In Memory of Curtis Smith

Curtis Smith died on February 15, 2017 at the age of 93. He joined the Mount Holyoke College faculty in 1955 and retired as Professor of Biological Sciences on the Norman Wait Harris and Emma Gale Harris Foundation in 1992. After 4 years in the U.S. Army during World War II, he attended the University of Chicago, where he earned both his undergraduate degree and his doctorate. Curtis arrived at Mount Holyoke with an exceptionally broad background. He had physics, chemistry, optics and electronics as well as physiology and anatomy at his fingertips. He also came equipped with a piece of Chicago Pile-1, the first nuclear reactor, built by Enrico Fermi. He had a flair for designing and building equipment to meet any challenge, for anyone's thesis or course. He loved to repurpose government surplus, which he regularly harvested from a depot in Taunton, Massachusetts. He could transmute gun sights into microscopes. For decades, there was hardly a piece of equipment in the Biology Department that Curtis had not brought back to life.

At Mount Holyoke, he was one of the founding members, and chair, of what is now the Neuroscience Program. Initially, it was Biopsychology. That name, he recalled, led to transcripts that listed one course in 'biopsy" after another. His own experimental work began at the intersection of biochemistry and neurobiology, but later, he turned to higher mental functions, especially memory. His book, *Ancestral Voices: Language and the Evolution of Human Consciousness* (1984) weaves together many strands in biology, neuroscience and cognitive science. It is also informed by his love of poetry. Nineteen years after his official retirement, he taught his January Term course, "The Structure of Memory" for the last time, to 67 students.

He participated in the development and teaching of several interdisciplinary courses, including "The Idea of Progress," "Quantitative Reasoning," and "The Unity of Science." He taught "Information Theory" before that subject was widely recognized.

His office was a maze of back-to back bookcases, brass rubbings that he had made in Britain, and plaster busts that had been left homeless when the College Art Museum moved

into its new building. Curtis maintained that at his retirement, Buildings and Grounds would bring a cement truck up to one of the office windows and fill the remaining airspace. South Hadley would then have its own Pompeii, 250 million years after its last volcanic eruption. Today, it is Ken Colodner's neurophysiology lab.

Curtis was one of the first faculty to champion personal computing. One of his earlier models was a government surplus Univac computer that filled the longest wall of his lab on the third floor of Clapp. That computer might have been capable of supporting a quarter of the functions of the weather app on your cell phone. A teletype machine served as the printer.

He supervised 82 honors theses, including one year that saw 8 completed theses. He never turned a student away. Two weeks before he retired, he wrote a memo to Biology after the department had faced its annual obligation to award the Katherine Stein Prize for the best thesis of the year. He suggested that in the future, the "Curtis Smith Scrape Through Award" would provide balance.

His first position was at UCLA, and his major responsibility there was research. He found it rewarding, but he realized that he wanted the emphasis of his life to be teaching. His teaching was nourished by his unshakeable belief that every student wanted to learn. He could provide some guidance along many paths that enabled students to find their own ways to questions larger than themselves. He absolutely believed that all of the people around him, the staff, the faculty, and administration, were truly good people who were giving their all. He viewed the college faculty meeting as a secular chapel; he was one of the leading lay ministers to that congregation.

Curtis was interested in everything. But nothing brought him more joy than his family—his wife Elaine, their children, and their children's families. He turned his energy and creativity to work against Elaine's decline. After her passing, he was depleted. Then Dr. Dana Whyte, '60, brought him back to a life that again inspired everyone who had the good fortune to know them.

I have had the good fortune to know many astonishing people in my life—mentors and students and students who became mentors. A few of them have had, in addition to what they had studied and discovered, an aura of goodness about them. So it is with Curtis. Often, those lives have been informed by religious belief. We celebrate Curtis Smith in this church, of which he was a founding member. He presented several papers to the Guild of Scholars of the Episcopal Church, the first, in 1980, entitled "Evolution of the Soul," and the second, in 1986, "Ethical Problems in Contemporary Neuro-Pharmacology."

One topic that Curtis and I never got around to discussing was religion. It might well be that he realized that I was on the same spiritual plane as a pond turtle. Simone Weil lived her short life on higher and more challenging planes. She said that science is the study of the beauty of the world. Curtis would have agreed. She added, that science in her sense had to be the whole universe, not a just an isolated slice of it. Again, Curtis would agree. Curtis saw the beauty of the world, and he acted on it. He shared it, and by so doing, made those he touched part of that whole. He made the beauty of the world into something that awakens wonder and helps to hold our fragile world together. His life shows us what we can be doing with ours.

After this service, there is a reception at Willits Hallowell. And, as at all events touched by Curtis, there will be valuable prizes.

Stan Rachootin
19 March 2017