

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF FRANKLIN MERRELL-WOLFF

Franklin Merrell-Wolff was an American philosopher, mathematician, and sage who combined an extraordinary intellect with profound mystical insight. He was born Franklin Fowler Wolff on July 11, 1887 in Pasadena, California, and was raised primarily in San Fernando, California, the eldest of three children. His father was a Methodist minister, as well as a pioneer in the California citrus growing business. Wolff was home-schooled by his mother until the age of nine.



Wolff recalls his childhood as a happy one. He did not rebel from the strict ethical discipline of his father's church, which was a "modified form of Puritanism"; however, when he reached his teenage years, he began to question some of the Church's theological doctrine.¹ Wolff explains:

[A]t the point of adolescence I began to think for myself. I remember walking the streets at night in the pitch-dark (this was in the days before electric illumination). I walked and thought mainly upon ecclesiastical questions—for, in as much as my father was a clergyman, and I had always automatically attended church and Sunday school, these questions were the ones that most readily arose in my mind. I began to find contradictions. I began to see that there were problems and things that needed to be cleared up. I walked night after night, thinking, thinking, [and] thinking.²

Wolff goes on to relate that when he took his concerns to the clergyman of his church (which was not the church where his father officiated), he was told "leave it to the Lord, my son," and that "[a]t that moment the church lost me. Never since then have I been able to endure traditional Christian religiosity. Oh, I had no trouble with the well-meaning of the people and so forth, but here was mutilation of truth, and I could no longer go that way."³

Here one can see, at the young age of thirteen, two dominant hallmarks of Wolff's psyche beginning to emerge: first, a strong desire to pursue the ideal of truth, or, as Wolff might have said, a need to "drive to the root"; and, second, the predominance of the role of thought in his life. With regard to the latter, Wolff notes that during his teenage years, "I felt the awakening of the interest in the girl and of the boy's interest in sport, but this became largely repressed and thought took all the interest. Thought continued to do so as I grew and indeed has dominated my life up to the present."⁴ Wolff's orientation to sound thinking and his interest in truth led him to the study of mathematics, and he would soon develop "the persistent feeling that at the root of mathematics there lay a mystery, reaching far deeper than anything attained through the senses."⁵

In 1907, Wolff entered Stanford University with the intention of pursuing a career in the legal field, but chose to take a "cultural" course-load for the first four years.⁶ Specifically, Wolff elected pure mathematics as his major field of study (at the time, Stanford also had a department of applied mathematics), and philosophy and psychology



as his minors. Wolff received an in A. B. Mathematics on June 25, 1911. Wolff's intellect had not gone unnoticed. He was elected a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in his fourth year of studies, at which time he was approached by two of his professors, who each offered to add a course to the curriculum to suit Wolff's needs. The first was a course in the mathematics department on David Hilbert's *Foundations of Geometry*; the second was a course in the philosophy department on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁷ Wolff served as an assistant in philosophy during a fifth year of studies, at which time he won a scholarship to Harvard University that was awarded to one

outstanding graduate from either Stanford University or the University of California at Berkeley by the Harvard Club of San Francisco. His interest in the legal profession long since gone, Wolff would make his way to Cambridge.

Wolff spent the 1912-13 academic year at Harvard attending graduate courses in philosophy, where he shared classes and hiked with Norbert Weiner, the child prodigy who originated the field of cybernetics. Both students had hoped to study with Josiah Royce, but could not as the revered professor had recently suffered a stroke. Wolff also attended a seminar given by Radinath Tagore, with whom he had a private meeting—the young graduate student came away profoundly impressed. Wolff's course load at Harvard included the following classes: symbolic logic, the philosophy of religion, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Ralph Barton Perry's course on *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, and two seminars: one on metaphysics, the other on epistemology.⁸

Lacking the financial means to continue his studies at Harvard (the Harvard Club scholarship was for one year only), Wolff entertained two offers of posts teaching mathematics that would begin the next academic year: one was a position at a missionary school in India (arranged through an Indian acquaintance), the other at Stanford University. Wolff chose to return to his alma mater, where Prof. Rufus Green had summoned him as a sabbatical replacement in the Department of Pure Mathematics.⁹ The position was to become a permanent professorship after a year.



