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# THE FRANKLIN MERRELL-WOLFF FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER

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The Franklin Merrell-Wolff Fellowship is a publicly supported, non-profit corporation whose mission is to educate the public about the twentieth-century American philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff through his writings, audio recordings, teachings, and life. Our activities include publishing and distributing his works, and the sponsorship of forums and events to study and discuss the life and work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, as well as to explore the connection between Wolff's teachings and those of other traditions.

## A Message from the Chair

Chuck Post

I noted last issue that the Dutch scholar Dave Vliengenthart was finishing his dissertation on the lifework of Franklin Merrell-Wolff. I am happy to report in this issue that Dave has completed his thesis, titled “Franklin Merrell-Wolff: A Reasoned Flight beyond Reason” and that he was awarded his doctorate this spring from the University of Groningen.

Dave wrote his dissertation after working through the Wolff Archive, and the Fellowship hopes to have the complete Wolff Archive—including all of Franklin and Sherifa’s diaries, journals, notes, letters, manuscripts, letters, and unpublished works—placed in a special collection at Stanford University.

In the meantime, we continue posting a good deal of this material on our website, which you may have observed has just been “freshened.” The biggest revision is that you no longer need to login to access any part of the site. New members now join simply by signing up for our mailing list, and newsletters as well as special endeavors will be available to all visitors.

I wish you all a wonderful summer!

## In this Issue

One of our objectives for this newsletter is to present personal accounts of the life and work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff. From these testimonials we hope that our readers will not only glean some knowledge of the man, but also of how his work has informed the endeavors and lives of those delivering their reports. This issue features an interview with someone who can give us some insight into both. Michele Newman is the daughter of Fay and Harry Newman, who were longtime students of Franklin and Sherifa Merrell-Wolff. As Michele relates, Fay became associated with the Assembly of Man, the group founded by the Wolffs, while she was still a teenager in Chicago. After they were married, Fay convinced Harry to move to California with their two young children, Michele and Mark, in order to be closer to “the Work” of the Assembly as well as to enjoy the Golden State’s wonderful environment. Michele recounts her childhood memories of this work, her impressions and interaction with Sherifa and “Yogi,” some fond remembrances of Gertrude (Wolff’s second wife), and she touches on how these influences helped shape her own life.

In this issue you will also find our plans for posting more of the Wolff Archive on our website, and we end, as usual, with a quote from the work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff that we hope will stimulate further reflection. Finally, we note that this issue is a bit tardy; hence we have dubbed it our “Spring/Summer 2017” issue; we will resume our regular schedule in the fall.

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## An Interview with Michele Newman



**FMWF:** Perhaps we could start out with some background on your parents, Fay and Harry Newman. What is their background and how did they get involved with Franklin and Sherifa Merrell-Wolff?

**Michele:** My mother began studying to become an opera singer as a young child. By the time she was six or eight years old, she would travel to downtown Chicago on her own to study with a former opera singer by the name of Blanche Slocum. Blanche and my mother would become very close, to a point where my grandmother—a Jewish immigrant who was very busy running a dry goods store—became somewhat jealous of Blanche.

The connection between Blanche and my mother was their attention to the spiritual side of things. For example, my mother always felt that when she sang she was communicating a spiritual force that was intended to heal; indeed, she told me that when she sang on stage (which she did beginning about the age of twelve) that she would see a silver thread emanate from her mouth to the audience, and that she saw this as part of her healing work. Blanche was in tune with this side of my mother, and was

there to provide her support in this work. This included bringing my mother to meetings of the Assembly of Man, which was the group founded by Franklin and Sherifa. So, by the time she was fifteen years old (around 1940), my mother was meditating with this group.

My mother went on to sing with the Chicago Lyric Opera, as well as at Temple and for the High Holidays, and anywhere she would be asked to perform. I should note here that my mother did not refer to her singing on stage as “performing,” but rather, as an “offering.” Of course, she did get paid for it, had beautiful clothes, and by the time she was in high school, a career—something that was pretty unusual for a young woman in the 1940s.

