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**Tales of Wisdom & Wonder:
The Fascinating Life of Huston Smith**
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Part of what I say at the beginning of each Sunday service is that, “We seek to **draw wisdom from all the world’s religions balanced with the insights of modern science.**” The good news is that an increasing number of people are open to multiple religious truths and practices, but that was not always the case. And one of the people who helped turn the tide of public opinion more toward religious pluralism is Huston Smith, who died almost three years ago at the age of 97.

Smith is most well-known for his book, The World’s Religions, which became “**a standard textbook in college-level comparative religion classes for half a century.**” Part of the reason why it is arguably “The most important book in comparative religious studies ever” is that when it was first published in 1958, it was groundbreaking to offer a humane, open-minded, appreciative approach to all the world’s religions that was accessible to a popular audience. (Keep in mind that Smith’s book came out amidst the conservative 1950s, not during the countercultural movements that took off in the mid-1960s.)

So in this month of December, when multiple major religious holidays overlap and intersect, I would like to share with you some of the fascinating life of Huston Smith—both to honor his pathbreaking contributions to religious pluralism and for some of the insights we might gain for our own lives.

To start at the beginning, it was far from clear at first that Huston Smith was on a path to become one of the most preeminent communicators about the world’s

religions. He was born in 1919 in a small rural village in China, fifty miles west of Shanghai. His family was part of a Christian missionary lineage that stretched back to the mid-nineteenth century. His maternal grandparents were missionaries, and his mother was also born and raised in China (Smith 2012: 4). The guiding motivation in his family of origin was **“to Christianize the world”** (Sawyer 9, 18).

And in contrast to a worldly cosmopolitanism, his childhood in rural China of the 1920s was, as you might imagine, rustic. There was “no flush toilet, no television, no telephones, no newspaper, no automobiles, no planes overhead” (Smith 2010: 4). Indeed, a man would visit everyone’s outhouses each morning, leaving behind a few coins in exchanging for their “night soil” that was used as fertilizer (Sawyer 18). Importantly, however, he said that neither he nor his siblings felt deprived; it was simply the way things were (Smith 2012: 9).

In 1932, at age thirteen, Smith’s world began to widen when he moved away from his parents to attend high school in Shanghai (Sawyer 20). But a much bigger change came in 1936, when at age sixteen he traveled eighteen days by steamship to the United States to attend the small Methodist college in Missouri his father had attended (Smith 2010: 19, 23). It may have been a campus of 600 students in a town of 3,000 people, but compared to Suzhou, China it felt like a bustling metropolis (Smith 2012: 25).

Although Smith originally thought he would return to China after graduation to become part of a third-generation of Christian missionaries, he knew after two weeks that there would be no going back (Smith 2010: 28). He quickly became an active part of campus life, serving as a writer (and eventually editor) of the college newspaper, the head of the pep rally, and President of his class all four years. My favorite story from Smith’s college years gives us a preview of his later willingness to take controversial public stances. He was summoned to the dean’s office, where he was told, **“Not today and not next week and not until doomsday will you write another editorial called ‘Central College Faces Syphilis.’”** That article, by the way, won a state journalism prize (Smith 2010: 30).

At this point we can also begin to see the beginnings of the thread that Smith would begin to follow throughout his life—although the path was never clear in

advance. Huston's favorite professor in college had been a protege of the theologian Henry Nelson Wieman at the University of Chicago. And in 1940, that connection help Smith get accepted into their Ph.D. program (Sawyer 31). And as impressive as Dr. Wieman was, Smith was even more impressed with Wieman's daughter Kendra (Sawyer 32). After dating for two years, they were married in 1943, and the first of their eventual three children soon followed nine months and ten days later (Smith 2010: 39).

Although Huston Smith was not a Unitarian Universalist, I'll share with you a few examples of how he was frequently "UU adjacent." Although his dissertation adviser Bernard Loomer was not a UU at the time he was mentoring Smith, his theology was in many ways in sync with Unitarian Universalism—and toward the end of his life Loomer did become a UU, leading popular theological conversations each week at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, California (Sawyer 36).

