

A Conversation with James Baker Hall

(February 5, 2009)

by Arwen Donahue

In February of 2009, I met with Jim for our second interview. By then his stamina had decreased dramatically. We recorded a half hour of conversation about his studies in Zen Buddhism and his friendship with W. S. Merwin, and then Jim was worn out. It was our last one-on-one visit.

As with the interview conducted three months earlier (November 18, 2008—see page 53), I have again edited with a light hand.

ARWEN DONAHUE: How did you get interested in W. S. Merwin, and how did you meet him?

JAMES BAKER HALL: I heard W. S. Merwin read in Seattle in 1959, and I don't know this for sure, but I think probably he had published two or three books at that time. He won the Yale Younger Poet's prize and very quickly got a reputation for being a young prince of American poetry. In his late twenties, he was well-known among poetry readers, and because other people were reading him and he did get into the conversation with some regularity, I always read W. S. Merwin books and poems when I saw them. But I never got all that much from them. He certainly was not one of my favorite writers. He wasn't somebody that I was paying a whole lot of attention to.

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In those days a lot of us thought we had to *keep up*, as we said, stay abreast of what was being done, read the people who were being read, be able to talk to other people

who were keeping up, and a good deal of your credibility in conversation with other artists, with other writers, hinged on you knowing what was going on. If you started talking to somebody who didn't know what was going on, it meant to most of us that what they had to say wasn't well-informed enough.

So I read W. S. Merwin for years, as just another person on the long list,

and in the mid-seventies—1977-8, somewhere along in there—I was at the University of Kentucky teaching fiction writing and poetry writing, and was in Lexington when school was in session, and then I was in Connecticut with my wife and children when school wasn't in session. And my life was, over a five-year period, coming apart. That marriage was coming apart, and along about '78, I got aware of the fact that I couldn't maintain this long-distance marriage, and had to get out of it.

I was down to a mattress and a pillow and a bottle of bourbon and a package of Winston cigarettes and a typewriter. Somewhere along the way, I read a W. S. Merwin poem that just took my head off, and then I got another one and another one. And I realized all of a sudden that this guy was writing poetry that excited me like only a few other poets ever had, and that he was talking directly to me. He was telling me, time and again, where I was and what was going on. Along with the mattress and the bottle of bourbon and the typewriter, I had two or

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three W. S. Merwin titles on the floor there. Before I went to sleep each night, I would just reach over at random, open one of those books, and read two or three poems. This was a relationship

with literature the likes of which got me excited when I first encountered T. S. Eliot. This was work that you wanted near at hand and that you looked to for guidance. He was a spirit guide.

I was running the writing program and the reading program [at UK] and I invited him to Lexington to read, and that's how I met him. I think this was probably in '78 or nine. We struck up a conversation that got increasingly intense on the subject of teachers. I was looking for a teacher, and the one most apparent over and over and over again was Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who was in Boulder. There were a bunch of Trungpa students in Lexington. There was a Tibetan center—what's now the Shambhala Center.

AD: Before we go on, can I ask if you remember what the poem was that first penetrated?

JBH: No. No. Let's just say “Lemuel's Blessing.” I had heard “Lemuel's Blessing” many times before it took my head off. It could have been “Lemuel's Blessing,” “The Station.” It could have been any number of poems that are teaching poems.

That was like Rilke. I had this experience with Rilke of reading him for years and years and years and years and thinking he was a kind of fuzzy-headed German philosophical poet that everybody seemed much more interested in than I could get, and then all of a sudden Rilke became available to me, and that's the way it happened with William. He came to read in Lexington several times while I was running that reading program. The first time, he met some of my students over at my place, and he saw some books in my apartment that he asked about. I was reading things that interested him; some of the transcribed teaching sessions of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* among them, and a bunch of books on Zen and such like.

[Merwin] was an old friend of Wendell [Berry]'s, and after he got done with his responsibilities at UK, we went down to visit the Berrys in Port Royal. On the way down there, we had a conversation in which he asked me what my interests were that those books represented, and I said, "I'm looking for a teacher." I told him that the only obvious teacher was Trungpa, and that one of the things that hung me up about going to Trungpa was the story, among the many that accompanied Trungpa, of his terrible abuse of W. S. Merwin.*

I did not want to submit my mind to the influence of the guy who did this [to Merwin]. So I said, "Well, who are you studying with now?" He said he was studying with Robert Aitken in Maui, and that he'd gone to Maui to study with Aitken Roshi. I asked him if he was a trustworthy teacher, and he said, "Yes, he is." And I said, "Well, could I become his student?" He said, "I'll ask."

So I went to Hawaii to be a student of Aitken Roshi at the Maui Zendo, and William was a member of that sangha. I stayed there for about a month at the training center in which you sat all day long and had dopas. I had a teaching session head to head with the teacher. I started kōan study, and William and I got close. He and Dana were living in a house on Maui; I took care of the dogs when they were on the mainland, and I think I was out there for two months, two separate sessions in the summer of '79.

At the end of it, I had a sabbatical leave that was followed by an NEA grant which gave me two years. When I left Maui and [Merwin] wanted to know where I was going, I didn't know. I had somebody in Seattle that I wanted to visit. He said, "Do you want my apartment in New York?" He had had for years the lease on a sixth floor walkup at the corner of Waverly Place and 7th Avenue. I mean, that's right in the center of the West Village. He kept the lease because he loved the place, but he didn't live there all that much. He had a place in southern France. He had a place in Hawaii. He was all over the place, in New York for only a few weeks a year, so he let somebody else stay in the apartment who would pay the rent and be able to vacate it when he wanted it. He asked me if I wanted that apartment, and I said, "Sure."

