

Tales of Wonder

Adventures Chasing the Divine

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY



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WITH

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I

COMING OF AGE
IN A SACRED UNIVERSE

AS I WRITE THESE WORDS, MY NINETIETH BIRTHDAY LIES over the horizon. It is hardly unusual to encounter a ninety-year-old today. Nor does it feel “unusual” to be ninety. When I look out, my eyes take in what anybody would see. But once. . . . No, let us begin properly: *Once upon a time, long ago and far away*, there was a boy who saw a world no one will see the likes of again.

When I compare my childhood to a boy’s or girl’s today, I realize, in retrospect, that mine took place in a garden of *never-agains*. *Probably never again*: shall a boy grow up so isolated from the bigger world, in a place so self-contained that it made its own little world. *Probably never again*: shall a child’s days be so simple. (I could not petulantly pout, “Don’t want this—want that!” because there was only *this* and no *that*.) *Probably never again*: shall opposites—life and death, rich and poor—be so close as to seem two sides of the same coin. *And surely never again*: shall existence be so uncluttered by technology, so gadget- and distraction-free. Every sound I heard was natural or human-made. Ours was basic Life 101.

My early memories might be pictures in a medieval manuscript rather than belonging to someone still living in the

twenty-first century. My childhood took place in rural China, and indeed the town where my parents were missionaries had a medieval wall around it. At ten at night the town gates were locked, to keep out thieves, and the town crier beat his bamboo stick against a gong—*gwang, gwang, gwang*—to scare off robbers. Within the town wall nothing—in a way not even our body parts and body functions—resembled its counterpart today. Our *amah*, or nanny, had “golden lotuses,” those bound feet so prized (by men) in old China. I recall watching, with horror and fascination, her unwrapping the horrid, smelly bandages from her feet each evening. Inside our home we had no flush toilet; rather, a “night-soil harvester” carted away our bowel movements for fertilizer, leaving us in exchange a few small coins. The town wall kept out not only thieves and robbers; it shut out almost everything you would be familiar with today, which in any case had not been invented or simply was not available there.

It was a self-contained world. In our small town, named Dzang Zok, no movies, television—much less the Internet—existed to bring the faraway near. There were no telephones whose ringing would have inserted *elsewhere* into *here*. By the time a newspaper finally reached us, its news was history. If we eventually had a sort of radio, it was because my clever older brother built his own crystal wireless set. It received a grand total of one station, broadcast from Shanghai, sixty-five miles away. When we called our *amah* in to listen to it, she circled it, wary of the demon inside the contraption. It was easier to believe that a hidden sprite was talking than that a box could.

Except for that radio, no traffic, no automobiles, no sirens, no planes overhead intruded; not even a dentist’s drill



The youngest churchgoer in China.

I am standing outside my father's church in Dzang Zok. Soon I would start my own church—in our toolshed: I played minister and the neighborhood Chinese boys and girls were my parishioners.

hummed. There was little in the way of machinery or technology in the town: our coal-stoked generator provided our house with the only electricity in the area. With no other electric lights and also with no pollution in rural China then, from our backyard I gazed at the same night sky a hermit on a Himalayan mountaintop might see, infinitely star-lit and glittering.

As an adult, after living in America, I returned to China on a visit. I tentatively asked the elevator man in our Shanghai hotel if my Chinese was still understandable. When he nodded, I explained, since I spoke not in a Mandarin but a Shanghai dialect, "I am a Shanghai man."

"Noooo!" he said.

I then named the city nearer to the town where I grew up. "I am a Soochow man."

"Noooooooooo!"

He shook a finger at me. "You are Dzang Zok man!" The globe today is one interconnected overlapping network, but my accent still marked me from one tiny dot, Dzang Zok, which in my boyhood was the whole world.



The town of long ago and far away. Dzang Zok was in many ways more a town of the Middle Ages than one of today. You can just make out part of the medieval wall that encircled the town.