Even more significantly, his mother-in-law was a Unitarian. And in 1949, his father-in-law became a Unitarian after he retired as a professor at the age of 65, and joined what is now the UU Church in Eugene, Oregon (73). Relatedly, on the one occasion when Huston Smith met The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it came up in conversation that King had recently completed his doctoral dissertation on the theology of Henry Nelson Wieman. Smith confesses, "**I was too shy...to tell him that I was actually Wieman's son-in-law**" (67)!

That missed connection is a rare example in Smith's life of his letting an opportunity pass. Much more frequently, a takeaway from studying Smith's life is that **when a door opens, many unforeseen possibilities can appear if you take the risk of going through it.** If you feel strongly enough about making a potential connection, reach out—and you might be surprised about what possibilities begin to unfold. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about from Smith's life.

In 1947, after teaching for two-and-a-half years in a contract position at Denver University, Smith was offered a tenure-track position at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri (44). Over the previous few years, he had grown increasingly interested in the philosophy of Gerald Heard (1889-1971); so, knowing that he would have a break before his new job started, Huston wrote to Heard to ask if he would be open to meeting in person. Heard wrote back that he would be glad to meet, but cautioned that

he lived in a remote area of southern California. The situation was further complicated since the Smith family—still burdened by graduate school debt—did not own a car. Smith, undeterred, hitchhiked his way to Heard's house (Smith 2010: 45).

And here's where it starts to get really interesting—and you can begin to see the fruit of Huston saying yes to opportunities that presented themselves. As he was preparing to leave Heard's house after a good visit, Heard said that based on their conversation and mutual interests, there was a friend of his that Smith might like to visit in nearby Los Angeles. Heard wrote the name and contact info on a piece of paper for none other than Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) (Smith 2010: 46-47). Huxley, in turn, upon learning that Smith was bound for St. Louis gave him the name of a "very good swami" who lived there. He did not have the exact contact information, but it turned out that there was only one Satprakashananda in the St. Louis phone book (Sawyer 49).

In taking the risk of writing a letter to Heard, Smith thought he was simply reaching out to meet someone he admired intellectually. He had no way of foreseeing that brief encounter would connect him to Aldous Huxley and Satprakashananda, which blossomed into a friendship in which Smith learned about the Hindu tradition not only through books, but also through meeting in person with this Indian holy man once a week for about a decade from 1947 to 1958, which is not how most Americans spent those ten years (52).

This experience of learning about a religion from real-life practitioners is a precedent that Smith would follow the rest of his life. His initial immersion into the Buddhist tradition involved spending the summer of 1956 meditating under two traditional Zen masters in Kyoto, Japan (Smith 2012: 45-46). And when Smith was later adding a chapter on Indigenous religions for his book, he regularly visited the Onondaga Nation for about ten years (Sawyer 228).

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Let me go back in time just a bit to emphasize that in the 1950s, when Smith began teaching *The World's Religions*, such a course was "practically unheard of in university curricula" of that time (Smith 2010: 52). And in 1955, because he was doing this unusual thing, he was invited to teach a version of his *World Religions* course over seventeen television episodes for National Education Television, a forerunner of PBS (55). One of the more than a hundred

thousand people who tuned in for those episodes had lived a rags-to-riches success story, and wrote Smith this letter:

Dear Mr. Smith,

I understand that some of the religions you are teaching in your television course are in countries you have not been to. **If the university would grant you a semester's leave and you added your summer vacation to it, a check to fund a round-the-world trip for you and your wife will be in the return mail.**

Sincerely yours,

William H. Danforth (59)

Huston and Kendra were fortunately able to take that trip, although that extended time away was hard on their children, who stayed with friends of the family. Kendra said frankly that, **she would rather “hate herself” for leaving the children behind on the months-long trip than set herself up to be resentful of them for depriving her of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity** (Smith 2012: 58).

