

# Keep hope alive

Jean Houston, who visits next week for the Festival of Faiths, sees a reason to believe in the future

BY CARY STEMLE

First, we should get this out of the way. If you're scratching your head about the name Jean Houston — you've heard it somewhere, sometime, haven't you? — chances are you are recalling a dustup from a decade ago when she allegedly helped then-First Lady Hillary Clinton have a séance with Eleanor Roosevelt. Trust us — that was pure bullshit. But, of course, it was American-made bullshit, birthed and fed by the media, the kind we seem to insist on ingesting en masse, never mind that Houston is an intellectual giant and arguably this generation's Margaret Mead. That story's still out there; you just won't be reading much about it here.

What you will read is an interview with a woman who lives in rarified air. She is a scholar, philosopher and researcher in Human Capacities, a visionary thinker *and doer* who mixes all sorts of disciplines into a compelling notion of what our world is and can be. She's written more than two dozen books, and her PBS special "A Passion for the Possible" is widely known.

What Houston espouses, quite simply, is that people can do more than they think they can, and by being open to outward *and* inward forces, any of us can transform both our own lives and the world. We in the Western world can be truly great (not to be confused with grandiose), if only we can unlearn some of the things we've come to accept as gospel truth. And we're not speaking (necessarily) of religion.

Last week Houston took time to chat about this pivotal moment in history, how and why she maintains hope, and why she thinks dogs are really important.

**LEO:** Is the individual really able to cope with the pace at which we live now?

**JEAN HOUSTON:** In many ways we've not been trained for today's world; it has come upon us so suddenly, hasn't it? Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of us lived the way we had for the previous 5,000 years. And then it all changed exponentially and it's been this chronic story of change, non-stop. This has certainly thrown off our natural rhythms and our sense of where we are in the universe. And yet at the same time, we have been, with our technologies, able to explore outer space, and now with the harvest of the genius of cultures from all over the world, and the great wisdom traditions, we're exploring inner space. I think that we have been so disconnected from the natural rhythms that, naturally, fundamentalisms of all kinds, not just religious but political, ideological, grow to try to bring us back to the older ways that seemed safe, of seeing and doing.

I'm the senior consultant to the United Nations on human development, and part of my work is to train leadership, literally all over the world, in their own development in the light of social change, in the light of social complexity. I'm going to be talking about that when I'm in Louisville. Because we find that most leaders have been trained for a different time, a different era, and the world, unfortunately, suffers from this tragically. Part of my job is to train people to "cook on more burners," so to speak, to use much more of their mind-body systems, so that they are adequate stewards of this most complex and critical time in human history. I mean, it really is the great "either-or," isn't it? Other times in history thought they were it; they're wrong, this is it, this is when we make the difference as to whether we grow or die.

**LEO:** You don't deny the difficult things that exist, and yet you seem to think things can work out. Not everybody believes that.



Jean Houston

**JH:** One of the reasons I believe this is because I've worked in 100 countries, and intensively in 40 cultures. So I tend to see a world that is very different from, let's say, the one a television journalist goes into just for the big, difficult story and then he or she is out of there. I'm not talking about Iraq or Afghanistan, I'm talking generally around the world. You've got to hang in there, learn something of the language, learn something of the culture and then see what's going on. This is why I am ultimately rather positive, more positive than, say, my journalist friends, because, for example, I will be there to observe factors that are unique in human history that they're not observing. One of the most important is that women of a certain age — well over 40 (laughs) — when their children are grown, by and large, really are out there trying to make a difference and are doing remarkable work. It is making a difference, because with such partnership, I think we have a chance to come to solutions in a very different way.

At the same time, we have a new technology that is linking us literally all over the world. With these new \$100 laptop computers that are now going out, this will make a significant difference. So it's as if the world mind is taking a walk with itself. We truly are in a time that I've called in one of my books, "whole system transition."

**LEO:** Someone recently asked me if I think most people are stupid. That took me aback, because in the alt weekly world we get accused of being elitist. And yet I live here in "flyover" country —

**JH:** What is it called?

**LEO:** "Flyover" country — you know, the culture, the things that define the status quo, happen in the bigger cities on the coasts, and so to some people, middle America is known pejoratively as "flyover" country. We're the people who elected Bush, right, because we're "too stupid" to know better. The "What's the Matter With Kansas" scenario. I guess my question is: When you speak to audiences as you will here, I assume people are open to your message. How do you go beyond preaching to the choir?

**JH:** So much of my work is not with the choir, it's really hands-on work around the world, on the millennium development goals. They're the goals about sustaining ecology, gender equality, basic good education, greatly reducing HIV-AIDS, partnerships, ending pollution, suffering and poverty and etc., so when you're hands-on in the real issues, you don't run into a hierarchy at all, or stupid or not stupid — you just are all working together.

Let me just respond to some of the import of your question: I have myself never met a stupid child. I've met incredibly stupid systems of education that reduce and diminish the child's mind.

