

Gerald Larson · In Memoriam

Many of you here today are missing Gerry as your colleague, your mentor, your friend, the thorn in your side—and he could totally be your friend or colleague or mentor while STILL being a prominent thorn in your side. Gerry was one who made you work longer and think harder than you thought you should have to, Gerry consistently demanded more of you than most people thought reasonable. He was like that.

Gerry and I were *born* to be thorns in each others' sides and that's just how we liked it. Over the course of more than 40 years of friendship, we spent a lot of time being exasperated with each other. Now that Gerry's gone, I have no one that I can hurl Sanskrit insults upon. He often called me "O Vacuous One" because of my Vedanta background, and I called him, among many other things, Swami Kleśānanda.

We agreed on very little, argued about everything, and adored each other. Gerry honed his ideas through argument; I couldn't stop myself from setting him straight, especially where religion was concerned. When he & Claire came to lunch at the convent, it was dharma combat as a contact sport, voices raised and napkins hurled down the table.

If there was ever a poster-child for Taurus, that would be Gerry. He was bull-headed, confrontational and strong-willed. He was also loyal and fierce in his love and he loved a good meal and a good drink. He had a large and imposing presence and people were often intimidated by him. Gerry found that useful at times.

Case in point: He & Claire regularly attended an Episcopal church in Santa Margarita. Last year he called the rector and said he'd like to have a word with him over lunch. The Rector freely admitted that he was intimidated by Gerry & went over every word of the Sunday's previous sermon, looking for some mistake that he knew Gerry was set to pounce on.

They met for lunch, the rector was nervous as he rushed to explain that he knew he could have made some mistakes—Gerry just waved all that off and said, “I hear you're getting a new music director.”

“Yes,” the Rector said.....

“You're not planning on changing the direction of the music are you?” Gerry asked.

“Oh no no, not at all!” the Rector said

“Good!” Gerry replied. “Then we won't have any problems.”

Pipe in the music from *The Godfather* in the background. SO vintage Gerry Larson.

And none of this contradicts the fact that Gerry was the most loyal and loving friend in the world. He had an extraordinary capacity for friendship and his love for his family, friends, and students went right down into his bone marrow. When Gerry loved you, he loved you like a Sumo wrestler.

Because I worked at our convent bookstore and we stocked the Sanskrit texts that Gerry wanted, I became friends with many of his students, a number of you are here—Paul Mueller, Jim McNamara, Wade Dazey, Knut Jacobson, Lloyd W. Pflueger, Ramdas Lamb, Patrick Mahaffey, Jeff Lidke—the list goes on and on.....

His students went on to become exceptional teachers in their own right, which made Gerry extremely proud and happy. It was like getting more grandkids.

Nearly all of Gerry's students found him a very tough teacher. He was uncompromising and his students were sometimes left in tears, which genuinely surprised Gerry. He would say, "Not everyone is cut out for Sanskrit! It is not a prerequisite for a happy life! You can be perfectly happy *not* knowing Sanskrit!" But Gerry never lowered his standards, he couldn't, it simply wasn't in his temperament.

What most of his students didn't realize was how deeply he cared for them, especially his graduate students. He loved them with the in-

tensity and the pickiness of a father. He was like a clucking hen about them and most of them didn't realize how much he invested in them, more than his time and energy, he invested his love and blood loyalty. He shed tears over them and they didn't know it. Grad students that were his 40 years ago were still on his mind and he still fussed about them.

Being the bull that he was, Gerry would charge in where anyone else in their right minds would just keep quiet. But not Gerry, and sometimes it was a good thing. One of the few things that Gerry & I agreed on was classical music. He was a life-long oboe player and had a discerning ear for fine music. He and Claire always had season tickets for Segerstrom Concert Hall in Orange County.

When he was still in Santa Barbara, Gerry & Claire attended a Santa Barbara Symphony concert that I was in—I was and am a choral singer. He later said, "I saw you onstage. Why wasn't your name in the program?" I told him that I used my legal English name because I didn't think my fellow musicians would be able to deal with Pra-vra-ji-ka Vra-ja-pra-na. Gerry immediately shot back: "Oh, are you embarrassed about your name?"

"Of course not!" I said. "I am deeply proud of my name and my tradition."

Gerry replied, “Then why don’t you give the other musicians a chance to learn something?” he said. “You may be surprised.” And he was right. From then on I only used my long Sanskrit title and name. My fellow singers struggle with it but they try to get it right and they care.

One of the other things we agreed on was the importance of the Academy listening to the believing community with respect, and not presuming that we left our brains and critical thinking ability at the door of the Temple. When he was at UCSB he always brought his students to the temple so that one of us could speak to the students on our understanding of Hinduism.

Gerry did not condescend or assume that the Academy alone had all the truth.

That’s why he argued so much; he was always honing his thinking, always posing questions, always learning. He wrote in in *JAAR* that it was important for the Academy to be in frank and open conversation with the communities they study, He said that **“the relation of symmetrical reciprocity ... is the only way to go if we wish our studies to be taken seriously and if we wish our studies to be properly nuanced and persuasive.”** No one has one great big Key to Truth and Gerry understood that.

Certainly the highlight of his scholarly career was the completion & publication of his staggering 1000+ page *Classical Yoga Philosophy and the Legacy of Sāṃkhya*, Gerry asked me to write a review, which I did. In our last conversation, 2 weeks before his passing, Gerry said, “I thought you were going to do a Vedanta hit piece on it, but you actually wrote a good solid review! I think it will help sell some copies!”

Yet for all of Gerry’s work in the Academy nothing in the world was more important to him than his family. Claire and the girls were his life. His 6:00 pm on-the-dot dinner with family was the center around which the rest of his universe turned.

If the highlight of his academic career was the completion of his magnum opus, the highlight of his life was to celebrate Claire & his 80th birthdays and 58th wedding anniversary—by taking Claire and their 3 daughters and their husbands and all their grandkids—to Waikiki for a week where he booked a floor in a hotel and luxuriated in the joy of being with the people he loved most—his family.

I miss him, we all miss him. I miss his absolutely stellar integrity, his refusal to compromise in order to make life easier, and above all I miss his love and friendship.

Cheers, Gerry, you impossible, wonderful man.

—*Pravrajika Vrajaprana*