Upon commencement of his teaching duties, Wolff began to have doubts about accepting a position in the Mathematics Department. For one, he found a calling to more properly philosophical issues about mathematics than he did to problems of a more purely mathematical nature. He explains: "I also faced problems that could not be solved with mathematics, such as the problem: In what sense, what range, and what degree has mathematics given us truth? This is a philosophical problem and could not be itself supplied in the mathematical field."¹⁰ In addition, Wolff had developed an interest in Theosophy during his undergraduate days, which had been reinforced during his time at Harvard, and he was beginning to feel increasingly drawn in this direction.

Wolff recalls that it was during a 1909 visit to the Palo Alto post office that he noticed a flyer advertising meetings of a local theosophical group. Having heard his "father once speak disparagingly of Theosophy," he "was immediately interested."¹¹ He ventured to a meeting of the group, was led by an Irishman named John Varian. Varian

had first encountered the Theosophical Movement in his native Ireland and after immigrating to the United States he joined the Temple of the People, a theosophical organization that had sprung up after the death of Helena Blavatsky and William Q. Judge. The meetings of the “Temple Square,” as the Palo Alto branch of The Temple of the People was called, were held in Varian’s home. Wolff reports what he encountered:

Here was a way of thinking and valuing totally different from that which I found in the university. Nonetheless, I was intrigued, and so I returned again and became even more interested, and ultimately a regular attendant. . . . But I was not satisfied with the soundness of the thinking, and the result was that for three years I disputed the soundness of his position with the leader of the group; meanwhile, feeling that yet there was something here. It was a kind of thinking that was totally foreign with respect to that which I had found in the university. I knew the scientific soundness of university teaching. I knew mathematics and philosophy, or was experiencing it at that time, and yet here was something that seemed to make an appeal to another possibility. Ultimately, I was sufficiently interested to make a tentative association with the entity known as the Temple of the People. I became a member and attended its convention in 1912, just before I went for the year at Harvard. But I was not yet fully convinced that here was a door to truth; it was an intriguing possibility, but there were many elements that were not satisfactory.¹²

While at Harvard, Wolff was to find a source that helped to ease some of these doubts:

One student in the seminar in metaphysics presented a paper when his time came around which was a formulation in terms of a certain modification of the Vedantic type of thought. This was fairly close to the theosophical thought that I had heard in the Temple meetings. I saw . . . him defend himself successfully against the critics. He was a Scotsman, a very brilliant man, who was completing his fourth year of graduate study with a PhD that year. This impressed me; here I saw—heard for the first time, a successful critical defense of a position that I had been tentatively entertaining but had not yet reached to a decisive conclusion.¹³

So it was that Wolff, while working as a sabbatical replacement during the academic year 1913-14, found himself in the midst of intense deliberation about his future. He felt strongly oriented to the pursuit of truth, and had come to the realization that this might lead to a path outside the field of mathematics, perhaps to the realm of academic philosophy. But now, he had to admit the possibility that this pursuit might lead him outside the academy, for the type of knowledge promulgated in Theosophy was not widely recognized in scholarly circles. He recounts this period:

Meanwhile, I had been meditating and thinking about this other way of thought and of light. So, I faced this situation: If this other way is indeed true, if there is another way of cognition that is not recognized in the academy at that time, then the kind of knowledge rendered available by that other way of cognition, if it exists, is so important that no philosophic statement could be adequate which

neglects its existence. So I came to the decision to make a search to verify whether this way of cognition . . . existed and was valid.¹⁴

Wolff thus decided to leave academia and to set out in search of “another kind of Consciousness where alone, it seemed, [a] solution to the antinomies of the subject-object consciousness could be found.”¹⁵ His first step was to “go into the wilderness,” and along with John Varian and other friends interested in theosophy, he formed a philosophical colony south of Carmel, California, where they began to live off the land.¹⁶ When their philosophical colony proved too ambitious, Wolff returned home to San Fernando and worked the orchards with his father. He would soon rejoin Varian, however, at the headquarters of the Temple of the People in Halcyon, California. Led by Francia La Due (Blue Star) and Dr. William Dower (Red Star), the community was located just south of the town of Arroyo Grande in San Luis Obispo County; it remains an active organization today.

