

Courtney Smith: Quaker, President of Swarthmore, Scholar, Friend

by Gilmore Stott

WRITING ABOUT COURTNEY CRAIG SMITH is a bigger job than I feel equal to. But, like so many, I honored, respected, and loved him. I knew him since Oxford and worked beside him many years. So I do my plainest and honest best to say what is in the hearts of many of us, who knew him in many ways, but in them all felt his greatness of spirit.

I suppose it was partly through Swarthmore College that Courtney Smith found Quakerism, but he and Quakerism were a proper match. I write, with reticence, as a non-Quaker, but think that with you I can see some of the reasons why Friends' views were felt by him to be right and fulfilling.

Many of you have heard him say that, with Friends, he believed there is something of God—a spirit of goodness—in every man. He knew this good was there. He spoke to it, and respected every person because of his faith that a goodness was there that could listen and answer.

I think the good in persons he saw and believed in was not vaguely or sentimentally expressed. In helping Courtney Smith, I learned many things, but mainly his belief in reasons. Sometimes he asked me for suggestions about problems, and I tried to make them; but for him, I soon found, finding the right way through problems implied having reasons. Reasons are, one may say, our own, and are our Inner Light. But if reasons are to move out beyond ourselves, affecting (as they must) the lives of others and appealing to the judgments of others, they must be sound and relevant, meaningful not only to oneself but to thoughtful people generally who have conscience and good will. Courtney Smith saw all of life as being like education in that it seeks for, and honors, reasons.

So, as a person and an administrator, he was more concerned with being right and with doing jobs well and thoughtfully than with mere "getting things done." And to him it was antithetical to human goodness, and to education alike, to say "this and this only can be believed," or to force one's will on another. Some think of our world as a mere balance of rival contending interests. Courtney Smith did not. To him the goodness, or element of God, in man was in part the gift of seeking together, as God allows us, right reasons for how we may live together, if we are to come to the best that is in each of us.

Courtney Smith sometimes said we should "reason out

of a warm perception." By this I think he meant that the good that is in each man must be a good that has a heart as well as a head. Reasons are relevant and important to us, in part, to the degree that we take seriously that there are other people in the world besides ourselves. Each of these spirits, each of these conscious lives, has its ultimate human importance. One cannot help but feel that when Courtney Smith spent the last weeks of his life using reason and order to respond to needs of black people for full educational opportunities and for a sense of dignity and independence they feel they do not possess, he was about a business which—if expressed as furthering the family of man and not the rivalry of group against group—he believed in profoundly.

He believed equally profoundly that when the heart becomes sensitive to knowing that other people are really there and really matter, it follows as a corollary that reasons will be respected as reasons—and will not be used as threats or imposed by force. The family of man can and should be better than that, and nobler than that.

Courtney Smith worked hard for Swarthmore. He himself could hardly have known how prophetic it was when in the first sentence of his inaugural speech at Swarthmore he said, "I stand humbled before this trust, and pledge whatever in me there is of good in fulfilling it." Through the years, this meant some homely things, like seeing his hat on the office coatrack long after most people's dinner hour, or the inevitable brown case under the arm carrying work home or back to the office. Around the clock and around the calendar, he spent his life for Swarthmore.

But, as so many of you well know, through all of this hard work there was more than mere dedication. There was style and insight. And there was that saving humor, so that Swarthmore, for all its keenness for quality and achievement, has for years and years celebrated its academic festivals with a good laugh at its own foibles and a warm appreciation of the human details (like the Outing Club's lighted Christmas wreath hanging from the top of Clothier tower) that filled out and defined any Swarthmore year. And there was strength—incredible coolness with nerve, courage, and judgment—for those tough moments when one must act and speak decisively and with full responsibility.

Courtney Smith did much for Swarthmore, but maybe it will be judged in the long run that he did even more for education itself. The small, quality, liberal arts college has not, in recent years, been in the easiest of situations. There are those who say that intellectual excellence belongs mainly in universities and mainly in their graduate schools and that colleges concentrating on undergraduate teaching will do so only by failing to reach top academic attainments.

