One deceivingly simple question has driven Dr. James Boyd from a small town in Wisconsin to Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka to Banaras Hindu University in India, and that question is: how do others live life? As a professor of Religious Philosophy at Colorado State University, he has strived to internationalize the department and study the value systems of other cultures and religions, or in simpler terms, to “somehow get inside that world view, that mindset … to see what life was like.”

Born on April 16th, 1934, Boyd grew up in Manitowoc, WI, “an interesting working-class town, shipyards, cement plant” with even more interesting parents. Their dynamic, his mother’s effervescence and his father’s serious-minded nature, was a balance that still inform his life. Music was an early influence as well. “[My uncles] were all first chair clarinet in all the bands in Wisconsin and Illinois … my father was a church organist for 29 years. So music was essential,” he explains. He remembers one of his father’s lessons on listening and credits his father for the gift of “living in a world of what I would call soundscapes.”

At first, Boyd thought he would become a professional musician, like his father and uncles. His father told him to think twice, and his benefactor, the founder of the Manitowoc shipyards who Boyd chauffeured during the summer, suggested Lawrence College, a small liberal arts college in Appleton, WI. He chose Lawrence but was no closer to knowing what he wanted to do, ending up with a triple major in music, English literature and education. He was certain about one thing though: he didn’t want to teach. “I came from a family of teachers. I was terrified … But Father said, take education courses.” Despite his fear, Boyd started teaching junior high in Illinois after graduation. He almost quit the night before, but soon, “it sparked. I realized that I loved to tell stories, I loved young people.” And more than this, he loved ideas.

After a few years, Boyd returned to Northwestern University with a scholarship in English literature, which he transferred after a semester to a “department called the History and Literature of Religions.” Here, he finally found his passion. He earned his Master’s in Comparative Religion quickly, but it would take him 10 years to finish his PhD because Fulbright grants and opportunities to get real cultural experiences of different religions drew him away from the school, a hallmark of his later career as well. He studied in India, Sri Lanka, Madison, WI, taught a little in Purdue, and then eventually finished his dissertation and started his job search in Sri Lanka. He applied exclusively to jobs in western states. “I didn’t want to live in Indiana. I didn’t want to see cornfields. I wanted to see mountains.” Luckily Willard Eddy, the head of the Philosophy Department at Colorado State University, had also applied for jobs while overseas, and due to Eddy’s compassion for his plight, Boyd was hired without an interview in 1969.

CSU’s Philosophy Department presented a challenge for Boyd, as he found out during a meeting his second week on campus. “The meeting was about abolishing Religious Studies in Philosophy … And I’d just been hired,” he laughs. Despite the bad beginning, he found many supportive colleagues at CSU. Every three years, he would take off again to another corner of the world, this time with a Rockefeller Grant, that time with a fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies, another five times with a Fulbright. “I’m interested in approaching and entering other philosophical religious traditions,” he says by way of explanation for his many leaves of absence. He worked with Hindu scholars in India, a Buddhist sensei in Kyoto, Muslims in Iran, and the renowned Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula in Sri Lanka. He collaborated with Dastur Kotwal, a Zoroastrian high priest, to create a primary source book called A Persian Offering which “documents and interprets perhaps one of the oldest rituals in the history of the Western world, a fire ritual.” When he wasn’t traveling, Boyd directed committees in the Association of Asian Studies and presented at conferences.
Teaching remained passion. “To borrow a phrase, I loved to ignite those headpieces filled with straw,” he says of the delight he found in his students. He created and taught his own courses and advised Master’s students, with his goal “to internationalize students and faculty.” Due to his insistence, the Philosophy Department at CSU hired an Islamic philosopher. He reached out into the community as well, running “three National Endowment for the Humanities Institutes on Asia to teach Asian thought and history to public school teachers” in Fort Collins and Wisconsin. The International Baccalaureate program now includes world history and Asian studies, thanks to his initiative.

Concerning the future of the university, Jim Boyd hopes that the measure of scholarship continues to be a passion for learning rather than grants or publication records. It wasn’t the need for a grant or a good article that took Boyd all over the world, but rather his passion, curiosity, and love of ideas.