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OBITUARY

In Memory of William Corliss

William R. Corliss, regarded by many as the world's greatest contemporary anomalist, passed away at his home in Glen Arm, Maryland, on July 8, 2011, at the age of 84. During a span of some 40 years, the physicist turned stalker of paradoxical data brought to light a mind-boggling collection of unexplained observations, embarrassing deviations, and paradigm-shattering discoveries that orthodox science had largely swept under the carpet of consensus. In recognition of these contributions, he received, in 1994, the Tim Dinsdale Award presented by the Society for Scientific Exploration.

Corliss was born on August 28, 1926, in Stamford, Connecticut, and served in the Navy during World War II. After receiving degrees in physics from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (BS) and the University of Colorado (MS), he worked for more than a decade as a physicist in industry, first with Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, then with General Electric Company, and finally with the Martin Company where he was Director of Advanced Programs in their Nuclear Division. In 1963 he began another career, in technical writing, and produced works for NASA and the National Science Foundation on such topics as electric power generation, computers, space radiation, robotics, and telecommunications.

With an interest in "outlaw science" that had been sparked by the reading of a controversial book on geology in 1951, Corliss turned to writing about scientific anomalies in 1974, an endeavor he christened The Sourcebook Project. In the decades that followed, he conducted a massive amount of library research, poring through many thousands of scientific journals and gleaning from them a wide assortment of neglected data in the fields of geology, biology, archeology, astronomy, psychology, and geophysics. He first reprinted the accounts he found in a series of six ring-bound volumes, followed by six massive hardback volumes he called "handbooks." But by 1982 he had switched to a hardback catalog format that not only presented examples of various anomalies and their sources, but also gave an evaluation of the quality of data—and an evaluation of an anomaly's possible impact on science, from being a mere curiosity to being "revolutionary," by which he meant that the anomaly could not even be explained by a modification of present scientific laws.

The evaluations were necessarily subjective. He admitted that it was difficult to categorize and organize the unknown, and always pointed out that

the material he chose to include in his anomaly catalogs reflected what—in his opinion—was not well-explained, as "anomalousness is often in the eyes of the beholder." Not all the anomalies he highlighted presented a threat to mainstream science. Some are mere blemishes. Others are leaks, cracks, and fissures in the foundations and facades of the various sciences. But there are potholes as well, the potential game changers. "Instead of simply accepting nice, slick theories like evolution, relativity, and continental drift," he said in 1980, "I think we should occasionally reexamine them to be sure they are not accepted just because they are so slick. And based upon the material I've collected, what I'm saying is: I'm not so sure." Among the major paradigms widely considered to be fact that his catalogs of anomalies put at risk are: the expanding universe; the Big Bang origin of the universe; Neo-Darwinism, specifically evolution via random mutation and natural selection; plate tectonics and continental drift; Special and General Relativity; and the assumption that genomes are the complete blueprint for life forms.

Corliss made no claims of completeness. Indeed he would constantly point out that he had covered just a fraction of the literature on a subject. In 2005, he wrote that his 40 published volumes detailing more than 2,000 scientific anomalies and "provocative" phenomena represented just 50% of his database. And even after decades of work, only a handful of English-language journals had received his serious attention. "The journals in other languages, government reports, conference papers, publications of research facilities, proceedings of state academies of science, and an immense reservoir of pertinent books," he noted, "remain almost untapped." The task he faced was daunting: "The anomalies residing in the world's literature seem infinite in number."

But he never lost his enthusiasm, and one has to admire his courage in single-handedly attempting a project of such enormous scope. His catalogs are unique in the annals of science, in that he cataloged not what is known but what is not known. "It seems to me that any organized activity like science would have done this a long time ago," he said. "It is at least as important to realize what is not known as it is to recognize the well-explained."

Though Corliss has often been compared to a modern-day Charles Fort, their differences are considerable. Unlike Fort, he avoided using newspapers as the source of his data whenever possible, preferring instead to depend on academically accredited journals that described anomalies that were the product of scientific observation, research, and exploration. Furthermore, Corliss, unlike Fort, was not anti-science and he did not editorialize. He thought the data were damning enough on their own. "In the Catalog of Anomalies," he wrote, "the data rule; all theories and hypotheses are held to be tentative. The history of science proves that this is a wise policy." Corliss saw anomalies as a way to renew, to reinvigorate, science.

Though his first volume of anomalies, entitled *Strange Phenomena*, was actually recommended by both *Nature* and *Science*, quite often the publication of his catalogs met with disbelief, even disdain. The critics claimed that the data must be in error, that the data is anecdotal, that it was too old, that a supposed anomaly was explained long ago. His reply? "The baseline of well-established theories, against which anomalousness is measured, is always shifting and some data, indeed, are bad. But for every anomaly or example that can be legitimately demolished, ten more take its place. Nature is very anomalous or, equivalently, Nature is not yet well-understood by science." Such words did not endear him to the scientific mainstream, which largely ignored much of his later work.

Corliss did not have any illusions about the impact The Sourcebook Project would have on science. Would it revolutionize science? "Probably not—at least not immediately," he wrote. The late sociologist Marcello Truzzi called Corliss "an unsung hero of science."

I was introduced to The Sourcebook Project in the late 1970s, when I received my very first published volume of anomalies from the mail-order service he operated with his wife, Virginia. (Most volumes are still available from The Sourcebook Project, P.O. Box 107, Glen Arm MD 21057. See also: http://www.science-frontiers.com.) Shortly afterward, I met and interviewed him for an article I was writing on his work for *Science Digest.* We kept in touch over the years, and I would occasionally send him a newsclipping for the newsletter he published called *Science Frontiers*. After being involved in producing a couple of science exhibits for museums, I began to think that his work should have a wider audience, that there should be a William Corliss Museum of Anomalies or at least an exhibit for museums based on his work, called What Science Doesn't Know. I can't imagine anything more stimulating to the minds of young people than to discover areas of science that are up for grabs, puzzling topics they could explore, wide open fields of research where they could make a difference, instead of being presented with science as a closed book of knowledge, as at most science museums. The work of William Corliss is an inspiration, a wonder-filled refutation that we have not come to the end of science. Quite the contrary. As he would often say, "Much remains to be done."

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