Within that small world there was a smaller world. We were the only Caucasian family in Dzang Zok, practically a law unto ourselves. My father was every (white) father; my mother, every mother. I knew only one way things could be. I did not wonder whether to become a fireman, baseball player, or president when I grew up; only one profession was imaginable: missionary. Going from home to school was not the shock of strangeness many six-year-olds feel; for me it meant walking to the dining-room table, where my mother taught me and my two brothers. I can remember my very first lesson. Mother described a blind man who, bumping into a tree, asked what it was. Upon being told a tree, he said, "I see." I wrote down my first words: I SEE. My mother taught with such gentleness that I never realized I was an agonizingly slow learner. Had I gone to a public school, and not received the atten-



The tower that dominated our town. All such towers have seven stories to represent the seven heavens and a roof to ward off the rain.

tion she lavished, I might have been segregated into a class for “special” children.

And opposites and contraries were neighbors there. Death was too common in Dzang Zok to be hidden away. My parents’ first child, Moreland, died on his second Christmas Eve. Our male cook’s son died in the night, and I remember thinking it strange to see a man weeping. An irrepressible, high-spirited missionary visited us, and the next day he ate contaminated food and died. My parents grieved for Moreland; our cook grieved for his male baby; I grieved for the fun-loving missionary. My earliest memory is of the precariousness of life—of being on fire with a raging fever, when I was rationed to one teaspoonful of boiled water every forty-five minutes, for that was all I could keep down. What’s different (from now), however, is that though people suffered and grieved, they did

not live in fear of the Dark Stranger. Death was not a thing apart, an “unnatural” tragedy, nor for the religious was it even the end of the story.

If life and death existed side by side, so did rich and poor. Which were we? Neither. Both. We had a half dozen servants, including one who “mowed” the lawn with scissors. But my parents never stopped working, knew no leisure, had no luxuries. We were like millionaires without money. When my older brother, Robert, went away to school in Shanghai, my father, realizing that haircuts cost money in the city, prudently shaved off all Robert’s hair, to save twenty-five cents. (It earned my brother the unfortunate nickname “Sing-Sing,” after shaved-headed convicts in that penitentiary.)

The elements were our neighbors. If we had water, it was because my father dug a well. Having grown up on a Missouri farm, my father had learned to raise, tend, and build everything needed, and he continued to so in Dzang Zok. We had to boil the well water for twenty minutes and then filter it through a cloth before we drank it. If we tasted sweetness, it was because my father kept honeybees. If we could read and write, it was because my mother taught us how. Children in America at that time, after the Lindbergh kidnapping, feared suspicious-looking strangers. My fears were more basic. I feared the wild dogs in the street. (One visiting missionary advised, “Throw charcoal—not a rock—at them; bursting, it scares the curs away.”) I feared cholera. Before a trip I still find myself drinking glass after glass of water: you never know—as the saying goes—where your next drink will come from. Mine was an earthy childhood, but its earth was close to heaven. Without the clutter of many things, with few distractions (no television, computer games, and so on), not

hemmed in with scheduled activities, a subtle, almost transcendent sense of something else, the lovely undertone of just being, made itself felt.

In an imaginary scrapbook, as I turn again the pages of my childhood, most of the “snapshots” or memories are happy ones. And in them a lost China lives once more. I look up, transfixed, at dragon kites—six or eight round paper disks strung loosely together—undulating in the blue sky. I steal off to play as my Chinese tutor dozes off, muttering, “Write a bit more clearly.” I climb into the porcelain tub and feel the delicious shock of the hot water, heated on the stove for our Saturday-night weekly baths. At Christmas I carry red paper lanterns, three on each outstretched arm, to give to father’s parishioners. The lanterns have “Jesus Christ” painted in Chinese characters on one side and “Birthday” on the other. When the lanterns are delivered, we hurry to the Christmas Eve pageant in the church, where girls from my father’s school sing a carol in English to impress their parents. However, Chinese children have difficulty pronouncing our *R*, so it comes out, “Ling the melly, melly Clismas bells; ling them fah and neah.” It all feels so palpable, as though there were a door somewhere and I could reenter that lost world of wonder. Well, this book, I suppose, is that door.

