

Robert Collins, Ed.D., and his late wife Julie began attending the Portland center in approximately 1955, and Robert served on the board for about a decade. Robert, a retired professor of biology, resides in Portland.

Interviewed in Portland.

Somewhere around 1955, an elderly woman and friend of ours told us how wonderful Vedanta was, and that she wanted us to try it. So we went one Sunday evening to the old temple downtown. That night Swami gave a wonderful sermon and we were very impressed because he seemed to be so well educated: he brought into his sermon references from many well-known thinkers. Then Anne Hatfield sang. She had the most wonderful voice you could imagine, and I wondered why she didn't sing in the opera—her voice was better than many opera singers I heard. (We found out later that Swami did not want her to sing any place but at the temple.) Between Swami's great sermons and her beautiful singing, we were sold.

There were fewer than twenty-five people attending. This was shortly after Swami had arrived to the center. Marvin (now Harananda) was just out of high school; Vera, and her sister, Fae, are the only other people now attending from that period.

EW: Did Vedanta seem strange to you? Some people recalled thinking the pictures were odd.

RC: No, we didn't even give it a thought. Anyway, there were very few people, perhaps 25 or fewer attending because the former swami lost his audience owing to declining health. Our swami had the job of building the congregation. As I recall, there were very few men there; most of the people were women. We would go out to Scappoose every Sunday morning as soon as the weather got nice; that was something we particularly enjoyed. We'd go to the Sunday service, sometimes followed by a potluck dinner in the men's cottage. Sometimes we'd sit outside on the lawn with question and answers from Swami. This was before the hall beneath the temple was finished, as far as I can remember.

Swami didn't like driving with women, so when we started attending, he liked going with us when possible since I was one of the few men there who could drive.

EW: When did Mr. Bush [a devotee who lived at the center for decades] come?

RC: A year or two after we did. Then Swami would ride out with him.

EW: Did you start attending right away?

RC: Yes, after that first Sunday we were immediately captivated. So we went Sunday morning at the retreat and Sunday evenings in town, but not to any other classes during the week. Back in those days we invited Swami to our house for dinner and he came out several times. One time there was a biblical epic playing at the movies and he went with us. He enjoyed it but had several comments about the inaccuracy of the content.

EW: Did you share this interest in Vedanta with your friends?

RC: Actually, yes. I was teaching high school in Gresham at the time and there was a group of students who were interested in having a philosophy group. I suggested that they meet at our house and see whether Swami would come. Swami was delighted. One of the students was Jim Sanderson; he was so impressed with Swami that he went home and told his folks [Marina and James Sanderson]. James senior and Marina talked with us and they went to meet Swami. They were so impressed that they joined immediately.

EW: Amazing story! I interviewed Marina at the age of 90 and she told me that her son went to someone's house for a discussion group.

RC: That's me! As long as Swami lived he kept thanking me for introducing him to the Sandersons. Apparently they had met the other swami when he was not doing well. They were interested in this kind of philosophy but he was not able to help.

EW: So how did you become interested in Eastern thought in those days?

RC: My brother had become a Bahai and wanted us to look into that. So we went to a fireside chat where we met the woman who introduced us to Vedanta.

EW: So you were in your mid-twenties when you met Swami. Did you find any kind of conflict with your scientific background?

RC: As a matter of fact, it was the scientific references in that first sermon we heard that impressed us.

EW: So how did your relationship with Swami evolve?

RC: We became instant friends. As I mentioned, we invited him to dinners, to the movie, and the philosophy group in our home. Later on he apparently discontinued visiting devotees in their homes. When we started going we didn't have kids. When Julie became pregnant, Swami gave his blessing and asked all the time how she was. When our first child was born in 1958 we immediately called Swami and he was the first person to see Julie and our daughter Coral in the hospital and to give her a blessing. Swami stated that he had never seen a newborn baby in a hospital before that occasion. When our other two daughters were born, he was one of the first to visit them in the hospital and gave his blessings. All three of them adored him.

EW: Did they go to Sunday school there?

RC: They didn't have a Sunday school. When Coral was born we'd take our crib and set it in a side room there. I'm sure some of that went in because she developed a very strong bond with Swami. He was just wonderful to the girls. We'd take two of them down there but when the third came along, it was hard to continue going. We went as long as possible and then shifted to Unity where they could attend Sunday school in the mornings. Then we'd go to Vedanta Sunday evenings when we could.

RC: You were a member of the board. What was that like bearing in mind Swami's tight management style?

RC: Swami would tell the congregation whom he wanted on the board and the congregation voted how they were told [laughing]. He wanted the board to be all men. From the old board, there were a few women and they stayed. Eventually there were nine men on the board.

EW: Did you actually have the ability to make decisions or were you simply implementing what Swami wanted, as some have suggested. [Editorial note: See also Terrance Hohner's remembrance for his experience of the board's purpose.] What was the purpose of having a board?