Wolff was drafted in October 1917, and as a conscientious objector to armed conflict, was permitted to serve in a noncombatant military role; specifically, Wolff served as a sergeant in the Spruce Production Division of the United States Army Signal Corps.¹⁷ When he left the service in early 1919, Wolff returned to Halcyon. The following year, he married a fellow resident, Sarah A. Merrell Briggs; Sarah was eleven years Wolff’s senior and had



moved to the community with her young son James in 1915. After the death of La Due, and a struggle over her succession, the family left Halcyon and settled in San Fernando, California on forty-five acres of orange grove that Wolff’s father sold to them. There Wolff built a stone house that would become home for over thirty years, and tended to the orchard that would provide economic support for the family.



The couple was to make several important associations over the next ten years. The first was with Hazrat Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, with whom they worked closely for a period of about three months. In 1923, Wolff formally became a part of Khan’s International Sufi Movement, and Sarah would take the title that Khan bestowed upon her—‘Sherifa’. They formed a Los Angeles branch of this organization, but they withdrew from this work after finding it too difficult to work under the organization’s chief operating officer.¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, Wolff and his wife established contact with the United Lodge of Theosophists—a Los Angeles group that was founded in 1909 by Robert Crosbie. Wolff was deeply impressed with the character and the intellectual quality of the work produced by the Lodge, and remarks that “I could have found a basic home in it, but I must admit that it produced an effect that seemed cold. It seemed as though the heart side was relatively neglected—a



side that had been rather strongly developed in the Temple of the People at Halcyon. This was a deficiency that affected Sherifa more profoundly than it affected me. She did not find it an adequate opening for her resources. Though we always have remained a friend of the United Lodge of Theosophists, we have not identified ourselves with it in the exclusive spirit.”¹⁹ The couple attended Lodge meetings from 1923-28, but broke off after the organization moved to a location that made it too much of a burden to regularly make the trip from San Fernando.



In 1925, the couple joined the Benares League of America founded by Dr. Hari Mohan Singh in Los Angeles. Known as Yogi Hari Rama, Singh was an initiate in the Kriya School of Yoga, and expounded a discipline that he called “Super Yoga Science.” (Paramahansa Yogananda, the author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, is the most prominent proponent of the Kriya School.) In 1928, Hari Rama returned to India after appointing Wolff one of twelve “disciples” whom were to carry on his teachings in America. Wolff lectured actively on Super Yoga dressed—at Sherifa’s suggestion—in turban and robe, and under the name of “Yogagñani.” Wolff wrote his first two books using this name: *On Yoga* and *Re-embodiment* were self-published in 1930. Wolff resigned from this organization when its members began to take exception to his inclusion of material other than that taught by Yogi Hari Rama in his lecture work.

In December 1928, Wolff and Sherifa founded The Assembly of Man, an educational center that adopted a generally theosophical orientation. To symbolize their complementary and equal roles in this work, they informally joined their original surnames as ‘Merrell-Wolff’. This would be the pen name Wolff used in his later written and recorded work. In 1929, Wolff and the members of the Assembly received permission from the U.S. Forest Service to build an ashram on a tract of public land in Tuttle Creek Canyon, nestled at an altitude of seventy-six hundred feet on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The group chose this spot because it was near Mount Whitney, which at the time was the tallest peak in the country, and they believed that the spiritual center of a country should be near its highest point of elevation. This project—the construction of a stone building in the shape of a balanced cross (symbolizing equilibrium)—consumed over twenty years of summer work, and Wolff and his group held yearly conventions on the site.



