alogian” (one who is serious about interfaith exploration and understanding) has entered the ecosystem of ideas indispensable for a sustainable human future, and it will keep on living. It is up to us to remember what remains of Roger’s labor and carry on.

Mark Gonnerman

* * *

I first met Roger when we both attended a colloquium on “Buddhist Thought and Culture” at the University of Montevallo, Alabama, in April 1988. Roger read a paper that was thoroughly engaging, called “Becoming a Dialogian: How to do Buddhist-Christian Dialogue without Really Trying.” At that point, I was hooked on getting to know this funny little man with a British accent who could deliver an excellent reflection without being bothered by his occasional stammering.

What struck me about Roger’s paper was that it was meant to engage the one who heard it. It was written with a sense of interpretive transparency—a reflection on experience that was his own but also bigger than his own. It was one of those times where in hearing the account of his experience, one found one’s own experience mirrored and affirmed. The paper was an autobiographical reflection on his journey into the interior ambiguity of interreligious dialogue, which at times can be very challenging when one tries truly to listen deeply to the visions of two distinct religious traditions. But his life was testament to the integrity of the journey and to an emergent overarching trust, or faith, that something very real and true was being birthed in the midst of it all.

In the paper, which I use as an introductory essay for my Interreligious Dialogue course, he delightfully describes his boyhood “conversions” from one religious tradition to another in his own imagination as his pocket money purchases from Penguin Press “brought the world to my front door.” One evening he emerges from his bedroom to inform his parents that he had become a Buddhist. “I had been reading all about it, I explained, and it was clear that I was already a Buddhist. It was as if I were remembering something from a past life. ‘That’s nice dear’ commented my mother, ‘have you finished your homework yet?’”

He goes on to describe his theological studies, and his ever increasing grasp of, and being grasped by, the Eucharistic celebration. But he recounts:

I was now in a quandary. Buddhism made sense to me, Meditation worked, and the Four Noble Truths seemed indeed to be true. But, now Christianity also made sense. In the Bible and the Mass some Power greater, more serene, and more loving than any other power I had known, was trying to contact me. Apparently, it was God, the same God, I presumed, that Buddhism denied.

I did not know what to do, other than to be loyal somehow or another to what I had discovered, even though what I had discovered was self-contradictory.