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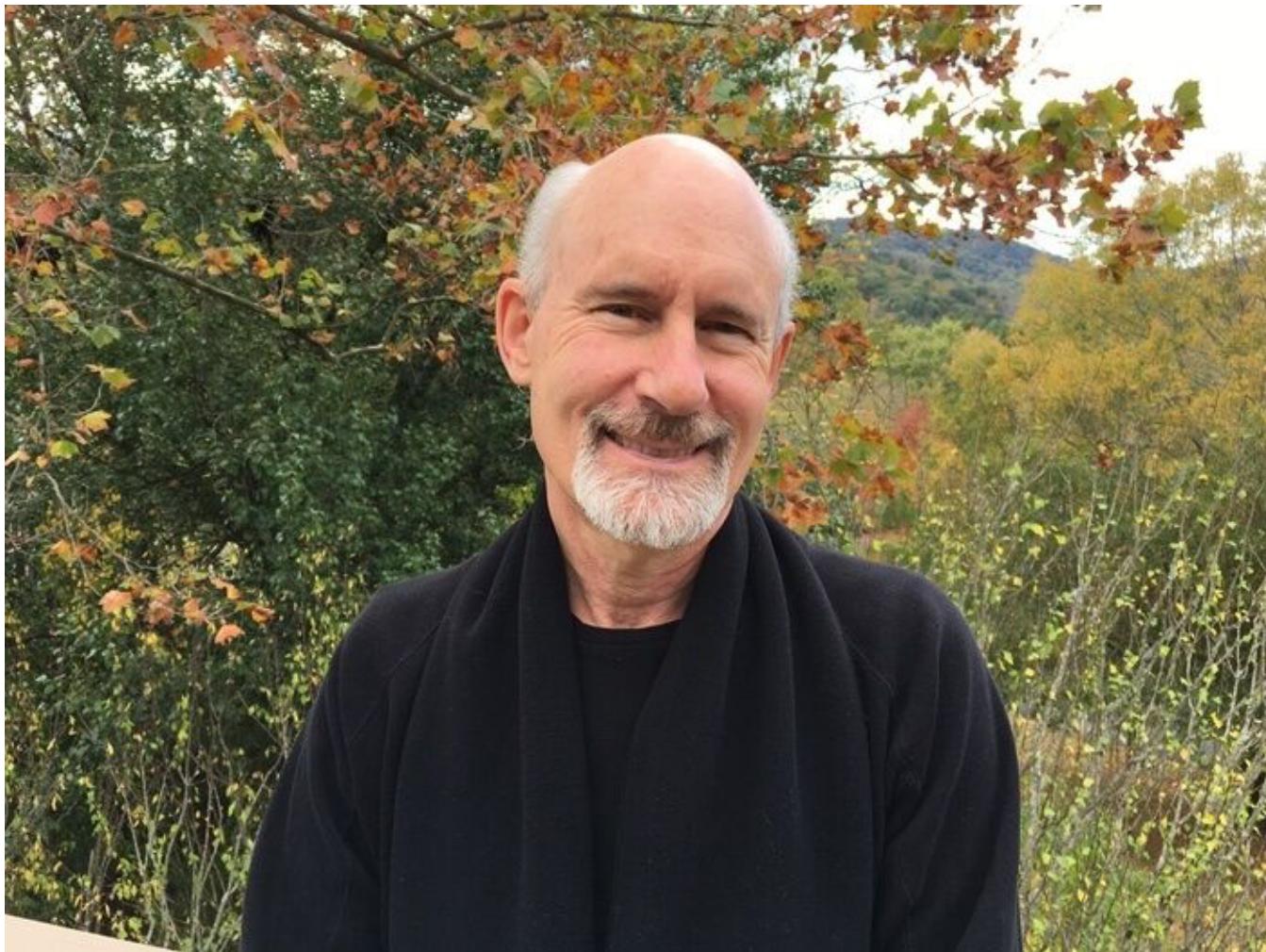
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Conserve and Build: the Power of an Idea