During the Great Depression, Wolff began prospecting for gold in order to support his family. It had been twenty years since he first embarked on his spiritual quest, a search that not only included deep engagements with the Theosophical, Sufi, and Indian traditions, but also periods of self-doubt regarding his abandonment of a promising academic career. His mining efforts proved only modestly successful, but he did manage to feed his family and keep his property from foreclosure.

Throughout all, Wolff had found himself led by a particular shining light—Śaṅkara, the Indian philosopher who had consolidated and advanced the non-dualistic school of Advaita Vedānta. The long periods of solitary work prospecting in the mountains gave Wolff occasion to read and meditate on this material more seriously than at any prior time, and in the summer of 1936, he was focused on a Western interpretation of Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the Brahma Sūtras.²⁰ After returning home from working a prospect in the northern Sierras near the small town of Michigan Bluff, Wolff continued to brood on this material; his spiritual quest was about to come to a triumphant end.

It was on August 7, 1936 that, in Wolff’s words, “the ineffable transition came.”²¹ This would prove to be the first of two “Recognitions” or “Fundamental Realizations” that would provide the foundation for Wolff’s philosophy. While Wolff interpreted the first Realization as confirming the perspective of Śaṅkara’s philosophy, the second Realization—which unexpectedly occurred thirty-three days after the first—led Wolff to a philosophical position transcending his understanding of Advaita Vedānta.

At the suggestion of one whose opinion he respected, Wolff began to chronicle the days that followed his August 7th breakthrough, and the result is *Pathways Through to Space*, a journal that documents both his outer experiences and his inner life in the 101 days that followed. During this period, Sherifa also kept a journal, from which the following is excerpted:

These are interesting days: Franklin has penetrated to the very depths, it seems, of the Transcendental Consciousness. His work in mathematics, with its subsequent ecstasy of the abstract consciousness has opened this great door. ... His face was and is sublime. A light is all about him; his eyes have depths upon depths that almost engulf one who looks into them. He shines! He is happiness incarnate, a quiet depth of happiness that affects me variously. At times, I am ecstatic; again I am in a flame of fire that causes me actual physical distress, and I rain water from every pore. At other times, I see deeper than I have ever seen into the meaning of life.²²



In the decade following his 1936 realizations, Wolff’s writings became more systematic manner than that found in *Pathways*. And, true to the academic calling he still felt, he was particularly keen to present a rigorous philosophical interpretation of his realizations. He first published an article, “Concept, Percept and Reality,” in the 1939 volume of *The Philosophical Review*, one of the most highly regarded academic philosophy journals published in English. His magnum opus followed, a four-part treatise intended to restore the office of philosophy to “a Way of Realization” as opposed to one whereby it served simply as “a handmaiden of earthly science.”²³ Originally entitled “The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object,” Wolff regarded this work as an introductory outline of a philosophical view that he christened “Introceptualism.”²⁴ This name was derived from the term ‘introception’, a word that Wolff coined to designate the fact that the transcendent states of consciousness he had experienced in 1936 represent a

third form of cognition in addition to perception and conception, and which Wolff defined as “the Power whereby the Light of Consciousness turns upon Itself toward Its Source.”²⁵

Wolff also wrote a number of short essays intended primarily for his students and his close associates, and engaged in correspondence with the same; other than this, however, he virtually ceased all formal writing about a decade after his realizations. The Assembly of Man continued its work, and Wolff administered to his students, who were primarily centered in the metropolitan areas of Chicago and Los Angeles. Summer work progressed on the Tuttle Creek ashram until 1950, which was the last year that Sherifa was able to travel to the site. The effort of the Assembly was then confined to the San Fernando area, where Wolff continued to give lectures. By 1956, Sherifa’s health had deteriorated to the point that Wolff discontinued all activity other than caring for his ill wife. He sold a portion of their land, and the couple moved to Santa Barbara near the sea, where Sherifa wanted to spend her remaining days.²⁶