Yet I am sometimes told (by people who were not there) that it could not have been a happy childhood. Your parents (they point out) were missionaries, blind to the indigenous culture. They were also fundamentalists, abstainers, prudes. That is partially true. I never saw my father in less than a full suit of underwear that covered every inch of his body from throat to ankles, hands excluded. My mother could not bring herself to say the Chinese word *dung*, though it does not refer

to excrement. She would drop the *g*, so that no Chinese had a clue what she was talking about. And yet . . . I am tempted to respond: no one under the age of maybe a hundred—but at the youngest sixty—has any idea what it was to be a missionary then. So let me tell you what my father and mother were really like.



A slogan thrilled my father that would chill many people today. *Let Us Christianize the Whole World in One Generation* was the motto of the Christian Volunteer Movement as the twentieth century began. It stirred my father's youthful idealism. His given name was Wesley, and a more Methodist name there cannot be. Like the original John Wesley, who traveled two hundred and fifty thousand miles on horseback and delivered forty thousand sermons, establishing charities and bringing salvation to the downtrodden, my father, who bore his name, would do the same work, on a smaller scale. He, too, would glorify God and serve man, even if at first he was not sure how to.

When my father was a student at Vanderbilt University, a recruiter from the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions spoke there. The recruiter took out a pocket watch and began counting off the seconds, but what he was really counting, he said, were the souls who, second by second, were sinking into perdition. This avalanche of lost souls were the unfortunate millions in China who would never hear the word of Christ preached to them. The recruiter paused for effect and then rang out, "Who will go to Asia? Who will

give all, do all, be all to save the lost souls of China?" Wesley Smith's hand shot up.

The board of missionaries assigned my father to Soochow, where he taught at the Methodist university until he learned Chinese sufficiently to do true missionary work. In 1910 in Soochow he met a young woman named Alice Longden. A missionary's daughter, Alice had grown up in China, almost next door to the Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl Buck, whose novels spelled the romance of China for my generation. Alice was then teaching young Chinese women the piano, so they could accompany the hymn singing in church—exactly as her mother had done before her. Alice was a single female Methodist in China (of which there were not many); Wesley was a single male Methodist missionary in China (of which there were not many). Methodist missionaries should not be single. Given a similar circumscribed choice, Adam and Eve had also paired off. Alice Longden and John Wesley's marriage was to have happy consequences and—to jump ahead of the story—I was the middle one, in between my older brother, Robert, and my younger brother, Walt.

Preach the gospel where it has never been heard. That idealism inspired my parents to move to missionary-less Dzang Zok, an arduous journey first by train and then by canal boat from Shanghai. My parents were so young then, the age my grandchildren are now: I marvel at their innocence, their courage. Moving to Dzang Zok cut them off from everyone who shared their heritage, removed them from anyone who could understand them, left them among people who spoke no English. And without thinking twice they decided: perfect. But what did they actually do, once in Dzang



A missionary family in China. Wesley Smith and Alice Longden Smith with their three sons—my older brother, Robert, me, and my younger brother, Walt. We look as dour as some people's image of missionaries.

Zok? The short answer is “the good.” A foundling was left at their doorstep, so they started an orphanage. They saw people starving, so they started a soup kitchen. Girls received no education, so my father began a girls' school. Since they wanted their children to have smallpox vaccinations, the Chinese boys and girls should have them, too: my parents personally inoculated all the town's children, risking exposure to the disease themselves. All this was good, but for my parents there was still the greater good to do, which was preaching Christ's love and living it out in their own lives.

I didn't learn Christianity in Sunday school; I drank it in with my mother's milk. As I trundled downstairs in the morning, there would be my father warming himself by the stove, already deep in prayer. The servants would be called in for prayer. Then we sat down to breakfast and prayed some more. The Transcendent was my morning meal, we had the



In the window of a Chinese train, we look as happy as we usually were. I am eleven months in that photograph.

Eternal at lunch, and I ate a slice of the Infinite at dinner. I could no more have imagined people without religion than I could have pictured them without clothes. The mythographer Joseph Campbell, whom I got to know years later, downgraded religion to the status of a myth, to repudiate the joyless, judgmental Calvinism that had scarred his boyhood in Scotland. By contrast, for me religion reflects reality (or realities), as undeniable and essential as were my parents and the house and the meals and everything else of my childhood.