**FMWF:** When did your father come into her life?

**Michele:** My father had fought in World War II, and after the war returned home to Chicago. His mother had recently met Fay (my mother) at an esoteric lecture (I believe by Manley Hall), and immediately told him (in her Latvian accent), “There’s a beautiful woman I want you to meet.” My dad said, “No, I am not going to meet any woman you want me to meet.” Instead, he got married to another woman from whom he was soon divorced. His mother again began to (repeatedly) proclaim “I want you to meet this woman,” and finally he relented. Of course, as soon as he met Fay, he was smitten.

On the other hand, my mother—who had a budding career as an opera singer—had no desire to get married. As they would put it years later, my dad chased my mother around for four years, but she always told him, “Yeah, yeah, you’re a nice boy, but no thanks.” Things changed after my mother lost her voice and was unable to fulfill her life’s ambition—an audition with the New York Metropolitan Opera. She not only missed her audition, but the doctors told her she would never sing again. She did, but only after embarking an ambitious health regime designed to heal her vocal chords.

In the meantime, she gave into my dad, and began a family (first me and then my brother, Mark). During the time of their courtship, my mother had brought my dad to several meetings of the Assembly of Man, and after they were married, she began to suggest that they move to California, insisting that my father would love the environment there. She had visited Yogi (they always called Franklin, “Yogi”) and Sherifa during her summer college breaks, had hiked to the Ashram, visited Yosemite, and just fell in love with California. My father agreed, and we moved to Torrance, California in 1955.

At that time, Yogi and Sherifa were living in the San Fernando Valley, and we used to go out to their house for Sunday services and a large meal. My brother and I were very young, and we would play at “meditation,” insisting that each other be quiet. I mention this because it reflects the profound influence Yogi and Sherifa had on our family life. I remember Sherifa—when she was still well—as being very sweet to me, and as being “warm and cuddly”; I remember Yogi was always talking to the group. And although it was clear that he liked me (he would sit me on his lap), I don’t think that I would refer to him as being “warm and cuddly.” On the other hand, I remember Sherifa as always hugging me.

**FMWF:** What other memories do you have of Yogi and Sherifa? For example, can you recall their house and its surroundings?

**Michele:** Yes, their home was a beautiful sprawling brick and wood ranch house far out in the Valley, a long drive from Los Angeles (there were no freeways in those days!). I remember the beautiful gardens around the house with flowers and fruit trees, and with brick walkways that my brother and I would run around. I also remember a Mercedes Benz that Yogi would drive (and that he always seemed to have a Mercedes). To me, they always

seemed wealthy; of course, we weren’t, so this observation is from my own perspective.

To me as a child, Yogi seemed to exude the attitude that he had everything and could do anything. At the time I was too young to pick up on the philosophical content of his lectures, but I do remember “absorbing” their energy; but otherwise his talks seemed to be a monotone affair from which I would have rather escaped and been playing and running around.

I remember Sherifa becoming ill and being bedridden, as well as my mother telling me to go hug her because she was dying. I did so and told her that I loved her and hoped that she would be OK; she looked at me and said, “I’ll be OK.” I also remember my mother telling me that Sherifa had just died, and that we discussed her death openly within our family (we often discussed death, including discussions of reincarnation). It was a sad time, as if someone in our own family had died.

After Sherifa’s death, Yogi decided to move up to their ranch near Lone Pine and my father told us that “We are going to help Yogi build a house.” I remember being particularly impressed that Yogi was so down-to-earth and knew how to build a house and knew how to use power tools. And I remember my dad, Murray [Gregg], Peter [Geshell], and Bob Briggs all coming to help. I also remember Yogi driving the bulldozer around the property.

