

Wu Wei- the art of doing/not doing

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Reflection from Fred Best

The Tao of Everyday Life

My Brother used tell me, "Don't become so fixed on your goals, that something better passes you by." I suppose this is because I frequently became over-zealous about my goals. Then at other times, he'd say, "The impossible just take a little longer." He'd say this to exhort me when time were tough.

In some ways my brother was some kind of down-to-earth sage. He didn't know much about eastern religions, but he was kind of a working man's Zen-Buddhist/Taoist master. I doubt that ever encountered much in the way of Taoist thought. But looking back, it seems the basic ideas came naturally to him. He seemed to move effortlessly between a kind of detachment and effortless action.

Since my studies of Chinese History as an undergraduate, I've been uneasy about Taoist philosophy. It's mantra of following the path of least resistance has been alien the me. It sounds outright un-American. We're a nation of doers, people who take action. We build dams and water ways. We control water, we just don't let follow its own course. We push ourselves against hardship and barriers to forge new frontiers.

When I think of Taoism, I think of the quintessential monk sitting in isolation on a barren mountain top. The "fool on the hill," as the Beattle's put it, "who sees the world turning round," yet is totally uninvolved.

That's the myth, the extreme; but it raises an important issue. Between that mythical monk and the person of constant action, there's a mixed ground that most of us occupy. There are times to "go with the flow," and times to change it. Has the bulk of the Republican Party met its own and the nation's needs by "going along" with our departing President? Were the members of the Vichy government in France wrong to go along with Nazis while subtly laying roadblocks to prevented the bombing of Paris?

Mindful "going with the flow" and "effortless actions" are not easy. They can't be dismissed as being lazy. They are a discipline.

In ancient China, Confusion sages struggled with the application of Taoist concepts. There were two schools of thought: those that withdrew as hermits and those that sought to apply Taoism principles to governance and the activities of life. The later sought to incorporate the techniques of the hermits into a life of action through meditation, self-knowledge and self-control, seeing things as they are, and ethical discipline. The goal was to keep oneself centered yet flexible in the unpredictable winds of the world. They sought to be aware of limitations and also to be wary of hubris when there are few limitations.

I think about my own life. Of taking unwise action, of overstepping boundaries that, right or wrong, could not be overcome. Of moving with arrogance and hubris rather than love when action had possibilities. I don't really think in Taoist terms, but I've come to believe that it is essential to cycle through periods of inaction and reflection, and periods of action. This cycle might be in minutes and hours, and sometimes in months and years. Both withdrawal and engagement are necessary, and neither can stand alone.

A virtue can be a vice in some circumstances, and a vice can be virtue in different circumstances. "Turn, turn, turn; to everything there is a season."

First reading

From the second book of the Tao translated by Stephen Mitchell

You can't talk about the ocean
with a frog who lives in a well;
He is bounded by the space he inhabits.

You can't talk about ice.
with an insect who was born in June
he is bounded by a single season.

You can't talk about the Tao
with a person who thinks he knows something
he is bounded by his own beliefs

The Tao is vast and fathomless
You can understand only by stepping
Beyond the limits of yourself.

Sermon part 1

My life this past week has been spent in the throws of doom scrolling. That is where you are fixated on bad news so that you keep reading every post and update that takes you to a darker and darker place. It is so hard to pull away.

Whether or not you have been doom scrolling, It has been a hard week and many of us have been on edge. And it's not over yet. I must admit to you my friends, that some of my thoughts about the secessionists who attacked the capital have been less than compassionate – I have had my own violent thoughts in response to their violence. And that's OK – as long as I don't dwell on those thoughts. Sometimes our anger and powerlessness need expression, if only in our minds and words. It helps us stay present. And it keeps us from taking our emotions out on others.

The sense of powerlessness is painful – painful to watch our democracy at risk and feel that there is little we can do. One thing I have heard from many of you is your desire to do something – to reach out, to create bridges to the other side. Maybe not to the guy with the fur pelts and horns on his hat, but to trump supporters whom we know in our hearts are not that different from us. It is a compassionate impulse. There is much to learn from what has happened – to learn about our country and ourselves. One way to gain perspective is to draw from the wisdom of the ages Human history is riddled with violence and strife – and blessed with sages who have sorted through these challenges. So this morning I want to how Taoism may have some wisdom to offer in these tumultuous times.

