

In Honor of Dr. Rodney E. Donaldson

by Jenny Manes – student and friend

“He who really knows how far our generation has lost the way of true freedom, of free giving between I and Thou, must himself, by virtue of the demand implicit in every great knowledge of this kind, practice directness – even if he were the only man on earth who did it – and not depart from it until scoffers are struck with fear, and hear in his voice the voice of their own suppressed longing.” Martin Buber (underlining added)

It is with great sadness and a deep feeling of loss that we inform the friends, students, and colleagues of Dr. Rodney E. Donaldson of his recent passing. He died quietly, in his home in Port Angeles, Washington, on November 13, 2009, at the age of 58.

Dr. Rodney Donaldson was President of Crazy Tiger Institute for the Cultivation of Living Systemic Understanding and Design in Seattle, Washington. He was a past President of the American Society for Cybernetics from 1992 to 1994, and was a professor of Whole Systems Design at Antioch University, Seattle for ten years. He was the creator of the Official Gregory Bateson Archive housed at the University of California, Santa Cruz, including his six-volume “Guide/Catalog” (1982). Rodney also edited a volume of essays of Gregory Bateson’s, entitled “A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (Harper Collins 1997).

Rodney was an extraordinary teacher, a scholar of superlative precision, clarity and caring, and a masterful spiritual warrior. He was incredibly generous, literally giving everything he had to his teaching, his students, and his mentors. He was, quite simply, a pure and deeply caring human being.

Considered to be one of the world’s foremost authorities on the works of Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana, Rodney lovingly gave countless hours of work to ensure that his mentors’ intellectual legacies survived. He was very grateful to have the opportunity to serve his mentors in any way he could. His contributions will surely be missed. No one was his equal.

Those fortunate enough to have participated in Dr. Donaldson’s courses will attest to his ever fresh, inventive, and creative genius. In his impressive series of courses, he invited us, his students, to deepen our own understandings of that which we were exploring and studying through a never ending myriad of exercises. To be experienced fully, these had to be done with our entire being, never with just a compartmentalized portion, such as from our heads. Some of what Rodney offered us had to be taken as a koan, to be wrestled with and reflected upon, for some time, before fruit was born. This in itself was a lesson in meditation and awareness.

When we students were struggling with new material and ideas of a different ilk, Rodney would continually remind us that to understand the new ideas, we had to enter them. And that act often seemed impossible. What Rodney was pointing to was a knack of 'feeling one's way into, a 'grokking', an act of 'gestalting', a surrendering, a 'swimming around in', repeatedly, until one developed sufficient catching mechanisms that would then lead to a 'jump' into the new understandings. Any attempt to understand something new from our current beliefs and understandings would merely result in taking rich, multi-leveled ideas and turning them into flat, one-dimensional misunderstandings. We had to learn to surrender to what we did not yet know.

In working with his students, Rodney always offered to those wanting to learn – multiple descriptions, multiple ways in, explorations often opposing each other, in order to deepen the experiences/understandings with which he and his students were playing. It goes without saying that what he invited people into was rigorous, both intellectually and spiritually. Gregory Bateson told Rodney that one should always teach to the top 3%. Rodney did so. Some people were ill equipped to follow. That inability on others' parts certainly did not diminish Rodney's genius, but did leave him in a 'playground' by himself.

On some deep level, whether by his reputation or in people's interactions with Rodney, people recognized that they were in the presence of greatness. His genius was as an artist in the human domain. This scared some people. The fear of 'looking-square-in-the-face' that to which he was inviting, was impossible for some. For those people, the preservation of their egos and attachment to their beliefs was more important. In his teaching, he would tirelessly invite us to consider that through attending to the habitings of ego, and through awareness of the consequences of those habitings, we would eventually see through the errors and cul-de-sacs of those behaviors. While we cannot not live in habitings, we can notice the direction certain habits take us. Once the errors, or confusion in logical typings were fully seen through, those habitings would then naturally fall by the wayside. It was his job and gift, as our teacher, to poke holes in and burst the bubbles of our egos and attachments. In spite of our resistances and projections when we felt our egos under attack, Rodney remained true to the process of self-liberation for our sake. (And it goes without saying that the 'self' in 'self-liberation' is precisely NOT the ego self.)

Every single invitation was an act of love and compassion from Rodney. His infinitely varied and creative invitations and perturbations, though not always comfortable for the students' egos, were always pointing in the direction of one's self-liberation (or as some would say, enlightenment). They were often arduous, painful, scary, and yet, enlivening. When we students would find ourselves stuck in a habiting of ego, Rodney would either gently 'pat our egos/habits on the head', or at other times, swiftly 'sever' them. When the last vestige of a particular manifestation of ego was seen through, the space in which we would find ourselves was far less burdened and freer. That is, until that particular habit again reared its head, and once more, the learning, exploring, surrendering, attending, reflecting and becoming aware, would have to take place anew. This cycle created a series of 'catching mechanisms' such that the next time (and the next) we

students found ourselves living that habit, it was easier and easier to see through it and find it fallen away. In the Blakean sense, we were learning that our attachments were nothing but self-imposed 'shackles' and fictions of the mind.