It would have been hard to separate my parents from the religion they practiced. (As a boy I could not have done so.) My father seemed to me nobility personified. My mother, on the other hand, while loving, was frivolous. Consequently I admired my father without reservation, while pitying my mother her inadequacies. This black-and-white judgment was

one I held until well into my twenties, when I began to have doubts about it.

I had thought my father noble and my mother shallow because that was my father's view, and he had implanted it in my unconscious thinking. If my mother ever bought a new dress—which was very rarely—he would denounce the imprudent folly of womankind. (Her demands were so modest; all she asked for at Christmas was a blooming narcissus plant and a box of chocolate-covered peppermints.) After Mao assumed power, my mother and father, in effect exiled, came to stay with us in St. Louis. As my wife cooked dinner for seven people, my father's contribution was to comment disapprovingly. If Kendra cut off too much skin while peeling the potatoes, he would shake his head: "What men bring into the home by the shovel, women throw out by the teaspoon." When he discovered the wine and beer I had carefully hidden in the basement, he was like an Old Testament prophet thundering wrath—"To think, a son of mine!"—until Mother interrupted him: "Now, now, Wesley, times have changed. A little wine cannot. . ."

Slowly I realized that my mother was the more complete human being—though I had every reason to know it earlier. At age twelve, when I began attending the American School in Shanghai, I forged a letter from my parents saying I could attend the school dances. When Mother discovered that I was engaging in the forbidden activity, her mild response was "Dancing does seem like a healthy activity." Many years later our oldest daughter, Karen, had a child out of wedlock. This was in 1974, when single mothers were far rarer than now. She nervously wrote my mother, her grandmother, to inform her. Alice wrote Karen back so tenderly, "It is a sin to have a baby

out of wedlock, but then each of us sin every day,” and every word of the letter was supportive. Mother was the more complete person, because she put the other person first, before creed or ideology.

My thoughts about my father are a pendulum swinging back and forth from admiration to criticism and back again. The sheer volume of good he did—I will go to my grave having done not a fraction as much. Risking his life, when necessary, was simply part of a day’s work for him. Once a flood drowned our region, a Noah’s deluge turning an area as large as Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma combined to liquid, and during it Father was always in his tiny boat, delivering rice to the stranded victims. After Mao’s revolution, my parents tried to stay on in China, despite the peril, for there was still good to do. I have before me a letter, written on onionskin paper and dated 1950, in which Father describes delivering hundreds of cups of hot milk to the children in Dzang Zok. Had he not secured milk powder and mixed it himself at the hot-water shop and fed those children, they might have starved. He believed, of course, that there was something else to give as valuable as food. Once he went off in his boat across the lake on some mission, but the lake froze over, making it impossible to get home. Yet at 10 p.m. on Saturday night an exhausted specter appeared at our door. He had walked thirty miles around the edge of a frozen lake so as not to deprive his parishioners of their Sunday service.

Father once joked about what his idea of heaven was: a baby crying in the next room would waken him in the night, and the baby would not be his. He was referring, I take it, to more than the burdens of paternity. For four decades, from 1910 to 1950, he never heard a cry—whether from his own

family, a member of his congregation, or any needy person in Dzang Zok—for which he did not feel personally responsible. *The most sublime act is to set another before you*, wrote William Blake. Setting others before themselves—that, in a phrase, was my father’s and mother’s career.



If I took to religion like a duck to water, the most it did for my brother Walt was bore him. My brothers became good men, in the well-trodden ways of good men. I, however, wanted to soar, and the outer limits would be only the first station stop. My older brother, Robert, did go into the family business; that is, he became a minister. But every Sunday when the service was over came his real passion: to crawl under the car engine in his old overalls, all covered in oil. “When God made me a man of the cloth,” Robert would say, “he got a third-rate minister and lost a first-rate mechanic.” Walt went into journalism, which thrilled me: he’ll go on, I assumed, to write poetry and novels and who knows what else. No, he was content to remain a journalist reporting the news. We had the same parents; why such different offspring?