RC: [laughing] Well, that's a good question! I have no idea, but we more or less did what Swami wanted. I will tell you a little story that takes exception to this. When the old temple was condemned because the state wanted to buy that property for Portland State University, they offered just a pittance for the property, nowhere near what it was worth. [Robert recalled the term "condemned" may have been used although the building was in fine condition.] Members of the board said we should sue to get more. Swami was adamant that we not sue. The members of the board kept pushing him to get what the property was worth and finally Swami relented. We did sue and we won; we got considerably more than they offered originally. The board *did* influence Swami enough to file a suit.

When we sold the property, Swami wanted to make sure that Portland State kept the rhododendrons that the previous swami, Devatmananda, planted are there. So when the library was built, the rhododendrons were incorporated into the landscaping design.

EW: Did Swami shout at people on the board in those days? Do you know about his scoldings?

RC: Oh yes, quite well! That came later. In those days he was much more mellow. I can remember him shouting at the women working down there, but I can't remember him shouting at anybody on the board.

After the center was sold, Swami moved to a rented apartment. It wasn't large enough to hold services, so we rented the chapel at the YWCA. On special occasions we would meet at different people's homes; once the group came out to our home. There were only about thirty people in the congregation at that time.

EW: Several people felt Swami wanted only a small committed following. Some commented that he reportedly discouraged insincere people. [Editorial note: See related discussion in remembrances of Doretha Stuart Moore and Alan Boyce]

RC: That's true. It's a wonder the Portland center has been able to stay afloat. When the Sandersons joined, they sold their property and moved into the retreat's cottage for women, one of two cottages there. Eventually the men's cottage became so run-down, full of rats, that it was taken down. The women's cottage also had rats. Swami would not allow anyone to use rattraps or poison—but he allowed them to have a cat to take care of the problem.

EW: The Sandersons were rather brave taking all that on. It sounds rather primitive.

RC: I saw there were blankets hanging down from a rope dividing their upstairs space into two separate bedrooms.

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EW: Are there some special teaching moments you recall?

RC: The most memorable pertained to Swami's talk on [the Biblical] "The Sermon on the Mount." He later gave me Swami Prabhavananda's book *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* and you can read the inscription: "To Bob Collins with my very best wishes and greetings, Swami Aseshananda, January 24, 1969." This book is one of my favorites and I recommend that it be required reading for anyone interested in Vedanta. For me, that was Swami Aseshananda's most memorable sermon: he explained things that made it quite different from traditional Bible study.

EW: Are there one or two points that stand out in your mind?

RC: One of the main points is "Blessed is he who mourns." Swami's explanation is much more educational than what the traditional fundamentalist Christians think.

EW: What was Swami's explanation?

RC: The person who mourns is one who must have such a strong desire to see God that he or she is wishing and longing for this. It's not just about crying over someone dying and seeking comfort. Swami could explain it so well.

You asked about some of Swami's favorite sayings. The one that sticks out the most for me and that he continually spoke about in his lessons was "The kingdom of heaven is within you."

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Oh yes, I remember one endearing incident. After the old temple was sold we transferred much of the contents to the retreat, including a box of letters, to Swami Devatmananda. Because I collect stamps, I asked Swami Aseshananda whether I could have the stamps. He thought for a moment and said, "Sure, as long as you don't read the letters!"

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RC: [The conversation turned to Robert's service on the Society's board of directors.] When we didn't have a place to meet after the old temple was sold, the board members looked all over the city, at all kinds of churches for sale. Although they might have been nice facilities, when we got done looking Swami would say, "I don't like this place—it doesn't have good vibrations." He was dead set against the place. So we decided we'd have to build our own. Finally we bought a lot out in north Portland. Jim Selig's brother was an architect, and he drew up complete plans for a temple.

The senior swami in the country, Swami Vivedeshananda in Seattle, came down and we took him out to show him where we were going to build. Right away he said, "Ramakrishna doesn't like this place." So back to the drawing board: as long as the senior swami had said he didn't like the place, our swami decided to scrap all the plans!

We started looking around again and finally found the house where the temple is located now. It was a home that a doctor had started building with office space, an unfinished shell. We decided to buy it.

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EW: Did the subject of initiation come up?

RC: Swami asked us if we wanted to be initiated, probably around 1960, and we let him know we weren't ready. We regarded him as our teacher anyway.

EW: It seems that the fact that he offered meant he saw in you real sincerity, I'd guess.

RC: We were honored, but just not ready.

As time passed, and with our three daughters, we weren't able to be as active; but we still went when we could. My wife and I would take turns in the chapel while the other

one stayed with our daughters in the adjacent room. When everything was over and Swami had said goodbye to everybody, he would take the little girls into the shrine all by themselves. He would give them their little private visit and blessing in there. It was very special.

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