

## Memories of Franklin Merrell-Wolff

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Las Vegas, NV (2000)

### *Introduction*

Franklin Merrell-Wolff (FMW) embodied the highest aspiration of philosophy—as love of wisdom. Yet, we rarely talked philosophy, even though I had come from Canada to California for the purpose of researching his philosophy for my doctoral thesis. I am convinced that this was because he wished to avoid influencing my treatment of his work. I can only recall two occasions when he initiated philosophical discussion with me—the first and last times I saw him. When we met in 1982, when Doroethy ushered me into his office, we shared our mutual appreciation for Plato. The final time that I saw him, while sitting in his garden after his final Convention, he engaged me in a philosophical discussion—which I sensed was his parting gift to me. These are among my very fondest memories.

### *First Encounter*

I first discovered FMW's writings in 1974, as I was beginning my doctoral program at University of Waterloo, in Ontario, Canada. In the graduate lounge/mailroom, the Philosophy Department displays the book jackets of all new publications in philosophy. At that time, Julian Press had just published *The Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object*, which was duly exhibited. I was immediately drawn to it, for I understood that it was a philosophical work concerning mysticism, and felt compelled to order a copy from the publisher. Its value vastly exceeded my hopes and expectations, and I still regard it as the clearest, most profound, articulation of the nature and significance of mystical experience.

## *Choosing the Thesis*

Wolff's work had a deepening effect on me that called for a deeper involvement. The University of Waterloo Philosophy Department had assigned me to teach the Introduction to Philosophy of Religion course for the next two years, so I promptly adopted this book as one of my texts. A few years later I found *Pathways through to Space* at Fifth Kingdom bookstore in Toronto, which reinforced the growing notion that his work might be a viable subject for my doctoral thesis. In 1980 I reflected from the depths of my being and received strong confirmation that this was indeed what I should do.

I chose James Horne as my supervisor because his own interest in mysticism had led him to write his own Ph.D. thesis on the mysticism of Richard Maurice Bucke (a Canadian mystic whom Wolff also acknowledges) and write several monographs and papers on the subject. I had assumed from the dates in *Pathways* that Wolff was no longer alive, but Horne suggested that we inquire of John Lilly (who knew Wolff) whether Wolff had written anything else. He forwarded my query to Wolff, who was in his nineties, living in retirement in Lone Pine, California. His assistant at that time, Rao Garabedian (whom I incorrectly imagined to be a diminutive East Indian man), conveyed his warm invitation to come to study with him and informed me that he had also recorded about half a million words on tape. I accepted, of course, but wanted to clear up all other business and academic requirements in Canada (during all of 1981) to allow complete freedom to take advantage of a unique opportunity to encounter a person whom I regarded as Enlightened.

During that year, Doroethy (knowing only that a Canadian who was doing a thesis on FMW was coming to visit) moved there from Phoenix to be his assistant. I ordered back issues of the *Sangha* newsletter, several tapes, and *Introceptualism* (the second half of *The Philosophy of*

*Consciousness without an Object*), but declined the invitation to that year's Convention. As the time began to draw nearer, I felt increasingly excited—but also overwhelmed. I felt unprepared and unworthy to actually meet my spiritual hero.

### *The “Big Dream”*

In November of 1981, about six weeks before I was due to leave, I dreamt that I was at Convention sitting (amidst about thirty-five others) on the lawn at the little house facing the front porch (just the way it actually looked). FMW (looking just as he did in real life), wearing his gray suit (which at that time I did not know he had), comes toward the crowd with his arms outstretched to the side (palms forward) as though in blessing. I feel reluctant to identify myself to him, even though I know he expects me, and decide to remain silent and anonymous. From my left, a beautiful blonde lady (in a white robe, it seems), whom I ‘recognize’ as Doroethy (looking as she did in reality), walks over to me, smiling warmly as though she has known me forever, and says, “Welcome, you are meant to be here.” The feeling was profoundly overwhelming.