As Rodney said many, many times – “Everything we do is a doing on our part”. (Doings=doing, saying, acting, behaving, emotioning, thinking.) We do what we do because we want the consequences of those doings, even when we claim that we do not. The proof is in our doing. (paraphrased from the work of Humberto Maturana) Therefore, as Rodney would say, “How-you-do-what-you-do is who you are becoming.” In other words, “You cannot not teach yourself and others an epistemology 24 hours a day.” “‘Manner-with-whichs’ matter!”

Rodney cared deeply. He could never not help those in suffering. He never ‘told’. He had no need to espouse beliefs. He was always exploring, and invited those who wished to ‘play’ with him to do the same. He created contexts in which we learned to understand the ‘nature of ‘X’s’, and the implicit. He invited us to go for the meaning of any given ‘X’ (from a gestalting, grokking space, never from our ‘head’). Rodney invited us to explore the ‘suchness’ or ‘facticities’ of any given ‘X’ and to detect and expunge sentimentalities, which are no more than fantasies, fictions and acts of violence against self and other. For Rodney, it was about the ‘Hows’ versus the ‘Whats’. And there is no such thing as ‘trying’, only ‘doing’. He taught us to live in open awareness, not to do techniques. Techniques merely deaden. To be aware and open allows space for discovering the next ‘not knowing’. To go for what we already know is precisely a dead end. We learned to detect the difference between feelings and emotions—emotions being stories we attach to and tell ourselves about our initial experience/feeling. He taught us to speak from our experiencing, not talk about. Through his skillfully varied teachings of often seemingly contradictory ideas, we learned to integrate. When we students were inclined to blame something or someone outside ourselves, he would invite us to turn our outwardly pointing fingers of accusation back upon ourselves and honestly explore from that ‘position’ first. The possibility of learning was greater when the focus was not outwardly directed. He was always inviting us to verbings, versus static, ‘shoulds’ and pegged down nounings. Rodney’s triggers, perturbations, and invitations were aids for us to ‘discover’ for ourselves. We students were always being invited to a phenomenological ‘jump’, a move to a higher or deeper level of understanding. Everything he taught was an invitation to the sacred. “The sacred,” he would say, “is that which cannot be talked about and pinned down, because to do so is to kill ‘it’ (which of course is not an ‘it’). The sacred can only be pointed to.”

One of Rodney’s favorite quotes is a line out of T.S. Elliot’s “Four Quartets”: “an ultimate simplicity costing not less than everything”. Rodney would say that “risking everything is the nature of spiritual work and without being willing to risk everything, in every moment of now, one can not get ‘there’, which of course, is not a ‘there’.” And this is indeed how Rodney lived his life. He risked everything in every moment of his living. In his teaching he invited others to do the same.

In his last four or five years, the speed with which he moved in his own explorations, his growth as a consummate teacher, and development as a spiritual warrior was stunning. For the students who studied with him until his death, it was obvious that he was now playing in a completely different phenomenal domain or level than the rest of us. He could not slow himself – he was on a ride and he went for it with everything in him. He told us that he was aware he was moving faster than we could keep up. Sensing his own death to be near, he provided us with everything we needed in order to continue with our own spiritual studies and explorations after he was gone. It was important to him that we were taken care of in his absence.

There was not a more generous soul than Rodney Donaldson. He cared deeply about helping us to become our 'true' selves. He knew what it meant to truly love. And he did so, without hesitation or equivocation.

This is a much poorer world now, without his presence, his energy, his teaching, his caring, compassion, and his love. Count yourself blessed if you had the rare good fortune to study with Dr. Rodney E. Donaldson.

"There is no time off for spiritual work", he would say. "True wars are never won." (e.e. cummings) He taught us that when we are suffering the most is precisely the time to do the work. Those are the moments most ripe for potential movement and opening. It is when times are the toughest, when we are the most resistant, when we are in the most pain, that the real work of becoming a human being can happen. Such times require a complete surrender and willingness to open. Rodney was always inviting us to grow up. To be honest with ourselves. To be ALIVE.

The 'manner-with-which' of his living will serve as inspiration for those of us who remain behind. There is a saying, "One goes to the Master to watch him tie his shoes." (source unknown) As Rodney often said, "It's all about the implicit." One of the last things Rodney said to his students was, "Everything, everything, everything is grist for the spiritual mill. You have everything you need to continue your spiritual journey, as long as you remain open, be utterly honest, and explore with everything you've got."

Rodney Donaldson was a visionary, a spiritual master, and a humble ordinary man who cared deeply. And his manner of caring made him an extraordinary human being.

We would do well to honor this extraordinary man through living our lives in a like manner. The consequences just might be the one thing (which of course is not a 'thing') that he would have loved for us all. Self-liberation. Freedom. A living of explorations in the direction of true understandings and meaning. A living in ALIVENESS.

With our gratitude, and in appreciation for you and all you offered, Thank You, Rodney. You were loved. You will be missed.

"Every thing that lives is Holy." William Blake