

Traits Not States?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalists
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Meditation

Let us share a time of meditation and prayer:

Time to just be present.

To allow our worries, even our sorrows, to be held in this house of love, this community of love and compassion.

Time to open our hearts.

To allow our hearts to experience the range of joy and sorrow that our hearts can indeed hold – ours... and one another's.... and the world's...

Time to let our minds to slow and calm, to “let the mud settle and the water become clear”

To allow the wisdom sometimes hidden in the rush of thoughts to emerge, like a lotus in a pond.

Time to just be present, to open our hearts, to let our minds slow and become calm.

The better to do what needs to be done... in our lives... in our nation.... in the world... on this dear earth...

Readings

Tao Te Ching, chapter 54

translated by Man-Ho Kwok, Martin Palmer, and Jay Ramsay

What is built on rock cannot be pulled down;
What is held lightly can never be lost.

Meditate on virtue within yourself,
and you will find the benefit of virtue.
Use it as the ground for the family,
and your virtue will last for generations.
Take it as your guidance for the village,
and the place will blossom for years to come.
Use it to guide the nation,
and that nation will create abundance.
Be guided by it for the Whole,
and it will flood its way over the world.

So, look at someone else as you would yourself
And treat other families as you would your own;
See your community in other communities,
Think of all countries as part of your being
And treasure the world as the round center of everything.

How can I see the world like this?
Because I have eyes.

the words of Huston Smith

from an interview in 2000 with journalist Richard Scheinin

published in *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life*, edited by Phil Cousneau

...the important thing is not altered states, but altered traits of life. If the experience doesn't in the long run make you more compassionate, reduce the clamoring ego so that you can give attention to others – why, then it's for the birds. Experiences come and go. In fact, this is one sign that people are on the wrong track – that they keep on wanting more and more experiences.. They ought to get down on their meditation pad and start meditating to bring what they discover into their daily life.

Sermon

When scholar of world religions Huston Smith died at the age of 97 this past December, the world lost a particularly bright shining light of wisdom and understanding, particularly when it comes to interreligious understanding – which God/Allah/Goddess/Brahman/Great Spirit knows we need now more than ever.

Who was Huston Smith, where did he come from, and what roads did he travel in his 97 years? And why might any of this matter to us, today, in these times? Yes, *these* times.

I'll begin not at the beginning, but more or less mid-stream in Huston Smith's life journey, at a sort of hinge point in his life.

In 1958, when he was thirty-eight years old he wrote and published what was to become a classic in its field, *The Religions of Man*. Later to be re-issued and re-titled as *The World's Religions*, it has sold well over two million copies and influenced countless undergraduates and others simply curious about humanity's religious heritage.

Smith's goal in the book was to present what he called the "winnowed wisdom" of the world's religious traditions. So he glossed over much of the institutional history of each religion, glossed over the "sins" of the various traditions, whether wars in the name of religion or various forms of social oppression in the name of religion or fanaticism in the name of religion – instead going to the wise heart and core values of each tradition.

And he did this in readily accessible fashion. The book actually had its start as a St. Louis public television program; and as Huston Smith noted of the TV audience in the foreword to the 40th anniversary edition, "If you lose their attention for thirty seconds they will switch stations and you won't get them back."

So he kept the programs, and then in turn kept the book, lively with illustrations and anecdotes to keep the viewers' and, later, the readers' attention.

It worked, and continues to work almost sixty years later.

Now, by the time he wrote *The Religions of Man*, Smith was already well into his lifetime of exploration of the world's religious or wisdom traditions – so a little backtracking is in order. Smith had been raised until the age of seventeen by his Methodist missionary parents in a village in rural China, so when he came to the United States to attend college in St. Louis, he had already absorbed not only the Christianity of his parents, but some of the Confucian, Taoist, and folk religious traditions of China.

Then, in his twenties, still in St. Louis, he discovered the Hindu philosophical tradition of Vedanta; and proceeded to deepen his understanding and experience of that tradition during a ten-year tutelage with Swami Satprakashananda, the leader of the

Vedanta Center in St. Louis. At the same time he began what became a lifetime practice of hatha yoga (which was not yet very common in 1950s America).

Also during this period Smith traveled to India to learn more about Hinduism firsthand, and travelled to Japan where he experienced an eight-week intensive meditation retreat at a Zen monastery – thereby beginning his long apprenticeship in the tradition of Zen Buddhism.

Well, in the midst of all this, Smith had glimpses of the awakening to the larger reality that both Hindu and Buddhist traditions talk about and which he had come to affirm intellectually. But glimpses only.

Then, in the early 1960s, during his time teaching philosophy at M.I.T., Smith became involved with Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (who later became Ram Dass) and others who were experimenting with psychedelics. Smith joined in this experimenting, taking the drugs mescaline and LSD in controlled situations just a few times.

But these few times were enough for Smith to feel he had verified by firsthand experience the truth of the larger reality or “unitive knowledge” (as Aldous Huxley called it) spoken of not only by Hindus and Buddhists, but by all the world’s religious wisdom traditions.

As Smith put it, he was convinced that these experiences were authentic, because (as he said in the same interview from which the reading was drawn) “they have shown me what I already believed was true. They didn’t change my worldview. They just fleshed it out with direct experience.”

Now, the danger – I want to say *of course!* – with chemically induced experience of ecstasy or oneness is that one can (and all too many have) become hooked on the experience and never take it any further into one’s life.

Huston Smith put it this way in his memoir (*Tales of Wonder*), writing that though these chemicals, “if taken with the right attitude and in the proper setting... may produce religious experiences... it is far less clear that they can produce religious lives.”