As an aside here, let me note that my parents were very dedicated to the Temple and to the Jewish community, and I remember them telling me not to mention the ranch and our meditation group to anyone in that community, because “they won’t understand.” Furthermore, since we lived in a Catholic neighborhood, I didn’t talk about our Jewish heritage to our neighbors and many of my friends. The result was that my life was rather segmented—I had school, I had home (including the ranch), and I had Temple—and I had different lives and different friends in each place.

At least once or twice a month, my parents would pack the car on Friday afternoon, then attend services at Temple on Friday night, after which we would drive up to Lone Pine. My father loved to drive, so for him, heading up 395 to Lone Pine was a delight. Sometimes we would leave my mother at home so that she could write, but in general, camping trips to the ranch were our regular family outing.

**FMWF:** What can you tell us about Yogi's second wife, Gertrude?

**Michele:** Some of my favorite memories are of Gertrude, whom I remember as sweet and adorable. She was fun, and was the one who would always talk to me. I would help her in the kitchen and since she liked to talk and I liked to talk, we were happy conversing there. I was amazed that Gertrude could feed large groups, particularly during Convention, with little or no help in the kitchen. Of course, my own mother was not particularly "domestic" (being busy as a musician), and so to see Gertrude accomplish what she did was quite inspirational. She was a very old-fashioned style cook, but always welcomed my help preparing the meals. In fact, I learned how to cook many recipes from Gertrude. I also learned how to set a table in the proper way, as Gertrude insisted on a traditional and formal table setting. Occasionally while we were in the kitchen, Yogi would call in from the meeting (being held in the living room), "Come on in Gertrude, you don't want to miss this," and she would yell back, "If I don't finish this there will be nothing to eat, and I know that you will all be hungry after you are done!"

I recall wondering about the relationship between Yogi and Gertrude, which seemed unusual to me. My parents always hugged and kissed, but I never noticed any such interaction between them; of course, most of the time they were in front of a group, and accordingly their behavior was quite business-like. It was also quite obvious that

Gertrude was very devoted to Yogi—in fact, I could see her devotion. As my mother explained to me, Gertrude was devoted to the "Spirit" represented by Yogi, and that she performed all the mundane tasks needed for him to carry this Spirit to others. Gertrude seemed to enjoy it; and, it seemed to me that she was fulfilling an important purpose in her life.

**FMWF:** How about some of your memories of Yogi at this time?

**Michele:** Some little things stand out. For example, I remember him lacing up his big boots to walk around the property, always in a plaid shirt with a sweater or vest. I remember him stroking his beard when talking or looking at something. And I remember that he was always very aware—of everything: for example, he knew what the fox was doing, what the bushes and trees were doing, and what the weather was doing. He knew all about the land and I particularly enjoyed his discussions of the property. And, I could feel his deep connection to the land when I watched him.

When I was in college I drove up to the ranch to visit, and I told Yogi that I was going on a vision quest in the desert by myself (at the time, I was studying La Junta Indian medicine). He told me not go alone, but I insisted that I would be fine. He insisted that I report back to him and Gertrude when I returned. I did. I felt loved by him, but I am sure that he thought that I was a willful young woman—and I was.

**FMWF:** Let's end with a more personal question. Having grown up with parents that were deeply involved in the work of the Assembly of Man, how has this influenced your life?

**Michele:** I feel that I grew up in a spiritual environment, and that this reflects my parents' deep involvement with both the Temple (where my father was the Cantor and my mother the Director of Music) as well as with the Assembly of Man. The

difference between these two was that meditation was emphasized by the Assembly and so I was meditating by the time I was seventeen or eighteen.

In fact, after Yogi moved up to the ranch, our family, along with Murray and a few others began meeting at Maybelle's apartment in Los Angeles every Sunday night for meditation. This Sunday evening meeting was very important to my parents, who were very busy—but they would always make time for these meetings.

Generally speaking, I would say that having grown up in the sphere of the Assembly of Man has given me a deep connection and understanding of what one might refer to as “esoteric” concepts. More importantly, I have learned to live the reality of what these concepts represent. For example, I have never questioned the idea of reincarnation, and this has led me to several past life regressions. In my own work, I have integrated these ideas—along with music—into healing work that targets the spiritual immune system, my goal being the complete healing of body, mind and soul.