I am embarrassed to know the answer. Parents aren’t supposed to have a favorite child, but I was both my father’s and my mother’s favorite. Freud observed that a mother’s favorite son (which he himself was) will enter the fray of life with greater will and self-assurance. My parents had planned to name me Wilbur (after my grandfather Wilbur Longden) but were worried that I would be called Billy, and “Billy Smith” was not suitable for the great man they envisioned me becoming. And this, too: when an infant dies (as Moreland had),



The angel who wasn't. My parents considered me angelic, *but...* Shown here in this photo with my brother Robert—you can easily tell which of us is playing up to the camera. I likewise knew how to play up to my parents, to achieve my childish ends.

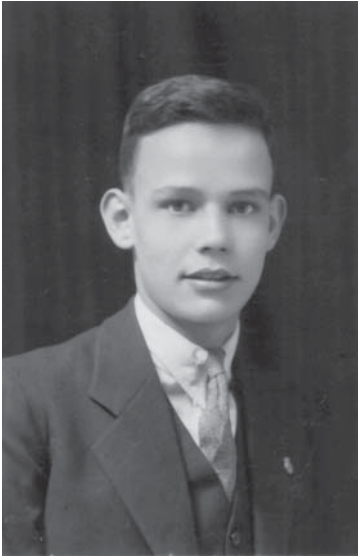
the parents' affections often get displaced onto a later child. I took Moreland's place; I became the angel who can do no wrong—though I was no angel, and wrongs I did aplenty on the sly. I knew how to work my parents' favoritism to serve my selfish ends. I'd leave adorable notes scattered around the house, calculated to double their delight in me, particularly at Christmas. As Freud predicted, my time in life would be much easier than my brothers'—which now weighs heavy on my conscience.

When at age twelve I went off to boarding school at the Shanghai American School, I was ready for bigger worlds and assumed the bigger world was waiting for me. The underside of this self-confidence, however, as is often the case, was an inferiority complex. How could it not be? Unlike my American cousins whom I'd met, I was the provincial boy, underexperienced, without a clue. Besides, I was not a good student,

if not plain mentally slow. When my mother left me at the Shanghai American School she told the principal, "Don't give up on Huston. He'll get it. He just needs more time."

I did get it. *It* was Shanghai—the big world! My parents had first brought me to Shanghai years before to see one of the first motion pictures commercially distributed. *The Iron Horse* shows a speeding train (the cameraman filmed it from a pit) that hurls straight at the viewer. I hid under my theater seat so as not to be crushed to death. And now I was living in that city of marvels, schoolmate to the worldly sons and daughters of diplomats, who needn't forge a signature to attend school dances. In one class we were asked what we had read over the summer. One boy said, "*Moby Dick*." The girl next to me answered, "*War and Peace*." I stammered, "Uh. Uh, a book called *Miss Peach*." On weekends, when the other kids went home, I would go out into the deserted athletic field and cry. My parents; my younger brother, Walt; our servants and their children my playmates—all of them were back home, the only place I wanted to be on those first lonely weekends. But even then I was buoyed by knowing I was on my way. Way to where? Why, in only a few years it would be to America and my rendezvous with destiny.

And along the way I discovered that my classmates were not demigods in a sphere above me after all. My first roommate kept pigeons, with the corollary that pigeon shit formed the decor of our room. There was an honor society at the Shanghai American School called Tuksis. My last year there a boy approached me in the hallway and made a *T* on my forehead, indicating I had been selected to be a member. I couldn't believe it: *Little Huston Smith—a member of Tuksis!* I truly was on my way.



Launched in the great world. This picture was taken about the time I forged a note from my parents permitting their son to attend school dances at the Shanghai American School. When I arrived from Dzang Zok, life in Shanghai seemed dizzyingly big and modern; by the time I left for America, it was not big enough.



In 1936, at age sixteen, I came to America to attend college, and I never looked back. My parents would stay in China for the next fifteen years and would have stayed till they died, had it been possible. It had become their adopted country, till history in the shape of the Communist Revolution exiled them from it. I'll summarize that story briefly.