These opportunities helped Smith develop the following method:

1. “Read a tradition’s sacred scriptures—including the profound and trusted commentaries on those scriptures.”
2. “Seek out the most authentic and profound living representatives of those views.”
3. “Do the rituals and practices they prescribe to get an insider’s view.”

Only after completing these steps would he teach and eventually write about a religion. This ‘participant-observer model’ is common in academia today, but when Huston Smith started doing it, most religion scholars worked in their offices, basing their research on textual study alone (Sawyer 84).

As a result of these precedent-setting explorations, he was offered a professorship in 1958, where he taught for a decade and a half until 1973. There, his courses became “the most popular in the philosophy department.” But here’s the flip side of moving against the traditional model of dry, theoretical academic research: he was never allowed to teach graduate students at MIT (Paine x-xi). As one of his colleagues told him, **“The difference between us and you is that we count and you**

don't" (Smith 2010: 67). (Although Smith just walked away, a retort could have been that, "If you want to count something, how about counting that my book has sold more than three million copies! How many has yours sold?")

There's so much more I'd like to tell you about Smith's life, but I'll limit myself to one more significant episode. On New Year's Day, 1961, Huston and Kendra were invited to try psilocybin at the home of Timothy Leary (1920-1996), who at that point was still a psychologist at Harvard University (Sawyer 124).

A few years later in 1964, Smith published an article titled "**Do Drugs Have Religious Import?**" which became the most reprinted essay in the history of *The Journal of Philosophy*. The upshot is that he did find value in psychedelics giving people a taste of higher states of consciousness, but he cautioned that **the goal of spiritual growth is "not altered states but altered traits" and that cultivating "morality and charity" is essential, not just "blowing one's mind"** (Sawyer 139). Rather than continuing to take psychedelics longterm, Smith took the advice that Ram Dass once gave him: "**After you get the message, hang up**" (Smith 2010: 175).

There's an important epilogue to the story that I should add: decades later, Smith was asked to be filmed taking peyote in solidarity with the Native America Church as part of building a First Amendment case to protect indigenous religious practices. The last time he had taken psychedelics had not gone well, but he agreed, given the importance of the cause. So at the age of seventy-three, the world-renown scholar of religion spent four nights in a peyote trance. In Huston's words "It was terrible and absolutely wonderful" (Sawyer 255).

In sharing about Smith's life, however, I would be remiss if I left you with the impression that his life was predominantly one of serendipitous encounters. Although he certainly had more than his fair share of happy synchronicities, he also had a significant amount of sorrow and loss, as is typically the case if you explore deeply enough into anyone's life.

In 1993, when one of his daughters was forty-nine years old, she was tragically diagnosed with a fatal form of sarcoma, leaving her only months live (261). And about a decade later in 2002, another tragedy struck the family when one of his

granddaughters (the child of his other daughter) was killed under nefarious circumstances on a trip to the South Pacific (Smith 2010: 91-92). Smith also had his own ailments: surgery for prostate cancer, hearing loss (eventually resulting in a cochlear implant), and serious osteoporosis (Sawyer 263).

For a few years his health and mobility worsened to the point that Smith was moved into a managed care facility because Kendra could no longer care for him at home (277). But I love that he was able to move back home for the final seven years of his life because he and Kendra opened their home to a Tibetan family who were able to help care for Huston in exchange for housing (280).

Looking back on the full span of Huston Smith's life, part of what is so remarkable is that he was a trailblazer. There was no precedent for him to follow: "From the vantage point of a century ago, his career would have been flatly inconceivable" (Paine xiii). Smith himself also found it striking that although he never met a religion he didn't like, "his brother Walt had the same upbringing, and religion bores him" (Smith 2010: xx).

Turning to Smith himself, in his autobiography, he chose three quotes that sum up his life, experience, and worldview from the perspective of his ninth decade:

1. "How interesting, how very interesting it has all been."
2. "The older I get, the more the boundary between me and not-me thins and becomes transparent."
3. "Praise, praise for everything. Thanks, thanks for it all" (187-188).

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