By Chris Highland
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Professor Johnson had a long-lasting impact on me. In my conservative Christian college, he was my first Philosophy teacher, as well as an inspiring Religion teacher, with classes on the Gospel of John, Christian Mysticism and Ancient Philosophy. While I took his courses, I was studying Classical Greek, mainly to dig deeper into the Christian Scriptures. Professor Johnson became my faculty adviser, a mentor, gently nudging me to open my mind to wider and more diverse worldviews. With pure white hair, impish smile, and face wrinkled until his eyes squinted behind thick glasses, he made us chuckle, but there was a serious intent to the curiosity he stirred in our young minds. I still recall the first time he wrote on the chalkboard the words: "Power of an Idea." This established the foundation for all our intellectual explorations in the loving pursuit of wisdom—the fundamental meaning of the philosophical adventure of learning.

The other phrase that stuck with me, written with chalk on Professor Johnson's board, was: "Conserve and Build." I suspect he meant this as an underlying principle to all our reading and thinking and discussing difficult concepts. The power of ideas generated progressive thought, and I'm sure Professor Johnson knew some of us might progress beyond our conservative

Christian mindsets, perhaps even beyond Christianity or beyond faith itself. He was offering a groundwork for our Quest of Questions, journeying out to unknown territory where traditions, theologies and scriptures could be fearlessly probed and interrogated. Later, when I took other Philosophy classes and a World Religions course from one of his colleagues, Professor Wells, deeper groundwork was being laid, seeds were planted for my later inter-religious work as a chaplain.

What did Professor Johnson mean by "Conserve and Build," and why emphasize that powerful idea in a classroom full of young, mostly conservative Christian students? Looking back, I think he was well aware of the impact this could have, the spark that could cause hot debate and fiery freethought, if not there in the university, then maybe down the road, upon further reflection by "students of life."

My progressive Protestant wife says that she is "conservative in reaction, moderate in action and radical in beliefs." She clarifies that by conservative reactions she means she is cautious, thoughtful and not "reactive." Her "radical" beliefs are not actually extreme but, as she might say, as radical as Jesus (who, by the way, could be thought of as a model of Professor Johnson's principle: conserve and build). Jesus himself pushed the limits of traditional religion, challenging religious authorities who resisted building a more compassionate community. "Conservative" has its economic and political meanings, yet essentially refers to being "averse to change or innovation, and holding traditional values." A strict conservative outlook resists progress, particularly when chosen and cherished values appear threatened. Sometimes this means a person is set in their ways, so firm in one mindset they refuse to accept forward movement. On the positive side, a conservative individual may feel they are acting as a guardian of "traditional values and beliefs" that, in their mind, underpin a unified and healthy society. And they may be right. Advancements and alternatives may indeed make change possible if not inevitable, and not all advancements are good. We need cautious members of the community; we need those who conserve, holding to what has worked well in the past and should continue to guide. However, intransigence for the sake of digging in and defending the "old ways" isn't healthy either, and benefits very few people.

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Of course, all this is open to discussion. Which was, I think, Professor Johnson's original intent. One who conserves either energy or beliefs, has to be willing to grow and build upon the beliefs that make sense, that really work for people. In the same way, one committed to progress—a progressive—has to be willing to conserve as well, building on a firm foundation of ethics and humanistic values. One who conserves, and one who progresses, form two sides to a potentially balanced perspective.

Ironically, conservation of the natural environment often seems to bother some conservatives, especially if they are accustomed to using resources without considering the larger ecosystem that includes humans. Likewise, some progressives aren't willing to listen closely to carefully consider the protectiveness of those who risk losing the way of life they have known and valued. Other definitions of conservative present a more sensible image: "conventional, sober, quiet, modest, plain, unobtrusive, unostentatious, restrained, reserved." These are values most anyone can appreciate.

Holding strong beliefs may be admirable, but what if those beliefs are no longer constructive for many? To conserve, without a willingness to build, can be an obstacle for growth and progress. More powerful ideas are possible.