

## In Memoriam: "We are Life, Its Shining Gift"

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ROGER JONATHAN CORLESS

(26 June 1938—12 January 2007)

*Harry Wells*

Roger Jonathan Corless died on January 12, 2007, in San Francisco, California from complications associated with cancer. Born in Merseyside, England in 1938, he began studying religion at the age of sixteen, understanding himself as being Buddhist, though attending Christian churches. He studied theology at King's College at the University of London, receiving a Bachelor of Divinity in 1961. In wrestling with the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, and particularly in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Roger experienced God's presence. He was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church in 1964 after coming to the United States to pursue a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from which he received that degree in 1973. From there, he joined the Department of Religion at Duke University and remained there until his retirement in 2000.

In 1980, Roger took refuge as a Gelugpa Buddhist under Geshela Lhundup Sopa, having first obtained permission from his Catholic spiritual director and having explained to Geshela what he was doing. His refuge or dharma name was Lhundup Tashi, "spontaneous fortune" or "luck." Later, Roger also became a Benedictine oblate, taking Gregory as his Oblate name after Pope Gregory, whose instruction to Augustine of Canterbury was not to destroy the pagan temples, but to bring them into the church by trying to find what was good and preparatory to the Gospel. Roger understood himself as a dual practitioner, but did not seek to blend the two practices or traditions. Rather, he sought to be present to each in their own irreconcilable differences and deep riches.

Roger was always reflecting and writing on something, wanting to be open to the insights emerging from his studies and practices. His works are prolific. Over the past thirty years, he published three monographs (*The Art of Christian Alchemy: Transfigur-*

ing the Ordinary Through Holistic Meditation, Paulist Press, 1981; *I am Food: The Mass in Planetary Perspective*, Crossroad, 1981 and Wipf and Stock 2004; *The Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree*, Paragon House, 1989), one edited volume (with Paul Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations*, Paulist Press, 1990), essays in 31 books, 37 articles in 20 journals, articles in six encyclopedias, along with 27 papers. Before his death, he had also completed six additional essays, forthcoming in edited volumes, and a draft of another monograph, *Where Do We Go From Here?: The Many Religions and the Next Step*. Over the years, his works examined Buddhist teachings and practices, Christian teachings and practices, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, interreligious dialogue, and more recently his focus had turned to queer dharma topics and same-sex issues.

A memorial service, *We are Life, Its Shining Gift*, was held for Roger on March 10, 2007 in San Francisco. Friends and colleagues spoke of Roger's life and accomplishments and his impact on their lives. There was Buddhist chanting and Christian hymns, with the service opening and closing with two musical pieces selected by Roger for that purpose, "The Swan of Tuonela" by Jean Sibelius and "The Lark Ascending" by Sir Ralph Vaughn William.\*

### Remembering Roger Corless

Roger Corless, who was a bridge between East and West enjoyed telling a story which he cherished. It was based upon the words of his English mother, who commented to him once about his appearance at birth. I can almost visualize Roger again smiling with his eyes not quite in a happy squint. His mother had remarked, "Yes, you looked yellow." He loved telling that story which suggested reincarnation.

Roger had, in addition to a facility with a wide range of scholarly and religious interests, a cultivated sense of humor about life, and the way scholars' minds work. Of course, he also cultivated his own wry sense of his own complexity and enjoyed playing the role of mediator (between East and West).

We were fortunate to have Professor Corless make contributions to six volumes of *The Merton Annual*. These six contribu-

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\*Monetary memorial gifts are being received by the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies to be used toward the 8<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue to be held in 2009. Gifts should be sent to SBCS Corless Memorial Fund, CSSR Executive Office, Rice University MS 156, P. O. Box 1892, Houston, TX 77251-1892, or to donate by credit card, call 713-348-5721.

tions consistently raised healthy questions about the intersections of religious tradition, belief, and intellectual inquiry.

In honor of Roger J. Corless we are including a slightly abridged version of his "The Christian Explanation of non-Christian Religions: Merton's Example and Where it Might Lead." We do this because upon his death, Professor Corless, in the very spirit of the article included below, was preparing another article to be included for this volume about "Hinduism and Prayer." In place of that we are pleased to offer our readers this essay which is done so well in the best manner of Roger Corless and in the spirit of Merton.

(V.A.K.)