

THE LAST WORD Memories, insights, and reflections

The Chun-tzu

If you would know Huston Smith, start with China. Born there to American missionary parents, it was there he spent the greater part of his first 17 years. Beholding him, one wonders whether fantastic tales about Chinese magic are not true after all. There is something distantly—and yet distinctly—Asian in his physiognomy. China paused on his skin, it seems, before proceeding to his marrow. But proceed it did.

Open the pages of the *Analects* to Confucius' descriptions of the *chun-tzu* (ideal gentleman) and you touch Huston's fiber. *Chun-tzu* literally means "son of a ruler," but the Confucian tradition reserves the term for one who possesses a truly human heart, who cherishes the arts of learning and teaching, and who is as concerned to teach by moral example as by intellectual knack. That, for starters, is Huston.

For those who had come to graduate school seeking Wisdom (and some of us *had*), Huston incarnated the spirit of the Quest. He embodied a graceful balance between academic objectivity and an abiding sense that we moderns had much to glean from wisdom traditions. He was one of the most senior professors in the Department of Religion, and he held the prestigious Watson Chair, yet all who knew him felt he was, at heart, but another wayfarer on the Way marked out by the saints and sages of the human past. Huston, the *chun-tzu*, became my mentor. I began to learn as much from how he was as from what he said.

The *chun-tzu*, says Confucius, is meticulous in the performance

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of reciprocal duties. I once asked Huston why, after I had completed my doctorate, he worked so hard to help me land a job in the tight market. He explained that in China a teacher's duties are not complete until he helps his student get established.

The *chun-tzu* is also a social adept, as skillful in moderating intellectual conversation as he is in mollifying a surly neighbor. Deferential and courteous, he wields the marvelous, hidden power of formality—the *real* Chinese magic. From Huston I learned that formality opens lines of communication that a too easy familiarity tends to clog. Huston is a reserved man, and one of such massive impartiality that those who approach him seeking signs of special favor often come away instead with a heightened awareness of their own dubious motives. And yet, for all that, he remains the eminently approachable "Huston," as the many who have sought his counsel will attest.

Huston's Chinese grain contains Taoist squiggles as well. He once led 30 students, three professors, and their families on an academic year around the world. Logistical nightmares, outrageous proposals for exotic side trips, and cross-cultural difficulties that would have made a lesser mortal tear out his hair were handled by Huston with the unruffled ease of a man on a Sunday stroll. The Taoists call this quality *wu-wei*, or creative quietude. As the *Tao Te Ching* has it,

*The Sage
Puts himself in the background
But is always to the fore
Remains outside but is always
there . . .
Through his actionless activity
all things
Are duly regulated.*

For those who would come to

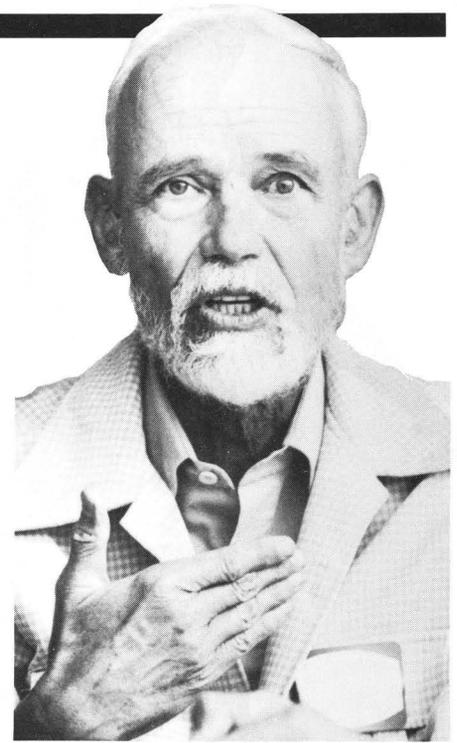
know Huston only through his work, China bestowed a final gift: a profound appreciation for non-Western cultures that fated him to be a bridge builder. At 37 he published the book that was to make the whole world his lecture circuit. *The Religions of Man* has sold over two million copies in six languages and, amid a host of more recent

world religions texts, is still going strong.

No single culture or tradition, however, can shape the soul of a bridge builder. His life has been an earnest, incessant pilgrimage. Certainly the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which he was raised and in which he served for a time as a minister, has played an important role. But there were also tenacious explorations of the other traditions. In the 1950s weekly sessions with a Hindu swami led him deeply into the contours of the Vendanta and the practice of yoga. In the 1960s a full dose of Zen training in Japan and a friendship with the great Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki opened wide the Dharma-Gate of Buddhism. In the 1970s new intellectual allegiances provided entry into the House of Islam and the Sufi brotherhood. In all these adventures there were lessons for his students: If you want to know you must taste.

I have traveled with Huston and watched him in the company of contemplatives hailing from various climes. The scene, often repeated, has etched itself in my memory. The scholar greets the robed figure and their eyes meet. Something nearly palpable flows between them. Rapport seems instant, mutual respect obvious.

What do those tranquil souls



Huston Smith

see in Huston's that makes him one of them? Perhaps the very thing seen by the master of ceremonies last year at a banquet attended by 800 representatives of religions the world over. Twenty honored guests, Huston among them, sat at a long table atop a stage. As the meal proceeded each was introduced; positions or academic pedigrees were duly noted. Eventually it came time for the closing remarks, Huston's task that evening. The master of ceremonies stepped to the podium, broke the routine, and in lieu of a list of credentials, introduced Huston in six words. "He is," said the MC, "a man with a golden heart."

There is much else to say, of course. But I remember that once, during a seminar that was being hobbled by the irrelevant expostulations of an over-talkative graduate student, Huston passed each of us a slip of paper bearing the following message: "In a setting such as this, it is tempting to comment on many things. Unfortunately there is time only for the essential. Learn the art of omission." It is a piece of advice with relevance far beyond the occasion that brought it into being. And so I close, esteemed teacher, omitting much.

—Philip Novak