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Life as Dialogue: Remembering Roger

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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

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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.

The rest of the paper discusses his journey of that loyalty, becoming a Roman Catholic along the way, and later “the Buddhism erupted and demanded to be taken just as seriously as my Christianity.”

From that starting point twenty years ago, Roger and I shared our thoughts and reflections along the way at academic conferences and Buddhist-Christian dialogues. I always looked forward to hearing Roger speak, because he had a unique way of taking scholarship seriously by *not* being stuck in the mold of academic presentation. What I mean is this: Roger thoroughly researched what he was studying, but he is always studied for the engagement of life. As a result, his presentations were always lively in the best sense of that word—“alive,” reflection seeking insight, and the “playful” embrace of living life within that insight.

Here are some of the ways Roger impacted my life:

- Roger taught me about “faith.” He helped me learn to trust my experience of being compelled into interreligious experience, which takes immense effort and internal conflict initially but is a “burning in one’s bones,” to quote the prophet Jeremiah, for those called to be in that stance.
- He taught me how to be a better teacher-scholar. He modeled for me the ability to present papers that were written to make a difference in the lives of those present, to connect with them in a way that led me and them to participate in insight as it was manifesting. Scholarship was always there, but it was a scaffold for learning about life.
- Roger helped me see that a person can have great insight and still have insecurities and weaknesses. It is just part of the whole mix of human brokenness that is lifted up in faith toward transformation amid practice.
- Roger taught me to be patient and perhaps a bit more compassionate. Put another way, at times Roger’s eccentricities would drive me nuts! But that put me in touch with my own needs and habits as well, and in some way made me more accepting of myself “just as I am” before God.

The openness with which Roger lived has carried him well in the Bardo state, and he is held in the mystery of the promise of resurrection in Christ. I am sure of it.

Harry Wells