As Mao swept into power in 1950, my parents decided they would remain, for they kept out of Chinese politics and were willing to work under any regime. From the first day the Communists arrived in Dzang Zok, however, their old, useful life there was obviously over. If they acknowledged a friend on the street, that friend was suspected of collaborating with the foreign imperialists. And if the friend ignored their greeting, it hurt the friendship between them. Yet that friendship was still quietly evident: the Communists pressured

the townsfolk of Dzang Zok to denounce the imperialist-missionaries, but not a single person would. Nonetheless, unable to carry on their work, my parents made plans to evacuate, only to discover they couldn't. The Communists had banned foreigners from traveling without a written permit, and when my father applied for such a permit, it was denied.

Nor was that the end of the matter. A day after the Communists arrived, their commandant marched into my parents' home and announced, "This is a large house." There were four rooms downstairs and four rooms upstairs. "You move upstairs and leave the downstairs for our soldiers." That lasted for about two weeks, when the commandant reappeared. "There are only two of you," he told my parents, as if that were a capitalist crime. "You take the two back rooms upstairs and leave the front ones for our soldiers." Two more weeks passed, and my parents were living in one room with access to the bathroom.

Meanwhile time dragged on, with no exit permit. Finally the Communist authorities told my father that if he would hand over his gun he could leave. Now, my parents were pacifists and had never owned any weapon. It was a conundrum: how to hand over something one does not have? This impasse dragged on for months, until my father recalled that an Episcopalian missionary had once briefly lived in Dzang Zok and had supposedly kept a revolver in his attic. And by chance that missionary's last name was also Smith, Hollis Smith. My father reported that this other gun-owning Smith was the man the authorities were looking for, and shortly thereafter Father's exit permit appeared.

The railroad journey that took them to the port of Canton required three days, and during it my parents did not eat,

knowing that the train diner was not sanitary. But there was always a steaming pot of hot tea on the ledge of their compartment, and every mile passed was a mile closer to safety. At Canton their trunk, which had been meticulously examined for contraband at every stop along the way, received its final inspection. My mother owned a handsome piece of carved jade, but to prove she was no smuggler she placed it squarely on the top garments in the trunk. The inspector waved it through, assuming since it wasn't hidden that it must be worthless. As the boat ferried my parents to Hong Kong, they saw an American flag on the tail of a plane flying overhead. That flag had never looked so good to them.

My parents felt that, with the Communist takeover and Christianity in effect banned, their life's work had gone down the drain. Recently, however, the Chinese government has permitted the practice of Christianity (and other religions), provided it is conducted by approved representatives. And the cultural ministry has expressed interest in having my book *The World's Religions* translated into Chinese. Were this to happen, and were my parents still alive, they might think their life's work had not been in vain after all: rather, the circle is coming round.



Three-quarters of a century have now passed since I left China. What has happened to Dzang Zok—to the Dzang Zok in me? O years of childhood, would you still recognize me?

A few things have happened to me between then and now: *The World's Religions* sold nearly three million copies;

Bill Moyers filmed a five-part PBS series about my thought and work; people refer to me, probably because I have been around so long, as the dean of comparative religion in this country. Bill Moyers described my career as inevitable, as something that had to happen. But really, my life since leaving China can seem chance, a fluke, a series of lucky accidents. I met Aldous Huxley, who directed me to a Hindu swami in St. Louis. The Hindu swami, both a scholar and a saint, revealed to me aspects of spirituality I had never suspected existed. Inspired by him, I decided to teach a course, for there were none being offered at the time, on world religions at Washington University. Public television was new and ravenous for programs, so they did a series based on my course, which made me a local celebrity. While filming the series I thought, This might make a book, and a book it did make, *The World's Religions*. Some—all—of this could just as easily not have happened. And could what did happen be traced back to the years in Dzang Zok anyway?

On second thought, Dzang Zok does seem fertile soil for my life to have grown out of. The town was no miniature Chinese Jerusalem, yet it was a cauldron of different faiths. I could skip a few blocks from my house and skip past half the world's major religions. Side by side they existed, Christianity and Buddhism and folk religions and other spiritual influences. Let me count them off on the fingers of one hand.