Even to this day I cannot recollect or relate this dream without this powerful feeling, which often moves me to tears. The effect of the dream was to confirm the correctness of my choice of thesis, and to give me the courage to stay on course. It also revealed an inner connection with Doroethy, which would later develop into a deep relationship.

### *The Pilgrimage*

In January of 1982 I drove from Waterloo to Lone Pine by way of Las Vegas, Death Valley (the lowest point in the country) and arriving near Mt. Whitney (the highest point in the lower 48 states). I had a sense that it was a pilgrimage, and that my life would never be the same.

I arrived at about 4:00PM and was pleasantly surprised that Doroethy liked most of my music tapes. She then brought me to his study where he was waiting. In a previous phone

conversation Doroethy had told me that Franklin had broken his collarbone in an auto accident over Christmas, so he might not be up to receiving visitors. Even so, I expected that I would have to be fully present and grounded to meet him. I was right. The force in that room was palpable! It took all of my power just to enter and remain fully present with him. He greeted me warmly, and soon was pleased to find that we shared a deep appreciation for Plato and the mystical ground for his philosophy.

### *Life with FMW*

Thereafter, he seemed reluctant to initiate philosophical discussions with me. It was as though he trusted me to present his work, and wanted to avoid even the appearance of pressure. I appreciated his intellectual integrity and honored his trust. Although I asked him several questions that were necessary, in retrospect I wish that I had asked him far more. These are some of the salient issues that we explored:

1. I had noticed a discrepancy between the number of realizations given in *Pathways* and *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, which also considered “Substantiality is inversely proportional to ponderability” to be a realization. He explained that he only appreciated its full significance later, after he had written *Pathways*, where he had regarded it only as an important idea.
2. In recent tapes and discussions he had discussed the theosophical story of the *manasaputra*, a race of beings transcending humanity that had been required to overshadow each individual human being as a penalty for some inconceivable misdeed. Although this seems rather transparently mythical in nature, Franklin seemed to be taking it literally. I found this rather perplexing, except that he never claimed more than personal belief for such views. It helped crystallize the approach that my thesis needed—showing how his philosophy was grounded

on his realizations, while ignoring the parts of his worldview that were adopted from other sources.

3. This distinction was crucial in dealing his attribution of fifth century B.C.E. to the life of Samkara (commonly accepted to have lived eighth century C.E.). He said that he was following T. Subba Rao, whom he regarded as “an initiate.” When I checked the book itself (from his library), I found no substantial argument supporting this claim. Instead, Subba Rao diffidently declines to offer the basis for his claim because “we would be inclined to dismiss it.” He also notes that “the name Samkara was fairly common, so there could have been a misidentification.” All of this begs the question! I knew from Franklin’s tapes that his value for Theosophy was qualified—that it provides no guarantee of infallibility concerning matters of fact. He also mentions in his writings that Samkara stands as a response to Nagarjuna (who is known to have lived c. third century C.E.). I found his “blind spot” concerning this issue more disconcerting than any other, but it served to verify his own adage that Enlightenment does not confer infallibility in worldly matters.

I found Franklin’s humanity both surprising and reassuring. He had a great sense of humor, enjoying retelling anecdotes and jokes—including practical jokes. He enjoyed Pall Mall cigarettes which he “never inhaled” (although after a few hours, I was choking within a blue cloud), a glass of white port, and was a nonvegetarian, and was even persuaded to watch the 1982 Superbowl (San Francisco vs. Cincinnati) with us (he was satisfied that “the Western team won.”). That he had common human foibles and idiosyncrasies was evidence that Enlightenment did not remove a person from ordinary existence—or confer immunity from error.

While giving some people the Lüscher Color Test, I invited him to participate. I was not surprised that the dark meditative blue was his favorite color (with the dark forest green in

second position—indicating a healthy sense of self). He then invited me to take the Myers-Briggs test (which I later learned he gave to all members of his group). He was visibly pleased when I tested INTJ, which was identical to his psychological type.

