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. Chunjzu 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 teaching, and who is as concerned to teach by moral example as by intellectual knack. That, for starters, is Huston.

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