On February 23, 1959, Sherifa Merrell-Wolff passed away at the age of eighty-three. Wolff had been married to Sherifa for almost forty years, and her death left him without any desire to continue living. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Wolff began to experience what he described as a hemorrhaging of “subtle blood” after Sherifa’s death—that is, a bleeding of his life-force that he was certain would lead to his own death if not stopped. He found that he could not staunch this flow by any act of will, but that the loss did stop in the presence of certain of his female students. Accordingly, he faced this question: Should he pass in and discontinue his work or should he seek someone to staunch the bleeding and allow the work to continue?

Wolff chose the latter course and married Gertrude Adams, a student of his from Chicago whom he called “Lakshmi Devi”—one of the four aspects of the Divine Mother as represented by Aurobindo. The couple immediately set about to revitalize the work of the Assembly of Man, and decided to move to the four-hundred-and-twenty acre ranch near Lone Pine, California that the Assembly had purchased in the



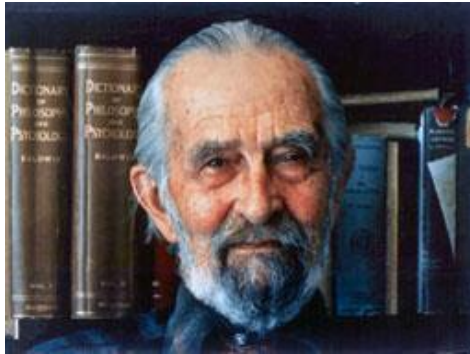
1940s.²⁷ They built themselves a house on the property, with Gertrude in charge of design and Wolff in charge in construction. The house was completed in 1963, and here Wolff would spend the remainder of his years not far from the Tuttle Creek ashram that had been a focus of his earlier work.



Wolff’s time with Gertrude would prove to be the most productive years of his life.²⁸ In the early 1950s, he had begun to experiment with a new format of expression—namely, the recording of his words on magnetic tape using a reel-to-reel recorder. In the nineteen years that he was married to Gertrude, Wolff recorded some two-hundred-forty audio essays covering topics that include

philosophy, psychology, religion, politics, yoga, and more—more material than he had produced at any time before.

On May 28, 1978, Gertrude suffered a stroke and died two days later. Gertrude was nearly twenty-four years younger than Wolff, and her death had come suddenly and without warning. Wolff was devastated by the loss, but with the help of his friends and confidants, including Dr. Burgh Joy, he worked through his grief with his characteristic honesty and forthrightness.²⁹ Wolff continued to record audio material, although not at the rate he had when Gertrude was alive (at the time of her death, Wolff was nearly ninety-one years old). During the remaining seven years of his life, Wolff welcomed visitors into his home, encouraged spirited discussion, and retained his wry wit until the end. He died on October 4, 1985 at the age of ninety-eight, giving his life a remarkable symmetry: it had been forty-nine years since his 1936 Realizations at the age of forty-nine.



ENDNOTES

¹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Life and Influences” (Lone Pine, Calif.: July 6, 1978), audio recording, 4.

² Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: The Feminine Side of My Experience,” part 1” (Lone Pine, Calif.: May 19, 1982), audio recording, 1.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Wolff, “A Recollection of My Early Life and Influences,” 4.

⁵ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy: A Personal Record of Transformation and a Discussion of Transcendental Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 252. Elsewhere, Wolff explains that

Ultimately, truth became the object of my greatest interest, and the truth which we know with greatest assurance is the truth that is found in mathematics; and so, ultimately, mathematics, in its pure form, became my central interest. One might bring up the question that this might be truth that is not relevant to the immediate problem before one in his feeling life, and that is true enough. But the important point, as seen by me, was truth that could be relied upon, that could be trusted, whatever it might be. It wasn't so essential that it happened to bear upon or did not bear upon an emotional need that I felt at this moment. The important consideration was that it was something reliable; and of all the knowledge which man has garnered to this day, the truth found in pure mathematics is

the most reliable that he knows. (Wolff, “The Feminine Side of My Experience,” part 1, 2.)