He continued:

A religion made up solely of heightened religious experiences would not be a religion at all.... The major religious traditions address the mysteries (with or without entheogens), but they have other business to do: widen understanding, give meaning, provide solace, promote loving-kindness, and connect human being to human being.

Putting the whole point succinctly, Smith wrote: “This is my litmus test for... any mental experience however induced: does it enhance your whole life, and then do you in turn enhance the lives of others?”

As Ram Dass has put it in regard to the use of chemicals to induce a spiritual experience: “After you get the message, hang up.”

Hang up and, we might add, begin or continue the daily work of opening your heart and spirit, the work of developing character, deepening compassion. How? Through any of a myriad of spiritual methods from inward practices such as prayer and meditation to outward practices of selfless service, kind words, good deeds.

Huston Smith continued on all these tracks throughout his life. To his daily inward spiritual practices he eventually added Muslim prayers to his regimen of yoga and meditation; and he continued to attend Methodist church services throughout his life.

Outward practice? When you experience Huston Smith in the interviews with Bill Moyers given almost twenty years ago, as Smith was approaching eighty, you know you are in the presence of a kind, warm-hearted human being, someone who must have had a profound effect on everyone he met or taught or loved. Additionally, over the years, Smith was involved in various movements for social justice – his was not a cloistered life separate from the winds of change blowing around us all. So, it seems to me we can say that Huston Smith was a living example of the way in which altered *states* of mind and spirit can enhance altered *traits* of character.

So, let me flesh out a bit more this relationship between states and traits.

As we've heard, Huston Smith's basic affirmation is that altered states of ecstasy or unity – however attained – are not worthwhile in and of themselves, unless they lead to altered traits of character.

But it's not quite that simple; for the relationship of states and traits is a sort of two-way street.

It's not only that an experience of oneness can lead to kinder character. As I hinted a moment ago, it is also true that practices of kindness can lead to the experience of oneness.

For example:

When you serve a meal at Father Bill's it might well be at the end of a day when you already feel stretched to the limit, when you are tired, when you feel as though you might rather just go home and go to bed.

But then you serve the meal. You enter the rhythm of passing the plates of chicken casserole and salad to each client with a word of greeting and often receiving a word of thanks in return.

And lo and behold, at the end of what might only be a half hour you feel not just better. You may well experience a profound sense of connection and peace. More than a pleasant feeling, on some nights it might well be a glimpse or more than a glimpse of that "unitive knowledge," a little awakening to the larger reality in which we all live and move and have our being, that "field beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing" of which Rumi wrote.

In other words, yes, unitive experience on the meditation cushion can breed more generous character traits, but it is also true that practices of generosity and kindness can evoke the unitive experience, as individual self, ego, dissolves a bit, the edges softening into shared mutual identity.

Sometimes on my day off I play music for a class of four-year-olds at Hingham Nursery School. As I often describe it, if I'm having a sort of blah day, I leave the Nursery School feeling better; and if I'm already having a good day, I leave feeling *way* better!

What has happened? As I've played and sang and encouraged the children's singing or clapping or foot stomping, I've had to be utterly attentive to those children, sometimes putting whatever list of songs I'd planned entirely aside in order to meet the energy level of the class. So, however else you might describe all this, it always means letting my ego, my individual sense of self dissolve into the need of the moment and into the energy and lives of the children.

Further – and significantly – when I leave the Nursery School to do my grocery shopping the "mood" if you will of that experience carries forward. I often find myself

inhabiting a lighter spirit, more likely, without having to think about it, to exchange a friendly word with other shoppers or with the clerk at check-out.

In a small way, I've moved through the whole interrelated cycle of states and traits!

Sharing the music with the children, which sometimes is just because I had said I would... evokes a glimpse of the experience of connection and oneness... which in turn overflows into a little more kindness and good cheer for the rest of the day.

Well, I hope by now you may be seeing that my message this morning is certainly not just about sharing the biography of an interesting and good man; and is also far from irrelevant to our daily lives or to our lives in community, in our nation, in the world.

Indeed, what Huston Smith called "the winnowed wisdom of the world's traditions" is, if anything, more relevant now than ever – even though it may sometimes seem quite otherwise.

Now, if you've been listening to me for the past years, you know that Smith's journey through the world's wisdom traditions has been mine as well, albeit in a much more modest way. And sometimes I've wondered, as I imagine he may have wondered now and then, how relevant such "wisdom" is to our lives, personal or political; wondered whether meditation and reading and reflection are a diversion, a waste of time when there is so much to be done, so much that presses upon us – from our personal daily to-do lists to whatever current political turmoil swirls around us all.

At such moments it helps to recall the anecdote I've shared before, told about both Gandhi and the Dalai Lama – both of whom spiritual giants as well as political activists.

It is said that when a particularly busy, full, or even crisis-filled day loomed before them, they would spend not less but *more* time in their morning meditation. Because Gandhi knew and the Dalai Lama knows, by experience, this interrelationship of "states" and "traits."

Put another way, Aldous Huxley, near the end of his monumental anthology *The Perennial Philosophy*, quoted the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who wrote centuries ago that what one takes in by contemplation, one pours out in love. By contrast, Huxley went on to note the danger of neglecting the contemplative side of our lives in the midst of otherwise good works and good intentions: for we thereby are engaging "in the impossible task of pouring unceasingly from a container that is never replenished."

May we, then, in these times as at all times, find ways of replenishing our spiritual wells of oneness, compassion, and love, the better to serve one another and to serve life, states and traits intertwined for our own good, and for the good of the larger life we share.

So may it be.