*Editor's Note:* For more on Michele's work, please visit her website at [www.SingYourSoulSong.co](http://www.SingYourSoulSong.co) and her Facebook page, [SingYourSoulSong](https://www.facebook.com/SingYourSoulSong).

## **A Review of Archive Posting**

There is a significant amount of material from the Wolff Archive already posted on the Fellowship's website, and there remains a considerable amount yet to be posted. We review some of the material to be posted below:

### *Audio Recordings*

Of the 432 audio recordings in the Wolff Archive, all have been categorized and posted to the website. Of these, 371 have accompanying transcripts. (And we thank Tim Zook for his efforts in getting thirteen of these posted this spring.) Of the remainder, fifty-six recordings have yet to be transcribed, and five have been transcribed but require “proofing.”

### *Correspondence*

We are sorting through the many letters to and from Wolff in an effort to determine those that should be posted and those that are not suitable of posting. The latter include some every day and mundane material that is not of particular interest as well as some private material that is not appropriate for public display. There are, however, many valuable letters in which Wolff dispenses practical advice and teachings, and in which he explains some of his own experiences and insights.

### *Library*

We will soon be posting a list of the titles found in Wolff's library.

### *Mementos and Memorabilia*

We are working to develop a complete inventory of this material as well as best means to display information about these items.

### *Organizations and Group Work*

This material has been categorized as follows:

1. The Temple of the People (1909-1922)
2. The Arcane School (Sherifa, 1923)
3. The Sufi Order in the West (1923)
4. United Lodge of Theosophy (1923-1928)
5. Benares League of America (1925-1930)
6. The Assembly of Man (1928-1967)
7. The Holistic Assembly (1952-1956)

We are writing introductions to these categories and will post the material for each in separate tables.

### *Photographs & Video*

We hope to be able to post all of Wolff's photographs and videos soon.

### *Sherifa*

We hope to be able to post all of Sherifa's essays, perhaps some records of her channeling, as well as excerpts from her journals.

*Gertrude*

We have a book penned by Gertrude to post, and a number of articles that she composed for the *Assembly Man Bulletin* and its sequel, *The Seeker*.

We will notify our members as this material is posted.

### **A Quote from Franklin Merrell-Wolff**

The following quote is from the Introduction to Wolff's unpublished and undated manuscript, "Death and After." Although the subject matter of this work is death, in this passage Wolff reflects about matters political, and he makes a number of points that seem particularly relevant today. Of course, there may be some ideas in this passage to which the reader might take exception; Wolff would have been open to a critical examination of these ideas, and in fact, he took some delight in entertaining different points of view.

Not all peoples stand at the same level in their individual evolution, and as different stages of unfoldment call for correspondingly different forms in thought-structure, in religious and social institutions, the peculiar needs of all individuals can never at any one time be satisfied by the same limiting forms. With their characteristic profundity the East Indian sages of old solved this problem with a social form which gave the maximum freedom to the widest range of relative degrees of evolutionary unfoldment of individuals. In its original sense, caste structure corresponded to actual differences in character and unfoldment of the individuals composing the membership of one caste-form as compared with another. The formal life and religious rites of each form were designed to meet the peculiar needs of that group. At the same time, the formal barriers of separation between groups made possible autonomous cultures graduated to meet

the needs of different stages of development of the psychological nature. The result was that, in the same land and with equal freedom, the primitive Dravidian and the high-caste Brahmin of the very highest spiritual consciousness, together with every degree of intermediate group, were able to live essentially harmoniously, each according to his nature and spiritual needs. The Aryan invasion of India did not spell the extermination of the primitive people which were found in that land, nor did it destroy for them their native culture. On the other hand, the spiritual life of the highest type of man was not made impossible by being forced into a smothering psychological matrix, as would have been the case if the Brahmin had been forced to amalgamate with the psycho-sphere of the low-type Dravidian.