- I. First there was *Christianity*. In my childhood home Christianity was indistinguishable from living. Beyond our house, Christianity was my father's church and, to a lesser extent, the girls' school and the orphanage he founded.

2. *Buddhism.* Christianity was familial and intimate, but Buddhism and Confucianism had been historical forces in Dzang Zok and had left their visible markers. Chan (Zen) Buddhism erected its first monastery in China just outside the town, and we often picnicked there. In the town's alleys and lanes old people muttered to themselves, which I dismissed as just what old people do. Later I realized that they were saying "Dharmakara," the name of a legendary monk, and that because the Buddhist saint had accumulated so much merit, simply repeating his name supposedly brought you blessings.
3. *Confucianism.* When Confucius passed through Dzang Zok, a young man emerged from bathing in the canal without a stitch of clothing on. Confucius confronted him, Was not he ashamed to appear naked before a dignitary? The youth, named Yan Hui, answered, "With the sun as my cap, the air as my clothes, and the earth as my sandals, is there need for shame?" Confucius was charmed, and the young man became Confucius's favorite disciple. Yan Hui is entombed in Dzang Zok, and so venerated is he that even during the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards would not desecrate his tomb.
4. The elusive hint and scent of *Taoism.* The Taoist classics, the Tao Te Ching and the I Ching, were not much read, not in a town whose citizenry was 80 percent illiterate. Yet a certain Taoism seeped into my bones. I have undergone a dozen internal revolutions in my life (these will form the theme of this memoir), but oddly, in a Taoist way, always without conflict or crisis of conscience. As the Taoist yin and yang complement each other, so each

new development or upheaval flowed calmly, evenly, out of the preceding stage, though outwardly it might appear its opposite.

5. Finally, on my fifth finger, I shall name the real religion of Dzang Zok. In any textbook you read that Confucianism and Taoism were the main faiths of China, but the true religion of Dzang Zok was *folk religion*. Lanes never ran straight but winding, because evil spirits have trouble turning corners. Bottles protruded from houses with their necks facing outward so that demons, whose eyesight is not good, would mistake them for cannons and flee. Such notions, if you do not understand their psychological symbolism, sound superstitious, but my definition of *superstition* is: what you yourself do not happen to believe. Later, when I became involved in Native American spirituality, I realized that Dzang Zok had prepared me for the inner validity of its different kind of wisdom.

Growing up, I envied my American cousins their sophistication, their living at the center of the center. However, for the career I was to pursue, I was the lucky one. From the very beginning, even when I was too young to think about them, I was observing and absorbing the different spiritual traditions that met unobtrusively in that quiet, forgotten place. A child under, say, three years of age, if exposed to them, will learn more than one language effortlessly. Similarly, I learned to appreciate different religions before I even knew that's what they were. In effect, I began my research on *The World's Religions* before I could read or write.

The years of childhood seemingly will never end, and then they do end. If I could return to bygone Dzang Zok for only



Funny, you don't look Chinese. Three youth of China: me with my brothers, Robert and Walt. (Several anthropologists later told me that, when seen from behind, I have a distinctive "Chinese swivel" to my walk.)

a day, I know which day I would choose. It would be a day of no significance: I must have been under six that early morning I stumbled out barefoot into our backyard. The moist dew under my feet felt fresh, exciting between my toes. Its freshness penetrated every atom in my body. The day was just dawning, the sun was coming out, cool and warmth intermingled, and I knew that everything would be just right. I use the musical term *grace notes* to describe such moments,

when our perspective shifts and we suddenly glimpse perfection beyond words.

I felt that the morning's promise of goodness would last till the end of time—which has not always proved the case. Yet I am old enough now to have forgotten what went wrong and, for that matter, much of what went right. Still, if I could re-enter that morning of grace, that small boy and I would likely recognize each other. For even then that boy was learning two truths or insights in Dzang Zok that have served me well all my subsequent life. The first is that we are in good hands. The second: that in gratitude, we should help bear each other's burdens and take good care of one another. In 1935, as I packed my trunks for America, nothing would prove more durable than those two hypotheses.