

## 1936–February 26, 2010



William R. LaFleur, distinguished professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, passed away at age seventy-three of a sudden heart attack on Friday, February 26, 2010. A native of Patterson, New Jersey, LaFleur received his BA from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He earned two master's degrees, one in comparative literature from the University of Michigan and another in the history of religions from the University of Chicago. He also completed his doctoral work at the University of Chicago, where he studied with Joseph Kitagawa and Mircea Eliade. After completing his PhD in 1973, LaFleur taught at Princeton University; University of California, Los Angeles; Sophia University, Tokyo; and University of Pennsylvania, where he was the E. Dale Saunders Professor of Japanese Studies.

LaFleur was a groundbreaking figure in the interdisciplinary study of Buddhism and culture in Japan and trained two generations of graduate students in these fields. His seminal work *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (University of California Press, 1986) broke away from a traditional focus on specific Buddhist figures and lineages and instead approached Buddhism as the “cognitive map” by which medieval Japanese of all Buddhist schools and social levels made sense of their world. He also uncovered an intimate relation between the Japanese Buddhist episteme and medieval literary arts. The innovative studies now emerging from a generation of younger scholars working at the intersections of Buddhism and literature owe much to LaFleur's influence.

A scholar of far-reaching interests and expertise, LaFleur refused to be confined by any single research area, historical period, or method of approach. In addition to his work on Buddhist

cosmology and the “mind” of medieval Japan, he was a gifted translator and interpreter of poetry and published two volumes on the medieval monk-poet Saigyō. He was deeply interested in Zen, especially as a resource for contemporary thought. He wrote and edited several books and essays, introducing to Western readers the work of the thirteenth century Zen master Dōgen, the Kyoto-school figure Masao Abé, and the twentieth century philosopher and cultural historian Watsuji Tetsurō. In 1989, he became the first non-Japanese to win the Watsuji Tetsurō Cultural Prize.

LaFleur’s *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1994) expanded his earlier attention to Buddhist notions of the body and catalyzed his growing interest in comparative public philosophy and social ethics. In his later career, while continuing to study medieval Japanese religion and literature, he produced pioneering studies of Japanese bioethics, highlighting contrasts with Western approaches to such issues as abortion, organ transplants, and medical definitions of death. Altogether, he wrote or edited nine books. He left several other projects still in progress; some of which will be published posthumously.

“As a gifted poet and philosopher,” his [University of Pennsylvania obituary](#) reads, “Bill brought humanity and wisdom to the study of everything he encountered, from the taste of tea to the technology of medicine, from hungry ghosts to haiku poets. His students, colleagues, friends, and family will miss him immensely.”

## **Some of Bill’s Former Graduate Students Reflect on Him as Teacher and Mentor**

Our teacher, Bill, loathed any suggestion of a “LaFleur school” and never tried to turn us into clones of himself. But he worked tirelessly to instill in us the habits of critical thinking that would allow us, each in our own way, to mature as scholars. “Bill was methodologically eclectic,” writes Edward Drott (University of Missouri). “He never allied himself fully with any particular school, approach, or critical method. He encouraged us, by example, to maintain an awareness of the blind spots that accompany any critical perspective and to cultivate a healthy suspicion — even of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.”

“Bill was brilliant and quirky,” writes Laura Miller (University of Missouri, St. Louis), “with a wicked sense of humor that could catch you off guard if you didn’t know better. But that twinkle in his eyes often gave him away.” Humor was frequently Bill’s way of prodding us to rethink comfortable assumptions. “Just when he’d have us nodding our heads in agreement, Bill would offer a counter-argument,” recalls Jan Bardsley (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). “For me,” adds Stephen Miller (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), “Bill brought the humanity

back to the Humanities. He was never pompous. He was not afraid to look you straight in the eye and say something you needed to hear. But he was never mean when he did it. His incredible sense of humor — at me, himself, the world — made me take myself less seriously in some ways, but he also showed me what it meant to become ‘scholar-fied’.”

Bill could also be, in Laura Miller’s words, “more of an anthropologist than some anthropologists,” turning a shrewd participant-observer eye on the profession and exposing academic taboos with witty irreverence. “He did it with humility,” writes Linda Chance (University of Pennsylvania), “but sometimes touched with an anger he reserved for cant or condescension. For Bill there were no sacred cows, especially among the latest ideological fads. In my opinion, Bill taught just this: Take Japan seriously, turn all assumptions upside down, and ask ‘Why do we think that?’ or ‘Was that really true?’ whatever *that* happened to be. Not true in the abstract, but really true for people — this was the magic, the compassion, of his intellect.”

Bill continually challenged us to develop the larger significance of our work. Bruce Baird (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) writes, “What meant most to me about Bill was that he was never satisfied to tackle small problems but always wanted to weigh in on the major issues. His comments on my seminar papers showed me how to integrate my work into larger dialogues that scholars were having. It was incredibly generous, and now that I grade papers, I realize even more how generous it was.”

“With regard to Bill,” says Michael Marra (University of California, Los Angeles), “I can only repeat the dedication of my *Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), ‘To Professor William R. LaFleur, without whose

*Karma of Words*

my karma would have no words.’ I also think that, without him, my words would have had no karma, if by karma we mean purposive action. Bill was a man of great taste, whether it came to matters of thinking, stylistic matters, or the recipe to cook eggplants — the best I ever tasted. I keep looking at his web picture taken in his office at the University of Pennsylvania. All the books in the background are exactly the same books I keep behind me on the bookshelf in my little office at home — that should speak to the notion of influence. The challenge has been to keep up to his standards. In terms of quality it is an impossible task; gourmet cooking is rare indeed in this world.”

Jacqueline Stone (Princeton University) writes: “Bill was the first person to believe in me intellectually and encourage me to pursue a scholar’s life. His is the standard of mentoring I aim for with graduate students of my own. In my scholarship, it has become a longstanding habit to test my arguments or work through conceptual roadblocks by imagining ‘what Bill would say.’”

It's hard to accept that conversations with Bill can now only take place internally.”

*This In Memoriam piece was written by □ Jacqueline I. Stone, Princeton University.*