⁶ Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 90.

⁷ Wolff, “A Recollection of My Early Life and Influences,” 4.

⁸ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: My Academic Life and Embarking upon My Spiritual Quest” (Lone Pine, Calif.: March 1, 1982), audio recording, 5ff; see also Wolff, “A Recollection of My Early Life and Influences,” 6.

⁹ He was to teach the general courses normally taught by Prof. Hans Blichfeldt. See Wolff, “My Academic Life and Embarking upon My Spiritual Quest,” 5-6, for a description of these courses.

¹⁰ Dorene White, “Interview of Franklin F. Wolff” (Lone Pine, Calif.: 1982), audio recording.

¹¹ Wolff, “A Recollection of My Early Life and Influences,” 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6. The student to whom Wolff is referring to here was Robert Fleming Rattray, who after receiving his doctorate in 1913, returned to the United Kingdom and entered the Unitarian ministry. See the *Presidents Gallery* on the website of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society for more biographical details; the link to Dr. Rattray’s profile is below: (<http://www.leicesterlitandphil.org.uk/1924-robert-f-rattray-ma-phd-1924-25>).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁵ Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 91.

¹⁶ White, “Interview of Franklin F. Wolff.” John Varian was an influential figure in Wolff’s life: sixteen years Wolff’s senior and an Irish emigrant, Varian was the leader of the Palo Alto theosophical group with whom Wolff had debated so vigorously during his undergraduate days.

¹⁷ This division was established to supply the army with high quality spruce and other wood products needed for the production of combat aircraft and ships during World War I.

¹⁸ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa” (Lone Pine, Calif.: July 6, 1978), audio recording, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ Paul Deussen’s *The System of Vedanta* (Chicago: Open Court, 1912).

²¹ Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 3.

²² Sherifa Merrell-Wolff, “1936-37 Journal” (San Fernando, CA), entry dated August 29, 1936.

²³ Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 241.

²⁴ The first two parts of this work have been published together with *Pathways Through to Space* by SUNY Press as the aforementioned *Experience and Philosophy*. The third and fourth parts of this work have also been published by SUNY Press under the title, *Transformations in Consciousness: The Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Albany: 1995).

²⁵ Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 197.

²⁶ When the couple moved to Santa Barbara, Wolff acquired and managed two apartment buildings, using the proceeds to offset Sherifa’s medical bills.

²⁷ In 1941, Franklin and Sherifa Merrell-Wolff along with several members of the Assembly of Man, purchased a nearly 430-acre ranch at the base of Lone Pine Mountain near Tuttle Creek Canyon outside of Lone Pine, California. The ranch was named “The Assembly of Man Ranch” by Sherifa, after the school she and Wolff had organized and dedicated to spiritual education. Franklin and Gertrude began holding annual August conventions on the property in 1961, and they changed the name of the educational center to the “Friends of the Wisdom Religion” in the late 1960s.

²⁸ And, as Wolff recounts, some of his happiest years: he explains that after his marriage to Gertrude, he “had fully expected to make accommodation to adjust myself to another personality,” but that:

There was no such accommodation required. Everything moved smoothly, frictionlessly, and with growing happiness. To begin with I simply liked her. I knew her to be one of our students—a faithful one and a serious one. I knew that she was a person of musical ability and she had contributed to the work of her talent. The result is that if I would ever speak of a relationship between man and woman that was superb, frictionless all the way, such was the relationship that grew up between Gertrude and myself. In the beginning I merely liked her; in the end, I profoundly loved her. [Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: The Feminine Side of My Experience,” part 2 (Lone Pine, Calif.: May 21 & 26, 1982), audio recording, 5.]

²⁹ Dr. Robert Johnson was also one who helped Wolff through this period. For details on the life and work of this extraordinary man, please check the Wikipedia entry at this link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Johnson_\(psychotherapist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Johnson_(psychotherapist)).