Fred got us off to a great start with his reflection. Taoism is challenging. The Tao means the source, the pattern and substance of everything that exists and according to Taoism and our task in life is to live in harmony with the Tao.

My sermon this will be in three parts (this is part one) each part beginning with a reading.

So let's consider the reading - You can't talk about the ocean with a frog who lives in a well. Of course, we easily identify the frog with the trump supporters. They live and swim in waters quite different from our own and many of them are in deep. Bridge the gap is challenging because we don't come from the same context, the same reality. The second part of the reading is directed to us – “you can't talk about the Tao with a person who thinks he knows something, he is bounded by his own beliefs.” You can only understand only by stepping beyond the limits of yourself.” So while our world view may be larger and more expansive - and quite different from the people who attacked the capitol, it is limited as well. We are in our own well, so to speak.

This reading helps us to understand the challenge – that we can't talk about the ocean to a frog who lives in a well. But we also need to let go of what we know and step beyond the bonds of our beliefs.

Second Reading

From Chuang Tzu – The Inner Chapters

Chuang Tzu was an influential Chinese philosopher who lived around the 4th century BC. His writings are considered some of the foundation text of Daoism, written about 200 years after the time of the primary text of Daoism, the Dao Te Ching.

Yen Hui went to his master to say goodbye.

The Master asked, "where are you going." "I am going to Wei" What are you going to do there." I heard that the prince of Wei is young and that he is arbitrary in his actions. He is not much concerned with his country and is not aware of his mistakes. He thinks nothing of people dying. The dead lie everywhere like thick grass in a swamp. The people have nowhere to turn. I've heard you Master say, "Leave the country that is already well governed and go to a country that is in chaos." I would like to use your teaching to remedy the situation there.

The master said, "Ah, if you go there you will only get into trouble. Tao must be pure. When something is added to it, there is confusion. When there is confusion there is anxiety. With anxiety, there is no hope. The wise ones of old realized Tao in themselves before they offered it to another. If you are not certain that you have it in yourself, how can you change a tyrant's action?"

"Though you are highly virtuous and trustworthy if you do not understand the people's spirits, and though you are famous and do not compete, if you do not understand people's minds but instead go to a tyrant and lecture him on goodness, ethical behavior, measurers, and standards, you are just using the failing of others to demonstrate your own superiority. This is deliberately hurting other people. One who hurts others will in turn be hurt. You will probably end up in trouble."

"Do not force things. It is dangerous to deviate from instructions or push for completion. It takes a long time to do a thing properly. So then, flow with whatever may happen, and let your mind be free; stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate. How else

can you carry out your task? It is best to leave everything to work naturally, though this is not easy. “

Sermon Part 2

That reading was written by Chinese philosopher who lived during the warring states era – a period of more than 200 years of war and political upheaval.

I want to start with the last line –“it is best to leave everything to work naturally, though this is not easy.” This is the heart of the Daoist concept of Wu Wei – loosely translated as doing/not doing. Wu Wei is refraining from trying to force things by deliberate action. Daoism is not against force – natural systems have force, water flows forcefully – Taoism suggest we refrain from deliberate use of force against the natural order. Intentional use of force.

So if we refrain from deliberate action or force – what do we do?

Wu Wei does not mean doing nothing - or conversely not doing anything.

The idea is to leave most things alone, only interfering at strategic points when the minimum effort will achieve maximum results. A good leader understands this principle – let your team take responsibility but encourage or tweak as necessary to keep things moving in the right direction. Good teachers understand that you can’t control your classroom by standing in the front and screaming or sending every child to detention. You use a light hand, pay attention to their energy and channel it.

I have gotten fond of the fellow in the reading- Yen Hui. He has been learning the virtues, studying the texts and is ready to head off to help the people and convince the tyrannical leader to change his ways.

He is well intentioned and earnest.

And of course, he gets bracingly clarifying questions about his motives. His teacher says - If you do not understand the people’s spirits or if you try to lecture the tyrant on his failings, you are just using the failings of others to demonstrate your own superiority. Yikes.