### *Romance*

During my seven months living in the Guest House (the original farmhouse that FMW bought) I was invited to share lunch and dinner with him and Doroethy. At about 9:00PM, when he was ready to retire for the night, he would hug both of us (I felt very privileged), in a light and gentle manner, but with a clear and refined energy from the heart. When he was ready for bed, he would call to Doroethy to turn off the generator.

Christopher English was also visiting for a few weeks, but slept in his car, and would leave Doroethy and me to continue talking. We soon became quite close. I shared that I had ten characteristics that an ideal mate should possess—and that she seemed to qualify on all ten. She was impressed that I had thought about the subject, and pleased about my assessment of her. Franklin subtly encouraged our relationship, at one point when we were alone referring to her favorably as a “slim blonde.” The following spring (1983), while living in Phoenix, Doroethy and I visited Franklin at Easter, at which time he performed the ceremony for our spiritual wedding (see photo), in advance of our civil wedding in Phoenix that June.

### *Caretaking*

During Easter of 1992, Doroethy had returned to Phoenix, leaving to take care of Franklin for over a week. He was used to waking between 4:00 and 5:00AM, whereas for about ten years I had been used to going to sleep close to that time, but had made to effort to adjust to 9:00AM mornings while I was there. Doroethy had made arrangements so that I would not have to make breakfasts while she was gone, but, nonetheless, Franklin tried to encourage me to arise

earlier. In the evenings we would usually watch his personal travel movies taken by his second wife, Gertrude—especially those to Alaska. Since I have never been there, and I had not yet seen his movies, I enjoyed his sharing them as much as he did. This experience brought me to consider the possibility that I might stay on as his assistant after Doroethy returned to Phoenix. However, upon reflection, it became clear that my greatest service to him would be to complete my doctoral thesis, which would have been impossible to do in Lone Pine. Also, I wanted to go to Phoenix to pursue my relationship with Doroethy. She had proposed to me at a dance at the Double L Saloon during an unguarded moment, but I had found myself curiously positive (for a 37 year old bachelor) toward the possibility. Finally, since John Flinn (the ideal companion for FMW) was willing to serve as his assistant for another year, there was no angst in my choice.

### *Anecdotes*

While I was caring for FMW a young man (who said his last name was “Alabama,” and that the Alabama Hills had been named after his family) drove in just before lunch to see him and show him his own writings—weird stuff scrawled in pencil in a coil notebook. I felt that I should invite him to stay for lunch, but it soon became apparent that he was only interested in promoting his own ideas. Shortly after lunch, Franklin excused himself to take a nap. I talked to him politely for a short while before excusing myself “for a nap” as well.

Also, during this week of care, I finally burned out on Franklin’s music. He would stack his six favorite records (78’s) on his turntable and they would automatically play through. He then would reverse the stack and play the other sides, and continue to do this indefinitely. I didn’t want to say anything because I knew the music brought him pleasure, but at a certain point I needed to get relief, so I went to sit in the garden. I was just thinking about what I could do

about the situation—when the music abruptly stopped. After I returned, I could not find a cause, but it seemed that afterwards he no longer played these records excessively.

### *Convention 1982*

A young man, about twenty years old, came to Convention for the first time. He looked and acted a bit like a Young Turk—with a copy of *PCWO* and a list of half a dozen tough questions, which he forcefully arranged to ask FMW during one of the discussions. Franklin easily answered each one of them calmly, clearly, accurately and succinctly. We never saw or heard from this person again. I had been apprehensive that such a public inquisition might put Franklin on the spot, because I had watched him rouse his energy and focus for the preceding two weeks. I then realized that even at ninety-five he was still in full command of his faculties when it mattered.

It was also an ongoing source of humor that he would precede each of his last half dozen or so Conventions with “This will probably be my last Convention.” It was only the Convention following his official ceremony, passing on the mantle, as it were, to Doroethy and Bob, that this prediction was correct. During that time, on Sunday afternoon he remarked to those in his living room concerning his Realizations, “It was a profound religious experience,” perhaps as a final effort to prod our own motivation.