I went to Princeton, picked up the keys, and went to New York, and lived in that apartment for the next two years, except for a few weeks when he wanted to be there, when I'd come back to Kentucky. And then Mary Ann [Taylor-Hall] and I took up in 1980, and we shared keys to that apartment with William and whoever he was with for years. It was a glorious apartment. It was upstairs over the Village Vanguard, where a lot of the great jazz sessions in New York were held, and the rent was \$137 a month for three small rooms, but beautifully, beautifully located. And so we shared the rent and shared the keys, and we had an apartment in New York to go to whenever we wanted it, and it was a charm. We got closer and closer, and when he took up with Paula, his current wife, I was the best man at their wedding. It was at the Zen Center in Riverdale.

I studied with two or three different Zen teachers in New York in that two- or three-year period I was there, and we had this connection through poetry and through Zen study, through kōan study, that led into this shared apartment. And there were many times when we needed one another in a special way. After he and Paula got married, Paula and Mary Ann became very good friends. They talk to each other on the phone regularly. So we stay close.

*For an account of this story, see for example Tom Clark, *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*, Cadmus Editions, 1981.

Sometime during the eighties, Mary Ann inherited some—what was it—stocks, maybe, from her father, and she wanted something real. Jerry [Gerald] Stern and his girlfriend and William and Paula and Mary Ann and I were at this hotel on the Jersey coast, and at breakfast one morning, the subject came up of this inheritance that Mary Ann got and wanting something real. William or Paula said, “The property across the creek from us is for sale. It’s six and a half acres.” Mary Ann had never been to Maui. I knew what we were talking about. But by noontime we were on the telephone with a lawyer in Honolulu and we bought the

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six and a half acres, sight unseen, with a house on it.

This didn’t last long. Three years. Something like that. It got way too complex. We shared a creek bed with the Merwins. He had I

don’t know how many acres at that time. Now he’s got many more, and they’re all planted in endangered South Pacific palm trees. He’s got one of the world’s great arboretums, and it’s a stunning, stunning place; his arboretum, his house. And we were on the next ridge over.

So there had been any number of ways in which our lives have become very entwined, and we know Paula’s children, especially the writer son, John [Burnham] Schwartz, and we know a lot of their friends. People that I’ve never met are in the conversation because of stories that Paula tells Mary Ann. And his work has been a very important influence on me and my work.

AD: Has that influence evolved over time?

JBH: Well, it’s a question I find very difficult to assess. I mean, some people would say, “Yeah. You don’t use any punctuation and he doesn’t use any punctuation.” It would be that superficial. But it’s not superficial at all, and it’s not just that I’ve learned a lot from his poetry. It’s that we both have common teachers. We both study—I mean, he could be a Dharma heir, meaning he could [have been] a Zen master a long time ago if he wanted to be. He doesn’t want to do that, but he continues to work with selected teachers. He’s an absolute genius in kōan study.

AD: Can you give an example of what you mean by that?

JBH: Well, no because you have to know what kōan study is in order to, and that’s a long story. Kōans are little conundrums. They cannot be responded to rationally. Like in the lineage that I’ve studied most in, the first kōan they give you is called *Mu*, and it goes like: “The student came to the teacher and said, ‘Does a dog have Buddha nature?’ And the teacher said, ‘Mu.’” So they send you away to sit on that, and then you go back and the teacher asks you questions like, “What is mu? Show me mu.” And you give these answers and the teacher sends you away, rings the bell, you leave, until you get it right, until the teacher thinks you know what you’re talking about. Some people stay in Zen study for years and years without passing *Mu*, without giving a teacher a series of answers that are satisfactory.

AD: Was that the format of your studies with Aitken?

JBH: Yeah. It took me a month to pass Mu, and that was quick. If you have a Zen mind or something close to it to begin with—which means a non-conceptual mind—you get these things much more easily. If you conceptualize, they’re just impassable. There are different collections of kōans—the one that we were working with is a book called *The Mu Mon Kwan* and then on the other side of *The Mu Mon Kwan* is the *Blue Cliff Record* and other collections of kōans. And depending on what lineage you’re in or what teacher you’ve got, you work with x number of kōans, like 164 or forty-eight or five hundred or whatever.

So we not only have the body of poetry written in English as a common teacher as poets, but we have common teachers in Buddhism. And I mean, you wouldn’t know that W. S. Merwin was a Buddhist from his poetry unless you knew what (laughs) Buddhism was. I mean, Gary Snyder is known as a Buddhist poet because he makes it apparent; uses all of that special Buddhist terminology and talks about Buddhism. Allen Ginsberg is known as a Buddhist poet. He’s a Tibetan Buddhist poet. Ginsberg was a student of Trungpa’s.

AD: Have you ever talked with William about why he doesn’t do that?

JBH: Well, yeah. Sure. (Laughs) It represents a very profound lack of understanding of Zen to talk about Zen, if that’s comprehensible. It’s not something you talk about.



W. S. Merwin in Hawaii, late 1980s. Photograph by James Baker Hall