According to the master you must be truly clear on your own motives when you try to change a situation. This requires knowing yourself well and bringing honesty and humility to self-reflection. This is how we cultivate virtue.

Once you are clear on your own motives you must be very tuned into a situation in order to know how and when to intervene - or not. That sometimes not doing is as important as doing.

These works by Chuang Tsu – are the first known statement of the philosophy of nonviolence as a form of resistance, as a form of action – of doing by not doing.

Wu-Wei is about being in tune with natural processes and acting or not acting when the time is right. This requires knowing yourself, understanding your motives, staying centered in your values, and being present to what is unfolding. As the Master says – it takes a long time to do things properly.

Third Reading

Quotes from Martin Luther King Jr.

“In spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace.”

“We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts.”

“Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

“In the nonviolent army, there is room for everyone who wants to join up. There is no color distinction. There is no examination, no pledge, except that, as a soldier in the armies of violence is expected to inspect his carbine and keep it clean, nonviolent soldiers are called upon to examine their greatest weapons: their heart, their conscience, their courage and sense of justice.”

Sermon Part 3

One of the most famous acts of Wu-Wei in the past 200 years was when Rosa Parks refused to get up on the bus and move to the back to let a white person have her seat. She was the not first one to be arrested for this act, nor was she naïve about what she was doing. She knew activists were considering staging an arrest for the purpose of confronting the racial segregation system. But that was not the plan for that day. On that day she was just sick and tired and didn’t want to get up. And so she stayed seated.

Her action set off a chain reaction. She was extremely well connected in Montgomery – active and engaged in her community. Respected for her kindness and decency. So when people heard that Rosa Parks had been arrested, they all wanted to know what they could do. Their

energy and commitment naturally led to the bus boycott, a non-violent action that put pressure on the city to change the laws. 26-year-old Martin Luther King Junior was called in to help lead the effort. The new kid in town, he had only been in Montgomery for a year. He had studied the theories of non-violent action – through the teaching of Jesus, and Gandhi and others and had been preaching these ideas to his congregation. But this was the first time he had put these ideas into practice.

After a few months of the boycott his house was firebombed by white supremacists and crowds of neighbors came out to support him. A confrontation started with the police. King found himself the center of a possible violent riot in the black community.

Its one thing to preach non-violence, quite another to convince a mob to practice it on the spot. But convince them he did, with the words of Jesus “love your enemies, bless them that curse you: pray for them that despitefully use you.”

This moment – and all that, Rosa Parks non-action, the community solidarity, the boycott, the bombing, all of it launched years of non-violence action in support of civil rights and ultimately changed the segregation laws in our country. The Wu Wei of the 20th century.

Can you image the self-control that it took for African Americans to engage in non-violent action – how much faith, and commitment and courage. They had the anger frustration, humiliation, and pain of hundreds of years of slavery and violent oppression of their people. And yet they were able to stand there while being sprayed with water cannons, beaten, and attached by dogs.

And their action was powerful, because it forced our country to look at the violence and the hate that was spewed by the white supremacists.

Doing by not doing. Changing the world by not reacting when people tried to stop them from exercising the basic rights of walking down the street or sitting where you choose to on the bus. MLK also chose carefully when and how to stage actions, staying tuned into the current of the community.

In his words we hear the echoes of the Tao, of Chuang Tzu – King tells us to learn from our understanding of the enemy – not just about them, but about ourselves from what the enemy perceives in us. He tells us that our greatest weapon in the act of doing/not doing is our own heart, our conscience, our courage, and our sense of justice.

Wu-Wei can seem passive against the torrent of hate in our world, but it is a powerful tool to understand ourselves and be in touch with the natural flow of life.

One way to practice Wu-Wei is through kindness – attentive responsive kindness. Kindness to yourself and to others – to everyone in fact. Talk to that Trump supporter in your family or neighborhood about something other than politics, the weather perhaps, or movies. Listen. Be aware of your motives. Keep an open mind. In our current climate, kindness is a radical non-violent act of resistance that can help us along the path of transformation.