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## RUMOR

AND INNUENDO

RUMBLINGS FROM  
THE WORLD OF SPORTS

**No Tello?** I'm advised that Louisville's basketball staff is seriously concerned that Juan Palacios, obviously injury-prone, will never recover enough from his latest knee injury to be fully effective this season.

**What's old is new.** U of L fans might notice something a bit different this hoops season. The pep band will be playing a new version of the school's fight song. Which is actually old, the original, according to its director.

**Trick or Treat in Blue?** The Cats were tricked. To be a legit contender in the SEC, ya gotta be ready every week. Not-Quite-Ready-For-Prime-Time UK looked battered and tired, mentally and physically, against Mississippi State. The schedule — at Vandy and Georgia, Vols at home — gets no easier for the already bowl-eligible Cats. A week off should help them heal.

**Trick or Treat in Red?** The Cards' treat was gift-wrapped with a big bow. Pitt, a team even more mediocre than U of L, laid the bit-

tersweet victory on the ground with a minute to go, and Coach Steve's guys pounced on it. Only one bowl rep was in the house, he from Meinecke Car Care Bowl. For the disorganized Cards' to holiday in Charlotte, it will take a miracle.

**SchnellSpeak of the week.** The Great Pontificator retired his weekly stump speeches in the school cafeteria. He reminisced about the value of the interaction with the student body: "Instead of being booed when I started speaking in the cafeteria, I was

loudly cheered. It's a growing swell."

Before last Saturday's conference match-up with Louisiana-Monroe, Construction Boss Schnell had to repair his lineup: "It's a patch-up job. We're close to not having enough reserves. We're trying to bring in new men." Before the game, he also talked about a possible future encounter with Florida State.

The Fighting Owls

lost 33-30 in three overtimes to the Not-Quite-Seminoles. On the winning 31-yard run by Warhawk Calvin Dawson, Dermatologist Schnell: "That was a freckle on a freckle's difference of him being knocked out of bounds, and that was the difference in the ballgame." Marksman Schnell summed up the loss: "On the last play, they found the bulls-eye in the target on our back."



BY SEEDY K  
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## Keep hope alive

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Part of my work around the world has been to get rid of the bad 19<sup>th</sup> century British missionary education, which the Brits themselves abandoned 80 years ago. And to really help create schools which speak to the whole mind, the whole body of a child. Because if you put art back as critical to the curriculum, where a child is dancing and singing and telling stories and doing hands-on work, children do not fail.

If you educate for the test, people may pass the test, but they're not going to learn anything. It has to do with the new maps of the mind that we now understand, that you can put in sort of immediate electrical patterning in the brain, but it won't go into long-term chemical patterning unless the whole mind and body is involved.

**LEO:** Education has become a very political issue.

**JH:** It has, but the science of it is very advanced. I'm not even sure I've met a stupid adult, either. I just see people who have fallen asleep. It's not that they're stupid, but they may have fallen asleep into apathy because of the sheer complexity of a world which we've not been trained for.

**LEO:** Regarding the realm of escapism — and reality TV — we give a lot of our time to it. It almost becomes a cliché, but is that innocent mindlessness or a symptom of something deeper and more negative, maybe a capitulation to a reality we see as so overwhelming that we give up and say the best we can do is watch and not participate?

**JH:** It's interesting that you mention reality shows. My father was Jack Houston, the guy who wrote the joke "Who's On First?" among other things. Dad was also one of the first creators of the game shows — "People are Funny," "You Bet Your Life," "Truth or Consequences" — and he had a lot to do with the setting up of those shows. I remember as a small child being taken to them and how

excited people were, rooting for people to win. They were around ideas or funny tricks or pranks. It's very different from those shows and the shows of today, which have a kind of meanness and a cruelty to them that I think are reflected in some of the cruelty that we see in certain parts of the world. But what I see is hope winning, almost a spectacular increase in awareness. People say, How do you *dare* be so positive. It's because I'm out there seeing all these good things happening.

**LEO:** In an interview from 1997, you speak of how over-intellectualizing can be a way of justifying anything. You seem pretty intellectual — are you saying things are really pretty simple at their core, that we make things too difficult?

**JH:** I think we need balance. I take my own life, for example. I have all the women's role, except for housekeeping. I do all the cooking and lots of details. I have a lot of the men's roles and I have roles nobody ever thought of before, which is part of the province of being a modern professional woman, isn't it? I'm looking out and I have a vineyard — I live in Ashland, Oregon, in the last house ever designed by Buckminster Fuller — I have two domes.

**LEO:** That must be awful (laughs).

**JH:** I'm looking out over the Cascade Mountains that I can see from my window — and I'm a dog person. One of my best books, by the way, is "Mystical Dog," because I'm a really serious dog person. I'm a big-time dog person. I consider myself half-dog, actually. We err greatly when we think of dogs, or animals, as lesser than ourselves. They are really other tribes, other nations, aren't they, with totally different ways of knowing and seeing.