With us in the West, and in America especially, the ideal of equality has actually worked to destroy the freedom which that idea, in theory, was supposed to serve. The tendency here has been the regimentation of institutions, and while this has facilitated the raising of the formal culture of the average man, it has, in general, depressed the life-expression of those whose consciousness-state lies above this regimented dead-level. For those who lie at the extremes, our system has been deadly. Really great men, in the sense of an inner profundity, have not had the protection of the insulation through which alone they can reveal themselves effectively, and our civilization has been much the poorer for this. At the other extreme, the groups which cannot adjust themselves to our cultural forms are destroyed. The humaneness of the Aryan in his relation to the Dravidian stands upon an incomparably higher level than does the spirit which we have manifested with respect to the North American Indian.

Our democratic institutions in America present us with the practical problem of finding some

suitable form which lies beyond that which exists currently, and that greatly complicates the issue. The very concept which becomes a liberating force to one portion of the whole group, at the same time tends to wipe away the crutch which is still necessary for the other portions. To have a knowledge which one cannot understand is worse than ignorance. The aggravated criminal problem in this country is an instance in point. Technical knowledge is developed far beyond the wisdom which is necessary to make judicious use of it. The West generally, and America especially, are facing a situation where the external intellect has become too powerful for the soul of the average man. This situation is one fraught with the gravest danger. Our only hope lies in the growth of those movements which tend toward spiritual profundity, as the powers of external intellect, now released, cannot be sequestered by the few who are really wise enough to administer them.

In a peculiar degree, therefore, we in the West are forced to face the necessity of giving open expression to forms of knowledge from deeper levels of the arcana of Consciousness which, while they are probably of a maturity beyond that which best fits the understanding of the average man, yet only in these forms lies the antidote to the over-developed external knowledge. Western civilization has reached a point where it must rise much higher or it will fall to barbarism. Never in the world's history have we been so distinctly in a place where we dare not let Nature take her course. We have forced our way far into Nature's secrets in one direction and we must equally force acquisition of the complement of this knowledge or, by failure to possess the adequate instrument to control the power we have invoked, the latter will arise with destructive violence and overthrow us. In one sense we have dared heroically and we must continue equally

heroically in our efforts, until the necessary balance between outer power and inner profundity is achieved which alone makes relative stability possible, or we can hope for nothing short of disaster. Never was there a time when superficial optimism was more dangerous than now. There is no safety in the automatic continuance of the forces already invoked. Victorious achievement is possible, and if attained, it will probably place the world beyond any point it has ever yet known, in an inner as well as an outer sense, but such victory can only be the fruitage of conscious and intelligently directed effort, heroically continued.

## **The Franklin Merrell-Wolff Fellowship**

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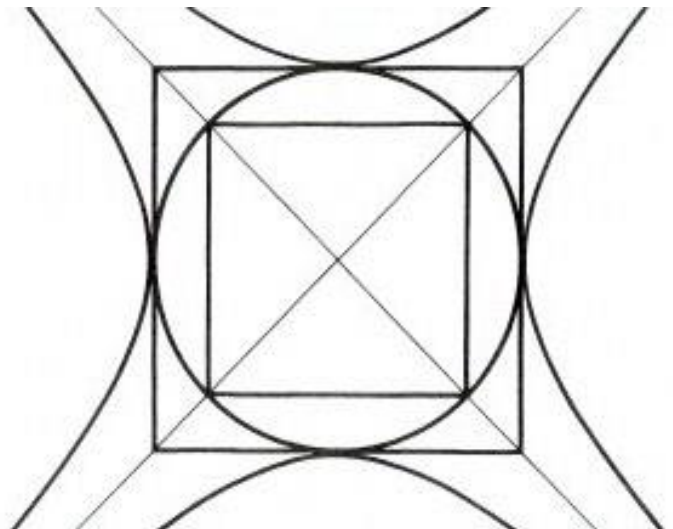
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