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Change in plans: a study abroad story

Furman University

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David A. Smith, 1928-2003

David Smith, who taught at Furman for 31 years, died January 4 of complications from Parkinson's disease. Smith retired in 1991 as the Reuben B. Pitts Professor of Religion. Memorials may go to the David A. Smith Scholarship Fund in the Humanities at Furman, or the American Parkinson's Disease Association, 1250 Hylan Blvd., Suite 4B, Staten Island, N.Y. 10305.



The first of David Smith's virtues to impress me was his kindness. Upon my arrival at Furman in 1971 as a naive instructor, David quietly took me under his wing. He encouraged me, warned me concerning the realities of university politics, shared insights into teaching, and offered the kind of conversation that nurtures friendship.

In time I came to realize that David was the only person I have known with whom I would think of associating the word "sage." I am thinking first of the handsome, hoary visage and demeanor he wore with such dignity. But also our "sage" stems from the Latin *sapere* and connotes a person who embodies mental, moral, spiritual and aesthetic qualities of wisdom, judgment, sensibility and taste. Small wonder so many students came to revere him as a Christian sage, or that institutions like Furman and Greenville's First Baptist Church came to covet his sage advice.

His special legacies to Furman include our program of Asian-African studies, which David was influential in establishing; a strengthened interdisciplinary Humanities course, which for years he team-taught and coordinated; and Furman's broad educational offerings in world religions, which David was one of the first to recognize as essential for ethical citizenship and mature faith. In his honor the Department of Religion has established the David Anthony Smith Award in Religion, presented annually to "a graduating senior for excellence in the study of world religions, and for promotion of inter-religious understanding and dialogue."

Upon David's retirement from Furman in 1991, the department invited students, colleagues and friends to share their thoughts about him. The response was an embarrassment of riches — far more tributes than our formal ceremonies could accommodate. He was portrayed as a lover of Charles Dickens, mystery stories, cats, music, watercolors, Christmas, manger scenes, trains, North Carolina coves, Yorkshire countryside and London culture. One former student distilled the praise of many: "More than a great teacher, he was a trusted counselor and friend."

A faculty colleague, with a reputation for being pretty crusty, wrote about David at length: "I think he sees every human being as a subject for love. He is tolerant, far more so than I am, and he has gentled me a little. Yet he sees a fool or a phony as clearly as anyone.

"David has none of that mealy-mouthed unctiousness by which many folk avoid making responsible judgments. But he doesn't let the foibles of people bother him. Rather he tries to find some good, and if he can't, he maintains balance and gets the job done. He is widely learned, extraordinarily eclectic, and delightfully eccentric in his interests. As a faculty member David stands for what is right in University matters, at times courageously. And everyone knows that David has been a wonderful and loving influence on his students, counseling them on matters ranging from spiritual doubt and moral dilemmas to decisions about daily life, always with their personal welfare foremost. I hope that Furman continues to cherish people like David Smith."

It was striking how many of these

tributes began with the observation expressed by one colleague in this way: "When I think of David, I include Clara. I can't separate them. Marriage requires partners to face tasks to be done and agree on who will do what. David and Clara seem to have agreed."

The heroic sinew of their marriage was proved in their battle with David's Parkinson's disease. I think of Chaucer's characterization of his admirable Parson in the *Canterbury Tales*, which David taught in the Humanities course:

*Benign and wonderfully diligent
And patient when adversity was sent,
For so he proved in great adversity . . .*

David Smith was strong enough to acknowledge his weaknesses. He was man enough to share his emotions. His words conveyed wisdom and wit. His eyes could flare with an impish twinkle. May Light Perpetual shine upon him.

— Albert L. Blackwell
Reuben B. Pitts Professor of Religion

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When Chechen nationalists invaded a theatre in Moscow on October 24, an attack that eventually led to the deaths of more than 100 people, an additional casualty was Furman's winter term program in Russia and Eastern Europe. Although cancellation at such a late date would disrupt student schedules and create administrative problems, the directors of the program decided that security concerns made it necessary.

But rather than fret about the trip's demise, Furman saw it as a challenge. Would it be possible, in just a few weeks, to develop a viable new program? The answer: yes.

History professor William Lavery, director of the university's Center for International Education, called on contacts he made last summer while directing a faculty trip to Ireland and Scotland. Working with colleagues at Trinity College in Dublin, Queen's University in Belfast and the University of Edinburgh, with which Furman has an ongoing relationship, he quickly designed a four-week program called "The Comparative History and Politics of Ireland and Scotland in the 20th Century."

In the end, 13 students scheduled for the Baltic trip chose to take part in the self-directed program. Lavery and his colleagues overseas arranged for them a comprehensive schedule filled with classes, lectures, tours, visits to historical sites and museums, meetings with local politicians, and excursions to such areas as the Scottish Parliament and law courts in Belfast and Edinburgh.

Four other winter programs abroad — to South Africa, Turkey/Greece/Italy, Belize/South Africa, and Costa Rica — went off as scheduled.