**LEO:** It's amazing what you can learn by just watching a dog.

**JH:** They pick up on you very quickly. They have other sensibilities, because they've been with humans for anywhere between 20,000 and 90,000 years. There was a wonderful study not too long ago about how they have developed other kinds of brain patterns to be sensitive to human beings in ways that other animals have not. ... I have a dog here who's the world's largest living Airedale — 120 pounds — and he sings. He can sing opera. Would you like to hear?

**LEO:** Of course. (At this point, she calls the dog — Zeus — to the phone and asks him to sing the quartet from Verdi's "Rigoletto." The interviewer falls on the floor laughing/crying, paying particular note to the dog's impressive breathing technique.)

**LEO:** Bravo. I need to meet this dog.

**JH:** He's twice the size of a normal Airedale. We named him Zeus and that may have been the mistake. Never give your dog an archetypal name!

**LEO:** You've spoken about cyclical changes — in the interview I read, you were addressing how Generation Xers feel unmoored and that the future doesn't have anything for them. And you said that just happens with some generations and it will correct itself. But I'm thinking of my dad, who was born in 1926, child of the Depression, working class, found a way to college, studied hard, got a good job and ended up working for one company for 38 years. That worked for him. Nowadays, people are extremely disposable. Health-care goes up 30 percent a year. Why wouldn't we be half-crazy and angry? It feels like the covenant has been completely (devalued).

**JH:** We had a certain covenant, didn't we? But we had a different one in 1850, and a different one in 1750, and the covenant that your father came along with — I think this is part of the issue of the

expectations of Americans, especially, and some Europeans, not to the same extent, certainly not in Norway or Sweden or the Scandinavian countries. But the expectations are no longer the same. We have to grow and think and use our humanity in new ways in order to deal with all these challenges for which, as I said, we have not been prepared.

And so you can respond to fundamentalisms, or you could respond by going into galloping entropy in front of the television set or addictions of one or another kind. Or you can say, Wait a minute, this is a huge opportunity to keep on learning, to think differently, to be able to not just adjust but become part of the most exciting time in human history. Humanity right now in America seems to be, I don't want to say divided between the two, because that's not true, but there are those who give up and there are those who go forward. And part of my job is to help people go forward. We do live much longer now. Adolescence doesn't end till about 31 or 32, you don't know anything till you're 50, and our lives are so much longer. There is an age wave right now, of people who are really rethinking their lives. That's why there are so many conferences, there are so many people getting together in ways they never have before.

**LEO:** I like that. I hope that is the third way forward. Our institutions don't give much reason for optimism, do they?

**JH:** Some do. The grassroots organizations tend to. I don't want to make a political statement ... but I think that the grassroots organizations are really trying very, very hard to restore meaning and hope and ways in which, profoundly, we can make a difference. ... By the way, thank you for not asking about Hillary. It never happened, I did not download Mrs. Roosevelt from the cosmos. It was an entirely made-up story. If you want the accurate story — Carl Bernstein just came out with a major book about Hillary; he set the record straight on that. ■

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### Creativity and Social Artistry with Jean Houston

(Part of the Festival of Faiths, Nov. 4-10)

Wednesday, Nov. 7

1:30-5:30 p.m.; \$25

Kentucky International Convention Center

For more information on the Festival of Faiths, plus a full schedule, go to [www.interfaithrelations.org](http://www.interfaithrelations.org)

## City Strobe

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### A new approach to dog problems

Plans are under way to create a new "quick response" unit to respond to dangerous dog situations in targeted areas. Details are still being worked out, but the plan is to dedicate two Metro Animal Services employees to Metro Council District 5, the district with the highest number of reported dog bites, where they'll canvas the area searching for problems and also be available for rapid dispatch. The MAS staffers will focus on emergency calls and will only respond to gen-

eral calls in the area to which they are assigned.

The plan, which is being organized by Metro Council members Cheri Bryant Hamilton, D-5, and Kelly Downard, R-16, is a prototype and will be evaluated after a prescribed period. The MAS employees will drive a MAS vehicle and work the 3-11 p.m. shift because more incidents occur during that period. Residents will be notified about the effort and asked to help direct animal services staff to specific problems.

The plan is an effort to involve all parties that may have a role in public safety as it relates to dog problems: the police, the post office, citizens and other Metro departments. Some postal routes have been

interrupted because of safety concerns about dogs. Additionally, citizens and public officials have complained about the lack of timely response to incidents involving dangerous dogs. —Cary Stemle

### Left hand, meet right hand

Last Friday on the KET issues program "Comment on Kentucky," during a general discussion of how attentive and generous governors have been to Louisville, Keith Runyon of The Courier-Journal's editorial board said he is not sure Gov. Ernie Fletcher picked the best site for Louisville's downtown arena. Now he tells us. —CS