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Peter A. Huff

Centenary College of Louisiana

Almost a year after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated his beloved New Orleans, Benjamin Wren, longtime member of the history department at Loyola University–New Orleans, died on July 20, 2006. Wren joined the Loyola faculty in 1970 and taught popular courses in Chinese history, Japanese history, and world history. He is best remembered for his unprecedented courses in Zen and the unique campus zendo where he taught them. His courses integrated meditation practice, philosophical reflection, historical investigation, and a bit of group therapy into what many students have described as life-changing experiences.

Wren was the son of an American Marine and a Hong Kong native who met in Tientsin, China. Growing up in the American South during the Great Depression and World War II, he encountered firsthand the racism and xenophobia that defined the Bible Belt as a distinct cultural region in the first half of the twentieth century. He entered the Society of Jesus when he was seventeen years of age and earned degrees from Spring Hill College, Saint Louis University, and the University of Arizona. Nearly fifty years later, he left the Jesuits and married Patricia Wren.

Wren's professional life did not follow the path of the conventional academic career. For several years he taught in Jesuit high schools. After discovering a book on the Japanese art of flower arranging in a Texas public library, he pursued graduate studies in Asian religion and history. Like many of his generation, he was influenced by Jean Dechanet's *Christian Yoga* and Dom Aelred Graham's *Zen Catholicism*. He studied Zen with Yamada Roshi in Kamakura and ikebana with Sofu Teshigahara of the Sogetsu School in Tokyo. He initiated his Zen courses at Loyola partially in response to student unrest in the wake of the Kent State massacre.

Wren published very little and did not easily negotiate the tenure process. His *Zen among the Magnolias* (1999) represents more personal testimony than scholarly argument. He did, however, have the extraordinary ability to stretch his students' imaginations and aspirations beyond the formal limitations of higher education and professional expectations. I saw this dimension of his

work very clearly when he served as the keynote speaker for Centenary College's 2004 one-day conference on "The Dharma in Dixie," a program featuring leaders and practitioners from Louisiana's Hindu and Buddhist communities. Wren's animated talk, fusing a whirlwind tour of Chinese history with a riveting critique of contemporary American culture, was by all accounts the highlight of the event.

In *Zen among the Magnolias*, Wren wrote, "The two symbols used to write the word Zen are the symbols for God and warfare. For us who come out of a Judaic/Christian background, we have the tradition of Jacob fighting with God and emerging from the fight with a new name, Israel (He who has fought with God)" (p. 7). By the time he spoke at my institution, Wren was already engaged in his final battle with cancer. During the chaos of Hurricane Katrina, we lost track of each other. Then I heard of the memorial service to be held in his honor at an Episcopal church in a New Orleans suburb.

"Zen Ben" Wren's brand of personal passion and intellectual integrity is a rare commodity in today's corporate academy. "The best teachers," he said, "never lose their student IDs, and they also bring out the master in their respective students" (p. 16). Loyola's zendo once housed an unforgettable teacher.