The small colleges may, it has been said, give benefits

in the way of corporate life but must make sacrifices in terms of educational achievement. Courtney Smith spoke with the clearest voice, a voice known and respected not just in our country but around the world, to show that the small liberal arts college is importantly relevant to contemporary education, can meet its problems, and has the potential for outstanding intellectual excellence—many would say top excellence.

He has helped show contemporary American education that the stimulus to faculty that normally goes with the strong university situation, with planning and support, can be made available to the faculty of the small, quality college and that during the undergraduate period—maybe even especially then, when young people's minds are growing and creative—teacher and student can have that extraordinary encounter of working together with live ideas, united in what Whitehead called "the imaginative pursuit of learning."

There have been times, too, when the eyes of the world turned—not always in admiration—on what stand Swarthmore would take on the right of young people to hear any speaker in whom they had an honest interest; or on what Swarthmore would say to those who thought students receiving government assistance should be asked to sign a disclaimer affidavit of belief.

One speaks not in eulogy, but to express the plainest of facts, in saying that Courtney Smith, as Swarthmore's president, is identified, with respect, pride, and gratefulness, as the wisest of good men in educational administration and the strongest in knowledge of the essential freedoms that make true education possible.

He stood for these clear and good ways steadfastly, articulately, firmly, and literally to his last breath. Not only in but beyond Swarthmore, his interpretations have clarified, indeed defined, educational integrity. When death took his body, his strong spirit was still about this business, wisely, steadily, consistently.

Before Courtney Smith came to Swarthmore, and while he was still teaching at Princeton, he succeeded Frank Aydelotte as head of the Rhodes Scholarships in the United States. Courtney was a Rhodes Scholar from Iowa, and attended Merton College. As head of the American Rhodes Scholarships, he selected and appointed committees of selection annually in each of the fifty states, as well as committees for final selection by regions. Responsible directly to the Secretary of the Rhodes Trust and the Rhodes Trustees in England, he shaped policy for the selection of the thirty-two Rhodes Scholars who annually go from this country to study at Oxford. And those who know the American competition think that its quality has never been so high.

A few weeks ago I sat with Courtney Smith while a visitor, interested in possible programs for international scholarships, asked Courtney whether he thought Rhodes

Si una espina me hiere

If wounded by a thorn, I turn aside;
I cannot hate it. Jealous enmity
May prick my flesh with barbs, still have I tried
To make the plant that is my life a guide
To purer realms of love and charity.

What good is hate? What can it e'er achieve?
It stems no blood, corrects no fell abuse;
My rose bush has the time but to conceive
Its buds; the thorns I'll let no sap receive.

The passage of my foe will but induce
The sweetest-smelling buds to open wide.
And if a single blossom should release
A subtler balm, a red intensified,
'Tis blood spilled by his hand, but purified,
And now transformed into a flower of peace.

*Translated from the Spanish of
Amado Nervo by SAM LEGG*

Scholarships were on the right track in seeking Scholars who should be broadly qualified in four areas—intellect, character, leadership, and physical vigor—not just one.

Courtney began, I remember, by pointing out that Mr. Rhodes' own words, which contain phrases like "qualities of manhood, truthfulness, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak . . ." do have, as Courtney put it, "an old-fashioned ring to them." Then he said he thought that Rhodes was, after all, right, because the capacities Rhodes had in mind are too essentially human to be the subject of fad or fashion.

Even today, perhaps better, especially today, Courtney Smith pointed out, we need young people who can understand clearly and accurately, who care about others, who act consistently by reason and principle—not pressure—and who have the personal effectiveness to lead. I know that it meant much to him that Rhodes Scholarships hope to select, encourage, and assist such young men.

If I may be allowed a brief tribute that is entirely personal in nature, I would say that, more reserved than some, Courtney was in an especial sense the most intimate and loving of persons. This was expressed many ways, for example with children—and I remember an extraordinary three-line letter he wrote to my sons (who had helped over a weekend to get out a large Rhodes mailing) in which he said in appreciation, "Arise as Sir John and Sir Bill, awarded Knighthood as letter stuffers for Rhodes Scholarships!"

I remember how, when I was under pressure for problems or mistakes, I felt his incredible loyalty and understanding. In the larger reaches of this universe where personal relationships are seen for what they are (as Plato put it, "for all time and for all existence"), he was, though a man of dignity, also the most humanly intimate and loving of men.